ENCOUNTERS IN EXCESS: TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISMS IN

CONTEMPORARY INSTALLATION ART

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Encounters in Excess: Transnational Feminisms in Contemporary Installation Art

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This dissertation investigates video-based installation practices of three nonwestern contemporary women artists working since the 1990s: Indian artist Nalini Malani (b. 1946), Trinidadian-U.K. Roshini Kempadoo (b. 1959), and Pakistani-U.S. artist Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969). While recent scholarship astutely theorizes the immersive and interactive potential of video-based installation works, it has yet to address what this experiential encounter yields within the context of gendered and racial difference. Arguing for the importance of both historical context as well as an analysis of the *content* of installation works, this dissertation offers a theoretical construct of strategic excess to describe both the material and metaphorical engagement with gender that is at the basis of each of these artist's practices. Through this strategic excess these installations confront and challenge the gendered complexity of globalization and concomitant nationalist agendas. In this ethical encounter fostered through an immersive excess, their works also represent a new formal practice that currently exists beyond the margins of art historical discourses.

The very idea of a transnational feminist praxis has yet to be fully delineated in art historical discourse. As such, it exceeds the discourse itself.

Traversing across three distinct cultural contexts and three very different types of installation practices, this dissertation reveals that the enormity of the task of a transnational feminism is not impossible, but rather, is a compelling opportunity for discourse to exceed itself and transform into something new. Focusing on one artist at a time, this dissertation charts three different modes of excess, which, while all fundamentally different, can be united under their shared production of an ethical encounter between the viewer and the work itself.

The immersive installations of these three artists all portray a multiplicity of female protagonists, who, through temporal and geographical leaps in video sequences and animation, fuse historical pasts with contemporary realities in India, Pakistan, Trinidad, and their diasporas. Troubling conceptions of South Asian and Caribbean feminine identity, these artists' works evade essentializing definitions and stereotypes of race, gender, and nationhood. [1] Their works materialize a radical agency for the subaltern woman that exceeds not only the historical and ongoing gendered oppression and violence, but also the boundaries between art, literature, and political engagement.

Rather than charting a historiography of these artist's practices, this dissertation instead engages with their works ontologically, that is, it asks: *what* exactly do their works evoke? What *is* a transnational feminist installation practice? Contextualing the mythic and imaginative scope of these installation practices within their sociological and historical conditions, this dissertation engages with a metaphysical query into the power of art. Ultimately, all three

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[1] My understanding of the role of gender dynamics in the construction of nationalist legacies stems primarily from the work of Anne McClintock, especially her

artists discussed in this dissertation engage with an intersectional feminist approach to representation, and through the evolution of their practices into immersive installation formats, this approach is revealed as a powerful tool for producing an ethical encounter with both the subaltern woman as well as with difference more generally conceived. As such, this intersectional feminist approach is important not just for feminist concerns of gender violence, oppression, and inequality, but rather, can be conceived of as a methodological tool that can be utilized in other contexts, other situations, and different concerns.

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Chapter Three

Introduction

Ethical Encounters: The Installations of Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo, and Shahzia Sikander

As issues of visibility, representation, and ethics permeate theorizations of the impact of globalization, this dissertation offers an understanding of how nonwestern feminist installation art intervenes and disrupts the logic of postcolonialisms, nationalist rhetoric, and the exertion of power over the disenfranchised subaltern. My dissertation addresses multi-media installation works by Indian artist Nalini Malani (b. 1946), Trinidadian-U.K. Roshini Kempadoo (b. 1959), and Pakistani-U.S. artist Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969). Malani, Kempadoo, and Sikander's works portray a multiplicity of female protagonists, who, through temporal and geographical leaps in video sequences and animation, fuse historical pasts with contemporary realities in India, Pakistan, Trinidad, and their diasporas in India, the United Kingdom and the United States. In their immersive installations, there is no stable referent, no single determination for the figure(s) of the nonwestern woman. I argue that the artistic practices of Malani, Kempadoo, and Sikander stand at the forefront of illuminating how an intersectional feminist methodology can inform and transform conceptualizations of not just contemporary diasporic cultural practices, but cultural praxis as a whole.

This dissertation argues these artists deliberately engage in an ethical feminist engagement with the viewer in installation works. What an ethical understanding of the installation art discussed here entails is not the issue of how

to represent the subaltern woman, but rather, of how to engage with the specifics of location and culture that demarcate her position. At the intersection of the problematic of "speaking for" the subaltern woman, and a desire to include the figure of the subaltern woman within the epistemic project of the humanities, Gayatri Spivak articulates the position of an ethical subject who avoids the kind of representation that re-inscribes the subaltern woman into the doubly marginalized position that prohibits her participation in the production of meaning.[2]

Excess marks both the material framework as well as the metaphorical significance of these installations, operating as a tactic for asserting the agency of Gayatri Spivak's subaltern woman, who is caught "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation," in which "the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization."[3] To be a subaltern woman is to be in the margins, beyond the logic of patriarchy, and in excess of stable definition. These artists engage in a strategic excess that embraces this positioning and utilizes this excessive positioning as a tool for disruption and destabilization.

Through a strategic excess of materiality and referentiality embedded in the practices of these feminist installations, both the essentialist trajectories of (western) feminism and the marginality of gender within postcolonial discourses

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[2] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1999), 274.
[3] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 102.

are replaced with a viable discourse that moves beyond binary considerations.

This in turn allows a consideration of how ethics reveals the epistemic violence

that continues to exclude the (nonwestern) female in operations of power and

subjectivity.[4] An examinaition of nonwestern feminist praxis reveals a

simulatenously difference and similarity with western feminist praxis,

illuminating that the issues condemned by western thought onto nonwestern

realities merely reveal the same denigration of women in western cultures, albeit

through different means and messages. This dissertation asserts that works such as

those by Malani, Kempadoo, and Sikander does not merely reverse the dichotomy

between western and non-western, but rather, creates an excess with which we

can begin to see beyond this limiting, and therefore false, binary prevalent in

western thought based in the Enlightenment.

My first chapter is on Indian artist Nalini Malani. Through an extensive

theorization of her installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012), which first

appeared at Documenta 13 and has subsequently been shown at Galerie Lelong in

New York in 2013, Vadhera Art Gallery in New Delhi in 2014, and most recently

at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston in 2016, to name just a few. To

stand within her installation is to become completely immersed and overwhelmed

with image, audio, and sensation. The installation fills an entire room, and her use

of audio blends ambient noise and staccato reverberations with literary questions.

This places the viewer in a disjointed narrative that explores the darker sides of

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[4] Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 12 (1985): 235-61. I utilize Spivak's term of "epistemic violence" to refer to the modes in which women's participation, narratives, and contributions have been left out of history.

post-Independence India and the violent rise of Hindu nationalism. The viewer

becomes implicated in her often nightmarish yet strangely beautiful installation:

to stand within it is to become a part of it, if only through the layering of the

viewer's shadow across the walls where projections also play. This corporeal

elision between work and viewer produces an ethical encounter with difference,

and specifically with the figure of the subaltern woman. As such, it allows the

viewer to listen, rather than attempt to know, her experience, which is all too

often neglected from the legacies of history.[5]

My second chapter is on Roshini Kempadoo. Through an engagement

with her video-based installation *Amendments* (2007), I align her work with the

movements of literary Black Futurism, dub aesthetics, and Black feminism.

Despite excellent scholarship on the work of Kempadoo, this chapter is the first

theorization of her works within an integrated context of black British and

Caribbean histories and literatures. In the installation *Amendments,* the viewer

enters a dark room and encounters a screen projection. Placed before it is a

console in the form of a domino game. The viewer is invited to play a game of

dominoes, and when the pieces are moved around the console, disparate narrative

sequences of both sound and projected images are triggered. The image sequences

are comprised of digital images taken by Kempadoo herself of Trinidad and its

diasporic communities in London, as well as of historical photographs found

during her archival research in the National Archives of Trinidad. The disjointed

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[5] Gayatri Spivak states that one cannot know the subaltern, but one can attempt to listen to them, even if their voice is indecipherable. For a thorough theorization of this terms in terms of ethics see: Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 124.

and nonlinear narrative sequences are triggered the by viewer's placement of dominoes on a console. Running throughout them is the fictional character of Venezuela and quotations from Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*. The combination of still moving image sequences alongside oral narratives of dub poetry enacts the process of reclamation and remembrance of that which the archive neglects: black women's perspectives and voices. Discussing how the archive as well as the photograph are expanded into an imagined reality through an engagement with temporal excess, this chapter will explore how imagination and fiction (as belonging to the realm of excess) create the potential for an ethical encounter with the other (the woman protester, in this case) through temporal excess.

Like Malani's installations, Kempadoo's works constitute a reality that is always in excess of itself—in excess of archival documentation and of the dominant narratives that leave blank the experience of the Caribbean woman. Venezuela is not singular; she is simultaneously a female protester as much as she is a mythical woman who does not exist in any particular where or when. This position beyond, in a state of excess from normative and patriarchal accounts of history, is utilized as a material strategy in the installation for engaging with notions of gendered and racial inequality. Kempadoo utilizes this position of excess as negative reality into a generative force for reclamation and agency of the subaltern woman.

My third chapter is on Shahzia Sikander and the trajectory of her practice from the early 1990s to her most recent installations based in digital animation.

Examining her use of the Hindu figure of gopis, women who abandon their responsibilities to worship Krishna in frenzied sexual devotion, I argue that Sikander's feminist aesthetic transformed from using figuration into an abstract visual language utilizing her sign of woman, a hair silhouette, in nearly every single one of her digital animation-based installations works since 2003. For Sikander, hair is a mode of entanglement and of creating a visual language of feminine collectivity. Despite her repeated statements about the importance of gender to her work, her work has not been properly theorized in this context.

As Sikander's practice evolved from painting to digital animation based installations, she realized that she had to transcend (or exceed) the designations of her status as a Muslim Woman Artist, and the solution she arrived at was animation and installation. Her use of animation and installation has been theorized as postmodern abstraction,[6] but this chapter offers compelling evidence that this is not solely the only concept at work. Her use of movement and abstraction can be read as her use of an Islamic aesthetic that concerns itself with creating a spiritual space. Sikander's works stand in excess of binary distinctions, especially that of the personal versus the universal. Her technique of excess is performed through abstraction and repetition that has its origins in Islamic artistic and cultural production.

In my final chapter, "Exceeding Art History," I present my methodology of excess in order to theorize transnational feminist praxis within the specifics of

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[6] Sean Kissane, in his essay on Sikander, states that her work references the postmodern through its use of grids, abstractions, and "modernist dots," while this is one reading of her work, I present an alternative reading situated in Islamic aesthetics. Sean Kissane, Introduction to *Shahzia Sikander,* Exhibition Catalog, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 31.

local production and context, while maintaining its transnational relevancy by connecting each to other strains of feminism. I conceive of a global transnational feminist project not as a homogenous universal whole, but rather as an opportunity for multiple and heterogeneous sites of ethical encounters with the subaltern woman, which connects the fields of literary and visual analysis to theoretical intervention. I offer a theorization of feminist installation art as a mode of producing an ethical encounter with difference through a mimetic representation of the excess that defines the position of women within historical discourses.

Ultimately, Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo, and Shahzia Sikander's practices represent an engagement with intersectional feminism. Their feminism is not just about gender, but rather offers a mode of thinking about difference. Importantly, their engagement with excess positions their work as feminist. The gendered consideration of the modes of representation of the diaspora, its fragmented and multiple histories, and the process of remembrance is significant. As Pinto states, "feminist methodology requires that we look for new and different ways of "doing" diaspora beyond massive official archival presences… beyond the traditionally documented, so to speak, which is really about how and what we think of as documentable."[7] As such, I argue that their artistic practices stands at the forefront of illuminating how a feminist methodology can inform and transform conceptualizations of not just contemporary diasporic cultural practices, but cultural praxis as a whole.

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[7] Samantha Pinto, "*Una escuela rara:* Feminist Methodologies, Innovation, and the Sound of What Is to Come in Diaspora Studies." *Small Axe,* Vol 39, (March, 2016), 178.

Chapter One

Corporeal Excess: Nalini Malani's *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012)

"The language of pain could only be a kind of hysteria—the surface on the body becomes a carnival of images and the depth becomes the site for hysterical pregnancies—the language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meanings."[8]

To stand within one of contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani's installations—such as *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012)—is to become completely immersed and overwhelmed with images and sounds [Figures 2.1-2.2].[9] Malani's installations fill an entire room, surrounding the viewer on all sides with projections of video, animation, and performance, while in the center of the room hangs four mechanically rotating clear Mylar cylinders with loosely painted watercolor figures. As they rotate, they project the watercolor paintings on top of the already densely packed wall projections. Her audio blends ambient noise and staccato reverberations that resonate deep in the body with literary quotations that place the viewer in a disjointed narrative that explores the darker sides of post-Independence India, and the violent rise of Hindu nationalism. History is enlivened in her works, but always from a female perspective. The viewer becomes implicated in her often nightmarish and strangely beautiful installations: to stand within one of her works is to become a part of it. This corporeal elision between work and viewer is produced through a feminist

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[8] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus,* Vol. 125. No. 1. (Winter, 1996), 86.

[9] Originally made for Documenta 13 in 2012, this installation has gone on to appear in numerous other exhibition spaces, including Vadhera Art Gallery in New Delhi, Galerie LeLong in New York, and most recently, the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston.

strategy of excess that envisions the perspectives of the disenfranchised through visual allusions from myths, literature, and history.

In this chapter, I address Nalini Malani's work and its possible interpretations as *more than,* a spilling out, a slippage, verbal or otherwise of meaning, materiality, and temporality. Utilizing Luce Irigaray's descriptions of woman as in excess of patriarchy, as well as Irigaray's call for a disruptive excess as an aesthetic strategy to challenge the absence of women's viewpoints from history, I position Malani's work within a feminist aesthetic of excess.[10] In the installation, *In Search of Lost Blood,* Malani's multiple and overlapping allusions to postcolonial and feminist interpretations of myth, memory, and history is a technique of excess, since it requires moving beyond singular cultural and historical referents. The title of the installation is itself a citation, from twentieth century Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's eponymous poem "In Search of Vanished Blood," which is about the trauma and violence caused by the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Malani states that she finds this poem a "beautiful expression of this trauma" and that the poem forms a "nerve system that is… going through the brain, and the fantasies and negatives fantasies that you see through the poem, racing through these nerve centers."[11]

Malani's protagonists are never stable or solitary, but rather, they are always amalgamations of multiple versions. In order to evoke an excessive and nonlinear narrative, Malani utilizes Christa Wolf's feminist revision of the Greek

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[10] Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," *This Sex Which is Not One,* translated by Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 68-85.
[11] Nalini Malani, "Arjun Appadurai in Conversation with Nalini Malani," *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts: In Search of Vanished Blood,* 38.

myth of Cassandra, and playwright Heiner Muller's rendition of *Hamlet's* Ophelia

in a complex montage of references, vision and audio. However, the majority of

the quotes that reverberate across the installation room are from Gayatri Spivak's

translation of Indian writer Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi." The story

is about the police abduction and rape of a female tribal insurgent in Bengal,

India, who shares her name with a heroine from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata.*[12]

The short story is about the double disenfranchisement of a lower caste woman

named Draupadi, who is marginalized by both her low socio-economic status as

well as her gender. Draupadi is the subaltern woman, who, as Gayatri Spivak

describes, cannot speak. Malani's project does not give voice to her, nor does it

attempt to embody her. Rather, Malani's immersive installation engenders an

ethical encounter with her, where the viewer can experience and attempt to listen

to the subaltern, even if her voice may be hysterical or beyond comprehension.[13]

     The potential for an ethical encounter within the immersive installation

format can only be understood as an ontological project, rather than an

epistemological project that seeks to *know* and define the object of its

investigation. An ontological account for Nalini Malani's practice does not seek

to contextualize it within the lineage of Indian Modernism in order to place it

within a teleological structure. Rather, an ontological project investigates the

modes of collaboration, cross-fertilization, and comparative analysis whose

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[12] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed, *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts: Nalini Malani's In Search of Vanished Blood,* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 10.

[13] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* 51. For a more detailed description of Gayatri Spivak's call for an ethical encounter with the subaltern, and Ola Abdalkafor's fuller theorization of the concept, see my first chapter titled "Exceeding Art History."

primary goal is understanding *what* her works are, in the very broadest sense as well as in the specific instance of *In Search of Vanished Blood.* An ontological account places her work in conjunction with not just artistic movements, but those of literature, philosophy, and history. At the very heart of this project, is an ontology that allows for difference and the unknowable, even as it simultaneously seeks to understand the experience fostered by the work itself. This chapter engages with an ontology of Malani's installations, arguing that they provide, through an engagement with excess, a site for transformation.[14]

Malani's evocation of the character of Draupadi occurs visually as well as acoustically through audio quotes-- the strobe lights that move across the installation room are a visual embodiment of the searchlights that roam the jungle in which Draupadi tries to hide in Devi's story [Figure 2.3]. Malani's envisioning of Draupadi's experience of hiding, capture, and rape evokes the horror of that experience: To stand in the middle of the installation is to become the figure of Draupadi herself, hunted and trapped within the installation. The corporeal elision between viewer and protagonist is the intentional outcome of Malani's strategic excess. To experience her installations is to be overwhelmed visually, acoustically, and placed *into* the work itself, rather than passively experience it.

It is Malani's experience of the trauma of Partition that produces these techniques in her installations, history forges an engagement with its effects that is then transformed into practice by Malani herself. This strategic envisioning of diversity, multiplicity, and acceptance is at the core of Malani's practice in both

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[14] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present, (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) *5,* 144-146.

form, as well as meaning, since the early 1990s. It is within this context that one can understand Malani's continual return to references to Partition within her works, as well as to the violence enacted against women in the name of nationalism and religion. As such, this chapter will necessarily engage with the history of Partition. Malani's engagement with history is integral to how she produces the possibility for an ethical encounter through the format of her installations themselves. Importantly, I do not understand Malani's engagement with history as a simplistic narration of it, importantly, as Sambrani similarly argues, one must regard her numerous references and engagement with theory as an "excessive referentiality that… ultimately transcends the limitations of those references."[15]

The booming audio in the installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* also recites quotes by multiple re-readings of the myth of Cassandra, who predicts the fall of Troy but no one believed her, as well as Ophelia, as modes of presenting the lost value of a feminine voice. These women guide the installation sequences through both vision and auditory quotations. They themselves are also multiple and excessive, allusions to originals with no stable origin. The voices and visual allusions to Draupadi, Cassandra, and Ophelia combine to create a chaotic presentation of the traumatic experience of rape in a presentation that is both cathartic as well as affirmative: through bearing witness to their trauma, the viewer is immersed in a mode of sight that insists on agency *through* (rather than on) their corporeal bodies. In her visual interpretation of these literary sources,

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[15] Chaitanya Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections, and Nightmare: the Art of Nalini Malani," *Nalini Malani,* Irish Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Catalog, (Milan: Charta Press, 2007) 35.

Malani forces a space for the previously invisible subjecthood of the postcolonial woman. Through a literary reading of her cited works, a visual meaning emerges—one that is excessive and resists singular and reductive interpretations.

Just as Malani envisions scenes and characters from plays and literature within *In Search of Vanished Blood,* she also crafts a visual allusion to postcolonial and feminist scholarship, in particular, the work of anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Veena Das on India's recent history from its Independence from Britain in 1946, the Partition of 1947, and the subsequent nationalization of a violent form Hinduism in India. Malani's conversations with Appadurai and Das, as well as two essays in particular, have formed the conceptual and historical backbone of her work. Appadurai's work, "Morality of Refusal," focuses on violence and masculinity, tracing Gandhi's non-violence to its violent roots in the warrior castes of ancient India. Das's work, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," examines the erased history of the abduction and rape of women during Partition.

Malani's excessive visual and auditory allusions allow her work to go beyond stable readings of text and image. Her works do what the texts to which she lovingly envisions cannot—they disrupt and ultimately abandon linear and temporal constraints. The evocation of these written works are central to the conceptual foundation of Malani's use of both vision and sound in order to create an ethical encounter with gendered difference through installation. As Harriet Hawkins notes, the installation's role for the viewer is "one of force, agency and process: experience exceeds what can be seen and written. Instead, the account

given is one of the interrelations of the materiality of installation and its spaces,

with bodies and senses, ones own embodied pasts and a socio-cultural relationship

with 'art.'"[16] Malani's multi-media video installation works seamlessly to blend

Western sources with Indian ones, evoking through both image and language, a

distinct, yet culturally specific, commonality across cultures that concerns itself

with the oppression of women's bodies and the suppression of their voices.

Malani's works involve an intricate synthesis of historical theory and

philosophy, as well as Greek and Hindu myth through an excessive presentation

that yields the effect of experiencing collective cultural memory. In a

conversation with anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, Malani references an email

exchange between them that wonderfully articulates her disciplinary scope:

> The relationship between visual art and scholarly writings is often reduced
> to captions from the scholarly work which are used to explain the drawing
> or pictures which are used to illustrate a verbal and written argument. We
> are interested in going beyond the genres of captional illustration… To
> seek a basis for translation, cross-fertilization, and mutual learning
> between object and word.[17]

This chapter positions excess as a methodology that allows for "translation" and

"cross-fertilization" in global contemporary art. Malani's work goes beyond the

medium of materiality of art and vision, and into excessive sensations that draws

the viewer in corporeally.

Indian art historian Geeta Kapur situates the third-world contemporary

artist in an "uneasy 'subterrain,' in the 'dug-outs' of the contemporary, where s/he

reclaims memory and history; where the leveling effect of the no-history, no-

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[16] Harriet Hawkins, "'The Argument of the Eye'? 335.
[17] Arjun Appadurai, "Arjun Appadurai in Conversation with Nalini Malani,"
*dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts: Nalini Malani's In Search of
Vanished Blood,* 45.

nation, no place phenomenon promoted by globalized exhibition and market circuits is upturned to *rework* a passage back into the politics of place." Kapur calls for a return, through the "force of interpretation" of the role of the self within the contemporary historical moment.[18] This politics of both place and identity, too often dismissed by art historians who privilege formalism above the interpretation of content, is what is needed when analyzing works that originate from postcolonial countries that are also transnational and feminist in scope.[19] Within this citizen-artist context delineated by Kapur, Malani's work hinges upon a discourse in being that is always rooted within the body and embraces both the represented body of the Indian woman, and the body of the viewer within her immersive installations. The elision between the two in installation form is how strategic excess works. It is within this context that this chapter contextualizes the philosophy of excess as a methodology for discussing activist and feminist works in a global context.

This chapter argues for the importance of contextualizing contemporary praxis not just within a global arena, but also within the specific cultural contexts that are evoked in the works of art themselves. Previous studies of Malani's practice have either contextualized her work within a post-modernist trajectory of global art, or have been contextualized in scholarship aimed for a primarily South Asian audience. This chapter's examination of Malani's practice within the

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[18] This idea links to ideas addressed in: Geeta Kapur, "subTerrain: Artists dig the Contemporary," *Body.city: siting contemporary culture in India,* Indira Chandrasekhar & Peter C Seel, eds (New Delhi, India: Tulika Books, 2003), 47.
[19] Amelia Jones echoes Kapur's statements here, and crafts a forceful critique of formalism and the eschewing of identity-based discourses in art history in Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts,* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

generation of Indian intellectuals into which she was born (coined 'midnight's children' as they were born around the eve of Independence), elucidates the importance of history and cultural context to understanding her multifaceted works.[20] This approach, however, does not negate the importance of a global scope for Malani's work, as her allusions span continents and histories, especially as this relates to gender inequality. A methodological framework of excess allows both to be considered, not in opposition to each other, but rather, as equally crucial parts of the multi-faceted process of interpretation. Ultimately, this chapter asserts that Malani's practice represents the importance of a transnational feminist voice in countering dominant nationalist discourses that remain steeped in a problematic conception of gender binaries.

In Search of Vanished Blood: **Visual Analysis**

Before breaking down the installations components and theorizing their significance, a thick visual analysis is required. The densely packed visual and aural elements, as well as their embedded allusions to literature and history embody the excessive materiality that is signature to Malani's oeuvre. In an attempt to replicate this effect of her installations, the following description of the installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* as it appeared in its first exhibition at the contemporary art fair Documenta 13 in 2012.

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[20] For an art historical context for this generation (but not for literature) see: Beth Citron, "New Mediators: The Third Generation," *Midnight to Boom: Painting in India after Independence, From the Peabody Essex Museum's Herwitz Collection* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013).

In a darkened room, an eight-minute four-channel video projects a film sequence of performance, drawing, and paintings across the walls. Searchlights pulse as they roam across the walls, illuminating the viewer in their search. As the video projections progress, the interval between the search lights quickens into a strobe—and the viewer sees intermittent flashes of a woman's face projected on the four walls of the installation [Figure 2.4]. Suddenly, the nude body of a South Asian woman comes into focus, with her back facing the camera. Her skin is tattooed with shadows of loosely drawn watercolor figures: snakes, scorpions, sari-clad women, and the figure of Gandhi project themselves as they too rotate across the four walls [Figures 2.5-2.6]. These watercolor figures are painted on four giant rotating clear Mylar cylinders that hang in the center of the room [Figure 2.7]. The video projection of the woman suddenly becomes steeped in red, as a woman's voice sings a haunting melody in a minor key, reverberating across the bare walls of the room. Each wall of the room projects a different shot of the woman's crouching body--- a body in pieces, marked over with constantly shifting figures and steeped in blood. The melodic singing stops, and a woman's voice states:

> It took an hour to get her to camp… Something sticky under her ass and waist… Incredible thirst… She senses her vagina is bleeding… She sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed she's been made up right.

Haunting children's voices punctuate the woman's narrative, and the screens project a red-ink drawing of turbaned men holding machine guns [Figure 2.8]. The screen fades away into glaring television static that intrudes on the previous darkness of the room.

The four-channel video projection continues. The body of the woman

disappears, and shortstop animations of running greyhound dogs take her place, as

a mechanical clicking staccatos across the installation room. The loosely painted

watercolor figures continue to project themselves across the greyhounds' space,

mechanically disappearing and reappearing as the cylinders rotate [Figure 2.9].

The room goes completely black, and searchlights begin again and illuminate the

head of a woman tightly wrapped in white cloth. On this cloth an unreadable text

is projected. Discordant guitar music stops suddenly and silence envelopes the

room—until a loud clash booms—and static projects itself again across the four

walls. Inaudible whispers from a child strengthen in volume until the viewer hears

a child proclaim "now the day is over, night is drawing nigh, shadows," and the

search lights resume their frantic roaming, until again the face of the woman re-

appears across the walls, again bathed in red. The quote is from an evening hymn

from the 19th century, which is quoted in Samuel Beckett's 1958 one act play

"Krapp's Last Tape."[21] Another woman's voice reverberates across the room,

proclaiming:

> This is Cassandra[22] speaking. In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of
> torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims, I eject all
> the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into lethal poison.

This audio citation is from the final scene of Heiner Muller's 1977 play

"Hamletmachine," in which Ophelia appears alone, and the stage instructions

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[21] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, introduction to *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—
100 Thoughts In Search of Vanished Blood,* 8.
[22] Malani replaces "Electra," which is in the original play, with "Cassandra" in the
installation

describe her character as wrapped in white gauze from top to bottom.[23] Brian

Walsh states that Ophelia operates within the play "Hamletmachine" to "distill a

fundamental point of *Hamlet,* reminding us of the play's investment in

confronting the male horror at female sexuality. And yet, Muller also

fundamentally reinvents Ophelia's characterization by giving her a voice that

speaks back to everyone who is preoccupied with her body and her potential

desire."[24] The female body in parts, dismembered by disparate camera angles, is

covered over by the figures from the rotating Mylar cylinders, and given a voice

through Malani's citation of literature. The videos are on constant loop, there is

no room for linearity in this hysterical envisioning of abduction and rape.

Mingling quotes from Mahasweta Devi and Heiner Muller, the installation does

not merely illustrate these stories.

 Rather, in a play of referential excess, Malani adapts these representations

into a visual framework that is inspired by the narrative form of Christa Wolf's

1984 novel *Cassandra,* in which Cassandra is both the narrator and main

protagonist. In the novel, the events leading up to and after the Sack of Troy are

told through her eyes. In painful detail, the story extols Cassandra's brutal capture

and the events leading up to her public death. It is this first-person perspective and

feminist viewpoint that Malani utilizes in her installation. Malani does not merely

cite literature, but rather visualizes its textual aims as a part of her strategic

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[23] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, introduction to *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts In Search of Vanished Blood*, 10 .

[24] Brain Walsh, "The Rest is Violence: Muller Contra Shakespeare," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art,* vol, 23, no. 3, (September, 2001), 31.

excess—going beyond textual allusion and into visual evocations of both narrative strategy and content.

Background: The Trauma of Partition and Malani's Movement Towards Excess

Nalini Malani's practice expanded beyond painting into multi-media installation works beginning in the 1990s. Malani describes her work during this time as "an artwork in excess—a kaleidoscope of media" that urged viewer involvement.[25] Malani's formal decision to move towards an excess of reference and media stems from her feminist reading of social events that were unfolding around her. She developed the multi-media installation format in order to engage the viewer. In explaining her decision to incorporate installation, video, and performance into her works in the 1990s, she notes,

> by presenting these experimental forms to the public I was able to put the public on the wrong foot. They couldn't apply their usual standards to judge or absorb my work. And in the slipstream of that attention I was able to express alternative visions on social suffering and gender issues inspired by people like Judith Butler or Veena Das.

This desire to destabilize the viewer's conceptions speaks to the process of "jamming the theoretical machinery" to which Irigaray speaks. By pushing the viewer beyond what they were used to, Malani engages, through the "slipstream of attention" the importance of gendering history and contemporary life. In the slipstream of attention, the space between images, her works evoke realities that exist beyond traditional straightforward readings of what it is to be a subaltern woman. In this excessive space, imagination is allowed to mingle with historical

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[25] Johan Pijnappel, "Our Points of Reference, Ideas and Values are not Confined by Man-Made Borders: Interview with Nalini Malani," *Nalini Malani ,* 39.

fact, quotations from literature, and formal framing devices drawn from the prose of literature from across the world. Framed through a careful reading and collaboration with theorists, Malani's approach is not coincidental, nor does it involve a simple juxtaposition of cultural realities. Instead, her works are an interdisciplinary presentation of the multiplicity and breadth of female realities and voices, such as her citation of the female figures of Mahasweta Devi's character Draupadi, Heiner Muller's character of Ophelia, and Christa Wolf's character of Cassandra in *In Search of Vanished Blood* which comingle together to evoke the truth of rape during Partition based in a multiplicity of female voices.

This impetus towards excess must be contextualized within the tremendous impact of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, and the future violence it encoded. Malani's works base themselves on recent historical events, and as such, her works encourage an understanding of how the newly independent India's formulations of a Hindu dominated nationalist rhetoric perpetuated the violence and terrorism first instigated through Partition. Her works confront an understanding of how India's establishment of a Hindu national identity encouraged a violent masculinity, and positioned the figure of the woman as receptacle for both meaning and violence.[26]

Disputes over nationhood, identity, religion, and cultural ethos embroiled Muslims and Hindus in a politically bitter divide for years leading up to 1947, and the British-devised solution was to embody these nationalist impulses geographically into two sovereign states. After the borders were drawn, millions

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[26] For a sustained discussion of the role of violence, masculinity, and Indian nationalism see: Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India,* (New York: SUNY Series in Religious Studies, 2005).

of people were forced to flee: Muslims to the north into the newly formed

Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs to the south to India. Middle class families on

both sides packed up only what would fit in their cars and fled across the border,

usually by night as rioters from the other religion gathered outside their homes

calling for their expulsion. The abandoned homes and their contents were re-

allocated to newly arriving middle class families, but for the majority of those

who fled across the borders, nothing awaited them on the other side.

Approximately two million people were directly affected by Partition, and official

counts (which are largely considered grossly underestimated) put the death toll at

around 500,000.[27]

    Nalini Malani was born in Karachi, in what is now Pakistan, in 1946 to a

Sikh mother and an Anglicized Theosophist father. As an infant, she and her

family fled the newly formed Pakistan during Partition, and relocated to Bombay,

India.[28] The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 reflected years of contentious

debate about the formation of the newly independent India. Muslim leadership

called for a 'state of their own' in order to unite culture and religion with

nationality, as did the majority Hindu leadership, with whom the Sikhs aligned

themselves. Many scholars have insisted that Partition is too tame a word, and

that "civil war" or "genocide" more accurately describes the events that took

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[27] Gyanendra Pandey, "The Contours of Violence: '*Ordinary,' 'Extraordinary,' and Epistemic"* in *Theorizing the Present: Essays for Partha Chatterjee,* Anjan Ghosh, Tapati Guha-Thakurta ed et al, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.

[28] This chapter uses "Bombay" instead of "Mumbai" because of Malani's own choice, in which she described in an interview with the author on November 7th, 2014, that the name-change symbolized India's desire to erase its history of foreign rule, as Bombay was the British given name, and this erasure of history remains deeply problematic and suspect to the artist. Chaitanya Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections and Nightmare: the Art of Nalini Malani," *Nalini Malani,* 23.

place in 1947.[29] Although Malani was an infant during one of the most traumatic

events of the twenty-first century, her sense of being is firmly rooted in this

reality that resonates among her generation. This trauma was embedded in stories

told to her during childhood, as well as in her pedagogically nationalist oriented

schooling in the newly formed Hindu India.[30] To describe Malani's works without

evoking the trauma of Partition is to negate the tremendous tremors it sent

through every aspect of her, and her generations', lived experience growing up.

Malani writes in her essay "Unity in Diversity," that,

> Ever since I can remember my family always referred to the year 1947 as a time of Partition, never of Independence. Stories of this time have long overshadowed my life, as my family were refugees from Karachi. I have tried to make sense of these feelings of loss, exile, and nostalgia, and writings such as the Partition stories of [Sa'adat Hasan] Manto and research by social scientists like Veena Das have been of great value.[31]

Thus, this collective memory of Partition is deeply engrained within Malani's

practice, and a subject to which she almost always returns in her works.

Gayatri Spivak who grew up in Malani's generation of Indian

intellectuals, describes this generation as the "midnight's children" of

Independence-- forever marked by a "dying fall that had to be rearranged in an

upbeat march, and were thus thrust into a space of remaking history."[32] This

remaking of history into an optimistic idealism betrays the reality of the on-going

religious violence in India. India's history since Partition continues to be marred

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[29] Vatsala Shukla, Ed, *Communalism in India: Reach, Ruse, and Remedy, (*Gurgaon, India: Hope India Publications, 2008).

[30] Chaitanya Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections and Nightmare: the Art of Nalini Malani," 24.

[31] Nalini Malani, "Unity in Diversity," *Nalini Malani,* 99.

[32] Gayatri Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 63.

by terrorism, riots, and rape in the name of Hindu nationalism.[33] This idea of historical progress, of rearranging the violence and terrorism into an "upbeat march" is also problematized through Malani's excessive material language. In her works, the humanist ideals of historical progress are revealed as utter fabrication; violence repeats across time, space, and memory. The upheaval and psychological and physical terror wrought by Partition did not produce a peaceful democracy, but rather it encoded future violence in the form of religious fundamentalism, fear, and anger against different cultural groups within India.

Malani's early oil on canvas painting, *Grieved Child* from 1981 evokes the feelings of loss and exile that embedded themselves within the collective psyche of Malani's generation. In the painting, the figures fill the space, and their flattened representation obfuscates line between interior and exterior. In the upper right hand register, a young girl in a light colored dress with a look of dread rushes into the interior space, unnoticed by the adults caught up in their own daily activities of sleeping, sewing, and talking. In a conversation with Homi Bhaba, Malani describes that it is a depiction of a child rushing in from the outside to alert the adults in the home of violence she has just witnessed. Malani recounts that despite the girl's visible grief, the adults are indifferent to the trauma.[34] We never learn what the child has seen, rather we only see her in the moment shortly after. The adults are tired, perhaps annoyed, by the little girl's reaction to the violence that has just occurred in the streets from which she emerges. This piece

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[33] For more on the rise of communal violence in India since Partition see: *Theorizing the Present: Essays for Partha Chatterjee,* ed by Anjan Ghosh, et al, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[34] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Interview with Nalini Malani," *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts: In Search of Vanished Blood,* 17.

illuminates Malani's early concern with violence and the everyday, and is her critique on the immunity towards everyday violence. The act of seeing, or truly seeing the world around one is at the core of Malani's works. As Malani moved into multi-media video installations, she was better able to grapple with the themes of indifference and invisibility, as well as the visual exhaustion of witnessing trauma and extreme poverty on a daily basis. Even in this early piece, Malani is questioning how one sees, invoking the figure of the young girl who actively sees what the adults wish to ignore.

The deaths of over a quarter of those affected by the Partition of 1947 are not the only violence that occurred. In addition, approximately 50,000 Muslim women and children and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women and children were abducted, or detained in 'foreign' territory as the newly formed governments of Pakistan and India called for the mass relocation of Muslims and Hindu and Sikhs, respectively.[35] The abduction of women became a national focus for each country, and both the rape and the recovery of these women became modes of exacting the anger each side felt over the massive forced migration. The 'recovery ' of these women was not without its own violence. Gyanendra Pandey writes that the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 gave permission for any police officer to, "without warrant, enter and search the place and take into custody any person found therein, who, in his opinion, is an abducted person."[36] This search and seizure of both property and women's bodies only heightened the national fervor to "recover" each country's women.

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[35] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 67.
[36] Gyanendra Pandey, "The Contours of Violence: *'Ordinary,' 'Extraordinary,' and Epistemic,"* 90.

Remarkably, the language of these official dictates, as well as contemporary commentary on this process, speak of ownership of women's bodies: they were not their own, but rather they belonged to their new nations.

Women's bodies were seen as property—as entities of the state, and vessels of statehood. The shame endured by 'recovered' women resulted in a forced silence about their experiences, and a collective disdain for the children conceived by rape. 'Recovered' women faced severe abuse by their husbands and families upon their return, and the routine violence that was enacted in these abduction and recovery efforts continued in their homes. As Pandey suggests in her historical analysis of these events, it was not the honor of the abducted women that officials and non-officials fought over, but rather, it was the honor of the patriarchal families and newly formed nation states.[37] Malani states that, "it is only now that the women who suffered in the Partition are beginning to speak out… They also say that they speak with a voice, which could be called hysterical, but I feel that now we have to change that terminology, to call it "the female voice" and give it a legitimized presence. The trauma that these women have been through has had such a devastating effect."[38] With this in mind one can read Malani's mimetic presentation of hysteria as a "female voice" that is capable of recuperating the silence and shame around the mass abduction and rape of women during Partition.

Malani's strategic mimesis insists on the visibility and legitimacy of the raped woman, and re-casts what Jisha Menon describes as, "the symbolic

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[37] Ibid, 97.
[38] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Interview with Nalini Malani," 23.

elevation of women as the repository or culture and tradition [that] ironically positioned real women as targets of violent assertions of family, community and nation," as external designations forcibly applied to the body of the woman.[39] The woman's body in *In Search of Vanished Blood,* is layered over with other images that apply themselves not the psychological make-up of the woman, but rather, apply themselves only onto the surface of her body. Menon also imagines the body, in such instances, as a "somatic text" that is "produced through acts of violence, mobilized by competing or collusive masculinist discourses of family, community and nation. The fluidity of social identity is annexed in the violent fixing of bodies as specifically gendered and ethnic."[40] Malani reverses the idea of woman's body as being defined by nature, and instead posits that it is instead defined by a phallocentric logic that seeks to keep the position of woman silenced and without agency. Malani's woman is not elevated by culture, but rather is trapped and confined by it, within the spectacular and overwhelming space of the installation.

In Malani's material evocation of the first person experience of being hunted and raped in *In Search of Vanished Blood,* hysteria is utilized as a tool for expressing the indescribable, rather than as a symptom of women's weakness. The palimpsestic hysteria produced through this material and metaphorical layering mimics the historical role women's bodies have played in the violent formations of Hindu-led nationhood since India's Independence in 1947. To position the viewer in the role of the abducted woman is to mimetically reproduce

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[39] Jisha Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition,* 121.
[40] Ibid, 153.

the conditions under which her rape occurred. In this context, Malani's elision of the woman's body-as-nation comes into sharp focus. If the woman's body is to be the vehicle for the construction of nationalism, it is also the vehicle upon which violence in the name of nationalism is enacted.

The reality of nationalist fervor in India, spurred on by an increasingly antagonistic relationship with Pakistan, took root in the Hindu fundamentalist political parties that rose to power in the mid 1980s, whose agendas encouraged violence and aggression against India's minority Muslim population.[41] For instance, the 1992 destruction of the fourteenth century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India, and the subsequent riots that erupted over poor Muslim neighborhoods throughout the country in reaction to the event, demonstrated the myth of historical progress and peace upon which India's Independence is based. The destruction of the mosque, built by one of the first foreign Muslim rulers in India, Babur, was instigated through the widespread myth spread by the Hindu fundamentalist political parties, such as the BJP, or Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party), that the mosque had been built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. Ram became a mythological embodiment for Hindu-led rule over India, and his iconic trisul (trident) was emblazoned on flags and posters that touted increasingly violent rhetoric against Muslims. As Richard Davis makes clear, the icon of the trident embodied the "symbolic promise of aggression" against Muslim minority, which accounts for only 12% of India's population, and most of

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[41] Arjun Appadurai, "Morality of Refusal," *Nalini Malani & Arjun Appadurai 100 Notes—100 Thoughts/ The Morality of Refusal.* Documenta 13 Pamphlet. (Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishing, 2012), 9.

whom are poor and disenfranchised.[42] The destruction of the Babri mosque by

over 300,000 Hindu fundamentalists also triggered anti Muslim riots across India.

The rioters went into Muslim neighborhoods burning, pillaging, and raping its

inhabitants. Over the next four months, 1,700 people were killed and over 5,500

were injured throughout India.[43]

Malani describes witnessing these events, in particular the riots in the

Bombay Muslim slums, as impetus to push her artistic practice beyond painting.

Resistance and political activism came to the forefront of Malani's practice in the

early 1990s, when events such as the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque

demonstrated the violent tear at the already fragile social fabric of India by Hindu

fundamentalists. Malani states that,

> in the early 90s the Hindu right wing started to make Taliban-like noises,
> female artists feared the worst. After all it was the woman who would be
> forced to wear symbols of religion: she would not be able to express her
> views in such a regime. Women had everything to lose. Those were times
> that prompted us to take up different subjects and new materials to address
> the changing political and cultural environment.[44]

Malani maintains that time-based work allow her to explore political issues in her

works, without succumbing to political "sloganeering" (her word) or didacticism.

She notes that, at this time, she realized that painting was a single image, and was

thus "too small a receptacle to contain such a vast subject" and that her "tendency

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[42] Richard H David, "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot," *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India,* David Ludden, ed, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 48-49.
[43] David Ludden, "Introduction: Ayodhya: A Window on the World," *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India,* 3.
[44] Johan Pijnappel, "Interview with Nalini Malani: Our Points of Reference, Ideas and Values are not Confined by Man-Made Borders," *Nalini Malani,* 42.

[in art] is to go beyond, into multiples or videos and performances."[45] In going

beyond singular representation, Malani opens up a space in which women can

claim their bodies as their own, beyond (or in excess of) patriarchal social

determinations and objectification.

For instance, her 2003 video-based installation, *Unity in Diversity,*

explores the violent manifestations of Hindu nationalism that sparked the Gujarat

Riots in 2002, where anti-Muslim rioters killed over 1,000 people. Malani

describes this event as the end of the Nehruvian era of religious tolerance, whose

slogan had been 'Unity in Diversity.' The installation reproduced Indian painter

Ravi Varma's *Galaxy of Musicians* (c.1889)*,* which depicts eleven women from

different cultures on the Indian subcontinent sitting together playing music.[46]

However, in Malani's single channel video installation, these female musicians

are jolted out of their camaraderie by a pistol shot, which announces the visual

disintegration of Ravi Varma's female musicians into Malani's animation

sequence of violent upheaval.[47] Malani reproduces Ravi Varma's visualization of

women as representing the nation and disrupting this idealization with the reality

of religious division and violence within India. In this way, she reveals that the

ways in which women's bodies are co-opted into signs of idealized national unity

is a farce, and one that has dangerous repercussions for women. If women are the

[45]Murtaza Vali, "Interview with Nalini Malani: Her Cassandra Complex," *artasiapacific,* vol. 63 (May & June, 2009), 85.
[46] Maschula Robinson, "Nalini Malani: In the Shadow of Partition," *Art Monthly,* vol. 256 (2012/13), 40.
[47] Nalini Malani, "Unity in Diversity," *Nalini Malani,* 99.

passive objects for national and religious determination, as such, they are subject to immense violence against them in the name of nation and religion.[48]

Arjun Appadurai, in his essay "The Morality of Refusal," which Malani re-published in her Documenta 13 pamphlet for her installation *In Search of Vanished Blood*, describes the rise of militancy and fundamentalist fueled violence in India in explicitly gendered terms. Appadurai states that events, such as the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque, demonstrate that "the idioms of sacrifice and violence (as legitimate exercises of male public power) become connected with the idea of the motherland and of distinctly modern ideas of land, territory, ethnicity, and majority." The idea of violence as legitimized through nationalist and religious expressions of male power to "protect" the feminized nation is one Malani seeks to counter in her installations. If violence is a legitimate exercise of male public power, is there a legitimate exercise of female power? The answer is, of course no, the woman's body is connected to the idea of the motherland, which is to be protected and encoded with meaning through 'legitimate exercises of male public power.' The only legitimacy of female power exists beyond these dictates, in an excessive state that is given a voice through the illogic of hysterical expression. Through evoking the experience of abduction and rape in *In Search of Vanished Blood*, Malani legitimizes the hysterical voice of woman as a mode of (re)presenting the horror as well as recuperating the agency of the woman, despite her victimized place.

Spivak writes that her and Malani's generation's rupture from their colonial past is "always also a repetition."[49] This repetition did not wrest itself

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[48] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 82-83.

away from its violent beginnings, but rather, repeated this violence across the psychic and physical landscape of India's reformulation of Hindu nationhood. Material and metaphorical repetition are seen in the visual form of Malani's use of film loops, stills, and layering. Her installations repeat across site-specific venues, recasting themselves into new contexts that always refer back to the body of woman, and the trauma and rape it endured during Partition. The cylindrical aspects of her work, such as her continued use across various installations of rotating Mylar cylinders also emphasize repetition; there is no beginning nor end, just endless looping. Documenta 13 curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev describes entering Malani's installations as entering a space of "re-enactment, as opposed to recognition," which connects to the repetition of trauma.

In an interview, Christov-Bakargiev asks Malani if one could envision a non-traumatic return in this repetition, to which Malani responds: "yes, it could be that the "return" could be a way of purging, of healing within art."[50] As the Mylar cylinders, which are based on Buddhist prayer wheels, mechanically rotate in *In Search of Vanished Blood,* they project imagined figures across the video projection of the body of the woman. However, their rotation can also be seen as a transformation through mourning. Veena Das imagines the process of mourning as a gendered practice that must take place in the bodies of women, and it is in their bodies, that pain is given home in a language. Thus, in revealing the pain and mourning enacted in women's bodies, Das writes there is a possibility for transforming the world from one of death into one in which "one can dwell again,

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[49] Gayatri Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" 63.

[50] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Interview with Nalini Malani," 35.

in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss. This is one path towards healing—woman call such healing simply the power to endure."[51] Through a presentation of mourning, and the continual rotation of Malani's version of a prayer wheel, Malani offers a reclamation of women's damaged bodies, demonstrating that the very act of mourning makes possible recuperation and recovery, that is, a hope for a better future.

The evocation of Partition in Malani's works, as well as the violence incited between religious factions since, repeat across contexts, installations, and history. Yet in this violent repetition, Malani vehemently urges tolerance towards difference. In this sense, her works constitute the alternative and precarious mode of resistance that Spivak describes as the project of the midnight's children generation, for whom resistance comes through a "strategic acceptance of the centrifugal potential of the plurality and heterogeneity native to the subcontinent."[52] This strategic envisioning of diversity, multiplicity, and acceptance is at the core of Malani's practice in both form, as well as meaning, since the early 1990s. It is within this context that one can understand Malani's continual return to references to Partition within her works, as well as to the violence enacted against women in the name of nationalism and religion.

Disruptive Excess: Speaking (as) Hysteric

Over the past twenty years, Malani's multi-media installations point to a common practice grounded in a strategic excess that resists social conscriptions of

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[51]Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 68-69.
[52] Gayatri Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" 65.

gender in a postcolonial context. This strategic excess must be contextualized through an understanding of Malani's activist goals in which her installations provide an alternative, or virtual, future that first recognizes and voices suffering. Through this evocation of an alternative future, Malani states, a potential for both a collective, or social, as well as individual healing can begin to take place.[53] This recognition of women's viewpoints asserts their importance and legitimacy. Malani's evocation of India's recent history, as well as theorizations of that history through anthropological and sociological texts, and interpretations of meaning in literature citations in her multi-media installations situate the agency of the subaltern woman in an interdisciplinary context that confronts the marginality of women from mainstream historical, theoretical, and literary discourses.

To be beyond description and place describes the positionality of both the postcolonial as well as the woman within Western dominated discourse. This chapter does not argue for an essentialist understanding of excess, that is, because the postcolonial woman exists in a state of excess, her artistic strategy is itself excessive. Rather, this chapter argues that the position of excess is deliberately utilized as a strategy for resistance and evocation. Excess is both lived and performed. Luce Irigaray outlines the problematic of speaking of or about woman in this context, noting that such voicing of woman may "always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition." This is to say, woman is incapable of being defined in and of herself, because language is always already inscribed

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[53] Nalini Malani, "Interview with Allison Harbin," Skype, November 5, 2014.

within the logic of phallocentrism. Thus, woman exists beyond the logic of

phallocentrism, beyond language and within the realm of excess. If woman is in

excess of patriarchy, how then, can one formulate a theoretical framework that

can account for the position of the woman? Irigaray's solution is through a:

> jamming of the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension
> to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.
> Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in
> knowledge. That they do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a
> logic of the feminine that would still take the onto-theo-logic as its model,
> but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the
> economy of the logos. They should not put it, then, in the form "What is
> woman?" but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within
> discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as
> imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with
> respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side.

Malani's works "jam" the machinery of representation in both Western and Indian

visual culture: layered over and multiple, the figure of the woman in her works

cannot be coherently defined through the economy of the phallocentric logos that

maintains women are to be vehicles for national identity, cultural purity, and

passive beings upon which patriarchy exerts its force. Malani achieves this effect

through an excessive referentiality that simultaneously surrounds the viewer with

an abundance of voices and representations, all of which seek to assert an agency

for women.[54]

Following her call for a "disruptive excess," Irigaray continues, cautioning

that "an excess that exceeds common sense only on condition that the feminine

not renounce its 'style.' Which, of course, is not a style at all, according to the

traditional way of looking at things...Its 'style' resists and explodes every firmly

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[54] Chaitanya Sambrani, "Shadows, Reflections, and Nightmare: the Art of Nalini
Malani," *Nalini Malani,* 24.

established form, figure, idea or concept…"[55] Nalini Malani's immersive

installations exist beyond the ability to describe them fully through text. Her

installations do not merely cite female protagonists, but rather, they are embodied

in her works. Her style resists any fixed or stable concept of the woman, she is

always multiple, and her body is always layered over with external designations

from both the video sequences, as well as the shadows cast by the figures painted

on the rotating Mylar cylinders. It is through this framework with which one can

understand Malani's "style" of excess, her installations explode across the

viewer's space, overwhelming vision and hearing through excessive

visualizations that layer on top of one another, resisting an interpretation of each

element of her works in singularity.

I argue that this form of disruptive excess is precisely what motivates

Malani's densely referential and multi-media layerings in her installations. This

aesthetic strategy overwhelms the viewer, producing an impossibility of a stable

image or stable meaning. Excess functions as a mode of disrupting and

challenging the absence of women's viewpoints from history. In her installations,

such as *In Search of Vanished Blood,* just as one sequence is presented, it is

disrupted by another seemingly unrelated presentation. Images of Gandhi mingle

with dogs running in place, with red-inked animations of turbaned men holding

machine guns, all of which are punctuated by shots of a woman's body in pieces.

Nothing is stable, nor solid. Throughout her installations, she explores issues from

the recent history of India, the end of British rule, the violence of Partition,

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[55] Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," *This Sex Which Is Not One,* 78-79.

contemporary terrorism, and religious-based violence from the perspective of the Indian woman as viable agent. In so doing, Malani asserts the importance of the woman's voice in historical dialogs, and in her dense and excessive referentiality, portrays the complexity and importance of a gendered dialogue within history as well as art.

Excess marks both the material framework, as well as the metaphorical significance of Malani's installations, operating as a tactic for asserting the agency of Gayatri Spivak's subaltern woman, who is caught "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation," in which "the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization."[56] To be a subaltern woman is to be in the margins, beyond the logic of patriarchy, and in excess of stable definition.

Malani evokes this in her installations through never presenting the woman's body as whole, it is always in pieces, and always has projected over it, external imaginings of identity. Further, the appearance of the woman's body in Malani's installations is never singular or lasting, she presents the viewer only with fleeting glimpses of a woman's body in parts, denying a singular or even whole presentation of the woman's body. This intentional choice both exposes the objectification of the woman's body and simultaneously prohibits an essentialized conception of corporeality: her figures are never whole, never singular, and never belong to only one reality. Rather, Malani's figures are layered and multiple, exposing that social determinations mark the body of the woman. This refuses a

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[56]Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 102.

reading of Malani's works as essentialist; they are not concerned with instilling the woman's body with a predetermined force or meaning, but, rather, expose that it is society that conscripts onto the body of the woman what femininity is and should be.

Importantly, Malani does not present the body of the woman as a victim, but rather as an acting subject. Through re-corporealizing the role of abstracted signifier that the woman's body takes on in moments of political and religious upheaval, her work enacts a painful catharsis of remembered trauma.[57] Malani posits the body of the woman as capable of a powerful recuperation of selfhood. The rotating Mylar cylinders that hang in the middle of *In Search of Vanished Blood* are Malani's adaptation of Buddhist prayer wheels, which when you turn them are supposed to answer all your prayers. Malani adapts this concept by using her rotating cylinders as a vehicle to pronounce women's pain, and in their continual turning, they embody the prospect of healing through women's recuperation of trauma.[58] Yet the reclamation of the female body through inhabiting what Veena Das terms as "the site of trauma" also figures into Malani's installation. As such, in Malani's works, the body is returned to the woman, and thus her re-corporealization enlivens woman's potential to be more than, or in excess of, sites of meaning and patriarchal violence.

In Malani's installations, excess as a strategy and as a state of reality is best evoked through the paradigm of hysteria. Hysteria, in Greek means womb

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[57] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 67.

[58] Andreas Huyssen, *William Kentridge, Nalini Malani: The Shadow Play as Medium of Memory,* Published on the occasion of the exhibition: *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood* September 6-October 9, 2013, (Milan: Galerie LeLong & Charta Press, 2013), 52.

and was used to describe diseases associated with the female reproductive

symptom. The term was taken up by psychoanalysts, most famously, Freud, to

describe a psychological disorder stemming from, what he described as "sexual

shock."[59] As Freud states: "Hysteria necessarily presupposes a primary experience

of unpleasure—that is, of a passive nature. The natural sexual passivity of women

explains their being more inclined to hysteria." [60] In Malani's *In Search of*

Vanished Blood, we hear women's screams echo across the room as discordant

music accelerates into a frenetic energy that can only be described as hysterical.

Malani disputes the idea of hysteria as symptom of women's irrationality, and

rather, utilizes it as a tool to evoke to irrationality of gendered violence. Irigaray

also utilizes Freud's conceptions of hysteria, offering not a diagnosis of what

Spivak terms the "epistemic violence" enacted on the woman,[61] but as offering

the potential to dismantle the episteme through the so-called logic of hysteria. [62]

Irigaray questions what it means "to speak (as) hysteric," describing

hysteria as a space within which the expression of woman is "reduced to silence

in terms of a culture that does not allow them to be expressed. A powerlessness to

'say,' upon which the Oedipus complex then superimposes the requirement of

silence." However, Irigaray writes that the hysteric does speak "in a mode of a

paralyzed gestural faculty, of an impossible and also a forbidden speech… It

speaks as *symptoms* of an "it can't speak to or about itself… Hysteria is silent and

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[59] Freud, writing to Fliess, argues that hysteria is caused by a sexual shock. Noted in: Freud, Sigmund and Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader,* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), xxxv.

[60] Sigmund Freud, "Making of A Psychoanalyst," *The Freud Reader,* 96.

[62] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

at the same time it mimes. And--- how could it be otherwise---

miming/reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language."[63]

Irigaray describes that the only way to give the hysteric a voice would be to better

adapt it into masculine society. This enables not just women, but also men, a

mode of expression that moves beyond the gender binary, as Irigaray concludes

"for in fact, by repressing and censuring hysteria they have secured increased

force, or, more precisely, increased power, but they have lost a great deal of their

relation to their own bodies."[64]

     Throughout Malani's interviews and essays, she always returns to the idea

that both genders exist within each person, and that current cultural manifestations

of gender limit this possibility in both men and women. Malani explains that, in

line with Irigaray, she considers "the intuitive part of the mind is coded as

female."[65] Malani's reading of Irigaray, however, is not essentialist, in that she

believes women are innately endowed with the characteristics typically

considered feminine, such as intuition, but rather, her analysis of Irigaray's

conceptualization of gender, "doesn't have to do with the woman or the man, as

genders, but that these are two abstract ideas, masculinity and femininity that take

place in each one of us."[66] Malani's practice centers around an imbalance of these

abstract ideas, and the ways in which each gets perverted to fit dangerous

nationalist ideologies. Within Malani's installations she envisions hysteria as a

mode of pronouncing what cannot be given voice in language, a mode of speaking

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[63] Irigaray, Luce, "Questions," *This Sex Which Is Not One,* 137.
[64] Ibid, 139.
[65] Murtaza Vali, "Her Cassandra Complex: Interview with Nalini Malani," *Artasiapacific,* (May & June, 2009), 84.
[66] Nalini Malani, "Arjun Appadurai in Conversation with Nalini Malani," 39.

from beyond the phallocentric logic that seeks to define and limit designations of both genders.[67]

Similarly, Veena Das, in her essay that Malani uses as a theoretical basis for her installations, points to a language of excess to describe the role women's bodies were given during Partition and its aftermath. Das states, "the language of pain could only be a kind of hysteria—the surface of the body becomes a carnival of images and the depth becomes the site for hysterical pregnancies—the language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meanings."[68] The "phonetic excess of hysteria" relies upon Irigaray's definition of woman as beyond the logos of phallocentrism, situating hysteria as a tool for Irigaray's "disruptive excess" that confuses the theoretical machinery of patriarchy. In this understanding, hysteria, as disruptive excess, is also a tool for both uncovering and disrupting what Spivak considers to be the epistemic violence around the silencing of the subaltern woman. If women's bodies are the bearers of meaning, as Spivak terms, they then operate as "signifier in the inscription of the social individual."[69] Malani's immersive installations re-corporealize the nationally fragmented woman, presenting her body not as signifier but as real subject.

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[67] Further, way out of essentialist attacks via Malani's conception of each gender within us—thus woman just as capable of violence as men (as the Electra quote makes clear) but because of social conditioning and nationalist utilization of gender binaries that it tends to make women into victims, men and in perpetrator/protector

[68] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 86.

[69] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 95.

Excessive Nationhood: Memory, Mimesis, and the Body-as-Territory

The connection between women's bodies and the rhetoric of nationalism serves as a centrifugal point within Malani's multi-media video installations. Her installations' forms, as well as their content are charted through an excessive language that unveils the power mechanisms that wrest subjecthood away from women, and instead use their bodies as an empty container with which to enact powerful imaginaries of nation, land, and cultural belonging. Anne McClintock describes the process of nation formation as contingent upon gender, stating;

> nations are not simply phantasmagoria of the mind but are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed. Nationalism becomes, as a result, radically constitutive of people's identities through social contests that are frequently violent and always gendered.

The formation of nationalism in the wake of India's Independence embodies the gendered violence to which McClintock refers, as she further argues that while women are "excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit."[70] This section will address how Malani's work responds to the violent project of nationalism enacted since Partition on and through the body of the woman. Her work reimagines the figure of the woman as beyond symbolic embodiment of nationhood through mimetically reproducing the violence played out on women's bodies in the name of nationhood. This mimetic reproduction, in its repetition, reveals a fault in the patriarchal logic that inscribes women's bodies as carriers of meaning, rather than as acting subjects.

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[70] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest,* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 354.

Malani's five channel video installation piece, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,* is Malani's first visual counterpart to Das's essay "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," in which Das writes that the language of pain about the enormity of the violence of Partition remains elusive. Das writes, "I want to reenter this scene of devastation to ask how one should in-habit such a world that has been made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss."[71] This is what Malani accomplishes in her immersive installations that materially embody and make strange the historical events and personal consequences of Partition and the continued religious violence in India. While Das writes about how to inhabit trauma, Malani's immersive installations actually create a sense of inhabited trauma for the viewer. This is a beautiful evocation of interdisciplinary conversations, done not through text, but rather through material manifestations, and stands as an example of how to make an activist oriented art that remains visually compelling and appealing.

Malani's multi-channel projection-based installation, *Mother India,* fills three walls of a gallery space. Each screen alternates in between historical photograph, mass media imagery from India, newspaper headlines, and Malani's own illustrations. The work illustrates the roots of embodying nationalist ideals onto to the body of woman. Sumathi Ramaswamy traces the origins of the "Bharat Matha" or "Mother India" image began during the 1880s, and in the wake of Partition, these images of Mother India took on the clothing and shapes of a Hindu goddess, despite India's claims over wanting to become "secular, diverse,

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[71] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 67.

and modern."[72] In Malani's room-sized installation the viewer is confronted with

five large screens that fill the entire width and height of the gallery [Figure 2.10].

In the video sequences, screens fade in and out of blackness, alternating images.

In one segment, the far left screen shows a cow with horns in blue and white

duotone, at the center of which is a full color image that grows larger and larger

until its over the cow's entire body. Maschula Robinson points out that the cow's

body has been linked to the woman's body: frequently scholars of Indian

modernity articulated the Hindu sacred cow as the mother cow, which in turn,

became in icon for "Mother India" beginning in the late 19th century.[73] The

screen adjacent to this one depicts the bare torso of a woman seeped in red light

[Figure 2.11]. This same woman is shown again in the next screen, though in this

one, it is her face that stares out directly at the viewer. All of these images are

transitory, and as quickly as one grasps them, they fade away and move on to the

next sequence.

The over-all effect is a mash up of colorful popular depictions of Hindu

gods, borrowed from Indian popular culture, with a woman's body in segments:

her torso, her face, her eyes, a close up of her teeth as she opens her mouth in a

silent screen, and then back to total darkness. From the darkness of all the

screens, slowly, a young girl appears in the far left, again forcing the viewer to

turn toward the light. In the middle of her forehead is a Bindi dot, which grows in

size and mutates into a Coca-Cola symbol [Figure 2.12]. Then back to darkness.

Next the viewer hears a whirring, and all five screens depict historical footage of

[72] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India,* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.
[73] Maschula Robinson, "Nalini Malani: In the Shadow of Partition," 41.

a women spinning thread [Figure 2.13].[74] Malani describes this footage in her

introduction to the exhibition as women "spinning the nation into existence."[75]

Memory is revealed as part historical document with the photographs of the

women spinning, a dead Gandhi being marched through the streets in India, and

part cultural ethos produced by Bollywood and pop culture. Memory, in this

installation, thus stands on divisive ground.

  This play of memory is a visual tactic that Malani adopts into order to

respond to a central question that Das poses in her essay. Das asks: "did forms of

mourning find a place in the re-creation of the world in, for instance, the

discursive formations of post-Independence India?" This brings into focus the

most pervasive aspect of trauma, as well as the modes in which it is transcribed

into history by way of collective memory. Malani demands much of memory,

both in its presentation, as well as that of the viewer; it is impossible to recall

everything that is presented in lightning fast transitions and the excessive layering

of fabrication, historical document, myth, and popular culture. What results when

the viewer leaves the installation is the play of her own memory on what just

happened. A selective editing must take place to digest the multiplicity of rapid-

fire sequences in Malani's work, one must choose what to look at, as much as one

must select what to remember from the installation. Das evokes a similar

experience in her essay:

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[74] For more on the role of women, spinning, and Gandhi see: Rebecca Brown, *Gandhi's Spinning Wheel and the Making of India, (*New York: Routledge Studies in South Asian History, 2010)

[75] Malani Nalini, Description to the Video Installation: *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,* Web. Accessed: 09-30-2016.

But from the present position in which I write, one appears as the distant shore on which events of violence, brutal rape and abduction of women, and painful inscriptions of nationalist slogans on the bodies of women made sudden appearances. One is never certain whether the distance of these images is an optical illusion, for this is always the temptation, as in family and nationalist driven narratives, to cast away these images from the shore of everyday experience to some distant unseen horizon… At the very least these scenes of violence constitute the (perhaps metaphysical) threshold within which the scenes of ordinary life are lived.[76]

This quote could easily be a description of Malani's installations themselves, which conflate everyday scenes with historical archival footage, cultural ethos, and indexes of religious violence. This quote also gets to the core of how rape is remembered, both in cultural and trans-generational memory, and also for the survivors of rape themselves. In Malani's work, her language is that of women's bodies, conflating Das's discussion of the transactions of body and language in which grief is performance through (and on) the woman's body.

Thus, returning to Malani's excessive presentation of the female body as nation, the female body as land, the female body as somatic text, and ultimately, the female body as site of violence, the paradox that these excessive mimetic reproductions of the female body reveal is a strategy for recuperation, of returning the female body back to the woman, and as such, returning her agency and subjecthood. In her installations, Malani imagines a female subject beyond the dictates of national boundaries and nationalist rhetoric that confines and defines both the woman's body and her proper place in society. Malani pronounces this liminal and excessive space of womanhood in order to suggest that within this excessive space is the potential for recuperation of subjecthood. If the woman is unknowable, objectified and personified as nation, land, and site of violent

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[76] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 68.

enactment of the two, returning the subjecthood to the woman's body positions a powerful message of corporeal feminism that reclaims the site of the body as powerful precisely because of its excessive, or marginalized, state. If it is unknowable to the phallocentric order, it represents the ultimate threat to it.

Nalini Malani's works situate the subaltern woman's experience as beyond stable categories to which she is normally confined by both the imperial as well as patriarchal gaze. In the essay, "Who Claims Alterity," Gayatri Spivak contends that the postcolonial intellectual must address and challenge the current global postcolonial context through the modes in which it is coded through the lens of gender and colonialism. The female in this decolonized space is doubly displayed by it, and thus becomes the "proper carrier of a critique of pure class analysis."[77] Malani utilizes the position of the doubly displaced subaltern woman to critique not only class, but also the patriarchy upon which class ultimately rests. This subversion of the subaltern woman's double displacement is performed through an engagement with mimicry that embraces the identity of woman as beyond patriarchal meaning. As Ella Shohat makes clear, any feminist critique within a postcolonial context, must "surpass homogenizing conceptualizations that posit "nation" as well as "area" and "region" as coherent spaces of inquiry."[78] This need to surpass, or move beyond, situates the experience of woman in an excessive state beyond the dictates governed by paternalistic gestures of nation formation.

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[77] Gayatri Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" 60.
[78] Ella Shohat, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age,* (Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Art & MIT Press, 1998), 47.

Irigaray delineates this potential for agency within the objectified position of the woman through mimicry (which Irigaray describes as having been "historically assigned to the feminine"), and that through mimicry the destruction of the phallocentric order is made possible. Irigaray states, "to play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it."[79] While Irigaray has been criticized as being essentialist, I argue that her writing does not point to a stable definition of womanhood (which is basis for essentialism), but rather, opens up the discourse to allow a consideration of woman as subject, rather than object. In the same way, Malani resists the reduction of the definition of woman into an essentializing trap by portraying an excess of determinations, all of which are unstable, and ultimately, refuted by the presentation of trauma as belonging to the body.

However, in her installations, Malani transforms the shame endured by these women into a valorization of the strength of women. Her women are not shameful, but rather vengeful, as the audio quotations make clear, and their power is restored through a reclamation of their bodies. Malani restores the right to mourn within the body of the woman through the evocation of quotes from female protagonists, and layered visual realities that merge performance with imagined animations. Throughout the video sequence and installation of *In Search of Vanished Blood,* the woman's body is presented as multiple, incapable of being pinned down by a singular image, or by external attempts at charted exploitation

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[79] Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," *This Sex Which Is Not One,* 76.

and objectification in the hands of either the Western imperial project, or the internal project of Indian nationalism.[80] Instead, the woman's body is a space for mourning and expression, of internal angst projected outward, countering the external designations that has historically charted the body of the woman.

In another installation site of *In Search of Vanished Blood* in 2014 at the Vadhera Art Gallery in New Delhi, the video sequence that projects across one large gallery wall is the same projection from the four-channel video projection from the Documenta 13 installation. Rather than cylinders, Malani created a single channel video montage, projected over an entire wall of a large gallery space. Recent newspapers from the *India Times* were loosely hung on the rest of the three walls of the space, fluttering as people walk past, or as the door opens and shuts [Figure 2.14]. Material yet ephemeral, the newspapers are transient; they will yellow and are already outdated, from a recent past, and in this way, the newspapers themselves are already a form of cultural memory. The effect of the newspapers implicates the present with the violent reverberations from India's history of the abduction and rape of thousands of women, which went largely unremarked upon until recently. The addition of the newspapers to this particular installation of *In Search of Vanished Blood* make clear that the present is not exempt from the violence of the past.

The single channel video is more unified than the four-channel Documenta installation, and as a result, the filmed performance of the South Asian woman as she turns her back to us, cowers and crouches to hide from the search lights, and

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[80] For more information on the figure of Mother India as embodied in the Map of India see: Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Visualizing India's Geo-Body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes," *Body.city: siting contemporary culture in India,* 218-243.

wraps her head completely in white cloth is more immediate and readable

[Figures 2.15-2.16]. The same quotations from the character of Ophelia in Heiner

Muller's play "Hamletmachine," and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" punctuate

the visual sequence. In this version, the video begins with a projection of a world

map with the Americas at its center. Gradually, looming clouds appear and float

across the map, and from this the nude back of a woman with dark hair swept

across her shoulders comes into focus. The viewer is presented with an ephemeral

image, lasting only a few seconds, of a woman whose skin becomes the map.

The world map marks the South Asian woman's body with geography, at

the small of her back is the tip of South America, while Canada disappears into

her dark hair [Figure 2.17]. The embodied map alludes to the long history of

describing land as woman, to be charted, conquered, and exploited. Here, the

woman is the world, her skin tattooed and marked by geography. The map is not a

map of India, but rather a map of North America. This intentional elision

references the history of imperialism and colonialism, in which the West

projected meaning onto the geographical terrain of South Asia, and onto the body

of the South Asian woman as carrier of cultural identity. The gender dynamics

that were crucial to the imperial subjugation and control of the Indian

subcontinent maintain their metaphorical constructs that rest on the body of the

woman, even within the postcolonial project of Indian Independence.

Malani's map is projected onto an actual body of a woman. The map is

merely a projection onto the surface of the body, where it remains, unable to

actually chart the interior of the woman, as thus evades successfully charting her

identity. In this context, Malani's image of the woman's body as mapped by North America, or as North America mapped by the South Asian female body, can be understood as an attempt to recover women's role within the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Despite the woman's exploitation by the discourse of these regimes, Malani's woman is not reduced to her geographical determinations: as soon as this image appears, the woman's body is marked over by other realities, other masculine determinations of female sexuality, such as the projection of turbaned-men holding machine guns, who ultimately are completely effaced by dripping red ink before the sequence moves on. The effect of this is to rupture stable designations of women's bodies that are produced by the patriarchal logic of colonialism.

Malani's works are a reclamation of the corporeal space of mourning. By presenting the metaphor of woman-as-map as an exterior projection that cannot go beyond the surface of the body, they suggest that the interiority of the woman remains unknowable and uncharted. Malani also disrupts the objectified representation of woman-as-nation through her strategy of excess, as soon as one projection over the woman's body appears, it is effaced by yet another. Within Malani's installations, in particular, *In Search of Vanished Blood,* the excessive layering of various signifiers that women's bodies inhabit within the logic of nationalism overwhelms the possibility of a singular reading of any.

The Rejection of Linear Time: Re-mythologizing Cassandra, Draupadi, and Ophelia

The previous sections outlined Malani's adaptation of theoretical enterprises that reveal the repressive conditions under which women's bodies are re-produced as carriers of nationhood, land, and cultural belonging, and how these reproductions instill physical violence against women themselves. This section will address how Malani adopts a feminist language drawn from writers such as Christa Wolf, in order to infuse her installations with an excess that pushes a reading of her works beyond linearity and history. Through using fiction and imagination, Malani "jams" the theoretical machinery of history that inscribes women's bodies as carriers of meaning, and ultimately, re-instills agency and subjecthood to women's bodies through a recorporealization through multi-media and excessive referentiality that must be understood as a feministic tactic of disrupting the phallocentric order *from* the margins to which women have been shuttled. From this place of excess, a powerful potential for asserting a new language and mode of expression that is not purely phallocentric is produced.

Geeta Kapur, in a lecture given at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2007, remarks that Malani's "iconographical aim is to remythologize representation." In this quote, Kapur refers to Malani's choice of texts with which she crafts her female protagonists.[81] In this section, I will discuss two specific mythological figures with which Malani "remythologizes" the representation of

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[81] Geeta Kapur, "The Play of Self and Gender: Through the Lens of Women Artists in India," Lecture given at the Irish Museum of Art, Dublin in July 2007, Transcript of the lecture: Asia Art Archive, Web, http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/3011 (Accessed May 2016).

woman: Cassandra, from the Greek myths, and Draupadi, from the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. In her decision to represent these figures across many of her installations, including *In Search of Vanished Blood,* Malani, in Kapur's words "embodies dispossession" in order to "allegorize the nation's betrayal of its citizenry, that index the level of loss entailed by the populace in relation to the state… Malani tries to materialize through image what Veena Das calls *social suffering.*"[82]

Through her clipped audio from the stories of Mahasweta Devi, Christa Wolf's eponymous evocation of Cassandra, and Heiner Wolf's re-characterization of Shakespeare's Ophelia in his 1977 play *Hamletmachine,* Malani blends Cassandra with Draupadi with Ophelia, crisscrossing across genre, nationality, and time. She does this in order to bring these characters into a conversation with the present. Malani states of this strategic excess in her installations that it produces; an "ambiguity and tension between the notion of an open mythic tradition and its place within contemporary life."[83]

In Christa Wolf's 1983 Cassandra project, she undertakes a radical feminist critique of literature and society through her re-visioning of the myth of Cassandra. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon,* Cassandra daughter of Priam, the King of Troy, who is simultaneously blessed and cursed with the gift of prophecy: she foresees the fall of Troy, but no one believes her.[84] In the four essays that accompany the novel that are told through the eyes of Cassandra, Wolf delineates

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[82] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 64.

[83] Ann Huber-Sigwart, "Interview with Nalini Malani: Political Metaphors," *n. paradoxa,* Vol. 13, (2003), 67.

[84] For more on this see: Paula Debnar, "The Sexual Status of Aeschylus' Cassandra," *Classical Philology,* vol. 15, no.2 (April 2010), 129-145.

a feminist aesthetic of resistance. Accompanying the first person account of Cassandra's life are first-person travel essays in which Wolf writes about her experience of traveling through Greece. Anna Kuhn states that through this tightly interwoven form of literature and biography the novel "effectively erases the generic boundaries between fiction and essay."[85] This erasure between fiction and biography, between the imagined and the historical, is a strategy that Malani evokes throughout her decade-long engagement with the myth of Cassandra, such as her 2001 installation *Stories Retold,* her 2008 installation *Listening to the Shades,* her 2009 30-panel painting *Cassandra,* and in her 2012 *In Search of Vanished Blood.* Across the mediums of painting, documentary film, performance, and video Malani does not merely cite literature, but rather visualizes its textual aims as part of her strategic excess—going beyond citationality and into visual evocation of both narrative strategy as well as narrative content. In her remythologizing of representation, Malani adapts Wolf's strategy of blending history, myth, and biography through both her oral citations from literature as well as in the form of the installation itself.

Anna Kuhn notes that Wolf's *Cassandra* explores "how the patriarchy's systematic exclusion of women has helped shape our present catastrophic world political situation."[86] This belief is given visual immediacy throughout Malani's corpus where the figure or voice of Cassandra appears. Delving into the ancient world created by Wolf in *Cassandra* lends important contextualization to

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[85] Anna Kuhn, "Cassandra: Myth, Matriarchy, and the Canon," *Christa Wolf's Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism,* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, January, 2009), 183.
[86] Ibid, 178.

Malani's evocation of both Wolf's characterization of Cassandra as well as the formal quality of Wolf's writings. Malani states that one scene in particular from Wolf's *Cassandra* completely astounded her. Malani describes Wolf's description of Cassandra's incarceration by her father in a basket, stating Cassandra "only sees the circle of sky through the basket. Her limbs are in a fetal position. She is going to be taken to the home of Agamemnon and she will finally be killed. She knows it all. She has no control anymore because somebody else has the control. In this passage, Cassandra's body is rendered inert and useless—in Malani's words, "she becomes a mutant."[87] If the nation is coded on the woman's body, then the nation here is itself defunct and useless.

In the autobiographical essay accompanying the Cassandra story, titled "Travel Report," Wolf offers up a nonlinear account of time, constantly oscillating between past and present. Judith Ryan notes that this mode of narration in "Travel Report," highlights the "constructed nature of chronological history and its problematic relation to the nonlinear character of myth."[88] This literary analysis of Wolf's essay provides another avenue into understanding Malani's envisioning of Wolf's writing: she does so not only through the content of the character of Cassandra, but also through the form of her installation pieces where video loops insist on no end or beginning, and thereby refuse a linear projection of time or history. The continuous narrative of Malani's work can only ever be a visual reality, rather than the textual one Wolf crafts, yet the reading of the two forms alongside each other provide a rich contextualization of a feminist future.

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[87] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Interview with Nalini Malani," 29-30.

[88] Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory, (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 113.

Like Wolf, Malani's use of myth is a rebuttal against linear time, or perhaps

against the codification of past events into official histories that leave out the

accounts of those within the margins, such as the subaltern woman. Malani brings

Wolf's feminist agenda into an Indian context in order to highlight the in-between

or normative histories from ancient Greece, Wolf's East Germany, and Malani's

India.

In "Travel Report," Wolf steers away from an account of her trip to

Greece, delving into the imaginative potential of myth. She writes:

> Cassandra. I saw her all at once. She the captive, took me captive; herself
> made an object by others, she took possession of me… Three thousand
> years—melted away. So the gift of prophecy, conferred on her by the god,
> stood the test of time. Only his verdict that no one would believe her had
> passed away. I found her believable in another sense: It seemed to me that
> she was the only person in the play who knew herself.[89]

In this quote, Wolf returns the agency that is denied Cassandra through her

capture and death, reversing the relationship of the captor and the captive. The

writer does not write her character, but rather it is the character that writes herself

in this passage. Time dissolves to reveal a figure who "knew herself." This has

profound resonance within Malani's installations, whose material manifestations

seek to re-embody the site of trauma, and to re-claim the body of the woman that

has been objectified and made a vehicle for masculine determinations of nation

and culture. Yet, as in Wolf's account of Cassandra, the female figure ultimately

"knows herself."

In *In Search of Vanished Blood,* near the end of the video sequence, the

viewer hears: "This is Cassandra speaking." Malani gives Wolf's Cassandra an

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[89] Christa Wolf, "Travel Report," *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays,* 2nd Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Publishing, May, 1988), 144-145.

auditory voice here, an understanding of which is enriched by a literary analysis

of Wolf's characterization. Anna Kuhn observes that Wolf adamantly asserts

Cassandra's individualism in which she rejects the demands of the community.

Kuhn states that Cassandra's voice is "the voice of dissent… In essence

Cassandra rejects the male moral code based on duty and justice as unviable."[90]

This runs parallel to the woman rejecting the use of her body as a site for

contested meanings.

Malani also pulls from Indian writer Mahasweta Devi's short story

"Draupadi." Her visual evocation of the main character Draupadi as well as the

political resistance that runs throughout the short story provides a challenge to

both western feminism's glance towards the third world illiterate woman, who is

so often viewed as without agency or subjecthood. The short story is based on the

story of Draupadi in Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata,* who is the only known

example of polyandry—she is married to five brothers. As Spivak remarks in the

introduction, Draupadi's "legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in

singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory. She

provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men," when one of her

husbands loses her to the enemy chief in a game dice.[91] In the *Mahabharata,* the

enemy chief attempts to disrobe Draupadi, but she screams out for Krishna to help

her, and as the enemy chief pulls at Draupaid's sari, it becomes endless: he cannot

disrobe her. Mahasweta Devi's short story is not a refutation of the epic, but

rather embodies aspects of her mythological namesake but also moves *beyond*

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[90] Anna Kuhn, "Cassandra: Myth, Matriarchy, and the Canon," 203.
[91] Gayatri Spivak, forward to *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi, trans by Gayatri Spivak, (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 1997), 11.

them, creating a character which Spivak terms to be "at once a palimpsest and a contradiction."[92]

"Draupadi," takes place in Bengal in 1971. Devi's story is told through mixed first-person narratives, jumping between the perspective of Draupadi and the police officer Senanayak, who has been hunting her for years. The date is significant, and the historical context of the story needs elaboration. After Indian independence in 1946 during Partition, the area that is now called Bangladesh was given to Pakistan, despite a thousand mile separation. In 1967, a Marxist driven peasant rebellion took place in the northern part of West Bengal, igniting similar rebellions across the region. In 1970, East and West Pakistan went to war with each other. In 1971, India deployed forces and wiped out the peasant rebellions throughout the region. At this historical juncture, we arrive at Draupadi's story: she is an illiterate peasant deeply involved in the rebellion and is fiercely hunted by the police. She is a messenger between rebel factions, and thus is a crucial figure in the rebellion. In this sense, her eventual capture and gang rape is the beginning of the end to these rebellions, without their female heroine, they are lost. Despite the rebel Draupadi's tragic ending at the hands of the government, she is a woman who yields the horrific power to undermine the constraints of patriarchy and nationalism. The final lines of the story end with a *bodily* threat to patriarchy.

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[92] Ibid, 12. Spivak also notes "I can be forgiven if I find in this an allegory of the woman's struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment," 14.

While the original mythic character of Draupadi cannot be disrobed, Devi's Draupadi refuses to be re-clothed after her violent gang rape. The naked Draupadi refuses to dress, and hurls her breasts at her captor—the text reads:

> She looks around and chooses the front of Senanyak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *kounter* me—come on, *kounter* me-- ?
>
> Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target,* terribly afraid.[93]

The idea of instilling fear in the captors is where Devi's Draupadi recuperates her lost power, and the empowerment that occurs is because of Draupadi's insistence on revealing her body not as a site of violence, but rather, as her own. Draupadi yields her body as a weapon, and in so doing, becomes an active subject. Malani's evocation of Draupadi occurs visually as well as acoustically in both versions of *In Search of Vanished Blood.* In the middle of the video loop, searchlights roam the room, randomly lighting up the rotating cylinders. The interval between the search lights quicken into a strobe—and the viewer sees intermittent flashes of a woman's face.

Following this segment in *In Search of Vanished Blood,* the film sequences shifts here—the film shows an image of blood-orange sunset, telling us that we are at the point where Draupadi awakes in the prison camp to learn she has been raped. Malani directly quotes Spivak's translation of the story, and a woman's voice begins to speak:

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[93] Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi," *Breast Stories,* 37.

> It took an hour to get her to *camp*…Something sticky under her ass and waist… Incredible thirst… She senses that her vagina is bleeding… She sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed she's made up right.

Haunting children's voices punctuate the woman's narrative, and the screen shows a red-ink drawing of turbaned men holding machine guns. The screen fades away, and Draupadi's story is replaced by that of Cassandra and Heiner Muller's rendition of Ophelia's.

Malani abbreviates the original passage, leaving out the specifics of place. However, one passage from the story remains pertinent despite its aural absence in Malani's adaptation, it is evoked visually. While the first-time viewer is unaware of Devi's story, this does not matter because the effect is the same: we hear orders being given for a rape, and then Draupadi's own realization as she awakes in the camp. In the story, after Draupadi is apprehended and gang raped, the story describes her turn to consciousness:

> [t]hen a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads [evoked through a hammering and machine-like *clanking* in the installation] shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst… She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?

In this quote, time transforms and folds in on itself, the rigorous timing that is assigned to describe the rest of the story have now fallen away; time is no longer measurable, but rather expands infinitely in Dopdi's ravaged mind. In Malani's installation, one hears the audio segment out of context and out of time, repeating endlessly every ten minutes, the viewer hears this horrific account amidst a

stacatto of machinery, doleful music, and children's wails. The video goes black

and flashes back with the strength and quickness of a strobe light. This functions

as a mode of temporal displacement for the viewer in Malani's evocation and

transformation of this passage from Devi's story.

In the final sequence of *In Search of Lost Blood,* the viewer hears the

following:

> This is Cassandra speaking. In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of
> torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims, I eject all
> the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into lethal poison.

This phrase is the beginning of the final scene of Heiner Muller's 1977 play

Hamletmachine, where Ophelia appears on-stage alone, as the stage instructions

describe her character as wrapped in white gauze from top to bottom. Malani

does not evoke only Ophelia and Draupadi in this installation, but also that of

Cassandra. Malani changes the name from "Electra" to "Cassandra" in *In Search*

of Vanished Blood in order to synthesize her literary referents, and to evoke

through oration the figure of Cassandra. Despite this small change, Malani

remains truthful to Heiner Muller's text and stage directions. To understand the

context of this quote, one must go back to Muller's text itself, and his

characterization of Ophelia. Brian Walsh states that Ophelia operates within

Hamletmachine to "distill a fundamental point of *Hamlet,* reminding us of the

play's investment in confronting the male horror at female sexuality. And yet,

Muller also fundamentally reinvents Ophelia's characterization by giving her a

voice that speaks back to everyone who is preoccupied with her body and her

potential desire."[94] Again, the idea of reclaiming the female body not as a site for external meaning and violence, but rather as a site for self-knowledge is reiterated in Malani's citation of this scene.

Muller's stage directions indicate that as Ophelia speaks, she also undertakes the damage and destruction of her monologue, again returning agency and action to Ophelia's *body.* In her opening monologue in Muller's play, Ophelia announces: "Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I'm alone with my breasts my thighs my womb." Her words are matched with bodily actions, as she states: "I smash the tools of my captivity, the chair the table the bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my home." It is Ophelia *herself* who reduces her world to just her corporeal body, the same body fought over and condemned by Hamlet. Her frustration over her (implied) rape in *Hamletmachine,* as well as the deaths of her family members, are finally directed outward in her final speech. The rest of the speech, which Malani does not include, follows:

> I choke between my thighs the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb. Down with the happiness of submission. Long live hate and contempt, rebellion and death. When she walks through your bedrooms carrying butcher knives, you'll know the truth.[95]

Malani deliberately edited out these final lines, which run in contradiction to Ophelia's physical state, wrapped head to toe in bandages in a wheel chair, she is immobile—all she has left are her words which cannot possibly be matched with bodily action. Malani dismisses the last part of the play where bodily action and

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[94] Brain Walsh, "The Rest is Violence: Muller Contra Shakespeare," 31.
[95] Heiner Müller, "Hamletmachine," trans by Carl Weber, *Contemporary German Plays,* ed by Margaret Herzfeld-Sander, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2001), 303.

Ophelia's speech cannot be reconciled in order to emphasis her own conceptualization of corporeal excess—the excess that defies Ophelia's body as a commodity and insists on her corporeal being as mode of agency.

Like Luce Irigaray, Malani evokes Greek myths throughout her works in order to problematize cultural hegemony, as well as our conceptions of the feminine other. In Gayatri Spivak's foreword to *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and 'The Greeks',* she connects Greek myth to the field of psychoanalysis, and that in Irigaray's linking of myth to psychoanalysis, Irigaray offers something new that moves beyond Freudian diagnosis and into a psychoanalysis that taps into "the subject to restore social agency as far as possible." Spivak notes that despite Irigaray's positioning as a European, herself and Irigaray "exist in the same struggle."[96] Naming this struggle as one of naming woman and instilling in her "social agency" aligns Nalini Malani with both Gayatri Spivak as well as Luce Irigaray. Malani's works share Irigaray's occupation with corporeality, in particular a corporeality that stands in excess of cultural norms, prescriptions and conscriptions. The corporeality of a woman's body has been used to separate her from masculine rationalist knowledge, and for this reason, is a tool for both Irigaray and Malani to develop a definition of woman that exceeds the boundaries of patriarchy and phallocentric logos. In her portrayal of the fragility of memory and history in the face of the violence of nation that is enacted on the body, Malani uses excess to present a possibility for agency and recuperation from trauma in her installations. Using female figures

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[96] Gayatri Spivak, Forward, *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and 'the Greeks,'* ed by Tzelepis, E. & Athanasiou, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), x.

from both Hinduism and Greek mythology, Indian and Western literature, Malani presents a viable alternative of female agency.

Art Historical Contexts: Transnational Feminisms

Nalini Malani's practice pushes a conceptualization of what a visual art practice constitutes through her interdisciplinary scope that expands beyond art historical canons and into the disciplinary realms of history, comparative literature, and cultural studies. Embedded within this is a strident feminist critique that traverses disciplines and temporality. As such, her practice represents a dilemma for how global art histories are written as well as periodized. Okwui Enwezor writes that, "contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also—and in a more critical sense—from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchanges as a consequence of globalization after imperialism." Enwezor defines this refracted nature of contemporary art as a "postcolonial constellation," that, in order to properly theorize, must be brought into the context of "a set of arrangements of deeply entangled relations and forces that are founded by the discourses of power." [97] To enact this project is to deeply problematize the historical conceit of Western Modernism itself, and with it the legacy of the Western historical avant-garde.

This chapter's approach is deeply engaged with the politics of identity, a project which has been dismissed by postmodern critiques as self-contradictory in

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[97] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Antinomies of art and culture: modernity, postmodernity, contemporaneity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 208.

its "attempt to conflate the universal and the particular, self and other, into the social site of artistic production."[98] Identity politics, in which feminist concerns are but a subset, has been espoused as regressive.[99] Arguing in line with Okwui Enwezor and Ella Shohat, I argue the reductive term of "identity politics" functions as a mode of dismissing and minimizing the very real concerns and issues taken up by both feminism and postcolonialism. As Mallika Dutt describes in her essay for *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age,* that the focus on "identity politics" and "diversity" has led to several problems, quoting Suzanne Pharr's essay "Multi-Issue Politics," Dutt states, "identity politics 'suffers from failing to acknowledge that the same multiplicity of oppressions, a similar imbalance of power, exists within identity groups as within the larger society.'"[100] Moving beyond the western designations of both

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[98] Ibid, 225.

[99] My understanding of how to approach the very concept of across cultures comes from Ella Shohat's *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age,* 1. Shohat states the book itself "aims at a feminist reimaging of community affiliations and cultural practices, articulated not in isolation but rather in relations. It does not exalt one political concern (feminism) over another (multiculturalism); rather, it highlights and reinforces the mutual embeddedness of the two. By tying the two terms together, the volume refuses the hierarchy of class, racial, national, sexual, and gender-based struggles, highlighting instead the "political intersectionality" (Kimberlee Crenshaw). My critique of the term "identity politics" and how it is reductive comes from Okwui Enwezor's critiques the reduction of the importance of identity discourse to mere "identity politics" in: "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," 207-234. Timothy B. Powell also writes regarding the term "identity politics" within academia that, as discourse expands and dismantles the "disturbingly resilient inner workings of racism, homophobia, ableism, sexism, and imperialism… We will have failed, however, if this initial phase does nothing more than to create a series of academic Bantustans walled off the by barbed wire of identity politics." In "All Colors Flow into Rainbows and Nooses: The Struggle to Define Multiculturalism," *Cultural Critique,* vol. 55, (Fall 2003), 152-181.

[100]Suzanne Pharr, "Multi-Issue Politics," *Transofrmations,* vol. 9, no. 1 (January/February, 1994), 2, quoated in: Dutt, Malikka, "Reclaiming a Human Rights Culture: Feminism of Difference and Alliance," *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, 234.

modernism and postmodernism, identity becomes a central aspect of

contemporary art production beyond the west, as well as in works by women.

This reality suggests a need for theoretical frameworks that, as Shohat states,

strives to "transcend the narrow and often debilitating confines of identity politics

in favor of a multicultural feminist politics of identification, affiliation, and social

transformation."[101] It is this model employed in this chapter that enables a rich

engagement with the specifics of artistic production, historical context, and, most

importantly, the content of the artworks themselves. This allows the works of

artists such as Nalini Malani, whose project takes aim at the social manifestations

of nationalist identity from a distinctly feminist position to be understood.

This chapter presents a methodology of excess as describing both artistic

praxis as well as a theoretical basis that offers a way of understanding and

contextualizing both the form and content of contemporary artistic practice

concerned with discourses and realities exposed by both feminism and

postcolonialism. Presenting the rich cross-cultural influences that form the

backbone of Malani's practice, this chapter also argues for the importance of

situating feminist praxis not just locally or globally, but rather transnationally.

This transnational model reflects that of an archipelago of islands, each island, or

feminist site, remains particular and unique while simultaneously connected

through shared concerns (in this metaphor, the ocean) to other feminist sites.

Geeta Kapur provides a similar theorization for nonwestern artistic praxis, as well

as a rich contextualization of Malani's practice that presents it as important to the

global art project. Rather than viewing Indian art in the same temporality as

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[101] Ella Shohat, "Introduction," *Talking Visions,* 9.

Western art historical discourses, Kapur challenges this and suggests that instead

Indian art discourses should see themselves as "crisscrossing the Western

mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that

restructures the international. Similarly before the West periodizes the

postmodern entirely, in its own terms, and in that process also characterizes it, we

have to introduce from the vantage point of the periphery the transgressions of

uncategorized practice."[102] Malani's practice does precisely this, crisscrossing

across Western and Indian art and writing in order to produce works that points

towards the possibility of transnational feminism in art.

Geeta Kapur astutely explicates the problem with a postmodernist lens on

both postcolonial and feminist art:

> The political discourse of the postmodern promises to undo the totalizing
> vision of the historical universe and with that the institutionalizing of the
> modern. But it subsumes nevertheless the politics of actual difference
> based on class, race, gender into a meta discourse of the one world order
> rivaling, despite its protestations to the contrary, any global hegemony
> sought of established by the modern. This post-modernism supersedes the
> kinds of cultural praxis historically possible in different parts of the world
> to such an extent that one might say that *our* cultures in the third world do
> not at the moment stand a chance. Thus the cultural manifestations of the
> postmodern may be something of a false gloss on the hard facts of the
> political economy to which these are related.[103]

Kapur illustrates the limits of postmodern discourses, as well as the problematic

application of them onto non-Western art histories. The postmodern relegates art

whose content addresses issues of actual difference into a subcategory that is

ultimately limited and not in line with the assumed universality of

postmodernism.

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[102] Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism,* 297.
[103] Ibid, 320.

Indian Art Historian Parul Dave-Mukherji continues the formulations of Geeta Kapur, continuing to stress the need to move beyond binary oppositions such as Western and non-Western disciplines. As Dave-Mukherji notes,

> the critique of Eurocentrism built into art history in the West lapses into a facile exercise if it is not also accompanied by a parallel critique of cultural nationalism, which inflects art history in India through its essentializing of 'Indian' identity….The democratization of art history to which the cultural studies turn has led puts on the map many new actors who remained in the shadow of the national modern. How will the insertion of women artists… disturb the bigger picture and shake the very ground on which stands the art historian? The task of the art historian is not to celebrate the denser peopling of the art map but to rethink the coupling of the visible and the *sayable* so as to register the new postcolonial redistribution of the sensible.[104]

In these terms, the necessity of identity politics within contemporary art history are not only still relevant, but deeply important to the decolonial project of re-mapping art history.

Nalini Malani's installations enact an experiential subjectivity for the viewer that must be understood within its specific contexts of the local histories of India as well as within the broader currents of the global contemporary. Harriet Hawkins, utilizing Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray's feminist conceptualizations of vision and subjectivity to describe immersive installation art as "in excess of the optical" in that it brings "the consciousness of one's corporeality to the forefront of the art experience."[105] The use of the body within Malani's installations enable the viewer to experience an ethical encounter with the representation of the subaltern woman. This ethical encounter is necessarily an

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[104] Parul Dave-Mukherji, "Art History and Its Discontents in Global Times," *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn,* Jill H Casid and Aruna D'Souza, eds, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 104.
[105] Harriet Hawkins, 'The Argument of the Eye'?" 329, 335.

ontological engagement that does not seek to know the subaltern woman (which is an epistemological project), but rather, this engagement fosters an experience with the other.[106] As such, Malani's practice illuminates what a transnational feminist art can be, and how its viewer engagement produces a socio-cultural awareness that is as important within the local histories of India as it is within the broader histories of global art, its transmission, and its viewership.

Ella Shohat reminds one that, "multicultural feminism navigates between the local and the global without romanticizing either transnational globalism as a form of universalism or localism as salvation through the indigenous 'particular'." Moving between German texts, Indian texts, filmed performances, digital animations, and loosely painted watercolor figures within the darkened space of the installation, Malani's practice is difficult to theorize. This difficulty, however, presents a tremendous possibility for art history and visual culture to become what Batchen describes as "responsible to our permeable, post-colonial, global present."[107]

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[106] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation*

[107] Geoffrey Batchen, "Guest Editorial: Local Modernisms," 7.

Chapter Two

Temporal Excess: Roshini Kempadoo's installation *Amendments* (2007)

I am now then, now there, sometimes simultaneously

> *Sounds, those are sounds, from another place. I have heard them before or*

am hearing them now, or will hear them later[108]

In Roshini Kempadoo's installation *Amendments* (2007), the viewer enters a dark room and encounters a screen projection. Placed before it is a console in the form of a domino game. The viewer is invited to play a game of dominoes, and when the pieces are moved around the console, disparate narrative sequences of both sound and projected images are triggered. The order of narrative sequences is dictated by the viewer's placement of dominoes onto a console. The involvement of the viewer draws her into the temporal and spatial reality evoked in the audio, which never maintain a linear form or a fully coherent narrative. Kempadoo's involvement of the viewer in *Amendments* implicates her in the process of remembering that which has been forgotten. In this work, it is the fissures of the colonial archive to document and portray the lives of the black Caribbean woman. As Merisa Fuentes remarks, the historical project of telling a linear narrative based on an abundance of verifiable documents and facts is "untenable" when examining the Caribbean subaltern woman.[109]

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[108]Nalo Hopkinson, *The Salt Roads,* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2003), 42.
[109] Emily Owens, "Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive: An Interview with Marisa Fuentes," Black Perspectives, Published by AAIHS.

Kempadoo's practice can be seen then as a way of contesting the untenable project of historical narratives around Caribbean women through an engagement with imagined voices of the Caribbean woman. The installation's sequences portray a nonlinear story of a fictional protagonist named Venezuela. She functions as the connecting line between the narrative sequences, joining the disparate temporalities and geographies evoked in the installation through both image and sound. Just as the oral narratives jump between times and geographies, the digital images are translucently layered over one another, merging images of contemporary Caribbean women with photographs of their historical predecessors. Kempadoo describes Venezuela, as an "illusory and mythical woman seen from a number of perspectives by relatives, friends, and others. Her imaginary life-experience encompasses stories that critique and query the predominance of [male] heroes in African and European centered anticolonial narratives."[110] The historical photographs were collected during Kempadoo's research in the National Archives of Trinidad. The combination of the image sequences alongside oral narratives of dub poetry enacts the process of reclamation and remembrance of that which the archive neglects: black women's perspectives and voices.[111]

This chapter positions Kempadoo's practice within the realm of temporal excess, in which her work moves beyond singular temporalities and normative historical designations in order to evoke a distinct feminist aesthetic of the Black

http://www.aaihs.org/enslaved-women-violence-and-the-archive-an-interview-with-marisa-fuentes/
[110] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 182.
[111] Roshini Kempadoo, "Interpolating Screen Bytes: Critical Commentary in Multimedia Artworks." *Journal of Media Practice,* vol 11, no. 1. (2010), 61.

diaspora. Discussing how the archive as well as the photograph are expanded into an imagined reality through an engagement with temporal excess, this chapter will explore how imagination and fiction (as belonging to the realm of excess) create the potential for an ethical encounter with the other (the woman protester, in this case). Utilizing the idea of random sequencing and remix techniques from the Afrofuturist movement and moments of dub poetry to disrupt linearity, Kempadoo catapults her viewer into a fragmented narrative that is both partial as well as imagined.[112]

Dub, a subgenre of reggae music, is defined as a type of remix that "moves forward in a recording while producing disruptive reverberations and loops that disrupt the flow of the original and create new connections." It is a process of fragmenting and remixing what currently exists in order to fashion something new. It is temporal mixing of sounds that makes dub not just a vernacular style, but also an, as Lief Sorensen asserts, an "aesthetic model for conceptualizing the dialectical experience of lived modernities in the Caribbean." This aesthetic and theoretical application of dub allows for a "remixing of history of social and aesthetic modernity to create narratives that point toward alternative futures."[113]

As such, the way in which dub challenges linear conceptualizations of temporality is why it is a central aesthetic practices for Afrofuturist works, which are speculative works that directly concern themselves with the politics of race,

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[112] Sheila Petty, *Racing the Cultural Interface: African Diasporic Identities in the Digital Age, (*Halifax, Canada: ABC Art Books and MSVU Art Gallery: 2004).
[113] Lief Sorensen, "Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson," *African American Review*, vol. 43 issue 2-3, (Summer/Fall 2014), 267.

blackness, and belonging in both the past and the future. Afrofuturism was originally coined by Mark Dery to describe black science fiction writers, presenting the issue of "can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"[114] It is precisely this that Kempadoo takes up through her works, simultaneously pointing to the erasures of black history while also looking forward, to a different future. This interest is further contextualized by Kempadoo's citation of Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* in the sequence titled "Becoming Venezuela" in *Amendments*.

Voice and sound are integral aspects to the installation as well as the viewer's experience of it. The audio enlivens the still-moving images, catapulting meaning beyond mere visuality and into an experiential reality that precisely echoes Ola Abdalkafor's notion that, as Gayatri Spivak states, a truly ethical encounter must take place face to face with the other.[115] In Fred Moten's essay about aurality in Frederic Douglass's narrative that details the horror of Aunt Hestor's beating by her master, Moten argues that Douglass employs music and speech as a mode of disruption and resistance. Moten notes that Aunt Hestor's screams during this violent incident, a "transference of a radically exterior aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional

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[114] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[115] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* 44.

musical form."[116] It is this same aspect of aurality that I argue is employed by Kempadoo in *Amendments* in order to disrupt and challenge the historical, present, and mythical realities of the Black Caribbean woman. It is through sound that the viewer can psychologically engage with the perspective of the Black woman. While the still-moving images place the viewer in time and geography, it is only through the disjointed narratives spoken in as a mode of dub performance, that allows the images themselves to become connected, if only temporarily, to the body and experiences of the Black woman.

Kempadoo's works constitute a reality that is always in excess of itself— in excess of archival documentation and of the dominant narratives that leave blank the experience of the Caribbean woman. Venezuela is not singular; she is simultaneously a female protester as much as she is a mythical woman who does not exist in any particular where or when. This position beyond, in a state of excess from normative and patriarchal accounts of history, is utilized as a material strategy in the installation for engaging with notions of gendered and racial inequality. The participation of the viewer in *Amendments* allow for what Ola Abdalkafor describes as an ethical encounter with the subaltern woman, in which one does not seek to know and quantify her existence, but rather, merely seeks to *listen* to her.[117] What an ethical understanding of this project entails is not the issue of how to represent the subaltern woman, but rather, of how to engage with

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[116] Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hestor's Scream," *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6.
[117] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 44, 162-193.

the specifics of her location and history, which exists in excess of archival documentation. [118]

Kempadoo's engagement with excess problematizes the notion of a stable and factual historical document by expanding it into an imaginative realm of fictionalized personal narratives. As Kempadoo states of the work, it "fills a void" in the colonial archives of Trinidad "of the resounding absences of the plantation workers' history: the absence of their individual, personal, and everyday life… the absence of the slave quarters and indentured burial grounds; the absence of women characters and their stories."[119] The void is also a space of excess, the lost realities exist there beyond archival documentation that can now only be accounted for through imagination. Kempadoo utilizes this position of excess as negative reality into a generative force for reclamation and agency of the subaltern woman.

The potential for an ethical encounter within the interactive installation format is necessarily an ontological project, rather than an epistemological project, which in its replication of Hegelian thought, can only ever continue the legacy of epistemic violence against the figure of the black woman. Michael Monahan argues for an ontology of race, "getting clear about what race is or is not will invite answers not merely to questions about biology and human variation but also about history, political and social relations of power, the nature of individual

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[118] This concept is elaborated in my first chapter of my dissertation, so is only briefly mentioned here.

[119] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 182.

and social identity, and the constitution of meaning within a social world."[120] In a similar vein, Michelle Stephens notes in her theorization of Sylvia Wynter's writing on the black body that:

> in the premodern epistemological universe, the skin was seen as permeable and malleable to the point of being horrific. Europeans applied these different physical standards and meanings of difference to themselves. The differences between female and male anatomies, for example, did not mark a clear, gendered differentiation between the sexes. Rather, the female gender was seen as merely the male body's grotesque inversion.

In this example, Stephens succinctly describes the problematic of European thought: it does not allow for difference, but rather subsumes, or as Stephens phrases it, creates "an invaginated understanding of the body."[121] This collapses difference into a solitary model of the same. This epistemic violence applies as well to the concept of race, thus ensuring that the black woman will only ever be a mode of subject formation that keeps her as its object. An ontological understanding, rather, does not collapse difference, but rather, takes it as its subject. Sylvia Wynter states, "new objects of knowledge… [that she's presenting here] call equally for the construction of new conceptual tools and theoretical foundations, which this time go beyond *not* only the hegemonic paradigms of literary criticism, but also beyond the grounding analogic of the episteme." In this call for new conceptual tools, Wynter stresses the importance of ontology: "for our proposed new objects of knowledge to be receivable, we accordingly need to go beyond the ontology of the figure of man and the empowering *normalizing*

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[120] Michael J Monahan, "Contingency, History, and Ontology: On Abolishing Whiteness," *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity, (*New York: Fordham University, 2011), 19.

[121] Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer, (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 12-13.

discourses with which this "figure," as the projected model/criterion of being of the globally dominant Western-European bourgeoisie, is still enchantedly constituted."[122] This is where an ethical encounter that can only be ontologically theorized comes to the forefront, it is this that I argue, drives Kempadoo's installation works.

Two of the longer narrative sequences from *Amendments* will be discussed here, both of which center around the figure of Venezuela. The first sequence discussed is titled "Tragrete Road," after the road in Port of Spain, Trinidad that was the host to numerous protest marches throughout the 1930s. Guyanese dub poet and performer Marc Matthews narrates this sequence. His reading gives a historically based, yet fictionalized account of Venezuela, who, in this sequence, is a female anti-colonial protester from around the 1930s in Trinidad. This sequence exceeds the lack of information about female protesters through the imagined character of Venezuela. The second still-moving image sequence discussed, titled, "Becoming Venezuela" utilizes an oral performance of the first person narrative of Ezili that plays alongside a still-moving image sequence of a contemporary black woman. The background images moves across landscapes from Trinidad, former plantation sites, and historical photographs. This Venezuela is not placed firmly in either time or geography, but rather, embodies the process of diasporic remembrance of the African slave trade.

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[122] Sylvia Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond," *Cultural Critique,* no. 7 (Autumn, 1987), 208.

Kempadoo's positioning as both a scholar[123] and an artist couches her artistic practice with both a strong historical and theoretical underpinning. This further places her work firmly in line with Abdalkafor's notion of the ethical encounter.[124]Kempadoo describes her aesthetic as one that tries "to make visible the process of research *as part of [my] practice* means to continuously reflect on your role and power as a photographers, and to become much more aware of your audience."[125] The viewer in Kempadoo's installation learns to feel, see, and experience through the viewpoint of Venezuela in the moments of oral performances of narrative dub poetry. This chapter offers the first trans-disciplinary contextualization of her work that engages with both the performance of dub poetry as well as the use of dub in literature.

Archival Failure and Its Radical Potential

Kempadoo's digital projections conceive of the archive as a material manifestation of a problematic temporality that claims its authority through having *once been.* Kempadoo writes that, "the loss, absence and destruction of accounts connected to and made by the bodies who labored as slaves, indentured, or forced laborers demands a more imaginative and contested relationship to be made between memories, poetics and history in the artworks."[126] In order to

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[123] Kempadoo is a Reader of Media Studies at the University of Westminster in London
[124] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,,* 44, 162-193.
[125] Nalini Mohabir, "An Interview with Roshini Kempadoo," *Explusultra*, vol 2 (December 2010), 12.
[126] Roshini Kempadoo, "Spectres in the Postcolonies: Reimagining Violence and Resistance" *Visualizing Slave Narratives: Art Across the African Diaspora.* Ed by Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 51.

evoke this in her works, Kempadoo describes her decision to move from still

digital assemblages to moving image sequences and audio because, with

multimedia, she was able to "play with temporal space so it's not as predictable or

linear."[127]

The installation *Amendments,* like her other installation based works, is

comprised of multiple sequences of what Kempadoo terms "still moving images"

and audio. Her conception of still-moving images combines elements of

movement from film, but in stilted slow-motion form that makes clear they are an

amalgamation of still images. As Kempadoo describes it, this refers to a

> slightly caught and suspended temporality that commits wholeheartedly to
> the photographic rather than to the 'cinema's affinity with sequence' and
> 'illusory movement of the frames.' It is this stillness that I wish to hold
> onto, as a quality that rehearses a photographic status and is embedded
> with associations of loss, absence, and transience—so symptomatic of the
> black diasporic experience.[128]

Her use of still-moving images visualizes an excessive space beyond linear

constraints, which for her, echoes the process of diasporic remembrance.[129]

In the sequences, the images transition quickly and simply, from contemporary

image to archival document to historical photograph and back. Just as you piece

together the components of one image, it slips away from you, and in its place is

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[127] Roshini Kempadoo, "Artist Interview with Karen Raney," *Engage 24: The International Journal of Visual Art and Gallery Education*, (May 19, 2009), 72.
[128] Roshini Kempadoo, "Digital Media Practice as Critique: Roshini Kempadoo's Installations *Ghosting* and *Endless Prospects." "Black" British Aesthetics Today,* ed by R. Victoria Arana, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 293.
[129] Kempadoo states in an interview with Karen Raney that inevitably, I'm working in between this space of what we might conceive as a photograph or still image and the moving image of digital video frame speed" *Engage 24: The International Journal of Visual Art and Gallery Education*, (May 19, 2009), 77.

another ready to be read. As a result, history is neither firm nor absolute; fiction merges seamlessly with fact.

As Samantha Pinto remarks, for women of color in the diaspora, history "does not explain as much as it fractures, fails, and/or erupts." In order to craft a feminist aesthetic of the diaspora, this aesthetic must violate "the temporality of historical context." Kempadoo's project violates the temporality of historical context by refusing linearity through the presentation of fictional oral narrative fragments alongside historical images and archival documents. These temporal violations are an aesthetic that gives way to elucidating potential futures, as well as what Pinto describes as "the revision of complicated histories of black women as subject in and of the academy."[130]

The failure of the archive to document women's participation in anti-colonial protests in Trinidad is laid bare in a historical image projected throughout the narrative sequence titled "Tragrete Road" in *Amendments.* This historical black and white photograph depicts a group of women protesters in the urban space of Port of Spain, Trinidad [Figure 3.1]. They are all wearing the same outfit of printed oxford shirts tucked into long skirts, plaid hats, and strange life-like masks that obscure their individual identities. Their exposed hands hold aloft signs that say, "Grow More Food Everywhere, Everyday" and farming hoes. The image can be dated to sometime between 1920-1930, when anti-colonial protests erupted all over Trinidad in reaction to the high cost of food, paltry wages, and widespread famine as a result of using farmable land not for food, but for sugar and cocoa that were exported. Rhoda Reddock recounts that many women

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[130] Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas,* 10.

participated in the protests, particularly around the issue of providing food for heir families.[131] There is also documentation of a women's branch of the Trinidad Workingman's Association (TWA) in Port of Spain, whose group activities included millinery and dressmaking.[132] However, while this limns the historical context this image, there is no documentation of their role beyond these traditionally domestic skills. The archive lacks a historical textual counterpart for the image, which so clearly documents their role as activists and protesters.

While these women exist as part of the visual archive, the absence of historical context for their active role in protests leaves the viewer yearning for more. The image fascinates and frustrates; it begs the question: who are these women? When was this photograph taken? And, the most pressing question to which Kempadoo found no answer in her research in the official archives: why have they not been historicized, written about and placed in the rightful context of anti-colonial protests in Trinidad?[133]

This image is symptomatic of the frustration Kempadoo experienced in her research in the national archives of Trinidad. The materials collected in this archive—newspapers, census information, and photographs all belonged to the British crown, to the white colonizers whose rule these protesters were so

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[131] Rhoda Reddock, *Women Labor and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*, (London: Zen Books and Ian Randle, 1994), 156.

[132] Jerome Teelucksingh, *Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago, (*Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). It should be noted that this documentation was published in 2015, after Kempadoo made Amendments.

[133] While scholars such as Reddock and Mohammad have unearthed evidence of female participation in anti-colonial protests in Trinidad during this time, there are only a few in-depth accounts of specific female protestors, and even in this, are not as thorough and well-documented as their male counterparts. There is no archival or scholarly account that refers to this image, the protest it represents, or the women's group who organized it.

adamantly resisting. Thus, as Kempadoo states, the colonial archive in Trinidad failed to both "register the inevitable personal trauma" created by colonial rule nor did it adequately document the participation of women in anti-colonial protests.[134]

These women protestors exist in a state of deterritorialization. Caren Kaplan describes that for Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization "describes the effects of radical distanciation between signifier and signified." Kaplan emphasizes that women have a "history of reading and writing in the interstices of masculine culture," and that this marginalized positioning, especially when this occurs between cultures, produces a "location… fraught with tensions; it has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair." However, from this position in a radical distanciation, as Kaplan concludes, there is also the possibility for "critical innovation." Utilizing Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "minor literatures" to describe this, Kaplan states that this type deterritorialization in creative acts "dismantles notions of value, genre, [and] canon," through its movement between the margins and center. [135] In this instance, what the photograph represents, the real women documented within it, is long absent. What remains is the photograph that is now a signifier of absence, of an excess to which we no longer have access.

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[134] Roshini Kempadoo, "*Amendments:* A fictional re-imagining of the Trinidad Archive." *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol. 9, No 2, (2008), 90.
[135] Caren Kaplan, " Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," *Cultural Critique,* No. 6, (Spring, 1987), 188-189.

Digital Photography and Resistance: A Black Feminist Aesthetic of Excess

Kempadoo was born in the United Kingdom to Guyanese parents, but her family returned to the Caribbean in the 1970s, settling in Trinidad during a time when post-Independence optimism promised better economic opportunities.[136] Her artwork is in part an exploration into her own multiple identities, which itself is reflective of the history of African slavery and Indian indentureship in Trinidad. Loss of origins is utilized in her work as a discursive space that opens itself to the realm of fiction and imagination. Ashwani Sharma writes that Kempadoo's image of a 'creole self' is "always distorted, blurred and destabilizing the imperial gaze."[137]

At the outset of her career, Kempadoo began a rich dialogue with Stuart Hall about identity and the politics of representation through her participation in the London-based Iniva, the Institute of Visual Art, and its affiliated gallery Autograph, which are both dedicated to visual culture and art from the black diaspora.[138] Hall describes a significant moment in the mid-1980s in which black British artists lost confidence in "the *idea* that 'the documentary' somehow embodied the essential truth of photography."[139] Through the process of deconstructing not just black stereotypes but also images themselves, Hall

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[136] Roshini Kempadoo, "Digital Media Practice as Critique: Roshini Kempadoo," 284.

[137] Ashwani Sharma, "At the edge of the Frame." *Roshini Kempadoo; Work 1990-2004. (*London: Organisation for Visual Arts in association with The City Gallery of Leicester and PM Gallery and House, 2004), 7.

[138] Ibid ,78.

[139] Stuart Hall, "Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity." *Different. A Historical Context: Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity.* Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, eds. (London: Phaidon, 2001), 37.

identifies a counter-narrative that did not point to a singular and essential position

for the black artist, but rather a "proliferation of positions."[140] While Kempadoo

began as a documentary photographer, her practice expanded during this time into

digital assemblages of historical photographs combined with her own

photographs. This engagement in multiplicity can be also grounded in the logic of

strategic excess to combat stereotypical and singular designations of identity.

Central to Kempadoo's engagement with the medium of photography is its

historical uses to objectify and pseudo-scientifically justify the subjugation of

peoples of color, especially women.[141] Kempadoo realized from her early

documentary work in the 1980s and 1990s that the photograph could never

"simply be considered objective." Kempadoo describes that her digital

assemblages combined multiple meanings into a singular image. This process, as

she states, "allows me to question the notion of truth values—that is the ways in

which we contextualize photographs to be read as evidence, factual or otherwise;

we need always to re-read history and make interpretations of that material that

challenge normative perspectives."[142] It is important, therefore, that Kempadoo's

digital assemblages be read as a challenge to both the photograph as document as

well as the historical archive that contains it.

An early digital assemblage, titled "Head People 03" from the series,

Sweetness and Light (1995) illustrates Kempadoo's longstanding engagement

with black feminist practices [Figure 3.2]. Kempadoo combines a photograph of

herself dressed as a waiter holding a desktop computer on a tray. On the computer

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[140] Ibid, 39.
[141] Nalini Mohabir, "An Interview with Roshini Kempadoo," 9.
[142] Ibid, 11.

monitor is a black and white photograph of a white man centered in front of black

Trinidadians dressed in matching shirts. His smile contrasts their solemn and mute

expressions. In the background, in between balustrade columns from a sugar

plantation in Trinidad are ethnographic photographs of semi-nude African women

positioned as black caryatids holding up the architecture of colonialization, that is,

the sugar plantation itself [Figure 3.3].

Transposing historical reality into the present tense, this image makes

explicit the connection between colonial exploitation with present-day

conceptions of labor and gender. The series title refers both to the use of light to

photographically capture an image, as well as to the colonial history of both labor

and sexual exploitation on sugar and cocoa plantations in the Caribbean. Deborah

Willis describes the images in this series as exploring "the position of someone

whose ancestry was the 'subject' of colonial experience.[143] This image also

references the history of black women's representation in both literature and

images. During colonialism, black women's sexuality was simultaneously thought

of as threatening and dangerous, yet also as readily available and enticing. Their

bodies were held up as specimens of backwardness, of excessive sexuality.

Ethnographic photographs that present their bodies in profile and frontally were

attempts to catalogue and document their excessive bodies, so as to subdue the

threat they were thought to pose, here physically represented by the spears in their

hands, as well as metaphorically to white man's sense of morality and decency.

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[143] Deborah Willis, Introduction, *Monograph: Roshini Kempadoo. (*London: Autograph and the Institute of Visual Art,1997), 12.

Lisa Gail Collins, in an essay about the historical uses of photographs of black people, writes that,

> the fact that some of the earliest photographs of black people were created to demonstrate that people of African descent were a separate and inferior race challenges a central tenet of photographic history. Since the medium's inception, critics have frequently touted photography's democratic properties and potential.

Collins notes that the underlying motives of colonial ethnographers' photographs of black women reveal "the hunger of the powerful to fix subjects of interest, to restrain them in order to capture what is thought to be the essence of their difference and the reason for their subordination." For Collins, this also points to the reality of an unstable authority that must derive its power from the immobilization of its subjects.[144] The absences, the inaccuracies, and the violent erasures of personhood that the archive of images such as those used in "Head People 03" become both the medium as well as the purpose for Kempadoo's photographic practice. This is why excess is such a strategy of black feminism--it embraces that which cannot be contained.

Samantha Pinto utilizes the obsession with black women's bodies as a metaphor for explaining the diaspora itself, describing both as a "visceral plane of traumatized flesh and as the lyric category that threatens to contain too much meaning, from too many sources." The idea of exceeding meaning laid out by the male imperialist gaze is central to Kempadoo's diasporic practice. Pinto describes that tracing the genealogy of the sexualization of black women involves a methodology that "both is documentable and exceeds the archival frame." As

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[144]Lisa Gail Collins, "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth," *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,"* Deborah Willis, ed (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 77.

Pinto continues, because the "double signification of physical bottoms acts as the sign of both success and excess for black women's cultural significance, the vehicle by which black women as icons were made visible and rendered fantastic and tragic simultaneously in the lineage of Western representation."[145]

Similarly, written in Kempadoo's destabilization of the truth-value of the photographic image through digital assemblage is a language of resistance, of an excess that resists what has come before. The authority of the historical photograph has, until now, been assumed to speak for all, rather than a select few. In order to combat this, Jorge Ribalta insists in his essay about digital photography that:

> We need a kind of staged realism, a negotiated or strategic documentary (equivalent to Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledge or Gayatri Spivak's 'strategic essentialism') able to overcome to false opposition between the index (naturalized by Photoshop as its photographic past) and the fake (naturalized in the current and future post-photographic condition). We need to resist the amnesic, homogenizing, privatizing… effects of the post-photographic discourse. This resistance is what I call *molecular,* appropriating the term from Guattari for describing the transformation of political struggles and subjectivity…[146]

Kempadoo's digital practice is a strategic documentary practice of embodying an excess that resists.

Kempadoo's work is not merely a reconstruction of the photographic image as digitalized historical reality, but in the process of digitalization and digital manipulation, her work is also a deconstruction of the supposed truth-value of the historical image. For instance, how can the historical photograph possibly

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[145] Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas,* 46.
[146] Jorge Ribalta, "Molecular Documents: Photography in the Post-Photographic Era, or How Not to be Trapped into False Dilemmas," *The Meaning of Photography.,* Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson eds, (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2005) 181-182.

be a reflection of reality if it leaves absent the history and perspective of your

peoples, culture, and gender? Further, how can a photograph of black women

plantation workers represent a historical truth if it leaves absent their viewpoints,

their contributions, and most importantly, their own lived reality? How can an

ethnographic photograph of a nude black woman's body represent a reality other

than how white colonizers viewed it?

For Kempadoo, the indexicality, or the truth-value, of the digital image

does not lie in its ability to convey historical fact, but rather, in its ability to

deterritorialize representation into the realm of the imagined. Kempadoo

emphasizes this facet of her work precisely because of her

> interest in the re-articulation of memories and disrupting dominant
> historical narratives. There is something still disconcerting in virtual and
> digital spaces where the break from the real is seen as liberation. I am
> therefore more enthusiastic about the possibilities of what digital media
> artwork can engage with to "decentre" what Foucault describes as the twin
> "figures of anthropology and humanism."[147]

The significance of the indexicality of the digital image for Kempadoo is

precisely in what scholars have declared as the "crisis of photographic realism"

which was ushered in with software programs such as Photoshop.[148] Jorge Ribalta

describes digital manipulation as "the factual liquidation of photography's

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[147] Kempadoo cited in Sharma, Ashwani, "At the edge of the Frame," *Roshini Kempadoo; Work 1990-2004,* 8.

[148] For a discussion of the crisis of photography in the digital age see: Geoffrey Batchen, "Phantasm: Digital Imaging and the Death of Photography," *Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age, Exhibition Catalog, (*New York, NY: Aperture, 1994), 47. Batchen states that today, "photography is faced with two apparent crises, one technological (the introduction of computerized images) and one epistemological (having to do with broader changes in ethics, knowledge and culture)."

historical mission in modern culture, the construction of the universal archive."[149]

To liquidate realism and factuality from the photographic image is to repudiate

that it was ever there in the first place. What better way to overturn photography's

indexical status in the context of representations of black women as scientific

abnormalities, slaves, and sexual deviants than with a medium (digital

photography) that, in Ribalta's formulation, eviscerates entirely the photograph's

truth-value?

Contrary to the use of digital photographic manipulation to mimic reality,

Kempadoo's digital manipulations *interrupt* reality. The layering of contemporary

photographs with older black and white ones produces a visual conflict. This

conflict reveals an underlying tension with notions of temporality and

authenticity. The viewer is not sure which image to believe. The obvious digital

manipulation of *Sweetness and Light* must be placed within the time period in

which this series was produced, the 1990s, when this type of layering and 'cut and

paste' manipulation were at the forefront of digital photographic technology. I

also argue that the obviousness of the digital manipulation in this series is

intentional, and not merely a product of the technological limitations of digital

processing in the 1990s.

Its contrived nature points to its excessiveness-- its lack of reality despite

the supposed truth-value of photography. In this context, the seemingly obvious

and contrived construction of this image from *Sweetness and Light* can be seen as

a visual manifestation of the constructed nature of the archive; the image visually

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[149] Jorge Ribalta, "Molecular Documents: Photography in the Post-Photographic Era," 178-185.

maps the assumptions and histories of the representation of black women in visual culture. It is because of its obvious digital manipulation that Kempadoo's photo constructions push the reality of representation beyond historical fact and into an excessive state that resists what has come before.

Digital Interrogations: Exceeding the Limits of the Archive

Kempadoo's use of photography exceeds its role as document, destabilizing the notion that the photograph contains a frozen moment in time by including multiple temporalities within a single image. The archive, however, purportedly discards fiction and that which exceeds linear time in order to function. Okwui Enwezor describes photography's role within the archive:

> because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object. This is the fundamental reason why photography and film are often archival records, documents and pictorial testimonies of the existence of a recorded fact, an excess of the seen.[150]

The object in the photograph is represented by the coding of light onto the emulsion of the film, or digitally, as light translated into pixels on the image sensor. Photography thus produces a reality apart from reality, as a material (or digital) manifestation of what has been. In another sense, to be in "excess of the seen" is to embody that which is not seen, that which might have gone unnoticed in reality, but in its photographic manifestation illuminates that which was not perceived, freezing it in time so that it may be studied in isolation from its original context. Photographic archives thus contain the possibility for destabilizing and countering written documents and their archives.

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[150] Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art,* (New York, NY: International Center for Photography, 2008), 12.

Enwezor cites Foucault, who states, "the archive of a society, culture, or a civilization cannot be described exhaustively: or even, no doubt, the archive of a whole period… The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable. It emerges in fragments, regions, levels…"[151] Echoing this, Kempadoo describes her work as critiquing the colonial limitations of the Trinidad archive in that all the material in it belonged to the British crown. As such, the perspective preserved in newspapers and historical accounts sympathetic to the British crown and white colonialists in the archive renders the colonial plantation worker's life invisible.[152]

Donnette Frances, in her essay titled "Strategies of Caribbean Feminism," notes that "it is precisely because of the absence of, or fragments of, what I call 'archives of intimacy' that we are denied access to a more fulsome understanding of the everyday lives of Caribbean women and girls living in the region and in the diaspora." In this essay, Francis describes literature as a "counter archival source" to which critics who are "in search of subaltern agency" turn.[153] Gayatri Spivak similarly outlines the possibility for fiction to provide what she terms an "aesthetic education" of the subaltern, especially since the subaltern, and subaltern women in particular, are not accounted for in dominant histories nor in

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[151] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130. Cited in: Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever*, 16.
[152] Kempadoo, Roshini, "State of Play: Photography, Multimedia and Memory," Artist Lecture. The Glasgow School of Art Scotland. Feb 5 2010. http://www.gsa.ac.uk/life/gsa-events/events/r/roshini-kempadoo/?source=archive#Roshini%20Kempadoo%20Video
[153] Donnette Francis, "Strategies of Caribbean Feminism," *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature, (*Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 340.

the archives that provide the basis for the writing of that history.[154] This counter

archive of literature that provides an aesthetic education can also be used to

describe visual practices.

While Kempadoo's work is not literary, the idea of creating a "counter

archive" through fictionalized personal narratives is key to understanding

Kempadoo's feminist intervention into the archive. Kempadoo states that her goal

in her early digital collage series such as *Sweetness and Light,* as well as in her

multi-media projections such as *Amendments,* is to trace a form of digital

resistance that questions and generates alternative dialogues. As she states, her

work is about "not only critiquing what went on before but noting what remains

and what may exist in future spaces of Trinidad, England, and other ex-colonial

spaces."[155] This tactic embodies the idea of an excess that resists, of an excess that

moves beyond linear temporality, that is, beyond the notion of the historical

archive as stable and monolithic. In so doing, an aesthetic education based in a

counter archive facilitates an ethical encounter with different and unwritten

histories.

In a series of four images titled "Great House 01, 02, 03, and 04," also

from *Sweetness and Light,* the viewer is confronted with a color photograph of

richly oiled and well preserved wooden gates that lead to a manor house.[156] The

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[154] Gayatri Spivak, *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization,*122. Spivak states: "as it is clear from the outset of this book, I am in the Du Bois-Gramsci tradition… I believe in an aesthetic education for everyone… by aesthetic education I mean training the imagination for epistemological performance."

[155] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 181.

[156] Kempadoo does not state where this photograph was taken, but she does describe that her works situate her own contemporary images from England and the Caribbean in conversation with historical images. The vegetation and gothic aspects suggest that this

first image is an un-manipulated photograph of the gates themselves. The next image in the series has text transposed over the doors that reads, "which ever way the eye is turned, it is regaled with an endless variety of pleasing prospects" [Figures 3]. This text makes explicit the connection between sexual exploitation of black women, and metaphors of conquest that relate the black woman's body to conquered territory.

While there is no visual reference to black women here, the meaning of this insidious text is laid bare in the next image: transposed over the left gate is a sepia-toned photograph of a topless black woman sitting in the lap of a clothed man, whose arm wraps possessively around her. His firm grip on her arm presses into her skin. The man is dressed as a sailor, and while the location of this photograph is unknown, Marisa Fuentes's work elucidates a likely historical context. Fuentes notes that "the sailors and military men sailing to the West Indies carried expectations of paid sexual services" and that such labor "forced enslaved women to serve the desires of the paying male without compensation."[157] That the man in this image posed for this photograph at all suggests he is not himself this woman's owner, but rather, that he is engaged in a transaction in order to purchase use of her body. The woman is doubly trapped in his lap and within the image itself [Figure 3.4]. The woman gazes directly out at the viewer with an implacable look that suggests, at the very least, wary distrust. The man, on the other hand, smiles confidently, as he too looks directly at the camera. In these

is a manor house located somewhere in England. Her use of this particular gate must therefore be because the fortunes made to build this manor stemmed from the Caribbean.
[157] Marisa J Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive," *Gender and History,* vol. 22, no. 2 (November 2010), 577.

images, Kempadoo envisions the dark underbelly of plantation history. Her digital layerings make clear that beyond those beautiful glossy wooden doors is a dark history of subjugation, rape, and brute force.

Kempadoo's practice, then, is one of taking the tools of the master, both the historical photograph and the archive, and transforming them into tools of resistance. Her composite images exceed the limitations of the archive as a stable or even factual document. Allan Sekula's seminal essay "The Body and the Archive" describes the invention of the "social body" that began with photography, and that this in turn produced an archive that contains "subordinate, territorialized archives…The general, all-inclusive archive necessarily contains both the traces of the visible bodies of heroes, leaders, moral exemplars…. and those of the poor, diseased, the insane, the criminal, the nonwhite, the female, and all other embodiments of the unworthy."[158] The binary dialectic contained and defined by the archive reduces its capacity to reflect multiplicity, contradictions, and bodies that refuse to conform to types.

In this context, "Great House 04" [Figure 4] contains both ends of this binary dialectic: a male with a firm grip on his 'property' (whether temporary or permanent) and at the other end, the dark topless body of the woman, whose sexuality must be controlled, as the man's strong grip on her arm makes clear. Yet her direct gaze, its unreadability (we cannot tell exactly what she is thinking) exceeds her subjugation. Her gaze erupts from the image, as if to counter to her

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[158] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, vol. 39, (Winter 1986), 10. Kempadoo refers to Sekula's "social body" in relation to her archival research in a lecture: Kempadoo, Roshini. "State of Play: Photography, Multimedia and Memory." Artist Lecture, The Glasgow School of Art Scotland, Feb 5, 2010. Accessed: December 20, 2016.

position and the image itself. Though trapped, her implacable gaze denies us the ability to know what she is thinking, while her slightly furrowed brow betrays just the slightest hint of hostility. The excess that resists situates this volatile body beyond the binary. Through digital assemblage, Kempadoo's images visualize the archive's reductive impossibility. This resists an understanding of the photograph as index of a universal homogenizing reality.[159] After all, the reality of the white man in "Great House 04" is vastly different from the unwritten perspective of the woman he holds under his grip.

Kempadoo's aesthetic of digitally layered images reflects both photography and the archive's "legacy of visual violence" by bringing those historical uses into a conversation with the present moment. Her works move beyond the legacy of visual violence inferred by historical photographs of black women, usually produced by and for men, by exceeding their temporal boundaries and implicating their historicity within the present moment. These composite images confirm and explore the reality of photography, which as Collins explains "is neither inherently democratic, as all do not have equal access to the camera or the ability to deny its gaze, nor does it necessarily foster identification or empathy with others, for just as it can be used to place people in contexts and tell stories of humanity, it can also be used in endeavors to dehumanize and catalog

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[159] Geoffrey Batchen, "Phantasm: Digital Imaging and the Death of Photography," *Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age,* 48. Batchen similarly problematizes the entire conception of the truth-value of the photograph, stating that "traditional photographs—the ones our culture has always put so much trust in—have never been "true" in the first place. Photographers intervene in every photography they make, whether by orchestrating or directly interfering in the scene being images… the production of any and every photograph involves some or all of these practice of manipulation. In short, the absence of truth is an inescapable fact of photographic life."

difference."[160] As Deborah Willis describes of this series, Kempadoo "reverses

the invisibility of black women and reorients images of women by mixing past

and present," that is to say, through an temporal excess that resists.[161]

Sweetness and Light illustrates that the denied subjecthood for the

subaltern woman exists not in history nor in the present moment, but rather in

excess of both, in a continual process of becoming what it will be, of producing

different futures. This series can also be seen as the precursor to Kempadoo's later

installations that animates collaged images into what she describes as "still

moving image" sequences in her later works. *Amendments* furthers her

interruption of the notions of the photograph as document and the archive as

monolithic reality.

Kempadoo's works are inherently feminist in that they seek to restore

what the archive has denied: the presence and role of women in Trinidad's post-

slavery and pre-independence period, the documentation of their active

participation in marches and rallies for Trinidadian independence, and their own

viewpoints and voices. This feminist aesthetic does not claim to be a voice for the

subaltern woman in Trinidad, nor does it speak on her behalf, but rather, as

Kempadoo states of her work, it "provide[s] a space for her voice to emerge that

also acknowledges my own complicity in creating the piece as a researcher and

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[160] Lisa Gail Collins, "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth," *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot,,"* 77.
[161] Deborah Willis, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Deborah Willis & Carla Williams, eds, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 79.

photographer."[162] This is made possible through an engagement with that which is in excess of history: fiction and imagination.

Historical Contexts for Kempadoo's Imagined Intervention: Elma Francois and Ethlin Roberts

In order to understand the historical context for *Amendments*, it is important to understand the history of colonization, labor exploitation, and anti-colonial unrest in Trinidad. In 1797, the colony of Trinidad passed from Spanish and French hands to the British. Under British rule, they expanded immigration and increased sugar production as its main economy. Following the emancipation of slaves in 1833, immigration increased, mostly in the form of Indian indentured contract workers who were enticed to come with the promise of a return journey to India that largely went unfulfilled.[163] This led to an intense antagonism between the African laborers and the Indian ones, whose presence decreased wages and lowered the value of laborers. [164] Kempadoo describes the social reality of the racial tension in Guyana (which shares this same history as Trinidad) as "so divisive" that it impacts "almost every aspect of life experience.[165]

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[162] Nalini Mohabir, "An Interview with Roshini Kempadoo," 12.

[163] Patricia Mohammad, "Crossing the Black Water: From India to Trinidad, 1845-1917," *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad 1917-1947,* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 17-47.

[164] For more on the tensions between Afro and Indo Trinidadians see: Rhoda Reddock, "Contestations Over Culture, Class, Gender and Identity in Trinidad and Tobago: 'The Little Tradition,'" *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture,* Verene A Shepherd & Glen L Richards, eds, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 111-129.

[165] Nalini Mohabir, "An Interview with Roshini Kempadoo," 10. Kempadoo continues, stating that this racial divide is "why I rarely anchor my work along racial identification,

By the end of World-War I, political unrest and protests for better wages and working conditions heightened. As working class consciousness increased, Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians joined forces, though the antagonism between the two groups remained present. The 1930s-1940s in Trinidad is described as a decade of "militant multiracialism" that involved a number of women organizers and leaders. [166] During this time, the minimum wage for men was 7 cents an hour, and for women it was 5 cents. To put this in context, food was very expensive—biscuits sold for 10 cents a pound.[167] During 1934, hunger marches as a form of protest spread throughout the entire country. Laborers from sugar and cocoa estates, oil fields, and other skilled and domestic workers converged in mass demonstrations across Trinidad and especially in the city of Port of Spain.

In 1934, the same year as the first large-scale hunger marches, the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) was formed by a group of

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but rather about an identity politics associated with belonging. I don't have any tolerance for essentialist positions particularly to do with race." Kempadoo's heritage straddles this social divide as she is descended from both Indians and Africans, and in other works, explores these antagonisms in more depth. Kempadoo herself never explicitly states her ethnicity, but her full sister, novelist Oonya Kempadoo describes their ethic heritage in the foreword to her semi-autobiographical novel: *Buxton Spice*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1998).

[166]Sara Abraham, *Labour and the Multiracial Project in the Caribbean: Its History and Its Promise, (*United Kingdom: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007),18-22, 28-29. Patricia Mohammad notes that the antagonisms between the two groups begun in the late 19th century, and that the existing Black laborers "felt threatened by the continued system of important Indian indentured labor, which was supported by the colonial and imperial governments, and served to diminish their stake in a society that was becoming more racially and culturally mixed." By 1891, Indians constituted one third of the resident population of Trinidad. Source: Patricia Mohammad, "Gender in the Definition of Indian Identity in Trinidad," *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad 1917-1947, (*New York: Palgrave Publishing,2002), 64-65.

[167] Kelvin Singh, "The 1937 Unrest and Its Aftermath," *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945,* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press & The Press University of the West Indies, 1994) 160.

activists, two of who, Elma Francois and Christina King, were women.[168]

Francois worked as a domestic servant, and joined the Trinidad Workingmen's

Association (TWA) under Captain Cipriani, a returning solider from WWI, who,

despite being white, advocated fiercely for socialism and worker's rights.[169] His

leadership came under question when he was viewed as too aligned with British

models of government, and the group began to fracture in the late 1930s.

When TWA dissolved, Francois dedicated her life to the Negro Welfare

Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA). Reddock describes that, "throughout

her life, Elma Francois was accepted as the chief ideologue of the organization. In

the words of Dudley Mahon, NWCSA member: 'We looked up to her for

leadership as she was always right. We had a lot of confidence in her."[170] Francois

was also the first woman to be tried for sedition in Trinidad and Tobago in

February 1938.[171] In the transcript of her speech during her trial, her closing

remarks read: "I know that my speeches create a fire in the minds of people so as

to change the conditions which now exist."[172] In newspaper headline included in

the sequence titled "Tragrete Road" from *Amendments* says a march took place in

Woodford Square, where Elma Francois was a frequent speaker during marches

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[168]Rhoda Reddock, *Women Labor and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History,* 136.

[169] C. L. R. James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies, (*Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

[170] Rhoda Reddock, *Elma Francois: THE NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean, (*London: New Beacon Books, 1988), 17.

[171] The *Trinidad Guardian* on February 15, 1938 described her arrest by CTWE Worrel as: "It was perhaps unnecessary for him to ask them to deal with the accused woman on the merits of the case and not with regard to her being a woman at all. He did not think that would make things any easier for her because believed with Kipling that the female species was more deadly than the male." Rhoda Reddock, *Elma Francois: The NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean,* 33-34.

[172] Elma Francois, "Elma Francois's Speech in Her Self-Defense at Her Sedition Trial (1938). *Caribbean Women: An Anthology of Non-Fiction Writing 1890-1980,* Veronica Marie Gregg, ed (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 5, 156.

and rallies. Matthew's oral narrative embodies the strength and leadership of Elma Francois in his descriptions of Venezuela as a "bad woman" who resists police arrest.

In the narrative sequence "Tragrete Road," Venezuela allegedly shoots a police officer. While fictional, this narrative is not without historical context. At the turn of the century, oil was discovered and Trinidad's oil production quickly became crucial to the colonial economy, as the British navy depended on it. By 1937, Trinidad produced 62.8% of the Empire's refined oil. Despite this, the oil field workers wages remained incredibly low.[173] During a meeting of oil workers at Forest Reserve, police reinforcements poured into the area demanding the arrest of the charismatic leader Uriah Butler.

When the widely unpopular police officer Corporal Charlie King went to arrest Butler, a crowd chased him until they forced him to the ground. While there is no archival evidence to substantiate this, the popular belief is that a group of women were responsible for chasing him, , beating him, and eventually burning him to death. While the historical accounts of this event all differ, they all agree on holding a group of women responsible. Some say that he was killed and then burned, other accounts say that he was burned alive. One woman was arrested in connection to King's murder, Ethlin Roberts, though she was released due to a lack of evidence. Ethelin Roberts denied her participation in any of the events,

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[173] Sara Abraham, *Labour and the Multiracial Project in the Caribbean: Its History and Its Promise,* (Lanham: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc 2007), 18-22, 28-29.

and no factual evidence exists to link her directly to King's death. However, first hand accounts from multiple sources insist on her involvement.[174]

The female figures of Elma Francois and Ethlin Roberts supply Kempadoo's fictional character of Venezuela with a historical counterpart, one who existed, but whose exact role and position remain unsubstantiated by the archive. It is this reality that Kempadoo supplants with imaginative excess. In order to elaborate the position of women both historically as well as in the present, she goes beyond the normative interpretation of the archives, which negate women's role in the anti-colonial struggle, and into the realm of imagination. The historical excavation of Rhoda Reddock and Patricia Mohammad supplies Kempadoo's fictional character of Venezuela with historical counterparts, who actually existed, but whose exact role and position remain marginalized. In this sense, Kempadoo's fictional rendering of Venezuela through both sound and image reveals the excessive positioning of women such as Elma Francois and Ethelin Roberts.

Sonic Excess

The archive in Kempadoo's work *Amendments* (2007) is interrupted and expanded by her nonlinear sequences and oral narratives that imbue the historical archive with imagined narratives told from the perspective of Venezuela. In the sections that follow, I address how orality presents Venezuela as both mythical woman and part historical amalgamation of female protesters during the turbulent anti-colonial labor struggles of the 1930s. Dub poetry, whose roots can be traced

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[174] Rhoda Reddock, *Women Labor and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*, 156.

back to oral slave narratives, is an integral aspect of Anglophone Caribbean culture. Orality is utilized in *Amendments* in order to further engage the viewer in a feminist diasporic perspective on Caribbean history.

Kempadoo writes that documentary photographs "have the power to legitimize a dominant gaze," but that narratives told through photographs and audio bridge the space between, or in the excess of, public and private stories. Nalini Mohabir describes Kempadoo's aesthetic practice as one that

weave[s] together narratives that lie somewhere between accepted historical fact and the truth of lived experiences. By exploring the potential as well as the limits of the archives, she gestures not only to untold stories of the past, but also to new narratives that may provide sustenance for the future.[175]

Central to this articulation of a temporality that is in excess of linearity is Kempadoo's use of oral narratives that are triggered by viewer participation. She states that through the combination of holding, moving, viewing and hearing in her installations, she intends to create for the viewer an "imaginative and creative dimension… [that] evokes an additional cumulative perspective that extends the scope of the imagination, playfulness, and thought as it is experienced in the present moment [in order to] extend ways of engaging with postcolonial narratives, historical legacies, and diasporic perspectives."[176] Within this context, Kempadoo's use of oral narratives in *Amendments* functions to immerse the viewer into alternative narratives of female Caribbean experience.

Michelle Cliff illustrates that the effects of British colonial rule impacted the evolution of language as well as how Caribbean people's understood their dialect in relation to their colonizers' language. Creole dialect is shuttled to the

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[175] Ibid, 5.
[176] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 93.

realm of folklore, while that which is written in what she calls "the King's

English," belongs to the realm of literature and art. Thus, Cliff states:

> To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands
> of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as
> our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potlash in the
> canefields, or go to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its
> rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past
> bleached from our minds. It means finding the art forms of these of our
> ancestors and speaking in the *patois* forbidden us. It means realizing our
> knowledge will always be wanting. It means also, I think, mixing in the
> forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting
> his style, and turning it to our purpose.[177]

It is this that Matthews taps into in his narrative, an imagined evocation of a

history whose knowledge "will always be wanting" through a mixing of forms

that co-opts the master's narrative and employs it as a tactic of resistance.

The Creole dialect with which dub-poet and family friend of Kempadoo's

Marc Matthews uses to narrate the story played in the sequence "Tragrete Road"

is reflective of his own dub poetry performances. Dub poetry, which takes its

name from the practice of sampling and remixing music recordings, originated in

the Caribbean as a language of resistance that viewed culture, art, politics, and

lived experience as inseparable.[178] Phanuel Antwi describes the fusion of musical

rhythm and language in dub-poetry as a decolonizing strategy. Through this

fusion of rhythm and language, dub poetry "instantiates a form of culture, one in

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[177] Michelle Cliff, "A Journey into Speech," *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry*, (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books,1985), 13-14. Cliff notes that to fully understand this, she must contextualize herself within the Caribbean. "One of the effects of assimilation, indoctrination, passing into the anglocentrism of British West Indian culture is that you believe absolutely in the hegemony of the King's English and in the form in which it is meant to be expressed. Or else your writing is not literature; it is folklore, and folklore can never be art."

[178] Phanuel Antwi, "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," *Small Axe*, vol. 19, no. 3, (November, 2015), 69.

which the art of poetry is not separated (or easily separable) from the *art of living,* or the art of *the living,* embodied self." Marc Matthews, who was born in Guyana in 1937, is a part of this legacy of dub poetry performers from the Caribbean diaspora in England, and has traveled throughout the Caribbean and its diasporic communities performing. He also has two published collections of poetry, *Guyana My Altar* (Karnak House, 1987) and *A Season of Sometimes* (Peepal Tree Press, 1992), and has been anthologized in *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry* (1992) and *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (1986).[179] Matthew's oral narrative is an important element of Kempadoo's presentation of excess that resists, as it infuses the images, both historical and contemporary, with a narrative that, while fictional, enlivens the absent narratives of anti-colonial resistance by women.

Kempadoo's practice is theorized as a part of the Afrofuturism movement, which, while originating in black science fiction, has strong links to sound technology, such as dub. While primarily theorized in terms of speculative fiction, Nabeel Zuberi's article "Is This The Future? Black Music and Technology discourse offers a definition for Afrofuturism that is useful for discussing the work of artists such as Roshini Kempadoo. Zuberi states that, for Afrofuturists,

> the rupture of the Middle Passage and slavery's destruction of African culture are a "Dematerialization" (Eshun 192)" and that in diaspora, "culture is rematerialized through a variety of techniques… Since the slave is property, she is alienated from the category of the human (Judy 5). This provides the conceptual space in which to argue about the very idea of the human subject [which I would argue, is an ontological, rather than

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[179] Ian McDonald & Stewart Brown, eds, *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry,* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992) 132-133, 232. See also: Burnett, Paila, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English,* Selected and edited by Paula Burnett, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 382.

epistemological, pursuit] and to imagine posthuman manifestations of blackness.

In short, Afrofuturism utilizes the fractures of history to theorize black peoples as subject to formulate a radical potential for a different future, for different theorizations and practices.[180]

Sheila Petty situates Roshini Kempadoo's multi-media installations and use of sound and oral narratives within this movement. Petty describes that Afrofuturism "remains connected to 'the tradition of counter memory,'" such as slave narratives, but that Afrofuturism also "goes beyond this tradition to reorient 'the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality' towards the near and far future."[181] Importantly, visual art practices that are aligned with Afrofuturism depend on an "interplay between the work and the spectator who must decode its meaning." This situates the aims of Afrofuturism in line with the notion of an ethical encounter with difference produced in aesthetic practices.

Kempadoo explains that in *Amendments*, she extends "documentary photography through the addition of imagined interventions. A series of present-day storytellers perform in the image—as 'digital griots' who evoke events against a backdrop of imagery that might have happened, is occurring in the present moment, or may occur in the future." Phanuel Antwi, in his article "Dub

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[180] Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This The Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse," *Science Fiction Studies,* vol. 34, no. 2, Afrofuturism (July, 2007), 283.
[181] Sheila Petty, *Racing the Cultural Interface: African Diasporic Identities in the Digital Age, (*Halifax: ABC Art Books and MSVU Art Gallery, 2004), 16. Eshun, "Further Considerations," 293, 289 quoted. 18, 16-17.

Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," traces dub poetry[182] back to the communities of people who gathered to listen to the stories of the West African griot, or storyteller. Kempadoo similarly situates *Amendments* as sequences of "digital griots of resistance."[183] Antwi's description of experiencing dub poetry resonates with what it is like to experience *Amendments*. He describes: "to fall into the archives of dub poetry to is to be possessed by a flow of rhythm that cuts across poetic alliances and artistic disciplines, allowing us to chart political and cultural connections while simultaneously compelling us to refuse a commitment to a life oriented to the order of things."[184] Kempadoo merges the artistic disciplines of oral story telling and visual image production in order to craft both a political as well as cultural dimension.

Antwi writes, "the history of the Black Atlantic, with its complicated intimacies, marks a history of ethical and unethical encounters, one that offers a field of interchange, complicity, and practices of borrowing and mixing of genres and themes." Antwi connects dub poetry to Paul Gilroy's assertion that black expressive culture, particularly, sound, "forces an encounter with the extratextual world." Marc Matthew's text offers the viewer the aural experience of a never-finished project that produces what Antwi refers to as an "embodied blackness" through an aesthetics that is as much aural as it is visual.[185] The aural elements of Kempadoo's installation function as an important connection between past and

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[182] Phanuel Antwi explains that the word dub is borrowed from recording technology, where it refers to the activity of adding and/or removing sounds. "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," 65.
[183] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 93.
[184] Phanuel Antwi, "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," 65.
[185] Ibid, 68.

present, placing the viewer as a part of this nonlinear narrative sequences through her/his placement of dominoes that triggers a random presentation of the sequences that comprise the installation. In effect, the oral narratives are the bridge between the images of past and present—they go back and forth in temporality in order to firmly implicate the present within events of the past.

The fragmented Creole dialect used by Marc Matthews' performance of the oral narrative in the *Amendments* sequence "Tragrete Road" is a mode of resistance to patriarchal and imperial narratives contained in the official archives. Nicole N. Aljoe, in her article "Caribbean Slave Narratives: Creole in Form and Genre," explores slave narratives as offering an alternative to colonial archives, which she describes as "entangled with the poetics of colonialism."[186] Contextualizing Caribbean slave narratives within Benitez-Rojo's conceptualization of the Caribbean as a "supersyncretic culture," Aljoe's article emphasizes the importance of orality and Creole dialect as a strategy of resistance.[187] Aljoe argues that the use of Creole dialect serves the purpose of "interrupting the narrative and creating sites of tension with the more formal English that surrounds it." Thus, in *Amendments*, the multiple viewpoints, both from Marc Matthew's narrative as well as those from Hopkinson's character of

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[186] Nicole N Aljoe, "Caribbean Slave Narratives: Creole in Form and Genre," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal,* vol 2, issue 1, (May, 2004), 1. Aljoe illustrates the need for a new theorization to better understand slave narratives, "The combination of oral and written forms and the number of voices operating in these narratives suggest the need for a similarly multi-layered theory of reading. The frameworks traditionally employed in examining single authored texts cannot adequately content with the multiplicity inherent in these narratives," 7.

[187] Antonio Benitez Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Condition*, James E Maraniss, trans (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 29 cited in Nicole N. Aljoe, "Caribbean Slave Narratives: Creole in Form and Genre," 2.

Ezili resonate and pay tribute to the history of the Afro-Caribbean diasporic experience. This chapter will now turn to an analysis first of the sequence titled "Tragrete Road" and then to the sequence "Becoming Venezuela," in order to examine the interplay between historical facts and myth.

Historical Excess: "Tragrete Road" Sequence

The sequence titled "Tragrete Road" that is narrated by Matthews begins with a digitalized image of a yellowed newspaper headline that reads "Unemployed Stage Hunger March In City," that dates to around the 1930s [Figure 3.5]. The image sequence shifts to an image of dominoes, then to a black and white photograph of a dirt road lined by humble houses with tin roofs, and then into a contemporary color image from Trinidad of a crowded cluster of street vendors. The yellow text at the bottom of the projection screen informs us that we are in "Tragrete Road, Port of Spain" [Figure 3.6].

As the images bleed into one another, Matthew's voice describes a protest march of women singing and waving banners. Matthew's voice informs the viewer:

> If you see action, you see some frying pan, mortar stick, broom, rolling pin, bottle, all kinda tings. If you see action! da women dem coming down Tragrete past Cipriani boulevard like road march, dey singing dey waving their banner, dey feelin good, dey peaceful, but they're vexed, yeah? And den dey get caught by da police, you know dat woman Venezuela? She bad! She pelting some kick and cough BA-DOW! BA-DOW! she spinnin', she bobbin' and weavin', dey start gang up bout half a dozen, dey rush she, dey say she done. Done? Done where?! She just so swoosh

take away a battle from one and it's just KA-TOW! KA-TOW! I only hear

something about shoot and I see the one in front take out her pistol and

point out in the crowd. I tellin' you and I know other people see, not only

me witness, but people frightened to believe what their own eyes see [188]

The narrative places the viewer into the perspective of a bystander, who observes

the road march turn into a violent altercation with the police. Sound punctuates

the textual narrative, as Matthews mimics the sounds of violence for the viewer,

and as a staccato techno beat punctuates and reinforces the rhythm of Matthew's

oral performance of the narrative. [189]

As the viewer hears the oral account of the female protesters, the screen

depicts an image of a contemporary black woman in a bright white shirt and short

jean skirt. Her arms swing decisively with her long stride. Her gaze catches ours,

her chin is turned slightly upwards, and her gaze is haunting and intimidating

[Figure 3.7]. Matthews' narrative informs the viewer that, "da women dem

coming down Tragrete past Cipriani boulevard like road march, dey singing dey

waving their banner, dey feelin good, dey peaceful, but they're vexed, yeah?" The

woman in the image is not an object to be consumed, and in the sequence of still-

moving images, she moves along the road and out of the frame. The woman's

confrontational gaze and confident stride merges with the black and white

photograph of the road march, with black protestors holding banners and flags

[Figure 3.8]. This temporal elision simultaneously depicts the woman as

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[188] Transcript of Marc Matthew's text for *Amendments* (2007).

[189] The collaboration between Kempadoo and Matthews also situates itself within the aesthetic of the Black Atlantic to which dub poetry belongs. Antwi states that the connection between the Middle Passage and dub poetry is a way of "emphasizing dub poetry's collaborative interdependence as a sound archive of the black Atlantic, and, as a sound archive, it offers a practice of communal archiving" as quoted in: Phanuel Antwi, "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," 68.

becoming her past, just as the projection of the historical photograph of the road march depicts the past becoming present within the space of the installation.

For a brief moment, the two moments are fused together in a singular temporality that denies the stability of linearity; here there is no stable moment in time, but rather, the past is directly encoded onto and into the present. This temporal deterritorialization confirms that the woman with the defiant gaze is more than, or in excess of, historical designations that leave absent women's role in the anti-colonial struggle. She is also in excess of her contemporary moment; her being is infused with the struggles and imagined narratives of the women who came before her.

The next image is of the women protesters dressed alike and holding signs that say "Grow More Food Everyday" mentioned at the beginning of this chapter [Figure 1]. This image directly addresses the absence of narrative accounts of female protesters just as Matthew's oral performance describes Venezuela's escape from the police, "dey say she done. Done? Done where?!" The text has a double meaning within the context of the image, simultaneously narrating the story as well as perhaps asking where these women protesters are (in historical accounts). The photograph depicting women's participation in the long fight for independence is infused into contemporary Trinidad. In this way, the frustration that Kempadoo experienced during her own research in the national archives of Trinidad is laid bare here. The only way to answer the question of who those women protesters were is through the fictional account of Venezuela.

Once this image disappears, the narrator states, "I only hear somethin' bout 'shoot' and I see da one in front pull out her pistol and point in da crowd." Concurrent with this, the screen shows Kempadoo's own photographs of a man about to hit a woman [Figure 3.9].[190] The effect of the 'still-moving images' looks like stop-animation as the images portray a halting recreation of the fight. In the background of the semi-transparent man and woman engaged in a fight are archival newspaper headlines describing the hunger marches that dominated Trinidadian news during this time. The background continues to shift back to the historical image of the women protestors [Figure 3.10].

In this sequence of still-moving images, the background is continually changing, making sure the viewer never fully knows when or where they are, like memory. The audio narration ends with Venezuela disappearing into the crowd, as Matthews describes a man falling dead from a gunshot. Paired with this audio is a lush image of brightly colored plastic flowers overlaid with a close up of a woman's hand in the shape of a gun [Figure 3.11]. The images make clear what the oral narration does not—this last image suggests in no uncertain terms that Venezuela is the one who shot the police officer.

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[190] Roshini Kempadoo, "Spectres in the Postcolonies: Reimagining Violence and Resistance," 56-57. In Kempadoo's description of an still image from *Amendments* of the struggle between the woman and the man, she notes that "the Black woman's body is in defensive mode, striking out against an organized state force intent on deterring and dismantling groups of workers demanding their rights for equality and better conditions in the colonies." She says this resonates with the work by artist, critic, and poet Ramabai Espinet's development of a Caribbean feminist practice called *Kala Pani*, or 'Black Water,' in order to conceive of the independent Caribbean woman. Kempadoo cites this quote by Espinet: "Kali embodies the other, undomesticated side of woman-the-creator-and-the-destroyer merged into a powerful female force. Kali has no domestic underpinnings. She is of the world, alongside males… she harnesses tremendous sexual energy and procreative power. Kali is an OTHER, outside the domestic sphere."

Unlike a film, there is a disjunction between what is heard and what is seen, while each informs the other-- they are not exactly aligned. This effect is intentional, illustrating the fictionality of the narrative of Venezuela, while the newspaper headlines and archival photographs of hunger marches illustrate that this fiction takes place in a very real set of historical circumstances. Further, this disjointed communication between image and audio furthers the idea of the gaps and fissures in the official archives, emphasizing fiction and imagination as distinct from the archive, yet also as supplements to the official story told in the archives. Through the layering of contemporary image with historical document, both are deterritorialized into an imagined state. The connection between oral poetry and digitally layered images combine in this installation to articulate Samantha Pinto's conception of a black feminist aesthetic that "exceeds the archival frame" through both image and sound.[191]

There is no direct reference to specific events in Trinidad during the 1930s in Marc Matthews' text. Rather, the fictional narrative is best understood as an amalgamation of historical events, remaining vague enough so that they cannot be tied to historical specificity, but detailed enough to maintain an illusion of truth, or embodied truth.[192] Hunger marches continued in Trinidad throughout the 1930s, culminating in the biggest one in 1937.[193] While Matthew's narrative is

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[191] Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic,* 46.

[192] Kempadoo cites Scholars such as Patricia Mohammad and Rhoda Reddock, who have unearthed evidence of women's active participation during this time period of 1930s Trinidad, and it is this work upon which this narrative from "Tragrete Road" is based.

[193] Richard W Jacobs, "The Politics of Protest in Trinidad: The Strikes and Disturbances of 1937," in *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945,* Kevin

fictional, it resonates with accounts of the marches from the Trinidad Guardian. One such article, from June 25, 1937, evokes a similar protest to the one described by Matthews. It states that, "men, young and old, women and children brandishing sticks, cutlasses and other weapons walked from factory to factory in the district, inflicting workers with strike fever."[194] The events referred to in both images of newspaper headlines, and in Matthews's text, are drawn from numerous examples of protests.

Mythic Excess: "Becoming Venezuela" Sequence

Kempadoo's discontinuous narrative sequencing, and disparate sources that mingle fact with fiction embody the literary aims established in Nalo Hopkinson's works. This sequence, titled "becoming Venezuela," combines with the other long sequence "Tragrete Road" and the other shorter ones to push temporality into an excessive space. This narrative sequence begins with the image of a woman, swaying to the music as the background transitions from abstracted images of earth, plants, and the ocean overlap and transition [Figure 3.12-3.14]. The woman, dressed in the modern clothes of a black t-shirt and jeans, stays throughout the transitions. The eye naturally gravitates to her body as the earth and water slip to and away, like an effect of memory quicksand.

Samantha Pinto's account of how black women writers turn images and stories of their sexuality and exploitation into a strategy for resistance and

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Singh, ed. (Canada & Jamaica: University of Calgary Press & The Press University of the West Indies, 1994), 18.

[194] Rhoda Reddock, *Elma Francois: THE NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean, (*London: New Beacon Books, 1988), 30.

recuperation can also be applied to both characters of Ezili (Hopkinson) and Venezuela (Matthews-Kempadoo). Pinto describes this act of inversion as producing a "mythic weapon of colonial resistance" in which the "diaspora always acts as a distinct site and moving target, circulating outside of its purportedly 'fixed' historical trajectory." Kempadoo utilizes the imagined and fictional terrain as "mythic weapon of colonial resistance," to surpass the absence produced by the (dis)appearance of black women's role in Trinidad's anti-colonial movements.

This sequence is narrated with a quote from Nalo Hopkinson's character of Ezili from *The Salt Roads*. This is the stream of conscious narrative of the Yoruba deity Ezili, that is written in the form of dub poetry.[195] The segment that Kempadoo quotes *The Salt Roads* follows an account of the character of Jeanne in Paris, 1842. Jeanne is Baudelaire's black lover, who actually existed, but is known only from the perspective of Baudelaire's writing. Hopkinson infuses what is historically known about the figure Jeanne with a first person perspective told from her side, painting Baudelaire as an incredibly violent and emasculated man dependent upon his mother's fortune. What follows is the section told from the first person perspective of Ezili that Kempadoo tells the viewer. A female voice in a Caribbean dialect reads:

BREAK/

I'm born from song and prayer. A small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality. I'm born from mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices [...] Born from hope vibrant and hope destroyed.

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[195] Lief Sorenson, "Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson," 267.

Born of bitter experience. Born of wishing for better. I'm born.
[corresponding image: Figure 12]

It's when my body hits the water, cold flow welling up in a crash to engulf me, that I begin to become. I'm sinking down in silver-blue wetness bigger than a universe. I open my mouth to scream, but get cold water inside. Drowning! [Corresponding image: Figure 3.13]

BEAT!
A branding sear of heat crazes my thigh. As the pain bites […] I scream again, swallowing salt. […] I can't control my direction. I roll about, caught in a myriad memories of dark shipspace…It hurts. Bloody stinking fluxes leak from hold I hadn't known I had. I vomit up the salt sea.
[…]Time eddies. I am now then, now there, sometimes simultaneously.

Sounds, those are sounds from another place. I have heard them before, or am hearing them now, or will hear them later [Corresponding image: Figure 3.14]. Three sounds: Song. Prayer. Scream. From a riverbank, from the throats of black women. The ululated notes vibrate the chains […] I thrash my arms in response, learning that they are arms the second I move them. The iron links of the chains break. Freed, I […] Begin to rise, rise up through blue water. No, I am not drowning. … I rise faster and faster till I am flying. The water heats from the speed of my passing—hits but does me no harm—boils to mist until it isn't any longer liquid, but clouds I am flying through. (40-42)
I fly.

What is that infant cry that never was in my head, and is, and never will be […] A fractured melody, a plaited seedscale song of sorrow. Whose voices? Ah, I know whose, knew whose. I see them now/then, inhabit them briefly before I tumble away again [Corresponding image: Figure 3.15]. Do I have a voice? I open my mouth to try to sing […] and tears I didn't know before this were called tears roll in a runnelled crisscross down the thing that is my face and past my… lips? to drip salt onto my tongue [Corresponding image: Figure 16].

> At the binding taste of salt, I begin to fall once more.
>
> Tossed helpless through the fog of the sky, going where I don't know. I land.
>
> I am here. In someone's soul case. And though I beat and hammer on its ribs, I am caught. I can no longer see everywhere and everywhen, but only in straight lines, in one direction; to dissolution.[196]

The narrative is not a linear one, nor one that tells a traditional story, but rather is a stream-of-consciousness dub poem of Ezili's corporeal experience in both geography and memory. The two, geography and memory, mingle in her words and our minds to become inseparable. The reader, like the viewer in *Amendments*, never gains a sense of *when* they are precisely, just as the Ezili seems to be able to recall voices that are not her own and memories she does not remember.

In the sequence, "becoming Venezuela," the female voice calls out to the viewer, or perhaps just to herself, "I am now then now there sometimes simultaneously." The image that accompanies this narrative is layered of at least three images: a background image of a beach, a historical image of a Indo-Trinidadian family, and aligned with them is the figure of the modern woman in black t-shirt and jeans [Figure 3.16] The voice continues as this image moves slowly: "Do I have a voice? Do I have a voice? I open my mouth to try to sing and tears I didn't know before this were called tears roll in a runnelled crisscross down the thing that is my face and past my… lips? to drip salt onto my tongue." This evokes a temporal excess that cannot be accounted for through a linear conception of time.

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[196] The corresponding text from Nalo Hopkinson, *The Salt Roads,* are found on 40-42 and 39-46. […] indicates portions omitted in Kempadoo's quotation.

In Lief Sorensen's account of the role dub poetry plays in portraying the character of Ezili in Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads,* he theorizes dub as "a contribution to and continuation of the tradition of dialectical Afro-Caribbean critiques of modernity discourses." Further, he states that *The Salt Roads'* "narrative structure functions like a dub mix, producing links between seemingly discrete compositional elements and historical moments."[197] Kempadoo's own project enacts the same process of jumping across time, between modern Trinidad, memories of slavery and indentureship, and historical photographs. In this sense, the viewer experiences the same confusion and displacement as Ezili, neither have any control as to when or where they are situated. The viewer, like Ezili, exists in a place of excess, of fragmented and incomplete memories, of a reality apart from historical accounts.

The temporality of dub belongs to Afrofuturism, as Sorenson suggests, "dubwise temporality eschews linear utopian thought without abandoning critique as a way of ameliorating the contradictions of modernity."[198] This is also a central concern of Kempadoo, who states that "conceptual frames emergent from the Caribbean have allowed for different perspectives and 'conceptual tools' for exploring cultural work from the Caribbean and other countries from the South. … I have argued that they explore more complex considerations of parallel temporalities or heterochronic time."[199]

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[197] Lief Sorenson, "Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson," 267.

[198] Ibid, 276.

[199] Roshini Kempadoo, "Timings, Canon, and Art History," *Small Axe*, Vol. 19 No 2, (July, 2015), 171.

In addition to belonging to the Afrofuturist movement, the discontinuous narrative form Hopkinson adopts to portray Ezili, as well as how Kempadoo layered this text with imagery in *Amendments* is also a feminist aesthetic of the black diaspora. The diaspora is always in excess of fixed historical trajectories, just as the figure of woman remains beyond history. In this, excess (of fiction, imagination) is a mode of becoming real. This demarcates the position and marginality of black women from history. But also, and most importantly, excess operates as a strategy to disrupt and challenge the dominant historical narratives that leave the contributions and experiences of black women invisible.

The still-moving images of the unnamed woman, who we suppose to be the figure of Venezuela, faces but does not confront the viewer. That is, she does not meet our gaze. Her body sways to the rhythm of the oral narrative as her eyes remain shut. The audio narrative and the shifting backgrounds that alternate between Trinidadian landscapes, plantations, and the ocean [Figures 12-16]. This still moving image sequence reflects the diasporic memory to which Hall describes as "part imagination part fact"[200] This woman, who perhaps is Venezuela or is perhaps being occupied by Ezili, is not an object that is readily consumable. We cannot grasp her, as if she is a ghost of a memory, or rather, a ghost of a fictionalized past. The geography around her slips in and out, evading capture, just as the viewer cannot readily ascertain a fixed identity to her. The audio narratives prohibit that, mingling tragic narratives of loss, brutality, and

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[200] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, Editor, (London: Laurence & Wilshard, 1990), 222-237.

physical pain with those of hope, celebration, and triumphal statements of personhood.

This sequence ends with a series of images that gradually become more and more confined, ultimately to darkness punctuated by lines of light that illuminate only vast space beyond it, or perhaps it is an enclosed space. The voice goes on to tell us, "I can no longer see everywhere or every-when, I can only see in straight lines… to disillusion" [Figure 3.17]. Linear sight and narratives are the binding and constricting experience here, and this text reminds us of the shortcomings of history, the national archives, and the absence of personal narratives within those.

The experience of existing in multiple temporalities, in between the past and future but never in a singular present moment is evoked in both Hopkinson's novel as well as in Kempadoo's *Amendments*. Building off of each other, the text and artwork point towards an aesthetic situated in a black feminist consciousness. This consciousness contests the legacies of modernism by inserting into them the viewpoint of the black woman, who is used merely as an object to be consumed by those who wrote history (such as Jeanne's relationship with Baudelaire). *Amendments* grounds the figure of Ezili within the specific context of anti-colonial protest in Trinidad, borrowing from the novel the idea of merging the spectacular with fictionalized narratives of lived experience drawn from historical documentation, for Hopkinson this is realized through the dichotomy of the mythic goddess Ezili and the fictionalized account of Baudelaire's black lover Jeanne. In *Amendments,* this is similarly performed through Venezuela as mythic

deity who exists beyond space and time as well as the protestor figure of Venezuela. Both oral narratives delineate what Pinto describes as a black feminist aesthetic that disrupts history and problematizes its exclusion of black women.

Conclusion: Art Historical Contexts

The fragmented multiplicity of Kempadoo's artistic practice traverses the disciplines of literature, history, and documentary photography in order to embody a process of remembrance that speaks to the experience of being part of the Caribbean diaspora. Here, history is always fragmented and lacking, which has propelled aesthetic practices such as oral storytelling, and later dub poetry and Afrofuturist movements, to infuse in them a creolized language that both resists and mimics that of the colonizer's. This aesthetic practice of Kempadoo is a distinctly feminist one in that it embraces the gaps and absences in history in order to recover the subjecthood of black women. This chapter aligned the visual and aural elements of Kempadoo's practice with the literary aesthetic of black diasporic women writers, as outlined by scholars such as Samantha Pinto and Michelle Cliff.

In this chapter, I argued that Kempadoo's evolution from singular digital assemblages into "still-moving images" furthered her desire for an ethical encounter through viewer participation. And that how Kempadoo created works to interrupt, counter, and fill the absences in the official archive begun in her early works, such as the series *Sweetness and Light* (1995), expanded to include the element of viewer participation in her later installations, such as *Amendments*

(2007). Exploring both the aural and film-like sequences of "Tragrete Road" and "Becoming Venezuela," this chapter established that the installation format creates what the still image cannot do: a dialogue and participation with the viewer.

Ultimately, Kempadoo's practice embodies Kobena Mercer's theorization of "dialogic engagement" in diasporic art practices. This engagement utilizes multiple viewpoints within a single work in order to, as Mercer states, "draw attention to future possibilities in the field without losing sight of the conflicted past from which it has grown."[201] This places Kempadoo's practice within the legacy of black visual artists. Importantly, Kempadoo's engagement with excess also positions her work as feminist. The gendered consideration of the modes of representation of the diaspora, its fragmented and multiple histories, and the process of remembrance is significant. As Pinto states, "feminist methodology requires that we look for new and different ways of "doing" diaspora beyond massive official archival presences… beyond the traditionally documented, so to speak, which is really about how and what we think of as documentable."[202] Kempadoo's artistic practice stands at the forefront of illuminating how a feminist methodology can inform and transform conceptualizations of not just contemporary diasporic cultural practices, but cultural praxis as a whole.

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[201] Kobena Mercer, "Art History and the Dialogics of Diaspora." *Small Axe*, Vol. 38, (July 2012), 213.

[202] Pinto, Samantha, "*Una escuela rara:* Feminist Methodologies, Innovation, and the Sound of What Is to Come in Diaspora Studies," *Small Axe*, vol 39, (March, 2016), 178.

Chapter Three

Abstracted Excess: Shahzia Sikander's Gopis with the Good Hair

For God's sake don't life the shrine's drape you preacher
Lest that pagan idol appear here as well

The lyric's narraow elegance is not made to measure desire
Rather more room is required for my disourse

-two shers from Persian ghazal tradition of poetry by Mirza Asadullah Khan
Ghalib[203]

In the digital animation-based installation by Pakistani-US artist Shahzia

Sikander titled *SpiNN* (2003), a large screen in a darkened room projects a

meticulously painted Mughal throne room. The flattened architectural surrounds

and dizzying geometric and floral patterning are based off miniature paintings that

depict Mughal court life during the sixteenth century.[204] Amidst this backdrop,

slowly, nude women drawn in the style of Indian miniature paintings begin to

populate the screen [Figure 4.1]. These women are gopis, cow herders who

abandon their responsibilities and husbands in order to follow and worship

Krishna. Almost always sexualized, Krishna's trysts with the gopis is a recurring

theme in Hindu epics and religious texts. Their sexual union with the divine

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[203] Faisal Devji, "Translated Pleasures: The Work of Shahzia Sikander," Exhibition
Catalog for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago March 8-April 19,
1998, 4. In this essay, Devji connects Shahzia Sikander's miniature practice to the
Persian poetry form of the ghazal, which Devji describes as the "writerly equivalent of
the miniature," that originated in Iran in roughly the 10th century and arrived in India by
the 12th century. The ghazal consists of a series of couplets called *shers*
[204] Homi K. Bhabha, "Beginning Again," *Shahzia Sikander,* Milano: Irish Museum of
Modern Art & Charta Press, 2006. 39.

Krishna is praised as one of the highest forms of *bhakti,* or worship.[205] In this

digital animation-based installation, however, Krishna is nowhere to be seen.

Their sexuality and their spirituality belong entirely to themselves.

As they multiply, they turn to each other in conspiratorial whispers and

warm embraces. While their skin tone varies, their identical hair coifs and nudity

unite them. As the accompanying music accelerates to a frenzied tempo, the

women begin to disappear one by one, leaving only their hair in the form of

stylized silhouettes behind. The swarm of black hair, freed from the body, look

like bats or birds as they pulse and flock together [Figure 4.2]. The hair

silhouettes coalesce into a sphere that hovers in front of the throne in the center of

the palatial room. The swarm does not occupy the seat of patriarchal power,

usually reserved in Mughal miniatures for kings, but rather, hovers in front of it.

After this moment, the hair silhouettes then spin out and away from each other,

exploding across the picture plane and beyond its margins [Figure 4.3].[206]

SpiNN is one of Sikander's first digital animations in which she scanned in

her meticulously drawn and painted Indo-Persian miniatures and enlivened them

with motion and duration with the help of animator Patrick O'Rourke and sound

artist David Abir[207] Since, Sikander has continued to work with digital and

[205] Tracy Coleman, "Viraha-Bhakti and Strigharma: Re-Reading the Story of Krishna and the Gopis in the Harivamsa and the Bhagavata Purana," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* Vol. 130, No, 3 (July-September, 2010) 385-386.
[206] Homi K. Bhabha, "Beginning Again,", 40.
[207] Sara Christoph, "In Conversation: Shahzia Sikander with Sara Christoph," *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture,* (November 1, 2016). http://brooklynrail.org/2016/11/art/shahzia-sikander-with-sara-christoph (Accessed January 3, 2017)
Claire Brandon, "Drawing in the Digital Field: Shahzia Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010) *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East,* Vol 35, no. 3

installation formats, viewing it as an extension of her drawing-based works on paper. In *SpiNN,* the collectivity of the nude women, first figural and then in the form of the abstracted sign of the hair-turned-bird overwhelm and break out beyond the margins of the screen. This marks the departure point for both her subsequent works on paper, as well as her digital-animation based installations.[208] In their collective strength they overwhelm their bodily constraints and scatter far beyond the visual field. This flight into abstraction through the sign of feminine hair is central to Sikander's visual grammar.

Hair is a mode of entanglement and of creating a visual language of feminine collectivity, and as such, is repeated across her works on paper and her digital animation installations, beginning with hair's first appearance in her works in the early 1990s. Sikander utilizes the medium of miniature painting to disrupt the false dichotomy between Muslim and Hindu South Asian cultures. Similarly, as her practice evolved and she moved to the United States, she realized that she had to transcend (or exceed) the designations of her status as a "Muslim Woman Artist," and the solution she arrived at was through animation and installation.

This chapter argues that Sikander's repetition of hair motifs is a mode of both engagement and resistance of Hindu and Islamic conceptualizations of women and their power, as well as of western stereotypes imposed onto the body of the exotic Orientalized woman. Her engagement with hair moves beyond simple dichotomies of engagement versus resistance, Hindu versus Islam, and

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(December, 2015): 492-504. As Brandon states of *SpiNN*: "the durational characteristic of digital animation allows the viewer to follow the physical removal of the hair from the wearer's heads in a single frame," 497.

tradition versus modern, in a mode that can be read as deconstruction as well as an engagement with Islamic theology and art, and Hindu conceptualizations of goddesses. Sikander adopts Hindu conceptualizations of women's sexuality as a metaphor for divine engagement and places it into a conversation with Islamic art's use of geometry and patterning to produce a spiritual encounter for the viewer.

Sikander states that her work reflects "an evocative engagement with gender and sexuality." Both her play of gender and sexuality should be contextualized within both western feminism as well as within the work of Islamic feminist scholar, Fatima Mernissi, whom Sikander describes as foundational to her thinking. The writing of Fatima Mernissi, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous enabled Sikander to explore how to formulate a feminist intervention into the male dominated field of miniature painting.[209] Irigaray and Cixous's work utilizes the conceptualizations of woman as beyond knowing as a powerful tool for subversion.[210] This has yet to be adequately addressed as one of the most important underlying aspects of Sikander's development of a visual

[209] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture," (presentation at Rhode Island School of Design. October 19, 2016) https://livestream.com/RISD/gail-silver-lecture-sikander Despite her repeated statements about the importance of gender to her work, her work has not been properly theorized in this context. Instead, scholarship on Sikander has primarily focused on a reading of her work through Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of cultural hybridity, and the closest theorizations that discuss the important gendered aspects of her work focus solely on her Islamic identity and her representations of the veil, which she explored only in the 1990s and quickly abandoned for reasons that will be discussed. Her works aren't about hybridity as they have been commonly described, but rather are about entanglement.
[210] See: Helene Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs,* Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976): 875-893. And: Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," *This Sex Which Is Not One,* Transl by Catherine Porter, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 68-85.

language, which, since 2001, has harnessed the figure of the gopi and her

abstracted sign of the hair-silhouette across numerous works, all of which explore

different aspects of life, from colonial occupation, oil extraction in Saudia Arabia,

and the distorted stereotypes of Islam produced by western mass media.[211]

The artistic trajectory of Sikander's work is a visualization of the

evolution of her thinking on the marginalization of women across the world. As

Sikander states, "I was interested to express in a personal voice antithetical issues

concerning historical animosities between India and Pakistan, and to expose

western stereotypes about women from the Third World."[212] Women of color,

especially Islamic women, are exoticized and conceived of as other. In this

positioning as other, they are in excess, categorized, as Irigaray puts it, as a lack, a

void, a blank screen to be projected on to.[213] Meyda Yegenoglu describes: "the

Other's particular mode of corporeality is an important site for colonial

inscription of power, as the desire to get hold of the native woman's body is

evoked as the metaphor of colonial occupation."[214]   It is this type of engagement

with the subaltern woman that is employed within Sikander's works, rather than

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[211] I am referring here to her large scale digital animation works *The Last Post* (2010), *Parallax* (2013), and *SpiNN* (2003). This is just a small list of her digital animations, all of which utilize the hair silhouette.

[212] Shahzia Sikander quoted in: Kristin Chambers, "Loose Threads," *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics*, *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics,* (Ohio: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 2001), 10.

[213] Meyda Yegenoglu utilizes this description by Irigaray in her theorization of a feminist reading of Orientalism. Yegenoglu states that Irigaray's "feminist deconstruction of Western phallocentrism shows how woman can not be a subject in the sense Man is. Irigaray's effort to construct an imaginary for woman is rooted in the embodiment of women: a kind of subjectivity in which the other is recognized rather than denied" *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* 9.

[214] Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* 117. This is also clearly explained in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest,* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

dealing directly with the figure of the subaltern woman herself as is the case for

Nalini Malani and Roshini Kempadoo's works, Sikander engages with the

subaltern metaphorically.

The power of feminine sexuality in Sikander's work connects to both

Islamic and Hindu conceptualizations of woman, but through their animated

liberation in the sign of the hair silhouette in her works she exceeds both cultural

designations, as well as western stereotypes externally projected onto the South

Asian woman. The signs and content of her work that drive this interpretation has

been occluded in scholarship on her in preference for a discussion of her work as

hybrid and of "disrupting the miniature tradition."[215] The value of the female in

her works remains largely neglected. Patrick Olivelle, in his essay, "Hair and

Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions," states that, just

like a language, "hair symbolism imposes its own grammar on the individuals in a

given period of a given society."[216] It is this grammar of hair that is adopted and

transformed in Sikander's works.

Her use of animation and installation has been theorized as postmodern

abstraction, but this chapter offers compelling evidence that this is not the only

concept at work. Her use of movement and abstraction should also be read as her

use of an Islamic aesthetic that concerns itself with creating a spiritual space. The

idea of creating a spiritual space is central to Sikander's installations, which

overwhelm the viewer with dazzling patterns and movements, much like Islamic

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[216] Patrick Olivelle, "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions," *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures,* ed by Jeannette Mageo, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 12.

architecture.[217] As Sikander remarks of her digital animation-based installations, they are meant to be "experiential and immersive."[218] This can be understood as an enlivening of the principles of Islamic geometric patterning. Valerie Gonzalez describes the *muquarnas* roofing of the Alhambra as "kinetic geometry," that is, a geometry that evokes a sense of movement due to its elaborate patterning that evokes a sense of infinity. This kinetic thrust is crucial to engaging the viewer experientially; the dazzling patterns in Islamic art evoke a sense of movement and can be conceived of as Gonzalez describes, as an "aesthetic phenomenology involving… a sensorial experience based on the vital relations between the object and the user's physical body through the sense of sight."[219] Homi Bhabha similarly conceives of Sikander's animations as providing a "kinetic" thrust in order to explore "the processes of time, movement, and visual representation."[220]

Abstraction, repetition, and layering, while on the surface may be appear to originate in western conceptions of modernism and postmodernism, are in fact, fundamental to Islamic thought and art. Just as Gonzalez theorizes that an *experience* is produced through the kinetic geometries of Islamic art and architecture, it is its abstraction that opens up imagination for the viewer.[221]

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[217] Valerie Gonzalez, "Abstraction, Kinetics, and Metaphor: the 'Geometries' of the Alhambra," *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture, (*London: I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 77, 86.

[218] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: Parsons Fine Arts Visiting Artist Lecture Series The New School" February 16, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0MrUMNRKKY

[219] It is also worth noting that phenomenology and ontology are closely related concern, see: Jennifer McWeeny, "The Feminist Phenomenology of Excess: Ontological Multiplicity, Auto-Jealousy, and Suicide in Beauvoir's *L'Invitee," Continental Philosophy Review,* vol. 45, issue 1 (March 2012) 41-75.

[220] Homi K Bhabha, "Beginning Again," 37.

[221] Valerie Gonzalez, "Abstraction, Kinetics, and Metaphor: the 'Geometries' of the Alhambra," 93.

Sikander states that "imagination and intuition" inform her experience, and that

"words validate my experience." She explains that the "power of imagination

fosters new discourse and creates new frontiers. Imagination is wondrous it

cannot be contained and it cannot be defined."[222] This relates to Sikander's digital

animation sequences which steadily move more and more towards abstraction

while simultaneously maintaining a play between figuration and abstraction.

Robert Irwin states that Islamic artists favor,

> abstract and repeating patterns and such patterns did not presuppose any
> fixed point of view… [they] played with the effects that could be achieved
> by viewing the multi-layered designs from various angles while in
> motion… In a sense, even in the figurative art of the Islamic world, no
> fixed point can be assumed. The Muslim artist, uninterested in the
> principles of linear perspective, was determined to show the subject matter
> from the best possible vantage point or, more often, points.[223]

This explains Sikander's multiple uses of gopis and their repetition and layering

as an Islamic aesthetic *not* a modernist aesthetic. As Rasheed Aareen further

states about Islamic geometry in art:

> The artistic form of geometry not only represents the ability of the mind to
> deal with complex problems of an abstract nature …The symmetry of
> geometry in Islamic art also offers, in my understanding, an allegory for
> human equality.[224]

In this context, Sikander's utilization of an Islamic aesthetic illuminates how it is

also a feminist aesthetic, as both, strive towards an ethico-political engagement

with human equality. Understanding her work as an ontological exercise

grounded in her assertion that "art is sustained by the desire to connect and

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[222] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."
[223] Robert Irwin, "The Mysterious Universe," *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture, and the Literary World* (London: Calmann & King Ltd, 1997), 193.
[224] Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History," 518.

communicate,"[225] her engagement with a poetics of a feminine spirituality can be understood as fostering a spiritual and explicitly gendered ethical encounter through hair.

Hair, liberated from the confinements of the body from *SpiNN* and her subsequence digital animations, operates as a powerful force. As Sikander repeatedly stresses, the abstracted sign of the hair-silhouette never sheds its original reference to the body of the woman, but rather, exceeds this singular designation to envision the interconnectedness of gender to how we conceive of ourselves and of being in the world.[226] Cixous similarly writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," that women's writing will "always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system" and woman, as peripheral figures to this patriarchal order, exist beyond the ability to ever be truly subjugated. As such, women and their signs are free to be whatever they want[227] Through this understanding, read through an engagement with Islamic feminism, Sikander generates a space where women are uncontainable, unable to be pinned down to singular interpretations or to patriarchal order. This is what her work offers—a visualization of women's power and potential, freed from narrative (and thus patriarchal designations of women throughout history) the sign of the woman becomes a force for revealing.

In her animation-based installations, Sikander takes figuration and pushes it beyond and into abstraction, creating a disorienting and baroque aesthetic. This

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[225] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."
[226] Ibid
[227] Helene Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa*." French Feminism Reader.* Ed by Kelly Oliver. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2000. 264.

excessive field of signification that is produced through layering and repetition is a feminist aesthetic. This feminist aesthetic does not describe a fixed identity, but rather creates endless new positions for subjecthood. In this sense, this aesthetic is not an epistemological venture, but rather, an ontological one. It is this ontological engagement that aligns her work with the notion of an ethical encounter.[228]

In his forceful essay that traces modernist abstraction back to Islamic art, Araeen outlines the differences between epistemology and ontology through the metaphor of figuration versus abstraction: "art abstraction basically consists of an elimination process of references to the matter towards thought, ideality, and ideas, whereas figuration, on the contrary, consists of a combination of references to matter in order to represent recognizable existing things and beings."[229] Further, Araeen stresses that Islamic art is not based on the human body or images of living beings, but rather, on that which is *beyond.* Sikander balances this drive to go beyond with a continued use of figuration, crafting a paradox of realities within her works that ultimately always evoke female empowerment through spirituality.

Sikander describes that in the globalized world in which we live, for her, "spirituality… is really about awareness, vigilance; transcending partisanship by constantly questioning one's own assumptions."[230] Importantly, Sikander

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[228]Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation*
[229] Valerie Gonzalez, "Abstraction, Kinetics, and Metaphor: the 'Geometries' of the Alhambra," 76.
[230] Daftari Fereshteh, "Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Fereshteh Daftari," DAAD IKON (2008), 64.

clarifies that her process of making is not about religion, but rather that it is "spiritual."[231] Central to this is a challenging of what she describes as the "male dominated view" of religion that exists not just in Islam, but in Hinduism as well (and nearly every other religion). Sikander's rebuttal to this is an imagining of a space in which women may exist independently from men, such as her empowerment of the gopis through Krishna's deliberate absence. This, paired with Mernissi's articulation of the power of women's sexuality that is reflected in Islamic thought,[232] combine in her works in a beautiful flux that is meant to resonate with the viewer's senses, both visual as well as auditory.

Meyda Yegenoglu's feminist reading of Orientalism provides an important contextualization to Sikander's engagement with representations of South Asian women, especially within the context of the United States, where Sikander now lives. Yegenoglu illustrates the intertwined relation between power and knowledge in the colonial project, and that this directly relates to how Muslim women's bodies are positioned within colonial discourse. Yegenoglu describes the western obsession with unveiling the Muslim woman is a way of "seizing hold" over them, and that this "seizure required knowledge and information to be extracted about them." Yegenoglu continues, stressing that the first step to knowledge about them was to render their bodies visible. This, she stipulates, is

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[231] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," *Spectrum: The Lockwood Thompson Dialogues* April 23, 2006 and December 1, 2006, (Cleveland: Cleveland Public Library, 2007), 62.
[232] Fatima Mernissi, "The Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality," *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society, (*Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 27-60.

based in Enlightenment ideology in which visibility is the precondition for the possibility of "true knowledge."

The radical potential of the veil, as Yegenoglu so astutely theorizes, is thus in its ability to refuse the colonial gaze, and that, paradoxically, this decolonizing gesture was enabled by the very conditions that construed it."[233] Considering Sikander's emphasis on the power of imagination, one can think about how the veil is contextualized in western imagination in the following terms: "A dysfunctional imagination cannot see beyond what enchants the eye."[234] It is this which Sikander exceeds through an engagement with the abstracted sign of woman in the form of hair silhouettes.

The multiplicity of meaning behind the visual language of the gopi hair becomes a metaphor for the power of female collectivity, of how it permeates and informs everything. The gopi swarm is the threat and promise of feminism, of the Islamic as well as South Asian woman. It is Sikander's eloquent response to the exotification of Orientalism, and an abstract sign that resists and permeates into everything. As the gopi hair sheds its corporeality in *SpiNN,* it also sheds its ability to be exotified and pinned to one interpretation. It is a reversal of the veil, it gives the scopic regime of patriarchal Orientalism something to look at, but an irreducible something. In its abstraction, the feminine is freed from phallocentric order of representation and can then act on its own accord.

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[233] Yegenoglu, Meyda, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66.
[234] Araeen, Rasheed, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History," 518.

Origins

Shahzia Sikander began studying art the National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore, Pakistan in 1988.[235] Sikander was one of the few students to study the miniature tradition. She notes that despite being discouraged to not study the it, she persisted because of its appeal to embody "both the past and the present."[236] This transcendant element is of particular importance given the political climate in which Sikander was raised. After the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the formation of Pakistan as an independent Islamic nation distinct from the Hindu-ruled India, cultural and artistic histories became incredibly polarized and politicized. As Vishakha Desai remarks, Pakistan developed a tumultuous relationship to its past in which a shared history with India was intensely problematic. As Desai explains that in the National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore, Pakistan (where Sikander graduated from in 1991) during the 1980s,

> artists could choose between two opposite directions: to escape the issue
> of local heritage and find meaning in Western forms, or to align
> themselves with the Mughal tradition of painting as Pakistan's heritage
> and embrace the Mughals as the true ancestors of the young nation…. The
> NCA's inclusion of miniature painting as an integral part of its courses
> was a consciously political act, an aspiration to identify and solidify
> Pakistan's ever-elusive cultural roots.

Desai links this to Sikander's own teacher at the NCA, Bashir Ahmed.[237]

Sikander describes that the miniature department was rarely visited, and yet,

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[235] Vishakha N Desai, "Interview with Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander," *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander,* (New York: Exhibition catalog for Asia Society, 2001), 68.
[236] Homi Bhabha, "Miniaturizing Modernity: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha," ed by Robert McCarthy, *Public Culture,* Vol. 11, no. 1, (1999), 146 .
[237] Vishaka N. Desai, "Engaging 'Tradition' in the Twentieth Century Arts of India and Pakistan," *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander,* 12-13.

whenever school officials showed around a foreign dignitary, they would take them to the miniature department as emblematic of Pakistan's cultural heritage.[238]

This however, did not align with Sikander's reason to pursue the miniature tradition. Sikander stresses that even in her decision to pursue miniature painting, she "gravitated towards… questioning the status quo." She regards this as an outcome of "coming of age in the unstable and oppressive political climate of Zia ul-Haq's military regime" in the 1980s.[239] As Sikander remarks, the way in which Pakistan's formation of a national identity "simplified the visual terms of Hindu and Muslim, or in my experience, Indian and Pakistani—a visual that I felt did not lend itself to simplistic dissection and separation. Maybe this refusal is where I entered the work."[240] Sikander describes that when she decided to study the miniature form in the mid-1980s, she was cautioned that its mode of rigorous copying of the past would retard her artistic vision. Regardless, the rigorous discipline and gendered aspect of the lineage of exclusively male painters fascinated her. She states: "I was interested in seeing what could be learned in this process of submission, of subjection to the technique as it was lodged in this patriarchal arrangement."[241]

Instead, Sikander's training in miniature painting reflects the multicultural dimension of the medium that began in the sixteenth century. When Muslim invader Akbar conquered northern India in the mid-1500s, he brought master miniature painters from Persia to work alongside native Hindu and Sikh court

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[238] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 58-59.

[239] Fereshteh Daftari, "Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Fereshteh Daftari," 55.

[240] Homi K Bhabha, "Miniaturizing Modernity: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha," 151.

[241] Ibid, 147.

painters, encouraging a cross-cultural dialogue between the two forms. Hindu artisans trained with Muslims ones, and it was common for ateliers to produce works for both Islamic as well as Hindu and Sikh patrons. [242] This collaboration ultimately developed into a hybrid aesthetic that is credited with ushering in the height of Mughal miniature painting.[243] Sikander refers to as the "composite school" of the Indo-Persian miniature tradition that "allows a variety of things to coexist without necessarily homogenizing everything."[244] It is this shared history and the distinctive style that emerged from this period that Sikander utilizes in her practice.

In her early works, which are more firmly based in figuration, images of women re-occur in different contexts beginning with her undergraduate thesis for her BFA from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, titled *The Scroll* (1989-1990). The work is 13 1/8" by 63 7/8" long, and through the miniature tradition of continuous narrative, it represents a woman with loose long black hair moving throughout the confines of a house engaged in various activities [Figure 4.4]. This woman is never singular, not even a stable visage. She is multiple, simultaneously everywhere and yet impossible to pin down; once you locate her in one scene, a translucent version of her appears in the same scene engrossed in yet another activity, seemingly unaware of her multiplicity [Figure 4.5]. In the final section of the scroll, we see the same woman in a garden before an easel, painting. On the canvas is yet another representation of herself [Figure 4.6]. The

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[242] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 42.
[243] Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Sacred and Profane in Indian Art,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 176.
[244] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 42.

visual play of the multiplicity of female characters, even within the same person, culminates in this scene.

Sikander notes that during her training at NCA, one could study a miniature painting illustrated in the Mughal tradition, but that "if the subject matter was Hindu, its value was debated."[245] Desai describes that in Sikander's use of Hindu goddesses in her work, she is "acutely aware of the fact that she is claiming an image that is not supposed to be a part of her heritage."[246] As Sikander explains, with the geographical separation between Hindu and Muslims, so too was a cultural separation where "whatever came under Muslim patronage became Pakistani heritage." So, Sikander's use of representations of Hindu goddesses is, as she explains, "the opposite of Muslim belief, where idol worshipping is… blasphemous."[247] Sikander deploys this exact type of blasphemy throughout her works.

Exceeding Exotification: The (Im)possibilities of Representing 'Muslim Woman'

Across a few of Sikander's works on paper from the 1990s are translucent white veils that drip over figures, both male and female, the edges of its stringy representation dripping as if in acknowledgement of the painterly artifice of this layer over her more refined and solid representations. This explosive referent to Islamic culture, and in particular, to Islamic women, demands close examination, especially as her work during this time period was primarily made and exhibited

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[245] Vishakha N. Desai, "Interview with Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander," 68.
[246] Vishakha N. Desai, "Engaging 'Tradition' in the Twentieth Century Arts of India and Pakistan," 12-13, 16.
[247] Art 21, "Interview with Shahzia Sikander: 'Chaman.'"

in the United States. Ana Finel Honigman states in her essay, "Against the Exotic," that the "exotification of difference plays out very well in this country… There are very successful female Middle Eastern artists in the U.S. who were marketed based on identity alone, and have made careers out of catering to these stereotypes." Honigman, notes that the success of this work maintained the fetishization of the notion of the "oppressed Muslim female."[248] It is this awareness that first brought Sikander to engage with both figurative and abstracted notions of the veil and Islamic woman, and an important reason why she continued to push her figurative practice farther into abstraction through gopi hair.

In *Spaces in Between* (1996), Sikander strips the index of appropriate Islamic femininity (the veil) from the body it is supposed to cover [Figure 4.7]. The expanse of the yellow hue of hand-dyed wasli paper is punctuated by a translucent white mass to the right of the center, and abstract circular shapes to the left. In the center emerges a ghostly rendering of an Islamic veil, the brush strokes stop short of fully realizing its form, leaving jellyfish-like tentacles dangling where the cloth of the veil would normally fall to cover the woman's body. *Spaces in Between* complicates the binary of presence and absence, of figuration and abstraction. One can understand this motive as the product of her engagement with feminist theory, and how to represent the figure of the woman without reducing her to an erotic or oppressed *other*. The painting envisions the complex reality of being an Islamic woman engaging in the modernist lineage of

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[248] Ana Finel Honigman, "Against the Exotic," *Art Review,* vol. 3, issue 9 (September 2005), 96.

Western art history: she is invisible save for the stereotypes pushed onto her.

However, Sikander wrests an understanding of the image away from the simple

binary of west/east: here, woman is absent, in excess of representation.

Responding to both feminist and postcolonial theory through a distinctly

Islamic aesthetic, Sikander's works visualize the idea of identity as an external

performance. In these works, the multiple visages of woman remind us that she is

neither singular nor stable, but rather, she is in a constant state of flux that refuses

to be pinned down to one category or even one activity. *Spaces in Between* evokes

a desire to move beyond both abstraction, as well as the heavily loaded image of

the veil: underneath it, there is no woman, suggesting that the veil itself is but a

performance and the woman underneath is unknowable, invisible, and beyond

categorization.

This early engagement with veiled figures can be read in terms of

Irigaray's conception of mimicry. Irigaray states that the only historically

assigned role of the feminine is that of *mimicry:* "To play with mimesis is thus,

for a woman, to try to recover the place of exploitation by discourse, without

allowing herself to be simply reduced to it." Irigaray writes that as much as

woman's ideas about herself are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but "so as to

make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain

invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language."

Irigaray continues stating that this, "it also means "to unveil" the fact that, if

women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this

function. *They also remain elsewhere."*[249] That is to say, women remain in the

spaces in-between. Sikander describes that she began pursuing the idea if

representation could possibly "exist out of the binary oppositions" and that,

further, she wanted to depict the possibility of a "third space, [an] in-between

space" in her work.[250]

Despite her intentions in exploring representations of femininity across

Hindu, Muslim, and Western women's identities during this time, Sikander states

both herself and her work became an exotic spectacle in the United States, and

that her Pakistani Muslim identity became the primary categorization for her as an

artist. She describes that she struggled to not be "ghettoized as a South

Asian/Muslim/Pakistani woman artist… most of the readings of my work focused

on cultural definitions rather than the work itself."[251] She found herself caught in

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[249] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans by Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.
65: In order to resist being reabsorbed into old definitions their repetition must be subversive "on the condition that naturalized gender codes are critically reflected upon." Sikander takes the naturalized gender codes of the feminine and critically engages with them via abstraction. As Yegenoglu continues, "the re-articulation, re-working, and re-signification of the discursive characteristics of phallocentrism can open the possibility of an in-between ambivalent zone where the agency of the female subject can be construed. In our case, the colonization of land and culture in Algeria was strategically **entangled** on the body of the woman--- such is the articulation of the historical and fantasy."
[250] Sikander credits Homi Bhabha's work for formulating her conceptualizations of a third space in her visual practice . Sikander notes that the concept of "interstitial space" is the core of her artistic investigation. She describes that this is drawn from Homi Bhabha's 'third space' as well as "to post-structuralist de-centered space; to political space, to transgressive space, to the space of the ideal, the fantastical, the subliminal. The focus is never on one polarity or another. What matters are the detours from both" in: Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 8. Yegenoglu stipulates that what Irigaray's writing makes clear is that the binary logic which maintains the "very opposition between real and appearance itself and the *interest* that resides underneath such an opposition: '*what* that we should question has been *forgotten,* not about a truer truth, a realer real, but *about the profit that under-lies the truth/fantasy pair?"* in Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* 53.
[251] Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 8.

this double bind and orientalist definition of her work as an exotic spectacle.

Sikander was asked to be what Spivak terms as the "native informant"[252] during

this time period, in which questions about her work centered around her

representations of the veil and her Pakistani heritage, which Sikander states,

"seemed [to] entitle others to engagement in this topic."[253]

Sikander describes her experience of being labeled a "Muslim woman"

when she came to the United States, even though she had never thought of herself

as that before. She notes that this label that was prescribed to her resulted in a

strange doubling of simultaneous obsession as well as invisibility. She found

herself being read as "unique and particular" to the point where people would

"refrain from engaging" with her.[254] Afzal-Khan describes that Muslim women, in

particular, have become the center of the angst over what it means to be a Muslim

woman living in America, but in this obsessive gaze on them, they have lost

whatever scant agency they had to define this for themselves.[255] Lila Abu-

Lughod similarly observes that dominant narratives in the media about Muslim

women in the United States ignored the "complex entanglements in which we are

all implicated."[256] *SpiNN* offers a similar critique of mass media. Sikander

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[252] For more on the concept of the native informant see: Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present,* 5

[253] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 52.

[254] Ibid, 72.

[255] Fawzia Afzal-Khan, "Playing with Images, or Will the RE(AEL Muslim Woman Please Stand up, Please Stand Up?" *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out,* ed by Fawzia Afzal-Khan, (Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press, 2005), 8-10.

[256] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist,* Vol. 104, No. 3 (September 2002), 784. Central to this was the politics of the veil, in which she states that veiling itself "must not be confused with, or made to stand for, a lack of agency."

describe that *SpiNN* "takes imagery that forces simplified understanding of global multiculturalism to be challenged through a vocabulary that is as vague as it is specific…. The title *SpiNN* also alludes to the powerful mass-media corporations and to the ways in which core information about a subject is often hidden behind layers of perception that can suggest multiple meanings."[257]

Sikander states that despite her intentions in playing with representations of the veil during the 1990s, she wonders: "would it have been smarter to steer away from this topic… [a]nd ignore the questions." She states that:

> I found that the three to five drawings I did on this topic [of veils] in 1994-1996 got a lot more coverage and were at times the only works chosen to be printed. My work got written about a lot within the framework of a "Muslim woman" or perhaps "liberation" experienced by coming to the U.S.[258]

Ironically, the over-emphasis on postcolonial interpretations of her work, merely aid in furthering Bell Hook's conception of the "double-bind," which "forces minority women either to confront manifestations of sexism particular to their own culture, or to give their racial and ethnic identity priority over their desire for gender equality."[259] Sikander notes that her response to this was to share as much as possible, as she admits, "perhaps in an attempt to shrink gaps of knowledge. But filling in the gaps doesn't necessarily change the assumptions people already are bringing to the question."[260] This again points out that the fundamental issue Sikander faced was not how to re-orient knowledge, or epistemology, but rather, how to understand the ontological realities of being in this world.

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[257] Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 15.
[258] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 54.
[259] Bell Hooks qtd in Ana Finel Honigman, "Against the Exotic," 96.
[260] Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 9.

At this epistemological and ontological impasse in which both she and her work were reduced to problematic binarisms, Sikander radically changed her practice to involve sound and digital animation. Identity politics, which Grosz as describes, merely "affirms what we are and what we know" is an epistemological project that remains steeped in a dualism that prohibits a true exploration of difference. Sikander found a way to resist the dualism of identity politics through an activation of duration and movement via animation.

Hindu-Islamic Entanglement: Paradoxical Excess

Sikander's work on paper, *Apparatus of Power* (1995), depicts multiple female figures, including six gopi figures. Drawn in the style of a miniature page with a wide decorative border and a centrally placed figure, the composition resembles a Mughal era portrait of a male ruler [Figure 4.8].[261] In Sikander's image, however, the central figure is not a male, but rather a composite of multiple women. The first layer, painted in red, is a silhouette of a woman whose form echoes the voluptuous shape of sculptures of Hindu goddesses. Sikander's goddess's feet ends in intertwined tree roots. Vidya Dehejia states that the "woman-and-tree motif" reoccurs throughout Indian sculpture, and that the sensuous body of the woman and her association to nature through her representation with trees denotes the "unspoken link of women with fertility" and

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[261] Mughal portraits, unlike the Hindu miniature, were vertical in format and are characterized by placement of a central male figure in profile accompanied by a wide decorative border. Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Sacred and Profane in Indian Art,* 176.

that abundance was emphasized through "sexuality and…the accompanying seductive body."[262]

Painted over this women-as-tree figure are loosely drawn threads that cover her body like an Islamic veil. In one of Sikander's many descriptions of her use of the veil that counters the predominant assumption that the veil in her work is a critique of the Islamic practice, Sikander states that the veiled figure in her work:

> Refers to different levels of women's experiences. It is a marriage veil, it is a dressed form. It is a celebration of femaleness and not about oppression! It is a far cry from how some viewers perceive it—it isn't symbolic of women's traditional roles or symbolic of my own experience. It isn't a political symbol it is supposed to represent a universal experience. I paint it with memories of childhood in my mind, of growth.[263]

In a play of cultural hybridity, the figure in *Apparatus of Power* also has wings that appear vaguely European/Christian, and crouched beneath the hips of the voluptuous red silhouette is another gopi, and the central figure's face is obscured by a pentagram. While commonly connected with witchcraft, the symbol of the pentagram dates back to the Sumeric period, around 3300 B.C.E. According to some accounts, Babylonian priests identified the pentagram with Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, in other words, she is a goddess of dueling paradoxes.[264]

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[262] Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Sacred and Profane in Indian Art,* 79.

[263] Shahzia Sikander quoted in: Kristin Chambers, "Loose Threads," *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics,* (Ohio: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 2001), 18.

[264] "The eight-pointed star was the symbol of a deity in Mesopotamia, but was especially associated with the Great Goddess Isthar" in "Pre-Euclidian Geometry in the Design of Mission Churches of the Spanish Borderlands," *Journal of the Southwest,* vol. 48, No. 4 (Winter, 2006) 332. See also: Doris Ewing, "The Fall of Eve: Racism and Classism as a Function of Sexual Repression," *Race, Gender, and Class,* vol. 7, no. 1 (2000), 10-21.

Sikander states that her visual play between Hindu goddesses and Islamic veils was about the "interplay of both" because when the image of the goddess is reduced to a singular and stereotypical designation, it becomes just as problematic as western perceptions of the veil as oppressive and the women who wear them as in need of western liberation. Sikander states that in light of the multifaceted reality of any sign of woman, "the veiling and revealing becomes the cause and effect for me."[265] The cause and effect of veiling and revealing is never simple or singular, but is always enacted with an awareness of paradox.[266] Further, Sikander explains that her beheading or occlusion of women's faces in her works, "had a lot to do with the expunging of the female" or "the removal of the feminine in certain cultures," and that she wanted to look for the, unfamiliar in the hidden, the one that elicits fear." Fear suggests power, and in this image, the value of the female is realized as collective, powerful, and overwhelming. Woman, is as the title itself suggests, an apparatus of power. Sikander stresses that, though these motifs occurred primarily in her works on paper in the 1990s, that when she revisits these earlier works now, she still sees how relevant these themes still are to her work, and that "we are still in that same moment of incredible uncertainty about the value of the female." [267]

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[265] Shahzia Sikander quoted in: Kristin Chambers, "Loose Threads," *Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics,* 18.

[266] As Sikander remarks of her engagement with paradox, "I want to frustrate meaning by maintaining that edge of multiplicity and contradiction," qtd in Meg Linton, "Stockpiling and Dissemination," *Shahzia Sikander: Dissonance to Detour, (*Los Angeles: Ben Maltz Gallery & Otis College of Art and Design, 2005), 7.

[267] Claire Brandon, "Conversation with Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power," Recorded Interview. Asia Society, November 13, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G82PIHyET68.

Fatima Mernissi's work allows a further contextualization of how Sikander empowers the value of the female through a heightened engagement with sexuality. Mernissi's writing underscores a feminist potential for Islamic thought, a radical notion in terms of how the west conceives of Islam. In her essay, "The Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality," Mernissi utilizes Islam's strict separation and surveillance of women as demonstrative of their immense "sexual power." As Mernissi states, "the whole Muslim organization of social interaction and spatial configuration can be understood in terms of women's … power. The social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate her power and neutralize its disruptive effects."[268] Sikander repeatedly describes her desire to evoke a feminine space for spirituality, as well as a feminine power. In the context of Mernissi's theorizations, this also connects Sikander's work to Hindu conceptualizations of women's sexuality as a metaphor for connecting with the divine. Sikander's engagement with feminine sexuality is a linking to both Islamic and Hindu thought about the power of women's sexuality, and through her animation, performs the possibility of women's liberation through the power of the sexuality.

Sikander's representation of the woman in the abstracted and moving form of the hair silhouette prohibits the Enlightenment ideal of "true knowledge." In moving beyond singular figuration, Sikander renders the woman's body as in excess of the visible, and thus beyond the scopic regime of power. Excess enables transformation even as it marks woman as unknowable, especially since we

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[268] Fatima Mernissi, "The Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality," *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society, (*Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 33.

cannot see her face. Thus, the work *Apparatus of Power,* can be read as Sikander's early visualization of a woman whose body exceeds that which is visible, and in doing, prohibits the scopic regime from knowing and containing her, as Yegenoglu and others have illustrated. It is this idea that finds another form through an engagement with duration and abstraction in her later works. If the figure of woman remains unknowable, her power is derived as a threat.

Vrinda Dalmiya defines the term used for Hindu goddesses, Devi, as "not only a suprahuman deity but [also]… simultaneously a principle in the inner and outer realms. An act of worship thus consists in dwelling on a deity, on a vital principle (internal to the body) and on a cosmic principle all at once." In this sense, the conceptualization of Hindu goddesses cannot be easily reduced to simple dichotomies. As Sikander herself states, the goddess figure in her works "refers to empowerment," but that there is also "a dark side… where there is reference to destruction… whether it's destruction of evil or good is left in the background."[269]

It is this same notion of paradox that Vrinda Dalmiya utilizes for theorizing feminist agency for Hindu goddesses in her essay "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali." As Dalmiya notes, just because "an image has been (and can be) manipulated to serve the ends of patriarchy does not imply that it has no positive value or that it cannot be further manipulated to serve other ends. It is the possibility of such an alternative encasing of a spiritual

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[269] Art 21, "Interview with Shahzia Sikander: 'Chaman.'"

phenomenon that is being suggested here."[270] Similarly, Sikander appropriates the

image of the sexualized gopi, and the power she represents through her ability to

connect with the divine through her (sexual) worship of Krishna, as well as the

associations of female hair as erotic and powerful, transforming them into a

powerful visualization of the power of the feminine. Through her theorization of

bhakti or Kali worship, Dalmiya locates a possibility for a radical feminist agency

to be performed through the act of worshipping Kali. Dalmiya further argues that

Kali worship represents not only a "dramatic reconstruction of femininity but of

selfhood in general" where the spiritual goal of the devotee "involves a

deconstruction of 'master identity'" that is also necessary "for the ethico-political

struggles for justice." It is this concept that links Sikander's appropriation of

Hindu goddesses and gopis to Islamic abstraction and geometry, which as Araeen

suggests, offers an "allegory for human equality."[271]

In hymns about Kali, she is frequently described as having wild,

uncontainable hair. Patrick Olivelle theorizes the meanings of women's hair in a

Hindu context, noting that "disheveled and flying hair may indicate the demonic

and the female outside of male control," and as such, loose and wild hair signals a

"liminal and dangerous status."[272] Dalmiya includes several examples of hymns,

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[270] Vrind Dalmiya, "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali," *Hypatia,* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter 2000) 133, 128.
[271] Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History," 518.
[272] Patrick Olivelle, "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions," 12-16. The idea of loose hair as signaling a dangerous femininity is further explored in Madhu Bazaz Wango, *Images of Indian Goddesses: Myths, Meanings, and Models,* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2003), 147. Wango states, "In the Hindu social context women's loose hair reflects the paradoxical qualities of power and pollution. On

one begins with the lines "Mother, incomparably arrayed,/ Hair flying, stripped down,/ You battle-dance on Shiva's heart" The hymn references a common image of Kali naked and intoxicated dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva, wearing, as Dalmiya describes, "nothing except a garland of human heads around her neck, a girdle of severed human hands around her waist, and infant corpses as earrings." This terrifying image, however, is described in terms of her being an, as Dalmiya notes, "impossible beauty" and "mother." This seeming paradox, between the terrifying and the beautiful mother, for Dalmiya, represents "a collapse of typically 'Western' binary thinking." Dalmiya says that Kali "exceeds what is allowed by the traditional construction of "mother," and that further,

> As a symbol of femininity, Kali may be read in two ways: as serving patriarchal purposes and emerging from male fear of female sexuality; or as a genuine feminine self-assertion and power, a mother who is not afraid of stepping out of the conventions of motherhood to express herself--- her rage and her needs.

In the essay, Dalmiya proposes an alternative way of conceptualizing Kali: "what is of feminist significance in this image is not simply the paradoxes in the image of Kali but rather a devotee's worshipful *attitude* towards Kali, called *bhakti.*"[273] Spiritual liberation is created through *bhakti,* which in its simplest form refers to the absolute devotion to a god. It is this conception of bhakti, and in particular the use of Hindu metaphors of women's sexuality to describe it, that will be addressed in the next section through an engagement with the figure of the gopi as well as the gopi hair silhouette.

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one hand it suggests the goddess's independence; on the other it is a sign of impurity (which also is the power of the goddess)."
[273] Vrinda Dalmiya, "Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali," 133-134, 126.

If loose, wild hair represents a female "outside of male control," then this offers a physical rationalization behind not only what Mernissi challenges is a misinterpretation of the meaning of the *hajib* in the Koran, in which the *hijab* is believed to be sent from heaven to cover women,[274] but also of modern Islamic calls for women to be veiled, where for every loose strand of hair the punishment was one year in hell.**[275]** Ashraf Zahedi, in her essay about the contested meaning of the veil in Iran, observes that both religion and politics have associated women's hair with sexuality.[276] As Carol Delaney observes in the context of women's hair in Turkish society,

> Women's sexuality is not allowed to run rampant, or to be displayed; instead it is covered and put under strict control. Women's hair, it would seem, comes to symbolize the physical entanglements by which men are ensnared, and thus must be kept out of sight.[277]

Zahedi further illustrates that "while head hair in its physical form is sexless, the symbolism and meaning of hair is highly gendered, and female head hair has become a symbol of sexuality" and that because of this, in Iran faced with encroaching western influence, "the meaning and symbolism of hair again took center stage… According to conservative Islamic view, 'it has been proven that

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[274] Mernissi's exploration of the original meaning of the *hijab* in the Koran as well as during the life of the Prophet breaks down definitions of it into three distinct realms. "The being the visual one: to hide something from sight." The second definition is spatial: "to hide something from sight," which is a definition that is "spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold." The final definition Mernissi describes as "ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidding… A space hidden by *hijab* is a forbidden space." Mernissi ultimately concludes that to interpret the *hijab* as a scrap of cloth meant to cover a woman is "truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it of its meaning." Fatima Mernissi, *Woman in Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry,* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1991)*,* 93, 95.

[275] Carol Delaney, "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol 67, No 4 (October 1994), 165.

[276] Ashraf Zahedi, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies,* vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 76

[277] Carol Delaney, "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," 164.

the hair of a woman radiates a kind of ray that affects a man, exciting him out of the normal state' (Tabari and Yaganeh 1982, 110)."[278] Inverting this external designation of the power of women's sexuality (conceived of in order to rest responsibility solely on the woman), Sikander imagines an alternative space in which it is woman's sexuality that offers liberation (rather than a justification for their oppression).

Additionally, this idea of using the Islamic veil to cover the erotic nature of women's hair gives an interesting insight into Yegenoglu's theorizations of the veil in western imagination as concealing a mystery, and that this desire to reveal and unveil is also a "*scene of seduction."*[279] While Yegenoglu does not theorize hair as Zahedi does, she nonetheless observes that the veiled woman is both a "disturbance and obsession… leading to a textual dialectic which, with its rhetorical excess, gives rise to the tropology of the veil."[280] This rhetorical excess of the veil, that which is beyond or underneath it, is quite literally a woman's hair. It is in this context that this chapter presents the charged imagery of hair as a feminist sign that evokes the paradox of destruction and embrace in Sikander's works.

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[278] In her essay, Ashraf Zahedi "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes," references several scholars who have noted the erotic nature of female hair: (Ebersole 1998, 77; Lang 1995, 43; Olivelle 1998, 20-1).

[279] Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* 44-45 (Italics original).

[280] Mernissi in *Women in Islam* states: "Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West. Only by keeping in mind this double perspective—women's body as symbolic representation of community—can we understand what the *hijab* signified in year 5 of the Hejira, what stakes it represented, and what stakes it brings into play in today's explosive, passionate, and sometimes violent debates." Fatima Mernissi, *Women in Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry,* 99-100.

Sikander's use of hair, and especially gopi hair, can be read as a mode of resistance and an assertion of agency. Her works explore the radical possibility of hair liberated from patriarchal control. Islamic abstraction in art, which has been theorized as promoting the individual's union with God, also provides an alternative understanding of the *hijab,* which Mernissi points out in one interpretation it meant to veil, or to separate and keep away, the individual from God. Mernissi states, that in the Muslim Sufi tradition, a Muslim must aspire to have "access to boundless spiritual horizons," and that, further, "in this context the *hijab* is an essentially negative phenomenon, a disturbance, a disability."[281] Thus in unveiling a boundless spiritual horizon is an envisioning of one of the most central tenants of Islam. As Mernissi notes, "for mystics, the opposite of the *hijab* is the *kashf,* the discover."

Through this metaphorical leap, the bridge to heaven (and thus God), which the Islamic conception of Sirat, describes as thin as a single strand of hair upon which the individual must walk and where the wicked fall from it into hell,[282] can then be understood in Sikander's transformation as the hair-bridge that unites women, not as that which . Throughout Shahzia Sikander's works threads of hair connect women's bodies, in other pieces, wild and loose hair obscure their bodies from sight, and hair is frequently represented as pouring over

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[281] Ibid, 100-101.

[282] Carol Delaney, "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," 165. Delaney notes that "hair may also evoke the [Islamic] image of Sirat, the bridge over which souls of the dead must walk. It is said to be the thickness of only one strand of hair; it slices the wicked like a razor and they fall into hell, but for the righteous it widens out into a path leading to heaven."

or exceeding the boundaries of the miniature page or spiraling beyond the boundaries of the projection screen.

Gopis with the Good Hair

Gopis, through their sexual union with Krishna, are hailed as representing the democratizing potential of Hinduism, in which even a lowly milkmaid may experience a divine encounter. The taboo of women's hair in Islamic as both an object for patriarchal control and object of male lust combines with the sexual spiritual reality of gopis across Sikander's repeated use of them and their abstracted hair silhouette. Gopis then stand as a central force within Sikander's practice, transgressing Islamic-Pakistani's dismissal of Hinduism and figural representations, as well as exceeding the patriarchal context that Hinduism similarly ascribes to gopis, as well as women more generally. The hair of the gopi, then, is the fulcrum upon which Sikander's engagement with feminism rests.

The women who populate the Mughal throne room in *SpiNN* are gopis (which translates to milkmaids), who abandon their husbands and responsibilities to follow and worship the Hindu god Krishna.[283] Gopis are central characters in illuminated Hindu epics, as they embody the ideal form of worship. The sexuality of the gopis, reserved only for Krishna, is a common leitmotif in Hinduism to describe total surrender of the individual soul, and oneness with the divine.[284] Tracy Coleman describes that Krishna's interactions with the amorous gopis has

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[283] *SpiNN* is the first time the gopi and their hair were animated, see: Brandon, Claire, "Drawing in the Digital Field: Shahzia Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010) *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East,* Vol 35, no. 3 (December, 2015): 492-504.

[284] Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Sacred and Profane in Indian Art,* 21.

been celebrated across India for millennia in Krishna's life is his moonlit tryst

with the gopis. The most famous story of them recounts Krishna playing his flute

in a forest underneath the moon. Vanamali, in his book on Krishna, describes that

as Krishna put the flute to his lips he

> poured out his divine call of love. The music drenched the air of
> Vrindavana and flowed into the hearts of the gopis, making them forget
> everything else. Neither duty, not honor, nor husband, nor child, nor house
> did they have… Leaving everything, they flew to their tryst with their
> lover.[285]

The gopis abandon their earthly responsibilities and husbands in order to fulfill

their sexual desire for union with Krishna.

Illuminated Hindu texts that detail the gopis interactions with Krishna,

such as the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita Govinda,* became immensely popular

under the Mughal rule during the sixteenth century across what is now India and

Pakistan. Purana means ancient story, and the *Bhagavata* is considered to be one

of the most important texts for Hindus. The *Bhagavata Purana* narrates the

legend of Vishnu (and his reincarnation as Krishna) and the *Gita-govinda*

describes the passionate love of Krishna and Radha, who is herself a gopi, but the

one most favored by Krishna in later texts.[286]   These epics are narratives within a

narrative, filled with stories and theologies of divinities, kings, queens,

exceptional devotees of Krishna, Vishnu, Siva, and the Goddess. In these texts,

gopis are considered the highest devotees because of their abandonment of their

husbands and lives in order to follow and worship Krishna. As Jonathan

Edelmann states in *Hindu Theology and Biology: The Bhagavata Purana and*

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[285] Vanamali, *The Complete Life of Krshna: Based on the Earliest Oral Traditions and the Sacred Scriptures,* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, reprint, 2012). Np, Kindle Edition.
[286] Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Sacred and Profane in Indian Art,* 160.

Contemporary Theory, "gopi women are the highest embodied beings on the earth: their love for Govinda [Krishna], the soul of everything, is perfected. No one else is given such adoration in the *Bhagavata*"[287] Tracy Coleman similarly states that,

> Because the story depicts simple cowherd women enjoying intimate contact with Krishna without knowing he is God, scholars have often viewed the gopis and their spontaneous love as proof that *bhakti* is a democratizing force allowing all people, regardless of caste or gender, unmediated access to divinity and deliverance from *samsara* [the cycle of rebirth].

Countering this theorization, Coleman argues that the gopis are never liberated, and their erotic tryst with Krishna, their form of passionate *bhakti* with him, is, "in fact, about domination and subordination, and the gopis are women disempowers, glorified precisely as Krishna's slaves, and their perfect *viraha-bhakti* effectively collaborates with patriarchy."[288]

Despite this, Tracy Coleman, in her re-reading of the story of Krishna and the gopis, suggests that gopis represent a counter to the dominant cultural conceptions of femininity and womanhood, even within their traditional representations. In this context, Coleman further argues that it is women in particular who are privileged in their intimate relations with Krishna, even when they transgress social norms by leaving their husbands to worship him. For

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[287] Jonathan Edelmann, *Hindu Theology and Biology: The Bhagavata Purana and Contemporary Theory.* Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2012. Digital access: December 5, 2016.

[288] Tracy Coleman, "Viraha-Bhakti and Strigharma: Re-Reading the Story of Krishna and the Gopis in the Harivamsa and the Bhagavata Purana," 385-386.

Coleman, this suggests that the gopis in particular reveal that *bhakti* is a "socially

subversive force in an otherwise conservative culture."[289]

As this interpretation makes clear, the figure of the gopi represents a

possibility for feminine empowerment *through* religious devotion. This is

envisioned in Sikander's adaptation of the gopi figure as beyond male-control and

thus as a sign of feminine spirituality. Sikander describes her recurring use of the

gopi motif in her works as allowing her to see the gopi in a

> variety of ways—one being to use humor to address gender and power
> hierarchies. In this case I am focusing on the gopi as a formal device for
> abstraction. The multiplicity of the gopis symbolizes women's views of
> their own spirituality as opposed to a male-dominated view. Despite being
> marginalized, women have found ways to create their own spiritual
> space.[290]

The idea of creating a spiritual space for women, as Sikander describes, is an

important component of her work that has yet to be properly delineated in

scholarship.

Linda Eilene Sanchez traced the gopi figures Sikander uses throughout

numerous works on paper in the 1990s through the digital animation *SpiNN* to a

Bhagavata Purana miniature page from around 1700 titled "Krishna Steals the

Clothes of the Maidens of Vraja."[291] [Figure 4.9] The scene is a popular one that

depicts the gopis bathing in a river. As they bathe, the trickster god Krishna hides

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[289] Ibid, 385. While Coleman problematizes this later on in her essay, this observation perfectly accounts for the way in which Sikander employs the figure of the gopi, for the gopi in her works, exist beyond social constructs and patriarchal control.

[290] Ian Berry, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis*, *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis* (Sarasota Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2004), 15.

[291] Linda Eilene Sanchez, "Representational Subversions and the Limits of Postcoloniality: Shahzia Sikander's Strategic Contemporaneity," (Dissertation: University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Join PhD Program, June 2009), 96.

in a tree and steals their clothing. In the center of the composition is a tree, its flat outline is filled with stylized leaves in the midst of which is the blue figure of Krishna. The colorful clothes of the gopis hang on the invisible branches of the tree, interrupting the continuity of the stylized leaves. The same postures and gestures of the gopis from the early 18th century *Bhagavata Purana* are repeated in much of Sikander's works on paper beginning around 1994.

Gopis are traditionally depicted in both text and miniature paintings as lost and hysterical with grief when Krishna is absent, and when he is present, they are infatuated and frenzied in their devotion to him.[292] In Sikander's re-representation of them, however, Krishna is not depicted, and the gopis are never distraught in his absence. Rather, they are always calm and content with each other's presence. Sikander's gopis do not even seem aware that they should be longing for Krishna, or that he even exists. Sikander states that her use of the gopis are a part of her technique of layering, where "the layers are read like part of a language, strains of myths can be knit together from them and familiar fables can be conjured, albeit in incomplete or abbreviated forms." Sikander continues, wondering, "are the gopis who lack Krishna's guidance truly lost?"[293]

Sikander first began experimenting with the figure of the gopi in her early works on paper in the 1990s. Her work on paper, *Then and N.O.W—Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella* (1997) represents an early engagement with both the figure of the gopi and with loose hair as both a veil to obscure the woman's body from objectification and as a mode of entanglement [Figure 4.10]. The setting is

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[292] Tracy Coleman, "Viraha-Bhakti and Strigharma: Re-Reading the Story of Krishna and the Gopis in the Harivamsa and the Bhagavata Purana," 393.
[293] Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 15.

typical of a Mughal miniaturist flattened architectural background, in which inside and outside mingle seamlessly with one another within the confines of the horizontal page. Layered over this is a grid of round circles. Seated to the right side of the page is a woman whose long black hair covers her entirely, mimicking the role of the burka. Directly below her are two nude gopis borrowed from one of the embracing pairs from the 18ᵗʰ century *Bhagavata Purana* page. In her iteration, one of the gopis has green skin that contrasts with the pale skin of the other as they wrap their arms around each other and look upwards. The green skin could be seen as a humorous visual pun on the "alien" nature of the nonwestern woman to the western viewer. Their loose, long dark hair tangles together to the point where it is impossible to discern where one's hair begins and the other ends. [294] Further, their entangled hair also combines with the flowing hair of the seated woman in the center, the Islamic Rapunzel. The tangled mass of dark hair from the three female figures expands beyond the border of the miniaturist page. This attends to precisely to the signatory status of female hair as erotic and empowering, exceeding attempts at patriarchal control as well as the confines of the page itself.

As Carol Delany remarks in her essay "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," that "women's sexuality is not allowed to run rampant, or to be displayed; instead it is covered and put under strict control. Women's hair, it would seem, comes to symbolize the physical entanglements by which men are

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[294] It is also worth noting that the homoerotic aspect of these nude embraces warrants further theorization and contextualization. While beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation, it is a topic that is addressed in my forthcoming essay on Sikander's use of homosocial and homoerotic imagery in her works.

ensnared."[295] In this image, hair covers the body of the Islamic Rapunzel, prohibiting the desiring gaze to *know* it (as Yegenoglu theorizes). Hair is also presented in this image as loose and wild, presenting a trap of entanglement as well as a mode of exceeding the patriarchal limitations placed on women and their sexuality. Sikander remarks of this work and the layering "obliterates underlying information," and is a process that "suggests the trapping of time and repeated removal of marks or layering leads to an accumulation of this loss."[296] The information that is obliterated here is precisely what can be used to gain control over: the body of the central figure.

Like with her other titles, *Then and N.O.W.: Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella* evokes a powerful cross-cultural and cross-temporal evocation of women. In the western fairytale, Rapunzel's loose and flowing long hair is central to her liberation, even if in the original story this liberation comes in the form of a man coming to rescue her. The visual evocation of Cinderella in this image is less clear, is she represented by the portrait of a South Asian woman surrounded by a white halo? Or is her presence evoked, through yet another cross-cultural reference, by the Japanese sandal containing a red pedicured depicted in the top border of the image? The multiple possibilities for interpretation are exactly what Sikander intends. The title also asks: what is Rapunzel telling Cinderella? Is she suggesting that she rescue herself? Rapunzel's hair, which covers her body like a Burka, as well as the gopi's loose and entangled hair that exceed the border of the

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[295] Carol Delaney, "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," 164.
[296] Fereshteh Daftari, "Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Fereshteh Daftari," 58.

miniature page, appear to suggest that it is hair that has become Sikander's visual sign of female self-liberation.

Homi Bhabha connects Sikander's use of hair as a motif in her works to artist Mona Hatoum's piece *Keffieh* (1993-1999), which takes the Palestinian headscarf worn by men and is a symbol of the Palestinian struggle for liberation [Figure 4.11]. Bhabha notes that this masculine sign of political resistance as marked by a "macho aura." In Hatoum's work, she embroiders the Keffieh with women's hair, leaving the hair flowing beyond the square frame of the cloth "in a way that breaks the symmetry of the symbol and contests the fiber of male resistance." Hatoum describes this female interruption of this macho sign of Palestinian liberation as bringing a "female voice to the protest." Bhabha remarks that incorporating this "fragment of the woman's body" into the keffieh reinserts women's point of view "through the embroidered strands of hair that hang loose beyond the boundary, breaking the pictorial grid" and thus "redefining the surface of political struggle." Bhabha ties this to Sikander's use of hair that also flows beyond the borders of the miniaturist page.[297]

It is the hair, in both artists' works, that push symbolic interpretation and representation itself into an excessive space that necessarily and deliberately breaks the boundaries of masculine symbols. In *Then and N.O.W—Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella,* hair appropriates the form of the burka, obscuring the woman's body except for her eyes. But the hair also moves beyond this adaptation as it mingles with the loose and wild flowing hair of the two embracing gopis

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[297] Homi K. Bhaba, "Another Country," 34. Mona Hatoum quoted here: *Mona Hatoum: Images from Elsewhere.* Week 36, exhibition brochure (London: fig-1, 2000) n.p.

directly below the Islamic Rapunzel. Hair connects women with each other, and in its excess, pushes interpretation beyond straightforward readings of women's hair as forbidden from view, reversing what the Islamic veil is supposed to obscure: here, hair obscures the body of the woman, and also moves beyond the boundaries of the page.

In *Gopi Crisis* (2001), the same figures of the gopis in their nude form and identical hair buns embrace and conspire with one another [Figure 4.12]. They twirl each other's long strands of hair. The hair strands loop across the page, wrapping around some of the gopis like an umbilical cord, physically uniting them. Rather than a single strand of hair as damning, either under Islamic ordinances that mandate a woman must cover her entire hair, nor in the conceptualization of Sirat as a bridge single strand of hair wide, hair in this image does not divide, it does not cast the nude gopis into hell, but rather, unites them and embraces them as it multiplies their individual strength through physically connecting them. In this sense, *Gopi Crisis* plays with the metaphor of a single strand of hair as damning women and offers instead the possibility of a single strand of hair to liberate women by uniting them in collectivity.

Loose strands of hair, liberated from their bodily referent, co-exist in the composition with the stylized hair buns on the gopis themselves. Hair is represented as both liberated from and attached to the body. Like the miniature tradition in which she is trained, there is no horizon line, no place for the gopis to situate themselves in real space. Instead, in the boundless geography of the blank page, they float across the page. Abstract black clouds that evoke the sensation of

assigning shapes to Rorschach ink blots hover just beyond the center of the page

where the gopis interact, looming ominously. What is the crisis to which the title

refers? Krishna is absent, and the gopis are without their patriarchal leader, which

in traditional depictions of them results in crisis, but here, there are no signs of

crisis. Perhaps the crisis is not about the gopis at all, but rather, what their

liberation from Krishna represents to the patriarchal order.

What, as Elizabeth Grosz calls for, does a transformation of the "present

as patriarchal, as racist, as ethnocentric" through the addition of feminist theory

involve?[298] For Sikander, this transformation is rendered visible in her early

digital animation *SpiNN*. The durational aspect of *SpiNN* allows the viewer to see

this very process of transformation, which is the line of flight into

deterritorialization, or abstraction of the figure of the gopi (which, caught in the

logic of representation will always have the potential to be exotified) to the hair-

silhouette-bird. Sikander's evolution into digital animation allows her work to

resist this exotification through movement and its state as an abstracted *sign* of the

feminine. Animating the abstraction of gender into a force, Sikander transforms

the excessive positioning of the South Asian woman in western thought

(epistemology) into a work that is grounded in a exploration of the ontology of

being. As Sikander remarks, her continued engagement with the hair silhouette is

a form of disruption as a means of exploration, where "the notion is to unhinge so

that the female account or narrative is freed to create its own narrative. Once

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[298] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, 82.

divorced from their prescribed representations, [they are] propelled into a new life."[299]

Sikander states, a sign of race, religion, ethnicity, or gender may be "a traditional form," but that "through the device of multiplication, it releases new associations" that are always in flux. [300] Sikander states that,

> by isolating the gopi character I emphasized its potential to cultivate new associations. The split from its feminine origin is indicative of my interest in exploring the space of sexuality and eroticism within a certain overt and controlled system of representation. The introduction of anthropomorphic forms cam about when I started to take apart Eva Hesse's work as a framing device back in 1993, as well as my exploration of the feminine via Cixous."[301]

The hair silhouettes are birds, or bats, whatever they may be identified as, they fly. In "Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous writes: "flying is woman's gesture…. For centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away… [women] take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in… dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down."[302] In line with this, Sikander describes of her use of abstraction as part of "searching for a form that has potential beyond its appearance, a form which has the ability to change meaning."[303]

In *SpiNN,* the gopis repeat across the screen, and in their dissipation they become impossible to be pinned down. As Sikander describes, the animated hair silhouette creates a "kinetic thrust [through] undulating movement" and in this

[299] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."
[300] Fereshteh Daftari, "Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Fereshteh Daftari," 56.
[301] Ibid 64.
[302] Helene Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs,* Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976), 887.
[303] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 46.

way, "the gopi particles function as a force and engine for survival" while simultaneously maintaining an "emphasis on flux." She notes that when the gopi hair "sheds its reference to its origin, to gender, and when isolated and multiplied turns into bats, floating helmets, or even abstract forms." [304] As Feresteh Daftari describes that in Sikander's abstraction of the gopis through the "reduction to their hair, disengaged from their usual narrative burden, they wheel and dance in the supposedly neutral zone of abstraction, quintessences of themselves."[305]

Gopis are hailed as supreme beings for their connection to the divine. Taken out of a solely Hindu context, and taken out of the patriarchal context of their identities as tied only to Krishna, Sikander finds in the gopi figure an embodiment of feminine power and of feminine spirituality. The reduction of the gopi to their hair refutes the ordinance that Islamic woman must cover their hair. It is also a refusal of what Homi Bhabha's observation of Sikander's use of gopi hair in both *SpiNN* and *Parallax:*

> The 'widowed' gopis, abandoned by their God-lover, start disappearing without a trace, leaving behind only bolts of their hair. Is this a sly inversion of the Hindu ritual of widowhood in which the widow shaves her hair and presents herself to the community as a symbol of pity and charity? Sikander's response to such a heartless and discriminatory social practice consists in resorting to the symbolic energy of abstraction.[306]

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[304] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."

[305] Fereshteh Daftari, "Islamic or Not," *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, (2006), 15.

[306] Homi K Bhabha, "Beginning Again," 39**.** Patrick Olivelle, in his tripartite division of the types of hair employed in Hindu symbolism, (groomed control of hair, shaving of the hair, and neglect of hair) describes that "people who shave their head are forbidden from sex" and that this type of sexual control functioned for widows as a mode of social control. Patrick Olivelle, "Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions," 20.

The hair motif is central to her feminist aesthetic of abstraction that pushes interpretation into an excessive space of multiplicity of meaning, interpretation, and possibilities. Homi Bhabha describes of Sikander's use of the gopi hair as sign of the feminine, stating that "it is only when feminist agency finds an embodied *and* abstract sign of symbolic representation—the hair bird—that it can transform the language of art by providing it with an aesthetic and affective vocabulary of renewal and pleasure, rather than a more direct 'message' of political resistance."[307]

Islamic Spirituality/Liquid Hair

Parallax (2013) represents Sikander's use of the gopi hair in a different context entirely [Figure 4.13]. The large-scale installation was first displayed at the Sharjah Biennial in 2013. Utilizing collaborations with Arabic poets, and Chinese-American composer Du Yun. It is one of her most ambitious projects to date. It is comprised of a fifteen-minute animation that is derived from hundreds of hand drawn illustrations and paintings.[308] The title of the piece "suggests a shifting point of view, disorientation and new ways of seeing." The piece, like *SpiNN* is based in present day circumstances, in this case, the oil fields in the United Arab Emirates and the large population of Pakistani laborers whom it employs. Casey Primel describes that the location of the Sharjah Biennial is now a major exhibition site for global contemporary art, and that, "ironically it is the

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[307] Bhabha, Homi K. "Beginning Again," 40.

[308] Muhammad Yusuf, "Ode to Sharjah," *The Gulf Today* (Thursday May 9, 2013), online, np http://www.shahziasikander.com/ARCHIVE/PDF/Ode.pdf

gulf that South Asian artists are most insistently confronted by the Janus-faced nature of late capital as both intimate and alien."[309]

    Parallax examines Sharjah's position beside the Strait of Hormutz, and its history of power tensions due to its proximity to water and oil. Sikander notes that this historical reality "became fodder for visual play between solid and liquid representations,"[310] and that the work is an exploration of the colonial legacies of the corporate enterprise.[311] Further, Sikander utilized the gopi hair for her evocations of liquid. She states, "all of the liquid states in the animation have been culled from images of gopis…. [they] transform into large swaths of static noise that hover between multiple representations, ranging from oceans, water and oil, to flocks of birds and patterns of human migration." Thus the gopis, freed from their original source, become engines to "cultivate new associations." Echoing this, Sikander emphasizes that there is no fixed viewing point for the animation, it hovers between aerial and internal, conflating the two until they collapse into one another.[312] The screen for the animation is curved and occupies well over twenty feet, enveloping the viewer entirely.

    At the beginning of the animation, thousands of gopi hair silhouettes pulse over the long horizontal stretch of the screen, looking like static from a television. Slowly a watercolor-like painting of clouds presses the static down until it is out of the screen [Figure 4.14- 4.16]. Elsewhere in the animation, gopi

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[309] Casey Primel, in collaboration with Anupama Rao and Susanna Ferguson, "On Artists and Artisans: The Experimental Worlds of Shahzia Sikander," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (2015), 490.

[310] Vishakha N Desai, "Intertwined Identities: Interview with Shahzia Sikander," *artasiapacific,* Issue 85 (September/October, 2013), 86.

[311] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."

[312] Vishakha N. Desai, "Intertwined Identities: Interview with Shahzia Sikander," 86.

hair swarms into spheres, hovering over the lushly painted clouds. The projection then shifts to an oily dark swirl of reds and blues evoking the forms oil takes when it sits on top of water [Figure 4.17]. Erupting oil shoots vertically over this abstracted plane [Figure 4.18]. Later, oil extractors, commonly called "Christmas trees," for the shape the pumps and levers give to it, appear as the only solid representation, as in, it is the only form that does not transform into something else [Figure 4.19- 4.20].[313] The solid form of the oil extractors is eventually overwhelmed by oil and replaced with swarms of gopi hair [Figure 4.21]. Throughout the animation, human voices recite in Arabic as musical tones reverberate and clash with one another acoustically.[314] The animation ends where it began: with the gopi hair, this time in the shape of rapidly revolving spheres [4.22-4.23].

Sikander's interest in the contrast between liquid (gopi hair) and solid (oil extractors) resonates with Luce Irigaray's essay "The 'Mechanics' of Fluid," where she conceives of fluid as feminine energy, and mechanics as masculine energy that seeks to contain and control the feminine. Irigaray notes that if one examines the properties of fluids, their designation of "real" is troubled by a "*physical reality* that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the

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[313] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."
[314] Sikander states in an interview with Muhammad Yusuf that the music was partly created in Sharjah, in collaboration with three local poets as well as with Chinese-American composer Du Yun. Muhammad Yusuf, "Ode to Sharjah," *The Gulf Today* (Thursday May 9, 2013).

characteristic features of nature."[315] What Irigaray means here is that the very

nature of fluids, that is, their physical reality, cannot be theorized or reduced by

mathematics. Their nature exceeds this logic, defying the assumption that the

world may be reduced to known, entirely quantifiable entities. Irigaray is not

saying that woman is fluid, but rather, she utilizes the metaphor of the

unquantifiable nature of fluids in order to describe the positioning of women

within the phallocentric ordering of thought. Continuing this metaphor, Irigaray

shifts to discuss how the feminine has not been conceptualized. She states:

> While she waits for these divine rediscoveries, awoman serves (only) as a
> *projective map* for the purpose of guaranteeing the totality of the system—
> the excess factor of its "greater than all"; she serves as a *geometric prop*
> for evaluating the "all" of the extension of each of its "concepts" including
> those that are still undetermined, serves as fixed and congealed *intervals*
> between their definitions in "language."

That is, woman, or the concept of woman, remain fixed and congealed in order

for the figure of the woman to be constituted as a blank other that allows man to

conceive of himself as subject. If woman remains static, that is, as "geometric

prop" her figure "guarantees the totality of the system." But what if woman

exceeds these designations and takes up the concept of geometry in her own

terms?

Irigaray anticipates the criticism as the absurdity of comparing

psychoanalytic constructions of gender to fluid mechanics, but maintains that if

anyone objects to her heavy reliance on metaphors, the response should be that

the question itself "impugns the privilege granted to metaphor (a quasi solid)

over metonymy (which is more closely allied to fluids), Or—suspending the

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[315] Luce Irigaray, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluid," *This Sex Which is Not One,* Trans by
Catherine Porter, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 106-107.

status of truth accorded to these … "dichotomous oppositions"—to reply that in any event all language is (also) metaphorical."[316] Irigaray maintains the validity of her metonymic use of fluids to state that it allows for a different understanding of sexual difference. This reading of sexual difference, through the (il)logic of fluids reveals that, as Irigaray states, *"since what is in excess with respect to form—for example, the feminine sex—is necessarily rejected as beneath or beyond the system currently in force."*[317] To reduce this concept for the purposes of my point, in this essay, fluidity is likened to the feminine sex as being in excess of that which can be known. Intriguingly, understanding mathematics not from a western perspective, but rather an Islamic one affords a way out of this problematic.

Dichotomies, such as between liquid and solid, masculine and feminine, infinite and intimate, drive Sikander's works. Through animation the element of duration is added to these conceptualizations, driving interpretation and meaning to nearly incomprehensible realities. This play of binaries, water and oil, aerial and internal, miniature and monumental is at the crux of Sikander's work. As Sikander describes of the work, "on the surface, the works are about another, but the vehicle in which they present themselves reveal yet another layer of meaning, that of feminism [or] whatever. These are not in opposition to each other, or even necessarily related, but rather, exist together and as such, inform one another."[318] This description coincides with Carol Brier's observation that the multiplicity of geometric patterning in Islamic art, and that, taken together, "the patterns seem to

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[316]Luce Irigaray, "The 'Mechanics' of Fluid," 110.
[317] Ibid, 110-111.
[318] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."

represent something larger than the forms of their individual expression… Each

[pattern] is not, then, a representation with a specific meaning, but rather pointing

to something else."[319] For Sikander, these conflicting signs and shapes ultimately

build to an evocation of the power of the feminine.

Sikander notes that shortly before she began working on *Parallax,* that she

began to explore "language in relation to the formal symbols of mathematics and

logic."[320] Astronomer Alan Hirshfeld defines parallax as "the apparent shift in an

object's position when viewed alternatively from different vantage points."

Hirshfeld states that the significance of this in astronomy is that "finding a stellar

parallax is central to measuring the universe."[321] E. S. Kennedy illustrates in his

essay "Parallax Theory in Islamic Astronomy," that the concept of parallax can be

traced back to "Hellenistic origin," but that it "received a new elegance of

expression through the Muslim-invented sine theorem." Kennedy notes that the

computation of parallax was found in a Persian manuscript along with a

description of an astronomical computing instrument invented by Jamshid Ghiath

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[319] Carol Brier, "Art and Mithai: Reading Geometry as Visual Commentary," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 41, no. 4 (September 2008), 504.

[320] Ian Berry, "A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," 7.

[321] Alan W Hirshfeld, *Parallax: The Race to Measure the Cosmos,* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 2001), xi quoted in: Marvin Bolt, "Review of *Parallax: The Race to Measure the Cosmos," Isis,* Vol. 93, No. 4 (December 2002).
As John Pond in 1817 writes of the use of parallax in astronomy, that it used "to ascertain whether the distances of the nearest fixed stars can be numerically expressed from satisfactory data, or whether it be so immeasurably great as to exceed all human powers either to conceive or determine." John Pond, "On the Parallax of the Fixed Stars," *Abstracts of the Papers Printed in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London,* vol. 2 (1815-1830), 65-66.

ud-Din al-Kashi, who died in 1429. Kennedy further states that the Islamic theory of parallax built off an earlier version from Hindu mathematics.[322]

The importance of mathematics for Islamic theology and philosophy is well established, as Carol Brier states, parallel to mathematical developments "were theological discussions that centered on the nature of God, and the relationships of man and the cosmos." Brier maintains that these philosophical and theological discussions are intimately linked to both Islamic architecture and geometric patterning in art. Brier argues that one must understand the relationship between Islamic theology, mathematics, and art, there must be a shift in focus "from style and history to ontology and cosmology."[323]

Rasheed Araeen describes a similar call for understanding Islamic geometry in his essay, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History." Araeen notes that, in Islamic art,

> geometry emerges as a sensory art form, not only revealing the complexity
> of its own formation but enshrining itself a rational discourse at the basis

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[322] E. S. Kennedy, "Parallax Theory in Islamic Astronomy," *Isis,* Vol. 45, No 1 (March, 1956), 33.
This intriguing history of parallax parallels with the rich tradition of cultural exchange found in South Asian miniature paintings during Mughal rule of the South Asian continent.
[323]Carol Brier, "Art and Mithai: Reading Geometry as Visual Commentary," 497.
Confirming Araeen's argument about the un-remarked importance of Islamic geometry, the connection to the mathematical explorations of the universe and the solar system in Islamic thought is directly connected to the development of Islamic geometric patterning and architecture. Carol Brier, presenting evidence of the regular meeting among Islamic mathematicians and artisans, states that "aperiodic patterns with five-fold symmetry may have been understood by craftsmen in Iran, if not mathematicians, hundreds of years before this phenomenon was discovered in the West." Further, the complexity of geometric patterning in Islamic art, the awareness of spatial ordering and spatial thinking in architecture reveals a profound connection with visual practices with "philosophical and theological discussions," all of which were emerging at the same time.

of Arab and Islamic civilization, and whose world-view opposes and supersedes the idea that places 'man' at the center of the universe.

What Araeen is suggesting here is that, opposed to the western binary construction of the west as rational and the east as spiritual, in Islamic thought, rationality is an intrinsic element to spirituality. The two terms cannot be neatly collapsed into western constructions of the binary, as Araeen's phrasing of his argument ultimately reveals the fundamental difference between Islamic and western thought. Araeen concludes that, "geometry in Islamic art thus represents a paradigm shift in the evolution of human thought from the observation of things and their representation as they appear to the eye to the creation of an art form whose sensuousness is the product of pure abstract thinking, thus giving the imagination enhanced power to think but also unprecedented freedom to create."[324]

It is this conceptualization of Islamic geometric patterning as giving the potential to radically shift human thought through abstraction and imagination that Sikander utilizes in her work. While this is referenced to in scholarship on her, it has yet to be delineated thoroughly in scholarship on her, an understanding of Islamic aesthetic provides significant insight into her practice.[325] Sikander's

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[324] Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History," 513.

[325] Fereshteh Daftari mentions Sikander's connection to Islamic geometry in the essay, "Islamic or Not?" *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, (2006), 10-27, and in Casey Primel, "On Artists and Artisans: The Experimental Worlds of Shahzia Sikander," 486-491. Daftari remarks that this move towards abstraction in this series may "recall the modernist idea of a universal language, free of cultural association, but as if to contradict that notion, Sikander points out that geometry is "fundamental to Islamic art." It is therefore important to contextualize Sikander's flight into abstraction as not part of the Western lineage of modernism, nor

engagement with architectural forms and geometric patterning originated in her

miniature training in Pakistan, which emphasized the medium's origins in Persian

manuscript painting. Further, before deciding to pursue art, Sikander studied

architecture for one year.[326] The Islamic bent to her initial training within the

nationalist sphere of the National College of the Arts as discussed earlier must be

considered central to not just to her early practice, but as also an element taken up

in her digital animation-based installations.

In an intriguing study, Laura Marks connects Sunni revival Islamic art to

new media art practices. Marks suggests that "imitating nature is not the source of

beauty in Islamic art of this period… rather beauty arises from the pleasure of

artifice. In their emphasis on artifice, both Sunni revival Islamic art and new

media are share qualities of the baroque." The word artifice here can be replaced

with abstraction, as abstraction in art historical thinking is the opposite of

academic naturalism. Describing the profoundly important first century Persian

theorist Al-Jurjani's writings on poetics, Marks notes that his works "lead to a

sense of divine harmony only if the recipient is willing to pursue a demanding

process of mental comparison. His aesthetics emphasize the in-between status of

geometry and other forms that mediate between the world of the senses and the

world of abstract ideas."[327] This process of mental comparison can also be found

in Sikander's works. In *Parallax*, the comparison between gopi hair and stylized

rendering of oil extractors (commonly called "Christmas trees" for their strange

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even a refutation of tradition, but rather, as a part of her artistic lineage as an Islamic
artist.

[326] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander," 37.

[327] Laura U Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 168-171.

shape) leads the viewer into a demanding contemplation of how these two could possibly relate.

If, as Sikander suggests, gopi hair is freed to make new associations in its appearance in *Parallax,* what is its association to the other abstracted figures in the installation, or, more broadly, to the Strait of Hormutz? The answer to this conundrum might rest in Sikander's interest on flux and duration. Her series, *51 Ways of Looking,* completed shortly before she began working on *Parallax,* is comprised of intricate drawings on paper. Ranging from meditations on the intricacy of Persian miniature borders, with its ornate floral patterning and dizzying geometry to geometrical studies of spheres, the series is inundated with gopi hair silhouettes [Figure 4.24, 4.25, 4.26]. This series can be seen as her ruminations on the potential of abstraction. Alongside her presentation of the drawings, Sikander writes:

> The construct is conceptual.
> The dialogue is open-ended.
> The narrative is unpredictable.
> The suggestion is subjective.
> The structure is infinite.
> The rhetoric is suspended.
> The memory is regurgitated.
> The ownership is continuous.
>
> I encourage the viewer to leave behind any cultural or personal assumptions, and in turn bring to these works as many ideas they can about the genesis of a circle and a rectangle. This suite of drawings was created from humble beginnings with a heavy dose of imagination.[328]

Sikander's statements align with theories of Islamic art and architecture. As Laura Marks notes, the seductive and ultimately baffling algorithmic patterns in Islamic

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[328] Shahzia Sikander, *51 Ways of Looking.* (New York: Sikkema Jenkins & Co Gallery, 2004), 55.

art "may initially appeal to reason, but ultimately… compel[s] a mystical response….arabesques and other kinds of pattern cajole our gaze and seek to search for what is beyond them, at the risk of perishing in the attempt, as a flame attracts a moth."[329]Therein lies Sikander's association of gopi hair with the Strait of Hormutz—this comparison draws endless conceptual and unpredictable relationships that invite the viewer to unfold them in order to, as Marks describes, "search for what is beyond them."

Jale Nejdet Erzen, in her essay "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge," states of the dizzying repetition of geometric patterns and floral motifs in Islamic architecture is an intentional act of destabilizing the perceiver's notions of what is real and what is imagined. As Erzen states, "repetition also points to the principle of constant change; what is otherwise perceived as simple and monotonous can be seen in many ways and from a variety of angles…. The spiral form of circulation and the circular form of directionality are also important movements for taking different points of view." Islamic aesthetics explains Sikander's practice of layering not as an interruption of tradition or an act of deconstruction, but rather, as a way of achieving multidimensionality, which as Erzen states, is "a way of implying the impossibility of knowing reality as it is."[330]

In this context, Sikander's flight into abstraction and duration in her digital animation based installations has much more to do with Islamic art than with

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[329] Laura U Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, 186.

[330] Jale Nejdet Erzen, "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism,* vol. 65, no. 1, Special Issue: Global Theories of the Arts and Aesthetics (Winter, 2007), 72.

western legacies of modernism. As such, Islamic patterning and geometry function as a vehicle in her later installations to exhibit and explore the notion of excess.

Erzen articulates that the difference between Islamic and western cultures can be regarded as a distinction between epistemology, the formation of knowledge, and ontology, which is queries the very nature of being. Erzen states that in Islam,

> there is a conviction that the relationships of humans to the world and human perceptions of it are not fixed, not codifiable, and cannot be captured using language that expresses generalized concepts…. Literal explanations provided by words are considered only superficial, so discussion is conducted in various kinds of riddles, and points of view are best expressed in symbols or in artistic expression.[331]

This desire to *know* as a being is different from the desire to *experience* as a being. This results in an aesthetic practice in which there is no fixed point of view, such as linear perspective. The Islamic principles of continual change within permanence corresponds to Deleuze's conceptions of difference and repetition, in which in it is only through the repetition of the same that difference is revealed. Sikander's project transformed from an epistemological quandary of *how* to represent, that is, how to *know* the "exotic" South Asian, and especially Islamic, woman, into an ontological practice situated in exploring the nature of being and difference, of creating the possibility of an encounter with feminine spirituality.

Sikander's interest in the semiotic nature of signs and their relationship to one another is not solely indicative of a poststructuralist bent, but also one of Islamic art and mysticism. In the context of Sufi art, Marks describes that,

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[331] Ibid 69-70.

"mysticism offers a refuge from a political world beyond the individual's knowledge of control." The abundance of geometric patterning and the repetition of abstracted signs in Islamic art, reveal, as Marks states,

> the theological and political implications of an unfathomable void meet and intertwine. A fragmentary world of signs concealing a fundamental emptiness: this is Benjamin's influential definition of allegory, an intuition that arises from a sense of the world's impermanence. The form of such an experience of the world takes is fragmentary and enigmatic, in it the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs[332]

This description provides a compelling account of Sikander's use of abstraction in her installation-based digital animations. Signs are repeated and fragmented in her abstraction of them, as they pulse together and explode beyond the margins of the projection. What better way to describe the world envisioned in Sikander's installations than a world that "ceases to be purely physical" and instead "becomes an aggregation of signs"? This aggregation of signs entangle within one another, not unlike the strands of hair that wrap around and connect the female figures in her early works on paper. The Islamic notion of the arabesque is itself an entanglement of patterns and signs that are abstracted to the point where it becomes nearly impossible to separate one strand from another. Layered together, the effect is one of constant disruption and flux. This understanding afforded by both Islamic mathematics and aesthetics allows a return to Luce Irigaray and to the very idea of a feminist aesthetic of excess.

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[332] Laura U Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art,* 187.

Against (western) Modernist Conceits: Gopi Contamination and Dissemination

Gopi Contagion (2015) took place between 11:57 and midnight each night in October 2015 in Times Square. During this moment, an animation of her iconic gopi hair silhouettes swarmed and pulse across the major billboards in Times Square, spanning approximately five blocks [Figure 4.27-4.28] There is no direct reference to the figure of the gopi other than its hair silhouette. The singular form was digitized thousands of times and choreographed to act like a swarm, where Sikander says they reach "self-organized criticality and then redistributes visually and experientially." Sikander continues, explaining that, "disruption as a means of exploration is a consistent element in my experimental strategy. The notion is to unhinge so that the female account or narrative is freed to create its own history."[333]   The visual impact of this in Times Square at midnight was overwhelming, visually juxtaposed to the brightly backlit advertisements, the gopis contaminate the spectacle of consumerism that Time Square embodies.

Sikander utilizes Islamic aesthetics in order to evoke a feminine space. This challenges perceptions of the oppressed Muslim woman in need of liberation. Further, in her reference to Hindu gopis, the power of the feminine is similarly harnessed. Oscillating between multiple references and interpretations, her works resist through a disruptive excess the binary conceptualizations of her work, between Islam and Hindu, between the West and the Postcolonial, and so forth.

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[333] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: 2016 Gail Silver Memorial Lecture."

The issue of modernity, as well as postmodernity as valid descriptors of Sikander's practice is troubled through an examination of her descriptions of her experience at art school at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan during the 1980s. She states that when she began school there was a large emphasis placed on western modernism, especially abstract expressionism. She states choose the opposite route on purpose, because the Euro-American canon of painting dominated the globe. Further, she says that her interest in the traditional genre of miniature that for her, "it was more about subverting modernism than being part of the modernist tradition."[334]

Of course, a negation of modernism does not entail a concomitant negation of postmodernism. However, as this chapter has argued, it is important to contextualize Sikander's use of abstraction and repetition within the trajectory of Islamic art. Further, as Casey Primel describes that Sikander is very concerned with resisting "the homogenizing impulse of global inclusion while centrally engaging its politics." As Primel continues, this issue addresses questions of form and formalism and that one must also examine her work not within the western legacies of abstraction, but also within the legacy of Islamic abstraction. Primel notes that Sikander's work is fundamentally "predicated on representing the missing presence of women, here figured as body part, of part for whole." Further, the aesthetic that Sikander has developed over the course of her practice,

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[334] Vishakha N Desai, "Interview with Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander," 72.

as Primel notes, alienates "audiences in the United States who identity with postminimalist, anti-aesthetic, or postconceptual practices."[335]

Returning to *Gopi Contagion,* one may see the abstracted sign of woman as permeating (or infecting) everything it comes into contact with: from their original separation in *SpiNN* through her numerous installations such as *Parallax* and *Gopi Contagion,* the sign of women function as vehicles for disruption, destabilization, and a deconstruction of what Sikander describes as not just miniature painting, but as extending also "to the reimagining of historical content and entrenched symbols. It is important to open the discourse, to challenge and re-examine our histories."[336] Sikander also stresses that she had been working with ideas related to deconstruction prior to her move to the United States.[337] It is precisely this that her gopi hair performs—querying and questioning everything, and always from a feminine viewpoint of entangled hair.

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[335] Casey Primel, "On Artists and Artisans: The Experimental Worlds of Shahzia Sikander," 486, 490.

[336] Shahzia Sikander, "The World is Yours, the World is Mine," The Opinion Pages, *International New York Times* (December 4, 2014) http://nyti.ms/1yVy5D9

[337] Shahzia Sikander, "Shahzia Sikander: Drawing Ideas," (Presentation given at University of Michigan Museum of Art in conjunction with the exhibition, "Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape and Islamic Art," April 25, 2014). Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf_x7WhCZro

Chapter Four

Exceeding Art History

"Meaning does not function like the circularity of something already given and received. It is still in the process of making itself."[338]

"Postcolonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame." [339]

How does one begin to theorize contemporary art praxis that is concerned with evoking a poetics of voice for those who have been not only marginalized but actively excluded from history? Contemporary installation practice has been well theorized for its potential to immerse the viewer with sight, sound, and space. However, the content of such installations that deal directly with the representation (or lack thereof) of nonwestern women has not been theorized in relation to its impact on the viewer. How does one reconcile his/her own subject positioning within installations concerned with evoking a mode of being in which subjectivity has been actively denied? Further, in the theorization of such artworks, the designations of postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist find themselves at odds with one another within current art historical discourse, which either periodize the works as postmodern (and thus not feminist, as feminist art belongs to an earlier historical era) or as a nonwestern feminist engagement (and thus as delayed or secondary to the primacy of western feminist practices), or as postcolonial (again, utilized as a historicized description of a particular moment in

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[338] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* Ithaca, (NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 178.

[339] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 1.

time that is closed, and as such, problematically prescribed). This chapter unravels the problematic at this intersection and argues for a new type of art historical discourse that can better account for installation works concerned with evacuating the figure of the nonwestern woman in both lived experience as well as within the representational space of installation itself.[340]

This dissertation utilizes a feminist and postcolonial conception of strategic excess as both a theoretical reality, and a material strategy in the multi-media works of three contemporary women artists: Nalini Malani (b. 1946), Roshini Kempadoo (b. 1959), and Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969). The immersive installations of Kempadoo, Malani, and Sikander allow what Ola Abdalkafor describes as an "ethical encounter" with the nonwestern woman.[341] What an ethical understanding of this project entails is not the issue of how to represent the nonwestern woman, but rather, of how to engage with the specifics of location and culture that define her position. Ola Abdalkafor, in her book *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* defines the "ethical encounter" as Spivak's delineation of a "responsibility towards the

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[340] Terry Smith. *Contemporary Art: World Currents,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 8. Smith notes that contemporary art "comes from the whole world, and frequently tries to imagined the world as differentiated yet inevitably connected whole," The institutionalization and spread of contemporary art from around the world through biennials, large scale exhibitions, such as *Documenta* and *Manifesta,* and last, but perhaps most insidiously, galleries and auction houses is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is worth noting that the modes in which the various threads of the art world participate in both gendered and cultural essentialism within the rubric of "globalized" contemporary art is a large part of why the artists discussed here moved into an excessive visual language.

[341] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* 162-193.

subaltern[342] by attempting to listen to them, rather than keeping on criticizing

colonialism and imperialism."[343] This ethical encounter can be theorized in terms

of an ontology of excess, rather than epistemological pursuit that seeks to

categorize and limit art so that it may be considered wholly knowable. While a

sidestepping of epistemology in its entirety is impossible, an ontological reading

for art praxis offers an alternative mode of forming knowledge about art.[344]

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[342] I am utilizing the definition of subaltern as it was first coined by Antonio Gramsci, who defined it as "any 'low rank' person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation." This definition was further refined by Ranajit Guha who defined the Subaltern Studies as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way (Guha, 1982) which was taken by Gayatri Spivak in her continued theorization of the term, who problematized its ability to be defined under non-essentialist terms, and utilized the term in order to describe Sati women as excluded from both Hindu as well as British definitions of them. Importantly, I do not seek to argue that the artists discussed in my dissertation are in any way subaltern, quite the contrary, but rather, the *content* of the artworks discussed in this dissertation directly concerns itself with the figure of the subaltern woman, doubly marginalized and thus doubly prohibited from becoming her own subject. See: El Habib Louai, "Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications," *African Journal of History and Culture,* vol. 4 (1), (January, 2012), 4-8.

[343]Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 163. As Abdalkafor notes: "Spivak rejects the validity of any attempt to retrieve the voice of the 'native subaltern female,' and this also leads to her rejection of concepts like nationalism and ethno-centrism which merely reverse the dichotomy of colonizer/colonized." And that further, Spivak does not believe that political representation is the answer to this issue: "Ethno-centrism and nationalism also seem to homogenize the subaltern under a collectivity, and such a homogenization is politically useful because it brings the subaltern into a unity that can be represented politically. However, political representation may repeat the epistemic violence and manipulate the voice of the subaltern without even realizing the differences in the problems, experience, and suffering among them. Spivak rejects political solutions and almost all her writings illustrate that the imperialist homogenizing of the Other as uncivilized cannot be countered by a process of reverse homogenizing. Rather, the imperialist construction of the 'native subaltern female' should be answered by taking up an ethical responsibility towards her, the responsibility that can be achieved by encountering the singular subaltern face to face. Spivak takes most of her ethical concepts, such as responsibility, which is a key term in her ethical approach, from Derrida," 124.

[344] The shortcoming of epistemological pursuits for theorizing feminist practices is astutely summed up by Samantha Pinto in her book *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*, (New York: New York University

Excess in these works serves as a means of revealing and transforming. Their works reveal through a multiplicity of mediums and visual representations the social mechanisms of both racial and gendered oppression. Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, conceives of excess as not merely a negative condition that describes the marginality of women, but rather, as a powerful generative force that produces endless possibilities for a future based in difference that can move beyond the binary dialectics of subject and object that is present in much of existing feminist thought. Grosz states that through displays of excess, contemporary art can "generate new sensations, enliven and transform bodies" that allows for a "deterritorialization of qualities [that] enables the eruption of a new kind of art… that has had a powerful effect on both the world of art and in the emergence of a new kind of politics."[345] Postcolonial theorist Bill Ashcroft describes that in order to change the continuing colonial paradigms, rather than merely reversing them, there is a need for a strategic excess that "does not simply occupy the fractures of discourse, but exceeds the boundaries of the discourse itself."[346]

Excess is thus a mode of describing that which does not fit within current art historical paradigms, which remain a fundamentally patriarchal and Eurocentric discourse. However, this positioning beyond also offers the potential

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Press, 2013), where she says that feminist aesthetics deliberately seek to "scramble(s the seemingly obvious knowability… of these cultural and generic orders of signification." If radical praxis, such as feminist aesthetics (written about here in the context of literature) scrambles "knowability, "it necessarily scrambles epistemology, and as such, a different type of theorization is needed. Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas,* 5.

[345] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 8, 187.

[346] Bill Ashcroft, "Post-Colonial Excess and Colonial Transformation," *On Post-colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture, (*London: Cromwell Press, 2001), 117.

for radical transformation of current epistemes; through utilizing it not as a negative designation but rather as a strategy for overcoming. As Grosz describes of excess, it presents a "capacity for self-overcoming [that] is the condition for the emergence of art, for the eruption of collective life, and for the creation of new forms of politics, new modes of living."[347] I argue that each of these artists engage in a deliberate mode of excess to evoke a feminist poetics of multiple realities, fabricated histories, and most importantly, an ethical understanding of gender equality within transnational discourses.

At the intersection of the problematic of "speaking for" the subaltern woman, and a desire to include the figure of the subaltern woman within the epistemic project of the humanities, Gayatri Spivak articulates the position of an ethical subject who avoids the kind of representation that re-inscribes the subaltern woman into the doubly marginalized position that prohibits her participation in the production of meaning.[348] I utilize Spivak's conceptualization of the subaltern woman as it is this topic that directly concerns the artists I theorize. I do not use the term to suggest that these artists themselves are subaltern women, as they clearly are not. However, their works are concerned with the idea of the subaltern woman as Spivak presents her: silenced by history, marginalized by discourse, and the object of western fantasies of both conquest and salvation. The artists in my dissertation engage in distinct modes of ethical subjectivity by presenting an excess of female protagonists, whose realities layer

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[347] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 8.
[348] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 274.

over one another through projection, painting, and film in order to destabilize the viewer's preconceptions of oppression, violence, and gender.

In these immersive installations, there is no stable referent, no single determination for the nonwestern woman. Thus, the viewer is exposed to the heterogeneous reality of the nonwestern woman, who cannot be defined as an individual, but rather must be re-constituted and re-formulated through colonial and then nationalistic gazes upon her body. In so doing, their installations embody Spivak's theoretical concept of "learning from below" which, as Abdalkafor explains, allows the reader/viewer to question normative historical projects in order to discover how the subaltern is excluded from participating in the formation of their own subjecthood in epistemology. In the format of these immersive installations, the viewer "learns from below" by becoming part of the installation itself, immersed and implicated in the presentation of historical erasure and silencing of women. This enables the viewer to "ethically encounter" the female subaltern in a way that avoids what Abdalkafor describes as "the kind of representation which usurps and manipulates the subaltern voice."[349] As such, their installations enliven a feminist agency for the subaltern woman through a presentation of the validity of female narratives that reorient normative conceptions of both the colonial and postcolonial nationalist legacies.

For this project, a theorization of a transnational feminism(s) is necessary. I conceive of a transnational feminist project not as a continuous universal whole, but rather as an opportunity for multiple and heterogeneous sites for an ethical

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[349]Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation,* 44.

encounter with the subaltern woman that connects the fields of literary and visual analysis to theoretical intervention. My dissertation is necessarily trans-disciplinary, traversing the realms of art history, literary analysis, and theory in order to situate the transformation of the excessive state of woman that cannot be defined or represented by the patriarchal epistemic project into a strategy for woman's participation in the production of knowledge. Following Spivak's imperative to avoid dichotomies (which, as Abdalkafor states merely entrenches binaries), excess as a methodology offers a way beyond and out of dichotomies when examining non-western art by women.

This place of excess allows us to listen to the "Other," rather than continuing to merely critique imperialism and colonialism. My work does not present a unifying conception of transnational feminism, but rather understands it as a heterogeneous and discontinuous network. Transnational feminism as a viable concept must be inclusive while simultaneously allowing for the differences of location and culture to not be subsumed under a homogenizing (and thus essentializing) rubric. That is to say, transnational feminism as a viable concept must posit a collectivity not based in terms of political concepts like, as Abdalkafor lists: "nationhood, citizenship, and others exported from European Enlightenment."[350]

This loose framework pursues an ontological, rather than an epistemological understanding of art practices can be best understood through the concept of the meta-archipelago. Antonio Benítez-Rojo describes the meta-archipelago of the Caribbean as an island bridge that "gives the entire area,

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[350] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 163, 178.

including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences…. uncertain voyages of signification."[351] I offer a reading of this definition as a geographical metaphor for global feminist practices, which can only be considered as connected through Benítez-Rojo's "discontinuous conjunctions" and "uncertain voyages of signification" which repeat themselves, "unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs."[352] While feminist practices repeat themselves across cultures and geographies, in each repetition they ultimately reveal difference, as Deleuze suggests[353], as well as Benítez-Rojo's conceptualization of the repeating islands of the meta-archipelago state, which "necessarily entail difference."[354] Thus in the feminist archipelago, concerns and practices repeat themselves across geography and time, enveloping their commonalities that paradoxically reveal their differences.

Their works, and their shared conception of feminist excess, can be understood through a re-conceptualization of Benítez-Rojo's meta-archipelago as a method of describing the globalized positioning of their culturally distinct feminist projects. As theories around globalization and pointed critiques of

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[351] Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective,* Second Edition, transl by James E. Maraniss, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

[352] Ibid, 4.

[353] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* trans by Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 1994).

[354] Antonio Benitez Rojo, *The Repeating Island,* 3.

western[355] feminism by scholars such as Ella Shohat and Meyda Yegenoglu have shown, there is no universal feminism that can adequately address the specific localities of production as well as their global bent.[356]Archipelagic thought, however, lends a productive methodology that considers the specific feminist engagements of individual practices as islands, connected to each other through a sea of excess that flows between and across, bringing the islands into conversation and collaboration with one another.

This is where archipelagic thinking intersects with my dissertation topic on feminist contemporary art from the former British colonies of Trinidad, India, and Pakistan. I conceive of a global transnational feminist project not as a continuous universal whole, but rather as a social archipelago of islands connected by a sea of collaboration and differentiation. Just as Continental thought conceives of the Caribbean archipelago as an exotic entity that is "else-where," so too does both western and postcolonial thinking relegate feminisms to a marginality, as an excess of patriarchal reasoning. Ella Shohat describes this phenomenon, stating that when gender is invoked outside of western spaces,

> it is subjected in the academy to a (inter)disciplinary order that anxiously and politely sends it "back" to the kingdom of area studies. There the designated savants of the day….will enlighten us about the plight of women; each outlandish geographical zone will be matched with an abused body part (bound feet, veiled faces, excised clitorises). A doubly exclusionary logic (that which applies to women and to their geography) will quickly allot a discursive space for women… Even within

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[355] I deliberately do not capitalize western, as it is a direction and not a proper name. Further, if postcolonial studies and feminist studies are not capitalized, nor should references to a geographical region. Further, to properly decolonize epistemology it's important to strip the west of its status as the only proper name.

[356] See: Ella Shohat, *Taboo memories, Diasporic Voices,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). And Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

multicultural feminist and queer cartographies of knowledge, the diverse regions are often presumed to exist in isolation from the "center" and from each other.[357]

Shohat tellingly evokes a bodily cartography in this description that reveals not only dominant discourses' desires to know and map the body of women, but also charts the concerns of women onto the peripheries of the humanities. These issues are addressed in the subsequent chapters of this project.

A mode of examining global feminisms beyond this doubly exclusionary logic exists in both Benitez-Rojo's meta-archipelago, and in Glissant's archipelagic poetics. In *Tout Monde,* Glissant says that "the whole world is becoming archipelagized," where even Europe "is becoming an archipelago, an archipelago where regional realities are like islands, open islands."[358] From this, Jennifer Birkett notes that Glissant's archipelago has the potential to provide a "non-antagonistic relationship between local space and global connections. In a global archipelago, the continents could be thought of not as overwhelming power blocs, but as islands connected by the sea, which subjects all things to change."[359] It is with this globalized archipelago that feminist practices across the world can be seen as islands, or sites of contestation, resistance, and local change, that are connected by the common ideals of equality and difference, which is itself in a process of continual becoming, of continual sea change.

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[357] Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories: Diasporic Voices,* 1.

[358] Edouard Glissant, *Traite du Tout-Monde, (*Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Original phrase: "Ma proposition est qu'aujourd'hui le monde entier s'archipélise et se créolize." Translated by Celia Britton in "Language as Strategy of Resistance," *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance,* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999*),* 179.

[359] Jennifer Birkett,"(En)countering Globalisation: Resistances in the System," *Globalization and its Discontents,* Saskia Sassen ed,(New York: New Press, 1999), 65.

In this feminist archipelago of islands that repeat themselves across geography and time, an understanding of how to address global feminisms within the particulars of culturally specific production can be derived. My model of feminist archipelagoes helps understand the global feminist project as what Shohat describes as a "polysemic site of contradictory positionalities,"[360] where transnational collaborations among geographically and culturally diverse sites can be considered as repeating islands of difference, connected by an ocean of change, transportation, and cross-cultural collaboration.

Within this loose framework of a meta-archipelago of excess, the three artists discussed here can be viewed as interrelated yet distinct ontological exercises of being in the world. While their projects engage epistemology, notably the lack of female perspectives within in it, which Nalini Malani describes as a "denigration of the feminine," their projects remain primarily committed to producing or evoking an ontology of being in order to resist, confront, and expose the gaps and fissures around women and their contributions produced and affirmed by the Hegelian epistemological project of art history.

Nalini Malani's ontological project of corporeal excess, grounded in a reclamation of the female body away from the (universalist) colonial legacies and reactive nationalist doctrine. Malani's works are a valorization (through a justification) of hysterical excess that can be seen as women's cry against the irrationality of patriarchal oppression. Roshini Kempadoo's ontological project of memory is grounded in temporal excess in which time, in her works, can be conceived of as a sea of overlapping temporalities and realities. Utilizing a mythic

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[360] Ella Shohat, *Taboo memories, Diasporic Voices,* 2.

conceptualization of a woman protestor during the struggle for the end of colonization in Trinidad, Kempadoo enlivens the injustice of historical absence that leaves blank the contributions of women. Shahzia Sikander's mode of excess is that which resists the exotification of images of women, prohibiting them from being co-opted and re-absorbed into patriarchal doctrines that keep woman as unknowable, exotic commodities in both the west as well as the rest. Sikander's abstraction of the sign of the female denies a re-absorption and instead points to a spiritual mode of becoming woman, of becoming a force that is not just visible, but a power beyond mere visuality.

What my project offers is not a disavowal of the existing epistemological pursuits of art history, especially the projects of modernist avant-gardes, but rather, a sidestepping of the so-called canon. It offers an alternative way of conceiving of and writing about art projects that do not fit into these existing projects or discourses. This sidestepping opens up discourse to include incompatibilities and inconsistencies which are all too often denigrations of the feminine and of woman. Epistemology cannot account for/understand/negotiate the feminine, but an ontological project can. This chapter will reveal that both modernism and postmodernism are epistemological exercises fundamentally rooted in western discourse that cannot account for the ontological reality of art, especially when art exceeds the epistemological premises of modernism, postmodernism, et al.

As Partha Mitter stipulates, epistemological projects are all universal because of their roots in Enlightenment thinking. (w)estern norms are not equal to

global values because there is really no such thing as either. Mitter critiques our faith in the universal by pointing out art works that are exceptions to this construct, chief among these exceptions are work by women. Through this, Mitter demonstrates that this self-evidently universal project "does not give sufficient weight to the role of convention in artistic production." The problematic rests in the upholding of Kant's view of aesthetics, which conceives of art as "neutral and disinterested" and this, in turn, "systematically ignores the implications of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class." Ultimately, the problem with modernism(s), and subsequently, the very idea of postmodernism(s) is that the "universal canon of art subsumes either the classical canon or the modernist canon that supplanted it in the 20th century." Further, Mitter states that the embedded hierarchy implied by the modernist canon and its impact on contemporary art from the cultural periphery is that it can only be understand in "historical terms," that is, in terms of an epistemological framework.[361] It is this framework that my ontological understanding of nonwestern art works by women seeks to exceed.

Part One: Diagnosis

In order to construct a transnational feminist methodology for contemporary art history, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which globalization has influenced art historical discourses. Discussions of art beyond the west have focused primarily on the uses or forms of modernism and postmodernism. Debates over how to define these terms have dominated the field.

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[361] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin,* vol. 90, no. 4 (December 2008), 532.

One end of the debate is an insistence on the value of a universalizing conceptualization of modernism and postmodernism that, while originating in European and North American discourse continues to be utilized to theorize art production from elsewhere in the globe. On the other side, are calls for a heterogeneous and multiplicitous conceptualization of modernism that shapes itself according to local demands and realities.

This dissertation argues that if art history is to become truly global, it must first shed its Kantian and Hegelian basis in Enlightenment thought. In so doing, as I will demonstrate, the designations of modernism and postmodernism become defunct. This section will first contextualize debates about the possibility of a truly global art historical discourse, and how these debates have impacted methodologies for theorizing global trajectories within art history. It will then demonstrate the inadequately of the existing theoretical models. In so doing, this section will ultimately argue for an abandonment of the art historical categories of modernism or postmodernism, demonstrating their shortcomings for both nonwestern practices as well as those by women.

The questions that arise from this are not just whether the rubrics of modernism and postmodernism are useful when contextualizing the historical trajectory, meaning, and cultural evocations of transnational feminist practices, but further, whether or not those terms are useful beyond western practices. The next section will offer an alternative model that will be employed through the subsequent chapters in my dissertation, each of which focuses on one individual artist's work at a time. The alternative model I propose offers an ontological

understanding in which excess offers a way out of the dichotomous reality of universalism. The final section will offer a model that enables a true discussion of difference across transnational contemporary artistic praxis through the example of installation art.

Art Historian James Elkins asks in his edited volume *Art and Globalization,* a published transcript in book form of a seminar at the Stone Art Theory Institute in 2007, which is part of a series that addresses "unresolved problems in contemporary art theory":

> What is the shape, or what are the shapes, of art history across the world? Is it becoming global--- that is, does it have a recognizable form wherever it is practiced? Can the methods, concepts, and purposes of Western art history be suitable for art outside of Europe and North America? And if not, are there alternatives that are compatible with existing modes of art history?[362]

Elkin's writing excels at cutting to the point concisely and clearly, and this is certainly the case with these opening questions. However, what should be pointed out is that the very structure of the questions themselves assure-- and maintain--- the centrality of western art historical discourse. The questions assume a universalizing scope for art history, such as when Elkins inquires if there is a "recognizable form wherever it is practiced." Worded differently, the question

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[362] I utilize this collection of essays as an accurate assessment of the discourse of western art history. While the publishing on globalization and art history is too numerous to list here, I will also include critiques of globalization by postcolonial theorists. I utilize the comments by what can be considered renowned art historians at the top of the field in order to illustrate the problematic of art history as a discourse. It is important to first contextualize and theorize what I am not interested in being a part of. Interestingly and tellingly, Rasheed Araeen was asked to participate in this series, and in his letter published at the end of the book he explains his reasoning for declining the offer: "How can I respond to the debate of which I'm not an active part, not as a subject but an object which is being looked at by those who claim to possess knowledge?" Rasheed Araeen, "Letter on Globalization," *Art and Globalization,* edited by James Elkins et al, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 140.

might very well be: should there be a recognizable form? If western art history is not compatible beyond Europe and North America, then why must the alternatives be compatible with existing, as in, western, forms? Inherent to these questions is also a profound anxiety about the state of the discipline that is founded upon a notion of western superiority and is intent upon replicating this in new and more discrete forms of cultural superiority across time and space.

Keith Moxey's contributions to this expansive round table demonstrate the problem rests not with art historians themselves, but rather with the epistemological rubric upon which art history is based. Moxey states that the issue of universality in art history is an "intractable philosophical issue." This implies that if the very notion of universality is removed, then the very basis of art history as a discipline collapses. Moxey states that art history's "understanding of history has been operating on a vaguely Hegelian notion of teleology, which has become harder and harder to sustain in the face of the incommensurability of global cultures."[363] Hegelian teleology is indeed incompatible with art practices from beyond the west, as will be demonstrated later on. While Moxey accurately diagnoses the problem, he unfortunately collapses all cultures that are not the west into one term, that is, "global cultures." This brand of cultural fits neatly within the Hegelian dialectic, upon which art history as a discipline is originally based.[364]

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[363] Keith Moxey, seminar response, "The National Situation," moderated by Frederic Jameson, *Art and Globalization,* 18.

[364] Uma Narayan, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," *Hypatia,* vol 13, no. 2 (Spring, 1998), 88. Narayan states cultural essentialism "assumes and constructs sharp binaries between "Western culture" and "Non-Western culture," and that in maintaining this binary structure, "discourses about 'differences' [such as this volume on the very idea of a global art history] often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such 'differences' presenting

In effect, in his statements about how the Hegelian roots of art history cannot fit beyond the west, he ironically reaffirms the Hegelian dialectic in which the west is the self and the rest is Other. This demonstrates the circular problem of art historical discourses when expanded beyond its culturally specific parameters. Partha Mitter, elsewhere in the same seminar, describes Hegelian teleology within the realm of art history as not just a problem for conservative modernists, but that is also replicated in theorizations of the avant-garde. Mitter states that even the avant-garde is dependent upon "Hegelian teleology and its concept of center-periphery, which automatically categorizes the so-called periphery as suffering 'time-lag' and derivativeness." As such, Mitter concludes that, "art history appears to suffer from an inbuilt obsolescence, its responses lagging behind the rapidly changing global situation."[365]

Within the postcolonial temporal and geographic terrain of art production, the western Avant-Garde's revolt against academic naturalism was welcomed by the newly formed "subject nations" (as Mitter describes them), who were "concerned with formulating their own resistance to the colonial order."[366] In this context, western modernism undoubtedly informed art practices from the nonwest, but not in the terms in which it has been theorized in which the west is presumed to lead the artistic forefront of innovation, with the rest trailing behind

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these differences as something pre-given and prediscursively 'real' that the discourses of difference merely describe rather than help construct and perpetuate." Ola Abdalkafor in *Gayatri Spivak* utilizes Allison Stone's definition of essentialism which is the idea that "there are properties essential to women and which all women might be either natural or socially constructed." As Abdalkafor concludes, "that is, women are given a fixed identity and meaning, without paying attention to the differences that distinguish women's experiences," 37.

[365] Partha Mitter, "What's Wrong with Global Art?" *Art and Globalization,* 223.

[366] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," 532.

them. Mitter builds off the work David Craven to explain this phenomenon, who

states, "the discipline of art history has yet to change in any substantive manner

the implicit evaluation of non-Western modernism as derivative and devoid of

originality."[367] Caroline Turner, building off of John Clark's premise that

peripheral countries "developed their own versions of modernity," similarly

stipulates that contemporary art "cannot be understood by looking only at the

engagement of Western modernism that set art in that region on a new

trajectory"[368] As Turner states, "we need to acknowledge the significance of

historical contexts and the reading of so-called universalist principles or ideas in

specific local contexts."[369]

It should also be mentioned, since it not addressed at all by either side of

the epistemological divide represented in this example by Keith Moxey and

Partha Mitter in the seminar *Art and Globalization,* that the Hegelian dialectic

upon which western art history is based also prohibits women from being

conceived of as subjects, rather than objects, of theorization. Thus the "intractable

universalism" of arguing for a global art history remains solely within the white

western phallocentric order. Phallocentric, defined by Lacan, and then repudiated

by scholars such as Foucault and Irigaray, refers to the order in which knowledge

is structured as a pursuit, with an object that must be defined and contained in

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[367] Ibid, 534. Full quote: "However, as argued by David Craven, critical interventions of major thinkers from the periphery in art history are lacking, which by their absence contribute to the erasure of nonmetropolitan art practices within the "universalist" canon." Mitter refers to David Craven's "C. L. R. James as a Critical Theorist," 146-65.
[368] Caroline Turner, ed, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific, (*Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 6. Turner is referring here to John Clark's seminal work *Modern Asian Art,* 1998.
[369] Ibid, 9.

order for it to reflect back on the subject. Shannon Winnubst, in her article titled "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan: Different Fields of Pleasure within Foucault and Irigaray," directly states that Lacan's conceptualization of the phallocentric order is indebted to the Hegelian Concept. She states, "Through a representation of the embodiment of Hegel's Concept, Lacan's phallus renders conceptual thinking as both the impossible desire and the ultimate power. This phallic power consequently becomes the power to distinguish, to delineate, to demarcate, to centralize and to control the 'proper' names of objects and values in the world."[370]

Shannon Winnubst astutely limns the problematic of Hegelian thought. In her theorization of Hegel's reworking of the Concept, and thus, as she says, conceptual thinking, she uses his discourse to reveal "the stakes involved in exceeding the phallus." She notes that, through Kant, "we can see how the understanding generates antinomies necessary to the workings of the dialectic: contradictory dyads, are, after all, the origin of the dialectic." The danger in this is the failure to move beyond Kant's dialectic, which forms a large basis of Hegel's own dialectic. As Winnubst notes, "the rigidifying of antimonies into intractable figures frozen in opposition quickly spins into the notorious 'bad infinite,' wherein no dialectical mediation can render thinking fluid again, and thinking cannot think itself as a temporal phenomenon." Trapped within this dialectic of rigid dualisms, "cognition is damned to a strict Either/Or logic that is stripped of any temporal location." This observation allows us to understand the origins of art history's discourse and how it continues to replicate itself in contemporary

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[370] Shannon Winnubst, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan: Different Fields of Pleasure within Foucault and Irigaray," *Hypatia,* vol 14, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 19.

theorizations. If one is to insist on maintaining the Hegelian dialectic, thought is no longer fluid, and as such, thought can no longer recognize that it itself is a product of its historical condition. This is what Winnubst means by the strict Either/Or logic necessarily has no "temporal location."[371] If art history cannot historicize itself, that is, recognize the historical conditions of its origins, then it maintains the idea of a false universal, that is, the idea of the discipline without historical context. This allows for the continuation of the idea that there is a universal art history, an art history without temporal specificity, and thus, an art history capable of repeating itself exactly across that which it conceives of as global. This is only ever a reflection of a simulacra, of a false copy of a false truth.

While Winnubst correctly points out that Hegel delivers us from this trap set by Kant, in Hegel's dialectical mediation of the three figures of "the Concept (universality, particularity, and individuality), he paradoxically delivers thought back to the idea of the "*True* concept, the determinate Concept." Winnubst quotes Hegel, saying that this figure is "the most concrete and richest determination because it is the ground and the *totality* of the preceding determinations, of the categories of being"[372] In Hegel's argument for the historicizing, that is, the temporal placement, of the concept, he states that, as Winnubst summarizes, "the figure of the Concept as self-determining, self-mediating, and ultimately self-creating: it totalizes the fields of both ontology and epistemology. It is both the ground and the telos of all philosophical thinking." This is the problematic of

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[371] Ibid, 14, 15.

[372] Hegel (1969, 617). qtd in Winnubst, Shannon, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan," 16.

Hegel's attempts to historicize conceptual thinking: it remains trapped in what

Winnubst describes as a particular type of embodiment in which conceptual

thinking requires a body that is "capable of grasping and handling others; a body

that can seize and control and manage others…. A body that can totalize, that can

master bodies--- bodies of knowledge, bodies of texts, bodies of cultures, bodies."

As Winnubst remarks, Hegel "does not entertain the possibility of a variety of

different bodies."[373]

Susan Buck-Morss in her essay "Hegel and Haiti," in addition to explicitly

connecting Hegel with Haiti, states that this connection is imperative to

historicizing Hegel himself, exposing both his work as well as himself as deeply

flawed. Buck-Morss states: "Given Hegel's ultimate concession to slavery's

continuance—moreover, given the fact that Hegel's philosophy of history has

provided for two centuries a justification for the most complacent forms of

Eurocentrism (Hegel was perhaps always a cultural racist if not a biological

one)—why is it of more than arcane interest to retrieve from oblivious this

fragment of history?"[374] Buck-Morss's historical theorization of Hegel's

conceptualization of the dialectic, especially the master-slave dialectic, reveals the

false-logic of his re-working of Kant's subject, which Winnubst theorizes as

Hegel's insistence on only one type of body, which is to say, the white male

body.[375] Buck-Morss continues, stating that Hegel's idea of "universal human

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[373] Shannon Winnubst, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan," 16.

[374] Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000), 864.

[375] Informative to this critique of Hegel, which I do not presume to undermine, but rather to shed light on yet another possibility outlined by Gayatri Spivak, who seeks to use the tools of the master to serve the Other. As Spivak's observes that "our sense of critique is

history" has been used to justify "white domination."[376] If, as Susan Buck-Morss

makes so explicit, Hegel's philosophy has been used to justify white domination,

what place can a discourse founded on Hegelian dialectics possibly have in

theorizing a global form for it without maintaining western supremacy over the

global? If art history is to become truly global, it must shed its conceptual rubric

that remains steeped in Hegelian philosophy.

Within this same false logic of a universal construct for art history, James

Elkin's questions of how to make a global art history look the same across the

world are revealed as false starts.[377] Elkins points out that there are very few art

history departments beyond the west, and in an attempt to make the discipline

global, he calls for a formula that can be adopted universally. He states that a,

"global art history would be very approximately comparable to a science. A field

like physics, for example, can be said to share a rigorously defined set of

assumptions and protocols no matter where it is practiced. A worldwide practice

of art history would have a looser, less quantitative version of that kind of

coherence: it would be a field some of whose assumptions, founding texts,

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too thoroughly determined by Kant, Hegel, and Marx for us to be able to reject them as "motivated imperialists," … A deconstructive politics of reading would acknowledge the determination as well as the imperialism and see if the magisterial texts can now be our servants, as the new magisterium constructs itself in the name of the Other." This quote is included here to point to an excess of positionings around Hegel, and to acknowledge that this essay chooses only one such positioning. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 8.

[376]Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," 865

[377] As my colleague, Tashima Thomas points out, this false-start can also be considered as a "premature ejaculation"

interpretive protocols, and institutional forms are compatible wherever they are taught."[378]

This proposition is grounded upon a logic that does not hold for creative acts in the same way that it holds for processes of discovery. In his essay calling for an ontological approach for theorizing art, where the question is not how to categorize and epistemologically quantify art, but rather is "what sort of entities are works of art," Robert Kraut offers a compelling explanation against the treatment of art history as a science, which is necessarily about a denial of difference in order to reproduce findings systemically. As Kraut aptly states, "art is not science," and that even if "concepts essential to the scientific enterprise might be implicated [in the study of art]," Kraut concludes that "artworks, unlike planetary trajectories or chemical reactions, are essentially results of human effort. Picasso's *Guernica* is the product of action."[379] In Elkin's desire to consolidate and replicate the field of art history across the globe, he paradoxically misses the very purpose of art history itself: to study art. Art cannot be theorized into neat scientific categories, and one could argue, this is the very point of art; it evokes something that cannot be easily translated into words or the realm of the knowable. If this were not the case, there would then be no need to theorize it. It would be self-explanatory.

In the section of the seminar led by Frederic Jameson titled "The National Situation," Elkins correctly points out that "senses of nationalism or ethnicity

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[378] James Elkins, Introduction, *Art and Globalization,* 4.

[379] Robert Kraut, "Ontology: Music and Art," *The Monist,* vol. 95, no. 4, Music (October, 2012), 687. Kraut observes that there is a "small but thriving philosophical industry" engaged in the *ontology of art,* but rather dejectedly contends that the practice of art world ontology and its prospects for "its salvation are dim," 684.

have been the sometimes explicit impetus behind art historical research from its origins in Vasari and Winckelmann." But his subsequent comment ironically fails to be explicit in how this could be applied to a global context. He states, "the current interest in transnationality, multiculturalism, and postcolonial theory has not altered the basic impetus but only obscured it by making it appear that art historians are not free to consider themes that embrace various cultures or all cultures in general."[380] Here, Elkins insists that the radical critiques of art history by both feminist and postcolonial theory, which he reduces here to the generalized names of "transnationality" and "multiculturalism," have, in fact, not changed the very essence of art historical discourse.

On the contrary, Elkins seems to be suggesting that they have only constricted art historians to being fearful of exploring the particulars and specifics of culture. This may certainly be the case for art historians committed to a stable and monolithic understanding of art historical discourse, or of any discourse more generally, but for those art historians with a true interest in attending to the particulars of local production and cultural specificity, postcolonial theory has ushered in a new rubric that offers possibilities for theorizing precisely what Elkins claims it prohibits: the specifics of 'various' cultures. To name just one example that is of direct relevance to this dissertation, is Iftikhar Dadi's *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Dadi in his introduction describes that the book "can be viewed as a deconstructive study of nationalism" and that it is "informed by postcolonial theory and globalization studies, this account views

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[380] James Elkins, "The National Situation," *Art and Globalization,* 9.

modernism as inherently transnational, rather than as national or even international."[381]

However, the problem of how to theorize the thorough and complex critique offered by both feminist and postcolonial theory has dealt art history is not one with a solution, if, as Elkins insists upon, the discourse is to remain fundamentally unchanged. Kobena Mercer pinpoints the enormity of such a task in his essay, "Art History and the Dialogics of the Diaspora," in which he discusses the enthusiastic reviews of *Annotating Art's Histories*. Mercer quotes Eddie Chambers in explaining the predicament:

> Pointing to 'the enormity of the task' of 'countering the dominant body of scholarship' (189), Chambers stresses the entrenched monocultural worldview that has made art history one of the most conservative disciplines in the humanities. Against the presumption that cross-cultural matters do not pertain to the study of medieval, Byzantine, Romanesque, or Renaissance art, or that the real work of art historical research need not detain itself with multicultural comings and goings in modern art, one is given pause by the David and Goliath proportions of the problem at hand.[382]

The "David and Goliath" proportions of the problem at hand are further elucidated by the comments of Frederic Jameson in the seminar he led in the book *Art and Globalization* titled "The National Situation." Jameson states that

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[381] Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia, (*Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1. It is also worth noting that Iftikhar Dadi contributes to *Art and Globalization,* in his essay, "Globalization and Transnational Modernism," that his book, which at the time of this seminar it was yet unpublished, that his book situates artists "within a narrative of transnational Muslim South Asian modernism rather than viewing them within the older straitjacket of a national art history," 185. That this assessment is published within Elkin's edited volume yet the contributions of Dadi's essay are not accounted for within Elkin's introduction to the volume nor in his contributions during the seminars is at the very least, problematic.

[382] Kobena Mercer, "Art History and the Dialogics of Diaspora," Mercer cites Eddie Chamber's "The Difficulty of *Naming* White Things," 186-97 in the same issue of *Small Axe*.

"globalization" has replaced "cultural imperialism," and that the mediation of the nation is central to this. Jameson also collapses globalization with postmodernity, stating that he, in this context, "doesn't distinguish between the two terms." Jameson is correct, but in his application of these theories into a concrete example, he remains not only trapped but solely committed to, western thought. As an example, he brings up his viewing of a Robert Rauschenberg exhibition in China, and how during the time when he saw it, "the Chinese had no idea what postmodernity was; their idea of art was modernism." [383] This faulty in two principle ways: first, it suggests that China needed to "learn" from the west what postmodernity was in order to continue progressing, and secondly, that, China is "behind" that of the west, for while the west was already postmodern, China was still modern. So while Jameson accurately diagnoses the issue, he fails to offer a valid theoretical solution. This reveals the exact problematic of the way in which art historical discourse is currently applied to practices beyond those of the west, and, it is worth mentioning, of practices by women.

Okwui Enwezor similarly uses China as a case study for issues of modernism and contemporary art. He states that, "if the current state of modernization in China effectively lays waste to heritage and historical glory and instead emphasizes contingency, might it not be reasonable to argue for the nonuniversal nature of modernity as such?" Pivoting from the industrial and economic components of modernization in China, Enwezor draws a parallel to contemporary art, and states that in order to understand the various vectors of modernism, one must provincialize it. Countering Jameson's myopic view of

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[383] Frederic Jameson, "The National Situation," *Art and Globalization,* 13-14.

Chinese contemporary art, Enwezor states, "the absence of pop art in China in the 1960s is not the same as the absence of 'progressive' contemporary Chinese art during the period, even if such contemporary art may have been subdued by the aggressive destruction of the Cultural Revolution." As Enwezor concludes, contra Jameson, that by examining the specific conditions of contemporary art production within cultural and national geographies, "we learn a lot more about the contingent conditions of modernity than about its universalism."[384]

Further, Partha Mitter, in his article "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," takes Hans Belting's observation that the demise of art history as a grand Hegelian narrative is because of the sheer diversity of art practices and the narrowness of canonical art history. While Mitter notes that works such as *Art Since 1990* effectively dismantled the triumphalist narrative of Modernism, the discourse remains western-centric. As Mitter suggests, that, despite inclusions, the art historical canon was not enlarged from the inclusion of nonwestern artists because their inclusion was primarily on account of their compatibility with the Avant-Garde discourse in the west.[385] The token inclusions of nonwestern art into art historical discourse, therefore, are still discussed and theorized within the context of western art history.

While Mitter is undoubtedly correct, it is also important to illustrate that this type of token inclusion also leaves a theoretical gap in contemporary works by nonwestern artists and women whose works do not fit within the current discourses of modernism and postmodernism. Rebecca Brown, in her response to

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[384] Okwui Enwezor, "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence," *Altermodern: Tate Triennial,* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 599-601.
[385] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism."

Mitter's essay quoted above, titled "Provincializing Modernity: From Derivative to Foundational," points out that Mitter's research "will enable colleagues concentrating on other global regions (including Europe) to attain more precise and focused understanding of the deployment of modernist ideas within this particular regional and national context." However, Brown correctly wonders if expansion is truly what we want. Citing feminist art history's illustration of the "unmarked nature of modernism," Brown counters Mitter's call for expansion of the art historical canon, stating that, "yet feminist art history also works to undermine the masculinist framework of the modern itself-- to question the underlying structure of the modern not in order to include women artists within it but to mount a holistic critique of the universalizing, imperialist nature of the modern." Brown proposes that we must more fully critique the modern, and that this involves seeing the so-called periphery as not peripheral at all, but rather, as central to the production of the modern.

As Brown points out, "if we seek to include, we accept the existing terms of modern art, by which works from the periphery remain derivative, placed on the map in relation to their more famous cousins." In a brilliant inversion, Brown points out that colonization produced modernity and brought it back to European soil. In a similar conception to Elizabeth Grosz's rejection on multiplicity on philosophical terms,[386] Brown states, "I fear that in rethinking modernity as

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[386] Grosz states, "Dualisms cannot be resolved either through monism, which involves the reduction of the term terms to one, or thought the addition of extra terms—as if three or four terms would somehow overcome the constraint of the two…. It is only the proliferation of dualisms, as well as their capacity for infinite reversal that reveals the stratum, the field, on which they are grounded, which is the real object of both Deleuze's and Bergson's explorations." *Becoming Undone,* 46.

plural, we risk sliding into a mode of understanding that reifies difference without recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of the modern." Brown concludes: "I argue not for inclusion of various works in a canon. Instead, I seek the radical re-understanding of modern art in which we find its fundamental principles in the elsewheres and not yets."[387] This is to say, in an ontological understanding of the excess that connects everything while simultaneously allowing for heterogeneity.

Geoffrey Batchen, who studied with Elizabeth Grosz as a graduate student, similarly offers a critique of modernism, noting that "despite all of the talk of a global art history, the history of modernism continues to be a story told in terms of Europe and the United States. In the usual version of this story, modernism is presented as something that is transmitted to the provinces from these centers-- sometimes quickly, sometimes more slowly, but always arriving late and second hand. But what if we were to see modernity differently-- as a dispersed experience based on exchange rather than transmission… How does this shift the ground of art history?" Batchen's solution is to conceive of modernism "as a phenomenon that is simultaneously local and global."[388] What this dissertation proposes is a conception beyond both local and global definitions of modernism, that is, an eschewing of the term altogether as it remains, and always will remain intractably steeped in western discourse, and as such, keeps western discourse dominant.

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[387] Rebecca Brown, "Provincializing Modernity: From Derivative to Foundational," *The Art Bulletin,* vol. 90, no. 4 (December 2008), 555-557.

[388] Geoffrey Batchen, "Guest Editorial: Local Modernisms," *World Art,* vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 7.

Mitter outlines what must happen in order to produce a counter-discourse of modernism, stipulating that art history discourse must seek explanatory tools to adequately describe nonwestern art. Rejecting Hans Belting's formulation of art history, Mitter states that the theoretical solution of "multiple local possibility illuminate the global processes of modernity more effectively than a grand globalizing narrative," which is more likely to perpetuate a relationship of power. Mitter concludes that the best way to build a new art history is through "contextually grounded studies of non-western modernism that engages with the socially constructed meaning of artistic production" which will actually contest, rather than inadvertently reaffirm, the center-periphery model.[389]

Caroline Turner, in her introduction to her edited volume *Art and Social Change,* points to a similar solution. She notes that in the realm of globalized art historical discourse, one must not confine artists to a national sphere. Rather, discourse must address art and social change through specific local and regional perspectives through "logical and necessary comparative frameworks." Turner does not disavow the importance of local histories for artistic production, but rather, states that "art practices in regional boundaries [also] transcend simple local/global dichotomies." Turner grounds the exploration of artistic production from Asia within the 1990s, just as I do in this dissertation, stating that a new mode of international art has since emerged. My dissertation similarly argues for an art that is profoundly connected to modes of resistance and modes of articulating and expressing social change. Art as activism is outside the Hegelian and Kantian aesthetic of a "disinterested" art form, and as such, cannot be

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[389] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism."

theorized within this framework. As Turner notes, "art and creative practice cannot be isolated, locked into a set of traditions, or frozen in time."[390]

From another geographical and cultural terrain of art history, Fereshteh Daftari similarly problematizes the very conception of modernism in his article "Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism." Daftari stipulates that artists who draw on Islamic art practices, such as Shahzia Sikander among numerous others, "defy the assumptions of modernism." Importantly, Daftari brings gender into the paradigm of Islam/Modernism in order to point out the shortcomings of art historical discourse as it currently exists: "Importantly, gender, when addressed, created a space of observation equally unsparing to those Islamic cultures with a narrow vision of women, as to the myopic western perception of the veil, for instance, as well as to modernism's own sins of female exclusion." In his summary of this article which examines the practices of Shahzia Sikander, Ghada Amer, and Shirazeh Houshiary, he concludes "if there is anything these three artists share, it is their refusal to inhabit a ghetto either Western or Islamic. They have invented new orders alien to both."[391] As Partha Mitter similarly observes, the work of nonwestern artists, and especially by nonwestern women artists, "exposes limitations of the modernist canon and its inability to accommodate heterogeneity and difference."[392]

Sikander's departure into abstracted signs of gender through animation-based installation works rests in the double bind in which she was placed as she

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[390] Caroline Turner, ed, Introduction, *Art and Social Change,* 5.

[391] Fereshteh Daftari, "Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* no. 43, Islamic Arts, (Spring 2003), 175.

[392] Partha Mitter, "What's Wrong with Global Art?" *Art and Globalization,* 224.

established herself as an artist in the United States. While the postcolonial

readings of her work are important and not to be diminished, they monopolize the

interpretations of her work, which she insists through both content, form,

medium, and writings are meant to be open-ended and not solely about the themes

of exotification of Muslim women or even the stereotypes surrounding artists

from Islamic countries. Sikander states that despite her intentions during this time,

she wonders: "would it have been smarter to steer away from this topic… [a]nd

ignore the questions." She states that:

> I found that the three to five drawings I did on this topic [of veils] in 1994-
> 1996 got a lot more coverage and were at times the only works chosen to
> be printed. My work got written about a lot within the framework of a
> "Muslim woman" or perhaps "liberation" experienced by coming to the
> U.S.[393]

Ironically, the over-emphasis on postcolonial interpretations of her work, merely

aid in furthering Bell Hook's conception of the "double-bind," which "forces

minority women either to confront manifestations of sexism particular to their

own culture, or to give their racial and ethnic identity priority over their desire for

gender equality."[394] For Sikander, animation that introduced movement and flux

as well as further abstraction of the figure of the woman was her way to resist this

double bind by pushing interpretation into an excessive field that resists both

gender and cultural essentialism. If the body is not subjugated, forced to contain

and restrain its excess, then it cannot be defined. This is what Sikander wants.

These silhouettes are divorced from their body, from the cultural codings of what

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[393] Kurt Anderson, "Dialogue One: Kurt Anderson and Shahzia Sikander," *Spectrum: The Lockwood Thompson Dialogues* April 23, 2006 and December 1, 2006. (Cleveland: Cleveland Public Library, 2007), 54.
[394] Bell Hooks qtd in Ana Finel Honigman, "Against the Exotic," *Art Review* vol. 3 no. 9 (2005), 96-9.

the female body serves as a vessel to represent—the nation, the mother, the goddess, as threat, as something to be controlled. The hair silhouettes are thus free to be anything whatsoever. Yet, their basis as gopi hair is significant, and this signification is always part of the multiplicity of meaning to which Sikander's departure into abstraction explores.

Just as Shahzia Sikander's practice demands a negotiation with the specifics of culture as well as the specifics of migration and transnationality in regards to its feminist content, so too does the work of Nalini Malani in regards to the forms of modernism in India. Crucial to her work is the writing of Geeta Kapur, which critiques the application of modernism in the art of Europe and the United States onto other countries' artistic trajectories, such as India. Kapur points us to a historically, that is temporally, positioned aesthetic for understanding modernism and postmodernism. Rather than viewing Indian art in the same temporality as western art, Kapur challenges this and suggests that instead, Indian art discourses should see themselves as

> crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international. Similarly, before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely, in its own terms, and in that process also characterizes it, we have to introduce from the vantage point of the periphery the transgressions of uncategorized practice."[395]

Malani's practice, as I will demonstrate, does precisely this, crisscrossing across western and Indian art and literature in order to produce a work that points towards the possibility of an ethical encounter with transnational feminism. As Malani states, "I have never followed a modernist agenda really. By bringing in various quotes, texts, stories, and images, exploring intertexutality, I have always

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[395] Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India,* (New Delhi: Tulika Book, 2000), 320.

been trying to bring a link between the language I use, between myself and the viewer, myself and the image."[396]

These "transgressions of uncategorized practice" is what this work offers to the field of global art history. The installation practices of Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo and Shahzia Sikander enables a discourse that opens the vantage point of the so-named periphery but does not circle back on itself. This avoids a closed reading of such works, and allows, through the ontological engagement with excess, lines of cross-cultural transmission which allow us to approach, if only obliquely, universal concerns of representation, place, memory, and the sexed body. The practice of excess leads to an excess of viewership: there is no clear intended nationality, gender, or race for their audience. It is also this excess that I will argue saves their work from succumbing to essentialism.[13]

Geeta Kapur astutely points out the problem with applying a postmodernist lens on both postcolonial and feminist art:

The political discourse of the postmodern promises to undo the totalizing vision of the historical universe and with that the institutionalizing of the modern. But it subsumes nevertheless the politics of actual difference based on class, race, gender into a metadiscourse of the one world order rivaling, despite its protestations to the contrary, any global hegemony sought of established by the modern. This post-modernism supersedes the kinds of cultural praxis historically possible in different parts of the world to such an extent that one might say that our cultures in the third world do not at the moment stand a chance. Thus the cultural manifestations of the postmodern may be something of a false gloss on the hard facts of the political economy to which these are related.[397]

[396] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Interview with Nalini Malani," *dOCUMENTA (13) Series 100 Notes—100 Thoughts: In Search of Vanished Blood.* Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012, 26.
[397] Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism,* 320.

Kapur illustrates the limits of postmodern discourses, as well as the problematic application of it onto nonwestern art histories. She states that while the postmodern seeks to undo the totalizing force of modernism, it does so through a negation of actual difference, such as race or gender, and in doing so relegates art whose content addresses issues of actual difference into a subcategory that is ultimately limiting and not in line with the assumed universality of postmodernism. It is therefore ineffectual to attempt to read such practices through postmodernism, but rather, their works are already moving beyond this ill-fitting category through ontological engagements with excess.

Through a reading of Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo and Shahzia Sikander's practice, one can extend Geeta Kapur's ultimate proclamation in her book *When Was Modernism*. Just as modernism in India never existed in terms set out by western discourses, nor does postmodernism. This also holds true for any art practice from beyond the west. Their work fundamentally reveals that postmodernism is inadequate even for a historicizing impulse; it was only ever one thread that has until recently been too chiefly prioritized by art historians, and allows the discourses of difference to be subsumed and re-marginalized within the totalizing (and false) discourse of universal postmodernism. As Kapur concludes in her book, "map the chronological scale of realism/modernism/postmodernism onto the lived history of our own deeply ambivalent passage through this century, it may be useful to situate modernity itself like an elegiac metaphor in the 'new world order.'"[15]

Nalini Malani works across genres and mediums, pulling from the social sciences, philosophy, literature, and performance in order to envision a feminist reordering of historical narratives that seeks to re-embody subjectivity for the nonwestern woman. Throughout Malani's works, she deals with issues of rape, violence, and illness as they relate to the body. Such as the abject trauma and horror of Partition, the threat of nuclear war, and fundamentalist violence. In so doing, she critiques what Jisha Menon refers to as the "performance of nationalism" on women's bodies and carves out an interdisciplinary and transtemporal reality with which to recuperate trauma and present modes of alternative futures that are not heavily laden with gendered discrimination and silencing.[398]

It is this aim that aligns Nalini Malani with Elizabeth Grosz's conceptualization of the virtual, that is a future that has yet to be determined by the present, as a feminist strategy. Grosz states that sensation through art, unlike politics, "does not promise or enact a future different from the present, it enforces, impacts, a premonition of what might be directly on the body's nerves, organs, muscles. The body is opened up now to other forces and becomings that it might also affirm in and as the future."[399] In her complex iteration of the political and the aesthetic, Malani's work pushes us to redefine the role of contemporary art and its current definitions. Her work is an example of belonging in the interstices of memory and history, beyond, or in excess of, simple (and essentialist) identity inscriptions and disciplinary boundaries.

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[398] Jisha Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition, (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, January 2013), 9.
[399] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 10.

Roshini Kempadoo's practice performs a similar dismissal of western lineages of art history. Her work is contextualized alongside the practices of other black diasporic artists such as Keith Piper, Chris Ofili, Rotini Fani Koyoda, Frank Bowling, Samena Rana, Isaac Mien and Samina Khan in Gen Doy's book *Black Visual Culture.* Doy's study makes clear that the dominant methodologies for art history, that is, the historical conceits of both modernism and postmodernism are inadequate frameworks for exploring both black visual culture and art history. Doy notes that considering the modernist historical missions of colonizing both people of color and women, that "it is hardly surprising that the perceived demise of modernism has often been hailed by both women artists and black artists as liberating and empowering." Doy describes that Greenbergian modernism was developed "not to describe painting but rather as a term to cover the approach associated with Greenberg, which sought to understand the development of visual art by formal qualities peculiar to that specific medium, not by economic, social, or historical factors related to artistic change," and that within this construct of modernism, "art existed in a world of form, composition, color, brushstrokes, and other material qualities of the given medium." With the introduction of psychoanalysis by Freud and Lacan's semiotic adaptation of it, this formalist approach was revealed to be predicated on the notion of the individual as a "coherent, conscious entity." This view of modernism, now thoroughly dismantled by postmodernism, is now seen, as Doy states, as "hopelessly flawed due to its construction of, and belief in, a coherent individual subject." However, this alone does not render postmodern critiques of modernism as favorable to

either women or peoples of color, though it does offer a salient strategy for them, should they choose to utilize it.[400] What postcolonial and feminist theory offer to this picture is a revealing that this "coherent individual subject" is almost always a white male. Returning to Jameson's collapsing of postmodernism with globalization with cultural imperialism, by this logic, globalization offers no consideration of discourses of difference.[401]

This conceptualization for both modernism and postmodernism implies, as Doy states, that "this strategy implies a belief that some views of (art) history are more valid than others, and that some histories are emphasized for their ideological and cultural reasons, and some are not."[402] This observation of the edited selection of histories in order to promote a unified narrative of art history is precisely what Kempadoo critiques in her own work, as well as in her scholarship. For Kempadoo, the response to how to explore global art spaces rests precisely in postcolonial theory. In Kempadoo's essay, "Timings, Canon, and Art History," she crafts a forceful response to the contemporary issue of how to rewrite a different historical narrative for Caribbean art through her critique of Leon Wainwright's publication of *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean.* Kempadoo reminds one that postcolonial theory reveals that "historicism--- the articulation of a counter historical narrative-- and the importance of reflecting subjectivities as a form of self-determinism," and that

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[400] Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 24-25. Doy further states that, considering the modernist missions of both peoples of color and women, that "it is hardly surprising perceived demise of modernism has often been hailed by both women artists and black artists as liberating and empowering."
[401] Frederic Jameson, "The National Situation," *Art and Globalization,* 13-14.
[402] Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity,* 25.

this, in turn, "becomes a central approach" in analyzing contemporary art

practices from former colonized regions." Kempadoo says that contemporary art

as well as historical art from the Caribbean should thus be judged "on the

eagerness with which the author dispels critically configured perspectives and

voices… who challenge the overarching timeline proposed for Caribbean art

history evoked from a singular perspective of the European art history canon.

Such voices importantly and readily provide more thoughtful (read, critical,

transcultural, heterochronic) explorations of Caribbean contemporary art in an

increasing globalized art space."[403]

In their critique of nationalism, these artists necessarily engage with

Kobena Mercer's "dialogics of the diaspora." Roshini Kempadoo's work most

directly contends with the issue of the black diaspora. As Kempadoo describes,

> My work is reflective of issues and attitudes that constantly position us--- as black communities, as black individuals. Colonial history was at it simplest about slavery, genocide, and dominance of one country over another for political, cultural, religious and above all, economic gain. At the very core of my work is a visual mapping and exploration of stories, place, and environment. Images produced work against and within particular assumptions, histories, and attitudes.[404]

However the contributions of the black diaspora in art historical theorization

provide useful insight for Nalini Malani and Shahzia Sikander as well. As Malani

critiques the ideological use of Hinduism to promote a violent and exclusive

vision of nationalism in her works, Sikander similarly seeks to shrug off

essentializing conceptions of her use of tradition and its ties to Pakistani

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[403] Roshini Kempadoo, "Timings, Canon, and Art History," *Small Axe*, vol. 19 no 2, (July, 2015), 171, 176.

[404] Roshini Kempadoo, quoted in "Techno Seduction : An Exhibition of Multimedia Installation Work by Forty Artists," *Art Journal,* vol. 56, no. 1 (Spring, 1997), 19.

nationalism. Further, her migration to the United States further enables her to reject and contest readings of her work as part of a nationalist rhetoric.

The Excess of Epistemology: Ontology and Ethical Art Histories

Tracing recent art historical texts on globalization, postcoloniality, and the black diaspora, I have demonstrated that current globalization models eradicate concerns of difference by subsuming them into a universalizing framework. This, I argue, is the chief operative that normative discourse performs in order to remain dominant. As Okwui Enwezor forcefully contends, "unlike the apotropaic device of containment and desublimation through which the modern western imagination perceived other cultures, so as to feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power, the nearness today of those cultures formerly separated by distance to the objectifying conditions of modernist history calls for new critical appraisals of our contemporary present and its relationship to artistic production."[405]

Eschewing the periodization of feminist art, and now, postcolonial art, into the teleological framework of a grand narrative for art history, I argue for the importance of socially engaged art practices and their theorization if art history as a discipline is to remain relevant. Anxiety over the state of the discipline itself is felt throughout the writings and edited volumes of James Elkins, as he engages with the notion of what a global art history means. This is not just a disciplinary

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[405] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 34, no. 4 (Winter, 2003), 57.

concern, but rather an important issue for the humanities as a whole. This reality

is theorized by Walter Mignolo in his article, "The Role of the Humanities in the

Corporate University." Mignolo states that the humanities must make themselves

desirable, rather than "placing themselves in a begging position" with regards to

the validity and value of a humanities-based education. Pointing out that as

history moves increasingly towards the transnational, humanities remain

"anchored in national languages and literatures."[406]

This is certainly the case for art history, as the recent roundtable on

globalization and art history demonstrates. The calls for a dismissal of the

national as an analytical framework must be addressed for art history. As Mignolo

states, disciplines have "the ability to transform themselves and to contribute to

the restitution of the role of the humanities in society without losing the

intellectual ground that the humanities have held in higher education." Offering

up a model of not interdisciplinary, but rather, transdiciplinary, Mignolo states

that the survival of the humanities is predicated upon its ability to convey that it

lays the necessary groundwork, through education, "for the transformation of

society."[407] How and what art history, or rather, theorizations of visually based

practices offer to the humanities will be elucidated over the course of this

dissertation within the specific, yet under theorized, arena of transnational

feminisms.

Okwui Enwezor conceives of the "postcolonial constellation" that marks

contemporary art today as

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[406] Walter Mignolo, "The Role of the Humanities in the Corporate University," *PMLA,* vol. 115, no. 5 (Oct. 2000), 1238.

[407] Ibid, 1238.

> refracted not just from the specific site of culture and history, but in a more critical sense, from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism."

In this essay, Enwezor examines the epistemic problematic of art historical discourse in which both the conservative as well as the more liberal traditions of art history have both "increasingly come to abjure any social function of art, except when it fits certain theories." This fracture renders it epistemologically impossible to theorize art whose purpose is not involved with the formalist and self-referential logic of both modernism and postmodernism. As Enwezor states, even when artworks concern themselves with "obviating" the "foundational principles" of art history, in their theorization and exhibition, they nevertheless "come under the putative influence and exertion of epistemes of historical thought." This re-absorption of the radical into discourse denies the artwork's possibility for resistance and social transformation. While Enwezor illustrates his point through an analysis of exhibition practices and their underlying curatorial initiatives, he returns to their theoretical impasse as fundamentally a problem that rests in the discourse of art history. He states that both the exhibition as well as the theorization of art remain under the sovereignty of the "judgment of art history, with its unremitting dimension of universality and totality."[408] It is this reality of art history that demands an ontological investigation of what precisely constitutes this epistemic shortcoming of art history.

In order to theorize this type of art grounded in an ethical encounter of race, gender, and culture, a new methodological framework for art history is needed. Existing writing on art history calls for critical reevaluations of the field,

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[408] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 50, 62, 74-75.

but they do not fully perform one. Elizabeth Grosz defines epistemology as "the field of what we, as suitably qualified knowing subjects, are able to know of the objects we investigate, including those objects which are themselves subjects."[409] According to Grosz, ontology offers a theorization of what is left absent by epistemology, which includes a consideration of how representation, that being art, theory, etc., mediates on the real. In this light, I offer a model that re-directs art historical discourse from a concern with the epistemological, which I have demonstrated locks theory within the existing Enlightenment framework of Hegelian binaries that prohibits a becoming other to be fully realized in racial and gendered terms. As an alternative, I offer a re-direction to an ontological model of becoming that accounts for that which is in excess of the existing epistemological discourse of art history.

An ontological examination of art history asks: what kind of *thing* is art history? What does its epistemological project entail? If art history is a "man-made" history as Enwezor stipulates,[410] then art history is a product of action and of differentiation. Elizabeth Grosz cogently asserts throughout her book *becoming undone*, that in order to transform epistemology, that is, the way knowledge is both produced and written, it is necessary to engage ontology. As Grosz describes, "theory, whether patriarchal, racist, colonialist… or otherwise is one means, and certainly not the only one, by which we invent radical or unforeseen futures."[411] An ontological reading of art history, therefore, lays bare its origins in Eurocentric elitism. Read this way, the future of art history in regards to its

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[409] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 85.
[410] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 73.
[411] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 82.

engagement with globalization can be seen as an assertion of imperial and cultural

dominant of those in power over the rest.

Thus, dominant discourses of art history as they are currently

conceived, have no use for postcolonial or feminist interventions. This is what I

consider to be the epistemological fracture within the discipline. This fracture

fails to account for the reality of contemporary art practices such as those by

Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo, and Shahzia Sikander, whose art can only be

seen as an engagement with both postcolonial and feminist concerns, or put more

concisely, they are engaged with an evocation of transnational feminism.

Eschewing the disciplinary constraints of formalist art history, this dissertation

instead concerns itself with art practices that exist in excess of the current

epistemological model, which can only theorize them in terms of "activist" which

swerves dangerously into the defunct area of "identity politics."[412] This is

precisely what Enwezor means when he says that radical praxis cannot be

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[412] In "Feminist Activist Art, a Roundtable Forum, August 24-31, 2005," Gayatri Spivak describes that the designation of "identity politics" (which she terms as "identiarianism"), is used to describe the "essence that was usually used strategically, was an essence that described a cultural or ethnic collective identity… I do think we are put together by whatever you might want to call culture and certainly by ideologies of sexual difference. However, if we embrace these determinates as identities, I believe we compromise the profound obligation for ethical sameness. This is not a polarization of course. I just meant that if one emphasized group identity, one claimed place of the other too easily and was ready to abdicate the general obligation," 17.
In the same round table, Martha Rosler points out the ways in which art history as a discourse as used the term "identity politics" to condemn feminist and activist oriented art, and that further, contra Jameson's emphasis on utopian modernity (see his book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopias and Other Science Fictions,* (London: Versa, 2005), 11, that "the decline of the utopian dimension of modernity--- progress towards social betterment and perhaps total social transformation includes a retreat to formalism, and more properly, aestheticism." This condemnation for art history directly relates to how I theorize the designations of modernism and postmodernism, and further, how I, via Okwui Enwezor, argue that "identity politics" is not defunct, but rather a central concern.

theorized by art history without it disavowing its radical basis. As Enwezor

forcefully contends, the dead-end of "identity politics" is ascribed to art practices

that resist art history's current model. Enwezor evokes Hal Foster's questions

concerning the fragmentation of the modernist totalization that was introduced by

postmodernism in order to suggest that it is, in fact, identity politics that is the

"specter that haunts modernism."[413] As Hal Foster himself states, "new social

forces-- women, blacks, other "minorities," gay movements…-- have made clear

the unique importance of gender and sexual difference, race, and the third

world."[414] Politely leaving aside the problematic listing of what Foster deems to

be "minorities," Enwezor concludes that the art world, even if it wants to, can no

longer "remain critically blind to the importance of multi-cultural and identity-

based politics."[415] In this observation, Enwezor resuscitates that which has been

denounced as "identity politics" as central to the future of the discipline.

Thus, in the current epistemological fracture of art history, there is an

ontological opening that reveals difference. As mentioned, an ontological account

for art history asks what kind of *thing* it is. If it is revealed as ultimately

concerned with defining art through of Eurocentric thought and art practices, then

there is a fracture or fissure left that marks postcolonial and feminist theorizations

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[413] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 71.

[414] Hal Foster, (39, qtd in Enwezor 72). Elsewhere, Partha Mitter observes that Hal Foster's attempts to "negotiate between diverse cultural space times" is beneficial, but unfortunately maintains the definition of art as a "universal category" that has its roots in Enlightenment thought. This problematic of a false-universal construct for art is what prohibits a rigorous theoretical engagement with nonwestern contemporary art practices whose works do not fit within the grand Hegelian narrative for art history. In other words, despite inclusions, the epistemological framework of art history remains based in Enlightenment (that is, western) thought. Mitter, Partha, "Decentering Modernism" 531.

[415] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 72.

as in excess of the discipline itself. It is this excess, theorized by western

philosophy itself, that produces opportunity for difference, that is, for art history

to overcome itself and produce a different model. As John E Drabinski states in

"The Ontology of Fracture," that "absolute difference, which locates absoluteness

in a sense of difference without measure or contrast, commits parricide against the

paternal line of the West."[416] What Drabinski means here is that western

discourse's theorization of difference, chiefly through the deconstructionist

philosophies of poststructuralism, provided the tools with which to invalidate

western thought. As such, the possibility for western discourse to commit

"parricide" against its forefathers is provided by western discourse itself. And in

so doing, western thought provides a tool with which to liberate itself from its

overly rigid Eurocentric assumptions.

Shannon Winnubst, in her essay, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan: Different

Fields of Pleasure within Foucault and Irigaray," articulates through the

framework of excess precisely this western parricide. Arguing that the conceptual

distancing of Foucault from Irigaray by western poststructural feminism perhaps

indicates a worrisome and insidious "re-inscription of the phallic field and its

erection of concepts and categories within the fields of poststructuralist

feminism," she argues for a union of the two through the rubric of excess.

Describing Foucault's works as an attempt to think beyond, rather than through,

the Hegelian Concept, Foucault demonstrates that discourses are rendered

meaningful through their "performative power." If this is true, then Foucault's

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[416] John E Drabinski, "The Ontology of the Fracture," *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 89.

writing reveals that concepts, "which in turn give representations of the true,

metaphysical nature of 'reality,' no longer hold the primary ontological status that

the dominant tradition of western philosophy proclaims--- or, as we see now,

decrees."

If the Hegelian Concept no longer reveals a representation of the true, then

the discourse based on this idea can be seen as only one discourse, or as Winnubst

states, "one articulation of a singular network of power constellations that

proclaims itself as 'the true': it is the exclusive discourse erected by the singular

power of the phallus."[417] Returning to Drabinski's proclamation that western

discourse commits parricide against itself, it is thinkers such as Foucault and

Irigaray, who enable this. As Winnubst states, Foucault's texts render "this self-

proclaimed absolute logic—this *langue*—one discourse, one *language*" as not

absolute at all, but rather, as one of many. As she describes, "Foucault's texts

disrupt and exceed this phallogocentric style of conceptual reading--- casting us

onto the infinitely complex and open-ended horizons of discourses… that exceed

the dominance of the phallus."[418]

My conception of ontology stems from Elizabeth Grosz's readings of

Darwin, Deleuze (by way of Henri Bergson) and Luce Irigaray in which a new

ontology offers one of "the relentless operations of differences who implications

we are still unraveling." This affirms Irigaray's refutation of existing ontological

models, and offers a model for a new form of ontology that opens itself up to

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[417] Shannon Winnubst, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan," 20. "Phallus" is used here as a
metaphor, or stand-in, for the patriarchal power afforded to men solely on the basis of
their gender.
[418] Ibid, 23.

difference. While Grosz's project is concerned with returning ontological pursuits to feminist theory (which she says epistemological concerns have "displaced or covered over ontological questions")[419], her conceptualization of ontology nonetheless offers a similar opening up for the discourse(s) of art history as well. This conceptualization of an ontology of becoming thus "provides an alternative to the traditions of liberal political thought, phenomenology from its Hegelian to its contemporary forms" in which the human man and woman "are contextualized not only by human constructs, that is, by linguistic and cultural environments, but also by natural and animal geographies and temporalities." As such, this ontological model can explore how "new forms of feminist, antiracist, and class theory might be created," and that further, "what epistemological forms--- what philosophical concepts—may be more appropriate to an ontology of becoming, a philosophy of difference." The usefulness of this conceptualization of ontology for theorizing a global art history becomes clear once we look beyond the epistemology of art history that remains committed to Hegelian thought to examine the ontological realities of art itself.[420] This conceptualization does not exceed art history oppositionally, which maintains the supremacy of Hegelian binary dialectics, but rather, differentially.

Feminism and the concerns delineated by postcolonialism, are, as Elizabeth Grosz describes, "the very excess and site of transformation of the patriarchy."[421] That is, feminism and postcolonialism necessarily exist in excess of western discourses that remain based on the validity of the Hegelian Concept,

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[419] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 4.
[420] Ibid, 5.
[421] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone,* 82.

which as Winnubst and Susan Buck-Morss, reveal, is only but one discourse, and a discourse fundamentally concerned with maintaining white male superiority over that which it perceives as other. Excess then is not just a diagnosis, but also a solution—excess is a "site of transformation."

What an ontological project offers is an allowance to consider how representation mediates the real. That is to say, how art's representation impacts lived reality, that is, how the experience of it imbues an emotional or psychological response. An ontological project for art history reveals the power of art to transform life. As Winnubst concludes that through an engagement with Foucault and Irigaray,

> we may thus learn how to articulate bodies that are body historicized and sexed in their subjective differences. We may learn how to articulate differences across their multiplicities of historical and sexed embodiments, exceeding the reign of the phallic, oppositional difference… Learning to invoke, rather than silence, these differences may give us richer tools with which to approach and articulate the differences without our different lives."[422]

This ontological understanding of difference is precisely what Grosz stipulates is given to us by Irigaray's writing. Importantly, Grosz says Irigaray's work "allows us to rethink the real along with the processes involved in rethinking subjectivity beyond its universalizing human norm." This signifies that Irigaray's project is not just feminist, that is, it is not just concerned with restoring female subjectivity, but rather, as Grosz states, her project is "much broader, for it aims at destabilizing the ways in which we understand the world, and a reformulation of the real thing brings with it a transformation of the ways in which we understand epistemology, ethics, and politics" through the "ontological and metaphysical

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[422] Shannon Winnubst, "Exceeding Hegel and Lacan," 30.

orientation" of Irigaray's writings. [423] Grosz concludes that this is made possible through Irigaray's writings because of her ontological orientation.

Irigaray's book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* pinpoints excess as a mode of resisting the wonder produced when examining something other to the self. As Irigaray states, "the other never suits us simply," because if it did, "we would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves it he or she suited us completely." This reinscription of difference, and how it eliminates the radical with regards to art history is similarly revealed by Okwui Enwezor, as this chapter has explored. Irigaray states that "an *excess* resists: the other's existence and becoming as a place that permits union and/through resistance to assimilation or reduction to sameness." Irigaray continues that *wonder* exists both before and after appropriation, and that in order for difference to affect us, "it is necessary and sufficient for it *to surprise,* to be new, *not yet assimilated or disassimilated as known."* [424] What Irigaray sets up here is an idea of pure difference, a difference not yet subsumed by epistemology or thought, a difference that has not be fit into a teleological model of explanation which reduces it to sameness. This is not an epistemological understanding of difference, but rather, an ontological reading of difference. Irigaray continues, "our attraction to that which is not yet (en)coded, our curiosity… vis-à-vis that which we have no yet encountered or made ours.

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[423] Grosz also states that, unfortunately, this is ontological position in Irigaray's writings is what has led to the misunderstanding of her work, especially when it has been charged with homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and Eurocentrism. Grosz points out that the majority of these critiques of Irigaray have been made by straight white feminists, and that in her book, Grosz states that by "outlining her ontological position, I will show that many of these criticisms are either misdirected or manifestly unfair," *Becoming Undone,* 101.

[424] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* 73-74.

The same as us, as myself." Irigaray derives this from her critique of Western

Enlightenment thought, in this case, through Descartes, in order to suggest that

this mode of epistemology both produces as well as cannot define that which is in

excess of it.[425] For Irigaray, woman is this type of excess, but the openness of her

thorough critique of Enlightenment epistemology has usefulness for postcolonial

theory as well. It is this *other* that sets up a critique of epistemology through an

ontological engagement with difference. It is this ontological engagement that is

at the basis of Irigaray's ethics.

Irigaray defines then, an ethical encounter. What consists of an ethical

encounter with difference? To place this question within the specific realm of art

history, how can we encounter that which is other to its discipline. This other is

most radically found in nonwestern art by women. They are the double other to

western discourse, and as such, offer the most radical critique of western

discourse itself. But this is predicated on them not being appropriated by western

discourse and reduced to sameness with it. This reduction to sameness can be

located in western discourse's external application of their epistemology onto that

which is its fundamental other. Put plainly, externally applied definitions such as

western modernism and postmodernism onto the art of women from beyond the

west reduces them to sameness.

As Meyda Yegenoglu stipulates, the formation of the Western subject (and

the universalism this entails) depends on its assumption of autonomy and

authority only in terms of its Other, which is most often the nonwestern

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[425] Ibid, 74-75.

woman.[426] This can be seen as the very surface of contemporary events; the narratives around the recent outburst against rapes in India in western media (always quick to illustrate Indian culture as misogynist and backward in its treatment of *their* women), the outlawing of the Hijab in France, the endless proliferation of the image of the oppressed Islamic woman, and Western attempts to liberate Islamic nations from the hands of their backwards religious extremists. Less visible in contemporary media is the representation of the black Caribbean woman; always sassy yet subservient to her man—oppressed in her own way by the black men who use the figure of woman to push against their own persecution and subjugation. While these are certainly one narrative of a complex and open-ended reality, it is nonetheless the prevailing narrative promoted in the United States in its thinking on the subaltern woman. It is Irigaray's writings which spell out an alternative subject formation, in which this new kind of subjectivity in which the other is "recognized rather than denied."[427] In this re-configuring of the condition of the subject, the subject must thus be seen as both otherness as well as limitlessness. This limitlessness is what I describe as "excess."

Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism in Contemporary Installation Art

In line with an ontological project of an ethical encounter with that which (or who) is in excess of western epistemology, Spivak emphasizes that the

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[426] Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism,* 5.

[427] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* 9.

responsibility towards the 'native subaltern female' should not be, as Abdalkafor states, "based on benevolence which makes her an object of knowledge whose identity and interests can be defined and decided for her." What an ethical understanding of this project entails is not the issue of how to represent the subaltern woman, but of how to engage with the specifics of location and culture that define her position. It is a project of how to engage without condescension. Ola Abdalkafor, defines the "ethical encounter" as Spivak's strategy of abandoning the discussion of binaries in favor of delineating a "responsibility towards the subaltern by attempting to listen to them, rather than keeping on criticizing colonialism and imperialism."[428]

This framing of an ethical encounter is particularly important in visual representations of the subaltern woman, which has yet to be adequately addressed in art historical discourses on globalization and the problematically termed "multiculturalism and identity politics," which Enwezor forcefully invalidates as useful designations. As Amelia Jones stipulates on the need to "see differently" in the realm of visual culture, there must be a "new model for understanding identification as a reciprocal, dynamic, and ongoing process that occurs among viewers, bodies, images, and other visual modes of the (re)presentation of subjects."[429] The common thread shared between these three artists is an ethical encounter with the subaltern woman that allows her voice to be heard and listened to, even if that voice is at times hysterical and undecipherable.

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[428] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 51.
[429] Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently,* 1.

In her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason; Towards a History of the Vanishing Present,* Spivak names the category to which the artists discussed in subsequent chapters could be named. In her critique of Frederic Jameson's conflation of postmodernism and poststructuralism, Spivak describes this conflation as a "cultural production" that necessarily constitutes "privileged areas of inscription," that has now come to occupied by female diasporic intellectuals. Spivak describes the diasporic female intellectual who comes to inhabit western spaces of academia, and that rather than thinking of themselves as victims, they must instead engage themselves in "resisting globalization and redrawing the vicissitudes of migrancy," As Sukalpa Bhattacharjee summarizes in his review of Spivak's project, that "this group should address the challenge of political imagination to rethink their countries not as nostalgic memories but as part of globality of the present, outside the U.S. melting pot." This re-meeting of America and globality through the diasporic female intellectual, or as I argue, artist, "can re-invent the (his)tory of the vanishing present which would in turn retell the stork of a Caliban or a Friday."[430]

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[430] Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Towards a Theory of Native Informant: Review of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 36, no. 14/15 (April 14-20, 2001), 1195.
Spivak says of Caliban in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present,* 118, that: "As we attempt to unlearn our so-called privilege as Arial and 'seek from [a certain] Caliban the honor of a place in his rebellious and glorious ranks,' we do not ask that our students and colleagues should emulate us but that they should attend to us. If, however, we are drive by a nostalgia for lost origins, we too run the risk of effacing the 'native' and stepping forth as 'the real Caliban,' of forgetting that he is a native in a play, an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text. The staging of Caliban work alongside the narrativization of history: claiming to *be* Caliban legitimizes the very individualism that we must persistently attempt to undermine from within."

Spivak states that while an alliance with multiculturalism is strategically beneficial, she similarly denounces in similar terms what Mignolo conceives of as a the "corporate university." Spivak states, "National language departments… hook up with the business community in the name of cultural studies in order to attract not only native speakers of those languages, but especially new immigrant students from the former colonials of the particular nation-state, so that they too can enter that white-clone enclave."[431] While Spivak is referring to intellectual recruitment, this can also be easily applied to the art world through its increasing interest in globalization, multiculturalism, and nonwestern practices. Chosen exemplars are imported into the art market, thus allowing them, as token examples, to be a part of the "white clone enclave" of the contemporary art world. Spivak states that this figure is caught in a struggle that when one questions "this distorting rationale for multiculturalism while utilizing its material support, we have to recognize also the virulent backlash from the current *racist* dominant in this country is out of step with contemporary geo-politics." It is precisely this struggle that the postcolonial and feminist art historian and artist find themselves in: simultaneously aware of the room that has been crafted for them in the name of multiculturalism and globalization by more liberal discourses while also acknowledging that on the other is the conservative discourse of art history that disavows their very existence in the discipline at all. Spivak concludes, "it is within this ignorant clash that we have to find and locate our agency, and attempt, again and again, to unhinge the clashing machinery."[432]

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[431] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 397.
[432] Ibid, 397.

It is locating agency for the nonwestern intellectual, and artist, that concerns this dissertation. Spivak writes, "the disenfranchised woman of the diaspora--- new and old—cannot, then engage in the *critical* agency of civil society—citizenship … to fight the depredations of 'global economic citizenship.' Spivak says, "I think of the 'native informant' as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation."[433] In her critique of the social sciences that defines and utilizes the native informant for its own ends, Spivak points to a humanities based education, in her example through literature from postcolonial women writers, as the source for a true ethical encounter with difference. Gayatri Spivak views the short story "Pterodactyl" by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi as a good example of an ethical encounter because the author herself refuses to be a native informant.[434] In chapter two, Nalini Malani similarly utilizes another short story by Mahasweta Devi in her enlivening of the subaltern female. Through this direct connection, as well as in the words of and work of the other two artists theorized here, it is clear that their project aligns with that of Mahasweta Devi, and as such, can be theorized as examples of an ethical encounter with difference, an ethical encounter that is necessarily an ontological conceptualization of excess as a "site for transformation."

Spivak, as Ola Abdalkafor describes, "assumes that the imperialist project of soul-making, the civilizing mission, started in the eighteenth century and the source is the construction of the Other as savage by the philosophy of

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[433] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 5.
[434] Ibid, 144-146.

Enlightenment. When Spivak speaks about the imperialist project of soul-making, she means that imperialism constituted the European subject as civilized and free at the expense of the 'native informant' who was constituted as uncivilized and bound."[435] In Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* she deconstructs Kant, in which his three critiques (Judgment, Pure Reason, and Practical Reason), "form a cultural self-representation of Western man's capacity for aesthetic judgment." Through a slippage in Kant's own logic, Spivak concludes that Kant's native figure "returns in the real, haunting the philosopher's text without surrendering to any kind of representation. Therefore, the 'native informant' belongs to the impossible in as much as s/he cannot be represented anymore."[436] This echoes Enwezor's observation that that which falls under the name of "identity politics" is the "specter that continues to haunt modernism."[437] Thus, as first dismissed by Spivak and iterated by Abdalkafor, within western epistemology, and its basis on the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the "other" to the Western man cannot exist. This other is beyond representation, and beyond knowing, and therefore, beyond the epistemological project of the Enlightenment. Why then, do we still rely on Enlightenment-based discourses to theorize and articulate non-Western subjects, let alone art practices?

Central to this is the figure of the subaltern woman. The subaltern woman cannot speak, as Spivak's seminal essay makes clear. Since she cannot speak, her voice cannot be retrieved. Rather, as Abdalkafor asserts, "the imperialist construction of the 'native subaltern female' should be answered by taking up the

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[435] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 16.
[436] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 117.
[437] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 71.

ethical responsibility towards her"[438] and that this responsibility can be achieved through an encounter with her. The subaltern female as the basis for the subject-constitution of the Western masculine self, thus offers, the possibility for radical critique. In this respect, this can be seen as a motive for the three artists discussed here's utilization of the subaltern woman. Nalini Malani's *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2013) offers a chance to listen to the subaltern women evoked in her installation. Referring to the mass abduction and rape of over one hundred thousand women during Partition, Malani remarks, "the Partition led to states of mind where women wove a membrane of silence." Malani is referring to the reality that once these women were returned home, the shame surrounding their abduction led them to fall silent about their experiences. As Malani states, "apart from the signs that marked and scarred the body it marked language as well into another interface: hysterical speech."[439] It is this hysterical speech that Malani envisions in her installation, and as such, constitutes an ethical encounter in which the viewer can *listen* to the subaltern woman, even if she may not understand it.

Similarly, Roshini Kempadoo's imagined narratives of the lost voices of Caribbean women opens up a possibility to affirm their existence, and through her installation, to listen to them. Donette Francis theorizes this in terms that one may understand the motive for Kempadoo's installations. Francis states that it is "precisely because of the absence of, or fragments of, what I call 'archives of

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[438] Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 124.
[439] John Pijnappel, "Interview with Nalini Malani from the iCon India Catalogue produced for the Indian show at the 51 Venice Biennale," Courtesy of Bose Pacia Gallery, New York. http://www.nalinimalani.com/texts/venice.htm
Malani's use of the term "hysterical" is a feminist reclamation of the term given by Freud to his female patients (most famously, Dora) and her theoretical backbone is through the work of anthropologist Veena Das.

intimacy' that we are denied access to a more fulsome understanding of the

everyday lives of Caribbean women and girls living in the region and in

diaspora."[440] It is this that is enlivened through Kempadoo's engagement with the

lost narratives of the subaltern woman in her installations. As Kempadoo

describes her installation, *Amendments,* it "fills the void of the resounding

absences of the plantation worker's history through the central character of

"Venezuela," who is an "illusory and mythical woman" whose "imaginary life-

experience encompasses stories that critique and query the predominance of

[male] heroes in African- and European-centered anticolonial narratives."[441]

Shahzia Sikander's project less directly confronts the idea of the subaltern

woman, but rather, directly engages with the representation of the nonwestern

woman, and her generalization in western imagination as the image of the

subaltern woman.[442] Cultural essentialism, which Sikander takes up through the

mass media in her work, collapses nonwestern women into a single category: the

subaltern, or third world, woman. As Chandra Mohanty states the "average third

world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender

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[440] Donette Frances, "Strategies of Caribbean Feminism," *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature,* ed by Michael A Bucknor, et al. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 340.

[441] Roshini Kempadoo, "Amendments: Digital Griots as Traces of Resistance," 182.

[442] As Gayatri Spivak remarks, referring to different forms of feminist practice and different forms of activism, "strategy is something that is situation specific." While the artists discussed in this dissertation all utilize what I conceive of as a strategic excess, they do so in different ways and for different means. Quoted in: "Feminist Activist Art, a Roundtable Forum, August 24-31, 2005," 16.

(read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)."[443]

Sikander performs this through the abstracted figure of the gopi, the uneducated milkmaids who worship Krishna, she offers a radical new positioning for them as autonomous and powerful. Writings on Shahzia Sikander demonstrate art history's attempts to reduce her to the figure of the native informant, and through her interviews as well as in the very form her art takes, it is clear that she resists this designation. Sikander states in an interview with Fereshteh Daftari,

> by isolating the Gopi character I emphasized its potential to cultivate new associations. The split from its feminine origin is indicative of my interest in exploring the space of sexuality and eroticism within a certain overt and controlled system of representation. The introduction of anthropomorphic forms cam about when I start to take apart Eva Hesse's work as a framing device back in 1993, as well as my explorations of the feminine via Cixous and Kristeva.

Sikander states that "the tension or encounter between the quiet and the chaotic is the thrust of my work. I see it in all representations, foremost in our media frenzied world. Through powerful images global media identifies, controls, edits, and dictates at a dizzying speed but the instability beneath the layer of representation is fraught with contradictions. In such a world, spirituality for me really about awareness, vigilance; transcending partisanship by constantly questioning one's assumptions."[444]

Through their work, these women refuse to be "native informants": they do not speak for the subaltern woman, they do not *inform* the west as to their

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[443] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* ed. Chandra Mohanty et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 56 cited in Narayan, Uma, "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," 91.
[444] Fereshteh Daftari, "Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism," 64.

realities so that the west may, as Enwezor describes, "feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power."[445] Rather, through installation, these women craft a mode of listening to that which is difference, and in so doing, craft the possibility for an ethical encounter with the other. The immersion of the viewer into installation, as well as the effect of sound, operate in Malani, Kempadoo, and Sikander's works to implicate the viewer within their works. This brings the viewer face to face with that which is the 'Wholly other' in Spivak's words, to western discourse: the nonwestern woman.[446] In so doing, these installations provide the possibility for an ethical encounter. Read ontologically, these installations do not seek to explain the Other, nor do they seek to know the other, but rather, these installations seek to *experience* the other. As Harriet Hawkins in her essay, "The Cultural Geographies of Installation Art," argues via the work of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray's feminist conceptualizations of vision and subjectivity, installations are, inherently, "in excess of the optical, in that they bring 'the consciousness of one's corporeality to the forefront of the art experience."[447]

The ethical encounter produced by these artists' installations can be defined as a mode of feminist activism. Jennifer Gonzalez defines feminist activist art as having as

> its long-term goal the critique and dismantling of patriarchal systems of power. The more progressive forms of feminism recognize that this goal

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[445] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 57.

[446] As Abdalkafor contends, "Spivak's designation that an ethical encounter must happen one on one with a wholly Other "is reproduced or mimed through the installation format themselves. Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak,* 174.

[447] Harriet Hawkins, "'The argument of the eye'? The Cultural Geographies of Installation Art," *Cultural Geographies,* vol. 13 no. 3 (2010), 15.

necessarily includes a critique of the racism and class dominance through which patriarchy frequently operates. For this reason, I do not believe that feminist activist art can or should be described as "identitarian" cultural practice that is simply focused, for example, on the category of "women" or the concept of "gender." Instead, it should be recognized as a set of critical engagements with systems of power that are oppressive for a wide variety of people.... As long as people continue to be defined socially and culturally by identifying "traits" such as gender or ethnicity, it will probably be efficient to organize politically around these traits to produce social change but unproductive to define or delimit radical art practice according to the same criteria."[448]

How to avoid this delimitation of radical art practice this when one encounters the irreducible difference of nonwestern art by women, then, is necessarily a question of method. Ajay Sinha, in his article "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method," points to the problematic faced by South Asianists in the U.S. in which they are continually asked to validate contemporary Indian art. To do so is through a justification of its avant-garde status, where scholars "search for its difference from progressive art movements in the West. Discouraged by its references to mainstream modernism, they inscribe it as derivative of that which they are more familiar."[449] This is like being Spivak's native informant. Spivak's warning against "migrant academic's desire to museumize a culture left behind gaining thus an alibi for the profound Eurocentrism of academic integrity." Spivak, however, states that "to be human is to be always and already inserted into a structure of responsibility" and that because of this, "the possibility of learning from below can only be earned by the slow effort at ethical responding—

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[448] Jennifer Gonzalez qtd in "Feminist Activist Art, a Roundtable Forum, August 24-31, 2005," Mary Flanagan, Jennifer Gonzalez, et al, *NWSA Journal,* vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring, 2007)**,** 19.
[449] Ajay J. Sinha, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method," *Art Journal,* vol. 58, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 31.

a two-way thread—with the compromised other as teacher."[450] An ethical

responding is a listening to the "compromised other," in other words.

Citing Geeta Kapur's critique of a globalized, transcultural notion of the

Third World offered up in exhibitions on Asian art geared towards a primarily

western audience, Sinha notes that Kapur's essay in the catalog is the only one

that warns against the cultural homogeneity that postmodernism created in the

1990s. As Sinha notes, "the warning rings true especially when addressed to

North Americans, for whom postmodernism contains a promise of neutral

frontiers and boundaries at which the United States' diverse migrant cultures

could seek a New World Order."[451] Like Rebecca Brown, as well as Elizabeth

Grosz and Gayatri Spivak in the theoretical realm, Kapur warns that (cited in

Sinha), "a continued insistence on eclecticism and its conversion to various

ideologies of hybridity within the postmodern can serve to elide the diachronic

edge of cultural phenomena and thus east the tensions of historical choice."[452]

Instead, Kapur proposes a "real battle ground for cultural difference" in India

where the suppression of women's voices and the marginalization of tribals work

to "open up the paradigm of nation to include new subject positions based on a

dialectical synthesis of these counter-cultures." Kapur considers multiculturalism

to be a postmodernist celebration that which is easily corruptible and co-optable.

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[450] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present,* xxiv quoted in Ketu H Katrak's *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World, (*New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), xxi.

[451] Ajay J. Sinha, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method," 34.

[452] Geeta Kapur, "Dismantling the Norm," *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions,* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 63. quoted in Sinha, Ajay, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method," 34.

While Sinha does not articulate the potential for the ethical encounter, he does confirm that the form of "installation emphasizes multiple, discrete signs, whose meaning depends on their interaction with the viewer's mind. Existing in the viewer's space as a heterogeneous cluster of sculptural, pictorial, and sound elements, an installation's crossfire of signs could draw the viewer vicariously into an area of true historical conflicts, giving the diverse, partially erased fragments of India's historical experience a contemporary semantic value."[453]

The method with which to appropriately encounter difference is one that embraces its status in excess, naming this excess as Irigaray does, as an "excess that resists." Grosz situates art as a site of excess. In her ontological definition for art, Grosz states that "art is an agent of change in life, a force that harnesses potentially all the other forces of the earth, not to make sense of them [that is the project for epistemology]... but to generate affects and to be affected." Art, Grosz concludes, is therefore "the excess of matter that is extracted from it to resonate for living beings."[454] Taking Spivak's call for an "aesthetic education in the era of globalization" seriously, Abdalkafor traces in Spivak's work a conceptualization of an ethical encounter with the other that is made possible through art.[455]

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[453] Ajay J. Sinha, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method," 34.
[454] Grosz, Elizabeth, *Becoming Undone,* 189.
[455] Abdalkafor, Ola, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation.*

Conclusion

Intersectional Feminisms and Ontological Art Histories

This dissertation has sought to trace the video-based installation practices of three nonwestern contemporary women artists who, working since the 1990s, have developed a visual language of excess in order to engage with the problematic of how to represent the subaltern woman, or of how to engage with subalternity more generally. Through this, their works point towards a possibility for a transnational feminist theorization for art historical discourse. Through an in depth examination of their works it becomes clear that not only do their works engage with the gendered complexity of globalization and concomitant nationalist agendas, but that their works also represent a new formal practice that currently exists beyond the margins of art historical discourse. The very idea of a transnational feminist praxis has yet to be fully delineated in art historical discourse. As such, it exceeds the discourse itself. Traversing across three different cultural contexts and three very different types of installation practice, the enormity of this task reveals itself not as impossible, but rather, as an exciting and compelling opportunity for discourse to exceed itself and transform into something new.

Focusing one by one, and in particular on a few selected works by each artists, this dissertation charts three different modes of excess, which, while all fundamentally different, they can be united under their shared concern for evoking an ethical encounter with difference. Excess in each of these artists' works functions differently, which while initially frustrating, eventually leads one

to the conclusion that this is precisely the point: no two (or three) feminisms, practices, or artists are the same. Why then even bother with a grand totalizing narrative at all?

While embracing a totalizing vision of a (read: singular) global feminism is an enticing thought, both from a fundamental belief that the one thing the world shares is a denigration of women, as well as scholarly, since it is so much easier to overlook the particularities of production, cultural and historical contexts, and artist's descriptions in order to cherry pick what fits in to a totalizing rubric and excluding what does not. Finding a conceptual dead end with this idea, and building off the work from other disciplines which have so thoroughly theorized transnational feminist practices *against* the reductive idea of confining it to a practice of "identity politics" or "multiculturalism," this dissertation instead embraces the heterogeneity of each artist's practice, rather than trying to fit their works into a grand narrative for contemporary feminist art production.

An important foundation for this dissertation was Ella Shohat's *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age.* The exhibition and the resulting book are remarkable because of the breadth of voices and mediums within it. Ranging from artist's essays, performance art, and visual art, I realized this is precisely how cultural praxis should be theorized. Why leave out the poetry, short stories, novels, philosophy, and academic scholarship that relates to artistic praxis? Whether it be referenced directly or referred to as a foundation for creative process, these other cultural practices had to be included. It is from this

positioning that this dissertation found resonance with Mignolo's call for a "trans-disciplinary" approach for the humanities.

Nalini Malani's work as well as her writing, interviews, and lectures build off of the work done in other disciplines, from her engagement with East German writers Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller, to Indian writer Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi," and then, further, her visualization of the philosophy of feminist and postcolonial writing. Sociologists Veena Das and Arjun Appadurai provide a historical and social contextualization for not only the importance of Malani's work, but further, these writers also serve as a lens through which one can see and understand why Malani makes the works that she does. This chapter strove to illuminate the usefulness of an ontological engagement with Malani's work that queries *what* exactly her work *is,* from a sociological and historical contextualization to a philosophical and literary imaginative aspect. From this, the ontology of an experiential and ethical encounter offered to the viewer through her installations becomes clear.

Roshini Kempadoo's work is similarly intersectional and trans-disciplinary. As a scholar herself, Kempadoo is adept at placing the visualizations of her scholarly concerns into conversation with not just each other, but with her praxis. One must understand her praxis within the larger community of contemporary black British aritsts and academic engagements with black and Caribbean history, literature, dub poetry, and the social realities in both the Caribbean as well as its diasporas in the United Kingdom. Just as Malani seeks to evacuate the subaltern woman's marginalized position in history, so too does

Kempadoo seek to reinsert the figure of the black Caribbean woman into her

proper place in history. Central to both artists is the power of imagination to

envision alternative futures while also contextualizing it within the trauma of the

past and present realities of gendered and racial oppression.

Shahzia Sikander's practice, while representing a mode of different

engagement with ontological excess that is founded in Islamic aesthetics and

Hindu miniatures, is similarly grounded in imagination. Imagination allows

Sikander to radically alter past representations of the nonwestern woman, within

South Asia as well as in the west, to present feminine collectivity that is not

mourning the loss of a patriarch, but rather is emboldened and empowered from

the lack of male presence. Her abstraction of the figure of the woman exceeds the

ability for her work to be read as confirming and furthering the notion of the

exotic and sexualized South Asian woman. In moving beyond the ability for

figural representations of her work to be exoticized and used as, in Enwezor's

works, as an "apotropaic device for containment and sublimation," Sikander's

gopi hair particles overwhelm and puncture every single one of her digital

animations since 2003.[456] Without shedding its referent to the figure of the gopi,

who is very much a subaltern woman in that she is presented as an uneducated

woman from the country, Sikander's gopi hair particles offer the possibility of her

redemption and empowerment through finding a strength within herself.

Ultimately, all three artists discussed in this dissertation engage with an

intersectional feminist approach to representation, and through the evolution of

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[456] Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," 57.

their practices into immersive installation formats, this approach is revealed as a powerful tool for producing an ethical encounter with both the subaltern woman as well as with difference more generally conceived. As such, this intersectional feminist approach is important not just for feminist concerns of gender violence, oppression, and inequality, but rather, can be conceived of as a methodological tool that can be utilized in other contexts, other situations, and different concerns. Malani presents a layered and lush palimpsest of imagery, engaging the viewer with the beautiful chaos of memory, erasure, and reclamation. Kempadoo's practice fills the gaps left by the archive and history with an imagined reality that exceeds both its fictional construct as well as its historical construct. Through her referencing of the Yoruba deity Ezili who exceeds time and space, so too does Kempadoo's installation format. Sikander's gopi hair appears throughout her installations concerned with the social and historical realities of British colonialism and the oil trade, where gopi hair operates as a vehicle for propelling interpretation of her works into an excessive field where it is impossible to reduce or assign a singular meaning to her works. While all distinct practices with differing sets of cultural concerns, all three of these artists engage in a metaphorical and material excess that prohibits reductive interpretations of their works.

A theorization and in-depth examination of the works of Nalini Malani, Roshini Kempadoo, and Shahzia Sikander represent a radical opening up of art historical discourse. Steeped in an excess that refuses a reading of their works as being native informants, oppressed and silent objects (rather than subjects), or

exotic others, their work marks a shift in the direction of contemporary art historical discourse. Through an understanding of ethical encounters in excess, their transnational and intersectional feminist approach offers a radical potentiality for the power of art, and what it can mean in the context of our globalized, neocolonial, and imperial realities.

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