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The paper proposes an analysis of Nomusa Makhubu's 2014 artwork *Umasifanisane* (Comparison I) within the context of critical black feminist studies (Sara Ahmed, Hortense J. Spillers, Sylvia Wynter) and archival studies (Ariella Azoulay, Tina M. Campt). The author's primary aim is to show how dominating historical narratives can be disrupted with the means of insightful archival research, artistic reappropriation, and montage, which actively alter postcolonial knowledge production. Makhubu's project demonstrates that although history itself will not solve the problems arising from colonial violence, working with a visual archive and persisting in staying with the trouble may propose new ways of representing black womanhood.

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Black Woman's Gaze. Nomusa Makhubu Unearths the Colonial Archive

Representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible. [...] Put simply, if we do not attend to representation and work collectively to bring new visual grammars into existence (while remembering and unearthing suppressed ones), then we will remain caught in the traps of the past.

Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton¹

Postcolonial theory proposes a profound critique of the perpetuating account of modernity and its history, and yet, as contemporary politics reveal, the work of decolonization is far from done. The past, inevitably narrated by history, sets traps, and this is why the need for representations still holds. "New visual grammars" should enable working with the past in affective ways. A singular image can be like a fold in the surface, a distorted noise in a consistent melody. Sometimes an encounter with an image can become the starting point for "unlearning inherent dominative modes."² When I first looked at the image to which this essay is devoted – Nomusa Makhubu's piece depicting two African women and a boy – I thought I knew what I was looking at. A myriad of visual associations appeared in my head, many of them arising from stereotypical depictions of black womanhood propagated in Western cultures. But when I looked at it again, I realized that I was not sure what I was seeing.

The three represented bodies neither fit the stereotypes nor correspond with the main characters of colonial history. "In order to maintain their stamina and their revolutionary capabilities, the people [...] resort to retelling certain episodes in the life of the community. [...] The process of identification is automatic,"³ notes Frantz Fanon in his examination of colonial violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Directly after this assertion, he lists the great figures of the colonial resistance movement who militantly opposed foreign occupation and subsequently became incorporated into the common narratives of liberation and nation-making. All of the heroes are male. There are two significant ramifications to Fanon's statement – one expressed explicitly by him, the other perceivable only through the lens of black feminist analysis. The first claims that consolidating history is a necessary step taken by the colonized people in the process of restoring their independence, and that identification with the actors of this narrative is essential for maintaining common identity. The second reveals that the historical record is ruthless in ascribing significance to particular events and peoples, and is governed – even within the oppressed communities – by a dominant ideology.

In a way, the image proposed by Makhubu sheds light on this representational gap: outside of stereotypical, fetishized visualizations, black women and children are practically erased from colonial history, or at least overshadowed by male heroes.



Nomusa Makhubu, *Umasifanisane I (Comparison I)*, 2014, from *The Self Portrait Project (2007/2013)*, archival digital print on 35 gsm Hanhnemule cotton photo museum paper, 59.5 × 42 cm, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund.

In her analysis of this perpetuating absence of certain actors from the archive, Hortense J. Spillers not only blames the colonial order but also critiques existing black scholarship. Referring to the black female as the “quintessential slave” – deprived of any subjectivity and coerced into performing unpaid labor⁴ both on the plantation and at “home” – Spillers underlines the too often overlooked ideological incompleteness of the accessible colonial archive. To quote her directly:

The visual and historical evidence betrays the dominant discourse on the matter as incomplete, but *counter*-evidence is inadequate as well [...]. The relative silence of the record on this point constitutes a portion of the disquieting lacunae that feminist investigation seeks to fill. Such silence is the nickname of distortion, of the unknown human factor that a revised public discourse would both undo *and* reveal.⁵

Obviously, this structural oblivion characterizes not only colonial records; women have been continually silenced and erased from history. As Spillers and other black feminists engaged in the critique of intersectional violence emphasize, black women were and are subjected to multi-layered disregard. Fanon's book was published in 1961, and Spillers' scrutiny comes from the 1980s. Still, the lack of criticism toward the colonial means of producing knowledge is often echoed in contemporary visual culture, with its fetishizing and essentializing gaze. In his 2014 documentary *Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialist Self-Defense*, Göran Olsson merges archival footage from Liberia, Mozambique, and Burkina Faso, capturing their struggles for independence, with excerpts from *The Wretched of the Earth*, recited by Lauryn Hill. As Rizvana Bradley states, the film “offers three gendered ‘thought images’ that serve as alternatives to Fanon's discourse on gender, the veiled Algerian women we find in a *Dying Colonialism, la femme de couleur*, or Mayotte Capecia.”⁶ Bradley draws our attention to a scene depicting a black female with her right arm

chopped off, sitting on a hospital bed. First shown alone, with an open wound covered in blood, she is then portrayed breastfeeding a baby, her arm covered with a white bandage. In the introduction to *Concerning Violence*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges us to re-read Fanon's canonical writing but to pay attention to the gendered character of colonial violence; indeed, such an attempt becomes Olsson's main focus. Spivak comments on the scene evoked above, referring to the black female as a "black Venus." Bradley comments on how Western and ultimately male this ascription is: it essentializes a living black person into a symbolic figure from the European tradition. Clearly, the degree of silencing of black female voices within historical narratives is hard to comprehend and thereby prevails. This tendency generates the risk of projecting history onto the past rather than researching it, and is repeatedly reproduced within visual culture. Once subjects are deprived of value, their presence ceases to be recorded, and conversely, when they are not visible in the archive, their existence is not perceived within the lived narrative. Subsequently, efforts to evoke their voices within cultural representations are too often substituted by the repeated projection of the functioning interpretations. The ultimate risk is of fetishizing violence to the degree that it becomes incomprehensible, unique, and horrifically attractive, while in fact it was and is the scarcely bearable everyday experience of captives, framed by violent bureaucracy, affective exploitation, and the principles of pseudo-law.⁷

While shedding light on this representation gap, Nomusa Makhubu's photograph *Umasifanisane I [Comparison I]* also proposes an alternative representation. The analysis of this proposal is the purpose of this paper. Why then does its title appear only now? My prolonged introduction is meant to demonstrate the layered context in which the photograph appears: the process of representing colonial history requires not

only the unearthing of the archive but also the critical reading of its content and dealing with pre-existing representations. Achille Mbembe refers to race and sex as two “reality-creating fantasies” which grounded the process of racialization. Mbembe emphasizes that the body of a black woman is a particular case within this order. As he writes, “to be black means to be placed by the force of things on the side of those that go unseen, but that one nevertheless always permits oneself to represent. [...] Negresses go unseen because we consider there is nothing to see and that we have basically nothing to do with them.”⁸ The black female is either not interesting enough to be represented or already over-represented. To quote Edward Said, the black female – just like other oriental bodies – as “something patently foreign and distant acquires [...] a status more rather than less familiar.”⁹ It is then worth considering whose gaze forms this familiarity. Although dominant culture does not offer a favorable context, the narratives of the subjects in question remain forceful. Nomusa Makhubu, born in South Africa before the end of apartheid, educated and working in post-apartheid institutions, represents the very perspective postcolonial critics still lack: the voice of a black female, a direct descendant of victims of colonial rule. In the following paragraphs, I propose an analysis of how Makhubu’s photograph disrupts the dominant narrative with the tools of affective and critical archival research, artistic appropriation, and montage.

Reappropriation, montage, and black female identity

Umasifanisane I is a triple portrait of two African women and a boy. One of the figures is in fact the artist herself. The work comes from *The Self Portrait Project* (2007/2013), for which Makhubu photographed herself with various colonial

photographs projected onto her body. The series was originally part of a body of work titled *Pre-Served*, which focused on representations of African women in colonial photography. Makhubu used historical photographic portraits of women in Southern and Eastern Africa from the book *Surviving the Lens: Photographic Studies of South and East African People, 1870–1920* (2001) by Michael Stevenson and Michael Graham-Stewart. It is an internally diverse project: although Makhubu is consistent in the choice of technique, she uses various photographs, the majority of which are studio portraits. In most cases she focuses on female bodies which, projected onto her own, interact with her own physicality. In the case of *Umasifanisane I*, the artist used a sepia double portrait of an African woman and her son, who suffered from a condition called vitiligo, which bleaches skin pigment. Photographed behind the projection of this image, Makhubu stands arm in arm with the woman, directly behind the child's figure. Like the archival photograph, the artwork is in sepia, or at least it seems to be (it is impossible to say for sure, as the artist is wearing only white clothing). The choice of the photographs employed in the project is important: in her artistic practice Makhubu is particularly interested in the construction of identity. Initially, the artist worked with photographs from her own family album, those capturing intimate moments which displayed no particular "ethnicity" of those depicted in them. Later, she turned toward anthropological books, where she found the opposite: they displayed "endless photographs that were unsettling. Most of [them] were taken by colonial photographers, historians, [and] anthropologists, and they were not only describing and documenting different 'tribes,' but they actively constructed ethnic identities, and the scientific photographic language that was deployed dehumanized the subject. [...] I interrogated the colonial photograph and its constructions of ethnic identity."¹⁰

This visual juxtaposition, contrasting personal photographs

with ideologized colonial footage, prompted an attempt to undo the many ascriptions imposed by colonial culture. As Makhubu notes: "the women in the photographs that I selected had come to represent collectivities of women and men who have been subjected to the dehumanizing scientific gaze."¹¹ Although this is an archive the artist can turn to when studying her own identity, she evidently needs to unravel its colonial order by extracting images from the archival structure and re-narrating them with critical and artistic tools. Makhubu's gesture of reappropriation is quite typical for queer and black communities as a reaction to primary violence through the semantic change of originally offensive discourse. Here, the act of reclaiming is not linguistic but visual.¹² It is also based on the recontextualization of material objects: the artist extracts a photograph from its original context and proposes a new one.¹³ Makhubu acknowledges appropriation as a deliberate practice: "I am stealing someone else's image. Appropriation here is not a form of copying but it is interrogative. In this way, re-enactment is a way of engaging with memory and multiple histories through an interrogative approach."¹⁴ Within the order of colonial anthropology, the act of photographing was the gesture of the brutal imposition of identity shaped by a racist and patriarchal order. We should thus scrutinize how Makhubu's intervention deals with both.

For most of the Western public, Makhubu's titles are decipherable only thanks to the English translations in brackets. As Makhubu underlines, using Zulu for her titles was a way of expressing her identity.¹⁵ Whereas the title of the whole endeavor, *The Self Portrait Project*, indicates its personal character, *Umasifanisane I's* title highlights the process of comparing, which may reveal both differences and affinities. But who or what is being compared? The artist positions the colonial depiction of a woman next to her own postcolonial body, and by doing so she visually and symbolically places herself in the

lineage of black African womanhood. Despite the temporal remoteness, the characters displayed on the layered images are shown as sharing the same history. Alison Guh notes that "One [woman] exists in a colonized Africa where portraiture is a documentary, ethnographic tool, the other resides in postcolonial Africa and continues to deal with the remnants of colonialism and the loss of local culture in the face of globalization."¹⁶ Alongside skin color and gender, Makhubu inherits the fate of racial and sexual discrimination. Both females depicted in her photograph, wearing plain white clothing suitable for their contemporaneity, stare directly into the eye of the camera(s) and consequently at us. This double gaze is very telling, as it intervenes in the tradition of museum exposure: even though female bodies are on display, we are the ones being stared at. The willful glances seem to be a palpable metaphor of history looking back at us. By layering the portrayals without disrupting them, Makhubu sets an open dialog with history and lets images from the remote past – and possibly the subjects depicted in them – speak or at least stand for themselves. As Clare Counihan notes, "*Self-Portrait Project 2007/2013* asserts a too-perfect merging. The photographs resurrected from colonial scrapbooks seem more real than the flesh and blood woman who attempts to disrupt their space, the present overwritten by past representations."¹⁷ The artist is present in this project by literally exposing her own body; however, this does not override the presence of the historical figures she evokes.

Standing side by side with figures from the past, Makhubu states that colonial history is not really behind us, and that its consequences are still perceivable. To understand contemporary racism, the artist urges us to look back. In the opening paragraph of "*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*," Spillers attempts to strip out the many names given to her by

both colonial and postcolonial cultures, with the desire to recount her identity in her own right. She performs this gesture in relation to all the women who were called the names she lists.¹⁸

Makhubu's project seems to mirror Spillers' writing: the artist narrates her own presence in conjunction with the history of her gender and race. While Spillers exposes how grammar and discourse grounded the violent genesis of Western colonial culture, Makhubu does so by using photographs from the colonial archive. They both point toward what is absent from the historical record, and remind us that one cannot be freed from the history of colonial violence unless one ceases to ignore its gendering character. As Saidiya Hartman points out, "Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on 'what happened then' than on the desires and discontents of the present. [...] What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn."¹⁹ The assumption that the past depends more on actuality than historic occurrence has far-reaching consequences, one of which is that granting living subjects the agency to express desires and discontents will actually increase the visibility of the excluded and forgotten.

The paradox of visibility

In her breakthrough article "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," Sara Ahmed analyses the way normative whiteness is experienced within shared spaces – physical as well as symbolic – and how it came to dominate and shape the experience of both non-white and white people. The theorist focuses mainly on phenomenological aspects of experiencing race; however, her remarks also translate into the way we perceive and produce shared visual culture. In the essay, Ahmed describes her experience of observing four black female scholars entering

a conference room. She ponders over her own confusion:

they walk into the room, and I notice that they were not there before [...]. I look around, and re-encounter the sea of whiteness. As many have argued, whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation. [...] We do not face whiteness; it 'trails behind' bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect of this 'around whiteness' is the institutionalization of a certain 'likeness', which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space.²⁰

As Ahmed underlines, the overrepresentation of whiteness marks non-white bodies as different and hence makes them more visible. This visibility of non-white bodies is obviously paradoxical. It does not grant subjectivity or agency; on the contrary, it subordinates certain bodies to a politicized narrative aimed at distinguishing and controlling them. This phenomenon of visibility as a tool of marking, fetishizing, and controlling some bodies while rendering others neutral and comfortably invisible, familiarized by Michael Foucault's notion of the panopticon,²¹ was very much a part of colonial practices. Grasping this phenomenon is easier with some visual evidence at hand. In case of the photograph used in *Umasifanisane I*, both the woman and the boy are portrayed as aberrations. As Makhubu notes, the colonial photographs "were problematic because they set up a clear distinction between the photographer and the photographed as male and female, European/African, white/black – in which the former is always privileged. I wanted [to] explore ways in which it might be possible to subvert that hierarchy, and re-write the political implications in the photograph."²² Colonial photographs of black people aimed at marking black flesh as distinct from the white norm. While making their bodies visible, this kind of fetishized anthropological display did not grant the figures any subjectivity, but was rather

used against Africans as “scientific” evidence to prove their supposed inferiority.

Their facial expressions do not disclose much. The boy and the woman are neither smiling nor expressing any other emotion, which remains in line with the aesthetics of solemnity preferred in the portrait photography of the era. With the woman’s hand resting behind the boy’s back they seem to be posing for a family portrait. This might also be implied by the shape of the image, as convex and oval photographs were the traditional types of family portrait. In her writings on colonial photography, Tina M. Campt calls attention to the blurring of the boundaries between violent anthropological photography and family portraits. As the theorist writes, “the repressive genre of the mug shot and identification photos was historically used to archive and categorize criminals, mental patients, and colonial Others deemed deviant or pathological. The honorific ‘middle-class’ portrait aspired to or proclaimed bourgeois respectability and social status. [...] the line between them is not quite so clear.”²³

It is obviously impossible to comprehend the actual power dynamics behind the colonial photograph used in *Umasifanisane I*; analysis is above all based on justified suspicion toward colonial anthropology and photography. Campt recognizes that while photographs of white families were an expression of pride in their racial purity, those of colonized people usually documented and demonstrated their “otherness”; both thereby potentially served the purposes of the eugenics movement.²⁴ It is therefore worth considering why the boy is in the photo. The woman is wearing a white long-sleeved dress, a typical 19th-century Western garment (though possibly not her everyday outfit), while the boy has only a hip band or a beaded skirt, exposing almost his entire body. Was the fact that he suffered from vitiligo important? The origin of this incurable autoimmune condition, causing the body to destroy its own pigment, remains unknown. Though vitiligo is possibly hereditary,

most children do not inherit the disease even if their parents have it. According to Sean P. Harvey, reports describing vitiligo fueled 18th- and 19th-century racial theories: "Among colonists curious about a spectacle and increasingly interested in questions of color and character, albino children born of black parents caused a sensation, as did those whose blackness seemed to disappear."²⁵ Black people suffering from such diseases were perceived as doubly aberrant: the change of skin color, resulting from the mutation of pigmentation, questioned essentialist theories of race which often granted merit to racism. Although the occurrence of the condition itself is accidental, its presence in the colonial photograph is obviously not.

The emerging question is then whether the boy's presence in Makhubu's artwork is accidental – was the photograph chosen for entirely different reasons? This seems unlikely. It is important to note here that females are not the only subjects of Makhubu's photographic project. Referring to Alice Walker's notion of *Womanism*, the artist stressed her approach: "although my project focuses on the representation of black women through colonial photography, it also includes the feminizing and infantilizing gaze that black men were equally subjected to as explicated by Ann Kaplan in her postcolonial concept of the imperial gaze."²⁶ The analyzed photograph is followed by *Umasifanisane II*; both depict mothers accompanied by (presumably) their children. Interestingly, in the second photograph, the lap of the albino mother is occupied by a black infant. Despite the occurrence of color "inversion" between the two photos, the artist's position remains unchanged: she stands adamantly behind the projection.

Makhubu describes her method as "performative photography," which may suggest a possible reading of her works. As she emphasizes, "I use performative photography to revise the ways in which post-memory is not only inherited memory without primary experience, but can rupture and

interrogate predominantly masculine historical narratives. Performed photography, in which the archive or historical as well as canonical photographic imagery is appropriated, functions as a necessary interruption and a powerful assertion."²⁷ Importantly, this interruption is not only visual but also performative. The re-enactment of the archive proposed by the artist is both discernible and concealed. Although we can see the results of her work and engage with the image's performative potency, the performative process behind it is only traceable via the author's comments. As Makhubu notes, "generally, the photographic image is fixed. Projections, however, are like simulations. They have a volatility of sorts. They invite change (for example, the image takes on the texture of the surface on which it is projected). This quality in projections opens up the possibility to alter the meaning of the photograph."²⁸ Makhubu is hence an active agent – not only as a photographer but also as a presence within *Umasifanisane I*. The very position of her body implies one possible reading: given that her figure contains the entirety of the boy's, it might be concluded that she is symbolically pregnant with him. This interpretation positions her as a bearer of whitening, as an ongoing condition originated from colonial rule. Additionally, it once again positions the artist in the lineage of black African womanhood, and evokes the transgenerational trauma of the mothers' fate: the subjection to violence, often rape-related in the case of mothers of multiracial children. Yet here another possibility for subversion emerges. As noted, vitiligo, a coincidental disease, questioned the very premise of racism and hence colonial rule itself. Along with the boy's body, the artist seems to "contain" or inherit this very potency of subversion, thereby undermining any "rational" or irrational justification of racism.

“Photographs as wounds”: beyond the symbolic narrative

Black studies reveal that the persistence of colonial violence is assured not only by its brutality and ubiquity but also by its nuanced and layered nature. Scrutiny of colonial archives, which were largely based on ethnographic materials created by European “science,” reveals that whips and guns were not the only technologies causing the suffering of colonized people and enabling the prevalence of structured colonial rule.²⁹ It is useful to evoke a certain analogy with a long tradition in the aesthetics of photography: the one between the gun and the camera.

As Susan Sontag writes:

Like guns [...], cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive. However, despite the extravagances of ordinary language and advertising, they are not lethal. [...] The camera/gun does not kill, so the ominous metaphor seems to be all bluff – like a man’s fantasy of having a gun, knife, or tool between his legs. Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.³⁰

When applied to the practice of colonial photography, this quotation demands a stronger emphasis: the colonial camera/gun, accompanied by persistent physical violence, becomes a lethal weapon, or at least one of the compulsory constituents of a grander killing machine. No wonder then that engagement with the colonial archive is a painful process for the subject. It may not be visible when we look at Makhubu’s project, but from what the artist states, her work on the archival materials brought about suffering and the subsequent rethinking of what those images actually meant to her. As she claims,

"re-enacting colonial imagery brings into frighteningly close proximity the horrors of the past. I had come to associate these photographs as wounds. For me, they were corporeal, physical, bodily."³¹ Thus, her personal and artistic engagement with the past appears paradoxical: acknowledgment of loss – unrecoverable wounding – fuses with the possibility of learning and healing. Echoing the premises of Afro-pessimism,³² Makhubu's project reveals that modern and contemporary societies were and still are dependent on anti-black violence. Arguably, then, every way of using the colonial archive, no matter how critical, evokes and repeats the violence inherent in its very logic.³³ Yet the production of critical art is not a zero-sum game, and the negativity of this realization does not undermine attempts to unearth and re-read history.

"Photographs as wounds," as proposed by Makhubu, are not equivalent to violence itself but are its remnants – partly healed traces carved in the colonized people's flesh. In order to re-read her history and grasp her own identity, Makhubu needs to untangle what has been projected upon her culture by Western ethnographic science and photography. Her intervention is a powerful gesture: it is performed upon the colonial photograph, an image capturing a specific moment of history, and it occupies a new time and space, the postcolonial contemporaneity. Makhubu draws a continuance between past and present, between historical destruction and its consequences. She does not offer a reassuring proposition, but rather opens up discussion on the persistence of colonial violence within the postcolonial realm. As she comments, in a straightforward manner,

[...] the segregation apartheid created is still there. Apartheid was simply made informal. There are no white people living in townships; when black people move to suburbs in numbers property values decline; a majority of black people depend on the public sector when there is a parasitic private sector

for the needs of the wealthy, who are predominantly white. Private schools, private healthcare, private transport, and private security/policing are the reason the public sector fails. There are many ways in which apartheid works. In these conditions, it is hard to recover from a malady that is still debilitating.³⁴

The artist thus critically observes the ways in which the “coloniality of power” prevails within the visual archive, and draws our attention toward its ongoing influence on the everyday life of the black community.³⁵ This gives her the opportunity to make black female bodies visible without subjecting them to sexist and racist narratives, and without the naive assumption that wounds can heal by themselves unless actual socio-political engagement occurs. While engaging with the past, Makhubu invites us to join the conversation about the present and possibly about the common future. What kind of invitation is this, and how, from the viewer’s perspective, can one respond?

Theorist Ariella Azoulay proposes the notion of a civil political space – a realm of negotiation of the meanings of photographs shaped by various forces and agencies, by conscious and involuntary decisions and interpretations.³⁶ We all participate in the civil contract – while being subjected to external forces, exercising our freedoms, subverting what is imposed or established, and connecting with each other. This given state concerns us all, no matter whether we are aware of its existence or consciously choose not to abide by the contract. This state of things is also presupposed by photography, but one may choose to continually renew the gaze and unsettle the pre-existing structures of visibility and exposure. Makhubu attempts to renegotiate the political stakes of the images she unearths from the colonial archive. In *Umasifanisane I* her gaze is uncompromising: she looks directly into the lens of the camera, into our eyes, holding her chin high without pleasing us

with a comforting smile. She confidently occupies the space of both the photograph and her own history. The two other subjects were not fully fledged agents shaping the narrative which transferred their presence into our archives, but nevertheless their depiction within the photograph is possibly the only trace of their existence. By placing herself next to them and controlling the final shape of the image – as well as determining where it can be seen – the artist extends her own agency to the bodies standing next to her. Ultimately, in the framework of the comparison proposed by Makhubu, the three bodies emerge as different and similar at the same time: equally real, factual, affective, and entitled to freedom and agency. Simultaneously, the solemnity of the figures reminds us of the extent to which those rights were and are disregarded. Although the bodies occupy the same space, at least visually and symbolically, the difference of their times is palpable and becomes another reminder of a dreadful past.

In her writings, Azoulay proposes that we “watch” photographs instead of “look at” them. As she notes, we tend to “watch” what is explicitly in motion (movies, performances), while merely “looking” at photographs and other still images. But the stillness of the photograph is just an illusion, the suspension of movement imposed on reality, and the static “looking at” can quickly become “seeing” and “grasping,” urging the viewer to establish obvious identifications. As Azoulay stresses, this gesture “is part of an ongoing effort to suspend the civil power of being a spectator and to neutralize the power of the civil contract of photography. To combat that effort, it is necessary to rethink the meaning of what it means to be a spectator.”³⁷ As we allow ourselves to watch Makhubu’s artwork and the photograph used within it – which, by the way, we never see outside her photomontage – we are given a task. Feminists researching colonial archives urge us to unearth history by observing discontinuities, to question what is missing from the archival record.³⁸ The

persistent absence of certain phenomena, bodies, and agencies which most definitely existed is also a trace of existence, especially given the lack of any other evidence. In this case, our task is to be unsatisfied with the image and to watch it so carefully that we feel the urge to look beyond it. As Azoulay puts it, "the spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee position to the addresser's position in order to take responsibility for the sense of such photographs by addressing them even further, turning them into signals of an emergency, signals of danger or warning – transforming them into emergency claims."³⁹ By observing us so attentively, arm with remote figures from the past, Makhubu obliges us to stop "looking at" and begin "looking into" the stories she wishes to convey – this one in particular and many others waiting to be told and heard. The artist's call surpasses engagement with the colonial archive as repeated victimization. As an active agent, Makhubu disregards the Eurocentric logic of knowledge and memory production. Intentionally or unintentionally referring to Sontag's metaphor, she "weaponizes" her own photographic act: "If these photographs were initially used as weapons to dehumanize Africans/African women, that language can be altered. If time is understood to be labyrinthine (not linear), then the appropriation of tropes of the past can be a powerful weapon that interrogates past and present repressive structures."⁴⁰ And yet the artist's gesture remains subtle: she just stands there looking at us, with the solemnly "neutral" mimicry so typical of portrait photography of the colonial era. This very gaze persuades us that there is nothing "neutral" in how that past is being narrated.

- 1 Reina Gossett et al., "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door," in: *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 2017).
- 2 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 –1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 355–356. Originally cited in: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 28.
- 3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 30.
- 4 The notion of forced labor as a marker of the socio-economic status of captive subjects is subject to criticism, especially within the Afro-pessimism movement. As we read in the "Editors' Introduction" to *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 8: "One of the central tenets of Afro-pessimism [...] is a reorientation of slavery: instead of (forced) labor, it is more accurately thought of as a relation of property."
- 5 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987), 73.
- 6 This quote comes from the description of the colloquium offered by Bradley at the University of Pennsylvania on April 4, 2018. See: <https://cinemastudies.sas.upenn.edu/events/2018/April/ColloquiumRizvanaBradley>.

- 7 As David Graeber puts it, while elaborating on the relationship between structural violence and the inequality of interpretative and affective labor within power relations, “it is one thing to say that, when a master whips a slave, he is [...] conveying the need for unquestioning obedience, and at the same time trying to create a terrifying mythic image of absolute and arbitrary power. [...] It is quite another to insist that that is all that is happening [...]. After all, if we do not go on to explore what ‘unquestioning’ actually means—the master’s ability to remain completely unaware of the slave’s understanding of any situation, the slave’s inability to say anything even when she becomes aware of some dire practical flaw in the master’s reasoning, the forms of blindness or stupidity that result, the fact these oblige the slave to devote even more energy trying to understand and anticipate the master’s confused perceptions—are we not, in however small a way, doing the same work as the whip? It’s not really about making its victims talk. Ultimately, it’s about participating in the process that shuts them up.” See: *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn/London: Melville House, 2015), 102–103.
- 8 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 173.
- 9 Said, *Orientalism*, 58.
- 10 Clare Counihan, “Interview with Nomusa Makhubu,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* vol. 36 (2016), 313–314.
- 11 Caroline Hancock and Nomusa Makhubu, “In Conversation with Nomusa Makhubu: A Disturbing Memory,” *Contemporary&*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/disturbing-memory-an-interview-with-nomusa-makhubu/> (accessed August 20, 2019).
- 12 There are many contemporary artists using different visual grammars – often by appropriating colonial and patriarchal aesthetics or archives – to rework dominant understandings of the past. In the photo series *My Pie Town*, Debbie Grossman, an artist interested in re-imagining history and reviving archival images, reworks photos from the 1940s to create a possible past for the American province – one that did not find its way into the archival record – inhabited solely by women and lesbian couples. Painter TM Davy, in works such as *Con Amore* or the series *Nus/Nude*, appropriates classical methods of depicting nudes in 19th-century painting – related specifically to Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* – by inserting black and homosexual subjects into the European aesthetics that dominated the international concept of beauty. Wardell Milan mixes photography, painting, and montage to engage with ways of presenting black

- and white bodies, employing symbols of colonial rule such as the Ku Klux Klan hood, indigenous masks, or “tropical” landscapes. For example, in the montage *WM11* Milan plays with the aesthetics of the colonial gaze represented by artists such as Paul Gauguin.
- 13 Reappropriating images as a visual strategy is discussed in Tina M. Campt’s book *Listening to Images*. Additionally, this topic poses the problem of the ownership of the material remnants of colonialism, and of reclaiming the right to the image, which is traditionally perceived as belonging to the photographer. This issue is discussed by Bernard Edelman in his Marxist reading of the history of photography. See: *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of Law*, trans. Elizabeth Kingdom (Abingdon: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books, 1979).
 - 14 Nomusa Makhubu, Portfolio, Erdmann Contemporary Internship Programme, Cape Town, 2014, 21, https://issuu.com/erdmanncontemporary/docs/book_-_nomusa_makhubu_-_final (accessed February 10, 2020).
 - 15 Hancock and Makhubu, “In Conversation with Nomusa Makhubu.”
 - 16 Alison Guh, *Self(hood)*, exhibition at *A Virtual Space for Dialogue*, 2017, Trustees of Dartmouth College, <https://www.aguh.vsfd.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/nomusa-makhubu> (accessed July 6, 2019).
 - 17 Counihan, “Interview with Nomusa Makhubu,” 308.
 - 18 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.
 - 19 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 77.
 - 20 Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8/2 (2007), 157.
 - 21 As Foucault writes, “The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized.” See: Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 184.
 - 22 Hancock and Makhubu, “In Conversation with Nomusa Makhubu.”

- 23 In the text, Campt is referring to selected passport photos from the mid-20th century; however, I believe her remarks are also applicable to this context. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 25.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 25 Sean P. Harvey, "Ideas of Race in Early America," in: *American History, Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistorical/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-262> (accessed February 4, 2020).
- 26 Makhubu, Portfolio, 23.
- 27 Hancock and Makhubu, "In Conversation with Nomusa Makhubu."
- 28 Makhubu, Portfolio, 19.
- 29 Said's *Orientalism* is one of the quintessential analyses of relations between the supposedly "positive" project of European science and culture, the creation of the category of race projected onto the exotic "other," and using this to reconcile colonial violence.
- 30 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 10.
- 31 Counihan, "Interview with Nomusa Makhubu," 313.
- 32 The term "Afro-pessimism," coined by Frank B. Wilderson III, refers to the field of thought considering blackness and slavery as regimes of violence which were foundational for the civilization and construction of its subject, and thus cannot be analogized with others such as patriarchy or classism. In a sense, it can be contrasted with intersectionality, which emphasizes the complexity of the mutual entanglement of various forms of discrimination. See: *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, op. cit.
- 33 In the context of colonial archives, the ethics of reusing and reprinting photographs that depict situations entailing violence and humiliation are addressed by Ariella Azoulay. The requirements proposed by the theorist are somewhat demanding, but they map the necessary intellectual and affective efforts that should be addressed differently, depending on the specificity of the case. Each time the stakes should be carefully revisited: does reusing the photograph grant the subjects emancipating visibility or rather the continuation of humiliation? As she writes: "It is imperative to scrutinize each individual case separately. The conditions in which the photograph was produced need to be reconstructed as exhaustively as possible [...]. On these grounds, one should then make a careful attempt to assess the damage that the photograph might cause the

person portrayed in it [...] and to gauge this possible damage against the photo's potential contribution toward realizing the address of the photographed subject or of those who speak on their behalf. No less important is trying to assess the photograph's perception within the cultural milieu of the photographed subject." Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 7.

34 Counihan, "Interview with Nomusa Makhubu," 314.

35 I evoke the notion of the "coloniality of power," coined by Anibal Quijano, after Sylvia Wynter. See: Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," *The New Centennial Review* vol. 3, no. 3 (2003), 263.

36 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

37 Ibid., 159.

38 For example, Hortense J. Spillers discusses the problem of the lack of records on women's disobedience and rebellion against colonial rule. As she stresses, the fact that it is difficult to find "female" in the "Middle Passage" does not by any means indicate that their opposition was absent – it rather means that the chroniclers were especially reluctant to record such events. See: Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 72–73.

39 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 159–160.

40 Makhubu, Portfolio, 25.

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