

“Alive . . . again.” Unmoored in the Aquafuture of Ellen Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic*

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Abstract: The marine life and aquatic worlds depicted in Ellen Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic* series of artworks conceive an aquafuture through Afrofuturist aesthetics. They feature the black Atlantic in counter-memories that reinscribe the historical murder of African women through a myth of their survival and transformation into aquatic beings. The artworks defy contemporary eliminations of, and assaults on, black lives to claim a spectacular present and posthuman future. This essay explores the artworks’ queer politics and undoing of race and gender binaries through interdisciplinary means conceived of both in the spirit of the artworks themselves and the cultural boundlessness of Afrofuturism.

Ellen Gallagher’s extensive series *Watery Ecstatic* (2001–present) includes mixed media works on paper, sculptural objects, and short animated films that address Afrofuturist themes of African-diaspora histories, survival, and transformation through distinctive marine imagery. Through a dazzling array of marine life forms, Gallagher manifests what could be described as “aquafuturist” aesthetics. I look at three artworks which feature distinctive subjects—the renowned African American dancer “Peg Leg” Bates recast as a pirate; a mysterious jellyfish-like creature; and the artist’s self-portrait as odalisque. I explore how they transcend or evade the heteronormative gender binary and racialization to imagine an “aquafuture,” an aquatic realm of Afrofuturist becoming.

Buoyed by the artworks’ eclectic maritime aesthetics and their close relationship to literature, this essay sees Octavia Butler’s queer alien shape-shifters, the Ooloi, swim alongside Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic* in

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the first section, "Afrofuturism/Queer/Aquafuturism," which centers on the painting *Bird in Hand* (2006). Maybe they could swim into the series since Gallagher describes her artworks featuring the image of Peg Leg Bates as a form of "picaresque novel" inspired by Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* and the novel's confounding structure (Gallagher 2005). Indeed, Peg Leg Bates only appears as a fleeting allusion in *Bird in Hand* since the image unmoors signifiers of race and gender. I elaborate how Gallagher's aquatic aesthetics suggest queer kinship by referring to Jean Genet's writings, building on Beth Coleman's connection between Genet's theme of doubling and the formal qualities of repetition in Gallagher's earlier paintings (Coleman 2001).

The second section, "Nurse Shark," looks at the monstrous, maternal aquatic creature depicted in the painting *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) to explore the agency of its destabilizing of signifiers of race and gender. Cast adrift, they affect the legibility of Gallagher's self-portrait *Odalisque* (2005), where Gallagher poses as Sigmund Freud's orientalist model, by rendering eyes that can speak. Her counter gaze recoups the odalisque from representing mute, racialized, and objectified femininity. To explore the agency of this gaze in the third section, "An Eye/I Adrift," I turn to Clarice Lispector's novel *The Passion according to G.H.* (1964), where a marginalized but critical black gaze ruptures language and propels identities toward the unknown. Lispector's reach beyond language resonates with Gallagher's transformation of signifiers, where words become objects to see and invite us to see differently. The novel's setting in a parched room contrasts with its protagonist's visions of a subterranean sea, into which we slip to conclude with a consideration of Gallagher's artworks, where race and gender undergo a sea change. Transformative modes of identity and subjectivity are imagined in an aquafuture where aquatic aesthetics queer the survivalist and futurist projections of Afrofuturism crucial at the present time.

Cultural critic Mark Dery coined "Afrofuturism" in the early 1990s to describe speculative fiction that addresses African American themes and concerns through technoculture and African American cultural production involving an appropriation of technological images and cyborg futurity. Its aesthetics of resistance to the obliteration of African American histories and dominant white-centered fantasies of the future feature in diverse works of art, music, comic books, and film (Dery 1994). Afrofuturism has been established in visual art through exhibitions including *Alien Nation* (2007) at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, which was among the first to curate artists who explore themes of difference through

science fiction aesthetics. Explorations of gender, race, African-diaspora histories, and politics of futurity intersect in the practices of other internationally acclaimed artists alongside Gallagher, including those of Julie Mehretu, Fatimah Tuggar and Wangechi Mutu. *The Shadows Took Shape* (2013), a major international survey exhibition at Harlem's Studio Museum titled after a Sun Ra composition, explored Afrofuturism's global reach among contemporary artists who variously do and don't claim an African-diaspora heritage. For cocurator Zoe Whitley, Sun Ra's boundary-less autobiography is key to understanding Afrofuturism's legacy and international appeal. She asks if one can be Afrofuturist without being "Afro," following the understanding of blackness prevalent in Britain in the 1980s as a "unifying political signifier," allowing diverse Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities to co-opt black identity for social equality and cultural recognition (Whitley 2013). Similarly, *The Shadows Took Shape* included the work of Larissa Sansour, which addresses questions of Palestinian statehood through futurist imaginings, to propose Afro as a cultural and political formation rather than an ethnic or racial identity.

Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic* series shares black Atlantic thematics with works by contemporaries as well as artists from earlier generations, for example Howardena Pindell's painting *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988). Gallagher finds inspiration in the myth of a black Atlantis called Drexciya, which was first revealed by the eponymous Detroit house collective in notes to their 1997 CD *The Quest* as the source of aural hallucinations channelled through their music (Gallagher 2005). Constituting what Kodwo Eshun calls an "Aquatopia," Drexciya shares Afrofuturism's investment in alien identity through a marine realm populated by the descendants of pregnant enslaved African women who were cast overboard during the horrific ocean crossings of the Middle Passage (Eshun quoted in Tate 2007, 19). It reworks the black Atlantic as a site of survival, with origins in the enslavement, torture, murder, and rape of African women, many of whom were observed to have "landed on our shores already impregnated by one of the demonic crew" (Shufeldt quoted in hooks 1982, 18). Instead of drowning, according to the Drexciya myth, the women gave birth in the depths of the Atlantic to offspring who evolved into aquatic warrior species of fish-men and mutant gill-men. Gallagher's version departs from this masculine martial myth to offer insecurely gendered identities through aquatic imagery, which place black feminine subjectivity at a threshold of knowability.

Afrofuture/Queer/Aquafuture

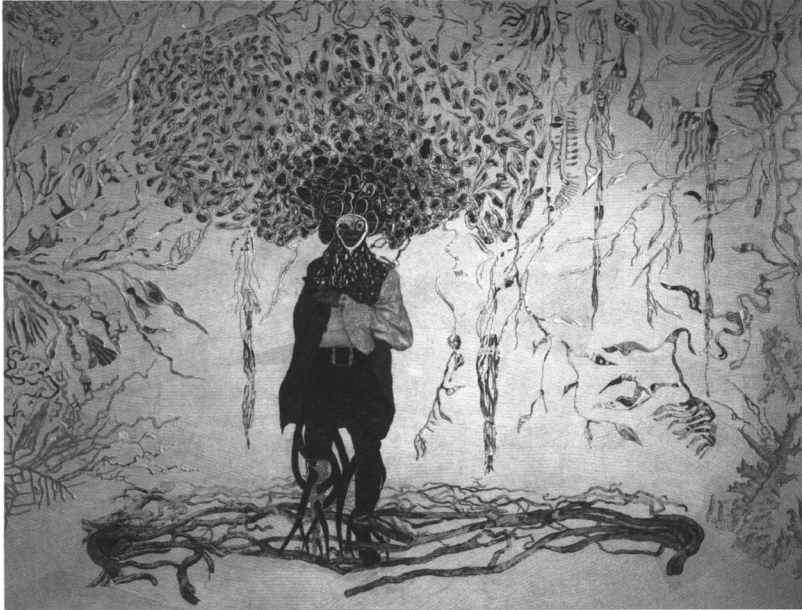


FIG. 1. Ellen Gallagher, *Bird in Hand*, 2006. © Ellen Gallagher. Oil, ink, cut paper, polymer medium, salt, and gold leaf on canvas. 120 7/8 x 93 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mike Bruce.

Alive!
Still alive.
Alive . . . again.
—Lilith's Brood

Octavia Butler's novel *Lilith's Brood* begins with Lilith Iyapo's resuscitation. One of the few human survivors of an apocalyptic war, she has been resurrected and kept captive by the Oankali, an alien species aboard their vast, tentacled ship. They gradually coerce Lilith into relationships with them. "I don't mean any offense . . . but are you male or female?" she asks the one designated her companion. "It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex that you're familiar with," it said, "but as it happens, I'm male" (Butler 2000, 13). The Oankali's assumption of heterosexual difference to bond with a human woman is an example of how, as Susana M. Morris observes, Butler's transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy examine possibilities for our current world (2012, 149). Her Afrofuturist feminism

explores the limits of free will and the conditions of symbiosis; suicide is Lilith's only alternative to relations with the Oankali.

Lilith's companion's claim to be male hardly renders him familiar. Initially he appears completely covered in hair, and, unnerved, Lilith keeps her distance: "Come closer and look at me." Unable to, she strains to see and realizes that the hair is innumerable tentacles—"sea slugs—nudibranchs—grown impossibly to human size and shape" (Butler 2000, 14). Lilith's saviors/captors have a marine biology and can breathe underwater. They experience others and the world through tentacles and filaments, savoring genetic structures and plugging into nervous systems. They reproduce hybrid offspring, the Ooloi, each born of several human and nonhuman parents, queering the process of reproduction, as Patricia Melzer observes (2010). The Ooloi are a novel sex of shapeshifting beings that acquire form by mimicking others, and they "hunger" for this contact (Butler 2000, 682). When one is isolated in a forest, it assumes various plant forms before becoming mollusc-like and sliding into a river. Then the possibilities are limitless as it is carried along on ever-changing currents to the sea.

Something like this Ooloi has landed in Gallagher's vast mixed media painting *Bird in Hand* (fig. 1). Resplendent on a collaged parquet of blue-lined paper sheets is a magnificent pirate, as mesmerizing as Butler's alien is repulsive. Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates (1906–1998), an entrepreneur and performer, was legendary for his exceptional dance prowess in spite of his artificial leg. His image recurs in Gallagher's artwork, and here he stands transformed on alien shores. But if this figure initially reads as masculine, closer looking reveals "him" to be an exquisite convergence of the materials of collage, carved paper, ink, gold leaf, and salt crystals from which the legibility of gender difference slips away. S/he inhabits an uncertain space that is simultaneously terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial, and is dispersed through numerous filaments and pods that reach across the surface of the painting. Each pod is a tiny volcanic island of carved stacked paper. At their centers, words and faces cut from old magazines for an African American readership such as *Ebony*, *Our World*, and *Black Stars*, and the typeface letters which so often feature in Gallagher's works—*A, o, e*—float in a darkness which the artist describes of an earlier work, as evoking the "electric black" of the minstrel stage (Gallagher and Hudson 2004).

The figure's face reveals the materiality of signifiers rather than an identity. One eye is provided by an inverted magazine illustration and another

suggested by a paper relief letter *o* with a tiny bespectacled face peering out from its center. Below the eyes is an image of a nose and mouth provided by another magazine illustration, the lips pricked with tiny blowholes as if to allow the figure to breathe both through skin and the surface of the image. A thick relief paper contour suggests a jaw, and around it, skeins of black and brown paint flow like locks, bejewelled with opaque salt crystals. Two legs, one prosthetic, are knotted up with thick roots connected to a lattice of branches spangled with sea anemones and urchins. The figure's billowy sleeve is adorned with an exquisite cuff of paper rosettes gathered into a filigree bracelet. It is as if the figure exhorts, "Look at how beautiful I am!" and like Butler's Oankali, invites us closer. Clutched in his/her hand is an iridescent indigo-green parrot. The bird's tightly closed eye bulges, its body is drooped and its claws are curled—in surrender, or ecstatic union? Little bird, did your capture allow the elements to converge into a figure?

Gallagher's Ooloi in *Bird in Hand* suggests we think about what remains to be imagined once we get past identifying humans by, as Butler puts it, a sex with which we are familiar. Butler's Ooloi result from Lilith's survivalist merger with alien life in posthuman coexistence with barely imaginable difference, so they are born of traumatic rupture and displacement. It resonates with the historical dispossession and trauma of the Middle Passage and with the apocalypse of slavery experienced as alien abduction and theft, which according to Mark Sinker, already renders Africa and America, Europe and Asia "Alien Nation[s]" (Sinker quoted in Eshun 2003, 299). Toni Morrison considers African subjects who experienced enslavement and the quintessentially modern conditions of dehumanization and alienation as the first moderns (Eshun 2003, 288). Butler's Afrofuturist projects defy imperial modernity's exclusion of African women from the category "human" with spectacular intergalactic subjects and posthuman futures, which operate as countermemories to historical erasure and assert an audacious presence and future in a hostile present. Like many of Butler's posthuman life forms, the *Watery Ecstatic* series draws from marine biology to imagine a queer aquafuture for embattled black identities, unmoored from racialization and heteronormative gendering into a state of becoming.

Beth Coleman is alive to the queerness of Gallagher's aquatic in a lyrical text accompanying the 2001 exhibition of Gallagher's earlier paintings, *Blubber*, which teem with innumerable images of popping eyes, flipped wigs, and distended lips. These references to the racist lexicon of "black-

face” minstrelsy and its white imaginings of “blackness” are transformed through repetition and propelled by black Atlantic currents, never to be arrested in signification. Responding to those arabesque shoals, Coleman expands the artworks’ maritime aesthetics to write of sailors and their “queer behavior,” cruising past Rainer Werner Fassbender’s adaptation of Jean Genet’s novel *Querelle of Brest*, “those buttfaced multi-orificed dudes” (Coleman 2001). The strictness of the sailors’ regime, she writes, permits “greater liberty of action,” and as the ship moves along their movement loosens in the wind (2001). Coleman corresponds the artworks’ transformative repetition of racist imagery with the way Genet’s sailors’ rigid organization paradoxically allows each an enhanced bodily expression. Genet’s work can also help in thinking about *Watery Ecstatic* and how their transformative imagery suggests queer modes of being and kinship. In *Querelle of Brest*, fraternity is the basis of an expanding queer community elaborated through the novel’s theme of the double. According to Edmund White, sexual role-playing supplants the masculine-feminine formation, yet in a novel all about homosexuality, nobody identifies as homosexual; homosexuality is an expanding formation unmoored from individual identity (White 1993, 335–36). The port of Brest, a former penal center, effloresces as a scene of queer transformation, and Genet imagines frail cabin boys, the offspring of life-sentence prisoners who were chained together as galley-slave couples (170). The wretched homosexual galley-slave wedding doesn’t merely parody the institution of marriage, where heterosexist regulation works the boundaries of class and race, and the transfer of privilege: it reworks it into a thing of beauty.

Ports had fascinated Genet since his days as a teenage runaway attempting to go abroad, foretelling a life of transgressive vagabondage. When in 1970 the Black Panthers invited him to help them, Genet immediately left Paris for the United States (clandestinely via Canada since he was refused a U.S. visa), a self-educated prisoner amongst other prison autodidacts. Queer kinship can be a political choice, rather than something constructed on a biological basis. Genet was, he later recalled, a “son” to David Hilliard, “a Black father thirty years younger than myself” (Genet quoted in White 1993, 608). An Afrofuturistic time warp brings a father from the future and elderly son together. Connected to sexual identity, “queer” also turns toward its contemporary understanding to mean radical modes of being which, for Jack Halberstam, encompass a nonnormative organization of community and activity (2005, 6). Concurrent with this is Genet’s

queering of the Panthers' political ideology to prompt Huey Newton to draw a parallel between black power, women's liberation, and gay liberation movements (White 1993, 607).

Nurse Shark

The distant kin of Genet's queer progeny of the oppressed, his fragile cabin boys, can be seen in the 2005 work *Watery Ecstatic* (fig. 2). It takes a close examination to find them and when we do, we might recall that Genet wanted "to form something with as beautiful a form as possible" in the French language because it is the language in which the courts condemned him (Genet 2003, 138). But rather than sailors, as we will see, Gallagher's aquafuture teems with the death-defying alien descendants of enslaved African women whose posthuman forms eschew normatively gendered, racialized identities. The dominant image in this mixed media painting is a creature afloat, resembling a glorious jellyfish. Tiny raised frills, nicked from the paper, run down the sides of its eyeless head, an orb tilted to re-

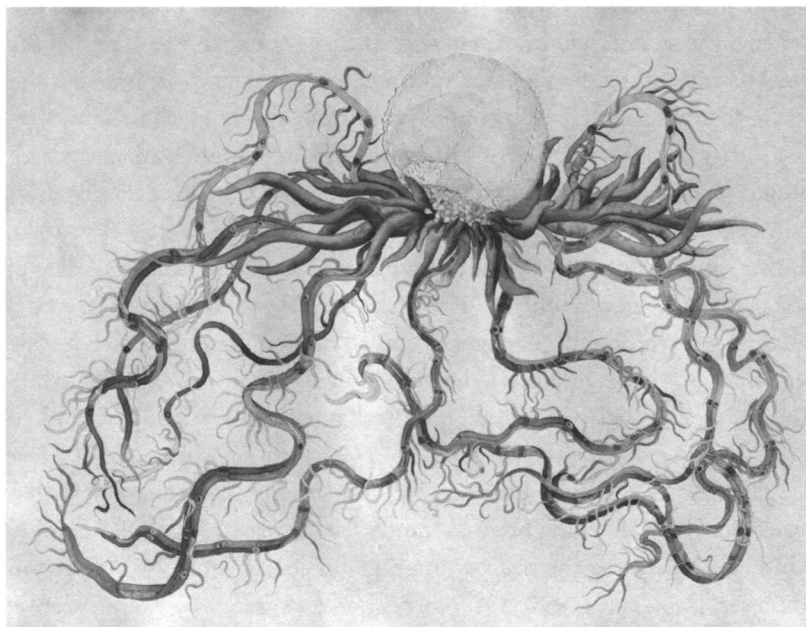


FIG. 2. Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2005. © Ellen Gallagher. Watercolor, ink, oil, varnish, collage and cut paper on paper. Unique. 32 5/8 x 42 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mike Bruce.

veal a ruffled interior housing numerous seed-like forms. Their edges are raised in relief, giving them the texture of snakeskin. Swollen tentacles are highlighted in bright pinks and contoured in darker purples. The paint's liquid has soaked into the paper to deposit a sandy layer of vibrant pigment on the surface. Longer filaments extend from the creature's underside and entwine with an elaborate bunting of fronds in shades of green—darkly translucent sap, dense viridian, light chrome. Upon closer examination, numerous little faces made from collaged magazine images become visible on the green fronds, some crowned with long spikes of white paper hair and caught under a smooth translucent glaze, painted over with eyes and pink lips. These exquisite cabin creatures, sustained by a marine maternity, are the speculative offspring of murdered, enslaved pregnant African women. They are reborn in a Drexciya reimagined as a fatherless realm awash with oppositions to the white patriarchal familial formation. Sexual difference is reworked toward open possibilities that resonate with queer black futurity. This futurity does not deny the degradation and elimination of the black body and the theft of the possibility of black parenthood (as distinct from reproduction) under slavery and its effects in postslavery. It defies racist and heteronormative discourses about the “failures” of the black family, about single black mothers who neglect or dominate their sons—daughters don't even count—and about absent black fathers.

Watery Ecstatic shares a posthuman and interspecies imagery with other works from the eponymous series to defy the historical animalization of the black female body. The autopsy account of Saartje Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus,” emphasized the supposed similarity of her genitals to an orangutan's. For Michele Wallace, such cases served a Victorian desire to pathologize the clitoris and constructed black female sexuality as “the standard for deviant sexuality in women” (2004, 427). The differences between white and black women were not just emphasized as one of degree, but as one of kind (Pacteau 1994, 133). In *To Have and to Have Not*, Ernest Hemingway's protagonist describes sex with a black woman by likening her to a “nurse shark,” reassuring his wife of her whiteness by casting the black woman as not even mammal, as Morrison observes, but a fish (1992, 85). Nurse shark: a surrealist juxtaposition of the familiar and alien, nurturing and cold-blooded. Who would rather be that repulsive man's beloved than a nurse shark that could bite him and swim back into the depths? *Watery Ecstatic* is devotedly aquatic. The image retrieves what Hortense Spillers calls the “monstrosity (of a female with

the potential to 'name') which culture imposes in blindness," and which she suggests African American women should claim instead of joining the ranks of domestically "gendered femaleness" (1987, 80).

The image offers no investment in heterosexual coupling, but an aquafuture of queer cabin creatures whose existence speaks of the historical rape of African Americans and who offer themselves as neither boy nor girl in an aquatic of gender fluidity and multiplicity. They have companions: tiny discs of paper bearing the letter *e* and mostly *o*'s. Oh! Lips that grimace into an *e* and encircle an *o* produce words. And the body is produced by signification, words that name and can wound and annihilate the body—"n-E-g-r-O." Race is constructed through discourse, but its effects are experienced as violence inflicted on mutilated and murdered bodies. Racism is the ideology of race, Collette Guillaumin contends, and race is "a universe of signs" (1995, 35). Words and letters are the wide, open mouths of Gallagher's multi-orificed tactile surfaces calling forth yet resisting meaning. Or maybe they are eyes. The letter *o* has its roots in the proto-Semitic "eye," derived from a hieroglyphic eye: an oval harboring an *o*.

Watery Ecstatic has been featured in several exhibitions, including the Freud Museum in London. It was included in Gallagher's installation titled *Ichthyosaurus* (2005), which was commissioned for the Freud Museum's ongoing exhibition program. *Ichthyosaurus* refers to a viviparous marine reptile extinct for two hundred million years and to Freud's codeword "*Ich*" for his beloved Gisela Fluss, revealed in his adolescent letters. For Freud, the seas are a world of secrecy, for Gallagher, of survival. *Ichthyosaurus* included works on paper, two 16mm films, and sculptural objects resembling marine creatures suspended in specimen jars, displayed amongst the objects and furnishings in Freud's former workplace. *Watery Ecstatic* replaced a print usually hung over Freud's couch, depicting a woman hysteric caught midfaint by an assistant of Jean-Martin Charcot to an all-male audience of medical students. If Freudian psychoanalysis shifted hysteria from a biological basis to propose that the analysand's symptoms stem from psychological trauma, Gallagher's image offers a queer aquafuture beyond Freud's foundational myths of Oedipus and castration. Its imagery of a maternal marine life-support system for otherness marks a horrific historical erasure—the murder of pregnant African women. From this traumatic history an alien jellyfish mother emerges, inscribing a future of coexistence with difference, outside of a phallic either/or model of assimilation or expulsion. Gallagher's unmooring of signifiers of race and disper-



FIG. 3. Ellen Gallagher, *Odalisque*, 2005. © Ellen Gallagher. Gelatin silver print with watercolor and gold leaf. Edition of 15. 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

sal of language can connect with Freud's articulation of subjectivity within symbolic systems. Michel Foucault acknowledges that Freud's grounding of sexuality in the symbolic sought to sever its ties to heredity and degenerescence, and therefore racism and eugenics (1978, 119). Freud understood what it meant to belong to an "alien race," and in 1926 remarked that he had considered himself German intellectually until growing anti-Semitism led him to prefer to call himself a Jew (Gilman 1993, 16). Paul Gilroy finds cosmopolitan ethics in Freud's loyalty to worldly culture as a renegade from the national state and its psychological poverty (2004, 65) and credits the influence of Jewish thinkers in his conception of a future black Atlantic cultural politics (2003, 205).

The Freud Museum was established following Freud's flight from Vienna after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. He and his family were part of a diaspora of psychoanalysts subjected to racist persecution and exiled from cities of the Reich. Anna Freud recalled the desperate attempts of aspiring emigrant psychoanalysts between 1933 and 1939 to secure the visas and work permits that might allow their survival (Steiner 2000, 13). Gallagher's installation brought diasporic black Atlantic symbolics to the Freud Museum, but Freud remains more scientist than specimen, more observer than merman. His little-known drawings of lamprey made between 1876 and 1877, studying their nervous systems, were displayed, and Freud himself is depicted rediscovering his early artistry in Gallagher's *Odalisque* (fig. 3). This silver gelatin print reworks a 1920s black and white photograph of Henri Matisse in his apartment on the French Riviera, in which he sits sketchbook in hand by a female model reclined in orientalist costume. In *Odalisque*, Gallagher replaces Matisse with Freud to recast the father of psychoanalysis as a father of modern art and she as his model, more netted mermaid than nurse shark, displayed in his seaside studio.

The self-portrait plays with the colonialist ideological formation of psychoanalysis, exemplified in Freud's much-criticized description of female sexuality as the "Dark Continent," which conceives of European femininity by erasing the black feminine subject (Young 2001, 172; Doane 2003, 450). But with closer looking, it becomes apparent that the image also operates at another level. Spillers's essay on the agency of the symbolic for black subjectivity, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother" (1997), can help here. Spillers's title is borrowed from a song by Charles Mingus, who explained that his composition is like "no thing we know." Similarly committed to the speculative, Spillers advocates that psychoanalysis be unhooked from its curative framework and the doctor-patient relation and recovered "in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility which might de-centralize and disperse the knowing one" (152–53). One of the things "you could be," she proposes, is someone who understands "the intricate verbosity of America's inner city" expressed in "the Dozens," a combative form of wordplay with its brags and insults, which Mingus's song references. Wounding words and outrageous combinations of imagery are weapons (152). Words, not bodies, are sent into the fray, and the most provocative of all—"your mOther."

Perhaps it is the jellyfish mother's o's that alight in Gallagher's *Odalisque* to potent effect. In the original photograph of Matisse and the model, he

looks out at the viewer while the model regards him with a strikingly wide-eyed glare. In Gallagher's print, Freud considers his sketchbook while she glares at him with the intensity of Matisse's model. It is as though some of the letter *o*'s have swum from *Watery Ecstatic* and landed on *Odalisque*. These *o*'s, so like open mouths, find their way to her eyes and emphasize a gaze. They hark to their roots in the hieroglyphic eye and become not just eyes, but eyes that speak, preventing Gallagher's beaching in an enactment of psychoanalysis's Dark Continent. Freedom to look and look back has been hard won for black and colonized peoples, bell hooks writes, and enslaved black people were punished for looking (1992, 115). A mark of oppression during slavery and racial apartheid was that black people had to assume a cloak of invisibility to hide that they were observing the whites they served. This repression produced a traumatic relationship to looking, which engendered rebellious desire and an oppositional gaze. The critical filmmaking practices of the Sankofa collective and Julie Dash provide different ways to think about black female spectatorship which constitute new kinds of subjects, hooks insists. By "looking and looking back" in an oppositional and critical gaze, black women are involved in a process of "history as counter-memory," a process which serves as a means to know the present and create the future (hooks 1992, 31, 168).

An Eye/I Adrift

In Clarice Lispector's novel *The Passion according to G.H.*, the discovery of a drawing by her recently quitted black maid shocks the protagonist G.H., a sculptor living in a Rio de Janeiro penthouse, known only by her initials. On the wall of her former room the maid, Janair, whose name G.H. can barely recall, has depicted a man, a woman, and a dog in charcoal, each figure oblivious to the others. G.H. believes this is how Janair saw her: "I, the Man. And as for the dog—was that the epithet she gave me?" (2012, 32). G.H.'s sense of identity begins to disintegrate. Her hatred of the room grows, and a cockroach crawling from the wardrobe provides her desire for violence with its object. She slams the door into the insect. Though almost bisected it survives, oozing pale innards. Transfixed in the room, G.H. gradually comes to regard the insect differently. It looks at her, its face a "deep sea diver's mask," a stranded marine crustacean. If she touched its eyes with her mouth, she wonders, would she taste salt? In a room as arid

as G.H.'s racism, there are traces of former marine life that promise something beyond her limits. She has discovered life and its salt in a desert (74).

To transcend her racism, G.H. must reach for what is beyond language and "deheroize" herself by crossing her defining borders. Her merger with the unknown is achieved through aquatic metaphors and resonates with the "oceanic feeling" introduced to Freud by Romain Rolland, for whom it is accessed through contact with others (Silverman 2009, 29). It is a feeling of union with the entire world, and a sceptical Freud concedes it might have links to infantile narcissism, where the ego and external world are undifferentiated (2002). The infantile oceanic feeling is interrupted by an awareness that the comforting maternal breast is beyond the self. He claims to find nothing of the oceanic within himself, with understandable rationalism given his target is religion—which might exploit a need for the oceanic feeling. He quotes the poet Friedrich Schiller, whose hero emerges from watery depths likened to both womb and tomb in *The Diver*, exclaiming, "Let him rejoice, whoever draws breath in the roseate light!" (Schiller quoted in Freud 2002, 11). Seeking regression to a presymbolic state of abjection, G.H. likens the cockroach's secretion to her mother's milk, which she once "wordlessly called love," unsuccessfully attempting to render it palatable (Lispector 2012, 172). Eventually, she tastes the insect's matter and depersonalizes herself "to the point of not having my name, I reply whenever someone says: I" (185). Words and identity are broken. She is adrift in an oceanic state and like an Ooloi, seeks the form of an other in an interdependent relationship, surrendering herself with the trust of belonging to the unknown (189).

Lispector's writing reaches beyond language and, for Hélène Cixous, calls for a revision of our relations with the world and living things (1993, 112). Lispector knew the arbitrary basis of privilege as a Jewish refugee fleeing the anti-Semitic pogroms in Ukraine in the 1920s, and that in the bureaucratic paperwork of statelessness and refuge, of visas and permits, words can stave off or impose a death sentence. Her reach beyond language rejects its authoritarian meaning, which is used to either approve of, or deny others. The world is "independent" with G.H. when language fails and reveals its otherness, and this leads to the dissolution of her identity. Stranded in the parched room, she imagines boring deep down to a great expanse of water, a rich subterranean sea like the one said to lie beneath the Sahara Desert. Salt water is the medium of her corporeity and trans-

formation: “[W]e are beings of seawater and tears . . . [that] must plunge into the depth in order to breathe there, as the fish plunges into the water in order to breathe” (Lispector 2012, 117). Lispector writes,

Long ago I was drawn with you in a cave and with you I swam from its dark depths up to today, I swam with my countless cilia—I was the oil that did not gush until today, when a black African woman drew me in my house, making me sprout upon a wall. (117)

Janair drew the dusty charcoal lines that limn G.H. and become her liquid passage across the boundaries that prevented her from seeing another woman. But if Janair’s gaze has the capacity to change reality and “create the future,” which hooks ascribes to colonized black people (hooks 1992, 116), she remains what Toni Morrison (1992) identifies in U.S. literature as a spectral “Africanist” presence aiding the white protagonist’s subjectivity. If she prompts G.H.’s horrifying awareness of her own racism, Janair enjoys no exploration for her capacity for subjectivity or sublime experience. But maybe we find something similar to her gazing eyes in Gallagher’s *Odalisque*, eyes that declare, “Look at me, I’m looking at Freud!” She looks with eyes that speak with the remnants of disassembled words, an unmoored *O*. The image offers a counter-memory to the innumerable Orientalist depictions of odalisques and black servants as mute objects of a racializing gaze in Western art history.

When G.H. realizes that the cockroach is looking at her, she doesn’t know if it sees her. But she doesn’t know what a woman sees either and discovers that there are many ways to see: possessing the other, eating the other, just being in a place with the other. The cockroach was being with her, seeing her not with its eyes but with its crushed body (Lispector 2012, 73). What does it mean to see with a wounded body or with tentacles like an *Ooloi* or anemone? The kind of seeing engendered by Gallagher’s tactile works of cut paper. These works are produced by a version of scrimshaw, an immersive activity whereby whalers contained their terror of the immense unknown by carving intricate images on bone fragments. Two works made entirely out of cut white paper collage, *Watery Ecstatic* (2001) and *Watery Ecstatic* (2007) cast signifiers of identity adrift as a sensory experience of material practice. The artworks are map-sized and resemble marine cartography, which shows what cannot be seen, what lies below the surface of the water. The works also suggest their beginnings as blank sheets of paper, full of promise but already freighted with meaning: how does an artist marginal to an entitled white male canon mark this expanse?

Perhaps by seeing it as a different kind of expanse. While incarcerated, Genet was so captivated by the grainy texture of the blank backside of a prison-bought Christmas card and the snow it evoked that it became the trigger for his writing (2003, 139). Gallagher’s words first appear whispered, white words, formed from cut-out white paper letters in upper and lower case, some in single quotes: “FULL CAP,” “Spiral Luster,” “HARLEQUIN,” and “FREE NURSES.” These and other words are from found magazine advertisements for Afro hair processing products and for nurse training courses aimed at African American women. They are arranged centrifugally around the undulating contours of barely there islands, white on white. We must concentrate our whole bodies to see them; we need tentacles to see these faint words that speak of race’s bodily toll. They migrate from the literary and undergo a sea change. “FREE NURSES” swim with nurse sharks in milky waters. Rendered in relief, the words are tactile rather than visual. They simultaneously emerge and disappear. We have an aquatic assault on race as a linguistic practice and as an objectifying scopic regime.

Conclusion

If anything feels inimical to the fluidity and mutability in the works of art discussed here, both visual and literary, it’s a conclusion. I make another appeal to Genet, for an opening toward closing, an orifice, to the wide-open nostril he finds quivering in Leonor Fini’s surreal paintings, painted in and on them to smell their “aquatic, feverish world” (Genet 2003, 10). If a thousand heady scents had to make themselves visible, they would take the forms of her images, he writes. They demand that he create another organ to sense what they are. Art reaches for what is beyond itself, the visual for the olfactory and the tactile, and through it we imagine our alien bodies. Our tentacles see in the *Watery Ecstatic* series the remnants of words unmoored from the burden of racial signification, in dazzling aqua-/Afrofuturist migrations. We see what was an *O* dispatched, now eccentric and queer, a destabilizing hole, passage, mouth. If it had to speak it might say, “I am unknOwn to myself and for the Other.”

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