Movements and Stillness: Rosana Paulino's *Tecelãs* and Experimentations of The Flesh

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> *Yet a voice interrupts: says she. It follows that black freedom is embedded within an economy of race and violence and unfolds as an indeterminate impossibility: wench, property of, likely lad, nearly worn out; certified to be free, says she was born free, formerly slave to. Says she was born free.*
>
> (McKittrick 16)

In 2018, Afro-Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino's retrospective, titled "Rosana Paulino: A Costura da Memória" or Rosana Paulino: "The Sewing of Memory," opened at the Pinacoteca of São Paulo. This paper will zoom in on one of her installation works *Tecelãs*, which means "weavers" in Portuguese (Fig. 1). *Tecelãs*, as Paulino describes it, is "a big installation that is a metaphor for how women transform themselves all the time, with the passing of time. They are analogies of women with insects, something that is already present in diverse mythologies. In the work, the woman pulls from within herself the threads with which she makes her cocoon—[where] she rebuilds, dies, and is reborn" (Anic). The figures are made out of clay with cotton and synthetic threads wrapped around them to signify their cocoons.[1] Dozens of these weavers are stretched, sprawled, and wandering every which way along two walls of the gallery, with most of their ceramic "nests" on the floor in front of them, but a few nests have joined them up on the walls.

In an interview at her retrospective, Paulino explains how "sewing" in the title refers to the ways her larger body of work brings together the history of slavery and black people within Brazil and the role of science in upholding normative notions of race and gender, and creates visual stories of black women's lived experiences. The theme of lived experience is present throughout the exhibition and is central to *Tecelãs* as Paulino centers her own life as the backstory. Recalling her childhood, we are given a glimpse into how the figures of these weavers have been transforming and following her throughout her life, long before she became an artist. Paulino's childhood home, where she grew up in the periphery of São Paulo, is now her present-day studio. In an

Fig. 1. Paulino, Rosana. *Tecelãs*. 2003. www.rosanapaulino.com.br. Accessed 5 March 2019.

interview, Paulino is speaking from that geographical location when she tell us, "[b]ehind here ran a tributary of the Tietê river, so the earth here is very plastic—earth near the river is very malleable. My mother made that clay [into] something for us to play with. We would spend the entire day making little turtles, little cows. Then we would put them in the sun to dry and later painted them and added little legs" (Reina). Paulino goes on to say that her mother's investment in teaching all three of her daughters to work with the earth and to sew, among other lessons, shaped her aesthetic curiosity and senses.

But more than just making dolls and little animal figures, we can consider what other lessons their creative experiments together conveyed about how to live and how to make a life as black women – of messages passed on from mother to daughter. The connection between what this material practice signifies for black women's lived experiences and what it can hold as a site of intellectual production through the *Tecelãs* figures is precisely the interest of this paper. How did Paulino get from the river mud animals with her mother to *Tecelãs*? Beginning with memories of childhood lessons that Paulino's mother imparted to her daughter serves as a way to establish a major inquiry of this paper, which is to look at alternative sites of black women's intellectual production. Specifically, how black women's paradoxical position of being free/unfree, women/Other, to name a few, produce the conditions for them to create their own form of philosophical discourses and practices—that linger in un/clear, hard-to-follow scripts, and thrive in the performative.

Black studies, performance studies, and black feminist scholars have challenged the ever present Enlightenment ideals of the Cartesian split and other privileged Western modes of knowledge production because they continue to undermine and erase the practices marginalized people have developed while living under white supremacist, colonial structures. Instead Western philosophy has characterized them as wayward, irrational, and Other. Recent scholarship by Sarah Jane Cervenak and Harvey Young grapple with Enlightenment writings and the context of chattel slavery—and its afterlives—to track how enslaved black people were developing their own intellectual traditions and philosophical strategies. Cervenak in particular argues that the violent push and pull of diverse racial and gendered oppressions on black women's subjectivity and their embodied experiences lead them to devise alternative ways to be free from those confinements. Thinking through the term confinement, but also descriptors like enclosure or captivity, this paper will close-read *Tecelãs* to consider how Paulino's work itself dispels traditions of Enlightenment thought and colonial tropes of race and gender that continuously seek to restrain black women.

The analysis of the paper flows between Paulino's installation, performance studies and black studies, theories of the flesh, confinement, and diverse black feminist freedom movements. The main argument of this paper is to say that for black women and girls, literal and figurative spaces of

confinement—such as living in the periphery or the marked black body—are also, spaces of performative experimentations towards freedom. It argues that the construction of cocoons by Paulino's weavers metaphorically mirrors the spaces of enclosure that restrict the movements of the body, while also allowing for transformation and planning. The two—confinement and freedom—are in a constant state of entanglement, as Paulino visually depicts for us; there is not one without the other, at least not yet. While discursively focused on close-reading of an individual weaver, the analysis of the paper is always aware of the collective and moves there at the end to bring the cocoon thread full circle, only to have it unravel yet again.

While *Tecelãs* might seem like a static art object confined in a museum installation, I will argue it offers a model to think through freedom movements and the performative capacity of black women from within the hold of captivity. I read in the weavers supposed stillness—as ceramic sculptures in an installation – the possibility of movement, specifically intellectual movements, that black women have long engaged with, but have often been overlooked for not fitting Western notions of knowledge. In Sarah Jane Cervenak's book *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*, she works to dispel logics of Enlightenment from defining methods and modes of Black intellectual thought and freedom—specifically through her framework of mental and physical wandering. Honing in on kinesthetic constraints on marginalized bodies, Cervenak sets up wandering as both a mental act—daydreaming and imagining—and physical act—roaming, walking, and nonlinear movements (2-10). Wandering as an analytical frame proves poignant as it draws from the nonsensical, unintelligible movements that Enlightenment sought to erase or to relegate as the domain of the racialized Other, which helped to solidify the Western white male subject as the pinnacle of humanity. Cervenak argues that Enlightenment sought to control and discipline the body resulting in hierarchical, linear, and "upright" postures of intellect and bodily movements (18). Black enlightenment or philosophical traditions, then, were not just corrective but actively sought to evade these constraints and thrive within opaque and hard-to-follow performances, what she describes as a refusal to "straightening out" (16). Or to put it another way, black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers stated, "[t]herefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an 'illegitimacy'" (80). Other black feminists—from Sojourner Truth to Toni Morrison—have theorized the limits of enlightenment ideals and projects around race and gender by interrogating the fictitious mind-body split and instead dialoguing with modes of knowledge production that have been under-recognized for centuries.

In adjacent ways, Harvey Young's book *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* looks at a myriad of ways that racial violence has affected the lives and bodies of black people and the resistance performances devised to address such violence. In Chapter 2 "Still Standing: Daguerreotypes, Photography, and the Black Body," Young turns his attention to specific technologies, such as the ship and the camera, built to capture and fix the black body for the purposes of profiting off it and to confine blackness into a reductive, general racial trope. What he calls "performances of stillness" (45) focuses on the performative potential of stillness, which he argues is an important amendment to the previous scholarship in performance studies: diaspora and black studies around the black

body. Young writes that looking closely at stillness offers a way to reconceptualize how the Black Diaspora is not solely "pure movement," which is going beyond the ways that scholars such as Paul Gilroy and others have focused on addressing routes, ships and other technologies of transportation (29, 41).

Rather than thinking just about where or in what ways the body was moved, Young invites us to think about how the *body* itself was enacting its own forms of movement and performing (41). Thus, while Young acknowledges the importance of pure movement, for him the turn to stillness attends to the ways in which "the bodies, occasionally densely packed as cargo and often shackled were rendered immobile even as they moved across the ocean . . . *stillness*, like movement and the body, is an integral and defining part of the Black Diaspora" (42). Despite kinesthetic constraints placed on the body, Young claims that spaces of stillness simultaneously were sites where self-fashioning and resistance could and did happen in tension with those restrains of power. Further, he insists that scholarship take seriously the validity of stillness and other more minute movements of the body alongside other forms of action like fleeting, running, marching, or sailing, in order to produce more capacious readings of history and the conscious actions of black people to "enact motionlessness" for very specific reasons (42-44). The forced state of stillness or confinement does not mean the absence of, or void of, performative action simply because it does not look like movement, but instead should be part of reconsidering where and how agency is being enacted. Both Cervenak and Young reflect on the need to turn to the internal minute performances and to the philosophical and physical wanderings in order to reconsider what else is possible at sites of captivity, such as spaces of the hold, the auction block, the periphery, the crawl space, and the body marked as black, woman, and Other.[2] This is to say that this form of redress demands we look to fleshy improvisations, subversive tactics, and "the freedom drive that animates black performances" (Moten 12). These discursive arguments laid out are some of the black feminist tools necessary to look at *Tecelãs*, think about the body differently, and pay attention to the philosophical teachings woven within.

Looking at *Tecelãs*, perhaps the first question that comes to mind is: what are these figures? The connections between the black woman's body and insects are far from being simple or superficial musings, but come from deep theoretical work by Paulino. Paulino has always had a passion for science and even passed the university entrance exam in biology when she was younger (TvBrasil 00:02:25). Paulino earned her PhD in Visual Arts from the University of São Paulo, which I argue positions her as an artist-philosopher and enables her to craft her theoretical arguments as visual essays. In reference to *Tecelãs*, Paulino has said, "[b]iology has a really strong presence, but it is a symbolic one," a result of Paulino's study of the role science played in espousing and legitimizing slavery (TvBrasil 00:03:00). The influence of this lifelong curiosity for research, science, art, and finding ways to speak from her personal life comes through in her body of work in innovative and visually striking ways.

Another investment in Paulino's work is to better understand the historical role and lived experiences of black women in Brazil: "In reading about the history of Brazil, much of my focus is to understand what space I occupy. As such, I seek to understand what position black women play in the social fabric of Brazil" (O Beijo 00:01:20). If Paulino is creating this work to represent the condition of being a black woman in Brazil, then why would she choose to construct

these images of insect-women to do so? As previously mentioned, Paulino researched how pseudo-scientific theories of race were not grounded in real science, but were a set of socio-political constructs and philosophical traditions used to naturalize race in order to support colonialism and slavery. In an interview, Paulino remarks that *Tecelãs* in many ways reflects how science and technology are instruments of control: "I want to explore 'scientific racism,' theories of superior races and pseudoscience, like craniometry, that animalized the black body and removed its dignity, shaped Brazilian society… This is not natural, but has been naturalized" (Gobbi).

Similar to Paulino's rejection of a Western construction of humanity as legitimate, Alexander Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* goes through several European philosophical concepts, in order to undo their validity. His critique stems centrally from the failure of Western philosophy to critically grapple with and reflect how it relied on the construction of race, as part of their intellectual foundation, to allow for the emergence of the Human. Weheliye's project—building on the work of Hortense Spillers—critiques Western philosophy for its refusal to recognize the conditions of black life or slavery as an atrocity to humanity, because as he successfully argues, blackness is the intellectual and physical foundation humanity is built upon. Disentangling race as a biological determined category to one that is socio-politically constructed, or what Weheliye calls "racializing assemblage," would require recognizing "race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (4). However, to "leave intact the ruling definition of the human as Man" has been in the best interests of those privileged enough to be considered fully human—their freedom is contingent on the unfreedom of the Other (130).

Depicting in *Tecelãs* the figure of a human body alone would not be sufficient to get at how the black female body is Othered, excluded from the category of Human, and even at times made to be more proximate to other non-human life to further justify their use as laboring property (Jacobs 49). For Spillers, perhaps the most important site to mark the distinction between free and unfree, human and nonhuman, is the body. The black body as the site of this violent disciplining and vulnerability played out specifically on the domain of the *flesh*, where the flesh signifies the "theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire," and from its subjectivity (67). To warrant enslavement, the unnatural distinction and subjugation of the flesh worked to conflate the black body with inhumanity, as the zone of non-being, ungendered, pathologized blackness—a murky space considered to be void of all intellectual thought, embodied feelings, agency, or freedom (Weheliye 130).

To take up the normative configuration of the body risks falling into Western traps of privileging an upright, straight, and normative shape of the body in ways that did not include the experience of blackness under systematic restraint. Weheliye reiterates Spiller's "intervention within the fields of black studies, feminist criticism, and critical theory in order to theorize some general dimensions of modern subjectivity from the vantage point of black women, which develops a grammar, creates a vocabulary that does not choose between addressing the specific location of black women, a broader theoretical register about

what it means to be human during and in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, and the imagination of liberation in the future anterior tense of the NOW" (39). Thinking through the position of black women requires different vocabularies and imagination of liberation, which I argue is the case in Paulino's artwork, where she leans into the zone of the non-human by bringing together the figure of the woman and of the insect. This form and metaphor of the insect-women functions to reflect the unseen or often ignored performances of stillness; here, the small forms of life that exist and move in ways and spaces that are largely overlooked. Small in size and slower in their activity, insects are forgotten within day to day activity in the world. One could walk past a bush and have little perception that behind its leaves is a cocoon where a fantastic metamorphosis is happening. As a reference to marginalized bodies, it begs the question of where and how subjugated life undergoes transformations of the body, which Weheliye also notes, stating that "[t]he particular assemblage of humanity …. insists on the importance of *miniscule movements*, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life" (12).

Likewise, the deeply philosophical work on ideas of the flesh by Spillers moved from outlining the violent origins of the flesh towards having us think of "what it might mean to claim in the monstrosity of the flesh as a site for freedom beyond the world of Man" (Weheliye 125). To think what the visual of these insect-women means in conjunction with claiming the monstrosity of the flesh, we might get deeper insights into how Paulino's weavers perform alternative dreams and visions of being into *being*. This brings us to a very important detail about the insect-women – they have no arms. What might seem like a disadvantage in not including arms on their bodies in fact seems not to create barriers to the skilled capacities of weaving. I want to suggest that alongside this uncomfortable, painful, or monstrous image of armless insect-women and the uncomfortable positioning of their bodies, we can see how they are creating other possibilities with their bodies by pulling out a thread from their mouth to weave a way out of those confines. It is visceral in effect.

There is pain present in the fleshiness of their bodies, a material manifestation of the hieroglyphic wounding of the black body and contortion produced from technologies of slavery, and the continued violence of global anti-blackness. The pain can lead to debilitating and paralyzing stillness, but as was previously discussed, even in supposed non-movement there is movement—cocoons are forms, bodies arch, insect-women crawl toward each other, cocoons nearly touch, and dreams are had. Residing in this space of pain and possibility, their fleshy movements and ability to perform as weavers throw a wrench into Western logics of an ideal, capable body. The fracturing, fragmenting, Othering of the black body in an effort to make it easier to control is challenged here, as the work of the weavers discloses an unforeseen, unplanned turn enacted by the subjected to finding a way despite captivity. What the black studies scholars make evident here is how Western thought failed to account for the embodied experience of being constrained in captivity producing the conditions for black people and blackness to move in ways that are difficult to follow or are undetected or misunderstood, which allowed for these freedom movements and performances to emerge.

When considering how the weavers could be read as monstrous in their lack of arms and Othered bodily forms, what becomes clear is that Western logics would

translate those characteristics as limitations or impairments, rather than considering the monstrosity as the hidden transcript. I consider the connection between the monstrosity of the flesh and the hidden transcripts to materialize in the alternative freedom performances of black women, because they function under the surface of the normative script ascribed to black bodies. Rather than submitting to the scripted, racialized, and gendered performance penned by white supremacy and logic of slavery, the insect-women literally craft for themselves new performative scripts from what they have within. Claiming monstrosity—or the space of the Other—takes rejection and consumes it, feeding it into the body and making, in this case, threads of potentiality. To find a different way out from the confines of the marked body means weaving and reweaving parts of the self and the flesh into different configurations and performative gestures in order to create something new.

The enactment of moving the body despite the hold of enslavement is related to the resistant behaviors that Robin Bernstein designates as tapping into the other scripts through performances of "hidden transcripts". Bernstein makes the case for performance as a mode of scripting, especially for those enslaved, because "[p]erformance can usefully produce many meanings simultaneously, and even tuck one meaning within another… Performance can appear to leave no trace (a gesture does not mark the air in the way that ink marks a page), but the repetition of performance …. [u]sefully appears ephemeral when it in fact lingers and haunts" (81). From the perspective of black feminist thought, Peggy Phelan's famous theorization of "performance as disappearance," does not work here as a universal concept for all performance (148). As I will consider, if performances get passed on intergenerationally and collectively and linger in the memory of the flesh, or im/material transformations of doing, then perhaps there are performances of the body that one might never see. Or, what if performances did not disappear but transformed themselves into another shape, hidden within their opacity?

Part of the logic of Enlightenment and the socio-political construction of race was to reduce the Other in such a way that as a category they were reduced to tropes and easily explained and understood—in ways that would (ideally) facilitate control and domination over them. However, this produced some blind spots: "Tragically, though, because these figures have often been dismissed as incomprehensible, hard to follow, and psychotic, they remain marginal in conversations on (legitimate) freedom…. What their critics sadly miss are the ways that a resistance to understanding is the site of radicalism" (Cervenak 14). Black feminist and performance studies scholars have named this incomprehensibility as the opacity of black performance. For Cervenak, "the opacity in the spectacular is the undetectable place of the errant movement, an interior kinesis that resists forces attempting to trace, follow, and read" (14). Similarly, Daphne Brooks, in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, focuses on black performance as dark points or what she names as "spectacular opacity" of the black body, which operates as a visual obstacle: "A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and rehistoricizing of the flesh" (8). By contesting transparency, Brooks considers black performance as opaque as a way to reject and get outside of oppressive constructions of race and gender.

I argue that the opacity in *Tecelãs* is generated in the actions of weaving and

creating webbed lines of flight that are not transparent or clear because these performances move according to non-hegemonic logics. Paulino explicitly chooses not to name these insect-women, and instead titles them by their labor and their knowledge as weavers. One of the definitions of weave is, "[to] twist and turn from side to side while moving somewhere in order to avoid obstruction." Moving our eyes across the wall, we notice that the women are not the same. Ranging from slight variations in posture to rather radical, seemingly impossible configurations, these women all hold different forms with their bodies. And yet, importantly, none of them are straight or in an upright posture. From the slightest curve of the back, the tilt of the head, or the angular swerve of the torso, their un-straightened postures and modes of being are what Cervenak calls hard-to-follow performances precisely because they are nonlinear and are produced through experimentation and improvisation. Therefore, the insect-women's ability to transform the limits of their bodies in relation to their enclosure within the constituted outside of the parameters of humanity forced black women to reorganize the limits and capacities of the body.

An explicit example of stillness and the contortion of the body brought about by racialized violence that lead to further retreat into confinement is found in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. In order to escape the sexual assault and threats of Dr. Flint, Jacobs sought refuge in the crawl space above her grandmother's shed. What she called the "Loophole of retreat" was a space of 9' x 7' x 3' (McKittrick 37). Living within the hold of captivity led to Jacobs' physical atrophy, discomfort, other feelings of pain, and minimal use of her body for seven years. Though Jacobs was hidden and had limited movement of her body, the space of the loophole of retreat also allowed her to keep watch over her children and elude sexual violence. Here her confinement was intimately woven into a mode of freedom. As Cervenak notes, "[t]he garret makes available a place for Brent to articulate her lived experiences and emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery" (11). Paulino's shaping of the insect-women's bodies in this myriad of forms recalls Jacobs' necessity to inhabit a paradoxical space of confinement in freedom. Thus the liberties taken with bodily form are a way of tracking histories and embodied forms of women like Jacobs and other unnamed black women who "lived, died, and were born again"; to put it another way, the resistant potential of black women's performances of stillness are "an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive" (Moten 39).

The ebbs and flows of freedom move like the threads that are curved and nonlinear, which is to say that the lines of freedom flight are not predetermined and demarcated. What the thread might offer us here is a way to think of another tactile expression of wandering, in that weaving patterns and practices are not random and unplanned, but are deeply intellectual. Weaving demonstrates how the tentacular and webbed forms of wandering freedom movements simultaneously entangle the strands tighter into one another in a constricting way, but also slowly builds with the accumulation of small knots, loops, and layering a site where change is possible and freedom is the goal. For the weavers it is a self-generating process where the threads come from within themselves and are pulled out from their mouths. How the thread is generated materializes the abstract internal workings of the flesh into an outward display of the potential of transformation of

the black body, here represented by a self-fashioned cocoon. In *Tecelãs*, the deconstructive power of weaving is just as essential as that of building. Errors or mistakes can be undone. Premade stitches can be ripped open in order to remake the parts and pieces into something else. New elements can be added along the way.

Importantly, none of the weavers are completely concealed or encapsulated by their cocoons in the installation. Paulino's refusal to depict any of the caterpillars in any other stages of becoming resists replicating any of the bodily logics or ideals that have excluded the black body in the past and the present. The insect-women are all in differing stages between confined transformation and breaking free, which brings to light an important choice on Paulino's part to leave the stages and details of their becoming ambiguous to us and the temporality of the process unclear. Because of this I wonder: are they currently building their cocoons up? Are they cracking their way out of the soft and silky confines? Or are all of the weavers at differing stages that blur into one another and make it quite impossible to distinguish the gesture of weaving from that of breaking free? As Young says, "within and betwixt these movements, there was a lot of stillness," (42) and yet in stillness there was movements of breathing, blinking, muscle twitches, thinking, and the self escaping the confines of the body.

The slipperiness exists between the many stages of becoming, but focusing on these two points in the transformation process highlights how the embodied acts of becoming and undoing necessitate and inform each other. "I am also interested in the possibility of invisible, inaudible modes of philosophical subjectivity — those modes of reason that roam just above, before, and ahead of the articulate, in the private, untranslatable, often rapturous and unrestrained domains of its making and meaning" (Cervenak 63). Let's turn to another version of Paulino's weavers for the sake of comparison, a drawing called *A Postura Dos Ovos* or "The Posture of Eggs" (Fig. 2). Here we get an impression of what a closed cocoon might have looked like, should it have been conveyed in *Tecelãs*. Interestingly, here we get to see a weaver supposedly enclosed in the space. The woven threads in the drawing are seemingly less opaque than the cotton threads of *Tecelãs*, in the sense that they visually reveal more about the inner workings of the cocoon. The drawing shows how the subjected live within the liminal zone of life and death, fixed and fluid, confined and free, and outside and inside. In fact, the drawing does the exact opposite of confirming the hold of enclosure by depicting how the cocoon structure is porous, soft, flexible, and escapable. How the thread coming from the weaver is depicted here, the sensation is that at any moment, she will open her mouth to release the threads and they will collapse along her body. The liminality offered by Paulino in this drawing version is to see—or not to see—the experimentation of enacting the difficult and laborious performances of

Fig. 2. Paulino, Rosana. "A Postura dos Ovos." 2005. www.rosanapaulino.com.br. Accessed 5 March 2019.

small movements. The difficulty in following the stages of the insect-women's weaving performances become atemporal, collapsing the past, the present, and the future with the promise of nothing more than the fleeting feeling of the now (Young 42).

Indeed, the point is not to argue that this joining of women with insects is only about mimicking the insects' embodied practices, but instead to visually symbolize how black women engage with different embodied practices in order to live. In this sense I mean to invoke how the flesh was not reduced solely to a site of violence and trauma, but the flesh also offers possibilities toward new ways of thinking about the human that come out of black people's exclusion from the category. Spillers frames this suggestion as: "[t]his materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh 'ungendered'—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (68). How do the experiences of the flesh translate into an art object, such as the weavers? How do we read the details of the insect-women's performances for how they reflect and honor the legacies of black women to make life within and outside their confines? And how can we reconsider sites of confinement as also being spaces of black feminist planning, mobility, and freedom movements, precisely because enclosure demands finding and engaging with atemporal survival strategies and devising new ones?

To hold space for the unknown workings of the flesh is to resist pinning down the work being done and to risk the claim that the things we cannot ever fully know still abound in theory and perform freedom all the time, in every which way. Moten too has outlined the atemporal, cyclical, and entangled dance that black bodies enact in relation to oppressive powers. He says, "constraint, mobility, and displacement are therefore, conditions of possibility… as well: as a certain aesthetics, as an effect of disinvestment, as a psychic condition: the decay of form and the internal and external environment of regenerative aesthetic production: turning, vanishing, enclosing, invaginating" (40). For example, one of the decaying forms offered in *Tecelãs* is the decomposition of the cocoons when ostensibly, as it is never guaranteed that we see this process, the weavers break out of their confinement. We would be quick and foolish to breathe a sigh of relief, for it should not be forgotten that the thread comes from within the weavers. This is not to be understood as a contradiction to my earlier claims that the cocoon is a site of freedom planning and agential performance, but it is for us to keep in mind that if the threads symbolize the interior world of the intergenerational scripts and histories of the flesh, then while they are freeing, they are also always marked by a legacy of being unfree as well. Again, Jacobs' account reminds us, as do the weavers, that the possibility of movement does not fully mark an end to violence or racial subjugation. It remains unclear and unknown whether the liberating potentials of the cocoons can ever wipe away the hieroglyphics of wounds of the flesh, regardless of the number of times the insect-women remake, die, and are born again—but that uncertainty does not stop them from trying and doing.

Looking at them upon the walls, we are unable to tell how many times that these insect-women have cocooned themselves. Are there sticky remnants of the past cocoons haunting and lingering on the walls and floors of the gallery? The materials and performances of transformation do not leave an obvious trace, making its trajectory and temporality unknown. The insect-women's performance of stillness and opacity make their embodied performances dense and

thick with intergenerational experience and philosophical wanderings that our eyes do not catch. Spillers remarks something similar: "[t]hese undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden" (67). Caterpillar women flip the script black women were assigned and talk back to the script, perhaps saying, "you cannot imagine this, nor what I and the women before me have been able to do from within and beyond this".

While I have named these performances as experimental and improvisational, it is not to say that the philosophical modes are not also ground in deep traditions that build upon one another. Wandering along the wall again, it is crucial to move from the individual weavers to address collectivity, for Paulino did not choose to make just one, but dozens of these insect-women and to present them together. Remember the river? Paulino did not learn alone how to work the mud, but did so with the company of her mother and sisters. Individual and collective, sewn together through their embodied practices like the thread they all are capable of producing. Thread lines come much earlier than *Tecelãs* because Paulino's mother was an embroiderer. In the act of buying her daughters thread to practice sewing or teaching them how to work the river's mud, could Paulino's mother have foreseen that Paulino would pull threads from within herself, which would bring her here to this moment as an artist with an exhibit at one of the most important museums in Brazil? And yet, Paulino's esteemed status as highly respected educator and artist does not change the gendered and racial oppression that she and other black Brazilians continue to face (Gobbi). Shifting from the individual cocoons that each of the weavers made from their internal threads in order to transform, we see that their efforts to redefine the body, follow freedom dreams, and other performances, are in many ways collective. The collective encourages a series of questions to speculate on, such as: how do we know whether the weavers are communicating with one another? Are the ones closer together working with each other to build their cocoons? Which of them can identify the differences in one another in ways we could never pick up on?

The lessons passed along to her as a young girl have been carried within the body and now have been impressed and transferred to the clay bodies of the weavers, who are now moving along their own path of becoming, of transformation, and of reimagining what is possible. With each of their physical movements, they carry with them the hidden transcripts of black women's intergenerational knowledge; more specifically, they carry traces of Paulino's mother. Audre Lorde says in "Poetry is Not a Luxury" that truth rises up from within a place of "darkness"—our interior world—to manifest as dreams and materialize from our bodies through poetry (36-39). Lorde continues by saying that this truth is not about knowing, in the Western sense of knowledge, but is about turning to ancestral knowledge for its emphasis on feeling and emotion as actual knowledge and truth (37). As such, wandering and performance, like poetry, mirrors a place of thinking, planning, remaking, and of researching the deepest selves found within. As such, we can consider that the performances of stillness are where the insect-women get closer to those truths that have often been discredited or suppressed by institutional oppression.

In her groundbreaking work, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman weaves through the enclosure of city ghettos and predominantly black neighborhoods to find stories of everyday black girls and women who are constantly

moving through the city to plan, philosophize, and perform into existence social transformation for themselves and their communities. Their performances refuse the limits promised to their bodies and dreams, which Hartman names as "infinite in variety… possibilities, even if most were fleeting and too often unrealized" (234). Thinking of these girls as a collective, as a chorus where each performs her part of the chorus, Hartman writes,

> The Greek etymology of the word *chorus* refers to *dance within an enclosure*. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? (348)

Hartman goes on to say, "[t]he chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise" (348). The collective as an "incubator" parallels the cocoon as the space of transformation; the chorus might very well be the dozens of weaving insect-women. We can infer that in making several insect-women in the embodied form of weavers, Paulino is encouraging us to see that small, yet revolutionarily performances are happening on multiple intersecting spheres: at the level of the individual body and the collective social body, improvisation and intergenerational knowledge, flesh and body, stillness and fugitivity, woman and insect. *Tecelãs* sews all these spheres together in a way that quells any notions of binaries and encourages us to linger in the liminality with the weavers. In giving all the weavers their own shape and embodied form, Paulino herself encourages us to read movement and transformations of their bodies, which denies us the impulse to assume that the weavers are ever finished and unchanging, ever fully free or unfree. But instead Paulino insists that they are learning from each other, and from their interior knowledge, of how to make real their freedom dreams.

> *Yet a voice interrupts: says she.*
> *Certified to be free,*
> *formerly slave to.*
> *Says she was born free.*
>
> (McKittrick 16)

Notes

1. From this point on, I will interchangeably refer to the figures in *Tecelãs* as weavers and insect-women.

2. While naming the ship and plantation, which are more obvious sites of confinement, Cervenak and Young argue that technologies of slavery were expansive and multiple in the ways they tried to fix or capture the black body. Looking to obvious and less apparent sites, such as an enclosure of the garret or the fixity of the photograph, challenges the ways we normatively understand acts of agency in slavery. Arguing for the performance of "taxing stillness" of a slave forced to be photographed as a specimen, to be just as important as the fugitivity along the routes of the Underground railroad, redefines freedom strategies, acts of agency, and black performance from a black philosophical tradition rather than a Western one.

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