

Over the Event Horizon: Denyse Thomasos, Black Abstraction, and
Diasporic Spacetime

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite her successful career, the late Trinidadian-Canadian painter Denyse Thomasos remains sorely underdiscussed in academic literature. To rectify this gap, this paper takes a comprehensive close reading of Thomasos' monumental abstractions of the city, the prison, and the slave ship, as well as a mysterious series of untitled final works. Drawing on physics, Black Canadian literature, decolonial poetics and spatial theory, I posit that Thomasos' abstractions are intensely affective because they wield space and time as aesthetic and conceptual means of articulating an inarticulable experience of being Black in Canada. In doing so, I conceptualize twin theories of *state spacetime* and *diasporic spacetime* as broader analytical frameworks for reading Black diasporic artistic production as a gravity-bending force within the capitalist, white supremacist rhythms of the state.

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INTRODUCTION

In physics, a “worldline” describes the quantum path left behind a particle’s curved movement through the four-dimensional fabric of spacetime.¹ This term resonates particularly well within diaspora studies, as the experience of diaspora is, inherently, a spatiotemporal journey. Its integral components, such as movement, displacement, memory, return, and the long-term project of self-invention, all require traversal through both space and time.² Ranajit Guha characterizes the question of diasporic belonging as one of spatial distance and “temporal maladjustment,” in which the migrant and their identity are suspended in “the immediacy of the present,” with the past cleaved off abruptly and the future obscured in uncertainty.³ Space and time no longer operate on normative terms, but are now skewed in the flow of what Warren Crichlow calls “the interminable aftermath of dispersal,”⁴ comprised of constant and ongoing negotiations of identity, community, mobility, and home. For the Black diaspora specifically, dispersed by the violence of slavery and still managing its lingering effects, the condition is one of unfinished emancipation, of “old and new colonialisms and imperialisms [that] continue to render black peoples the excess of global relations in a world lived and experienced more intimately than at any time before.”⁵ In other words, the Black diaspora are still reckoning with specific (and often hostile) spatiotemporalities produced by the nation-states in which they now

¹ Katherine M. Blundell, *Black Holes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16-17.

² Tim Cresswell qtd in Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space and Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 1.

³ Ranajit Guha, “The Migrant’s Time,” in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown: Yale University Press, 2011), 4-5, 7; Brand, Dionne, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), 18.

⁴ Warren Crichlow, “Prodigious Presence: After the Door of No Return,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* no. 46 (March 2023): 80.

⁵ Rinaldo Walcott, “Salted Cod...: Black Canada and Diasporic Sensibilities,” in “Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora: Deanna Bowen, Christopher Cozier, Michael Fernandes, Maud Sulter,” exhibition catalogue (Ottawa, Canada: Canada Council for the Arts, 2006).

belong. Negotiating this unsettlement has produced, in turn, alternative modes of traversing space and time in order to work against the inimical forces of the state.

The art of Denyse Thomasos necessitates, in my opinion, a spatiotemporal analytic. Her abstract and semi-abstract paintings use space and time as conceptual tools of visualizing the experience of Blackness in the diaspora; this is accomplished through visual strategies such as line, density, the flourish of brushstrokes, visual rhythm, and plane, as well as philosophical approaches such as the collapse of linear timelines of history and explorations of Black diasporic psychology. An immigrant born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and raised in Toronto, Canada, Thomasos bypasses depictions of the hypervisible Black body and instead directly interrogates the architectures, objects, and spaces of the Black diaspora. More specifically, she interrogates those that are implicated in the confinement of Black people across the so-called “New World” – the city, the prison, and the ship. Through abstraction, she delves beyond the surface of these technologies to get at the psycho-affective core of each, keenly interested in each object’s role in global antiblackness, as well as the emotional experience they produce in the Black psyche. She tracks multiple worldlines, including her own, in a single canvas: each of her paintings typify what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “a composition which is always already a recomposition and a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions.”⁶ By this, she refers not to the physical arrangement of visual elements, but rather the manifold ideological, material, sensorial, affective, geopolitical, and historical layers of signification that bubble up within the piece. Thomasos’ paintings must be read not as a single object but as an assemblage of real and virtual meanings that have accrued through space and time, collapsing the linear progression from the past to the future, and between place to place. Instead, we glimpse simultaneously the colonial

⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, “In the Raw,” *e-flux* no. 93 (September 2018): 7.

legacy of modern art, the diverse grammars of Black and Caribbean aesthetics, centuries of migration histories, the construction of race, global capital, and the imagining of Black futures.

After her difficult transition into Canada at a young age,⁷ Thomasos' life was one of restless movement. She moved to the United States in the 1990s to study and work, where she began researching the mass incarceration of people of colour and the state of urban collapse within cities.⁸ She then travelled extensively during the 2000s as a part of her comprehensive, research-based exploration of the Global South, studying imprisonment, war, genocide, and violence across continents.⁹ Perhaps this restlessness was par for the course; as curator of *Denyse Thomasos – Odyssey*, Gaëtane Verna says, “Our lives as Black folks are a succession of such voluntary and involuntary displacements.”¹⁰ Esi Edugyan further notes that Thomasos' paintings validate that “this is a global feeling,” that though Thomasos focuses on the lives of the Black diaspora, she also speaks to the chaotic worldlines of Diaspora populations at large, who have

⁷ By difficult transition I refer to Thomasos' described experience of coming to Canada, unprepared for both the cold weather and the direct racism she and her sisters experienced in Ontario. Her father also encountered serious racism, and despite being an established physicist, was unable to secure work and was required to return to Trinidad for a short period of time. In another text, Sally Frater chronicles how Thomasos' arrival to Canada in the seventies - first to Guelph, then the Greater Toronto Area - coincided with Canada's burgeoning era of multiculturalism and "acceptance" of immigrants, though "those of colour who emigrated here found that their reality was in direct conflict with this." Thomasos describes an "inhospitable" habitat of racism and alienation during her sixteen-year stay in southwestern Ontario. Esi Edugyan, Gaëtane Verna, Emma Doubt, and Sarah Milroy, *Denyse Thomasos – Odyssey*, exhibition catalogue (Toronto: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2021): 28; Sally Frater, “Spaces That Hold, Spaces That Bind: Built Environments in the Work of Denyse Thomasos,” in *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, eds. Renée van der Avoird, Sally Frater, and Michelle Jacques (New York: Delmonico Books, 2023): 50.

⁸ Denyse Thomasos, "Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice," in *Urban Jewels: Denyse Thomasos' Big Canvases, 1993-1999*, exhibition catalogue (Barrie, Maclaren Art Centre, 2013), accessed via <https://maclarenart.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DT-Urban-Jewels-statement.pdf>

⁹ In an interview, Thomasos' husband Samein Priester said, ““It wasn't okay for [Thomasos] not to know what was going on in the world,” Priester recalls, remembering how she would assign him the odd research project. “Like Cuba, for example. She would say: ‘I can't find out about everything. You have to help.’” Sarah Milroy, “Denyse Thomasos broke out of her own mould,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 23, 2012, accessed via <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/denyse-thomasos-broke-out-of-her-own-mould/article/5591670/>; Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos - Odyssey*, 64.

¹⁰ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos – Odyssey*, 28.

different but parallel experiences of violence and dispossession under the administration of European colonialism.¹¹

In 2021, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection exhibited the career retrospective *Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey*, closely followed by the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, in late 2022. These significant exhibitions re-introduced the artist to the broader public on a renewed scale. However, despite her career success for over twenty years and these large-scale posthumous exhibitions, a rigorous close encounter with her art is long overdue. While there are many public reviews of her work and a few interviews,¹² there is a distinct lack of long-form academic scholarship that takes a thorough, theoretical approach to her oeuvre. The main theoretical texts on Thomasos are the exhibition catalogues for *Odyssey* and *just beyond*, as well as an earlier solo exhibition catalogue entitled *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings by Denyse Thomasos*, from 2004. These texts pay generous attention to Thomasos' focus on structures of confinement; they also detail her interest in the prison-industrial complex, her research and social justice advocacy, and her extensive travels that speak to a multi-placedness of diasporic belonging. Most notably, in *just beyond*, writer Marsha Pearce analyzes the paintings as delineating a Caribbean sensibility of survival, and curator Adrienne Edwards employs affect theory to engage the sensual impact of her linework.¹³ In *Odyssey*, author Esi Edugyan regales the openness and sense of possibility signified in Thomasos' depictions of architecture.¹⁴ In *Epistrophe*, critic Franklin Sirmans and poet M. NourbeSe Philip admire her interjection into the

¹¹ Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, "#WIP Podcast – Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey (Episode 3)," Youtube Video, 46m 56s, March 28, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tQfH0ufWys>

¹² Reviews have been featured previously and posthumously in sources such as Hyperallergic, Artnews, The Guardian, The New York Times, Artforum, and National Post, among several others.

¹³ Jacques, Frater, and Van Der Avoird, eds., *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, 36.

¹⁴ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos – Odyssey*, 37.

modernist tradition of painting.¹⁵ While deeply thoughtful, critical, and relevant to this research, the essays in these catalogues are relatively short, and their topics merit further interrogation.

Scholars like Michelle M. Wright, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and M. Nourbese Philip have previously employed theories of space and time in relation to Blackness¹⁶, but Thomasos' artwork in particular has not yet been evaluated through this lens. In the chapters that follow, I aim to elucidate how her abstractions engage space and time as both aesthetic and conceptual means of representing a Black diasporic experience. I employ the metaphor of the black hole, or more specifically the singularity within a black hole system, to give language to a phenomenon to which Black contemporary art contributes greatly: an aesthetics of disruption. I propose two frameworks of what I am calling *state spacetime* and *diasporic spacetime*, both of which entwine, overlap, and conflict with each other. I use the term "spacetime" deliberately because space and time are inextricable concepts, both theoretically and materially: not only must we think spatiotemporally in scientific concepts like the general theory of relativity, but a spatiotemporal sensibility has substantial implications for the social study of colonialism and empire. As Holt Meyer, Susanne Rau, and Katharina Waldner write, we must not "locat[e] the imperial in some other time, or in some other place, but rather in the *entire[t]y* of the contemporary world."¹⁷ My concepts of state spacetime and diasporic spacetime amalgamate the fields of spatial theory, temporal theory, Black feminist geographies, and diaspora studies in order to study the unique intersections of space, time, identity, and affect that form the basis of

¹⁵ Ingrid Jenkner, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Gaëtane Verna, and Franklin Sirmans, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings by Denyse Thomasos*, (Lennoxville, Québec: Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University, 2006): 38, 50

¹⁶ Some of their more prominent writing on the subject include, respectively: Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *Re-visiones (Madrid)*, no. 7 (2017); M. Nourbese Philip, "Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time," *Transition (Kampala, Uganda)* no. 124 (2017): 118-136.

¹⁷ Holt Meyer, Susanne Rau, and Katharina Waldner, eds. *SpaceTime of the Imperial* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017): 3, emphasis mine.

Thomasos' art. Alongside early spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre, I engage the critical writings of Black diasporic scholars like Katherine McKittrick, Rinaldo Walcott, Anaïs Duplan, Christina Sharpe, and Dionne Brand among many others, all of whom chart a dense web of relations, intersections, and radical approaches to understanding Blackness and the intangibilities of diasporic experience.

i. STATE SPACETIME: A DEFINITION

First, let us situate ourselves within state spacetime. Put simply, state spacetime is the fabric that makes up the experiential foundation of the settler state. It synthesizes what French theorist Henri Lefebvre conceptualized as “abstract” or “state space” with the longstanding Western assumption of a linear, progressive time. Both have been employed materially and philosophically as structuring agents for society, and especially for diasporic and other marginalized people, but they are often approached as separate entities. Rooted in colonial logics and capitalist production, the unified force of state spacetime is instrumental in maintaining a normative social order that is fundamentally at-odds with the lived realities and rhythms of diasporic experience.

The notion of the production of space — generally defined as the understanding of space as socially produced, rather than naturally occurring and absolute — has been well-theorized since Lefebvre's 1974 text on the matter. However, his further insights on abstract/state space and his trialectic of the *perceived-conceived-lived* offer an important framework for thinking about space as complex and multi-dimensional beyond simply its social construction. A Marxist theorist, Lefebvre conceptualizes state space as an encompassing physical and metaphorical space produced by and necessary for capitalism. The rapidly growing economic network of

banks, business centres, and technocratic, productivist values in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century subordinated society to a “logic of capital” that is currently the dominant frame.¹⁸ Labour became alienated from social life entirely while human desires and social relations are abstracted, “stripped of their living substance” and lived reality; this abstraction then informs and makes room for a homogenous “world of commodities.”¹⁹ State space operates and survives on a paradox: on one hand, it requires the public assumption that the space of the state is “a container waiting to be filled by content,” indifferent to the bodies and happenings that occur within it (alternatively, it can be assumed to be simply nonexistent, merely a “mental thing” that has no material consequence or felt effects)²⁰. On the other hand, it relies on being perceived as an objective overseer, unbiased and not unkind, but simply acting in its inhabitants’ best interests by ordering the world in a rational, coherent manner. As Lefebvre says,

What we seem to have, then, is an apparent subject, an impersonal pseudo-subject, the abstract ‘one’ of modern social space, and hidden within it, concealed by its illusory transparency — the real ‘subject’; namely state (political) power. Within this space, and on the subject of this space, everything is openly declared: everything is said or written. Save for the fact there is very little to be said — and even less to be ‘lived’, *for lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is ‘conceived of’*. History is experienced as nostalgia, and nature as regret — as a horizon fast disappearing behind us.²¹

“Conceived” space, as mentioned here, plays an instrumental role in extinguishing the lived, social aspect of human life. In the realm of the conceived, we understand space through our knowledge, which Lefebvre writes is a subjective combination of understanding and ideology. Conceived representations of space are most commonly introduced through scientific, urbanist, and architectural understandings of the world we inhabit, which often prioritizes “objective” or

¹⁸ Japhy Wilson, “‘The Devastating Conquest of the Lived by the Conceived’: The Concept of Abstract Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre,” *Space and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2013): 368.

¹⁹ Wilson, “‘The Devastating Conquest,’” 368-369.

²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. First published 1974. (Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 3.

²¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 51, emphasis mine.

“logical” attributes of space such as physical properties or measurements.²² In doing so, these representations ignore the lived and human needs of its users, thus “strip[ping] these spaces of their spontaneity, diversity, and symbolic content, as part of a broader process of abstraction through which ‘lived experience is crushed.’”²³ Through the appearance of being an open book, state space manufactures consent and consensus for these workings.²⁴ In sum, state space(time) as a whole requires itself to appear rational, objective, neutral, and most importantly, *concrete*, existing as a series of immovable, “predetermined stabilities.” If successful, its hierarchies can then be naturalized enough into our daily routines that we do not worry about traps or secrets, because the truth can – ostensibly – be seen and experienced firsthand.²⁵

Abstract/state space *is* domination, for it subsumes all that we do and are, as it “conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance”²⁶, leaving little room for affectivity or living — two things that could evolve into a barrier to capitalist production in the form of protest or resistance. In fact, we as humans “experienc[e] space as an obstacle, as a resistant ‘objectality’ at times as implacably hard as a concrete wall, being not only extremely difficult to modify in any way but also hedges about by Draconian rules prohibiting any attempt at such modification.” This prohibition is accompanied, not always invisibly, by violence, which is inherent to both the abstraction of space and militarized state

²² Lefebvre writes, “We may be sure that representations of space have a practical impact, that they intervene in and modify spatial textures which are informed by effective knowledge and ideology. Representations of space must therefore have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space. Their intervention occurs by way of construction - in other words, by way of architecture, conceived of not as the building of a particular structure, palace or monument, but rather as a project embedded in a spatial context and a texture which call for ‘representations’ that will not vanish into the symbolic or imaginary realms.” Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

²³ Wilson, “‘The Devastating Conquest,’” 371.

²⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 57.

²⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): xi.

²⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 57.

power itself, the latter of which frequently employs violence against any resistant event or force.²⁷

On the other hand, state time orders society on a colonial, capitalist conception of temporality. Firstly, it contributes to settler colonialism through the designation of Indigenous people as “spatially, socially, and temporally before [the settler state] in the double sense of ‘before’ — before it in a temporal sequence and before it as a fact to be faced.”²⁸ This convenient de-temporalization of Indigenous people as “backwards” and prior to the nation, makes way for the settler society and its governing structures to reproduce and reinforce such temporalities, a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the spatial formulation of imperial empire begins with the violent theft of land and the creation of East/West and North/South hierarchies, the *temporal* formulation of empire relies on narrative claims of linear time.²⁹ The linear progressive timeline imposed by the West on the rest of the world is imagined as a single, unidirectional line, running from the past through the present, and into the future. Major events and key individuals are stamped onto specific points on the line, mapped by the clock and the calendar. This timeline is marked by an accelerating sequence of change and progress that stretches into the future, presupposing that things improve over time into some singular *way they ought to be*.

Through globalization, this sense of time is institutionalized and naturalized as an inherent fact of the world rather than a social construct. Once established as fact, it governs our narratives of history (including, of course, art history), our understandings of government systems, etc. It can also be prominently seen in, as artist and housing lawyer Rasheedah Philips writes, our systems of law, whose routines performed by both the prosecuted and the workers of

²⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 57.

²⁸ Elizabeth A. Povinelli qtd in Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 48-49.

²⁹ Meyer et al, *SpaceTime of the Imperial*, 4.

the legal system are organized by time — from the timelines of court dates, sentencing methods, eviction notices, housing development, and more. And the law, as an extension of the hand of state power enacting itself over the population, “produces time...[and] orders the nomos through its own temporalities, aspiring to assimilate and absorb other temporalities in the process.”³⁰ In other words, state time knowingly conflicts with social needs, especially within marginalized communities, and it is often directly wielded as violence or punishment.

Taken together, these hegemonic strategies create an implicit social understanding that there is one universal, invisible spacetime that we occupy. Any individual or collective that cannot keep up are the ones who are misaligned and stagnant, due to their own inherent incompatibility with *the way things ought to be*. This ideology is particularly and forcefully applied over the unemployed, the homeless, the impoverished, the marginalized, the stigmatized, the criminalized – all groups overwhelmingly inhabited by people of colour.³¹ They are the ones who are ultimately punished by the legal system (for which the police force provides a security detail and a violent helping hand) and subject to social death. In this way, they are much more easily swept into the state’s official management system: the prison-industrial complex.

The prison-industrial complex is one of the ultimate results of capitalism. Temporally, the state’s strategic management of life occurs through the subjection of its inhabitants to a life rhythm meant to uphold accumulation and production, rather than social life and creativity.³²

³⁰ Renisa Mawani qtd in Rasheedah Phillips, “Race Against Time: Afrofuturism and Our Liberated Housing Futures,” *Critical Analysis of Law: An International and Interdisciplinary Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2022): 17.

³¹ Elliot C. Mason, whose work I will return to shortly, attributes this attitude to the “apologetic logic” of “neoliberal ethics of self-improvement,” which defines poverty as “not really a material problem. It is not part of a social system that needs to be repaired, or destroyed and built differently, in order to correct the social flaw that is chronic inequality. Instead, the problem is that people’s interiors are not at peace. The individual is unhappy in her or himself. Poverty, homelessness, hunger, destitution: these are, in the new urban ethics, conditions of a self that has not bought the right equipment to be happy.” In essence, the lived spaces and personal actions of the city’s inhabitants are what are broken, not the system nor the state. Elliot C. Mason, *Building Black: Towards Antiracist Architecture* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2022): 61-62.

³² Lefebvre qtd in Wilson, ““The Devastating Conquest,”” 370-371.

Lefebvre wrote widely on the workings of everyday life, and eventually popularized a theory of what he calls “rhythmanalysis.” Rhythmanalysis contends that *rhythm* constitutes the basis of everyday life: biologically (in nature), physiologically (in the rhythms of the human anatomy, such as heartbeats), and socially (in both the literal sonic rhythms and the routines we produce every day). Part of this concept discloses that everyday life is regimented by a rhythm of “monotony, order, and alienation” due to our uneven work/life balance within industrial capitalism.³³ The friction between work and leisure produces a tension between “constrained” and “lived” time, making everyday life “a terrain of struggle between linear and cyclical time, between abstract and lived space, and between alienation and utopia.”³⁴ Everyday life’s original rhythms, rhythms of creativity, culture, relations, and other affective lived experiences that vary by individual, are incompatible with the alienating time-space of productivism.

This particularly affects the Black diaspora because it keeps Black people in Canada, who are already ostensibly invisible and made to be placeless, out-of-step with state spacetime. State spacetime actively works against and exists to manage Black people in the diaspora and their bodies. It manifests in part through what Katherine McKittrick refers to as “plantation futures”, or what Loïc Wacquant calls the “carceral continuum”; that is to say, the ways in which the economies, logics and configurations of slavery have survived into the present and seep into the future.³⁵ This is evidenced through spatiotemporal strategies of urban regulation such as the ghetto, redlining, gentrification, urban renewal, and the workforce, as well as the mass-incarcerating, abjecting, timeline-altering tendencies of the prison-industrial system. These

³³ Emily Reid-Musson, “Intersectional Rhythmanalysis: Power, Rhythm, and Everyday Life,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 6 (2018): 881.

³⁴ Reid-Musson, “Intersectional Rhythmanalysis,” 881.

³⁵ Katherine McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (November 2013): 2-3; Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When the Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95.

spatializations and rhythms are attuned with reproduction and accumulation rather than lived experience and difference, which are wholly effaced by the state's goal of homogenization. They produce a disjointed experience of life that is fundamentally predicated on the containment and management of Black people and their sense of place and time. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick emphasizes that despite the production and negotiation of space being a collective project, we must remember that "geographies in the diaspora are accentuated by racist paradigms of the past and their ongoing hierarchical patterns."³⁶ McKittrick fills in Lefebvre's gaps, rightfully acknowledging that the production of space occurs along a racial-sexual axis that orders knowledge based on the history of human captivity and concealment, as well as the ongoing management of Black senses of place. When compounded by an understanding of how time itself is used to order knowledge on the same grounds, we can look towards the ways that marginalized populations – in this paper, Black diasporic populations – move through, negotiate, and resist this field.

That all being said, we can now look towards how Denyse Thomasos' work demonstrates the potentialities of Black lives and art to become sites of rupture and richness within the spacetime of the state. In Chapter 1, I take a close look at the repeated motifs of the city and the prison in her paintings. I argue that Thomasos addresses and critiques state spacetime from a vantage point through which she deliberately abstracts and reconstitutes it, to make visible an alternative perspective on urban and carceral violences, a visual act of refusal that upsets established networks of power. I further suggest she takes a phenomenological approach to representation that makes visible the life-rhythms of the Black diaspora in the city, which is typically rendered invisible. In doing so, her abstractions reassert how state spacetime is

³⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xii.

fundamentally at odds with the lived spaces and sensibilities of the Black diaspora. Thomasos animates traditional representations of the cityscape, manipulating its time-spaces both visually and conceptually by playing with scale, visualizing the rhythms and syncopations of diasporic presence, and by keeping visible the always-morphing, omnipresent enclosure of the plantation. Thus she ensures we remain aware of our occupation of the afterlife of slavery while simultaneously invested in persistent disavowal of it.

In Chapter 2, I expand on the second framework, what I am calling (Black) diasporic spacetime. This alternative field of space and time, which I analogize to the singularity, is produced by the lived, nonnormative spatialities and temporalities as experienced by Black people living in the diaspora. Thomasos visualizes the experience of being in the diaspora through a purely psychic dimension, attending to the messiness, the knots, the hauntings, and unsettlements that she navigated throughout her life. The motifs of the ship, boats, rafts, and shipping containers are depicted not as an instrument of power but as hovering ghosts, whose solidity is threatened by Thomasos' vibrant, energetic abstract fields. Through the psychic and affective, Thomasos explores the state of the Black diasporic individual without resorting to a deterministic and reductive hyperfocus on the Black body itself, emphasizing how the body is not "the only relevant Black geographic scale."³⁷

Finally, I conclude this paper by way of a preliminary overview of further works of Thomasos to be interrogated, namely her final suite of works created in the last year of her life. Prior to her untimely and tragic death at age 47 in 2012, Thomasos produced several smaller-scale works that return to the style of complete abstraction, though in a markedly different way than her grids. Instead of vibrating tallies and hatches, these paintings comprise spacious colour

³⁷ Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007): 7.

fields in which the faint traces of some of her former paintings can be seen, reaching back in time to deconstruct her motifs into dissoluble, and thus conquerable, matter. I posit that these works mark an unfinished turn towards the future, towards visualizing worlds otherwise, even if these worlds are as yet unimaginable. When surveyed together, it is apparent how and why the breadth of Thomasos' creativity shifts us on a planetary scale.

CHAPTER 1

Capital grows to make the void: it kills around it on a planetary scale.
— Henri Lefebvre

The mere presence of Blackness in Canada, as McKittrick writes, is more often than not considered a surprise.³⁸ A proverbial wrench in the gears of Canada’s settler colonial machinations, despite its history of slave labour and multiple contributions to the triangular trade.³⁹ As “arrivants”⁴⁰ to Indigenous land as chattel slaves, certainly under complex circumstances but settlers still, Black people in Canada and their attendant geographies are assumed to not be in Canada, not synonymous with Canada, or simply not related to it at all. As mentioned, Blackness in Canada is often situated in a narrative of invisibility. Or, more specifically, a narrative of an “erasure-to-presence linearity,” which is a pervasive assumption that Black people’s place in Canada came into tentative and somewhat intrusive existence at some point in recent, unremarkable history.⁴¹ The naturalization of this surprise is one small part of a larger entrenched system that has removed Black Canadians from visibility and pushed them further into a “no-space”, wherein their lives and experiences are incessantly denied.⁴²

³⁸ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 92.

³⁹ “...Canada is, in fact, racially produced...” says McKittrick (*Demonic Grounds*, 95). Canada (then “British North America” and “New France”) has and continues to fervently deny or diminish its historical role in the transatlantic slave trade, since American and Caribbean slave economies were much bigger in scale. However, this does not mean the British and French colonizing forces on Turtle Island did not participate; by 1759 New France had at least 1100 African slaves (Winks 9) and the later establishment of British North America did not restrict slave labour; it was even implicitly encouraged once Britain tried to encourage immigration from the rest of the Americas, allowing people to bring their slaves with them (25-26). Black people are also present on the land through migration. I also refer to the production of slave ships and salt fish for slave rations on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador, as addressed by Bushra Junaid in her article in *Making History* (Junaid 113). For more please see the comprehensive text Robin W. Winks and George Elliott Clarke, *Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press, 2021) and Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni, eds., *Making History: Visual Arts and Blackness in Canada* (Vancouver: On Point Press, 2023).

⁴⁰ Jodi Byrd coined the term “arrivants” to describe those brought to the Americas on violent terms. Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 67.

⁴¹ Katherine McKittrick, “On Quiet Happiness, Charcoal Wood, and Metal: Charmaine Lurch’s Being, Belonging and Grace,” in Crooks et al, eds., *Making History*, 177.

⁴² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 16.

Such denial is part and parcel of what Katherine McKittrick conceptualizes as “plantation futures,” and is particularly related to how dispossession functions within the contemporary urban city. Plantation futures is a mode of thought that sees the plantation structure re-made and eternalized over and through time into several new, “migratory” forms that perpetuate the plantation’s logics, economies, systems of dispossession, and violences, without fully returning to its initial state.⁴³ Prominent examples include segregated and ghettoed living spaces, industrial towns, labour transport networks, slave labour-based economic structures, and the use of violence to enforce these activities. It also includes ideologies such as that of the “dysselected” racial Other, the naturalization of people-as-commodities, and colonial geographic knowledge.⁴⁴ The plantation was originally established on what Europeans deemed “the lands of no one,” disregarding Indigenous presence and assuming a divine entitlement to the land; and so, reservations and plantations operate on a logic of segregation and the maintenance of “particular spaces of otherness...designated as incongruous with humanness.”⁴⁵ Property, ownership, and labour extraction thus become the grammar of settler colonialism, inducing the simultaneous subjections of “stolen peoples on stolen land.”⁴⁶

As such, McKittrick lists the prison, the city, and the resort as physical and ideological successors to the plantation that are, at their core, rooted in values of property, power, and the enmeshment of “racial violence...[with] economic growth”⁴⁷. Similarly, Loïc Wacquant’s comprehensive concept of the carceral continuum outlines how the abolition of the plantation

⁴³ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 3.

⁴⁴ The word “dysselected” refers to Sylvia Wynter’s term for the white Western colonial model of “the Human,” which does not include certain people who are “dysselected” from the pure, ultimate definition of Man, whether racially, sexually, economically, ethically, and so forth. McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 8; Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR (East Lansing, Michigan)* 3, no. 3 (2003): 267.

⁴⁵ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 6, 8.

⁴⁶ Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 61.

⁴⁷ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 8,

economy merely elided into an era that continued the social contracts of the plantation, such as segregation, mob violence, hysteria around race mixing, slaveholder class hegemony, and the lack of education and political rights. This further extended into the superexploitation of Black labour in the form of debt peonage, restriction of workers to dangerous low-income work, and sharecropping.⁴⁸ Therefore, the slave trade, the Jim Crow system, the ghetto, and the ever-growing prison system are sequentially connected through time by their deliberate containment of Black people for the purposes of labour extraction and social management of surplus populations. Upon one configuration's obsolescence, it is replaced by a diffused, reformulated "successor regime."⁴⁹ Thus, the plantation becomes an inescapable condition of life, rather than an isolated past event.

The third institution of Wacquant's continuum is the ghetto, but I am expanding outward here to think of the city as a whole. The city as we know it is more than an environment, but a specific mechanism of management and governance, "a medium of hostility and social repression" that subsists on state-orchestrated violence and dispossession.⁵⁰ Thinking of the city as a racializing, imperial superstructure acknowledges the role of the built environment in upholding the concepts of race and property.⁵¹ In *Building Black: Towards Antiracist Architecture*, Elliot C. Mason describes the relationship between buildings and bodies as informed by colonial conceptions of the Human à la Sylvia Wynter, who has written extensively

⁴⁸ Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis," 100.

⁴⁹ Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis," 99.

⁵⁰ Sylvia Faichney, "Considering Afrofuturism and the Built Environment," *React/review* 2 (2022): 78; Mason, *Building Black*, 58.

⁵¹ Elliot C. Mason writes that "Together, [the codes of the city and of bodies] form an epistemology constructed on the raciality of bodies that are meaningful specifically in relation to the city, to architecture, and to the urban ethics that uphold the ontological structure affirming race's veracity." Rinaldo Walcott also speaks about this in *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition* (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2021). Mason, *Building Black*, 29-30.

about how our understandings of “Human” is restricted to the European male body, with all others occupying a tangential and therefore less human position.⁵² He writes,

The city itself, its manifold of material constructions and their synthesis as the city, is based on the premise that only citizens (Humans who are coded as belonging here) are constitutive of and constituted by this city. The relation between buildings and bodies is premised on the exclusion of some forms of life necessarily not entering the ethics of this synthesis, otherwise the city would be everywhere, undefinable, and meaningless.⁵³

The city, as an administrative entity, is as such characterized by these abjections. He goes on to say that if this exclusion were acknowledged by the state, “then the illusion of the ethical synthesis would collapse, and the city would end.”⁵⁴ Both Mason and Lefebvre understand buildings as a state’s method of asserting authority through monumentality and the integration of productivist values into every aspect of our lives; we cannot think of the city as anything less than structured by settler state networks of power.⁵⁵

As another form of the plantation, the city houses some of most marginalized and dispossessed communities, who are deeply embedded within the technocratic regime of work and production; processes that cannot be modernized away by technological advancements and perpetual urban development.⁵⁶ And dispossession, in turn, makes precarious subjects: theorists Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou define the concept of precarity as “unnecessary and systemic exposure to injury, violence, poverty, indebtedness, early death” — all results of the violent paradigm of state power that lays down social death like a punishment for existence, “in

⁵² This is an oversimplification of a very complex, nuanced understanding of the Human, bodies, and history that Wynter details in her comprehensive theories. For further reading please see Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.”

⁵³ Mason, *Building Black*, 52.

⁵⁴ Mason, *Building Black*, 52,

⁵⁵ Lefebvre speaks at length about how the “arrogant verticality” is linked to phallogentrism and that housing structures help the state oversee both capitalist production and biological reproduction, by encouraging the production of the family unit (232). Mason, *Building Black*, 39, 47; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 98.

⁵⁶ Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 70.

both spectacular and quotidian ways, insistently and insinuatingly.”⁵⁷ State violences in the city are not always immediately seen; they exist in the “furtive movements” of stop-and-frisk practices⁵⁸, broken window policing policies, and white citizens’ self-deputization as methods of policing Black existence, not to mention the discrimination faced on a day-to-day interpersonal basis.⁵⁹ They exist in the class-oppressive rhythms of the legal system, which enforce or support unequal rent-burdens on Black poor women, deliberately short eviction notices and inconvenient court dates, and the high rate of default eviction judgements on the basis of arriving late to court without regards to distance from city centers, childcare, and other obstacles.⁶⁰ State violences in the city also exist in the spatial and temporal displacement caused by gentrification and urban development projects, mostly affecting marginalized communities in the pursuit of cheaper real estate to flip for profit. In doing so, these violences “disrupt communal temporalities, erase public memory, and foreclose access to the temporal domain for the future,” even if displaced tenants are promised the right to return.⁶¹ Such projects destroy the lived rhythms of communities, including memories, shared customs, senses of kinship, and hopes for the future.⁶² Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective define precarity as “the word for those whose only proper place is non-being, nowhere,” and this liminal zone of existence is one of silently moving but powerfully racist and classist enactments of state power.⁶³ Such enactments cannot be easily shared or explained and instead are “largely *felt* when they intersect

⁵⁷ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou qtd in Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective, “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It,” *Liminalities* 12, no. 1 (2016): 12..

⁵⁸ Frederick Douglass qtd in Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 86.

⁵⁹ Walcott, *On Property*, 28, 39.

⁶⁰ Phillips, “Race Against Time,” 16-19.

⁶¹ Phillips adds that “Temporal inequities show up at every step of the displacement process resulting from affordable, market rate, and luxury housing redevelopment, from the short notice requirements, to the time required for a family to vacate their home if evicted or displaced, which is often severely out of sync with the temporalities and lived realities of the people being displaced” Phillips, “Race Against Time,” 22.

⁶² Phillips, “Race Against Time,” 28.

⁶³ Morrill et al, “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It,” 7.

with our everyday lives but hard to see as lines of direct relations — especially at their global scale.”⁶⁴ In terms of representation, then, artists are tasked with holding this indescribable affect in tension with the responsibility of representing these precarious subjects in a human light. Denyse Thomasos was one of many Black diasporic artists engaging in forms of expressive wake work; the wake being Christina Sharpe’s nuanced descriptor for what it means “to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding,” in the sense of experiencing its crushing weight and also the act of surviving it.⁶⁵ Thomasos’ particular brand of wake work strives to capture these morphing means and modes in a way that also attends to Black geographies, Black resistance, and the multiplicity of Black life at the same time.

ii. BLACK RHYTHM; BLACK SPACE/S

Life is this ongoing interaction between myself and my surroundings.
The basis of this interaction is my drive to satisfy desire: I want to
avoid destruction and death. My environment is alternately supportive of
and hostile about this goal. I fall in and out of equilibrium.
– Anaïs Duplan

Recalling Lefebvre’s concept of conceived space provides a generative entry point into Thomasos’ depiction of architecture. The denial of Black existence and, consequently, the denial of this denial, is a requisite component of what Lefebvre has termed “conceived” space or “representations of space”, a material and philosophical epistemology that contributes to the stripping of lived experience from the spaces in which we live. Lefebvre’s employment of the word “conceived” refers to the most dominant branch of his triple relation of *perceived* space,

⁶⁴ Patricio Dávila, ed., “Diagrams of Power: Visualization, Mapping, and Performing Resistance,” *Onomatopée* 168 (2019): 8.

⁶⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13-14.

conceived space, and *lived* space. These interrelated layers constitute the various dimensions we experience simultaneously within abstract/state space. Perceived space (also called spatial practice) comprises what we perceive through our senses, an empirical evaluation that contributes to state space's appearance of neutrality. Lived space (also called representational space) is the affective dimension in which us "users" *live* our space and time — it is a heterogeneous space of lived experience and imagination, and "tend[s] towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs."⁶⁶ This lived space however, is "progressively eviscerated" by the conceived.⁶⁷ Conceived space is constituted by abstract, so-called empirical maps and plans made by architects, city planners, and social engineers, which greatly inform our ideas of a hierarchized urban space in which our surroundings are ordered for maximum, unbiased rationality and efficiency.⁶⁸ Patricio Dávila cautions us to remember the "god trick that maps (and [data] visualizations) can perform. They have a tendency to make us think they are beyond human and therefore beyond reproach."⁶⁹ Spatial planning is typically asserted from an overseeing, aerial perspective as if from an all-seeing eye. In addition, it compartmentalizes and homogenizes areas by emptying them of their qualitative character in favour of the quantitative, such as measurements, borders, and data points, all without a human presence. Ostensibly, social spaces are too chaotic and full of difference to be functional, and thus we — the actors who passively experience space — must gratefully accept the intervention of "an imaginary coherence that functions to 'reduce reality in the interests of power'" to help us navigate its rules and borders.⁷⁰ As inhabitants who conveniently ignore how we continuously

⁶⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38-39.

⁶⁷ Wilson, "The Devastating Conquest," 371.

⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38, Wilson, "The Devastating Conquest," 371.

⁶⁹ Dávila, "Diagrams of Power," 5-6.

⁷⁰ Lefebvre qtd in Wilson, "The Devastating Conquest," 371.

produce our own conditions, we uphold this network of power. Sylvia Wynter posits that such entrenched notions of the normative social can activate subconscious neurochemical understandings of the world, such as within our internal punishment/reward mechanisms.⁷¹ These notions, I add, also inform our conscious and subconscious attempts to forcibly align ourselves with the productivist rhythms of state spacetime, at the expense of our variegated and creative life rhythms.

The concept of rhythmanalysis, outlined in the introduction, provides the most effective springboard for these recurring motifs in Thomasos' work, at least in the case of her cityscapes. Thomasos' unique visual language leads her paintings to be likened to other art forms — M. NourbeSe Philip compares her works to the (Black) innovation of jazz, while Marsha Pearce sees the abstractions as “visible poetry,” a term borrowed from Derek Walcott which refers to the Caribbean sensibility of survival.⁷² These comparisons suggest there is something about the paintings that delve so deep into our sensory worlds that they surpass the ocularcentric and resonate with other senses such as sound and touch, as well as other mediums like text. I suggest that this sensory element derives from Thomasos' rhythmic enunciations — in a phenomenological but also a visual sense — that beat in tandem with the rhythm of experience, particularly Black experience, making visible its syncopation from the rhythm of state spacetime and demonstrating the diaspora's insuppressible sensibility of disavowal. By doing so, Thomasos animates conceived representations of space in a way that exposes the thrumming pulse of human life that makes up the communities situated within it.

⁷¹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth, Freedom,” 328-329.

⁷² Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 47; Pearce, “An Aesthetic of Survival: Denyse Thomasos, from Middle Passage to Colossal Endurance” in Jacques et al, eds., *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, 35.

Lefebvre's critique of everyday life is directly informed by the existence of an inherent rhythm in our natural and social spaces. Everyday rhythms consist of both cyclical and linear movement, which sometimes intersect and sometimes do not. The former are mostly seen in cosmological cycles such as days and nights, seasons, and tides, as well as the human rituals and ceremonies in tune with them. The latter are mostly social rhythms produced by humans, such as ideas of linear progressive time and linear life sequences, such as the West's traditional path of birth-school-work-marriage-family-death.⁷³ Lastly, because such rhythms are place-specific, they are highly mobile and deeply embedded in processes of nation-making.⁷⁴ According to Lefebvre, rhythm is structured by repetition — there is “no rhythm without repetition in time and in space, without *reprises*, without returns, in short without measure.”⁷⁵ Our contemporary industrial era is defined by a conflicting combination of linear time and cyclical rhythms; capitalism in our global metropolises consists of cyclical rhythms of production, such as commuting, work hours, traffic, and so-called work/life balance, repeated over and over again. This monotony is hidden behind a moral ethic that fashions laborious effort into virtue, therefore naturalizing the maintenance of neoliberal capitalism as an inherently righteous act.⁷⁶ Lefebvre continues, “The rhythm that is proper to capital is the rhythm of producing (everything: things, men, people, etc.) and destroying (through wars, through *progress*, through inventions and brutal interventions, through speculation, etc.).”⁷⁷ This endlessly self-reinvigorating, alternating rhythm regulates life into neatly packaged fragments designed for maximum productivity and minimal

⁷³ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum Books, 2004): 8.

⁷⁴ Reid-Musson, “Intersectional Rhythmanalysis,” 886.

⁷⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 6, emphasis original.

⁷⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 51-52.

⁷⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 55.

leisure/creative time, pendulously swinging between the abstract and lived, “between alienation and utopia,”⁷⁸ between life and not-quite-life.

The persistent existence of lived space, however, proves that despite the richness that capital effaces, there is still life bubbling, especially within the city. As Lefebvre points out, it is precisely this conflict that makes resistance possible: “Everyday life is thus subordinated to productivism, but remains resistant to it, and is therefore both a realm of alienation and the site of a possible ‘disalienation.’”⁷⁹ La Paperson writes that “ghettoed” places are heterotopic,

not in the postmodern sense of unbounded heterogeneity but in a postcolonial sense that colonizing power is alive and well. Yet accompanying it at every instance and beyond every instance are lived realities that transgress its borders. So at a basic level, what I mean by postcolonial is that colonization is not over; we are intimate and complicit with it, yet we act, dream, and live in ways that are not limited by its horizons.⁸⁰

Heterotopic spaces subvert the steady repetition of production. The monotonous repetition in our current life rhythms is not absolute, and “there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive, whether as a lived (organic) element or not — *difference*.”⁸¹ If there is no rhythm without difference, and no power without resistance⁸², then the imbrication of state rhythms and lived human rhythms disclose how marginalized lived experience, in this case that of the Black diaspora, is the necessary difference that prevents the totalization of state spacetime and emancipates us from its total grip. If Blackness is the surprise in the landscape of

⁷⁸ Reid-Musson, “Intersectional Rhythmanalysis,” 881.

⁷⁹ Lefebvre qtd in Wilson, “The Devastating Conquest,” 371.

⁸⁰ Listing the ways certain neighbourhoods and citizens respond to their specific contexts is beyond the remit of this article, but please see the work of La Paperson and other scholars like Rasheedah Philips, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. La Paperson, “The Postcolonial Ghetto: Seeing Her Shape and His Hand,” *Berkeley Review of Education* 1, no. 1 (2010): 8.

⁸¹ In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre writes that absolute repetition doesn’t exist except in theory; he uses the example that A = A means that the first A is similar to the second A, but not identical, as one has the quality of being first and one does not. Further, the difference between them is actually produced by the repetition; the second A would not be second if it had not been compared to the first (7-8). Lefebvre partly qtd in Joe Graham, “Rhythmanalysis: The Line as a Record of the Moving Present,” *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 14, no. 1 (2015): 56.

⁸² I refer here to Fred Moten’s concept of the double ubiquity of power and resistance, which states that resistance has always existed in equal measure to power, sometimes even preceding it. Fred Moten, “The Subprime and the Beautiful,” *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (2013): 240.

Canada, then the Black lived experience is equally surprising; in the eyes of “civil society”, Black people are “unexpected, shocking...and have ‘astonishingly’ rich lives, which contradict the essential black subject.”⁸³ The element of surprise is also constituted through the creation of intentional, oppositional Black spatiotemporalities, which signify “an ongoing black refusal of a passive relationship with space and place,” and is emblematic of the ways in which Black geographic subjects respond to and subvert domination.

As a fabric that expands over people and places, state spacetime relies on the homogenization of people and experiences to maintain hegemony, effacing differences “over a great distance in order to undercut the manifold lived realities of local spatial embedding.”⁸⁴ But difference persists. This difference, this irreconcilable field that state spacetime cannot fully extend itself over, is *diasporic spacetime*. Here, the state’s network of power is disrupted enough that it creates an arrhythmic conflict between the two, a friction of epic proportions. Diasporic experience thus acts as a black hole, a singularity with massive invisible density and a gravitational pull that ruptures the vast blanket of state spacetime, and drags it inwards to a single point in which normative rules and knowledges break down. A pinprick of unknowability, or inaccessibility, at least in the proverbial mind of the state. A point that is irreconcilable to the logics of neither settler colonialism nor the plantation. The creative representation of diasporic experience, folded into symbols of the plantation future such as the city and prison, visibly turns *space* into *place* and in doing so ruptures the reductive tendencies of conceived representations.

I suggest that rhythm is the way that Thomasos visualizes that singularity of diasporic experience which produces its own, independent gravity that does not acquiesce to state

⁸³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 93.

⁸⁴ Nathan Allen Jung, “Mapping the Media of Aleksandar Hemon’s Diasporic Time-Geography,” *Ariel* 49, no. 2 (2018): 41.

spacetime's preestablished, "predetermined stabilities." To be clear I do not apply the term "rhythm" within painting entirely metaphorically. In *Visual Art and the Rhythm of Experience*, Danish researchers Kasper Levin, Tone Roald, and Bjarne Sode Funch posit that optical rhythm exists and can be experienced in visual art if we think in phenomenological terms. Rhythm is, of course, a necessarily temporal phenomenon, and more specifically an ordering structure for musical events. According to Edmund Husserl, a melody has a "'threefold structure' of intentionality" in which "the nontemporal now phase of a sensory content is always accompanied by the *retention* of past tones and the *protention* of anticipated tones" — in other words, a past, present, and future of the melody experienced at once (though the present remains central).⁸⁵ This is important because it introduces time consciousness as an immanent quality of subjective experience, which unifies our senses to produce an experience of continuity. Through another phenomenologist, Erwin Straus, Levin et al argue that *movement* is the common element that reaches across our multiple senses, causing them to communicate and produce continuous experiences of sensation. If "rhythm is the organizing principle that unifies sensing in an immanent connection to movement and time," then the movement of Thomasos' works (created through her multi-layered, sketchy brushstrokes and quickly changing colours) contribute to the viewer's subjective experience of time and activates more senses than just the visual.⁸⁶ In a more literal sense of rhythm in art, Gregory Minissale locates rhythm in the composition and constitutive formal elements of abstract art, such as line, texture, shape, space, etc. As viewers, we discern such rhythms by recognizing repeating patterns and variations, our brains and bodies

⁸⁵ Edmund Husserl partly qtd in Kasper Levin, Tone Roald and Bjarne Sode Funch, "Visual Art and the Rhythm of Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 3 (2019): 284.

⁸⁶ Levin et al, "Visual Art and the Rhythm of Experience," 286.

understanding the implication of motion. Agreeing that rhythm primarily comes from movement, in time and in space, he recruits the ideas of music professor Michael Thaut, who argues that

...every work of art possesses rhythm. Because rhythm deals with the discernible structure of temporal organization of an artwork's 'building blocks' into an arrangement of its physical elements into form-building patterns, rhythm is one of the most important components of an artwork....[R]hythm can also be transposed to visual spatial elements, for example, by organizing patterns of deflections in lines, by patches of distinct coloring, or by arranging similarly shaped objects in spatial configurations.⁸⁷

This thoughtful maneuvering of lines and colour is evident across Thomasos' lively abstractions.

Minissale further explains that static media such as painting can also convey rhythm through principles like "the law of common fate," which dictates that when two or more lines, similar but not necessarily identical, are placed together, they suggest that they are moving in unison; this produces the effect of motion or vibration, and is a part of the whole of the work's rhythm.⁸⁸

This can be seen in the work of the modern Italian Futurists, whose primary representational emphasis was on motion, blur, and momentum through frenzied lines, conflicting light sources, and repetition across time and space – all visual tactics that Thomasos employs.⁸⁹ The ultimate takeaway is that abstract art is certainly capable of producing rhythms, since abstraction is "a kinetic representation of the world experienced as flux, as a complex of sensations in which it is impossible to hold anything still."⁹⁰ As such, it corrupts our expectations of the flow of space and time in the painting, and introduces us to an alternative way of looking. This disruption is not to be mistaken for disorder, however; through the grid form and the precision with which her

⁸⁷ Michael Thaut qtd in Gregory Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 6.

⁸⁸ Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 6.

⁸⁹ Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 7.

⁹⁰ Mel Gooding continues, "In this thrilling place our sensorium is assailed by the teeming facts of the actual, and their poetic realisations have the flickering inconstancy of fire. Painting of this kind revels in the evanescence of the elements, in the ceaseless play of light and shadow, in the intensities of colour, in vivid creatures, in the rhythms of free dance and the dissonances of jazz." Mel Gooding qtd in Minissale. *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 7.

lines are placed, when taken as a whole, the paintings are remarkably cohesive, despite their frenetic energy. Thomasos' representations ultimately present a vision of harmony procured through the mastering of unsettlement, as Black people must do in order to survive. Joy and pleasure are not gone. The viewer is able to witness the dual action of Thomasos' wake work: the simultaneous effort of "inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme."⁹¹

iii. UNSETTLING THE URBANSCAPE: COMPOSITIONS OF DISPOSSESSION

To reimagine the body is to resituate the body out of the city.
— *Elliot C. Mason*

Rule number 7 of Martine Syms' *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* reads: "No alternative universes."⁹² Several of Thomasos' paintings depict what appear to be blocks upon blocks of ordinary city streets, steel and brick skyscrapers, and other metropolitan vernacular architecture. Though I would not designate her an Afrofuturist, compared to her other works with their surreal floating compositions or her abstractions, the city as motif is starkly more representational and almost painfully rooted in the contemporary. So Thomasos reimagines these urban landscapes otherwise; for example, *Arc* (2009, fig. 1) is a monumental, street-view perspective of what appears to be a crashing serpentine structure over a sea of anguished faces, rendered in chaotic brushstrokes. In this imaginative exercise, she performs an acute form of wake work, found across Black diasporic art, in which the pursuit is not "to explain or resolve the question of [their] exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather [to] depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes

⁹¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

⁹² Martine Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," *Rhizome.org*, December 17, 2013, accessed via <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/>

of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity."⁹³ Her goal is not to produce abstract art in the same fashion as the great (white, male, cisheterosexual) modernist tradition, nor to re-situate the vulnerable Black body back amidst its traumatizing surroundings. Instead, she deliberately contrasts recognizable, everyday signifiers of the city with the conceptual representation of the lived rhythms that exist alongside and within it. Notably, she does not attempt to assert Black belonging by reclaiming Canadian land; "the opposite of dispossession is not possession and property"⁹⁴ and the opposite of Black placelessness is not claiming Indigenous land as Black land. Rather, Thomasos "hold[s] place and placelessness in tension, through imagination and materiality, and therefore re-spatialize[s] Canada on what might be considered unfamiliar terms."⁹⁵ By disrupting visualizations of conceived space, such as city plans, architectural structures, and their perceived timelessness, she exposes its fragility and limits, and therefore the fragility and limits of neoliberalism and Western bourgeois logics of capital.

So, despite the very contemporary subject matter of the modern city and modern prison, one can easily read the past and future in them, especially when read within the context of her larger oeuvre. Situated amongst paintings of the suffocating slave hold, the imploding centrism of the eighteenth-century panopticon, and the ghostly presence of the slave ship, these images repeat over and through each other, creating an intense visual association. And her works are unequivocally in motion, her many-layered brushstrokes putting forth an appearance of undulation, of lines working together to shift out of their assigned places. She employs rhythm as a method of exposing the real people, vibrancies, and energies of colliding diasporas and

⁹³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

⁹⁴ Morrill et al, "Before Dispossession, or Surviving It," 2.

⁹⁵ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 106.

cultures obscured underneath the cold structuring of conceived space. And not just one rhythm — multiple emerge at the same time, a polyrhythmia of “diverse, coexisting rhythms”.⁹⁶ The resulting monumental expanses are rhythmic, offbeat, and most of all, like Blackness to the state, surprising.

Urban Jewel (1995, fig. 2) and *Swamp* (1996, fig. 3) appear almost as twin paintings representing different times of the day. Both monumentally sized at ten by fifteen and ten by thirteen feet respectively, they compile hundreds if not thousands of quadruply, quintuply layered grids, placed at varying angles to give the impression of three-dimensional projections. Viewed as a whole, they form an aerial view of a dense sea of skyscrapers, concentrated so tightly there is no breathing room to be found. The open spaces of the grids mimic apartment windows, its lines the buildings’ skeletons. The grids are painted inconsistently, some appearing dry and translucent while others were applied so heavily they drip down and over other buildings, which are already overlapping due to the uneven placement of each grid.

The aerial view is reminiscent of the overseeing perspective of most maps and representations of conceived space. Speaking on the grid works of Samuel Levi Jones, Leigh Raiford contends that this particular form of abstraction “challenges the ways we are disciplined to ‘see like a state’”⁹⁷; that is, through the abstracting, overseeing, and regimenting visual strategies preferred by the state’s city planners, architects, and social engineers. These strategies make society legible in a way that, as Lefebvre earlier put it, everything is laid out as if an open book with no secrets. The two-dimensionality of the grid hides nothing, its flat surface laid out straight and clean, despite its framework of evenly spaced bars hinting at restriction and

⁹⁶ Reid-Musson, “Intersectional Rhythmanalysis,” 884.

⁹⁷ Leigh Raiford, “Burning All Illusion: Abstraction, Black Life, and the Unmaking of White Supremacy,” *Art Journal* 79, no. 4 (2020): 80.

compartmentalization. Grids, like maps, are technologies themselves, and “function to impose order and structure, whether on unruly systems or the vast ‘apparently limitless space of the known world.’....they are projections of belonging and subjection.”⁹⁸ What belongs is inside; what does not is outside, or shut out. Thomasos appropriates this vantage point for a better view of the vibrant, shifting *places* made and inhabited by life. In every grid, no matter how measured it first appears, at least one line is askance, throwing off the whole pattern. Some grids are shorter, taller, wider, narrower, and a few are not even fully formed, leaving unaccompanied vertical lines. They overlap in some places, and never meet in others. Thomasos jostles each grid out of its expected tidy arrangement, which in turn upsets the rhythm of the larger, canvas-wide grid into a new composition of syncopated pulses. Each grid is emancipated from the larger whole and made unique, differentiated, no longer homogenous. Her city paintings reify the heterotopic lived spaces that are hidden in the city’s machinery.⁹⁹

The cool, natural palette of *Swamp* consists of a variety of greys, blacks, browns, greens and blues; it looks like a snapshot of the architectures we encounter daily in the city, illuminated by the kind of gloomy daylight recognizable to most Canadians. It is highly sensory — given its recognizability, it easily conjures the cacophony of traffic and people talking, the smell of exhaust and steam from street vents, the feeling of the cool morning air on your face. The cityscape is not uninviting but not the most pleasant; the neutral colours simulate bare, faded brick and steel, while the dense composition conveys cluttered streets and noise. *Swamp*’s title also implies an undesirable habitat, the kind of site that settlers disparage for their uselessness and uncultivability.¹⁰⁰ However, as significant carbon sinks and pollution filters, swamps are

⁹⁸ Raiford, “Burning All Illusion,” 83.

⁹⁹ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ In her article for the *New Yorker*, Annie Proulx speaks at length about the history of settler drainage and destruction of swamps in America, noting that Indigenous relationships to land were overpowered by colonial senses

self-sustaining and resilient locales, actively working against the effects of human-made climate change. They also signal a state of transition, as swamps bridge both land and water environments and force them to work in symbiosis.¹⁰¹ As such, they echo the ways that, despite settler destruction, people in the metropole make and sustain their own spaces of life. Diaspora itself is transitory, in-between, forced to adapt to the climate of the host nation but still experiencing their own temporalities. The metaphor illustrates the complexity of creating oneself anew in an inhospitable place; as Dionne Brand wrote, “To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction — a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself.”¹⁰² Brand speaks to the cognitive dissonance and emotional exhaustion of trying to establish one’s place in a modernity built on your subjugation, displaced by the Middle Passage and then left to figure things out for yourself. Thus, for the diasporic person in varying stages of rootedness, the swamp may serve as a conceptual entry point into the psychic liminality of diasporic spacetimes, the experience of “the various kinds of madness, pathological geographies, dismembered and displaced bodies, impossible black places” that haunt the Black diasporic subject, but which also initiate the development of differential geographies and place-making strategies.¹⁰³

In contrast to *Swamp*, *Urban Jewel*’s palette pivots sharply into darkened jewel tones and dark browns, simulating evening shadows settling over the city, brightened in places by shots of white and pastels, as if reflecting neon signs, business lights, or streetlamps. The noise of traffic

of entitlement and ownership. Swamps in North America have been disappearing as humans drain them for aesthetic reasons, agricultural interests, and housing developments, as well as cinsurmountable climate change effects, pesticides, etc. Annie Proulx, “Swamps Can Protect Against Climate Change, If Only We Let Them,” *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2022, accessed via <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/swamps-can-protect-against-climate-change-if-we-only-let-them>

¹⁰¹ Morgan Stanley, “Swamp,” *National Geographic Encyclopedia*, accessed via <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/swamp/>

¹⁰² Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 18.

¹⁰³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 5.

and people is still implied, but the dark shades soften the architecture's edges, making it less aggressive, more pleasurable to look at. The work's title directly juxtaposes the urban with notions of rarity and treasure, attending to how the evening becomes the domain of lived space: after the workday, the precious time-space of leisure, nightlife, uncommodified hobbies and other creative rhythms slide in and take over. For example, for Black people in urban areas, nightlife offers opportunities to negotiate social and spatial isolation.¹⁰⁴ Lefebvre writes about how buildings in state space "effec[t] a brutal condensation of social relationships," turning the places we inhabit into spaces of work and commodity and nothing else.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, *Urban Jewel*'s rich palette softens the unyielding structures and denotes the existence of an "equal richness"¹⁰⁶ of human life in each apartment, each window, each corner and alley. Side by side, the paintings mimic the cyclical rhythm of day and dusk, two completely different experiences of the same space that repeat in our everyday.

In contrast, the *Dismantle* series (2005-2006) comprises several smaller cityscapes that appear like a closeup shot of *Swamp*'s multi-unit buildings. In *Dismantle #11*, *#12* and, *#13* (figs. 4-6), despite the smaller canvas, the size of the individual grids themselves seem to remain the same; in *Dismantle #17*, *#18*, *#19* (figs. 7-9) they are magnified even more. The buildings now appear in much closer proximity, with the viewer suddenly zoomed in on a few specific apartments, and brought down to more of an eye-level that precipitates a sudden, sticky sense of voyeurism. No longer looking from above, the viewer is situated as if standing on the balcony of one of the buildings in the endless expanse, observing their neighbours. In this more personal

¹⁰⁴ Marcus Anthony Hunter, "The Nightly Round: Space, Social Capital, and Urban Black Nightlife," *City & Community* 9, no. 2 (2010): 165-166.

¹⁰⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 227.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Godfrey uses this expression for the photographs of Roy Decarava here, whose deep shadows give a luscious feel to his intimate photography. Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (London: Tate Publishing, 2017): 160.

experience, we become attuned to the individuality of each dwelling, the differences in colour, angle, and line placement. Again, homogeneity is disrupted to remind us of the heterogenous and valuable individual existences living in and through those spaces.

In sum, tightly-packed urban spaces mostly populated by poor Black and Brown folks are not designed for prosperity, they are constructed to tame humans to the “monstrous efficiency” of the ceaseless rhythms of production; the legacy of the plantation bleeding forward.¹⁰⁷ But another aspect to the city is the many rhythms inherent in the Diaspora, its diverse cultures, languages, family histories, geographies, and codes forming a constellation of identities united under an experience of displacement. It is here that we can source liberation; Anaïs Duplan contends that struggles for liberation are

actually fought by a collection of voices that can never be perfectly unified. At the same time, liberation struggles can and must occur. They arise out of and create sites where there is a ‘chaos of knowledge’...the fight for freedom is a continual oscillation between conflict and order, a multilayered, contradictory, and polyvalent fight that takes place on the level of the individual spirit, the social movement, and the art praxis.¹⁰⁸

Duplan rightly notes that this struggle occurs on multiple registers, including that of the creative, and further reifies Dionne Brand’s notion of the creative project as a method of escape and survival.¹⁰⁹ But Black diasporic people *need time* for this — time to form their identities, time to be comfortably settled in place and into their own rhythms, as well as time enough to establish a sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy over where they live and what happens to them.¹¹⁰ It also requires them, like the general population, to have enough residual time and energy from the work week to be able to invest in their homes and themselves. This requires reimagining on

¹⁰⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Anaïs Duplan, *Blackspace: On the Poetics of an Afrofuture*. (Chicago: Black Ocean Press, 2020): 8.

¹⁰⁹ Brand’s full quote on the matter reads, “‘We need to have a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of wayfinding...’ To reclaim the Black body from that domesticated, captive, open space is the creative project always underway.” I will expand on this in the second chapter. Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Phillips, “Race Against Time,” 28.

many frontiers: housing, social relations, financial security, placemaking, and community engagement, which necessitates the creation of a world outside of capital. Until then, activists like Rasheedah Philips propose vigorous community work dedicated to securing liberated housing futures and creating new temporalities that “disrupt time’s linear flow, recasting futures where Black people are housed, healthy, joyful, and thriving.”¹¹¹

iv. THE FOURTH “PECULIAR INSTITUTION”: REPRESENTING PRISON SPACE

“How *do* you do representation in a crisis?” asks Darby English.¹¹² Similarly, filmmaker Rea Tajiri once received the question, “How do you grapple with representing vanishing without reproducing the violence of vanishing?”¹¹³ Black lives are disappearing into the prison-industrial system and the global crisis of extra-judicial violence (such as police brutality, hate crimes, and ignored migrant crossings). Real, lived lives, not *described*¹¹⁴ plainly as they are in the media upon their deaths, or asterisked at the bottom of a statistics sheet, or never mentioned at all — and they do not need another system of representation that effaces them. Throughout her career, Thomasos was deeply researched, and took a keen interest in the cultural emergency of the West’s world-record incarceration rates, mostly of Black people and people of colour, and she had a “real sense of urgency” to study the prison, in the form of panopticons and themes of

¹¹¹ Phillips, “Race Against Time,” 34.

¹¹² Darby English, *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2019): 6.

¹¹³ Morrill et al, “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It,” 8.

¹¹⁴ I reference Darby English’s use of the word “describe” in *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersections of Art and Race Terror*; English conceptualizes how “to describe a life” upon the death of yet another Black person at the hands of police, deputized citizens, state systems, governments, prison personnel or the cell itself, is not enough to properly encompass “those moments of the living person that were singular and unrepeatable, irreducibly human”; in fact, it paraphrases and abstracts said life into the past and into memory. English, *To Describe a Life*, 3.

surveillance and isolation.¹¹⁵ Thomasos references how different stages of the plantation's evolution interact with and inform each other, stating, "The prisons indict the complex weave of interdependence between poor underclass and larger social and economic issues, which I translate in my interweaving lines."¹¹⁶ The socio-economic inequality engendered by the plantation future in state space requires further, more extreme tactics for managing undesirable, superfluous-to-capitalist-economy, completely Other populations. Social insecurity (the condition of those subject to social death¹¹⁷ for their unproductivity, such as the mentally ill, homeless, or jobless; or those who have been pushed into what Lisa Marie Cacho calls "racialized rightlessness", such as "illegal" immigrants and gang members) and financial insecurity (the impoverished and lower class) are often punished through criminalization, even though their very vulnerability was established through a state that systematically makes access to housing, security, and public services notoriously difficult.¹¹⁸ As Cacho writes, this process towards social death occurs partly through criminalization practices that actually prevent people from ever being understood, ontologically, as law-abiding, leading to populations that are considered "ineligible for personhood" and therefore more easily — with the general consensus of the supposedly more honourable body politic — swept into the slow torture of the deterministic legal system.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos - Odyssey*, 25.

¹¹⁶ Thomasos, "Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice," artist statement.

¹¹⁷ First conceptualized by Orlando Patterson, social death "refers to the process by which a person is socially negated or made a human non-person as the terms of their incorporation into a society: living, they nonetheless appear as if and are treated as if they were dead" (10). Avery Gordon offers a quote from a former prisoner, George Jackson who states that "The very first time it was like dying...Capture, imprisonment is the closest thing to being dead that one is likely to experience in his life." Avery Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 10.

¹¹⁸ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012): 5-6; Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis," 98.

¹¹⁹ Cacho, *Racialized Rightlessness*, 6.

Within the carceral space, plantation logics continue, and space and time become tools of violence. In addition to small cells, restricted mobilities, and other hostile designs, the prison makes use of regular and surprise visits from authority, unusually early meal, shower and socialization times, the “temporally disorienting” punishment of solitary confinement, and the monotony of everyday routines. These practices deliberately unmoor the individual from a reliable sense of space and time, taking away things that keep them grounded. A coherent sense of a future is also confiscated — from the time of sentencing, imprisoned populations are required to work forward into the future under constant surveillance from both a class of guards within the prison, or a legal/administrative class outside the prison through probation, parole, and ankle monitors.¹²⁰ Imprisoned people become “alienated from history,”¹²¹ removed from the linear progressive timeline and set in limbo; to top it off, they are now forever socially negated by the widespread stigma of imprisonment that insistently justifies their rightlessness. As a result of incarceration, people lose their right to futurity.¹²²

In visual culture, the frequent symbolism of the prison in relation to Black people reifies Black, poor, and other marginalized bodies as inexorably tied to criminality and deviance, regardless of whether said deviance ever occurred. In counter, Thomasos’ abstractions disconnect carceral spaces from the presence of the Black body, depicting no figures and again focusing on the architectures of confinement, reducing *them* to their constitutive parts and breaking them down. In many of these works, the abstractions muddle the structural integrity of the prison: she absents walls and partitions by opting for grids with wide, uneven gaps, leaving only the skeleton behind and opening up the inside to the outside. As such, she produces a far

¹²⁰ Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis,” 8-9.

¹²¹ Dylan Rodriguez qtd in Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” 14.

¹²² Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” 13.

more textured, affective representation of oppression, or what Sharpe calls the “total climate” of anti-blackness¹²³, refusing to resort to “mathematizable terms of colonial and plantation violence”¹²⁴ wherein bodies are to be counted and not seen, only described after the disappearance; while still keeping the centuries-long emergency visible.

The clearest expression of the prison in Thomasos’ works is the shape of the panopticon. Imagined in the late 1700s by Jeremy Bentham (an English jurist interested in torture methods often intended for rebelling slaves in European colonies), the panopticon is a multi-purpose structure intended for any institution in need of totalizing, constant surveillance of its occupants, though it is mostly a speculative design for penitentiaries and jails.¹²⁵ Consisting of an inspector’s tower and a bright light in the center of a rotunda, with inward-facing cells around the perimeter, the goal was for the watchman to be able to peer directly into any cell at any given time. The reflecting light disorients the prisoners, causing constant anxiety and further weakening the possibility of resistance. As Simone Browne notes in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, the panopticon and other maximum disciplinary institutions’ construction were prefigured in the Middle Passage, where ports and ships served as instruments of antiblack violence dedicated to the total control, surveillance, and management of “problem” groups and the exploitation of their labour.¹²⁶

Here we can especially read Thomasos’ work as a composition of previous and future compositions, to go back to Ferreira da Silva. In the plantation future, the prison is really another form of the slave ship, calling forth the *longue durée* of global Black oppression. And, as I will address shortly, it also calls forth a vision of a highly surveilled police state future, should we

¹²³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.

¹²⁴ Katherine McKittrick, “On Quiet Happiness,” 176.

¹²⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2015): 31-32.

¹²⁶ Browne, *Dark Matters*, 42.

continue down this path of mass incarceration and militarization.¹²⁷ Thomasos refers to her use of line as her method of entering “the state of mind at this exact moment of a people with a history of slavery,” indicating the funnel from the Door of No Return to the Black diaspora’s moving present.¹²⁸ Her work is defined by lines, and in her paintings, the lines not only shift, they vibrate, thanks to many layers of piled on top of each other. This not only creates a sense of depth but also variations in the location of the object or structure. One line making up a side wall, for example, is never simply constructed from one brushstroke, but several, in different colours, widths, opacities, and textures, all slightly out of alignment; this imprecision allows us to see each of the layers peeking out from underneath. It generates a sort of stroboscopic effect, an optical illusion produced when an object’s motion makes it appear to be in more than one place simultaneously; in this instance, the placements of each brushstroke are close enough together than it appears more like a quivering or a scintillation, a sort of quick pulsating that undermines the immovable stability we assume is inherent in architecture. Of course, we typically understand the city as fast-paced, but this is different — the structures themselves move and breathe. In paintings of the panopticon, Thomasos again adopts the god-like vantage point, keeping viewers a safe distance from its watchful center eye and in turn shifting the surveilling power to them. Three of the works in the *Dwelling* series (2005-2006, figs 10-12) — *Prison, Tower, and Tower of Babel* — employ the same flurried, multi-layered stroboscopic effect, transforming the brutalist and rigid design of the panopticon into kaleidoscopic matrices of grids and prisms stacked on top of each other concentrically, with a deep circular gap in the center.

¹²⁷ There are many examples to choose from, but as I write this paper, hundreds of university students across America are being arrested en masse for their peaceful protests against the Palestinian genocide, reported to the police by the university’s administrations. Arbitrary criminalization, especially in educational spaces, signals a terrifying turn towards a police state future.

¹²⁸ Thomasos qtd in Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 56.

Thomasos uses flashes of pastels among grays and browns here to “symboliz[e] life among the dead,” inspired by the abandoned houses she encountered when she moved to Philadelphia.¹²⁹

The term “dwelling” in the titles seems almost sarcastic; “dwelling” should gesture towards habitable, comfortable spaces of human life. Yet, instead, we see the surely unlivable space of a structure expressly intent on the debilitation of its inhabitants. Especially in *Dwelling—Prison* (fig. 10), most of the building blocks of the panopticon are coffin-shaped, another motif of the artist; they allude to the slow, forward drift towards death for prisoners, social or physical. In *Dwelling—Tower* (fig. 11) and *Dwelling—Tower of Babel* (fig. 12), Thomasos stacks multiple panopticons on top of each other, creating an almost absurd mega-structure that resembles a pagoda temple or, as indicated by the latter title, a ziggurat, like the Tower of Babel in Christian mythology. In this origin myth, God punished humans for building the formidable tower by making them speak different languages, so they could no longer work together. Thomasos, who practiced Christianity, frequently employed biblical allusions, particularly those related to the fall of man or divine punishment.¹³⁰ To allude to God’s retribution through the shape of a prison indicates the common perception of prisons as a necessary ethical measure for the sake of Man’s morality, and thus fair punishment for human wrongdoings. Prisoners deserve to be where they are, because they sinned, after all. Escape is not

¹²⁹ Thomasos said, “During my five years living in Philadelphia, the immediate experience of urban collapse had a huge psychological impact on my works. When I arrived in 1990, the crack-cocaine epidemic was at its height. Bombed-out drug dens and abandoned houses stood side by side with poor but functioning family homes that were brightly painted with festive colour combinations on their doors, window frames, and stairways. I developed my palette from the contradiction of brights and grays intermingled, symbolizing life among the dead.” In the same artist statement, she said during her research trips to defunct and maximum-security prisons, she “noted the sleek architectural innovations and the vibrant, high-tech, constructivist colour scheme. I added these prison-cell forms and the ultramodern palette to my art.” Thomasos, “Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice,” artist statement.

¹³⁰ Sally Frater, personal correspondence.

an option either; working your way through one panopticon leads you into another, like Dante's nine circles of hell, and the "circuit between ship and shore" continues.¹³¹

Almost hard to comprehend visually, the mess of concentric, angular shapes produces a labyrinth that seems impossible to untangle oneself from. These representations of the prison are more in line with what M. NourbeSe Philip likened to the "crashing atonality" of jazz¹³² — the circular layers seem to swirl and buckle under the pressure, each block colliding into the next. In all three works the sense of linear perspective is skewed and imbalanced, collapsing depth enough to push the structure closer to two dimensions than three. *Dwelling—Prison* looks as though the front center walls of the jail have been knocked out, leaving open air and a clearer view into the central abyss; in *Dwelling—Tower of Babel*, some edges swim into the foreground, throwing the composition out of whack and furthering its structural disunity. Chunks are missing from the topmost form and there are gaps and mismatching blocks running down the center. In all three paintings, the corners of the canvas are brushed with wide, cloudy stripes of earthy-coloured paint, as if haphazardly covering up something. The encroaching blankness risks overtaking the edges of the panopticon itself, and the greens and browns hint at environmental reclamation, as if reinforcing the obsolescence of Bentham's design. Together, Thomasos' style of representation successfully threatens the integrity of the institution.

Thomasos' psychological exploration of the prison digs deeper in her works that do not focus on the structure of the prison itself, but the psychic terror and isolation it engenders. The perspective in the eleven by twenty foot painting *Virtual Incarceration* (1999, fig. 13) is not situated aerially but places the viewer in a more to-scale position, centered in a sublime, decentralized network of lines. It is unclear whether the lines are diffusing outwards or

¹³¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 57.

¹³² Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 47.

imploding inwards; pin-straight orthogonals stretch into the empty space of the outer edges and crisscross the background, and along the bottom they extend beyond the edges of the canvas. Black, grey, and brown grids of relatively uniform thickness populate the inner canvas, becoming more dense towards the center as the layers multiply and begin to form three-dimensional cubes, implying prison cells. The orthogonals do not all trace back to the same vanishing point, and instead scatter throughout the entire expanse, and the resulting effect is reminiscent of how artists map out linear perspective underneath their drawings, implying an unfinished evolution that directly recalls the blueprint. In another reading, the lines mimic a wireframe grid space often seen in virtual reality simulations, as if it is in the middle of forming within an unrendered video game space.

To use Husserl's verbiage, our consciousness of the present moment indicates our intentionality *towards* it, implying movement and flow.¹³³ Drawing researcher Joe Graham considers the drawn line as a spatiotemporal element — in addition to moving through space, it embodies the motion of its creator's gesture, and Graham suggests here that rhythm emerges in the drawn line's minute undulations, its relation to other lines around or intersecting it, and in its recording of the artist's particular time of creation.¹³⁴ Therefore, the drawn line is an approach to representing time, and in *Virtual Incarceration* it is employed to connote the experience of being enveloped within the creeping walls of the prison. Further, the line, the temporal disorientations of the prison, and the plantation future are all associated with the unsettling, incomprehensible idea of infinity, implying the permanence of surveillance and confinement. The steadiness of the grid form in the paintings generates a measured rhythm, which is then syncopated not by deviation in the lines themselves but the three-dimensional cells that seem to be facing in

¹³³ Graham, "Rhythmanalysis: The Line as a Record of the Moving Present," 67-68.

¹³⁴ Graham, "Rhythmanalysis: The Line as a Record of the Moving Present," 59-60.

multiple directions, throwing the uniformity out-of-sync and corrupting the viewer's sense of orientation. Due to the monumental nature of the work, the twenty-foot wide canvas eclipses the viewer entirely, and even at an appropriate viewing distance the experience is one of envelopment and menacing proximity.

The title's use of the word "virtual" implies technology's role in surveillance, as well as a "virtual", i.e. not real but present, threat that conditions us into surveilling ourselves, a symptom of what Gary T. Marx calls the "maximum-security society."¹³⁵ The word also implies an alternative definition of *almost* and *nearly*, the condition of not-yet — not yet imprisoned, but soon. Thomasos remarked in an interview that her preoccupation with abstraction began by encountering a painting by modernist Willem de Kooning, which was the first of the genre to completely "make sense" to her: "It was because of the way his line moved through space. It wasn't so much the line that was there as the line that wasn't there, how it held space....He had gone so far in that direction that the communication was contained in the areas that were absent, rather than those that were there, on the painting."¹³⁶ The empty spaces of *Virtual Incarceration* contain that *retention/now/protection* triad of immanent temporal experience, because it is in those regions of the canvas that communicate to us the sense of encroachment, of the line moving outward into space and approaching us in real, unfolding time. It connotes the presence of this structure not only in our past or our immediate present, but our future too, as if to remind us that the plantation structure is not going anywhere. In fact, as Craig Haney notes, we are quickly moving towards a world in which the prison complex can "creat[e] 'a world after its own

¹³⁵ Gary T. Marx's notion of a maximum-security society is one that is managed by both the state's and the workers' internalized, panopticon-based self-regulation — once reserved for the military and prison, it is now applicable to the whole of society. Gary T. Marx qtd in Browne, *Dark Matters*, 15-16.

¹³⁶ Thomasos qtd in Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 56.

image’,”¹³⁷ a society with increasing militarization and total citizen self-surveillance in the form of data sharing. In the face of *Virtual Incarceration*, the moving present is accompanied by the protention of the incoming imprisonment and the retention of the long history of these architectures, which have imprisoned millions; a population of which the viewer is now, though temporarily, a part.

In sum, Thomasos’ abstractions walk a tightrope between the narration of ongoing Black subjugation and material resistances enacted in response, and the “affective and material energies....[that] emerge when Black Canadian art *is* and *feels*.”¹³⁸ By focusing her stylistic efforts on exhuming lively, untamed rhythms from the cold, conceived spaces of city and prison architecture, she unsettles our relationship to such spaces and exposes how they condition our seeing and knowing. She uses rhythm as a method of attending to diasporic sensory worlds and how our individual and collective bodies move in sync and syncopation with it — in short, resisting the knowledge that state spacetime has given us.

¹³⁷ Craig Haney qtd in Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” 9.

¹³⁸ McKittrick, “On Quiet Happiness,” 177-180.

CHAPTER 2

Black*death is the dark matter that scaffolds
the state as galaxy — theory of violent relationality that
orders the empire into meaning — sometimes it takes
a fatal frame to make truth legible, discernible, though
never fully visible
one story holds all that dark matter comes from dark holes
birthed after the big bang. *re:* manifest destiny,
re: terra nullius,
re: partition & amalgamation
re: assimilation, plantation, incarceration, innumerable primordial collapses producing the dark matters,
against which we make life.
— *Mobólíwajídide D. Joseph*

Ultimately, I believe Denyse Thomasos' paintings are so effective because through abstraction she articulates the inarticulability of feeling. Tyrone S. Palmer, speaking about Dionne Brand, argues that the eminent Canadian author writes literature that captures “a mode of feeling for which the available language and grammars of enunciation are profoundly inept; for which ‘feeling’ itself is perhaps an insufficient term for rendering its force.”¹³⁹ Here, Palmer is talking specifically about Brand's writings on the Door of No Return, a site that is at once real and imagined and which marks an intensely affective locus in the Black diasporic imaginary. Reading *A Map to the Door of No Return* is a visceral experience, one that called forth indescribable affects and uncertainties from the depths of my diasporic consciousness. The memory of those sensations is precisely the reason I believe that Denyse Thomasos accomplishes the same sensory translation, but on a visual scale: through the thick, dripping texture of the paint and the sheer force of her gesture, Thomasos makes visible the complex terrain of Black

¹³⁹ In future explorations I would like to create a dialogue between Palmer's exegesis on *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Thomasos' artworks, as they both engender a sensorial experience of the diaspora's “acute relationship to captivity.” (50) Tyrone S. Palmer, “Feeling-as-Capture,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* no. 46 (March 2023): 46-47.

diasporic subjectivities, attending to its simultaneous unsettlements, pains, and resistances, in order to share an experience of the world that is not so easy to reconcile.

While a large section of Thomasos' oeuvre contains representations of city and prison spaces, a very different stylistic approach is also woven through her portfolio, one that abandons the straight, short lines that constructed her architecture and opts for a looser, more fluid span of brushstrokes. In these works, the rigid contours of half-finished boats, coffins, and deconstructed buildings with blueprint-style outlines sink in and out of churning fields of colour, merging and morphing into a tumultuous flow. The same vibrating rhythms Thomasos stirs in her city and prison works are magnified to an almost overwhelming level, a cacophonous expanse of texture, colour, noise, and movement that pushes even deeper into abstraction. Here, in what I will heretofore refer to as her "mindscapes," Thomasos exposes and releases the full visuality of her personal experience of being and becoming within the diaspora, navigating the plantation future while producing her own geographies and establishing her sense of identity.

The term "mindscapes" is borrowed from Black American painter Richard Mayhew, who describes his own abstract landscape paintings as "based on mood space, the feeling of time and mood of the moment...all internalized thinking and feeling."¹⁴⁰ In a stark contrast to her depictions of domineering city and prison architecture, these paintings shift the viewer's perspective from outwards to inwards, as Thomasos nudges focus from built structures of confinement to the purely emotional and affective registers of such spaces. They offer generous glimpses into the artist's own psychology and relationship to her diasporic subjectivity, creating a throughline to her personal life that maps out events across time and space in a constellation of related memories and affects. These glimpses work alongside distinguishable iconographies of

¹⁴⁰ Richard Mayhew qtd in *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, directed by Sam Pollard (United States: HBO Documentary Films, 2021), HBO Max.

Black history and racial violence as well as a recognizable, relatable melancholia and “topsy-turvy”¹⁴¹ feeling of unsettlement, creating a sensorium that easily translates across perspectives, local and global spaces. Thomasos’ mindscapes depict diasporic space as it is both created and internally experienced by the Black diaspora.

v. DIASPORIC SPACETIME: A STORY

Let us return to the metaphor of the singularity in more detail. The objects in the universe known as black holes, of which the singularity is one constitutive, theoretical element, are not actually empty but rather extremely dense objects packed with information we as of yet cannot access or understand. Black holes are “inevitable and unavoidable” mysteries that quietly take up space and rupture the physical existence of their surroundings; their coming into being is produced out of chaos, at the moment a very massive star dies and collapses in on itself.¹⁴² Stars are generally stable entities when they are alive, because their gravity and atoms work together to keep a sort of balance: gravity pushes atoms together to form the star, then atomic collisions and explosions produce energy that push outwards.¹⁴³ But over time even the biggest stars will inevitably burn up their fuel, and their colossal gravity will push their atoms together with impunity, further and further until the star is infinitely small and its mass has been compressed into an extremely dense point containing enormous amounts of energy — a singularity.¹⁴⁴ Albert Einstein initially rejected the hypothetical existence of black holes because they simply break

¹⁴¹ Imani Elizabeth Jackson, M. NourbeSe Philip and S*an D. Henry-Smith, “Touching the Ground,” *Canadian Art*, September 14, 2020, accessed via <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/touching-the-ground/>

¹⁴² John Bernard Kennedy, *Space, Time and Einstein: An Introduction* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2003): 190-191.

¹⁴³ Kennedy, *Space, Time and Einstein*, 189.

¹⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Space, Time and Einstein*, 190.

down all that we know about physics, space, time, and existence, their presence ruining what the theory of general relativity had already established as universal truth.¹⁴⁵

The black hole now produces and operates its own much larger and distinguishable region of alternative spacetime. The dark void we think of when picturing a black hole is, in actuality, a massive shadow produced in part by an event horizon, a boundary past which no matter can ever escape, not even light. Once information passes over the event horizon, it ceases to be knowable. The fabric of spacetime here is curved so viciously that from an observer's standpoint, time seems to stand still altogether. At the point of singularity itself, space and time no longer exist.¹⁴⁶

These entities, born from disequilibrium and death and which survive through rupture and disobedience, offer a symbolic entry point into thinking about the lived spaces of the Black diaspora as spaces of generative disruption, unsettlement, and acts of wayfinding. As suggested in the first chapter, the lived lives of the Black diaspora create resistant and alternative spatialities and temporalities that work against the heavy blanket of state spacetime, not only distorting its linear temporality and colonial spatial strategies, but breaking its normative rules, borders, and knowledges down into inapplicability. If continuing in Lefebvre's thinking, these lived spaces are "qualitative, fluid, and dynamic," and are full of histories, symbolisms, affects and, I add, textures, which counter the universalizing tendencies of state spacetime.¹⁴⁷ Such lived dimensions, when so oppositional to the nation-state's and civil society's enactments of power,

¹⁴⁵ In 1980, Einstein's research assistant Peter Bergmann wrote, "It seems that Einstein always was of the opinion that singularities in classical field theory are intolerable. They are intolerable from the point of view of classical field theory because a singular region represents a breakdown of the postulated laws of nature. I think one can turn this argument around and say that a theory that involves singularities and involves them unavoidably, moreover, carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction..." John Earman, *Bangs, Crunches, Whimpers, and Shrieks: Singularities and Acausalities in Relativistic Spacetimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 11.

¹⁴⁶ J. Craig Wheeler, *Cosmic Catastrophes: Exploding Stars, Black Holes, and Mapping the Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 181.

¹⁴⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41-42.

exist within their own spacetime, a Black diasporic spacetime, which counters the essential Black subject created by the Middle Passage and reinforces individual and collective lived experiences, emotions, desires, and memories. Author Femke Stock describes well the intimate and nuanced push-and-pull of diaspora relationships to both homeland and hostland, a highly affective and individualized experience that cannot be accurately encompassed by just the word “complicated”. Rather, it is dependent on diverse factors such as individual intersections with other identities, locations of origin and arrival, generation, social factors, and various experiences of Otherness. There is also the issue of complex relationships to “home,” either through time, anxieties, ideologies of return, yearnings, codes of belonging, physical localities, cultural practices, or inherited memories.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Judith Misrahi-Barak writes that

[w]ithin the transatlantic paradigm that offers possibilities of intellectual crossings, reciprocal connections and aesthetic translations, the specific diasporic space is first and foremost dialogic, opening up towards a plurality of perspectives, a renewed outlook and, ultimately, emancipation and resilience. If spectres of the past may continue to haunt memories and imaginations, they may also contribute to the manifestation of a different way of being, one that would not be fragmented but multiple, not separated but *translated*, re-jointed and revealed in all its diversity and richness, even if the hurt is built into it, or rather because the hurt is built into it.¹⁴⁹

The affective space of Diaspora is cumulative; it accrues histories, stories, imaginations, dreams, relations with land and people, lived dimensions, mythologies, and everyday existences, all of which range across a spectrum of pain and joy. Diasporic spacetime, rather than being considered as a whole or a lack, takes up space. It takes up a lot of it, actually, to astronomical proportions: while the singularity itself occupies zero volume of space, it still engenders an inescapable gravity and a radius that can stretch into the billions of kilometers.¹⁵⁰ A diasporic

¹⁴⁸ Femke Stock, “Home and Memory,” in Kim Knott and Seán Mcloughlin, eds., *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities* (London: Zed Books, 2010): 24-26.

¹⁴⁹ Judith Misrahi-Barak, “Diasporic Agency and the Power of Literary Form in Caribbean Literature,” *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 2012): 443, emphasis original.

¹⁵⁰ Blundell, *Black Holes*, 4.

spacetime asserts itself; it “dwells and enunciates” in ways that, like Katherine McKittrick said, can be a surprise to the normative settler state.¹⁵¹ To take up space when Black, when Canadian, when Black Canadian, is to take up space amid negation — a space “conceived and lived as a phenotypical white nation-space” in which “blackness can only occupy one kind of position”, that of inventions like multiculturalism.¹⁵² I would like to continue to implement a notion of Black diasporic Canadian presence not always in relation to whiteness, but as its own weighty presence moving through time and space on its own terms. McKittrick writes about how “Black people refuse linear temporality...they just don’t embrace a sort of stable trajectory forward. They’re back in time and then jumping forward in time and then resting in the present moment while invoking a past-future.”¹⁵³ This freedom of movement in both space and time characterizes what Rinaldo Walcott calls diasporic sensibilities.¹⁵⁴ There is also a sensibility of disruption that is required: an understanding of modernity as formed through the paradigmatic rupture of European colonialism, but also the ongoing, psychic negotiation of this unsettlement that can be used, in turn, to “unsettle those who in fact unsettled us.”¹⁵⁵ Disruption is a deliberate way of being.

And so, I employ the metaphor of the singularity to gesture towards how unlikely, denied life-forms¹⁵⁶ — or to return to McKittrick’s term, surprises — become threats to established

¹⁵¹ McKittrick, “On Quiet Happiness,” 177; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 92.

¹⁵² Rinaldo Walcott, “Rhetorics of Blackness, Rhetorics of Belonging: The Politics of Representation in Black Canadian Expressive Culture,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 29, no. 2 (1999): 12.

¹⁵³ Liz Ikiriko, Timothy Yanick-Hunter, Isabel Okoro, and Katherine McKittrick, “Black Dots and B-Sides,” Exhibition publication, (Toronto: Gallery 44, 2021): 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies* (London, Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2016): 16.

¹⁵⁵ Jackson et al, “Touching the Ground.”

¹⁵⁶ Rinaldo Walcott uses the term “Black life-forms” to push against established definitions of human — which, in the Western imagination, do not entirely include Black subjects — and offer a launchpad for “allow[ing] us to see other ways of being human and thus other possible ways of living....The Black life-form, therefore, is an acknowledgement that we exist, we are alive, we are a site of life. But the Black life-form also seeks to call into disrepute and indict our present system of being human.” Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving Towards Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 10.

world orders. The ultimate threat that diasporic life poses to Western hegemony is the possibility of vanishing — not of itself, but that which encroaches on it. That it may consume and leave no trace of the status quo that forms its surroundings, or contort it into something we cannot yet imagine. Lea Anderson, on the topic of the gaping mouth and the Black grotesque in film, proposes that in the anxious minds of non-Black people, Blackness is a sort of “devouring force, something that, if acknowledged, would fundamentally necessitate a reconsideration of the ways we relate to one another and the world. Here the Swallowing is represented as that all-consuming shift in perspective, threatening only to those whose goal is revision and suppression.”¹⁵⁷ In this view, such monstrous presence could tear through the stagnant homogenization of state power and institute spaces wherein the logics of Western hegemony, capitalist production, and the linear progressive timeline can be refuted, resisted, broken down and recoded. It challenges how, where, and when Black diasporic people exist and move through the world outside of the structures of confinement and management inherent to the plantation future. This independent gravity of a Black sense of place, which legitimately occupies its own autonomous space, “distorts and bends” the production of state space, linear time, and its attendant rules, patterns, and geographies.¹⁵⁸

vi. DIMENSIONS OF THE SHIP: TWO FEET SEVEN INCHES

We can locate the beginnings of Thomasos’ preoccupation with the psychic space of Blackness in a 1993 triptych of monumental black-and-white paintings, arguably her most

¹⁵⁷ “The Swallowing” is a concept of Anderson’s that describes “the occasion in horror [films] where the abject (which is to say, the monster) appears as a form of the devouring Other.” (131). Lea Anderson, “The Ontology of Open Mouths,” *Liquid Blackness* 6, no. 2 (2022): 134.

¹⁵⁸ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 31.

famous works to date. Grimly inspired by the “premeditated, efficient, dispassionate records of human beings as cargo and also by the deplorable conditions of the slave ships” that she was encountering in her research, Thomasos undertook the challenge of representing these deplorable conditions literally, by painting the inside of the hold of a slave ship.¹⁵⁹ The triptych consists of *Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)* (fig. 14), *Displaced Burial / Burial at Gorée* (fig. 15), and *Jail* (fig. 16); according to Thomasos, the former two depict a hold and a burial site respectively¹⁶⁰, but without the textual aid of the titles, the paintings appear to represent both.

Rather than using the vertical-horizontal grid form, the works made use of long, sweeping brushstrokes to form a dense, disorienting matrix of lines — what Thomasos called “lashes of a whip” — recreating “the tiny, airless holds” that carried abducted Africans into the so-called New World.¹⁶¹ In the now-infamous and ubiquitous diagram of the Brooks slave ship, oft-employed to demonstrate the inhumane conditions aboard slave ships, the dimensions of the hold was recorded at two feet and seven inches tall, eliminating any opportunity for the slaves to do anything but lie recumbent on their backs. The pamphlet also notes that, due to the sheer numbers of African men forced into their designated gendered deck, they sometime had to lie on their sides or on top of each other to make room, “in which last situation they are not unfrequently found dead in the morning.”¹⁶² There is no shortage of gruesome facts to list about these conditions, but I outline it briefly here to consider the politics of size and dimension, an element of Thomasos’ spatial manipulation used to activate an affective register of the plantation

¹⁵⁹ Thomasos, “Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice,” artist statement.

¹⁶⁰ “In my artworks, I used lines in deep space to recreate these claustrophobic conditions, leaving no room to breathe. To capture the feeling of confinement, I created three large-scale black-and-white paintings of the structures that were used to contain slaves—and left such catastrophic effects on the black psyche: the slave ship, the prison, and the burial site. These became archetypal for me. I began to reconstruct and recycle their forms in all of my works.” Thomasos, “Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice,” artist statement.

¹⁶¹ <https://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/projects/burial-at-Gorée?ref=artshelp.com> ; Thomasos, “Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice,” artist statement.

¹⁶² Brooks diagram

future. The hold initiated the collapse, the supernova: the final instalment of a destructive series of events in spacetime that folded the existences of so many into a point of no return, shoved past the Door. But after collapse comes regeneration and transformation: a Diaspora of survival, of an expansive sense of self, “not deployed as an identity but as a way of conceiving the world.”¹⁶³

Instead of representing the painfully packed cluster of bodies in the hold, Thomasos depicts an empty interior, but still claustrophobic in its oppressively tight matrices. The small size of the hold is belied by the paintings’ mural-scale dimensions: *Displaced Burial / Burial at Gorée* and *Jail* both measure at nine by eighteen feet, with *Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)* coming in slightly under at nine by fourteen, but all staggeringly imposing. Thomasos’ psychologically driven works are always more abstract, and all withhold a coherent spatial awareness from the viewer. In *Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)*, it is unclear whether the two protruding, cylindrical shapes projecting from both the left and right side are the shadows of boats or just trompe l’œils produced out of the eye being forced to skitter across the canvas, unable to take in any coherent element except the image as a whole. In *Displaced Burial / Burial at Gorée*, there is slightly more sense of depth, and it is possible to pick out a stepped floor and perhaps even a wall or two, marking it as either or both a holding site and coffin. This non-specificity makes it possible for the interior to represent any form of the plantation future: perhaps it is the inside of a shipping container, the kind that dangerously propels migrants across seas, or a floating detention center, or a cell.¹⁶⁴ These multiple possibilities speaks again to Sharpe’s contention of “anti-blackness as total climate,” which is both produced and reinforced by state spacetime.¹⁶⁵ The structures of the plantation future — the plantation economy, the town, the city, the ghetto, the prison — are all

¹⁶³ Pearce, “An Aesthetic of Survival,” 36; Walcott, “Salted Cod...”

¹⁶⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 47.

¹⁶⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.

characterized by a claustrophobia that continues out and beyond the built environment and invades the psyche. That claustrophobia repeats in the shipping containers of ignored African migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean; through police knees on the backs of necks or citizen arms around Black throats; smothered under the sexual violence against Black trans women in North America; present in the jail cell, the homeless shelter, or as Sharpe notes, the classroom and the hospital, shivering in the wake of gun violence.¹⁶⁶ This claustrophobia is a deliberate tool of capitalist empire; as Rinaldo Walcott says, “Black people will not be fully able to breathe — a word I do not use lightly — until property itself is abolished.”¹⁶⁷ We will return to the topic of abolition later.

In light of these multiple past and present contexts, these “prior and posterior compositions” that make up an artwork, we can read Thomasos’ continued engagement with the Middle Passage as her way of marking time, or perhaps keeping time, as she intervenes at a discrete point (a turning point) within the *longue durée* of Western colonialisms and imperialisms. By depicting the hold itself, Thomasos depicts the origins of Western modernity in the form of the slave trade. But because the spectre of the hold haunts so deeply, it bookends Black diasporic experience, its lurking presence “what Black people know is at the end of these spaces,” at the end of the city block and cell block.¹⁶⁸ For viewers to the paintings who are already traumatized by the memory of the Middle Passage, who are living through that trauma now, then “it is not that step *into the hold* that requires imagination,”¹⁶⁹ but the vision of an eventual terminus to the unfinished emancipation. It is in this psychological anticipation that Thomasos enacts her mindscapes.

¹⁶⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 90.

¹⁶⁷ Walcott, *On Property*, 11.

¹⁶⁸ Sally Frater, personal correspondence.

¹⁶⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 89, emphasis original.

vii. THE POLITICS OF “MADNESS” AND DIASPORA AS SENSORY EXPERIENCE

What is it about space, place, and blackness - the uneven sites of physical and experiential “difference” - that derange the landscape and its inhabitants?
— Katherine McKittrick

Denyse Thomasos’ paintings are an exercise in upheaval. Almost as if excavating what is underneath her city buildings or maximum-security prisons, Thomasos digs out the invisible connecting thread between all the forms of the plantation future: the psychic. Her cityscapes explicitly considered this “confined psychology”¹⁷⁰ through the structures that have been employed to manage Black bodies and Black present-futures. But Thomasos’ swirling compositions, far more curvilinear and loose than the vertical fortitude of her cities, can be read in two ways simultaneously: as the visualization of the psychic dimension of diaspora, and a practice of wayfinding. Or, as the epigraph to this chapter eloquently calls it, “the dark matters against which we make life,” enacted through vibrations, textures, tones, contrasts, and opacities.

The mindscapes, all painted in the mid-to-late 2000s and bearing a high visual similarity, tend to appear agitated, a word that Thomasos herself has used to describe her work, representing a turbulent emotional condition of Black experience.¹⁷¹ The epigraph to this section derives from another effective point brought by McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*: the notion of a sort of “madness” that lurks around the diasporic subject. Drawing on Édouard Glissant and Toni Morrison, McKittrick cites a theme of pathology and fragmentation in Black cultural critique, an existential distress due to the awareness and/or firsthand experience of how Blackness and Black

¹⁷⁰ Dana Kandic, “Denyse Thomasos Interview,” Christian Torres-Rossi, Youtube Video, February 9, 2011, 3m 48s, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6r_64Xt7WQ.

¹⁷¹ Renée Van Der Avoird, “Agitated Surfaces: The Formative Works of Denyse Thomasos,” in Jacques et al, eds., *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, 27.

geographies are essentialized and concealed, the condition of unfreedom, dehumanization, and violence — the plantation future in action. She writes that these forms of “madness” are

tied to transatlantic slavery and colonialism: the landless black subject is, importantly, anchored to a new world grid that is economically, racially, and sexually normative, or, seemingly nonblack; this grid suppresses the possibility of black geographies by invalidating the subject’s cartographic needs, expressions and knowledges.¹⁷²

Being fixed to this new world grid, precisely what I have been describing as state spacetime, arouses that sense of syncopation that impacts Black diasporic movement through the world. In her chapter, McKittrick understands space(s) as “entered and exited on terms that require an engagement with ‘something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes,’” — in other words, their deeply psychic and affective registers.¹⁷³ Memories and postmemories (the traces of a traumatic event experienced secondhand by following generations¹⁷⁴) of disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and the reinforcement of difference contribute to an agitation that simmers restlessly: an unsettlement. The condition of the Black diaspora, then, is movement through this unsettlement.

The locations of diaspora are not always geographic but can include objects, sites, and metaphysical non-spaces that contribute to the construction of diasporic sensibilities. The ship is an important element in Thomasos’ mindscapes, for it offers ideas and locations beyond simply a mode of transportation or a symbol of the Middle Passage.¹⁷⁵ McKittrick argues that the slave

¹⁷² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 2-3.

¹⁷³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 2.

¹⁷⁴ For more on postmemories, see Marianne Hirsch, “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1992-3): 3-29. Hirsch coined the term. For the use of this concept in relation to Black diasporic art, see Arlene R. Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1649-1672.

¹⁷⁵ In an interview with Ben Portis for an exhibition in 2007, Thomasos described the impact of the Brooks diagram and other archival records on her practice: “I saw things broken down into an economy. People no longer existed as human beings. They existed as numbers and measurements and money – as products.... The boat was a vessel, a container that symbolized that concept and facilitated the system.” Thomasos qtd in Heidi McKenzie, “Denyse Thomasos,” *FUSE Magazine* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 9.

ship is simultaneously a physical object representative of Black “unfreedom” at the same time as a maker of geographies and a mapper of histories; but even still, it does not eliminate Black subjectivities, and instead remains a potent site for enacting Black resistance within aesthetics and the archive.¹⁷⁶ Paul Gilroy writes that the imagery of ships in motion alludes to not just the sale of bodies but ideas of return, circulation, movement between locations, or political dissent. They are “living, micro-cultural, [and] micro-political” systems and serve as abstract embodiments of diasporic movement.¹⁷⁷ The mindscapes incorporate most visibly canoes, rowboats, motorboats, or rafts, but they can easily be re-read as coffins, signalling the play of death on the water, or shipping containers, which speak directly to global capitalist circuits and the “shippability” of both bodies and ideas.¹⁷⁸ These motifs float in and out of transience, blending into each other and neighbouring architectural structures like stairs, scaffolding, and rooms. Thomasos’ use of abstraction to fragment and warp these technologies of cruelty deliberately blows apart their meaning, breaking them down into conquerable parts and claiming power over them. Especially within the conventions of an age-old medium like painting, abstraction offers Thomasos a way of getting at the affective kernel of her research. Anthropologists Leniqueca A. Welcome and Deborah A. Thomas consider abstraction a performance that deliberately “creates the conditions for an undoing of the hegemony of ‘the real’.”¹⁷⁹ They write,

We are most drawn to abstraction because of what we see as its capacity for facilitating “Witnessing 2.0”, refusal, and repair. We see abstraction as a mode of disorienting the viewer. It is a celebration of the unresolved, the indescribable, the non-linear, of excess. It rejects the normal representation binaries of romance versus tragedy and abjection versus redemption that have haunted visualizations and narrations of Black life and

¹⁷⁶ Mckittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xii.

¹⁷⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993): 4, 16-17.

¹⁷⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 28.

¹⁷⁹ Leniqueca A. Welcome and Deborah A. Thomas, “Abstraction, Witnessing, and Repair; or, How Multimodal Research Can Destabilize the Coloniality of the Gaze,” *Multimodality & Society* 1, no. 3 (2021): 393.

instead embraces ambiguity....Abstraction for us then is the presentation of the open question of what sovereign life feels like rather than the definitive answer of what life is.¹⁸⁰

Recalling again how Black art *is* and *feels*, abstraction avoids the spectacularizing or decontextualizing tendencies of representational painting, and zeroes directly in on the affective registers. It does not exploit the abjected Black body, or contribute to the linear narrative of diaspora.¹⁸¹ Thomasos reworks the symbol of the ship and exposes its enclosed Black subjectivity, including her own as a Caribbean diasporic transplant, as well as opening up the affective space to all diasporic and/or people of colour who experience that feeling. Toeing the line between abstraction and representation allows her to not dip entirely into obscurity or illegibility, but enough to undermine the heavy ideological weight that the ship carries, dissolving it in a dreamy veneer of sheer texture and sensation.

The stylistic approach in these paintings manipulates space and time by collapsing both. Spatially, Thomasos breaks down painting's usual structuring techniques, such as plane and linear perspective, folding everything into a single stratum with little sense of distance, dimension, or depth of field. For example, *Maiden Flight* (2010, fig. 17) consists of a disorderly array of flattened, angular prisms and rectangles; upon closer inspection we can see the mixture of rowboats, canoes, and skeleton frameworks of buildings and columns. These elements are gently given form by the thin lines and broad stripes of black shading that carve out their hulls, and they are suspended in a sea of unshaded patches of deep earth colours, dull tones, and bright pastels, all nudging and overlapping one another. The slight foreshortening of the boats' bodies are the only things that hint at any sense of plane in the canvas, yet it is counteracted by the

¹⁸⁰ Welcome and Thomas, "Abstraction, Witnessing, and Repair," 393.

¹⁸¹ The linear narrative of diaspora refers to the binary ways we commonly describe diaspora as a unidirectional journey from one place to the next, characterized by an initial trauma followed eventually by acceptance. For more please see Misrahi-Barak, "Diasporic Agency," 432-433.

dripping paint streams that overlap and mix with each other, reminding us that everything is on the same flat surface.

Many of the mindscapes get more detailed as we venture into the center, and the flat, emptier spaces along the edges add to the feeling of implosion, as if the composition is collapsing inward. Similarly, the boats themselves sometimes appear bent or wonky, as if forced into unnatural positions or distorted by the gravity of the objects around it. Marsha Pearce notes how these compositions tend to contain a nucleus around which the brushstrokes and shapes orbit, perhaps thanks to Thomasos' technique of starting her canvases in the middle and expanding outward.¹⁸² In *Maiden Flight*, this is especially clear as the bows of each boat seem oriented towards the center, as if converging on an unseen but important locus. In other works, such as *Albatross* (2010, fig. 18), the boats point in all sorts of directions, leaving it unclear where they are headed. Either way, the paintings connote a tangible sense of movement, both in the choreography of the vessels and the shifting, wayward lines and blocks. We can tell, however, that they are not headed for sea; despite the plenitude of ships, boats, and ports in her paintings, Thomasos' mindscapes are distinctly waterless, rarely including bodies of water or the implication of the sea. The roiling nature of the compositions might metaphorically imply the sea and circulation, but by absenting such a significant symbolic site in the Black Atlantic imagination, Thomasos arouses a diasporic sense of place that is landlocked, grounded, inaccessible by land, only by imagination.

Works such as *Raft* (2011, fig. 19) and *Odyssey* (2011, fig. 20) depict more clearly defined calvaries of boats and/or coffins, but grouped together in an oblong shape that makes it difficult to tell which direction they are facing. Are they heading forward? Moving backward

¹⁸² Pearce, "An Aesthetic of Survival," 41; Dana Kandic, "Denyse Thomasos Interview."

voluntarily, or being yanked? If you fix your eyes just right, they may appear to be whirling in a circle. What's more, their upwards triangular compositions recall a more traditional style of Western painting, such as that of Romantic painter Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819, fig. 21), a favourite of Thomasos and a likely inspiration for *Raft*.¹⁸³ *Raft of the Medusa*'s tale of real-life corrupt authority and doomed survival bears close ties to the many documented accounts of slavers throwing their enslaved African abductees overboard. The collision of the two narratives in the painting reaches through time and places them on the same epic historical scale.¹⁸⁴ As viewers, we cannot easily ascribe to the mindscapes a sense of coherent time. Instead, Thomasos opts to collapse history into a past-present-future blend, peppered through with certain events — specific points in spacetime — such as the Middle Passage, the contemporary urban city, and the age-old bars of prison cells. Thomasos' own personal narrative is also present, through her own psychological negotiation of the diaspora and her family circumstances. But nothing really roots the viewer in a single identifiable time period, countering the way we think about time and our movement through it. *Raft* and *Odyssey*'s sweeping compositions connote more than just movement, but speed, maybe even time travel through the flow of history. They also arouse a sense of cyclical time, relevant to the plantation future and the way its enclosures and activities crop up again and again.

Thomasos' personal narrative not only arises through her direct experience of diasporic “madness,” but in the ways she blends symbols of the Middle Passage with imagery that alludes to her family, particularly her father's experience of migration. The symbolism of the ribcage, for example, directly references Thomasos' father's experiences with xenophobia upon the family's migration to Canada; though a “brilliant” physicist and a mathematician, he was unable

¹⁸³ Van der Avoird, “Agitated Surfaces,” 21.

¹⁸⁴ The most notorious example of this is in the case of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783), painted by JMW Turner in 1840.

to find work in Canada and could not join his family until later.¹⁸⁵ He passed away in 1987, just before she entered graduate school, and after his death Thomasos decided that figurative painting could no longer “express what I needed it to express,” that the process of figuration felt “too conscious” and “a little dishonest.” But it was abstraction that offered her an “immediate connection with the canvas” and her emotional relationship to the painting.¹⁸⁶ We see the stirrings of this in Thomasos’ *Metropolis* (2007, fig. 22), a much more explicit, representational painting where a titanic ribcage punctures and encloses a disintegrating city building, soft pastel background colours clashing sublimely with the cold steel of the ribs. The surreality of the image is compounded by the way that the pastel background encroaches on the floating creature and its prey, and in the way the tail of the ribcage pulls upwards into the stern of a ship. This ongoing reference to her father’s experience is also evident in *Arc*, where the descending structure seems to have a rigid black skeleton, perhaps alluding to the crashing disappointment of experiencing racism in Canada. And across her oeuvre, the bars of prison cells eerily resemble floating ribs.

As such, Thomasos often creates a “through-line”¹⁸⁷ from her life to the Middle Passage and other points in world-historical time, enacting a dual memorialization and archiving process that tracks both her ancestors’ and her own movement through time and space. The throughline functions like a wormhole connecting two disparate points in spacetime, crossing through unyielding dimensions in order to connect her own histories to longer, ongoing histories of displacement and labour, from the origin of modernity to now. Again: “To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction — a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself.”¹⁸⁸ Thomasos gives shape to, to quote McKittrick on

¹⁸⁵ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos - Odyssey*, 28.

¹⁸⁶ Thomasos qtd in Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 55; Van Der Avoird, “Agitated Surfaces,” 27.

¹⁸⁷ Frater, “Spaces That Hold, Spaces That Bind,” 50.

¹⁸⁸ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 18.

Brand here, the complex unity between diasporic “desire for place, the suspicion of the desire for place, and experiential physical place(s)”¹⁸⁹; in doing so, she offers insight that comes from her studies of the archives of slavery, but also what she has learned in excess of that research, the everyday knowledges that flesh out more than historical documents and records.¹⁹⁰ It demonstrates Thomasos’ consideration of the Middle Passage as more of an “inheritance” rather than a past, a familial narrative she has shouldered from birth but one she still has agency over.¹⁹¹ She does not reconcile with this inheritance through a rewriting of history, nor by trying to conjure a linear return directly back to some eternal vision of Africa, as a recompense for the haunting she experiences. Rather, her ghostly boats and rafts are mired in abstract colour and texture, dipping in and out of solidity, and thus saturating her knowledge of the past with the affective vision of an unknowable beyond. She retains the “messy overlaps of peoples, places, and times that fully constitute the histories of...Blacks across the Diaspora,” mixing and matching slivers of different times.¹⁹² The avoidance of linearity stirs up the binary we tend to place onto narratives of diasporic journeys, which contribute to the idea of linear progressive time. Anaïs Duplan reminds us of the aesthetic and political power of narrative, easily “wielded by agents who hold power to produce some felt effect in a reader — or in a colonial subject.”¹⁹³ Narrative, as the invisible constructive force of History/knowledge¹⁹⁴ as well as a temporally organizing structure, cyclically produces and is then enforced by notions of objective, linear progressive time, headed straight into the future. Narrative orders and thus hierarchizes events, places, and people in time — good guys and bad guys, conflicts and resolutions, centers and

¹⁸⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 105.

¹⁹⁰ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 12.

¹⁹¹ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos - Odyssey*, 37.

¹⁹² Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 83.

¹⁹³ Duplan, *Blackspace*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 9.

margins, modernity and the past — making vertical connections between certain important events and certain important people. The narrative of linear progressive time is desirable for its easy continuity, giving coherent, readable shape to Blackness.¹⁹⁵ But it does not get to the heart of what needs to be said and seen. Thomasos disentangles this structure by shuffling around moments of time, locations, memories (her own and others’), architectures and symbolisms into helter-skelter arrangements that indicate neither specific place nor time, neither here nor there, neither end nor beginning. In dismantling this power, she confiscates its ability to shape her and our memory. In the mindscapes, the past is no longer left behind and the future is no longer being approached. Rather, events in time are placed on the same plane of existence, and thus are ascribed the same value. Or, to take it further, events are no longer fixed in spacetime at all, allowing the diasporic community to exist “within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.”¹⁹⁶ This is part and parcel of Thomasos’ intentional practice of resilience: she once said that “More and more, I recognize that my interest in imprisonment in the outside world actually stems from my own feelings of isolation and the ways I have had to survive that. With every line, every mark, it’s a language that I weave together to survive.”¹⁹⁷

An analytic of diasporic spacetime grants us an opportunity of “unthinking the world” as we know it, recoding the way we think about Black aesthetics and life.¹⁹⁸ Diasporic spacetime importantly reinforces that lived space is in fact *lived*, liveable, inhabited, experienced, humanly and intensely, capturing the everyday “radiant moments of ordinariness” that are actually quite

¹⁹⁵ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 18, 20.

¹⁹⁶ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996): 180.

¹⁹⁷ Pearce, “An Aesthetic of Survival,” 44.

¹⁹⁸ Ferreira da Silva, “In the Raw,” 1.

marvelous and spectacular.¹⁹⁹ In imaginative and psychic work we find the first steps towards realizing freedom and emancipation through the wayfinding practice that Dionne Brand asks of us, quoting Fanon: ““We need to have a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of wayfinding...’ To reclaim the Black body from that domesticated, captive, open space is the creative project always underway.”²⁰⁰ She uses the example of Caribbean mythologies of flight as mapless methods of escape, imploring us to think in ways dismissed by Western epistemologies — folklore, storytelling, magic, and now, the psychic— as our ticket out of this condition of unsettlement.²⁰¹ In response to *A Map to the Door of No Return*, artist and writer Amber Rose Johnson made a creative film titled “No Theories for the Liquidity of This Desire.”²⁰² A poignant title — the formlessness of this desire for place cannot be solved through discourse. There is no language for the ungraspability of this feeling. Only feeling.

¹⁹⁹ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 18.

²⁰⁰ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 43.

²⁰¹ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 43, 44.

²⁰² Amber Rose Johnson, “No Theories for the Liquidity of This Desire,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 46 (2023): 174.

CHAPTER 3: A CONCLUSION OF SORTS

Year 0: I have to keep a record. I am not writing about what I wore and who hurt my feelings. I am writing about the future while it is happening.

— *Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective*

One dream at a time.

— *Denyse Thomasos*

Thinking in terms of spacetime allows us to get at different ways of reading art beyond formal modes of analysis, and more intimately address why and how art feels. By understanding capitalism and Western society on a spatiotemporal level, we can more clearly see how the state functions to keep “Others” out-of-step with its rhythms, through subtle enactments of dispossession, abjection, and violence through things like architecture and spatial planning. However, the framework grants us an opportunity to better devise ways of subverting these rhythms; as Dionne Brand said, “By way of its indefinite and continuous and recursive duration, so blackness is a project to inhabit all time; to redeem time; as in claim time back from capital. Also, to count back events, as in to recount events as they happened; to *strive against inertia*.”²⁰³ Linearity is abandoned in favour of rhizomatic relations through space and time. As a disobedient force against state spatiotemporalities, diasporic spacetime offers us a metric by which to understand our resistances on the paradigm-shifting register that they deserve, as well as offer a map of alternative spatiotemporalities that make Black life possible. In this time-space we acknowledge how Black creative production is already doing this work. At the very least, an analytic of diasporic spacetime encourages all diasporic people to understand their personal histories and feelings the scale of the cosmic.

²⁰³ Dionne Brand qtd in Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2023): 257, emphasis mine.

There is still much to be said, given the sheer number of works Denyse Thomasos produced throughout her life. Her complex intentions towards her work – simultaneously reckoning with history, dealing with isolation, and just trying to survive – manifest themselves through both visual strategies and philosophical questions. Through a mastery of line and colour, she made visible a deeply sensual experience of diaspora that is otherwise difficult to express, toying with our understandings of space and time. Rather than setting out to depict some single, quintessentially Black subject, Thomasos tangles historical and contemporary motifs within her abstract fields, alluding to a sometimes shared but not always universal psychic experience of migration that has been in development since the sixteenth century. The pursuit of a single definition of Black experience is not the goal; in an artist statement, she said, “Using large-scale painting, I developed a visual language of line to express the black experience from slavery to present day. I use abstraction to convey the intractable complexity of slavery and the psychological ramifications that racism, displacement, isolation and confinement continue to exert on people of colour.”²⁰⁴ Noting Thomasos’ careful and inclusive use of “people of colour,” we arrive at that topsy-turvy feeling, the sensations of surveillance, and out-of-placeness, relatable across diasporas who experience this thread of melancholia as a result of the unavoidable tug-of-war between belonging and non-belonging. In this way Thomasos confronts viewers with a renewed understanding of diaspora not just as an identity or a historical trajectory, but as sensory experience.

There is something about her work that lingers, intensely, exposing the raw nerve of the Black contemporary condition, what Rinaldo Walcott calls the long emancipation, that condition of unfreedom that haunts the terrain of the Black diaspora.²⁰⁵ However, the Black creative

²⁰⁴ Thomasos, “Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice,” artist statement.

²⁰⁵ Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 1.

project, in this case painting, is one liquid possibility for visioning the world anew, a space of liberation and unthinking. Torkwase Dyson questioned, “What kind of expansion can a painting hold? Can it bring into our senses how encounters become scale and refusals textured? Becoming and being black is movement, state change, evolution, quanta, and distance.”²⁰⁶ Black abstract painting is matter in flux, composed of everything that came before and after, a composition of compositions. The compositions of Denyse Thomasos attend to that fine line between the “simultaneous precarity and possibility of black life.”²⁰⁷

There are still many works and styles of Thomasos’ oeuvre that I have not broached in this paper, and which unquestionably merit the same interrogation I have undertaken here. Specifically, Thomasos engaged a tremendous amount of future-thinking in her later works, musing on the state of futuristic technology and, I believe, the (im)possibility of a Black future. To pay proper respect to her visionary approach, and to fill the gaps in scholarly analyses of her work, I want to conclude this paper with the last works of the late artist’s career, works that are still shrouded in mystery due to her untimely passing. I will summarize my thoughts briefly here with the knowledge that they will be revisited in due time.

Two themes arose in Thomasos’ work in the early 2010s. The first was a growing interest in corporatized “green” architecture and Indigenous dwellings. The second, the topic for this conclusion, was a journey deeper into abstraction, (seemingly) emptying most of her paintings of the last vestiges of representation. Of course, most of her works can be and are characterized as abstract, but she often leans more into semi-abstraction, choosing to engage representational subjects in a subtle and curious way, which offers her a method of accessing a new register of

²⁰⁶ Torkwase Dyson qtd in Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 249.

²⁰⁷ Tina Campt qtd in *Ordinary Notes*, 259.

Black diasporic experience. And she had ventured into complete abstraction before, most notably in her grid works of the late 90s and early 2000s, as well as her suite of paintings made during a 2001 artist residency in Clearmont, Wyoming.²⁰⁸ All of these works typify her interest in colour, as well as an acute awareness of labour — the monumental grid works are an exercise in patience and time, and Thomasos has acknowledged the influence of African textiles, noting that her interest in labour came from encountering Dogon women’s architectural painting.²⁰⁹ The Wyoming works make use of looser, serpentine brushstrokes and natural tones, evoking the mountains around which the residency was located.²¹⁰

However, in 2012, the last year of her life, Thomasos initiated a robust revisit to this approach, producing a slew of smaller scale abstract works, all left untitled. These 2012 abstractions are significant because they demonstrate a continued evolution of thought for the artist, recording a fluctuating relationship to the structures of Black confinement. After interpreting her previous works in such detail, it is hard to ignore their lingering traces in this new work. It is almost as if Thomasos was heading towards pure abstraction as a natural consequence of her continuous deconstruction of her subject matter — the city, the prison, the ship, and their attending affects — to the point of unintelligibility. In *Untitled* (2012, [1], fig. 23) the composition and colour palette is strongly reminiscent of her paintings of international cities, particularly *Excavations: Courtyards in Surveillance* (2007, fig. 24). But it is as if she took away all the structure, smeared away the details, and left the viewer with the flat, bare bones of the

²⁰⁸ Phillips Auction House, “308: Denyse Thomasos, Inside Wyoming,” May 16 2023, accessed via <https://www.phillips.com/detail/denyse-thomasos/NY010523/308>

²⁰⁹ “Labour is always important in my work and initially came out of me thinking about slavery and then later the repetition found on African birch paintings or Dogon architectural painting often done by women.” Thomasos qtd in “Tracking: Thirty Years in Canada, Thirty Years in Trinidad: Denyse Thomasos,” self-guided tour booklet (2004): 6; Jenkner et al, *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings*, 51; Judith Nasby and Ron Shuebrook, “Contingency and Continuity: Negotiating New Abstraction,” exhibition catalogue (Guelph: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 1999): 21.

²¹⁰ Phillips Auction House, “308: Denyse Thomasos, Inside Wyoming.”

space. The agglomeration of vertical brushstrokes hints at architecture or cages, but there is no coherence offered in any manner that sticks; she has suspended space and time entirely, leaving us to contend with the paint and the paint alone, all the colour without the weight.

In these final abstractions, these new worlds, all that is left are a few visiting apparitions. In some instances of the aforementioned *Untitled*, her thin blueprint-style drawings can be seen, but they are miniscule and half-erased, as if left there by accident, remnants of an abandoned plan. In the top left corner of another *Untitled* [2] (fig. 25), the tip of a boat seems to peek through, before being diffused into the array. In the center of the same canvas, a white grid floats, but its curved lines seem more like ribs. In other, smaller paintings, such as *Untitled* (2012, [3], fig. 26) Thomasos leaves much more open space, using fewer colours and brushstrokes, instead opting for multiple passes of the same stroke in different directions, and layering them over each other. Here, there is more breathing room, and the eye does not bounce around so much and can cascade serenely over the paint instead. But even still we see the traces of former ghosts: turning *Untitled* [3] upside down gives us a boat-like shape; meanwhile, a basic artist's underdrawing of a face emerges from one work (fig. 27), reminiscent of the tumbling sketched skulls in *Arc*. In another untitled work (fig. 28), choppy pink and orange shading surrounds a series of thin, messy circles with curved legs protruding from the bottom and the back; here, Thomasos seems to revisit the scuttling, alien form of the ribcage monster from *Metropolis*, but this time she has dissolved the entire image down to its most rudimentary properties, like a preliminary drawing from the future (fig. 29). What does it mean, to break down this deeply personal motif into its most basic state, five years later? This return to form signals that something has changed.

Two possibilities appear to me in the mystery of these final works, both of which are undergirded by Thomasos' unique ability to articulate the inarticulable. In a posthumous open letter to Thomasos, Michelle Jacques, who was the curator of *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* and a friend of the artist, tells her, "Your work is political because the spaces and realms you picture in them are about the African diasporic experience. Perhaps they include abstraction because that experience has so often been necessarily premised in the visionary, the speculative, and the unrepresentable."²¹¹ On one hand, these works can be read as a sustained practice of deconstructive abstraction, a form of speculation through disintegration. In this way, these paintings represent a continuation of Thomasos' tactic of claiming dominion over the physical structures and internal experiences that she has grappled with throughout her career. Perhaps total abstraction offers a means of stripping these spaces and objects of the last of their solidity, and therefore their power, swallowed by the sheer energy of her gesture and unreadable colour fields. It makes me think of the black hole information paradox, wherein through some scientifically incomprehensible process, matter that crosses over the event horizon and falls into the singularity seems to be simply deleted from existence. This is a paradox because it undermines a significant law in both the theory of general relativity *and* quantum mechanics: that matter cannot simply be eliminated. If the paradox is true, it demolishes the discipline of physics and all the knowledge we thought we gained about the universe. Throughout this paper we have considered the "devouring force" of diasporic spacetime that ruptures the epistemes and logics of the settler state, that grows and moves through space as its own pulsing mass of life, disavowal, and resistance. Perhaps the final stage of this spacetime is the total elimination of those structures of confinement, in order to move forward into a future beyond antiblackness.

²¹¹ Michelle Jacques, "Moving Towards Loving Painting Again, or Dear Denyse," in Jacques et al, eds., *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, 81.

But perhaps this is too straightforward. It does little to pretend that we can completely obliterate that “total climate” of antiblackness that literally founded our modernity as we know it. But that does not mean Thomasos could not have made attempts. I want to offer an addendum to my initial reading and position her final abstractions as the beginning of her attempts to imagine worlds otherwise. It may be that Thomasos headed towards total abstraction in the pursuit of answering the question, *what comes next?* After all that we have seen and endured, how can we look beyond? How can we envision worlds otherwise, an elsewhere with a different climate? Anaïs Duplan, who muses deeply on what liberation truly means, offers a sumptuous definition of a desired future-world where there is “*nothing to get beyond, to get above or around. In this single world-substance, everywhere is home; everything is forever, and everyone is inalienable.*”²¹² A heterogenous world of lived spaces, of lateral relations and what Okwui Enwezor calls “a world of nearness”²¹³ to each other across diasporas and cultures. But contemplating the possibility of what a truly postcolonial future looks like, in full definition, is remarkably difficult; it is sometimes as if the mind goes blank, or freezes, because how can we make the dream of utopia feel realistic? As it stands, we have very few frames of reference for a world that operates without white Western hegemony. This unimaginability is especially true within our current era of late stage capitalism: Mark Fisher’s popular concept of capitalist realism describes our despondent belief that there is no alternative to the world we know, a “self-fulfilling prophecy” that endlessly re-feeds itself.²¹⁴ According to Fisher, capitalism normalizes crisis, vanquishes belief and non-Western philosophies, commodifies culture, and makes a spectacle of everything; Lefebvre would further add that it eradicates lived spaces of creativity

²¹² Duplan, *Blackspace*, 3, emphasis mine.

²¹³ Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box,” *ONCurating* no. 46 (June 2020): 430.

²¹⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009): 8.

and community.²¹⁵ There is a terrible, ever-looming feeling that political action is “carnavalesque background noise” to a system that cannot change.²¹⁶ In this way, then, we can see how capitalism “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable...[and] has colonized the dreaming life of the population.”²¹⁷ It has instead established an illusory state of *the way things ought to be*, undergirded by the supremacy of conceived spaces and white supremacist, capitalist world orders.

But why get away from this feeling? Why not run into it head-on? Can we read Thomasos’ final works as her attempts at broaching these horizons of the thinkable, through the creation of a new, affective space in which to breathe and think? Duplan asks:

Should we, “post-bondage,” focus on the ways in which we’re free (free to move, free to buy, free to breathe) or the ways we’re not free (free to move but displaced and shuffled around, free to buy but within a capitalist system in which one used to exist as commodity, free to breathe but in especial danger at all times)? Neither. In order to locate liberation, one has to locate a third space. This alter-space is not “outside of,” “away from” or “other than” our present world. Instead, it is an intensification, or deepening, of mundane reality.²¹⁸

This alter-space of true freedom, or what Rinaldo Walcott calls the “*pure decolonial project*,” does not require forgetting of the plantation, the ship, or the prison; antiblackness is a founding structure of Euro-modernity, and so we cannot do away with it so easily.²¹⁹ In *The Long Emancipation: Moving Towards Black Freedom*, Walcott writes:

²¹⁵ As Lefebvre fervently put it in *Rhythmanalysis*, “Capital has something more than maliciousness, malignance and malevolence about it. The wills, the wishes, of the property owners are not there for nothing: they execute. Through them, the death-dealing character of capital is accomplished, without there being either full consciousness or a clear intuition of it. It kills the town, turning itself back against its own bases. It kills artistic creation, creative capacity. It goes as far as threatening the last resource: nature, the fatherland, roots. It delocalises humans. We exhibit technology at the slightest suggestion....The impact of technological conquests does not make the everyday any more alive; it nourishes ideology.” Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 1-9; Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 53.

²¹⁶ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8, 14.

²¹⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

²¹⁸ Duplan, *Blackspace*, 57.

²¹⁹ Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 55, emphasis original.

Anti-blackness continually produces Black people as out-of-place in (post)colonial locations and white settler societies with numerous and devastating consequences. Further, what I call a *pure decolonial project* remains impossible as long as attention to the deathly production of anti-blackness is not central to future political desires. In the context of North, South, and Central America, decoloniality has been offered as a way out of European subordinations....A *pure decolonial project* is one that works to produce new modes of relational logics and conditions in which the racially structured intimacies that European colonial expansion produced, and that we continue to live, might be refashioned.²²⁰

Refashioned, not deleted. The traces of ships and ribcages in Thomasos' paintings are for remembrance and wayfinding more than they are for forgetting, or for temporally relegating antiblackness to a past event. Instead, they remain as an enduring presence to be navigated; they are "what remains of the remains."²²¹ Through these total abstractions, Thomasos presents a possibility of all of these things existing simultaneously, *during* the pursuit of liberation, rather than believing they must be pushed to the past or forgotten. Black future-thinking and -making does not have to be necessarily dependent on forgetting, or countermemory.²²² Rather, in the interest of jumping back and forth through time, they help us envision futures that pay attention to the past, perhaps even drawing power from it, while still engaged in the envisioning of worlds otherwise. This strategy calls us to action in a grounded, but still inventive way. I feel that Thomasos' career has been about reclamation and remembrance, that she pays close attention to the structures of empire and the spectre of the Middle Passage as methods of reclaiming both space and time. Further, her deconstructive approach leaves these dialogues open-ended, rather than offering closure. Esi Edugyan sees in one of the paintings (fig. 30) a lidded coffin emerge from the cluster of brushstrokes, but she encourages us to shift our eyes to read it as an open casket; after a blink, perhaps a boat again. In that decisive blink, "everything shifts in an

²²⁰ Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 55-56, emphasis original.

²²¹ Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 268.

²²² Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR (East Lansing, Mich.)* 3, no. 2 (2003): 288

instant.”²²³ The same can be said for the outline of a face, or the skeleton of *Metropolis*. In their landmark text *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang dutifully remind us that decolonization cannot wait to be enacted after we achieve absolute clarity, when all of our questions have been answered – we must move forward with questions, and “we will find out the answers as we get there.”²²⁴ This is also what Katherine McKittrick posits is at the end of the plantation future: what she calls a “decolonial poetics that reads black dispossession as a ‘question mark’,” which broadens our thinking around the current climate of antiblackness, and incorporates a continued effort to consider beyond these conditions and focus on a future “underwritten by life, the poetic, the theoretical, and the creative.”²²⁵ In this way, there is an element of anticipation²²⁶ and potential re-incorporated into the way we imagine and move into Black futures. Forgetting is not the goal; the past must be useable, unforgotten. However, acknowledging that Black life in the Americas has been shaped by white supremacy and colonial violence does not mean that we cannot analyze said Black life in additional or alternative registers, or liberate it on imaginative terms.²²⁷

In these ways I consider Thomasos as engaging a poetics of abolition rather than of deletion, because abolition is not simply the removal of systems like the prison-industrial complex, but also a change in the way we think about accountability and social relations.²²⁸ It also requires a reworking of our relationships to time: esteemed sociologist Avery Gordon, in speaking to the experience of prisoners against whom space and time become instruments of

²²³ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos - Odyssey*, 39.

²²⁴ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35.

²²⁵ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 5.

²²⁶ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 11.

²²⁷ McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 14.

²²⁸ The CR10 Publications Collective, *Abolition Now!: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008): 11.

torture, contends that abolition “recognizes that transformative time doesn’t always stop the world, as if in an absolute break between now and then, but is a daily part of it, a way of being in the ongoing work of emancipation, a work which inevitably must take place while you’re still enslaved, imprisoned, indebted, occupied, walled in, commodified, etc.”²²⁹ In a similar vein, Alexis Pauline Gumbs urges us to wonder: “What if abolition isn’t a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows?”²³⁰ Lastly, Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us that abolition, like the unseen density of the black hole, is about presence, not absence.²³¹ These scholars bring together ideas of slowness, patience, harmony, solidarity, and communal effort that begins to work against capitalist realism and open up potentialities for worlds otherwise. And art provides fertile ground for these potentialities: the Russian artist collective Chto Delat once declared, “We insist on the obvious; a world without the dominion of profit and exploitation can only be created but always already exists in the micropolitics and micro-economies of human relationships and creative labour.”²³² Black diasporic artists have long been executing this labour, through redefining genres, asserting traditions and philosophies, through speculative aesthetics, and more. Whether in art, social justice, or abolitionist politics, the work of resistance always starts in the now.

²²⁹ Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” 8.

²³⁰ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina,” in The CR10 Publications Collective, *Abolition Now!*, 145.

²³¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore qtd in Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 262.

²³² Chto Delat qtd in Sven Lütticken, “Capitalism and Schismogenesis: Part 2,” *e-flux* no. 139 (October 2023): 3.

Denyse Thomasos will always be an eminent figure in the Canadian artistic landscape, and merits more scholarly analysis than she is currently given. Her oeuvre is an example of not only a radical interjection into the modernist tradition but by a contribution to a Black diasporic spacetime that takes up space without apology or quietude. I am sure her work would have continued for many more years had she not passed away so soon; there is nothing in her paintings that suggest an interest in endings, or finitude, metaphorically or literally. She has an expansive way of painting that, with every stroke, contains the movement of her body and the swell of her energy, as if the perimeter of the canvas is barely holding it in. It is in this sense that Thomasos lives on in the paintings; we can imagine the choreography of her body through her studio as she makes every mark, the force of her gesture stitching together moments of time. The liveliness of her work reflects the liveliness of her life: by time of her death, Thomasos had exhibited internationally, receiving a slew of prestigious residencies and awards.²³³ She had been teaching art at Rutgers University for years, and had been travelling widely, and spending time with her husband, Samein, and her daughter, Syann. Gaëtane Verna, a friend of Thomasos, said that “[A]t the end of the day, Denyse was joyful and totally believed in life. At the time of her death, she was living her best life. She took tremendous pleasure in finding Samein, her life partner, in finally having a child — their daughter, Syann — in her exhibiting, in her teaching.”²³⁴ In a student interview posted on Youtube in 2011, Thomasos said, “I tell my students that I have had the most magical life that I could imagine, you know? Every dream I’ve ever dreamt has come true, every single one of them.”²³⁵ This is how I perceive Thomasos’ art

²³³ Some of these residencies include the MacDowell Colony, the Ucross Foundation Artist Residency, Yaddo, the Bogliasco Foundation Artist Residency. She received the 1997 Guggenheim Fellowship Prize, the 1998 Joan Mitchell Foundation award, and received multiple grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the National Endowment for the arts. Jacques et al, *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*, 166.

²³⁴ Edugyan et al, *Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey*, 25.

²³⁵ Kandic, “Denyse Thomasos Interview.”

— as undergirded by a total belief in life. In Black life, in the artist's own life, in human life.

There is no end to that.

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APPENDIX A: FIGURES



Figure 1: Denyse Thomasos, *Arc*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 132 x 240 in (11 x 20 ft). Photo courtesy of Michael Cullen



Figure 2: Denyse Thomasos, *Urban Jewel*, 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 in (10 x 15 ft). The Collection of Tricon Residential Inc., Toronto, Canada



Figure 3: Denyse Thomasos, *Swamp*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 156 in (10 x 13 ft). Private collection. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 4-6: (L to R) Denyse Thomasos, *Dismantle #17*, *Dismantle #18*, *Dismantle #19*, 1998. All acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 in. Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario (*Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* exhibition catalogue).

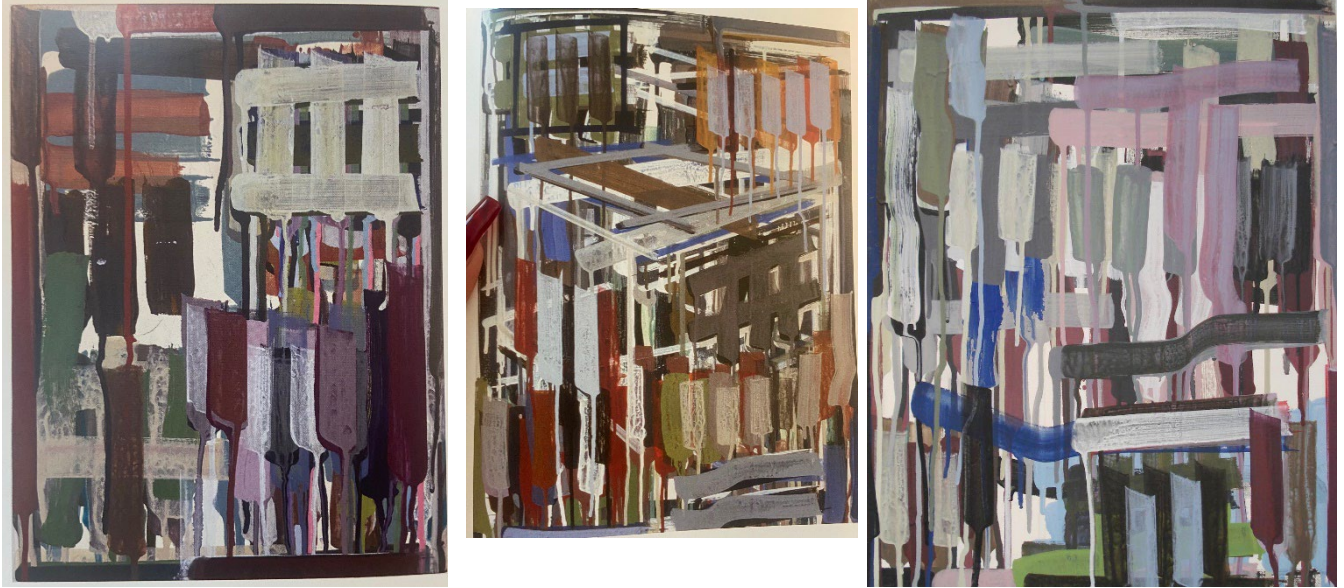


Figure 7-9: 1 (L to R) Denyse Thomasos, *Dismantle #17* (16 x 12 in), *Dismantle #18* (16 x 12 in), *Dismantle #19* (20 x 16 in), 1998. All acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario (from *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* exhibition catalogue).

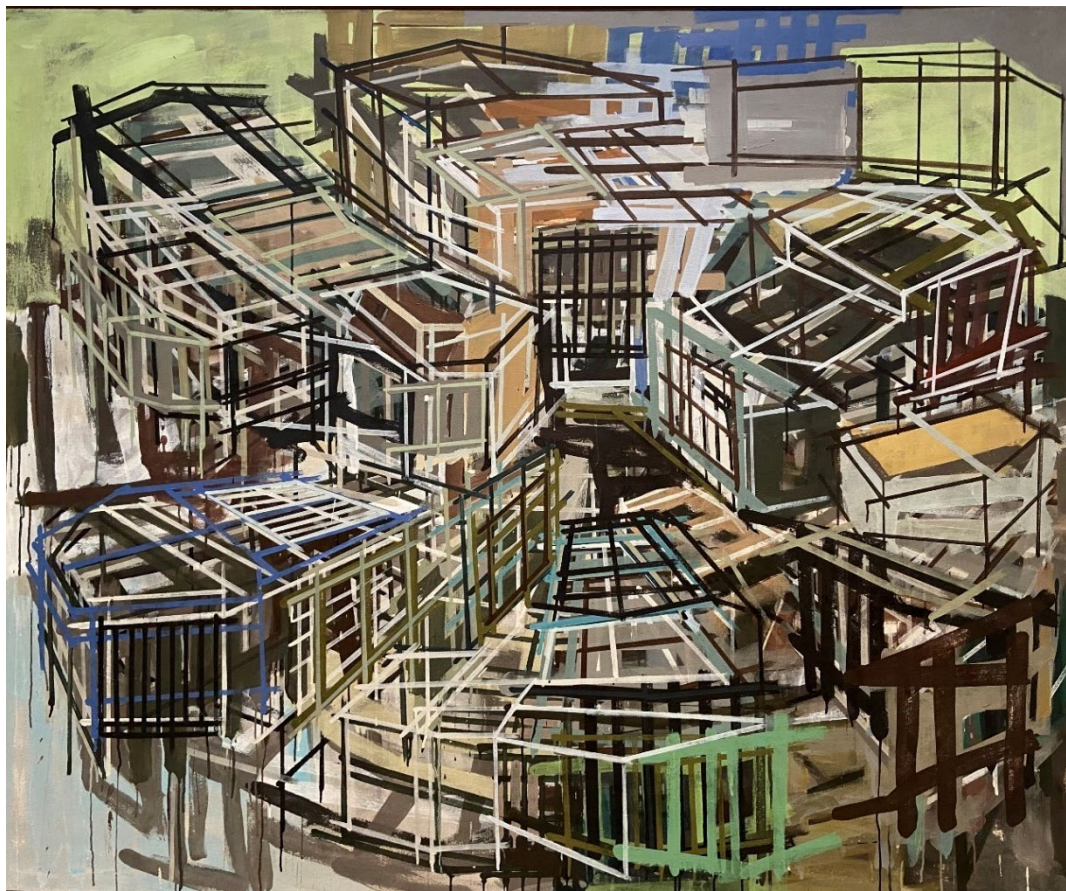


Figure 10: Denyse Thomasos, *Dwelling—Prison*, 2005-2006. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in (5 x 6 ft). Collection of Barbara Shum and Manos Vourkoutiotis. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 11: Denyse Thomasos, *Dwelling—Tower*, 2005-2006. Acrylic on canvas, 74 x 60 in (6 x 5 ft). Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 12: Denyse Thomasos, *Dwelling—Tower of Babel*, 2005-2006. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 in (6 x 5 ft). Photo courtesy of the author.

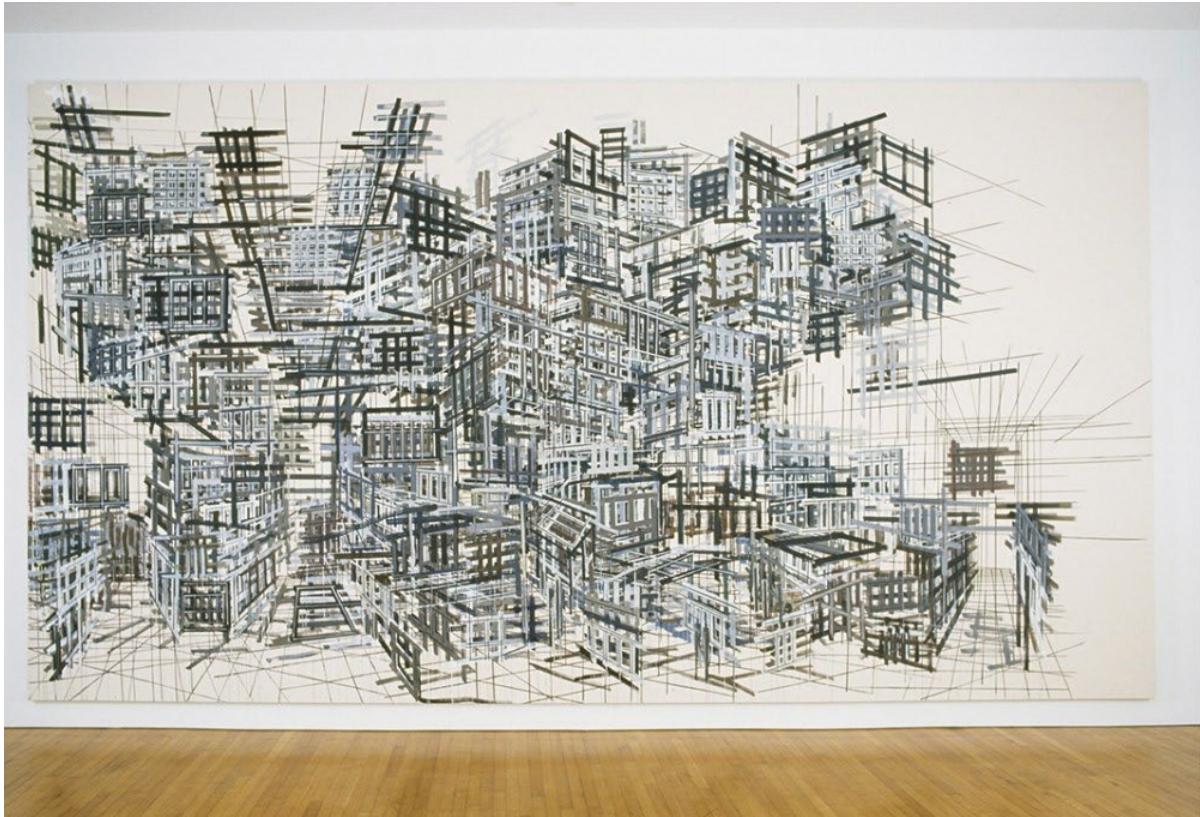


Figure 13: Denyse Thomasos, *Virtual Incarceration*, 1999. Acrylic on canvas, 132 x 240 in (11 × 20 ft). Photo courtesy of Artforum.

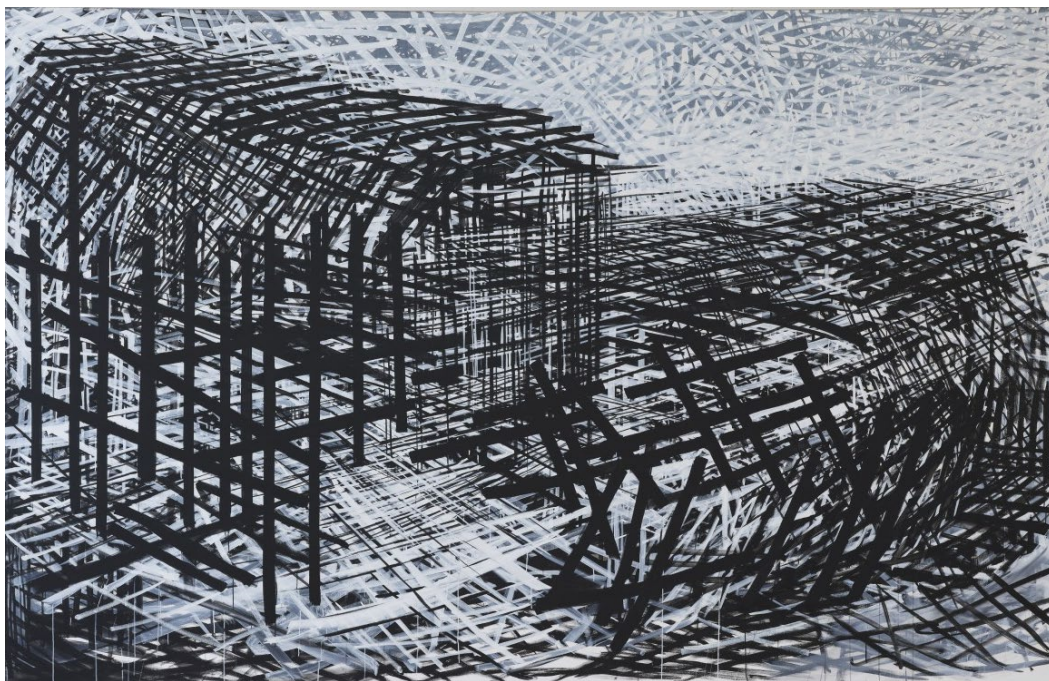


Figure 14: Denyse Thomasos, *Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 168 in (9 × 14 ft). Collection of Cadillac Fairview. Photo courtesy of Border Crossings Magazine.



Figure 15: Denyse Thomasos, *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 216 in (9 x 18 ft). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

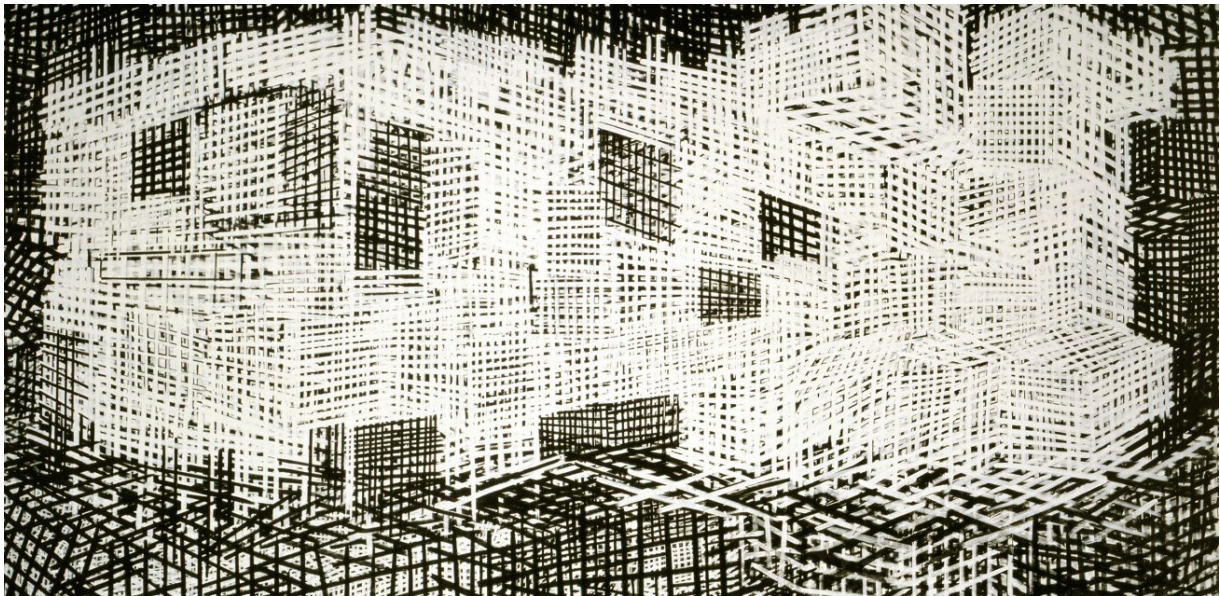


Figure 16: Denyse Thomasos, *Jail*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 216 in (9 x 18 ft). Blumenfield Collection. Photo courtesy of Joan Mitchell Foundation.



Figure 17: Denyse Thomasos, Maiden Flight, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in (5 x 6 ft). Photo courtesy of Olga Korper Gallery.



Figure 18: Denyse Thomasos, Albatross, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in (5 x 6 ft). Photo courtesy of Olga Korper Gallery.



Figure 19: Denyse Thomasos, *Raft*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 73 x 96 in (6 x 8 ft). The Collection of Tricon Residential, Inc. Photo Courtesy of The Miramichi Reader.



Figure 20: Denyse Thomasos, *Odyssey*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 73 x 96 in (6 x 8 ft). Photo courtesy of Galleries West.



Figure 21: Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819. Oil on canvas, 193 x 281 in (13.75 x 23.5 ft). The Louvre Museum, Paris.



Figure 22: Denyse Thomoasos, *Metropolis*, 2007. Acrylic, charcoal, and porous-point marker on canvas. 84.5 x 132.1 in (7 x 11 ft). Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



Figure 23: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. [1]. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96.5 in (6 x 8 ft). Collection of Paul and Mary Failey Desmarais III. Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario (*Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* exhibition catalogue).

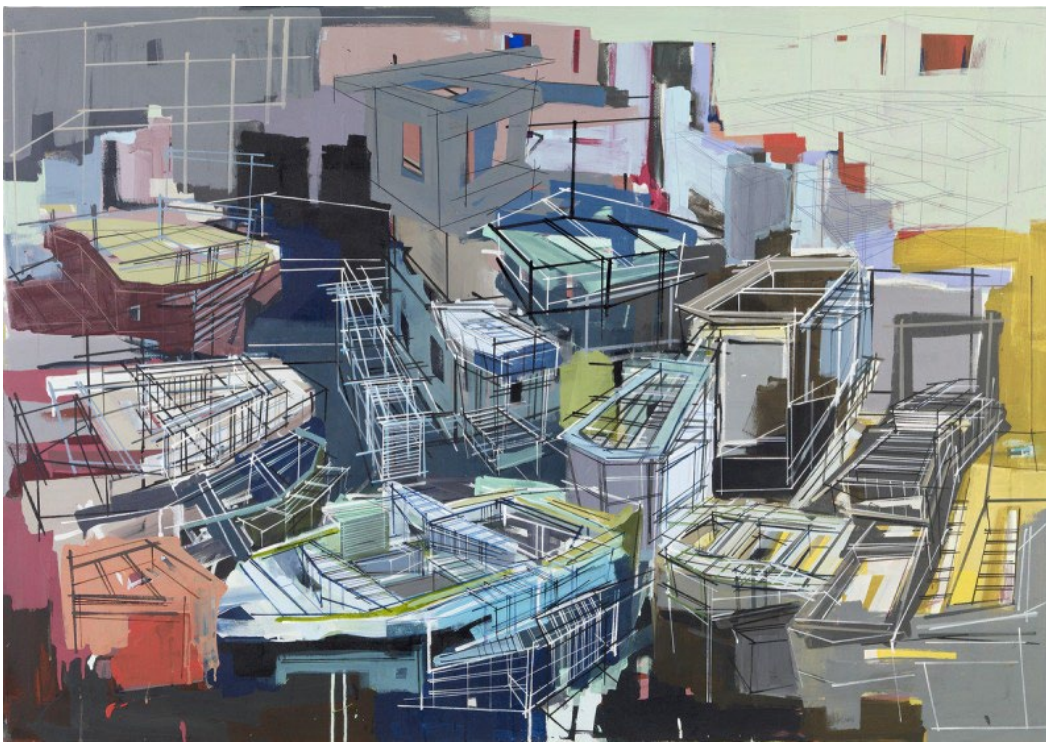


Figure 24: Denyse Thomasos, *Excavations: Courtyards in Surveillance*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 60 in (3.5 x 5 ft). Collection of Bob Harding. Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



Figure 25: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. [2]. Acrylic on canvas, 73.25 x 95.5 in (6.1 x 8 ft). Collection of Bob Harding. Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario (*Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* exhibition catalogue).

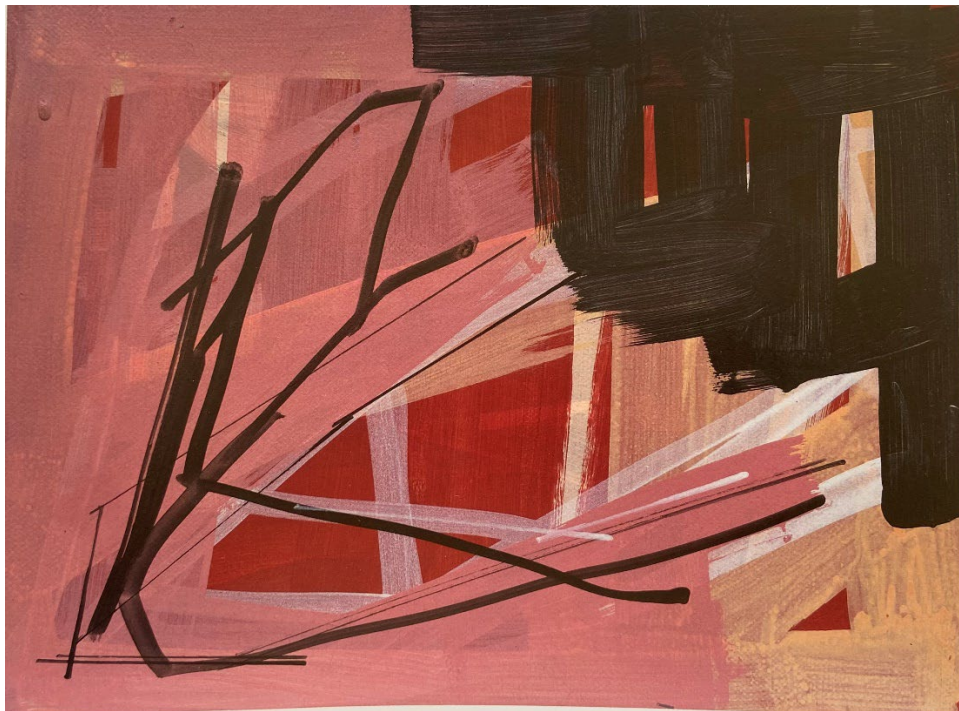


Figure 26: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012 [3]. Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 in. Collection of Michelle Koerner. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 27: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. [4] Acrylic on canvas. 8 x 6 in. Photo courtesy of the author.

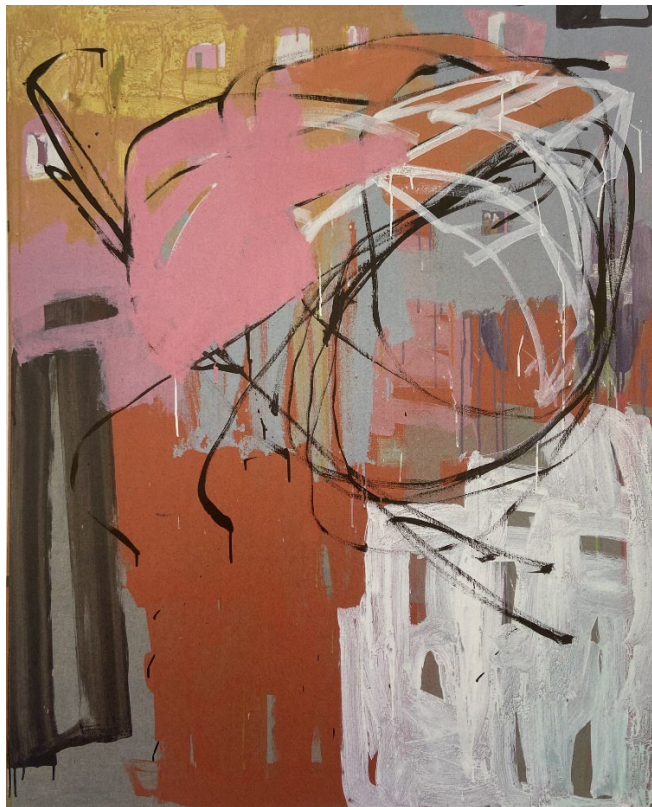


Figure 28: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. [5] Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in (5 x 4 ft). Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 29: Sidealong comparison of *Metropolis* and *Untitled* [5].



Figure 30: Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. [6] Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 16 in. Photo courtesy of the author.