

Nijah Cunningham

ON FLORINE DEMOSTHENE

96

Life without Form

Nothing in the world can rob us of the power to say “I.” Nothing except extreme affliction. Nothing is worse than extreme affliction which destroys the “I” from outside, because after that we can no longer destroy it ourselves. What happens to those whose “I” has been destroyed from outside by affliction? It is not possible to imagine anything for them but annihilation according to the aesthetic or materialistic conception.

—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

French philosopher Simone Weil defined affliction (*malheur*) as the “uprooting of life,” something “more or less protracted equivalent to death.”¹ Her description of affliction as an extreme form of suffering that “destroys the ‘I’ from outside” provides a useful point of departure for addressing the distribution of pain and anguish across the Caribbean and its diasporas, as well a good starting point for approaching the idea of social affliction that lies at the heart of this convening of artists and writers.² Weil poses a question about the fate of the afflicted and asks if it is possible to imagine it as anything other than a state of *annihilation*. She contends that annihilation, according to its “aesthetic and materialistic” conceptions, best describes what happens to those caught in the grips of frequent and prolonged suffering. Annihilation, for Weil, is akin to a process of “decreation,” which, as she defines it, “makes something created pass into nothingness.”³ This vanishing horizon also structures her thought when she contends, “Affliction is above all anonymous; it deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference—a metallic chill—which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul.”⁴ Decreation transforms people into things and freezes those it touches with an indifferent chill. In the end, all that remains is a metallic object—perhaps a part in a machine, like a cog or crank—emblematic of the fate of those who are bound to suffering and deprivation. And while this destruction of the self is where Weil will elsewhere locate a supernatural grace, it is clear that the possibility of such transcendence hinges on her presuppositions regarding how the “uprooting” of life leads to its annihilation and, ultimately, the creation of “life without form.”⁵

Weil's philosophical reflections on affliction greatly inform recent liberal-humanist theorizations of political violence and suffering.⁶ More notably, however, Weil's reference to aesthetic and materialistic conceptions of annihilation lays the ground from which I seek to approach the idea of social affliction and its relation to Florine Demosthene's art. Weil touches on a key problematic that, in my eyes, Demosthene embraces as a creative resource. Together, Weil and Demosthene help us rethink the social experience of suffering and duress as well as reassess the tropes of dehumanization in which life is stripped of its meaning and left naked, bare, and without meaning. Thinking of the two together, we might be able to better grasp the stigmatizing effects of violence in its various manifestations—for example, political oppression, organized abandonment, epidemics, and climate catastrophes—that are woven into the social fabric of the Caribbean.

Born of Haitian descent in the United States, Demosthene has traveled from New York City to Haiti, back to the United States, and then to South Africa and Ghana over the course of her life journey. Now she shuttles between these multiple locations. Her uniquely diasporic sensibility is refreshing. In her art, she disregards the ordinary coordinates of space and time. Continents, archipelagoes, and islands in her work have long faded into thin air, and the Caribbean emerges as part of a variety of nodes within a dynamic assemblage unbound to the territorial logics of sovereignty and global capital. She creates complex mixed-media paintings consisting of mylar, glitter, and ink, in which we find figures floating against ominous backgrounds. Everything is already uprooted in the dramatic scenes depicted in her works, as if she is offering us a powerful visual metaphor for the placelessness that defines Caribbean and African diasporic life. Listen to how Demosthene describes the challenge of addressing histories of loss and displacement: "It is like trying to locate yourself in this history and you don't even know what this history is."⁷ The visual encounter with her art is a similar stepping into the terrain of the unknown and the unthinkable.

What is remarkable about Demosthene's art when viewed in relation to Weil's philosophical reflections is that Demosthene's work is not so much *about* affliction—social or otherwise. She does not represent the "uprooting of life." Instead, such uprooting moves through her work like a quite refrain or leitmotif created by her dedicated engagement with the historicity of the black female body. She mainly puts her creative energies into reimagining the lived experiences of the forgotten and discarded black women in history. And yet, in her effort to retrieve these anonymous lives, the artist faces a similar impasse as Weil, who attempts to reconcile things with her idea of decreation. Both focus on how violence transforms life. However, where Weil sees a process of decreation that annihilates the self, I suggest that Demosthene enables us to see the more partial and incomplete process of life's *deformation*.

This essay explores the interplay of visibility and social affliction through a consideration of Demosthene's aesthetic practice. I am particularly interested in how her use of abstraction sets things into motion. Demosthene helps us reimagine affliction through what I describe as her *deformation of the human form*. Whereas Weil argues that affliction "destroys the 'I' from outside," Demosthene focuses on what endures annihilation. Through her abstraction of bodies, Demosthene invites us to think about the feelings, sensations, and strivings that animate those who have been touched by the indifferent chill of death. If social affliction can be understood as referring to generalized forms of dispossession, of prolonged states of suffering, and of ongoing deprivation that stigmatizes individuals and social groups and, for some, is akin to a living death, then Demosthene makes visible the alternative configurations of life that might or could have emerged from such an uprooting.

Take, for instance, artist's description of her recent solo exhibition at Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana, titled *The Stories I Tell Myself* (2018). "For me," Demosthene explains, "my art has been a peeling away of layers of preconceived ideas; but in the way a snake sheds its skin, this slow shedding process can be viewed as a continual rebirth of my identity."⁸ Exploring themes of gender and sensuality, *The Stories I Tell Myself* takes as its point of departure the anonymous black women in the history of the Caribbean and the broader African diaspora. Demosthene describes the figures that appear in these pieces as "heroines," underlining the paradoxical status of those systematically excluded from categories of historical agency. In order for us to apprehend the heroism and prowess of those who have been discarded and forgotten, we have to disabuse ourselves of the traditional conceptions of agency and power. Demosthene presents this challenge in the form of a question: "Would you be willing to suspend all your preconceived notions of what a heroine is supposed to be?"⁹

In a piece whose title is derived from that of the exhibition, *The Story I Tell Myself* (2018), we find an example of the artist's deformation of the human form (fig. 1). Note how the figure on the left contorts itself and attempts to dislodge the arm that appears to be



Figure 1. Florine Demosthene, *The Story I Tell My Self*, 2018; mixed media on wood panel, 52 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

stuck inside the monochromatic body. The figure on the left tilts away from the other, which looks over its shoulder as it falls forward toward the right side of the painting.

These opposing movements establish a sense of effort and exertion that is further amplified by Demosthene's use of color and lines. The pinks and browns resemble the muscle tissue. Instead of a soul, here we find a more materialist rendering of interiority that foregrounds the motility of the physical body as a living organism. The backward looking gaze of the figure on the right wavers between interest, curiosity, and concern. It is unclear if the two figures are one body or if they would share the same ill fate were they to be dislodged from each other. The face at the bottom of the painting is almost like an omen of things to come, until we notice the facelessness of the figure still struggling to free its arm. Perhaps, instead of falling forward, the monochromatic figure is reaching to pick it up: *saving face*, both literally and figuratively. When we attend to how Demosthene deforms the human in *The Story I Tell Myself*, what can easily be read as the liberation of a "true" self becomes a meditation on dignity as mode of practice that is more diffuse and inchoate than to the moral concepts of the sanctity. In other words, dignity and saving face draw our attention to efforts at redressing stigmatized condition of the afflicted. We are left to contemplate both the quality and magnitude of this labor that aims at making meaning in the face of the deprivation.

I want us to look at *Wounds # 17* (2018) again and again. I want us to double back precisely when we think we have seen enough. We have to unlearn how we see and instead attend to how things come together precisely when the human form is torn apart and disfigured. The painting calls for this constant approach and reorientation as a result of Demosthene's decision to produce the work as a diptych. While, when placed side-by-side, the two images appear to perfectly align, a subtle vertical line remains visible and recalls the separation that haunts the painting like a trace of a severed bond that can never be fully repaired. We also can trace some continuities from Demosthene's earlier solo exhibition to *Wounds # 17*. Note how the bodies we find in *Wounds #17* fall in line with Demosthene's general tendency to exaggerate different aspects of the black female body in a manner that plays with proportions or, to use her words, verges on the grotesque. Speaking in reference to the works featured in *The Stories I Tell Myself*, Demosthene explains, "All the works are created flat by pouring inks onto a sheet of drafting film. As the inks intermix and dry, I blot out certain areas, in order to create depth and layers. Certain types of inks create a chemical reaction on the paper and I allow that to just be part of the work. I use the oil stick on top of the inks as a way to delineate the space a bit more."¹⁰ There is a sense of immanence created by the chemical reactions between the ink, water, and drafting film. The hazy visual effect produced by the tension between the floating ink and the evaporating water gives her surfaces a kind of metaphysical thickness or depth. The colors swirl into each other but appear not yet settled, as if they were caught in a process of intermixing: becoming-color. *Wounds #17* features a similar dynamism of the surface as the artist strategically deploys different hues of pink, brown, green, blue, and grey to distinguish flesh from fabrics and the general atmosphere. The bare leg in the middle of the piece stands out not only because of the contrast of its brown-pink against the blue-grey background but also because of the intensity of the colors' intermixing in comparison to the subtler and more defuse swirls that surround. The intensity of the flesh accentuates the sense capacity, strength, and vitality that belongs to the minor figures in history that the artist wants to remember.

In *Wounds #17* the deformation of the human form is less explicit but nonetheless effective. In addition to color, Demosthene utilizes posture and spacing to defamiliarize the human form and challenge assumptions about human agency and the body's inherent capacities. In *Wounds #17*, when the figure on the left leans forward and stretches out its hand, this gesture forges a relation between the liveliness of one and the inanimacy of the other, which the artist further highlights with purple and turquoise lines of glitter. As Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero tells us, the figure of the "upright man" in modern philosophy "is literally a subject who conforms to a vertical axis, which in turn functions as a principle and norm for its ethical posture" If this upright posture represents ideal notions of autonomy,

agency, and self-possession, the figure leaning toward and reaching out to the inert body takes on a different ethical posture—one defined by attraction and vulnerability, affection and need. Like falling in love, to lean toward the other, Cavarero contends, is "to be moved outside of the self, to give into the attraction coming from another person."¹¹ From this perspective, the inert body, then, might not simply await to be acted on but, instead, compel the other to reach out and move it from the outside. Whereas Weil determined that affliction "destroys the 'I' from outside," in *Wounds #17* a similar displacement of the self occurs in a moment of affection. Here, posture functions as a charged medium through which the categorical distinction between self and other blur. Demosthene's incorporation of glitter, with all its reflective and decorative qualities, further enhances this blurring effect. It is as if there is something illuminative about that interrelation and space of a suspended touch. We can quickly note where else glitter appears in the painting: there are subtle lines that shimmer in the upper left corner like lines that diagram a constellation, dark purple streaks dripping down the lower half of the painting as if seeping from underneath the surface, and small amounts of silver twinkling in the figures' eyes. Here, glitter not only reflects light but also functions as a "medium of figuration, visibility, and concealment."¹² It is a form of visual surplus that strains at the limits of the visibility. Perhaps, where we may see only a missed connection, the glitter between that outreached hand and this motionless shoulder signals what escapes the field of vision: the affects and desires that move through the bodies of the afflicted and the inchoate forms of social life that they might or could have created among themselves. Like the diptych form, separation and distance are sites of connection. Perhaps, then, wounds, as a figuration of loss and rupture, are precisely what draw lives together and generate social forms. Demosthene puts this point best when she tells us, "We are wounded people. . . . There is no other way I can put it. . . . This thing is the driving force. . . . This wound is passed on."

Let us end on a poetic note. *Wounds #17* has a familiar ring to it, for those acquainted with Caribbean poetry. A metaphor for the injuries and deprivations inherited as the legacy of slavery and colonialism, the

wound is at the center of the well-worn opposition in modern Caribbean poetry between the Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. On one end, we find Brathwaite's thematization of the "hurts of history" by way of his linguistic play and experimentation with language that attest to the breach of the Middle Passage and, at the same time, signal the emergence of a nation-language from "broken tongue" of the dispossessed.¹³ On the other end, we find Walcott's repudiation of what one distinguished poetry scholar describes as Brathwaite's "separatist aesthetics of affliction" in favor of a pluralist vision of a cross-cultural poetics.¹⁴ Demosthene undoes this opposition with her own thematization of wounds and, like Brathwaite and Walcott, she finds sources for creative innovation within the context of pain and suffering. *Wounds #17* recalls previous works featured in *The Stories I Tell Myself* that share its name but are differently numbered. Usually, titles are the linguistic frames of visual works of art. But in Demosthene's *Wounds* series, the titles take on new operations as they link the one with the many, the singular work or art with a series that is in the process of unfolding. Demosthene's use of the serial form riffs on the ruptures and broken bonds that wounds connote in such a way that harkens back to Brathwaite and Walcott, while at the same time pointing to something like what we might call a poetics of social affliction.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 440.
- 2 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2003), 27.
- 3 Gustave Thimbon, introduction to Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, xxxv.
- 4 Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 445.
- 5 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 28.
- 6 See Alexander Wehiley, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Alessia Ricciardi, "From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben, and the Impolitical," *Diacritics* 39, no. 2 (2009): 75–84.
- 7 Florine Demosthene, telephone interview with the author, 10 February 2019. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the artist are from this interview.
- 8 Florine Demosthene, quoted in *The Stories I Tell Myself*, press release, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana, 2018.
- 9 Ayodeji Rotinwa, "Florine Demosthene Is Conjuring the History of Black Heroines—and Creating New Ones," *Artsy Magazine*, 29 March 2018, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-florine-demosthene-conjuring-history-black-heroines-creating-new.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 6.
- 12 Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 36.
- 13 Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 249, 210.
- 14 Jahan Ramazani, "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction," *PMLA* 113, no. 2 (1997): 405. See Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990).