

# feature articles



## Sydney Cain's Spiritual Refusals amidst the Afterlives of Slavery

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Sydney Cain (she/they), who also goes by Sage Stargate, is a young, Bay-area based artist whose multimedia works on paper explore Black ancestral memory, transformation, and spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Using a process of reduction, Cain moves small particles of elements such as chalk and graphite in a circular motion to surface shapes and figures.<sup>2</sup> These figures are often faceless and incomplete; their blurred silhouettes evoking traces, incomplete memories, and ghostly presences. Cain refers to these figures as ancestral spirits, and their graphite and chalk as ciphers that assist in decoding "unseen realities."<sup>3</sup> The artist's discussion of these zones of liminality, and their commitment to rendering these ephemeral, ancestral forms provoke the questions: what does it mean to make legible something which we feel is always there? What does it mean to make your ancestors visible, to conjure them within an aesthetic realm? This paper will explore Cain's interest in spirituality and ancestral memory through *Refutations* (2018-), an ongoing body of work that centers narratives of Black resistance across time. The project consists of various multimedia series of artworks, publications, and exhibitions that mine both San Francisco city archives and the artist's

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<sup>1</sup> "About Sydney Cain," Sydney Cain, last modified unknown, <https://www.sydneycain.com/about>.

<sup>2</sup> Pendarvis Harshaw, "Conjuring Our Ancestral Spirits Through Art," KQED, last modified March 20, 2020 audio, 10:53, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13877054/conjuring-the-ancestors-with-art>.

<sup>3</sup> Sydney Cain, "About Sydney Cain"; Christine Joy Ferrer, "Transitions: The Art of Sydney Cain," last modified March 31, 2018, <https://www.electiksol.com/blog/2018/3/31/transitions>.

personal genealogical research to address how ongoing urban renewal in the Bay Area disproportionately affects Black communities. I will focus on works from two different series: *Dark Sousveillance* depicts ancestors embedded throughout San Francisco cityscapes, while *Refutations* presents studies of these ethereal figures. My analysis of the works' content, materials, and process mobilizes Christina Sharpe's theories on the afterlives of slavery, Saidiya Hartman's practice of reading with and against archives, Afrofuturist aesthetics, and M. Jacqui Alexander's scholarship on practitioners of African-descendent religions. I consider how Cain's practice is ultimately a form of embodied spiritual labor that imagines alternatives to the anti-Black conditions that structure the past and present.

As this edition of *react/review* addresses, works with spiritual and otherworldly themes are either considered devoid of socio-political concerns, or are omitted from traditional art historical scholarship and academia more generally. To write about spirituality and spiritual practices is to grapple with the unknown, the intangible, ephemerality, affect, and opacity, which is inherently at odds with academic discourse's organization around logic, rationale, and conclusions. Thus, my exploration of Cain's spectral, ancestral evocations redresses the historical devaluation of spiritual practices as epistemologies or ways of knowing. By reading archives against the grain, engaging with Afrofuturism, and seeking communion with Black ancestral presence that leaves room for the unknown, I argue that Cain's practice is both a spiritual mode of survival and political resistance.

As a third-generation San Franciscan who has witnessed the transformation of neighborhoods that pushed long-time residents out of their homes, Cain refuses gentrification's attempts to erase and displace blackness through the series *Dark Sousveillance* (2018-2019), which asserts generational ties to the city. The series is inspired in part by Simone Browne's theory of "dark sousveillance," which describes strategies employed by Black peoples across time that invert surveilling mechanisms from below (*sous*) through forgery, fugitivity, and critique.<sup>4</sup> Figures in Cain's drawings appear and disappear beneath layers of charcoal and graphite, emphasizing how Black

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<sup>4</sup> Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). In *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne re-imagines the theoretical framework undergirding surveillance studies by centering the conditions of blackness. Rather than situate the Black body into a history of surveillance theory, Browne discusses how anti-Blackness emerged as a condition for the development of surveillance strategies and technologies rather than as a consequence of their deployment. Browne reframes the field of surveillance within the history of chattel slavery, drawing our attention not to Foucault's Panopticon as a starting point, but to the Transatlantic Slave Trade ship as an early structure of power. Her analytic, "dark sousveillance," calls attention to the strategies employed by enslaved people seeking refuge and the practices of contemporary Black artists to invert the gaze.

communities navigate obfuscation to survive the threat of erasure. In *Turk and Fillmore* (2018), Cain visualizes multiple dimensions at the historic Turk and Fillmore Street MUNI substation in San Francisco's historically Black Fillmore district, once known as the "Harlem of the West" (fig. 1). Formerly a powerhouse that supplied San Francisco streetcars with electric power, the building has remained vacant since the 1970s. To the left of the drawing, Cain renders the substation's discernible façade of brick and rounded arched windows, while a congregation of faintly outlined figures assemble on the right. Most of these ancestral figures have their backs to the viewers so that the audience can only perceive their varied hairstyles, hats, and headwraps. In the center of the composition, a blurred figure emerges from the wall and extends their arm towards a train that is moving across the middle ground. The locomotive moves towards a young child wearing a mask who is busy extending the train track. This interstitial space, which collapses the division between structure and spirit on either side of the composition, suggests that the artist is deconstructing the substation to reveal what once was and is always there.



Figure 1 Sydney Cain, *Turk and Fillmore*, 2018, graphite, charcoal on paper, 21 x 63 in. (53.3 x 160 cm). Courtesy of the artist; photograph by John Janca.

*Turk and Fillmore* affirms the historical existence of Black communities in San Francisco, which Cain describes as part of a larger practice of refusal:

*Refutations* is about refuting and the refusal of existing or not existing in space. I come from San Francisco, a common thing that I always hear is 'Oh, there's no Black people here...' and 'there's nothing here...' I know what it means conversationally for people, but the statement is not true because there's literally Black people here, it's just the ways in which we are erased or ignored, invisibilized and such...and that's something true for anything, like even with indigeneity...we're taught that there are no indigenous people anymore and it's a tactic in colonial projects to say that someone doesn't exist. So, with *Refutations*, it was tackling that idea....<sup>5</sup>

Cain's statement alludes to the ongoing gentrification and displacement rampant throughout the Bay Area, catalyzed by the 2008 housing crisis and recession, as well as the so-called Silicon Valley Tech Boom 2.0, which first started around 2011.<sup>6</sup> The tech boom, massive shifts in the real estate market, and increasing income inequality among Bay Area residents has precipitated an "eviction epidemic" of the city's long-term residents, many of whom are people of color.<sup>7</sup> As many historically Black and Latino enclaves in the greater Bay Area region undergo a significant demographic shift, their displaced residents are subject to increasing criminalization, incarceration, and lethal

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<sup>5</sup> Sydney Cain, interview by Angela Pastorelli-Sosa, July 6, 2021, audio, 56:26.

<sup>6</sup> As high-income tech employees moved into the region and pushed up actual and projected "market rates," San Francisco's tourist value also rose, resulting in a significant amount of affordable housing being taken "off the market" and inserted into the short-term rental market through companies such as Airbnb. These two tech-related forces have increased market pressure to either raise rents or convert apartments into short-term rentals, which in turn has precipitated an "eviction epidemic" of the city's long-term residents. See: Manissa Maharawal, "Black Lives Matter, gentrification and the security state in the San Francisco Bay Area," *Anthropological Theory* 17 no. 3 (2017): 342.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 340. The dispossession of property via foreclosures needs to be understood in terms of greater structural forces such as predatory lending and redlining. During the mortgage crisis of 2008, Black families were 70% more likely to be targeted by predatory lenders than white families. Many of those homes were located on land with a history of redlining. Redlining is a practice from the 1930s that prevented Black families from buying homes in certain neighborhoods and qualifying for home loans. The structural racism in housing results in a severe persistent pattern of racial, residential segregation and disparate life outcomes in the Bay Area. See also: Alex Schafran, *The Road to Resegregation: Northern California and the Failure of Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Erin McElroy and Andrew Szeto, "The Racial Contours of YIMBY/NIMBY Bay Area Gentrification," *Berkeley Planning Journal* 29 no. 1 (2017): 7-46; Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press: 2021).

forms of police violence at the hands of the security state.<sup>8</sup> Cain also acknowledges the interwoven nature of gentrification, displacement, and Black death in a statement about *Refutations*: “I’m refuting the idea that my existence doesn’t mean anything or the propaganda that says, ‘I’m not here’ or ‘I don’t matter.’ I’m refuting the idea that I’m only destined for a traumatic death...”<sup>9</sup>

This multilayered precarity of Black life in the Bay Area speaks to what scholar Christina Sharpe articulates as anti-Black structures amidst the afterlives of slavery. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe activates multiple registers of “wake”—the path behind a slave ship, keeping watch with the dead, coming to consciousness—to theorize how anti-Blackness structures Black life: “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence...”<sup>10</sup> Sharpe insists that while the modes of Black subjection may have changed from slavery and later during the post-Civil War era, the structure of that subjection remains the same, meaning that Black life continues to exist in close proximity to death, trauma, loss, and precarity.<sup>11</sup> Although Black life is conditioned by the afterlives of slavery, Sharpe also argues that Black peoples resist and rupture “Black immanent and imminent death.”<sup>12</sup> Sharpe theorizes this resistance and survival as *wake work*: “In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery.”<sup>13</sup> Wake work encompasses both the “unsurvival” that structures Black life as well as sites of artistic production, resistance, and consciousness that imagine the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 342. Anthropologist Manissa Maharawal discusses how gentrification and dispossession in the Bay Area disproportionately affects communities of color. The suburbanization of poverty in the Bay Area has gone hand in hand with the whitening of the cities of San Francisco and Oakland and relegation of the racialized poor to suburbia. Some of these trends are a long time in the making. For instance, the displacement of San Francisco’s Black population, which started with urban renewal policies in the 1970s that literally razed the historic Fillmore District (known as the ‘Harlem of the West’) has continued at an alarming rate. Yet according to a 2014 statistic, even though the Black population makes up only 6% of the city, its criminalization and mass incarceration have not abated and currently account for 56% of the city’s jail population. Thus, processes of urban transformation enact many forms of violence against communities of color.

<sup>9</sup> Sydney Cain, “Notes from MoAD: *Emerging Artists and Critic Series*, Episode 11: Sydney Cain,” interview with PJ Gubatina Policarpio, *Art Practical*, April 15, 2020, video, 57:35, <https://www.artpractical.com/column/notes-from-moad-episode-11-sydney-cain-with-pj-gubatina-policarpio/>.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18.

possibility of an otherwise. Both Sharpe's project, which was written in response to family deaths, and Cain's ancestral veneration are modes of wake work that keep watch with the dead and strive for spiritual resolution.

Cain cites Sharpe's theorization of "living in the wake" as an influence for works that honor local marginalized narratives. When creating these works, Cain asks: "What does it look like seeing people in spaces that they may not look like they exist there, but they still there, something about them is still there, they exist in the bricks, they exist in...regards to labor, in regards to memory, in regards to...the shadows?...So that was my interest, thinking about it outside of...the U.S. Census Bureau, or...in the wake, ways in which we exist in the wake."<sup>14</sup> With its depiction of multigenerational ancestral figures, *Turk and Fillmore* is an homage to this historically Black district of San Francisco and honors African American migration and labor histories. While the train locates the viewer at the historic substation, it might also reference the waves of African American migrants from the Midwest and the South who were given free train tickets in the 1940s to work in San Francisco and Richmond's shipyards.<sup>15</sup> Cain recuperates these figures, which are drawn from oral histories as well as familial and city archives, to refute demographic reports, such as the U.S. Census, which both dehumanize and render blackness invisible by limiting their analysis of the Black population in San Francisco to quantitative data. Cain's reference to ephemeral presences embedded throughout the city is a manifestation of wake work that responds to the structural racism which shapes demographic data, gentrification, and dispossession. Following Sharpe, *Refutations* resists the current climate of anti-Blackness in San Francisco and imagines an "otherwise" by "keeping watching with the dead."

Cain's visualization of histories that works both with and against archives is a common thread throughout diaspora studies scholarship about Black life. By working through the presences and absences of the archive, Cain's work also dialogues with scholar Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation. As a cultural historian and scholar of African American literature, Hartman attempts to write the histories of enslaved peoples without replicating the grammar of violence that structures the archives of slavery as well as its subjects.<sup>16</sup> Rather than be constrained by the parameters of historical writing, which fail to mention how facts, evidence, and even archives can be produced by terror, Hartman develops a writing practice called critical

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<sup>14</sup> Cain, interview by Angela Pastorelli-Sosa.

<sup>15</sup> Bianca Taylor, "How 'Urban Renewal' Decimated the Fillmore District, and Took Jazz With It," *KQED*, last modified June 25, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11825401/how-urban-renewal-decimated-the-fillmore-district-and-took-jazz-with-it>.

<sup>16</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1-14.

fabulation. Hartman plays with and rearranges the basic elements of stories found in archives to imagine what captives' lives might have been or could have been, while also practicing narrative resistance by leaving room for opacity and refusing to provide closure.<sup>17</sup> Critical fabulation does not give voice to the dispossessed figure of the slave so as to project liberatory desires into spaces of absence, but rather speculates about precarious lives that only become visible in the moment of their disappearance.<sup>18</sup> Cain's spectral work similarly deploys narrative resistance in that it does not make claims or fill in the historical record. Cain gestures to these marginalized histories but does not fully give the audience access to these ancestral figures. The artist respects their right to opacity by portraying these spirits with their backs turned and blurred silhouettes and shadows. Both Cain and Hartman deploy fabulation to engage subaltern figures in archives, but Cain moves beyond Hartman's critical writing practice by accessing ancestors using materials and through the act of image making. I will return to how Cain's gestural drawing and material specificity taps into embodied practices and knowledges, but first, I want to attend to the political stakes of speculative work.

Hartman addresses how speculative work about the past is both a response to the present moment's incomplete project of freedom—what Sharpe calls living in the wake—and a means of envisioning alternative futures and realities.<sup>19</sup> Like other speculative work, Cain's *Refutations* are simultaneously an engagement with the past and investment in Black futures: Cain explores the generative possibilities that arise when acknowledging that Black peoples are living with the dead in the wake. *Refutations (pt. 1)*, like *Turk and Fillmore*, locates the viewer at the historic San Francisco substation. However, unlike the earlier work, this drawing introduces a temporal convergence of past and present, depicting ancestral figures alongside those living in the present moment (fig. 2). The living are distinguished by line and dress, such as the figure seated against the wall with their legs spread out on the floor. Clear lines and familiar contours—a sneaker, a t-shirt, the strong shoulder of a jacket—encompass and confer upon the figures a reassuring corporeality against their eventual dissolution into the ether. Once again, the artist deconstructs the substation's brick wall as it extends across the drawing to expose ancestral figures with their backs to the viewers, apart from three smaller figures clustered in the front, who face the viewer. In the foreground, a small child holding a kite is flanked by two figures wearing masks; the figure on the left seems to be reaching their arm out to place on the child's shoulder while another child to the right looks on. Cain narrates the interaction: "This little boy—who's usually always got a soccer ball in hand playing on stilts—helping his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14.

earth friend along with her grandma from the Otherside fix/ build the kite.”<sup>20</sup> Cain’s statement conveys that the figures with the masks are spirits from the “Otherside” who have appeared in other works and materialize here to communicate with and guide a young child holding a kite located in the present. *Refutations (part 1)* visualizes multiple dimensions inhabiting the same space and reveals the dead as always there, even when we don’t see them.

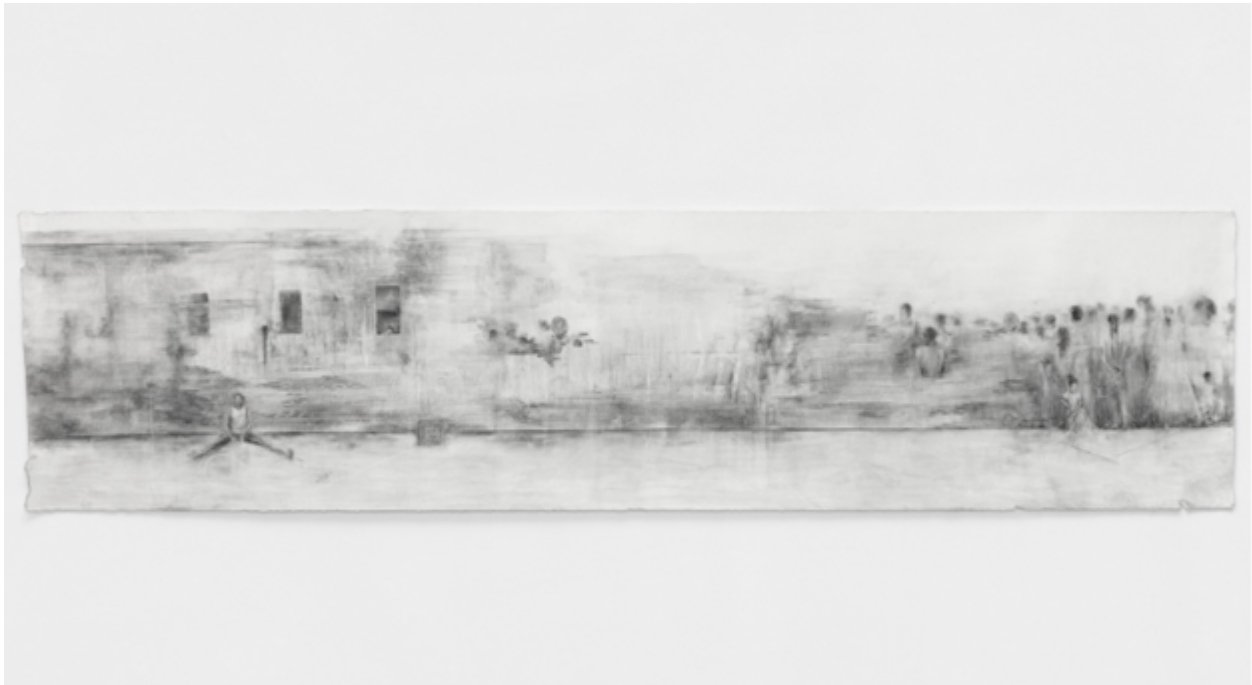


Figure 2 Sydney Cain, *Refutations (pt. 1)*, graphite and charcoal on paper, 2019, 132 x 36 in. (91.4 x 335.3 cm.). Courtesy of the artist; photograph by John Janca.

Cain’s portrayal of multiple dimensions aligns with Afrofuturist works that center nonlinear conceptions of time. Cultural critic Mary Dery first coined the term “Afrofuturism” in 1994 to describe cultural production and scholarly thought that reimagines Black experiences and generates counter-histories via science and speculative fiction and fantasy imagery, such as Octavia Butler’s novel, *Kindred*.<sup>21</sup> Drawing from many indigenous African cultures and spiritual traditions, Afrofuturist works weave connections between past, present, and future to convey the spatio-

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<sup>20</sup> Sydney Cain (@sagestargate), “this little boy - who’s usually always got a soccer ball in hand playing on stilts - helping his earth friend along with her grandma from the Otherside fix/ build the kite.,” Instagram photo, February 6, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtkUqewBuOH/>.

<sup>21</sup> Naima J. Keith, “Looking for the Invisible,” in *The Shadows Took Shape*, eds. Naima J. Keith and Zoé Whitley (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), 13.

temporal fragmentation and dislocation of diasporic experiences.<sup>22</sup> In addition to representing expansive notions of time, Cain's inclusion of the child wearing the mask from the "Otherside" resonates with another Afrofuturist concept of children as ancestors, which disrupts the myth that only elders are ancestors. During the 1990s and 2000s, the Detroit techno duo Drexciya popularized the Afrofuturist fiction that imagined a utopian underwater world populated by the descendants of pregnant enslaved women who when thrown overboard during the Middle Passage learned to breathe in their mothers' wombs.<sup>23</sup> While Drexciya honors the unborn children lost during the Middle Passage, Cain's spirit children might also memorialize the young Black folks who die at the hands of the police state, as well as the many children who were sold into slavery and died during the Transatlantic Passage (which Hartman also speaks to in "Venus in Two Acts").<sup>24</sup> In a world where Black subjectivity continues to exist in close proximity to death, trauma, and loss, Cain invokes Afrofuturist world-making to imagine what a spiritual practice can offer.<sup>25</sup> The reunion in *Refutations (part 1)* of the earth child and two spirits, one of which is the earth child's grandmother, demonstrates the capacity for spiritual communion.

Although Cain's *Refutations* demonstrate an Afrofuturist sensibility, their work is distinct from the larger Afrofuturist aesthetic which often contains hybrid, cyborg forms and clear allusions to technology or space.<sup>26</sup> Cain's spectral work differs from this technoscientific style because their process is also one of spiritual encounter. The artist places powdered metals, graphite, or chalk on heavy cotton rag paper and then manipulates tone and value by means of subtle pressure changes and varied application of the eraser until highlighted aspects of the composition emerge as dominant. In reduction, shapes gradually emerge from pictorial space with soft edges, making it an appropriate technique for revealing ancestral spirits, as seen in *Refutations (for those waiting for light)*. Here, Cain builds up and erases powdered graphite and ground up metals until "somebody comes out or an element comes out."<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>23</sup> Nettrice Gaskins, "Deep Sea Dwellers: Drexciya and the Sonic Third Space," *Shima* 10, no. 2 (2016): 75.

<sup>24</sup> Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 6.

<sup>25</sup> Harshaw, "Conjuring Our Ancestral Spirits Through Art."

<sup>26</sup> For example, Wangechi Mutu draws from Donna Haraway's vision of a cyborg world to create surreal, cyber-kinetic femme bodies that waver between animal and machine apparatuses. Mutu's amalgamations and collages allude to both Haraway's vision of a dystopian future where the West's legacies of conquest and misogyny continue to impose social realities on African women's bodies. Keith, "Looking for the Invisible," 6. See also: Abbe Schriber, "Wangechi Mutu," in *The Shadows Took Shape*, eds. Naima J. Keith and Zoé Whitley (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), 84.

<sup>27</sup> Harshaw, "Conjuring Our Ancestral Spirits Through Art."

contrast between shadows and highlights throughout the drawing results in figures with partially rendered faces, smudges, lines, and tones of gray (fig. 3). While these figures are only merely suggested, the use of African tribal masks indicate that they belong to the Black diaspora. Working with particles of black dust, Cain illuminates and reveals “those waiting for light,” or rather the spirits hidden within the voids of our own world.



Figure 3 Sydney Cain, *Refutations (for those waiting for light)*, 2019, graphite and metals on paper, 33 x 46 in. (83.8 x 116.8 cm.). Courtesy of the artist; photograph by John Janca.

When asked about the weight and responsibility of making ancestors and their stories visible, Cain responds that while the figures are sometimes demanding about how to be portrayed, they do not feel responsible for communicating entire stories. The artist continues, “There’s a strong power in letting things be suggested. Not everybody is ready to come forth at that time or needs to come forth all the time. Sometimes I can’t see them as well so it’s very hard for me to pull them out, so I give them a gesture, maybe you honor them with a title.”<sup>28</sup> Once again, Cain practices what

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<sup>28</sup> Cain, “Notes from MoAD.”

Hartman calls narrative resistance; rather than fully render or “speak for” these ancestors, the artist leaves space for the unknown, for opacity.

Cain’s statements gesture to how their artistic practice is also a process of mediation, which I think about alongside M. Jacqui Alexander’s articulation of spirituality as bodily praxis. In the book *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander posits spiritual work as embodiment, writing:

Embodiment concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term ‘habituated.’ All the mundane activities of working, eating, sleeping, having sex, and getting sick and getting well are forms of body praxis. ...religions such as Vodou inscribe [their traditions] in the body of their followers...the tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body.<sup>29</sup>

For Alexander, embodiment in Afro-descendant religions refers to the entanglement of body and memory; the body is already aware of how to serve the Sacred, which is most clearly seen in someone’s everyday activities. Thus, Cain’s body can be understood as a medium that serves these ancestral spirits through a habitual art practice.

Alexander also offers a framework for considering how spiritual communication and access necessitates a rewiring of the senses: “We learn about and come to know Wind by feeling, observing, and recognizing its activity; in short by remembering what it does as bodily experience. But it is bodily experience that demands a rewiring of the senses mirrored...Hearing is seeing and seeing is feeling.”<sup>30</sup> When Cain discusses “seeing” or “listening to” these spirits it is not because the artist is in direct conversation with the ancestors. Rather, Cain’s engagement with spirits requires non-normative forms of seeing and listening, a queering of their senses that can begin to grasp and recognize how the intangible affects and registers within their body. At some level, Cain deconstructs their subjectivity so that they can be a conduit for past generations and lives. Cain’s communication with and careful attention to the ancestors in their work speaks to the constant effort the artist devotes to their practice and these presences; the visual works connote a form of spiritual labor.

Cain’s artistic spiritual labor exhibits how diasporic peoples construct their own forms of embodied practice in order to cultivate a relationship with the dead, as well as gods. Their works are similar to other intuitive forms of spiritual engagement, such as altars, that gesture to veneration and are often executed by artists who may not be

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<sup>29</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, “Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible,” in *Pedagogies of the Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 297.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

formal initiates into particular traditions. For example, some of Betye Saar's earliest assemblages were altars and shrines that explored both African diasporic religions as well as the everyday manifestations of these spiritual traditions.<sup>31</sup> These works would feature small tables at their core with boxes mounted on top, resembling Haitian Vodou altars, which often rise in shelf-like tiers and are piled with sanctified, ancestral objects. Some altars would conjure Afro-diasporic gods, such as *Dambala* (1973), which was adorned with a variety of reptilian parts and snakeskin imagery to reference the eponymous supreme lwa, who appears as a sacred serpent. Other altars by Saar, such as *Mti* (1973), were installed in their own alcoves and raised on plinths, adorned with candles that would be ceremonially lit, and were spaces in which audience members could add offerings such as money, toys, jewelry, and other items.<sup>32</sup> Saar's altars disrupted the conventional fine arts space to allow for spiritual communion amongst the diaspora. While Cain does not create altars that gesture to African diaspora ancestral veneration, their bodily manipulation of powdered materials recalls Afro-American religious practices of drawing as spiritual mediation.

Cain cites Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Philosophy* (1983) as one of their introductions to learning about African and African descendent spiritualities, and by extension, other ways of thinking about Black afterlives. In *Flash of the Spirit*, Thompson tracks the appearance of Bakongo signs or "signatures" of divinities, which appear on the ground and are often produced in combination with singing, to similar ritual earth drawings amongst Afro-Christians in Trinidad and St. Vincent, Cuban Lucumi, Haitian Vodun, and Brazilian Macumba, Candomble, and Xango followers.<sup>33</sup> These cosmograms are often traced in white chalk either on the floor of a devotional site or on the earth's surface to delineate a sacred, ritual space. To render these signs, which can typically only be achieved in a state of spiritual enlightenment, is to invoke the presence of gods and ancestors, as well as their powers.<sup>34</sup> These chalk drawings represent fleeting signs of spiritual invocation and

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<sup>31</sup> Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Random House, 1983): xv. Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* begins with a critique of how African cultural studies has linked West African peoples to peoples of African descent in the New World in a generic fashion. This study focuses on identifying the spiritual, aesthetic, and philosophical continuities that can be traced between specifically Yoruba, Kongo, Dahomean, Mande, and Ejagham peoples and the art of Black peoples throughout the Americas. Thompson's extensive project is one of the first to deploy the term Black Atlantic within an anthropological and art historical context to examine the transformative global influence of African diasporic culture.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

encounter. Although Cain does not disclose whether they are a formal practitioner of an Afro-descendant religion or whether the work is achieved in a state of spiritual enlightenment, their process of listening, waiting, and utilizing reductive drawing to invoke ancestral presence is akin to the use of the body as medium in Afro-descendant religious encounters with gods and spirits. Thompson's discussion of the body as a conduit in rituals echoes Alexander's concept of spiritual labor, specifically the body's "memory of how to serve the spirits." Given *Flash of the Spirit's* influence on Cain, they are aware that drawing with carbon-based materials, such as chalk, charcoal, and graphite, holds spiritual significance. While Cain does not depict cosmograms or use chalk in this particular series, they conceptualize carbon-based powders as a material invocation of spirit.

Cain's interest in carbon-based materials is multilayered; they are interested in carbon's iterations as both dark media like graphite and charcoal, as well as translucent diamonds and white chalk. Carbon's ability to embody both lightness and darkness is the artist's entry point into rendering zones of liminality using chiaroscuro. In addition to utilizing carbon-based media as a material exploration of lightness and darkness, Cain also considers the element's corporeality and fleshiness. Given that humans are carbon-based life forms, Cain is interested in:

...what it [carbon] does when it breaks down from our bodies...so I'm thinking about...chalk, our bones, calcium carbonate, and how that crushes down over time and it becomes the soft, soft bottom of the ocean that's all very white...and also if you burn bones, you get that ivory black substance...all these iterations of how carbon exists...and I love it when it exists in powdered form or creating powder from that so then that connects to it existing as dust, as soil existing, as small particles...there's that popular saying 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust,' go back to where we came from so in that way working with the dust, working with those materials, is very important on excavating...memory, excavating what is supposedly buried...<sup>35</sup>

As Cain discusses, carbon's ability to exist as multiple colors and forms indexes the continuity of human life which from bones transforms into the soft bottom of the ocean, ash, and dust. Considering that Cain's work materially and conceptually attends to the everlasting presence of Black ancestors, the artist's statements resonate with Christina Sharpe's theorization of residence time, which speculates on how enslaved African peoples lost to the sea during the Middle Passage continue to exist amidst the

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<sup>35</sup> Cain, interview by Angela Pastorelli-Sosa.

afterlives of slavery. In an emotionally heavy passage, Sharpe theorizes about the current material state of these ancestors writing,

...What happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? My colleague Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean...the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues...The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time...<sup>36</sup>

To clarify, Sharpe conceives of those lost bodies living in residence time as fleshy, atomic presences, which allows for multiple ways to interpret how those who did not survive the sea “are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen...are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.”<sup>37</sup> Sharpe’s articulation of residence time speaks to Cain’s choice of carbon-based materials because of their corporeal traces.

When discussing the possibilities that carbon-based materials offer in accessing other worlds, Cain says, “I like to imagine that using carbon in my work is using a sort of filtration system that reveals a story...My sci-fi self imagines that even after/during/before? the burnings and disbursement [of carbon], an ancestral record exists that can be extracted through whatever creative vehicle we choose to communicate and clean ourselves with.”<sup>38</sup> Here, the artist puts their work in dialogue with Afrofuturism, and fabulates gaining access to and communicating with ancestors via the use of graphite, charcoal, and chalk in their artistic process. Cain believes that these ephemeral, mutable materials are iterations of what they previously referred to as “the soft, soft bottom of the ocean” and what Sharpe speculates as residence time, or the physical residue of ancestors. Cain’s speculative encounter with ancestors via carbon-based materials is significant because it extends beyond working with and against archives and oral histories. This is a tactile, bodily engagement rooted in African diasporic practice and which Cain is able to do through the creative practice of reductive drawing. While Alexander’s articulation of spirituality as embodiment allows us to read the artist’s body as a medium for spiritual labor, Sharpe’s conception of residence time frames the carbon-based materials as mediating spiritual encounters.

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<sup>36</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Sydney Cain (@sagestargate), “(a new black nihilistic refutation of time and space) work in progress, charcoal on paper.” Instagram photo, November 14, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqLt6VwBfkV/>.

Cain's extensive engagement with the afterlife, from subject matter, to process, and even materiality conveys the artist's Afrofuturist, spiritual investment in Black life across time and space. In a world where Black subjectivity continues to exist in close proximity to death, trauma, and loss, Cain's *Refutations* posit an alternate world in which Black people can reorient their relationship to death and be open to the afterlife's possibilities.<sup>39</sup> The work *Refutations (After everything spills through the seams)* (2020) imagines a tender reunion between two ancestors (fig. 4). While the figures' expressions are not depicted in intricate detail, it is clear that they are both wearing headdresses. Amidst blurred outlines and shadows, these ancestors occupy the center of the work facing one another and joining their hands as a gesture of acknowledgment, kinship, and intimacy. Cain's caption reads, "I love watching and listening to these two in the centers conversations—it's an endless reunion—of love memories and knowledge—respect understanding—really seeing—and letting be—what happens when we let the dust settle—see how they live forever."<sup>40</sup> While we are unsure about the nature of the relationship between these two ancestors, witnessing their reunion conveys one of the endless possibilities the afterlives of Black people hold. By portraying what is possible in the afterlife as well as how ancestors guide those in this world, Cain hopes that their primary audience, peoples of African descent, will have their own conversations with the spirits in *Refutations*. The artist shares an anecdote of her grandmother staring at a figure in one of the works saying, "That's my dad, that's my dad. You know you never knew my dad, you never knew him, but that's him."<sup>41</sup> In another instance, a viewer told Cain that she had portrayed his brother.<sup>42</sup> Cain hopes that the audiences' conversations with and witnessing of the ancestors in their works will push them to question, and even refute time and space as we know it in favor of nonlinear spatial-temporal frameworks.

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<sup>39</sup> Harshaw, "Conjuring Our Ancestral Spirits Through Art."

<sup>40</sup> Sydney Cain (@sagestargate), "after everything spills through the seams," Instagram photo, April 2, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fwKHRB68I/>.

<sup>41</sup> Cain, "Notes from MoAD."

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Figure 4 Sydney Cain, *Refutations (After everything spills through the seams)*, 2020, powdered metals on wood, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm.). Courtesy of the artist.

Similarly to Black artists and scholars who cultivate their own practices for engaging the deceased and dispossessed across histories of the African diaspora, Cain refuses to see the past as static or resolved. Although Cain's work is a response to the anti-Black present of Bay Area gentrification and erasure, the spiritual communions depicted in *Refutations* are not melancholic or mournful. Rather, they visualize tender reunions and interactions that insist on the presence and dynamism of past peoples and stories. These works and the audience's engagement constitute a liberated consciousness, where one distances themselves from linear conceptions of time and space, life and death. Ultimately, the refusal to declare the past as disconnected from the present and future ruptures the linear regime of anti-Blackness.

As a spiritual iteration of wake work, Cain's *Refutations* map the coordinates for another world in which anti-Black conditions such as gentrification, displacement, and premature death cease to be a structuring presence. These works urge audiences to

uncover the marginalized histories of the Bay Area and heed the unseen reality that occupies the same space as the living. Cain's words, "I'm refuting the idea that I'm only destined for a traumatic death," reverberate to reject the here and now in favor of an alternate reality. The artist's depictions of these encounters, as well as their larger art practice of manifesting these ancestral presences, suggests that a collective futurity is indeed possible, but only through the horizontal sharing of knowledge amongst worlds, dimensions, realms, lives, and generations.

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