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ON BELKIS RAMÍREZ

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Of Migration and Memory: Belkis Ramírez's *Volare*

They are dressed in black, nine women adorned as if in mourning, hands clasped or hidden in stately, solemn appearance. Womanly but demure figures appear in two-dimensional form on white sheets, as if in procession. Their bodies are equidistantly separated. In their formal reverence, these womenfolk leave much unstated as they stand straight laced, staring eyes, feet together, neatly coiffed, side by side, one ahead of the other, with measured gaits and placement. Artist Belkis Ramírez, in lieu of the formality of the white canvas, has chosen to stream a trio of airy white sheets clipped to clotheslines, draped from the ceiling as if hung for a wedding, to portray her unadorned females. White sheets are a domestic canvas of social affliction, a papering over.

The figures' silence on these white masses hangs as a weight, even as the celebratory form of these billows dance in the airflow of fans specifically directed at the installation. Silence and celebration, a coupling of irony that describes the patina of this social condition with which we are grappling. Social affliction is a shame we have grown accustomed to because of its uncanny ability to exist in this way. Ceremonial, seemingly prescribed modes of appearance must be maintained lest these women are criticized. Scrutiny of imagined onlookers seems etched into their skin—these flattened female forms are grooved and marked. Ramírez has used the technique of printing wood onto the sheets to create them, transferring the scratches of the chisel onto the flat surface. These marks are imprints that mar, mirror, and perhaps diminish our own scars.

For a change, these unknown, anonymous women have been unveiled, looking down upon us. Though their billows seem poised for flight, their forms are anything but in flight. Their ascent to the ceiling above our heads bemoans their fall. Dreams of flying are self-admonished. And their forced meeting in this space is not embraced, only peripherally acknowledged in the even white spaces between them. It is a gathering with echoes of distance, a haunting. It is a gathering of pained, traumatized women, made anonymous through their sufferings, defamed and diminished through their hurts. Through this act of assembling images on the familiar, tactile object of the white bed sheet, Ramírez creates a metonymic point of entrance to the uncomfortable conversation in which she is inviting us to engage. Notions of social affliction that come to the fore through this act of gathering can be entertained within our own sanatoriums of memory, where healing is imagined and made possible. For within memory, emotional migration can

be realized. And it is here that the artist meets us, impels us. In this moment of coming together of bodies—anonymous, unknown, and real—Ramírez deploys the visual of social affliction inciting us to flight, migration. We are, in this moment, acutely, uncomfortably aware of the coordinates of our point of departure and the journey that our migration might entail.

Volare (2018) is that liminal threshold space where flight or fight is determined, a Janus-faced condition where the public and private collide. We encounter *Volare* where the silence of social affliction, its ignorance, its patriarchy, is visually denounced, even as the pain of its familiarity remains written into the women's bodies. It is through this provocative positioning that Ramírez invites us to consider social affliction within a process of *migration and memory* shifting our vantage point. In repositioning our gaze and in the alterity of these women poised for flight, looking down upon us, a visual methodology of affliction is imagined—one in which the act of gathering of ghosts enacts a poetic of liberation, transcendence of violence. Yet one is uncertain as to whether their gathering for flight foreshadows an act of migration, a reclamation of home, or both. This duality is a poignant methodology signaling a necessity for action in retracing the past to activate alternatives, signaling a need to anchor another possibility of “home.”

Migrations

Is this congregation a point of departure from social affliction, an announcement of its death, its residues, its mourning, or is it a proclamation of impending death, a bemoaning of social affliction and thus flight into the netherworld? These white, even spaces between their womanly forms mirror the structures of violence in which they have been entrenched. Is this a symbolic “unghosting” of structural violence in multi-valent proclamation? But how, if the imprinting of the two-dimensional surface in lieu of three-dimensionality of form seems to reflect a kind of paucity of recognition? It is a thin recognition built into our presence as black women.

Perhaps this gathering is a recognition of the collectivity of solitary experiences, the publicness of the private. And we hope that this procession becomes a route, a pathway; we hope for something different. What these formal stances do not hide is a blank canvas. Despite the white of these sheets, sullying, tension, despair, acceptance, and revolt are written into their etched imprints. They are witnesses presenting silent testimonies. Rife with conflicts, these women haunt us to aid their escape from these bodies, these garbs. Reflecting a historicity of silence, of silent violence, their protesting procession follows the patterns and structures through which this violence was constructed; white sheets covering shame now unveil it, solemnly. The visuality of social affliction in Ramírez's *Volare* uses the very weapons of affliction in a dramatic almost black-and-white portrayal.

Ramírez shares that these nine women once belonged to a 2001 installation titled *De maR en peor* (a play on “De mal en peor,” which translates to “From bad to worse,” and *mar*, “sea”). Presenting the issue of human trafficking in the Dominican Republic,¹ *De maR en peor* comprised thirty-three female figures—two-dimensional wooden carvings, hanging from fishhooks of various sizes.² “The sea is present in the crossing,” explains Ramírez. “They hung as prey and bait.” Of the installation, Ramírez shares, “It was one of my most iconic pieces,” and of the women, “I use them in *Volare* as a way to release them, metaphorically speaking.”³ Their translation from prey of the sea into their detailed imprints on the white bed sheets speaks of a spiritual flight but opens their interpretation to myriad other invocations through their new material and positional presence, some perhaps ironic. What is appropriate to ask of these textured presences in space that perform a ghosting and “unghosting” of our presence in the past? What is appropriate to say to their ghosts, to their families and loved ones? What does the aesthetics of pain produce?

Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, challenges us to locate the space we call home, the space of our true gathering. Home is constructed through the process of imagining, languaging, and aestheticising toward a re-visioning of self even in the gathering spaces of others. Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, articulates a narrative of gatherings: gatherings across the psychological space of time, the gathering of historical images, the gathering of old spirits in new places and renewed spirits of old places for the purpose of restoration.⁴ Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, through his work, seems to locate himself in the forged restorative gathering space of the imagination, describing himself, “the author,” as one who is “the complex ghost of his own landscape of history or work.” However, Sam Durrant argues that through this ghosting, Harris separates himself from the position of “author as sovereign subject.”⁵ These writers all present the Afro-Caribbean ghost that lingers in space and the importance of coming together to tell multiple stories. It is a ghost that is searching for a time-space to gather the fragments of identity. Within this act of gathering lies home. The processes of searching and gathering allow us to locate our culture.

A Visual Life of the Image

Perhaps it is George Lamming's introduction to the idea of this gathering space as "sacred" that speaks to where *Volare* seeks to take us. Lamming presents the image of the gathering in the sacred Haitian Ceremony of Souls, through which opportunity is presented for the communication of the living with the dead, that the dead may lay to rest any quarrels of their life and rest in peace.⁶ The construction of a visual iconography in forming this "sacred" of Caribbean identity and Caribbean womanhood can potentially repair home. It no longer leaves us homeless, as Nietzsche asserts. But a sacred of any identity implies repetitive visitation for this sacred to emerge. The sacred also suggests the symbolic potential of repeated imagery while repetitions in varying contexts produce what we might call a "visual life" of the image. Multiplicities of imagery underlie an image's transformation into iconography, while the visual life might be used to describe how these instances of the appearance of the image hang together. And it is visual iconography that can augment the symbolic potential of such labor (the work accomplished through the artistic enterprise of creating iconographies) to alter everyday reality through the transformation of personal experience. *Volare* has only just commenced a visual life, starting with *De maR en peor*.

While *Volare* succeeds in portraying social affliction in entering and implicating the viewer in its complexities, it risks failure in sustaining a visual life. Life suggests continuity (even if social affliction leans toward punctuation or stagnation of that life), while appearance of work in a gallery is a temporary rather than sustained engagement. Other forms of work can be instructive here in thinking through where the visual life of social affliction may reside or transpire and how it could incite transformation. Site-specific work and performance art both facilitate alternative "livelihoods," different strains or possibilities of a visual life of social affliction. Resonances and dissonances with *Volare* can be found in the site-specific work of Bahamian artist Antonius Roberts and in the performance art of Trinidadian artist Michele Isava. Expectations of the visual life of social affliction differ between these varying formats of installation, site-specific work, and performance art.

Ramírez's *Volare* is in some ways an extension of the symbolic work of Roberts's site-specific installation *Genesis*—twelve women with grooved indentations of scars, sculpted from trees still rooted in the ground.

The entire artistic site created by Roberts and Tyrone Ferguson is known as *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* (2005) and sits on an old slave plantation, the Whyllly plantation in Nassau, The Bahamas. *Sacred Space* consists of the wooden figures of *Genesis* and a patio with low wooden stools carved by Roberts overlooking the sea. The balcony is protected by a metal railing, and the figures are encircled by metal gongs fashioned by Ferguson—bells of all sizes, strung from the trees, played by the wind. Surrounded by the bells chiming from the trees as though heralding spirits, the figures' sometimes silhouetted forms against the sky or sea seem to acknowledge the possibility of journeying. Inspired by the location, the artists created this site-specific installation without permission on the government-owned land.

Anchoring and gathering on an old slave plantation signals a reclamation of home. While still rooted, the *Genesis* women's positioning on a clifftop allows them to "meet" the sky when viewed from different vantage points. This dual positioning locates the *Genesis* women similarly to the *Volare* damas. Both works create an emotional space for testimony through a duality that suggests both a relationship to home but with a possibility of/for flight. As a site-specific work, however, *Genesis* can become a visual iconography within a Caribbean landscape, a physical space with alternative visual markers that can be repeatedly and ritually visited. *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* can and has become a physical space of emotional and spiritual respite (figs. 1–3).

Illegally created, this act of defiant reclamation of a "home" site—an old plantation—spurred public debate in the newspapers as to the right to stake symbolic ownership of this public space. By adopting formal positions, the *Volare* women express



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Antonius Roberts and Tyrone Ferguson, *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* (2005); installation of *Genesis*, twelve scarred female figures carved from rooted trees (Roberts), with handcrafted bells strung from trees (Ferguson). National Heritage Park, Nassau, The Bahamas. Photographs by Marielle Barrow.

a marked, structural defiance, much as do the women of *Genesis*. But this defiance must have latitude and longevity in keeping with the gravity of social affliction. The necessity of this project concerning social affliction lies in its disturbing proximity to so many lives, its intimacy. Visual presences that attempt this kind of labor are enlivened through a popular visual life rather than a mere “visitation.” They must come “home.” In other words, the accessibility to *Volare* is so limited that restorative, redemptive work accessed through the visual can barely enter everyday life for everyday people. The artwork itself is rarely able to experience a sustained visual life, repetition, and visibility in varying times, contexts, and spaces. What becomes of these potent women after exhibitions? Where do they rest, stay? Where *should* they rest? Where *should* they lie?

In many cases, the labor of these works takes on another, virtual life, as in the works of performance artist Michele Isava. A performative sentiment to *Volare* connects with Isava’s oeuvre. Isava exhibits what I have called a “performative memory-life” that taps into our cultural memory.⁷ Her performance work bears the ephemerality of episodes, an episodic temporality that is absent in the form of Ramírez’s presentation of social affliction, except that the *Volare* women, once removed from their display in a gallery setting, perhaps revert to obscurity. Whereas the rootedness of *Genesis* reclaims and anchors home, the temporality of *Volare* and Isava’s works necessarily call into question or problematizes the notion of home within social affliction.

In *Why Did You Go So Far?* (2011), Isava steps out of an entrapped space between a bed frame, covered with a white sheet, strung vertically from a window frame.⁸ In the gallery space, the white bed sheet mocks, while it mirrors, the white child’s dress that she wears and the white feathers in a pile on the ground. She attempts to escape the contraption of the bed—and her own despair—through frantic movement and the periodic chanting of “Emergency, emergency” (figs. 4–6). The composure of *Volare* is antithetical to the desperate anxiety of Isava’s performance. However, repetition of the forms of the *Volare* women is analogous to Isava’s repetitive chants of “Emergency, emergency”; they both present the reality of a cyclical entrapment. Memory traps Isava within its veil even as it unveils—the predicament of #MeToo. Similarly concerning are the ways the work of visualizing social affliction installed within hallowed halls raises the auger of the museum as civilizing an uncivilized institution of structured violence. It is a space to which these women seemingly conform and yet attempt to flee. It is not the people’s space. It is not home. These women have not yet escaped the sheets upon which each episode of their slow demise is etched.

While the visual life of this installation of *Volare* may be unknown, the artist gives visual life to social affliction through her body of works, acting, as Marianne de Tolentino says, “as a manifesto against different forms of violence.”⁹ Ramírez’s works more generally reflect a



Figures 4, 5, and 6. Michele Isava, *Why Did You Go So Far?*, 2011; stills from performance, Grimmuseum, Berlin. Filmed by Christopher Hewitt.

tendency to move from two-dimensional surfaces of her installations into an invitation not simply to look but to participate, to enter their absurdity. Paralleling the absurdity of violence, the three-dimensionality of the artwork is the interaction between artwork and audience. While presenting us with ghosts of the black female body, Ramírez’s works begin to indict us to perform the memory in our own bodies, to engage the pain of the ghost in an act of conductive artistry. Memory here is an act of ghosting of the black body, where a migratory gathering of

ghosts begins to make the white sheets of our beds a mnemonic unsettling of the social affliction to which we have grown accustomed. In child's play, the white sheet becomes the process of ghosting, sometimes with slits cut open for the eyes. Disturbingly reminiscent of the KKK costume, these confections of play, public persecution, and private perversions represented by Ramírez's women printed on sheets can cause us to reflect on the work of symbols within the individual mind and social fabric of society. Distortions, layers, and confections mock our notions of good in society.

Double Politics

Ramírez works within a double politics of the visual life of social affliction. The first layer of politics is one that is being played out by dominant forces through the visual context of the geopolitical landscape. Caribbean women are stereotypically presented in blazing color, often full breasted, too often exposed, pleasure seeking and pleasure giving. This is a masking of the violence inflicted yet a lens revealing the objectification of women that is part and parcel of a larger scope of violence. Ramírez avidly denies this politics and the visual trope of colorful Caribbean artwork that references a geopolitics via the gaze by presenting her women in funeral garb, devoid of color. The second is a politics generated by art, with the potential for the witness of art to facilitate unmasking.

The politics of masking functions on a subversive level where citizen subjects are interpolated as traumatized incapacitated victims based on an embedded collective memory of past traumas. While trauma and victimhood may be real, this is not the whole truth. Incapacitation is incomplete. Joseph Roach warns us of the negative possibility looming in memory, "how memories torture themselves into forgetting by disguising their collaborative interdependence across imaginary borders of race, nation and origin."¹⁰ By establishing this collective imaginary, the multiplicity of stories is sometimes lost, and as memory rife with forgetting becomes embedded as culture, the capacity for alternatives is subdued.

The Spaces Between

Counteracting the visual politics of society where concealment leads to reproductions of violence, the politics of the visual sphere is engaged by visual artists in reinventing the collective self. Ramírez deploys this through

nonindexical representations in the telling of atrocity. Jill Bennet, in *Empathic Vision*, probes the role of nonindexical representation in the context of postcolonial contemporary visual art. Is this nonindexical link to reality a more powerful means of disruption of the sensible than the indexical—the realism of photographs, for example? These recognizable yet radically unfamiliar forms in their scarring make the images transactive or conductive rather than communicating a direct and easy truth. The defamiliarization of the form in its etched smoothness on the white cloths allows for some distancing and masking of pain permitting for spatial and temporal gaps, perforated boundaries, and relationships as spaces of understanding and connection. Art, then, negotiates trauma and witness, allowing for inhabitation, surrogacy, confections. It facilitates an alternative meaning-making process, since meaning is not directly given. It is in this ability to forge new denotations in the gaps that is the power of art; positive meanings can also be forged in the midst of the mire.

Artworks can allow for an encounter, in the Deleuzian sense, that forebears critical thought, in which audiences begin to engage in building relationships with sites and persons without the substantive visual iconographies of monuments. In actively negotiating the strangeness of the artwork, individuals begin to negotiate the strangeness of trauma from an interior point of navigation. They begin to inhabit fluid spaces. The politics of such contemporary art is thus the politics of creating spaces for the engendering of agency through the generation of hermeneutic processes.

Both Roach and Bennet accede that surrogation is the topoi of memory.¹¹ But surrogation plays within both domains—within visual politics of society and within a politics of the visual sphere engaged by artists. Surrogation here—this technique or happenstance of displacement of feeling into the sculptural, painted, or printed figures—seems part and parcel of this visual life of social affliction. It is perhaps here that the danger lies, as "the body as place" becomes a zone for capture or play.¹² In this regard, Bennet reflects on the ways the body becomes witness. She deals with nuances of witness in deconstructing the structure of witness looking at oscillation as an aspect of witness, the movement between "feeling and non-feeling, psychic shock and numbing." She also deals with positioning as a critical element of witness—witness, secondary witness, and the possibility of "viewing from the body" that contemporary art seems to facilitate.¹³ This displacement is a significant tool of healing from the violence of social affliction in *Volare*. As the pain is displaced onto these printed figures that are carded for flight, it is also symbolically released. Migration as in (spiritual) flight rather than via the sea, as in trafficking, is a critical possibility here. Ghosts are thus an important manifestation for the possibility of healing and journeying home. While this flight and these ghosts acknowl-

edge trauma, this stage of migration facilitates escape, movement, an alternative trajectory. While we mourn its occurrence, we lay it to rest.

In my own artwork concerning migration, I reflect on the process of “othering,” particularly through light and, much like Isava and Ramírez, through masking. Playing with the notion of light and its difference in the Caribbean, as it filters through and around the billowing curtains, I contrast the linear imprint of the light cast on my body by using the blinds of the window shade in my foreign apartment. The blinds become a metaphor for a process of othering.

“Othering” is about moving through spaces, being in otherspaces and discovering what **we** become in each space.

It speaks of migrations—**spiritual, emotional, and physical**.

Becoming other in a new space left its IMPRINT on my

b o d y that merged and morphed creating **me** as “Other” rather than this new space as other.

These spaces and stages of alterity or otherness represent both presence and absence—presence of the new. This process of being imprinted was a **masking**, the prints cast by the blinds shifted *agency*. Those prints became louder than my **brown skin**. Their **voices** began to shape me, while my movement shaped them.

Volare’s flight is a process of othering, a process of migration in which these women’s movement onto the sheets, the ceiling, and beyond shape them, in lieu of the vicious hooks that once marked them as prey and bait. In its installation, *Volare* requires light.

Volare is the domain of the public and private, the fertility of darkness in producing light. It is transience, memorializing and embeddedness, cyclical, repetitive, yet signifies the seeming disposable, replaceable ensign of patriarchy. *Volare* recognizes the past but charts a passage, a cartography in space for a new journey, a new possibility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Dominican Republic continues to struggle with trafficking today. A total of 102 people were trafficked in 2018; of them, 89 were female, 57 were children. US Department of State, *2018 Trafficking in Persons Report—Dominican Republic*, 28 June 2018, www.refworld.org/docid/5b3e0b564.html.
- 2 Elena Valdez examines Ramírez’s *De maR en peor*, as well as her 2016 installation *Amadas (Loved Ones)*, in “Writing the Feminine: The Representation of Women in Contemporary Dominican Visual Art,” *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 126–40. The cover of the issue features woodcut figures from Ramírez’s 2014 *A través de tus ojos (Through Your Eyes)*.
- 3 Belkis Ramírez, interview with the author, Maryland, 10 October 2018.
- 4 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
- 5 Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53, 54. Durrant quotes Wilson Harris, “Interior of the Novel: Amerindian/African/European Relations,” *Explorations* (1970).
- 6 George Lamming, “The West Indian People,” in *Caribbean Essays: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Salkey (London: Evans Brothers, 1973), 5–16.
- 7 Marielle Barrow, “Counter-Memory and Cultural Capital: The Arts as Sustainable Civic Practice in the Caribbean” (PhD diss., George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, 2016).
- 8 See Michele Isava, *Why Did You Go So Far?*, 2011, 8:20, vimeo.com/30237362.
- 9 “Un manifiesto contra distintas formas de violencia”; Marianne de Tolentino, “Belkis Ramírez, testimonial o premonitora,” *Hoy Digital*, 3 May 2014, hoy.com.do/belkis-ramirez-testimonial-o-premonitora (translation mine).
- 10 Joseph Roach, preface to *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xi.
- 11 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 12 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 60.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 59.