

CUTTING TIME:

A TEMPORAL READING OF WANGECHI MUTU'S COLLAGED BODIES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE TWENTY FIRST OF JULY 2017

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

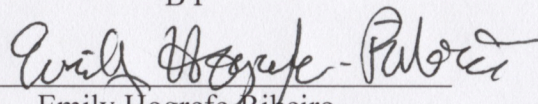
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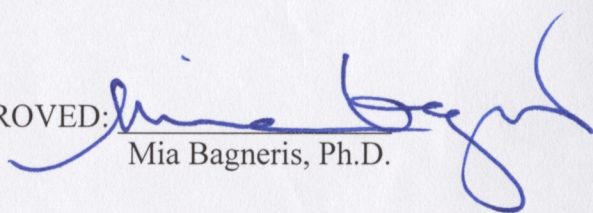
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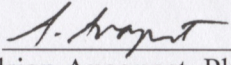
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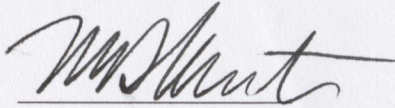
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu's body of work focuses on a collaged performing or posed figure amid shifting temporalities. Her compositions feature hazy backgrounds of colorful washes that evoke an ethereal wonderland just as readily as they conjure the bruised, blackened skies of a dystopian hellscape. Mutu manifests the bodies of her figures from washes of paint that drip and bubble, metastasizing color. Over the washes, she the arranges the images from *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, and pornographic magazines like *Black Tail* and *Player's Girl Pictorial* into cyborgian appendages, masklike faces, and stereotypical accoutrements. Collaged images of animals, disembodied female limbs, swaths of animal prints, African masks, glitter and chrome-covered automobile parts colonize the bodies of her female figures. The women in Mutu's collages communicate a sense of power and wonder, and each collage switches between indicting unsettling histories, referencing complicated reality, and projecting hallucinatory fantasy.

Mutu, the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, resides in what one critic describes as a "potpourri of liminal spaces."¹ Based in Brooklyn, New York, for the past fifteen years, she is originally from Nairobi, Kenya. After beginning her

¹ Ong, Amandas. "Wangechi Mutu: Everything is Made Out of Smaller Parts." *Elephant*, no. 20 (2014): 115-25.

primary school education in Nairobi, Mutu continued her studies at the United World College of the Atlantic in Wales. She moved to New York in the 1990s and earned her B.F.A from Cooper Union, and she received her Master's degree in sculpture from Yale University in 2000. The visual motifs and material concerns of her artistic practices reflect her life's lack of geographic fixity. In a number of interviews, Mutu discusses her collages as evocative of her identity as a black African woman working primarily in the United States.² These conversations with reporters, other artists, and curators offer ample insight into Mutu's process, intentions, and artistic interests, but they tend to focus on connecting her biographical information to her work in what has become the dominant analysis of her collages.

Mutu is a widely exhibited artist, and her work can be found in the collections of many major museums including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art; The Studio Museum in Harlem; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Tate Modern. Subsequently, she has been written about in both monographic exhibition catalogues and group shows. Essays in exhibition catalogues both engage with her biography and expand the discourse on her work, linking her practice to larger art historical trends and methodological concerns. Exhibition catalogues including *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* (2013), *Wangechi Mutu: This You Call Civilization* (2010), *Wangechi Mutu, artist of the year 2010: my dirty little heaven* (2010), *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image?* (2009), and *Wangechi Mutu: A Shady Promise* (2008) present essays that add art historical context to her work, discussing her

² Interviews include "Between Disgust and Regeneration," *ASAP/Journal 1* (2016) with Tiffany E. Barber and Angela Naimou, "Wangechi Mutu," *BOMB Magazine* (2014) with Deborah Willis, "Everything is Made Out of Smaller Parts," from *Elephant* (2014), "Shirin Neshat, Wangechi Mutu: Going Live," *Border Crossing* (2008).

practice in relationship to other artists including Hannah Hoch, Romare Bearden, and Candice Breitz. In exhibition catalogues for group shows, including *The Shadows Took Shape* (2013), *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa* (2013) and *Global Feminisms* (2007), featured texts begin dialoguing her work with Afrofuturist and more explicitly feminist perspectives, widening the scope of literature on her work.

While Mutu works in a variety of mediums including video, performance and sculpture, she is best known for her collaged bodies, and writers engage with this specific feature of her oeuvre through a historical lens. Mutu creates figures that critics have described as composite women and which she prefers to call chimeras – pieced together from images of human, plant, animal, and machine parts. Because of the mass media materials Mutu exploits and her choice to form them into female bodies that tend to emphasize gendered stereotypes, her work is frequently discussed as an inquiry into the intersection of race and gender as it relates to images of the black female body.

Subsequently, a growing body of work delves into Mutu's employment of the female body in her collages. Katrina Fletcher and Barbara Thompson have both explored Mutu's collages as illustrative of the complex relationship between representations of black African women and the repercussions of colonialism. Three articles, "Grotesque Sensations: Carnivalising the Sensorium in the Art of Wangechi Mutu," (2013), "Cyborg Grammar? Reading Wangechi Mutu's *Non Je Ne Regrette Rien* through *Kindred*," (2016), "Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests" (2016), and "The Ambivalent Grotesque: Reading Black Women's Erotic Corporeality in Wangechi Mutu's Work," (2017), center their inquiries around the aesthetic grotesque, the

decomposing and deforming components in Mutu's collages, what Barber terms in her essay as "transgressive disfigurement" (Barber 4) and Cervenak terms "aesthetic dismemberment." Focusing on the way Mutu prioritizes dismemberment and how her figures fall under the grotesque rubric generates expands the discourse on Mutu's collages.

As I also explore the collaged bodies Mutu creates, my thesis can be situated within this the growing body of inquiry. However, my scholarship prioritizes Mutu's construction of collaged bodies instead of her fracturing of bodies; I am focusing upon the building up of something rather than its apparent ripped-apartness. In addition, I prioritize a temporal reading of the different works I analyze in each chapter because Mutu's collages render bodies without linear manifestations of time. Her figures - these chimeras - embody a temporal synthesis whereby fragments of the past become the present and project the future. Mutu's collages seem to exist in the past, present, and future all at once as references to pre-colonial Africa shift between elements foreshadowing a cyborg future and implicating the contemporary turmoil of the continent.

The conception of time I argue exist in Mutu's collages can be characterized, very broadly, as an African construction of cyclical time where the relationships between the past, present and future are inextricably intertwined. A similar sense of time appears repeatedly throughout Africa and its diasporas and has been observed across disciplines including, for example, literature, and most comprehensively, anthropology. This cyclical time is represented cosmologically in the Kongo *Yowa* cross [figure 1] and its diasporic reiterations across the Americas and Caribbean. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson

describes it as a sign of a cycle where a person's life has no end, and "the sun, in its rising and setting, is a sign of this cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change" as it moves around the cross.³ Kokole, in a discussion of three large ethnolinguistic groups in Africa, notes that the "three cultures under investigation did not make a sharp distinction among past, present and future" because "the indigenous subculture of ancestor veneration did not permit the past to be completely forgotten. The dead ancestors remained a part of the present and could even influence the future, as well as the present."⁴ Mazrui and Mphane describe the same sense of time thusly, "If in the capitalist West, man is always moving 'forward' toward the future, in precapitalist Africa, the future is said to be moving 'backward' to become real, to become living present, to become the omnipresent past."⁵ This sense of a time allows for the past, present, and future to be conceptualized as repeatedly interacting together instead of in a more teleological linear chronology, and Mutu expresses this through her collaged bodies.

This thesis applies the notion of cyclical time to Mutu's work as a conceptual framework (rather than an anthropological concept) that illuminates the artist's collages. I organize my thesis with the temporal shifting of Mutu's collages in mind. Focusing on a single work in each chapter, I use the broad demarcations of past, present, and future to

³ Robert Farris. Thompson, "The Sign of the Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art and Religion in the Americas," in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), pg. 108.

⁴ Omari H. Kokole, "Time, Language, and the Oral Tradition: An African Perspective," in *Time in the Black Experience*, by Joseph K. Adjaye (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), pg. 50.

⁵ Lupenga Mphande and Alamin Mazrui, "Time and Labor in Colonial Africa: The Case of Kenya and Malawi," in *Time in the Black Experience*, by Joseph K. Adjaye (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), pg. 101.

structure my investigation. Each chapter analyzes one main work to discover how Mutu's handling of time – as an interplay between past, present, and future – functions and how the transforming temporalities contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the major themes in her work. While I prioritize a dominant role of the past, present, and future in each chapter, my intention in utilizing this structure is to strengthen my argument that temporal simultaneity occurs in and informs the reading of each work.

In the first chapter, I analyze the 2006 work *The Ark Collection*. In this series, Mutu forms postcard-sized collages by splicing images of the black female body from contemporary ethnographic postcards and pornographic magazines. In this work, Mutu implicates colonial modes of representation and distribution that created and perpetuated a visual archive of black female bodies perpetuated today. In this chapter, I argue that Mutu identifies the historical basis for the continued exploitation of the black female body, tracing its dispersal from the African continent to the United States, to ultimately disrupt the historical archive of black female bodies. Evelyn Hammond's "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" (1994) provides the theoretical framework for this chapter, and Barbara Thompson's *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* (2008) and Willis and William's *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) inform much of my discussion on representation and photography of the black female body. Christraud Geary's extensive work on colonial era European postcards of Africa in *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (1998) and "The Black Female Body, the Postcard, and the Archive" (2008) grounds my historical research on the topic. By analyzing colonial picture postcards featuring African women made for a European market, I will establish the historical

fulcrum from which Mutu constructs her archive and show how her collage manipulations interrupt the reading of her source materials as part of that archive. By focusing on the interplay between the colonial past and the present, I demonstrate the way that the past indispensably informs the work's relationship to the present and the future.

The second chapter explores diasporic identity in the present and the ways in which Mutu's collage practice embodies a subset of diasporic identity - the Afropolitan. My discussion on diasporic identity as a whole orients around conceptions outlined by Stuart Hall in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1998) and expanded upon by Kobena Mercer in works including *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994) and *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980's* (2016). My definition of Afropolitan come from Taiya Tuakli-Wosornu's essay "Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)" (2009). Coupled with inquiry into diasporic identity, I engage with the formal concerns of collage, and my discussion of collage theory and practice hinges greatly upon Kathrine Hoffman's *Collage Critical Views* (1989) and Gwen Raaberg's "Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts" (1998). Diaspora comes from the Greek words "to scatter" and "to sow," and in this chapter I analyze Mutu's 2005 collage *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head* as a contemporary iteration of the historical waves of human migration that produced, and continue to produce, the African diaspora and the possibilities that are sown from the nomadic existence that germinate from this understanding of identity.

The final chapter concerns the future projected in Mutu's 2014 collage *Beneath lies the Power*. In this collage, Mutu adopts the aesthetic strategies of Afrofuturism

defined by Mark Dery in “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tata, and Tricia Rose” (1993) and elaborated upon by Alondra Nelson in “Afrofuturism: Past-Future Visions” (2003) and Kodwo Eshun in “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism” (2003). To do this, Mutu constructs a collaged body of a futuristic female cyborg informed by the East African mythology of the nguva, or mermaid. My analysis of Mutu’s cyborg creation relies heavily on Donna Haraway’s “‘A Cyborg Manifesto’: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1984), but my argument ultimately pivots from her post-human conception of the future. In this chapter, I argue that Mutu connects East African mythology through the present to speculate at an Afrofuturist future.

By advancing the discussion of Mutu’s collaged bodies to include a temporal reading, I broaden the scope through which her collages can be understood, pushing beyond the dominant biographical interpretation. In addition, my prioritization of Mutu’s acts of construction over her deconstructions challenges more recent arguments made about her collages. Read together, the chapters of my thesis will complicate and expand the existing discourse on Mutu’s greater body of work.

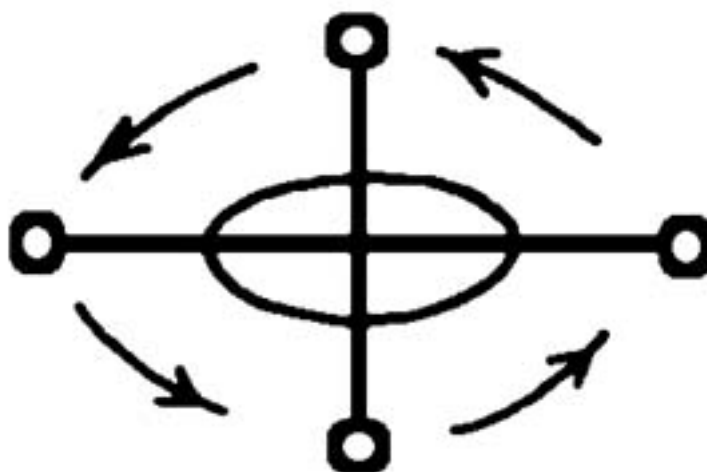


Figure 1
Kongo *Yowa* Cross

Chapter 2: Past

From Africa with Love: Postcards and Ethnographic Pornography in Wangechi Mutu's *The Ark Collection*

Situated at the center of a dark, austere gallery space, a compendium of 32 postcard-sized collages in four glass vitrines have been organized in a square formation (Figure 2). Positioned this way, the vitrines invite viewers to move around the center of the gallery along the periphery of the cases, peering at the colorful images popping against the deep brown wood of the encasements. Presented in a series of pairs, the collages contrast strikingly with their crepuscular environment. Bright colors and patterns flourish toward each collage's slender white borders. A cacophony of photographed beads, feathers, and fuchsia prints initially bombard the viewer, obfuscating the grafted bodies populating each piece. The works offer an initial, pleasure burst followed by the recognition that representations of layered black female bodies compose each image. Corporeal overlapping blurs where the image of one woman stops and the next begins, achieving a visual "illegibility that underscores how the bodies and

their significations are unframed and undefined.”⁶ Mutu extracts most of the women’s faces, and she slashes and reconstitutes their bodies with other imagery.

Mutu encourages the viewer to gaze at the individual parts of the installation, and the intimate scale of the collages force the viewer to confront the objects in a more personal way, examining them like peculiar specimens. This engagement imbues the work with historical resonance, likening the collages to anthropological objects. The vitrines protect the series from being touched and handled even as the glass allows the viewer to take in the careful details of each work. Located in these cases, the collages intentionally mimic postcards, objects collected and valued for their perceived exotic content, and Mutu’s presentation links the postcards to their own anthropological heritage. The work builds on this complicated reference by presenting the everyday object of the postcard, contrary to the object’s typical, quotidian function, and something exalted, creating a sense that the collages possess increased value because they have been kept and ordered.

Historical and anthropological references continue with the 2006 series’ title, *The Ark Collection*. “Ark” derives its meaning from the “Old English *aerc*. From Latin *arca*,” or chest, and it names “a chest or cupboard housing the Torah scrolls in a synagogue.”⁷ Deepening the works biblical allusion, “ark” cites the biblical ship constructed by Noah to save his family and two of every kind of animal from the flood, and Mutu orders her postcard-sized collages by twos, proffering sets encapsulated by the vitrines. “Ark” also

⁶ Fletcher, Katrina. “Re-covered: Wangechi Mutu, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, and the Postcolonial Potentiality of Black Women in Colonial(ist) Photographs.” *Social Dynamics* 40, no. 1 (2014), 188.

⁷ *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “Ark,” definition 1,2, accessed November 15, 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definitions/ark>.

conjoins the similar word “archive,” which, when paired with “collection,” denotes and emphasizes systems of ordering and organizing that structure anthropological inquiry. The work’s title, coupled with the installation’s setup, aligns the collages with historical attempts to classify and categorize. In *Ark Collection*, Mutu appropriates established modes of collecting and archiving to critique their historical implementation, and while the installation presents the collages like exotic artifacts within a collection of a dusty, mysterious natural history museum, the collages themselves jarringly reject this framing, their vividly contemporary images challenging the expectation of what should rest inside the cases.

Utilizing only the acts of cutting and pasting, Mutu adopts a unique collage strategy with *Ark Collection*. Instead of adding smaller collaged parts together to manifest a body, Mutu here fragments bodies from two different source materials in each postcard sized collage, and she builds a new shape once the figures have been recombined and recast, ultimately denying the viewer a completely figural representation. Appropriating postcards from the 1993 postcard book *Women of the African Ark: A Book of Postcards* and postcard sized images from American pornographic magazines *Black Tail* and *Player’s Girls Pictorial*, Mutu conflates the two types of sources, creating a visual argument that asserts the ideological affinities between the two genres. Pornography models’ hands and their long, polished nails hint at suggestively positioned anatomy that Mutu carefully redacts and replaces with ethnographic imagery that erupts from vacant eroticized spaces between, for example, remnants of spread legs and clutched breasts. Images of chromatic, layered beads, scarified torsos, and groups of women cloaked in ornate red garb appear and re-appear throughout the collages, and the

pictorial repetition of the same ethnographic representations throughout *Ark Collection* allude to multiplicity and mass production. The artist's collection of female bodies visually references the colonial era pseudoscientific attempt to categorize racial difference that the installation's vitrines and dark walls amplify.

Mutu composes *Ark Collection* from pornography and ethnographic imagery to clarify a lineage of the fetishization of black female bodies by white, Western audiences and underscore the perpetuation of this practice. Her work clarifies the connection between visual strategies of the past that continue into the present. In this way, the collection's collages combine seemingly disparate but actually related exploitations of the black female body, grafting stereotypical African women - noble yet primitive natives whose timeless and mysterious visages have been captured by white, Western photographers - onto exaggerated depictions of hypersexualized African American women whose bodies bloom with invitation from the pages of pornographic magazines. Mutu explains that these two kind of images, the ethnographic and the pornographic, "have the same inherent problems," and are "actually using the same tools. They're forcing fiction upon the bodies of these women, which people accept as true, or they go, 'Wait a minute, why is this woman in her muslin bouey-bouey next to this bent-over, highly sexualized figure?'"⁸ Through aggressive bodily excisions and pictorial juxtapositions, Mutu's postcard sized collages emphasize the resonance of the past and chart the widespread stereotypical perceptions of her black female subjects as the shockingly sexual, enigmatic and atemporal Other.

⁸ Robert Enright, "Resonant Surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu. (Interview)," *Border Crossings* 27, no.1 (2008): pg. 35.

The altered paper components of *Ark Collection* propound that the ethnographic image is indelibly linked to the pornographic, and instead of simply highlighting intertwined stereotypes, the work challenges a continuation of the narratives of its source material. By suggesting the postcard with the scale of each collage, Mutu directly addresses the past and punctuates the historical basis for her work while choosing not to work with 19th or 20th century postcards. Each collage in the collection ultimately rejects the “alien colonizing gaze and will to dominate”⁹ that orders and instructs the photographs of which it is made, and Mutu highlights the perpetuation of a kind of violence with her source materials that function as contemporary iterations of the same historical tropes in order to sever the lineage of exploitation. I contend that Mutu’s collages in *Ark Collection* express what Evelyn Hammonds describes in her article “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” as the politics of articulation, finding “ways to contest the historical construction of black female sexualities by illuminating how the dominant view was established and maintained and how it can be disrupted.”¹⁰ In this chapter I will analyze the ways Mutu, through the material process of collage, articulates the shared devices and ideological underpinnings of historical ethnographic images between contemporary ethnographic and pornographic images of black women in order to critique a historical archive of black female bodies. By splicing the images of her source material, Mutu ultimately disrupts the way the images work.

⁹ Stief, Angela. “Images of Triumph and Transgression” in *Wangechi Mutu: In Whose Image?*, by Wangechi Mutu, Gerald Matt, Angela Stief, Christopher Barber, and Maria Christine. (Nurnberg, Germany: Verlag Fur Moderne Kunst 2009), 15.

¹⁰ Hammonds, Evelyn. “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2&3 (1994): 126-145.

Constructed Images

In one collage, a model from a pornographic magazine squats at the center of the image (Figure 2). She wears knee high black boots that sparkle with glitter. Her naked thighs open wide, and she unlatches a shiny black vest. Her long nails pull the vest apart, intent on revealing her body. The woman cocks her head to the side solicitously, but her face and body are completely obscured. Another woman's abstracted image inhabits the model's frame, meticulously slipped into the first woman's body cavity, creating a dialogue between bodies. The African woman's form has been flipped. Her neck emerges out of the model's crotch, and lengths of bead and shell necklaces cascade down her torso while simultaneously appearing to crawl up the other figure's body and face. This overlaying of bodies creates a disorienting effect whereby the oscillation between the two aspects of the work becomes destabilizing for the viewer. Tension between the layered components of women and their seemingly disparate imagery contributes to a sense of anonymity where two distinct individuals form one body out of an unexpected jumble of parts. While the model holds an enticing pose, only her arms and legs reference this positioning, and her body morphs into a sexual invitation without an identity.

Joining pieces from two different source materials in order to conflate the ethnographic image with the pornographic, Mutu builds a black female figure embodying a plethora of stereotypes. In this collage, the viewer easily identifies two types of female figures, but in compiling their separate bodies, the artist extirpates any semblance of a face. This erasure is purposeful; Mutu states the the collages in *The Ark Collection* "do not depict any specific individuals, and from the very first they express doubts."¹¹ Thus,

¹¹ Stief, 23.

this is not a portrait of an individual, but is an exaggeration of an objectification. The collage asserts the ways that, in these visual representations, the black female body becomes reduced to an assemblage of sexual and “native” components without identity in these visual representation, and the work forces the viewer to consume the object of the collage, the conglomeration of the stereotype constructed, even as it denies the viewer a way to resolve the image.

The sherbet toned purple and yellow of the pornographic image’s backdrop stands out in its artificiality and diluted color palette when juxtaposed with the vibrant colored beads adorning the African woman’s body and fails to conform to the viewer’s expectation of a stereotypical “African” setting. The filmy black cloth and feathered boa behind the female figure(s) lead the viewer’s gaze to the edge of the pornographic image, revealing its layering on top of another image. A recognition of each photograph’s borders flattens the images and highlights the collage’s individual elements: a pornographic image placed atop an ethnographic image, the model’s body carved out to reveal an African woman’s body underneath. Edges of the ethnographic photo reach past the confines of the pornographic image, and they form a second border of verdant green and tree bark. The artist signs the bottom right corner: “Wangechi Mutu 06,” taking ownership of both appropriated images and marking herself as the author of the constructed hybrid female figure.

Thus, Mutu explicitly adopts the role of author, her signature mirroring the way a personal message might be scrawled on the back of postcard. A note on the back of a postcard passes through “numerous hands before reaching a destination. Likewise, a pornographic layout ostensibly meant for private viewing would be assembled and

packaged by multiple people and placed on view in stores before arriving in one's home,"¹² and that scenario repeats for ethnographic magazines. Subsequently, multiple viewers access the women's bodies in the photographs in both public and private contexts as their images become commodities. Mutu's addition of the written gesture, boldly claiming her own identity and agency as the author of the image, further underscores the anonymity of the women and their reductions to objects.

In this postcard, the model's action of provocatively removing her vest can also be read as the woman violently ripping her body apart in order to reveal another black woman underneath. First, the action conveys that one image begets the next, as if on an assembly line of stereotypical representations of female bodies, reinforcing the perception of the black female body as agency-less and an object to be used and discarded. The implied seriality of the figure's gesture continues the visual equation of ethnographic and pornographic content – from the pornography model comes the ethnographic model comes the pornography model in perpetuity – forced from the past into the present and suggestion a continuation into the future. This doubling confronts what Enwezor terms “the repulsive ethno-pornographic images to which the black female body was attached in certain pictorial situations.”¹³ The way the pornography model uncovers the ethnographic model in her chest prompts the viewer to look deeper. In this way, Mutu exhorts an archival impulse, achieving what Jennifer C. Nash describes as, “a method for making visible the connection between the past and an unfolding present, and

¹² Fletcher, 187.

¹³ Enwezor, Okwui. “Weird Beauty: Ritual Violence and Archeology of Mass Media in Wangechi Mutu's Work.” In *Wangechi Mutu, Artist of the Year 2010: My Dirty Little Heaven*, by Wangechi Mutu, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 26.

for staging a larger critique of visual culture that emphasizes representation as a practice that references and reenacts historical traumas.”¹⁴ Mutu’s painful archeology palpably locates the ethnographic within the pornographic, suggesting that pornographic conceptualizations of black women emerge from the historical and present day circulation of ethnographic postcards of African women. The collages of *Ark Collection* are specifically about the ways that ethnographic images, the postcard, and pornographic images function, and in the following sections I will provide an intensive analysis of each of these three components ultimately proving that while Mutu’s collaging emphasizes a reoccurring trauma that occurs in the visual field, her works do not perpetuate that exploitation. Instead, the collages interrupt the visual representations in order to articulate the connection and contest the sexual representations themselves.

Ethnographic Images and the *National Geographic* Aesthetic

The contemporary ethnographic images Mutu adopts in *Ark Collection* feature the same visual conceits utilized in colonial photography of black African women, and understanding the origins of these conceits elucidate the way the photographs function. Deconstructing colonial photography of African women, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams focus on a few key early photographers and the kinds of images they made that originated many stereotypes still perpetuated about the black female body today. Pierre Tremaux, a French architect-turned-photographer produced many of these images. After first travelling to Africa in 1847, he returned to visit Egypt and Tunisia and take

¹⁴ Jennifer Christine, Nash. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (2009), pg. 30.

photographs.¹⁵ Because images of naked or nearly naked black women and girls were considered picturesque instead of pornographic at this time, Tremaux took many photos of these subjects. Willis and Williams expound: “Tremaux clearly considers the sitter and her desires only as obstacles to be overcome; slaves made good subjects presumably because they had no choice, and even free blacks were not accorded adult status, further limiting the sitter’s ability to be photographed...making the black female subject almost entirely available for possession.”¹⁶

One of Tremaux’s photographs, titled *Fille du Dar-Four* (Figure 4), features a prepubescent black African girl. The girl stands awkwardly against a crumbling wall. Two blankets, seemingly haphazardly thrown over the top of the wall, frame the figure on each side of her head. She wears only a thin straw belt that barely obscures her genitalia. One hand rests on her hip, her right arm and right leg slightly contrapposto. Her left arm reaches back and her hand grazes the wall. Her feet appear backed up against the wall, and she gazes, expressionless, out past the camera. Her image, captured straight on, appears to the viewer as a specimen flattened against the wall behind her. In this photograph, and in many others by Tremaux, the photographer decontextualizes his subjects, staging them in constructed environments. His images “are carefully constructed, edited and beguiling fictions. As one historian has pointed out, ‘on of the few certainties about these photographs is that the women were seldom in real life what

¹⁵ Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, “Colonial Conquest,” in *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), pg. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

they appeared to be in the photograph.”¹⁷ These tropes outlined in Tremaux’s work became overwhelmingly reproduced by other colonial era photographers as they composed postcards featuring photographs of African women.

Colonial postcard photographers frequently pursued certain kinds of women because the sartorial conventions of their cultures included little clothing or highly distinctive tribal vestments. The photographers disrobed other women, sometimes stripping them to the waists, leaving their removed clothing gathered in a pile that remains visible at the bottom of the frame, emphasizing the women’s nakedness. They placed the African women in landscape settings, or before animal print backdrops, removing any reference to the women’s everyday lives and emphasizing a kind of tribal phantasy. Finally, the women themselves were posed unsparingly before the camera lens, arranged so as to be peered at and scrutinized, their anonymity and their nakedness emphasized in a way that repeats in both ethnographic and pornographic imagery.¹⁸ These repeated, manufactured visual cues transformed into truths in the eyes of the Western audiences, and stereotypes of sexual, exotic, primitive black women became accepted and ingrained into cultural consciousness. Thus, these historical images created by white European photographers for white Western audiences continue to dictate the way that black women are represented and viewed throughout the world.

Many of the visual cues from colonial postcards repeat in the contemporary ethnographic images Mutu appropriates for *Ark Collection*. The images featured in the book *Women of the African Ark* are informed by these visual tropes and the presumptions

¹⁷ Willis and Williams, 17.

¹⁸ Fletcher, 191.

of the book's white photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, providing Mutu with abundant collage material. *Women of the African Ark*'s introduction describes "the region of Ethiopia and its surrounding countries – the Horn of Africa" as "a land of mystery and fierce beauty," that shelters "the sophisticated cultures of the Christian highlands and the Islamic coast to the proud nomads of the Ogaden desert and the primitive tribes of the last wilderness of the continent,"¹⁹ and according to Fisher and Beckwith, "these unique cultures [featured in the book] possess a wealth of knowledge that should be celebrated, shared, and honored. It is our passion to document and create a powerful visual record of these vanishing ways of life for future generations."²⁰

Subsequently, the authors suggest that Africa's traditional cultures are threatened, and the enigmatic "ancient ways" are in danger of eradication by the onslaught of modern life, perpetuating a narrative where the white Westerner records the lives of black Africans as though they are specimens to be studied.

Beckwith and Fisher's framing of the cultures and women the photograph speaks to a perception that their subjects are atavistic, never modern. They do not portray the everyday lives of their subjects as they exist in the present moment, and they never give any indication as to why the women they photograph may be losing their way of life or the implications of that loss. In a discussion about *Women of the African Ark*, Mutu notes that many of the images are probably staged, and "they probably made sure not to

¹⁹ Carol Beckwith, Angela Fisher, and Graham Hancock, *Women of the African Ark: A Book of Postcards* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993), pg.1.

²⁰ Quoted in Fletcher, 187.

photograph anyone in the village who was wearing jeans.”²¹ The contemporary photographs propound a kind of cultural authenticity that is static, timeless, and decorative. It begs the question: what exactly are they authors trying to convey as their photographs concentrate on physical appearance and a documentation of the exotic?

The visual references in *Women of the African Ark* reflect what Willis and Williams term “The National Geographic Aesthetic.” This mode of representation introduced generations of Americans “to the unclothed black body under the guise of scientific inquiry.”²² *National Geographic* magazine began printing photographs of unclothed colonized women of color regularly in 1903, and since that time, “countless examples of bare-breasted or totally nude women of color have appeared – and still appear – in *National Geographic*.”²³ This occurs because “the more removed the subject was [is] from mainstream American life, the more acceptable her nudity became [becomes]; it could [can] be excused simply as cultural difference.”²⁴ This conceptualization of the Other continues to this day and has spread into commerce and fashion photography, and the National Geographic Aesthetic emphasizes the figure’s difference within Western images by accentuating appearance, staged photographic elements, a generalization of subjects based on their physical features, and readily

²¹ Jillian Hernandez, "The Ambivalent Grotesque: Reading Black Women's Erotic Corporeality in Wangechi Mutu's Work," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 2 (2017): pg. 434, accessed February 7, 2017, doi:10.1086/688290.

²² Willis and Williams, 80.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

displayed nudity, adopting and maintaining the visual tropes of colonial photography featured on postcards.

In one of Beckwith and Fisher's postcards, entitled HAMAR WOMAN Ethiopia (Figure 5), a young woman stands, posed with one bent arm against a tree trunk as her other hand perches on her jutting hip. Tight coils of silver metal bracelets collect at her wrist, elbow, and upper arm. Threads of cowrie shells dangle from her neck, gathering at her chest and framing the curves of her breasts. More beads, in bunches of white, black, yellow, and red, hang from her neck at varying lengths. She faces the camera but turns her head to the side, tilting it downward modestly. Three quarters of her face is visible, and she smiles. Her short, beaded skirt reveals the skin of her thigh as bends towards the camera. Large disk earrings dangle from her earlobes, and a headband of red and white beads lays against her forehead. The girl and the tree trunk stand sharply in focus against the muted, blurred green and brown tones of an ambiguous outdoor background. On the other side of the HAMAR WOMAN postcard, a text excerpt states, "Both Hamar women and men set great store by their appearance and decorate themselves beautifully. Their bodies are well oiled and ornamented with colorful beads."²⁵

The HAMAR WOMAN postcard reiterates features of colonial photographs, exemplifying the *National Geographic* aesthetic. The postcard identifies the woman by her ethnic group, and she is reduced to her gender, being called vaguely HAMAR WOMAN instead of her name, as if she exists as a type instead of an individual, and mirroring the exact titling of Tremaux's photograph *Fille du Dar-Four*, literally "Girl of Darfur", designated over a century earlier. The Hamar woman has clearly been posed, the

²⁵ Beckwith and Fisher.

backdrop completely decontextualizing her from any reference to her everyday life. Her posing and her dress highlight her body and her barely concealed breasts. The text that accompanies the image uses wording - “decorates” instead of “accessorizes,” for example – that reinforces a difference and inferiority with Western appearances and customs and dehumanizes her for that difference – an object is decorated; a person accessorizes. Within the construction of *Women of the African Ark*, Mutu locates the dregs of colonial-era practices over a century after the production of the first French colonialist photographs. In her collage featuring HAMAR WOMAN (Figure 3), Mutu accentuates the components of the contemporary ethnographic postcard that perpetuates the *National Geographic* aesthetic. She prioritizes the woman’s traditional beading, using it to draw attention to the area that would have been pornography model’s naked breasts, compounding the sexual overtones of each image. In addition, Mutu does not excerpt the vague outdoor background of her source image even as she layers the pornographic photograph atop it. Finally, Mutu composes her collage to hide Hamar woman’s face and punctuates the anonymity of the original post card’s photograph.

The Postcard

Mutu adopts the images and the series title from Beckwith and Fisher’s 1993 postcard book, illustrating the long history and contemporary utilization of the colonial tool of the postcard. Further accentuating the importance of the medium, Mutu excerpts her American pornographic images from postcards as well. She reveals: “there are particular pages in pornography where the images are about that size [of a postcard]. There’s the centerfold and then there are pages where the magazine is divided into four

little postcards in which the women are shown in various degrees of undressing.”²⁶ Thus, the concerns of her series necessarily rely on appropriating the physical format of the postcard. Because of the postcard’s role as a medium of communication, it provides the link between Mutu’s source materials. A postcard “straddles two spaces: the one it represents and the one it will reach,”²⁷ and in this way, the format also bridges the collage postcard’s source images of African women with African American women as a way of engaging and connecting Africa and its diaspora. As Mutu grapples with the linkages between contemporary ethnographic and pornographic imagery, she bypasses the nineteenth-century tradition of colonial postcards in order to use a contemporary iteration of this tradition.

Mutu’s choice to use the postcard format for *Ark Collection* prompts a deeper analysis of the temporal tension between historical dissemination of sexualized depictions of black women and the practice that continues in the present with contemporary ethnographic postcards. Here again, Mutu asserts an archival legacy of the perpetuation of exploitative narratives circulated by and for Westerners for financial gain. The historical must be located within the ever-evolving present, manufacturing a kind of cultural pornography, and the collages in Mutu’s series implicate the postcard as the means by which the circulation and perpetuation of a genealogy of black women framed as ahistorical, exotic and deviant.

²⁶ Enright, 38. I looked into the prevalence of postcards in pornographic magazines but could not find any substantial research. Because I am focusing so heavily on the history of ethnographic postcards and the linking of ethnography with pornography, I think a further discussion of this element is outside the scope of my paper. However, I would be interested to see when this practice started and how it relates to the proliferation of ethnographic postcards.

²⁷ Malek Alloula et al., *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pg. 4.

The postcard format blossomed out of the serendipitous confluence of an array of technological and social advancements. During the nineteenth century, “postal regulations changed to accommodate the mailing of a non-letter format, an unsealed communication that affected the types of messages sent,” and the development of the picture postcard also “depended on two major inventions, photography and printing processes, such as the collotype, color lithographs, and the use of halftones.”²⁸ These intersections of innovation manifested a surging market where countless postcards were produced for colonizers, tourists, and collectors.

These postcards circulated widely – promulgating and reifying narratives about colonized peoples and Western achievement as the colonial project expanded in Africa. At the turn of the nineteenth century, postcard production peaked: “in 1889, French printers turned out eight million postcards, about sixty million cards in 1902; and 123 million by 1910.”²⁹ A circuitous network of creation and distribution emerged to facilitate the mammoth appetite for picture postcards from Africa, and European and American photographers dominated the market. Christraud Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb explain:

Photographers and sponsors shipped scenes of the colonies to large cities and centers of empire, where they were turned into postcards by specialized firms in Europe or by big companies in the United States. As soon as cards had been shipped back to the distant sponsors or foreign territories, Westerners bought them as personal souvenirs of their travels abroad, inscribing them to family and friends before mailing.³⁰

²⁸ Christraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, "Introduction: Views on Postcards," in *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), pg. 2.

²⁹ Christraud Geary, "The Black Female Body, the Postcard, and the Archives," in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body*, by Barbara Thompson and Ifi Amadiume (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), pg. 146.

³⁰ Geary and Webb, 2.

Postcards produced by these international publishers for Western audiences gravitated towards the heavily conventionalized and stereotypical. Moreover, photographs featured on postcards produced for tourists and collectors underwent frequent alterations and manipulations. Malek Alloula explains that during this time, “the postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist. It is at once their poetry and their glory captured for the ages; it is also their pseudoknowledge of the colony. It produces stereotypes.”³¹ Of these postcards circulating both around the African continent and within a larger, global commodity chain, glaringly few involve African photographers or business owners. The role of the African people in this system was to be photographed and described by and for the Westerner, and of the photographs used for postcards, those featuring black women, in varying states of undress, were published and republished the most.³²

The circulation of colonial postcards, simultaneously public and deeply personal, crystallized a widespread understanding of the black female form based on complicated, constructed images that could be bought, sold, and possessed. Mutu’s collages in *Ark Collection* mimic the scale of the postcards as a means to underscore how the postcard served as a vehicle for the construction of black female sexuality in the Western popular imagination. Yet, Mutu collaging and the choices she makes in presenting her collages disrupt this mode of dispersal even as she adopts it.

³¹ Alloula, 4.

³² Geary, 143.

Pornography and the Archive of Pain

Contemporary assumptions about the black female body and stereotypes of the hypersexual black woman can be directly tied to the colonial image-making process. The photographs featured on postcards from the colonial epoch “captured the black female body and laid it open to the Western desire to create taxonomies, to establish control, and to find pleasure.”³³ Colonialism, the sciences, and photography fed into each other during the nineteenth century. Brian Wallis describes the Western impulse thusly: “The mania for the collection and quantification of natural specimens coincided with other statistical projects, such as the beginning of the annual census, statistic for crime and health, and the mapping and surveying of new lands, exemplifying a new way of seeing the world,”³⁴ and the camera documented all of it during a time when photography was perceived as always depicting the truth. Thus, an empirically explained, pseudoscientific urge coupled with the fabricated imagery of black African women transmitted through picture postcards contributed to a codification of sexual difference. Westerners began to label black women as primitive, aberrant, and the antithesis of the civilized white European woman. The stereotype of the “Jezebel,” for example, took root. A contrived sexual difference embodied in the black woman became “an icon for deviant sexuality in general” during the nineteenth century.³⁵ Colonial postcard directly contributed to the

³³ Geary, 156.

³⁴ Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): pg. 44, accessed April 11, 2016, doi:10.1086/424243.

³⁵ Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): pg. 209, accessed April 12, 2016, doi:10.1086/448327.

furtherance of these “standards of visualizing”³⁶ that bled into other mediums and inundated visual culture.

Because African women portrayed on nineteenth-century postcards were subject to mass consumption through global circulation, they endured a kind of violence. Alloula describes the violence of the colonial postcard project as centered around a fixation upon the body of the women portray. He contends that the nature of the colonial perception of African women leads the postcard to “paint this body up, ready it, and eroticize it in order to offer it up to any and all clientele moved by an unambiguous desire of possession.”³⁷ Images of the African women on the postcards were handled publicly and privately - passing through global networks of hands to reach their destinations where they were kept, displayed, and owned as curiosities. African women are frozen in time in the postcard’s photographs, and their bodies opened to repeat inspection. Moreover, through the size of the postcards, the intimacy of their scale, the women portrayed became enigmatic tactile objects themselves.

Codification of sexual difference along racial lines lingers today, and contemporary pornography featuring black women continues to be informed by assumptions perpetuated by visual culture since the nineteenth century. Mireille Miller-Young notes that representations of black women as hypersexual even inundate the porn industry itself: “Black women sexual performers and workers have to confront a prevailing stigma: if all black women are considered to be sexually deviant, then those that use sex to make a living are the greatest threat to any form of respectable black

³⁶ Geary and Webb, 3.

³⁷ Alloula, 5.

womanhood.”³⁸ Subsequently, contemporary images of ethnic pornography featuring black women, like the images Mutu appropriates in *Ark Collection*, have been discussed as negatively representing black women because they reproduce and sustain racist categorizations about innate hypersexuality. Nash recapitulates black feminist theory’s analysis of sexual politics and representation and terms it the “archives of pain.”³⁹ The “archives of pain” suggest that the visual realm intrinsically dehumanizes black women through the repeated historic reduction of their bodies into objects.⁴⁰

The artist’s inclusion of contemporary pornography in her collages suggests that she interprets the pornographic images she sources as innately objectifying as well. Mutu describes black pornography as incredibly graphic, stating, “it’s graphic beyond porn of any other ethnicity or race. There’s less Photoshop. There are shots that only a gynecologist should be looking at. It’s just, it’s obscene, and it always shocks me too because it goes beyond the point of titillation.”⁴¹ Hernandez describes the American black pornography magazines *Black Tail* and *Player’s Girls Pictorial* that Mutu uses in her collages as “the porn magazine(s) found at the corner store in ethnic urban communities.”⁴² The magazine’s pictorials feature black women with a wide range of skin tones posing on beds or against outdoor backdrops. The women display their breasts,

³⁸ Mireille Miller-Young, “Brown Sugar: Theorizing Black Women’s Sexual Labor in Pornography,” introduction to *A Taste for Brown Sugar* (Barcelona: Duke University Press, 2014), pg. 4.

³⁹ Nash, 27.

⁴⁰ Hernandez, 443.

⁴¹ Mutu, 2007.

⁴² Hernandez, 431.

buttocks, and vaginas, and they frequently lay spread eagle, touching their genitalia and looking directly at the camera. Instead of the airbrushing, professional lighting, and softer aesthetic of more mainstream pornographic magazines like *Playboy*, *Black Tail* and *Player's Girl Pictorial* offer a different look characterized by spandex clothing, Lucite platform high heels, visible tattoos, long fake nails, and distinct makeup.⁴³

By including American pornography of black women in *The Ark Collection* collages, Mutu traces the Western construction of black female sexuality from Africa to the diaspora and from the past into the present. Her collages assert that the photographs of black women in pornographic magazines are inescapably linked to the colonial image-making project, and they maintain a historically rooted representational violence. Mutu cuts up images of the pornography models' bodies to disrupt their objectification, and she links their anatomies with ethnographic images to articulate a lineage of Western identity construction. She emphasizes the shared visual tropes of each kind of image – the ethnographic and the pornographic – as she visually conflates them through her collage process.

Conclusion

Mutu eliminates nearly all the female faces in her *Ark Collection* collages as a conceptual strategy. However, in one collage (Figure 6), she reveals a portion of an African woman's face peering through a cutout in a pornography model's back. The naked model crouches before a body of water, legs spread with her back and buttocks displayed for the viewer. The ethnographic image seeps into an excised portion of the

⁴³ Hernandez, 430.

model's form. The African woman's close cropped black hair against a black background fills in the model's neck and chin, and most of the model's face is a blank screen of black. A subtle ring of the African woman's ornate beaded head and neck jewelry replaces the skin of the model's right breast. In addition, the ethnographic photograph fills in the model's left shoulder and part of her buttocks and right leg, and thick collars of striped beadwork mirrors the arch of the model's lower body, drawing the viewer's gaze around the model's voluptuous curves even as her body parts have been replaced through collaging.

Despite amply featuring the African woman's jewelry, Mutu's collaging includes one portion of the African woman's face – her eye. The woman's right eye sits directly in the center of the collage, looking out at the viewer through the pornography model's back. This eye confronts, challenging the viewer in a way the erased visages of the other women featured in the series cannot. The direct stare, its singular presence, disrupts the reconstructed onslaught of collaged female bodies in the series. Here, the artist still obscures both women's exploited bodies, but she builds the collage around an assertion of vision and visibility, asserting a subjectivity.

In *Ark Collection*, Mutu utilizes collage to make explicit the connections between colonial and contemporary images of the black female body in order to refuse them. She creates an archive of exploitation, citing her source materials within a genealogy of representational violence. Mutu uses precise cuts and unfinished borders to assert that the ethnographic image has always been pornographic. She forcibly severs any perpetuation of a historically predicated reading of the images of her source materials, making space within ethnographic and pornographic images for new conceptions of black female

sexuality to cleave. Through the act of violent cutting and layering, and the deliberate methodology of reforming, she provides a contestation to the historical construction and dominant views of the black female body she delineates.



The Ark Collection

2006

Collage auf 32 Postkarten in vier Vitrinen

Collage on 32 postcards displayed in four vitrines

101,6 x 157,5 x 58,4 cm (Vitrinengröße) 40 x 62 x 23 in. (each vitrine)

Figure 2
Wangechi Mutu
The Ark Collection, installation view
2006

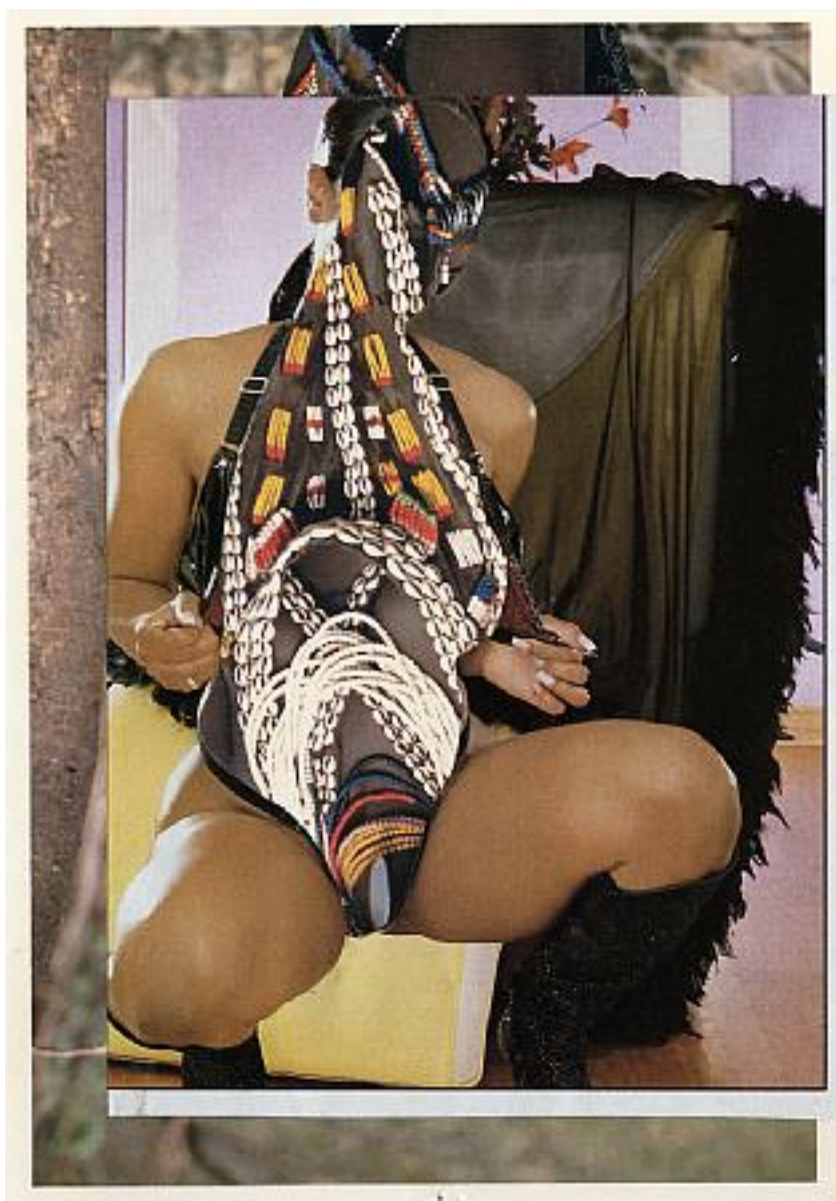


Figure 3
Wangechi Mutu
Collage, *The Ark Collection*
2006



Figure 4
Pierre Tremaux
Fille du Dar-Four, planche 38 (from Voyage au Soudan Oriental)
1800s

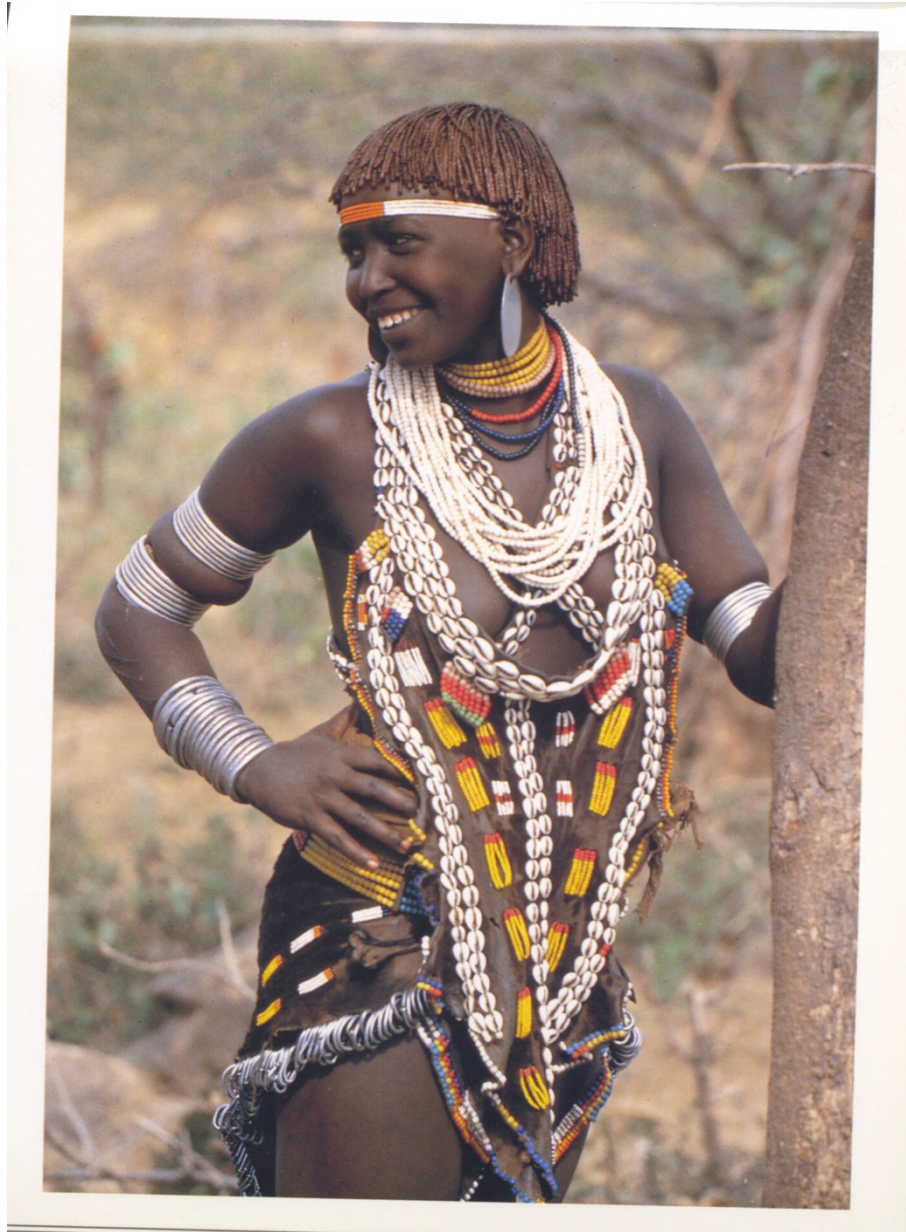


Figure 5
Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher
HAMAR WOMAN, postcard
1993

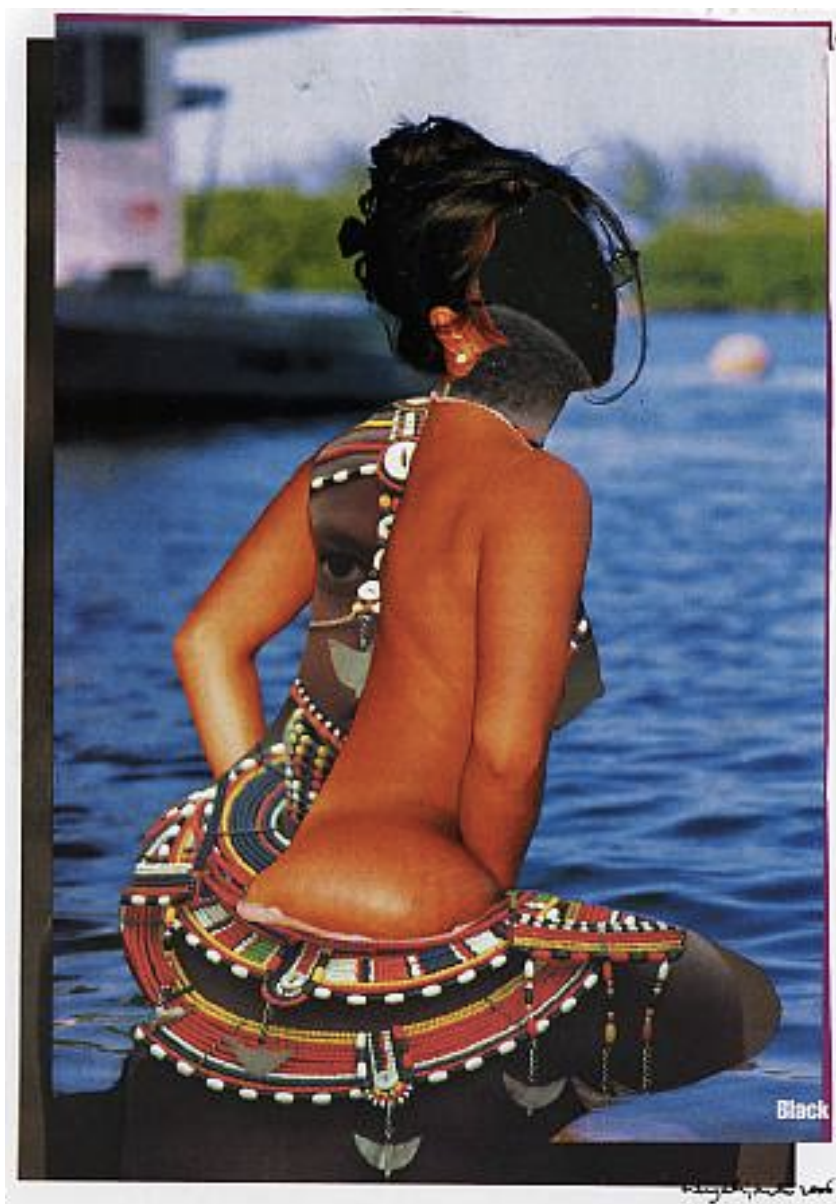


Figure 6
Wangechi Mutu
Collage from *The Ark Collection*
2006

Chapter 3: Present

Afropolitan Diaspora and Collage: Formation of Identity in *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head*

In the 2005 collage, *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head* [Figure 1], Wangechi Mutu manipulates her materials on planar field of reflective, translucent Mylar that both flattens and exaggerates the components of her collage, constructing the suggestion of a body that emerges from a vague otherworldly landscape. The work's female figure steps forward from a hazy grey-green background, underscoring the two dimensionality of the work. She approaches the viewer with one leg bent at the knee as if caught in motion. In place of feet, two masses of thick garnet tendrils trail from twin mounds at the end of each leg. Like dislodged roots, the masses simultaneously ground and uproot the figure and serve as a bed for a flurry of white paper strips that sprout up like grasses, foregrounding the tension between movement and rootedness embodied within the figure.

An embellished grass skirt or belt compiled from an array of shiny images cropped from magazines hangs at her waist, and the figure's brown skin bubbles into white blotches. On her shoulders, images of yellow skirts billow like sleeves with black paper strips erupting like tentacles from their centers in a more frenetic echo of the swaying grasses at her feet. The figure's sole arm explodes into bursts of

bright red blood from her wrist, the mottled paint washes of her arms redolent of boiling skin, blistered from an unseen impact. Her right arm is not visible to the viewer, leaving apparent traces of violence only on her right side. An arrangement of facial features clipped from the ads of fashion magazines and the body parts of women cut from pornographic publications limn her face which is a grey brown that stands out starkly, almost like a mask, from the rest of the collage. Extracted from the pages of a pornographic magazine, four fingers with bright red nails and gleaming rings latch around the figure's neck simultaneously evoking violent traces of blood and an ornamental quality like a lustrous necklace. A smaller collaged figure splayed precariously on its side balances atop the figure's head forming another compelling visual echo as the wild tendrils from its head and between its legs render it almost like a tiny deformed twin of the main figure. Swirls of color also demarcate this smaller figure's body, but where the larger figure is composed of more muted colors of paint, the smaller body is composed of vivid brown and caramel tones. Around the top figure, Mutu collages groupings of small birds and butterflies.

In this collage, Mutu uses the material dynamics of collage to make visible the intersection of histories, geographies and representations that construct diasporic identity. Through her collaging, she adopts what Katherine Hoffman terms "the vocabulary of chaos"⁴⁴ so that her work refuses either/or dichotomies and presents a complex, rhizomatic⁴⁵ representation of identity. Mutu creates a body out of a series of interrelated

⁴⁴ Katherine Hoffman, "Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview," in *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), pg. 1.

⁴⁵ The rhizome is a philosophical concept, based on the plant rhizome, developed by theorists Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. They attribute many traits to the rhizome concept, but their description of the rhizome as relating to a map "that

references that speaks to the diasporic identity of a certain generation of Africans “shaped by experiences of travel and migration that question the territorial claims of the nation-state as the primary basis of collective belonging.”⁴⁶ In short, Mutu uses collage to create bodies out of interconnected materials that refer both to Africa and global movement as a way to describe a particular kind of present day diasporic identity.

Collage’s dispersed and fragmented formal practice reflects a way of being that Kobena Mercer describes as unique to black diaspora culture. Mercer explains: “In a world in which everyone’s identity has been thrown into question, the mixing and fusion of disparate elements to create new, hybridized identities point to ways of surviving, and thriving, in crisis and transition.”⁴⁷ Mutu’s collage *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head* articulates a black diasporic positionality informed by global flux. In this paper, I will discuss the ways that Mutu utilizes the medium of collage, building on its Western diasporic, political and feminist histories, in order to convey a sense of identity as defined by Stuart Hall, a seminal theorist on African diaspora. Hall laid the foundation for the field of cultural studies, and his scholarship still instructs the work of many theorists today, including art historian Kobena Mercer, whose writing on the African diaspora also contributes to the theoretical framework for my analysis.

must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight,” is a useful application for my argument, pg. 21.

⁴⁶ Kobena Mercer, “Erase and Rewind: When Does Art History in the Black Diaspora Actually Begin?” in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, by Saloni Mathur (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), pg. 18, paraphrasing Gilroy.

⁴⁷ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pg. 4-5.

While my broader discussion of identity is structured around an articulation of diasporic identity as discussed by Hall and Mercer, my argument focuses on the concept of the “Afropolitan” originated by Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu⁴⁸ in her essay “Bye- Bye, Babar (or: What Is an Afropolitan?)” but widely adopted and used since, as evidenced by a 2011 symposium entitled “Africans in America: The New Beat of Afropolitans” at the Houston Museum of African American Culture where Mutu was a participant. Though Mutu’s involvement in the symposium can certainly be seen as a tacit endorsement of the title, it is important to note that the demarcation of Afropolitan has been discussed contentiously, and critics have argued that it is “exclusive, elitist, and self-aggrandizing.”⁴⁹ However, the diasporic identity that I contend Mutu’s collage explains does pertain to a certain class of Africans who occupy a space of privilege and move(d) to and from the African continent of their own volition. With all that in mind, I will analyze the ways that Mutu uses collage as a means of critical construction to build a body that conjures transformation amongst scattered elements and disparate parts, reflecting Afropolitan identity in the present.

Diaspora: to scatter and transform

Diaspora, a Greek word, is a combination of the verb *sperein* or “to sow” or “to scatter” and the prefix *dia* which means through, and it references the dispersion of people of a common origin, background, or belief.⁵⁰ The modern African diaspora started

⁴⁸ Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu now publishes under Taiye Selasi.

⁴⁹ Marta Tveit, “The Afropolitan Must Go,” *Africa Is a Country*, November 28, 2013, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://africasacountry.com/2013/11/the-afropolitan-must-go/>.

⁵⁰ Krista Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (October 01, 2011): pg. 8, accessed January 28, 2017,

with transatlantic racial slavery, and the term African diaspora or black diaspora has grown to encompass and describe the “diverse subjects affected by transatlantic slavery and its aftermaths [who] came to think of themselves as a group, across geographic locations, based on (but not limited to) a shared history be it of slavery, homeland, ethnicity, colonialism, imperialism, imperiled decolonization, white racism, or precisely the conditions of dispersal and acculturation.”⁵¹ Though the diaspora has its roots in the slave trade, the idea of a black diasporic identity is not a historical sense of identity limited to the past; it is an identity that changes constantly to adapt to shifting positionalities occupied by people of African descent. Diasporic identity must contend with the spectre of Africa just as much as it must continue a complicated dialogue with Europe and the West. Therefore, although conventional understanding of “African diaspora” consists of descendants of the slave trade, but the concept has expanded to describe postcolonial Africans with significant ties to Europe or the U.S., including native Africans who have roots in Africa but now reside elsewhere.

The Africa of the diasporic popular imagination exists because of a long and interminable chain of transformations, and the original “Africa,” that conception of a homeland from before the slave trade and Western intervention on the continent doesn’t exist - despite the way the West freezes it “into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past.”⁵² Instead, Hall contends, Africa, for people of the diaspora, belongs to

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/41430735?ref=search-gateway:fe1f9c8154daf0949ca97d2f3a74c97c>.

⁵¹ Thompson, 9.

⁵² Hall, 231.

“what Said once called an ‘imaginative geography and history’, which helps ‘the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away’.”⁵³ Thus, diasporic identity is based as much on an imagined connection the continent as it is any tangible relationship with the actual place.

In addition to Africa, the position of Europe in forming African diasporic identity becomes inextricable because it introduces power into identity through the role of the dominant. The European becomes what Fanon calls a “constitutive element in our own identities.”⁵⁴ It positions the African or person of African descent as the Other and positions the non-European identity as receiving not only with Western violence, hostility and aggression, “but the ambivalence of its desire.”⁵⁵ The influence of Europeans over diasporic identity provides a site of “profound splitting and doubling - what Homi Baba has called the ambivalent identifications of the racist world...the ‘otherness’ of the self-inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity.”⁵⁶ Diasporic identity is formed, and continually reformed, by these shifting relationships between the diaspora, the West and Africa. Mutu exploits and deconstructs this shifting relationships in her work, taking elements from the real and imagined Africa, the archives of the colony and the post-colony, to use as raw material in her appropriation of the Western art practice of the collage.⁵⁷

⁵³ Hall, 231-232.

⁵⁴ Hall, 233.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Tiffany E. Barber, Angela Naimou, and Wangechi Mutu, "Between Disgust And Regeneration:," *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 3 (2016): pg. 340, doi:10.1353/asa.2016.0026.

Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head references the positioning and repositioning of diasporic identity in its title, suggesting a nomadic conception of home that is dependent on movement, a home in transit that can also be transported. The collage's figure enacts the repositioning of the work's title; she carries her home with her, that spectre of Africa, but she can't go to her home because, ultimately, it's an imagined place. Building a visual representation of the title's quandary, Mutu emphasizes figure's roots ironically because ultimately the figure is rooted to nothing. In addition, the title's repetition of words suggests a positioning and repositioning that Hall defines as characteristic of diaspora identity, and it references the refitting and moving around of words and parts that epitomizes the collage making process.

Taiya Tuakli-Wosornu describes a subset of diasporic identity as "Afropolitan" or "African young people working and living in cities around the globe" who "belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many."⁵⁸ Starting in the 1960's, a first group of highly skilled Africans emigrated to the West in pursuit of higher education, beginning a succession of diasporic waves that created the Afropolitans. Between 1975 and 1984, another wave of immigration occurred, and the number of Africans leaving the continent doubled and doubled again by 1987, "representing about 30% of Africa's highly skilled manpower." Afropolitans include and follow that generation of immigrants, and their identity necessarily includes travel because Afropolitans have been to both Africa and the West; sometimes they have been based it both.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, "Bye- Bye, Babar (or: What Is an Afropolitan?)," *The International Review of African American Art* 22, no. 3 (2009): pg. 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Tuakli-Wosornu claims that Afropolitans are distinguishable in the West and in Africa by their “willingness to complicate Africa namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean the most to them.” She continues, “Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is this refusal to oversimplify: the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentializing the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend its cultural complexity; to honor its intellectual and spiritual legacies.”⁶⁰ Tuakli-Wosornu’s identification of Afropolitan identity is informed by the cultural and geographic Africa, but it is equally dependent on being from other places, as if conjured more from movement in between locations than any place lived.

Reflecting this Afropolitan description, Mutu’s collaged figure appears tethered and simultaneously unmoored. The figure walks in a vague, nondescript location, and the paint sprayed onto the Mylar looks like smoke or fog. The grey and green washes of color relay no information about a ground or a sky, and it as if the figure belongs to no geography or state. The colors are vaguely threatening, and it is unclear if the figure walks towards or away from a conflict, perhaps in a forced migration. She is, indisputably, in motion, with her leg rising as if in transit or perhaps even dancing. Thus, the place of the collage is less important than the fact that the figure appears to be moving there. As the title suggests, the place of the figure is within the woman. She is her home and she carries it with her. Despite the nebulous space that the figure inhabits, many of the parts that comprise her body allude to an Africa both imaginary and real: a photograph of an African mask dangles from the belt of her stereotypically African grass skirt, and

⁶⁰ Tuakli-Wosornu, 37.

skirts evocative of indigenous garb compose the sleeves around her shoulders. Mirroring the grasses that form part of the figure's outfit, the grasses sprouting from her feet evoke the picturesque African grasslands, a physical feature used to represent and commodify the continent through merchandise and safaris.

Though the figure's feet and legs appear like plant trunks wrenched from the earth, they attach to nothing. Without any depicted land to stand on, the roots of the figure's feet create their own kind of islands, an ecosystem within the figure itself, as long wavy white grasses take root on the figure's mound-like lower extremities. The roots of the woman's feet are a deep red, and the crimson paint forming the clumped tendrils at the bottoms of her appendages snakes in rivulets of layers that start on her legs, mixing with the dark brown of her skin. She appears to have been literally "uprooted." With this gesture, Mutu portrays the imagined African roots that linger after migration, reinforcing the tension between rootedness and movement in the collage. Genealogy and home are both conceptualized as root systems linking people to each other and people to place, and the figure carries her roots with her. She even cultivates a land, a home, for herself from these roots, but they remain separate from any larger geography. Mutu denies her figure the land that she, a hybrid of plant and home, grew from, and the figure ambiguously has either been dislodged or dislodged herself. At once both plant and animal, the figure's duality embodies the hybridity that Hall characterizes as intrinsic to diasporic identity, and on the collaged figure's ambivalent body, Mutu references both the forced travel of the historical diaspora and the more contemporary migration of the Afropolitan who moves by choice but still grapples with their genealogy, their roots.

A History of Collage

Collage's resonance with African American and West African aesthetic motifs, including polyrhythmic patterning and using multiple patterns simultaneously, make it a frequent strategy within the art of African diaspora, and my interest in Mutu's collage as representative of a kind of diasporic identity arose from researching Romare Bearden's work and its portrayal of a more historical definition of the diaspora. Yet, while Mutu's work can be situated with a specifically African diasporic collage tradition, in this section, I am contending strictly with the Western history of collage and the way Mutu's collage practice situates her work within a distinctly Western, political artistic tradition that she then subverts and critiques.

Collage, originally considered a folk art, has emerged in Western art history as both a medium and an idea,⁶¹ and throughout the twentieth century, a progression of revolutionary artistic movements adopted and endorsed the practice, imbuing the form and practice with political potency. Introducing the artistic significance of collage, Gregory Ulmer states that, 'by most accounts collage is the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation in our century.'⁶² It is considered a quintessential twentieth century art form, and it has also become synonymous with a postmodern state of being characterized by juxtaposition and disjuncture, ethos echoed in Mutu's practice and Afropolitan identity.

The hegemonic progression of art history sites collage's emergence as a "fine art" in the early 1900's with the work of Picasso and Braque. The French word *collage* comes

⁶¹ Hoffman, 1.

⁶² Ulmer, quoted in Hoffman, 1.

from the verb *coller* meaning ‘pasting sticking or gluing’ onto a surface. In slang, *collage* means “an illicit love affair,” a play on words which may have delighted Picasso and Braque.⁶³ Collage developed from the Cubist inclination towards aesthetic fragmentation and discontinuity, and the practice spread to Dada and Surrealist groups where it became a mode of cultural critique and psychological investigation. Collage technique - employed here as abrupt juxtapositions and disparate linkages - became viewed as “a means of undermining conventional associations and shocking the viewer or reader into a perception of a new reality - social, political and psychological, as well as aesthetic.”⁶⁴ Collage’s necessarily multivalent reading realizes a kind of immediate presence that skirts the basic conventions of representation because collaging complicates the way images are constructed and can be read.

Art criticism and theory developed alongside the spread of collage as an artistic medium. Peter Burger’s inquiry into collage as an artistic strategy of the twentieth-century avant-garde credits the practice with destroying the modernist conception of art as an autonomous space apart from the everyday. For Burger, “the insertion of reality fragments into a work of art fundamentally transforms the work. The artist no longer renounces shaping as a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality.”⁶⁵ Thus, collage complicates the role of the art object, merging art and everyday materials.

⁶³ Hoffman, 5.

⁶⁴ Gwen Raaberg, "Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts," *Mosaic* 31, no. 3 (1998): pg. 155.

⁶⁵ Peter Burger and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pg. 78.

Following Burger, collage becomes a metaphor for postmodern culture. First, theorist Frederic Jameson analyzes collage, or “pastiche,” and identifies it as the dominant mode of postmodernism. Jameson views the artmaking practice as demonstrative of the “fragmentation, ‘schizophrenia’ (referring to Lacanian notions of self, language and meaning), and ahistoricism of postmodern culture.”⁶⁶ However, despite making this connection, he begins to question collage as a productive, political mode of artmaking because of the relationship he identifies between collage and dominant capitalist culture. Echoing Jameson’s initial assertion, Lucy Lippard finds the collage aesthetic to be “the core image of postmodernity,” but, unlike Jameson, she finds this link to be generative and “particularly feminist” as a practice that “willfully takes apart what is or is supposed to be and rearranges it in ways that suggest what it could be.”⁶⁷ The deconstructive and subsequently reconstructive impulse of collaging imbues artmaking with new political possibilities that arise when artists assemble two distinct, different realities in order to articulate a new kind of reality.

For Lippard, identity exists as a kind of intrinsic collage component, and she contends that feminist identity is “itself as yet a collage of disparate, not yet fully compatible parts. It is a collage experience to be a woman artist or a sociopolitical artist in a capitalist culture.”⁶⁸ While the impulse to essentialize the experience of all women as a monolith is inherently problematic, Lippard’s contention that collage provides a

⁶⁶ Raaberg, 156.

⁶⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, “Issue and Taboo,” in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), pg. 25.

⁶⁸ Lippard, 168.

productive way to consider and represent identity informs my reading of Mutu's work. Collage, with its fundamental destructive/constructive process, and fluid, transformational, and relationally construed interpretive possibilities mirrors descriptions of diasporic and, more specifically, Afropolitan identity. Mutu capitalizes on the medium's potentiality, and her artistic practice continually refers back to the diasporic identity that she seeks to portray. Instead of manufacturing easily defined images, Mutu produces collaged works that visually map out - on the body - the complexities, contradictions, and intersections that forge Afropolitan identity.

The Reconstructive Impulse

The body Mutu conjures in *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head* appears fractured into pieces not only through the collage components Mutu uses, but also through the way Mutu emphasizes the figure's dismembered body. It appears as if one of the figure's arms has been completely removed while the other is in the process of being wrenched apart by force. By creating a body seemingly torn apart, Mutu relates her content back to her artistic process and offers a gendered critique.

In this collage, Mutu uses the central figure's blasted arm to raise the spectre of African politics, coups, violence and the victims of the continent's traumatic colonial past and current mercurial climate of post-colonial civil war. For Mutu an inextricable relationship exists between wars and the body, and between the bodies she creates and the African continent. She recounts:

There is a picture I find interesting because of its juxtaposition between a teacher killed in the Rwanda genocide - horribly, brutally killed in his classroom - and the map behind him that is obviously the geography of the continent of Africa: here you see the continent cut up into the pieces that Europeans wanted and desired,

could afford, and here is the result, the legacy of colonialization, lust, and greed...And there is always a relationship between wars and bodies: we wouldn't fight them otherwise. There is no war that is an isolated incident without the graphic of a body; there is always a relationship with something that has hit flesh - somewhere there.⁶⁹

This idea of bodies carved up into parts and a colonial history that continues to violently play out on the bodies of Africans in the present is pivotal to Mutu's conception of diasporic identity. *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head's* figure's damaged arm spurts blood at the wrist as if her hand has completely evaporated in an explosion, and the bright red of her blood viscerally punctuates the collage's dull background colors. Mutu explains, "There is always something about the violence of Africa in my work, the partition of the continent is always present in my collages and in the way I go about implying what happens to the female body."⁷⁰ The artist's statement asserts an intrinsic connection between the partition of the African continent by colonial powers and a certain violence done to the African female body that continues in the postcolonial moment today - an inescapable history that informs and predicts the present.

Dismemberment is a common trope in Mutu's work, and here, the severed limb contributes to the artist's evocation of the African continent's political turmoil refers back to the act of collaging itself. Harkening back to the materiality of Mutu's artistic technique, the dismembered figure is comprised of amputated, mutilated, and pieced together incongruous fragments. She has been formed from an explosion of different

⁶⁹ Barber, Naimou, and Mutu, 356-357.

⁷⁰ RoseLee Goldberg and Philippe Vergne, "Shirin Neshat and Wangechi Mutu," *Flash Art*, November 10, 2015, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/shirin-neshat-and-wangechi-mutu/>.

sources. Massimiliano Gioni suggests that “collage has appeared as an art of crisis” that has always “entertained a deep relationship with traumas and violation,” and Mutu’s engagement with the themes of trauma and violence through her imagery and practice speaks to what Gioni describes as contemporary collage’s “need to recompose the fragments left behind by world conflicts.”⁷¹ Thus, reading fragmentation in Mutu’s collages as purely representative of destructive ignores the generative action of recombining smaller parts to build a whole; she is building from what has been torn apart.

Mutu’s critique of the violent political trauma of the African continent continues beyond the way she explodes her figure’s body; she ornaments her figure with gemstones in a conjuring of pernicious decadence. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, Mutu describes her impulse to link abundance with something more malevolent. She explains, “I hope these images are going to insinuate opulence, but also a sort of dark place where abundance creates something horrific.”⁷²

The belt of the central figure’s grass skirt is a pattern of green levels and photographs of flowers made from large, glistening multi-colored gemstones. At the figure’s temple rests an image of large jeweled spider with a gigantic pearl for a body that gleams white against the darkness of her face. By using the gemstones, Mutu implicates the illegal diamond trade in Africa, riddled with human rights abuses and terrible consequences.⁷³

⁷¹ Massimiliano Gioni, “It’s Not the Glue That Makes the Collage,” in *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*, by Richard Flood, Massimiliano Gioni, and Laura J. Hoptman (London: Merrell, 2007), pg. 12.

⁷² Dodie Kazanjian, “Fierce Creatures; Kenyan Artist Wangechi Mutu Has Brought Her Fresh and Vividly Energetic Vision to Figurative Art-spinning Fantastical Tales of Folklore and Modernity,” *Vogue*, 2006.

⁷³ Kristine Stiles, “Wangechi Mutu’s Family Tree,” in *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, by Wangechi Mutu and Trevor Schoonmaker (Durham, NC: Nasher Museum of Art, 2013).

However, with the same gesture, she hints at the vast resource riches of the continent, and the imagined splendor of a precolonial geography and mythic homeland.

While disfigurement and fracture remain crucial to Mutu's work, her collages equally embody Raaberg's argument that within feminist collage "we may find a reconstructive impulse, based not on a totalizing perspective but on a collage strategy that utilizes fragmentation, discontinuity, and dialectical opposition to stage multiple, fluid relationship."⁷⁴ The collage as a site of connecting and construction of relationships that are made visible on the body describes the way Mutu expresses a Afropolitan identity, and it is as though Mutu is performing an act of surgery in her collaging, acknowledging the traumas of the continent as she puts them back together.

Conclusion

Mutu foregrounds the notion of a nomadic home in perpetual motion and transformation in *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head*, and with the collage's central figure, she amplifies the ironies of an identity defined by both movement and inescapable roots. Playing off diaspora's etymological reference "to sow," Mutu prioritizes botanical imagery in her collage to suggest that Afropolitan identity continues to grow and transform perpetuating a connection to home, to the Africa it carries with it, and just as the collage's figure blooms as it strides onwards, the diasporic popular imagination germinates the seeds of Africa despite any relationship with the landmass itself.

⁷⁴ Raaberg, 169.



Figure 7
Wangechi Mutu
Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head, 2005
(ink, fur, acrylic, glitter, Mylar)

Chapter 4: Future

Building Futures: The Nguva and the Cyborg in *Beneath lies the Power*

Wangechi Mutu's constructions of cyborg women whose bodies possess complex layers of mechanized gears, wheels for feet, and photographic montages of animal anatomies in lieu of skin typify an Afrofuturist aesthetic. The critical lens of Afrofuturism conjectures at a specifically African diasporic future, and its aesthetic appropriates a science fiction inflected grammar of representational hybridity and remix. In her collages, Mutu cuts magazine photographs, embellishes with glitter, and layers washes of paint to materialize perplexing yet majestic figures, and she adopts Afrofuturist conventions of improvisation and mythmaking in the materials she uses and the compositional narratives she molds. Mutu's collage artworks build an ancestral, mythic framework populated by futuristic powerful female figures, and the invented forms in Mutu's collages illustrate a vision of the future that simultaneously moves backward and forward through time in a way that rethinks the present.

Beneath lies the Power (Figure 8), Mutu's 2014 collage painting on vinyl, features two gynepomorphic figures - the nguva, a mythological East African water woman or mermaid, and the cyborg - defined by Donna Haraway as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a

creature of fiction.”⁷⁵ The collage’s nguva, the dark, aquatic animal-like, human-like creature with fins and a tail that occupies the bottom portion of the composition bolsters the cyborg, a brightly colored human-like, female-like figure, whose almost celestial body glows with swirling white dots that mirror the sky behind her, staring directly out at the viewer through a pair of mismatched and inverted eyes. The two main bodies of the collage connect in the center of the image and occupy much of the work’s flattened space. Mutu composes both subjects from layered materials and smaller collaged images, and she situates them on background of churning black sky dotted with stars and a cross section of a light blue body of water that appears to be tipped up against the picture plane. A group of fish dart in the water around the nguva, moving the viewer’s eye across the composition and back up at the cyborg.

In this chapter, I argue that *Beneath lies the Powers* is an Afrofuturist work in which Mutu connects East African folklore to an Afrofuturist future through the present. The collage depicts a reimagined nguva as a powerfully female cyborgian figure that Mutu positions between the mythological waters of the East African coast and the glittering cosmos of a contemplated tomorrow. Utilizing both Afrofuturist aesthetics and subject matter, Mutu creates an alternative narrative of female agency that bypasses colonial (and postcolonial) frameworks of Western power and conceptions Africa. *Beneath lies the Power* proffers a critical take on African mythology and achieves the Afrofuturist goal of presenting “an escape from the externally imposed definition of what

⁷⁵ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2007), pg. 291.

it means to be black (or exotically African) in Western culture.”⁷⁶ Subsequently, Mutu adapts an East African myth as a means through which to imagine a kind of future where an African mermaid could usurp the Hellenic notion of the siren maiden for mythological primacy⁷⁷ or even morph into a powerful cyborg unconcerned with hegemonic Western narratives all together.

Afrofuturism: The Process of Building Futures

Alondra Nelson describes Afrofuturism as a “critical perspective that opens up inquiry into the many overlaps between techno-culture and black diasporic histories...[and] reclaims theorizing about the future,” and “afrofuturist narratives insist that who we’ve been and where we’ve traveled is always an integral component of who we can become.”⁷⁸ Thus, an Afrofuturist must be rooted in the past, relevant for the present, as well as looking towards the possibilities of the future. Afrofuturism was originally conceived of as a revisionist discourse where African Americans could harness the realm of science fiction and technology to reparative ends. It was first a literary theory applied to the works of science fiction authors including Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delaney. Then, scholars began employing the term in discussing musicians

⁷⁶ Tegan Bristow, “We Want the Funk: What Is Afrofuturism to Africa?” in *The Shadows Took Shape*, by Naima J. Keith, Zoë Whitley, Tegan Bristow, Samuel R. Delany, Kodwo Eshun, Thelma Golden, Paul D. Miller, Alondra Nelson, and Peter Shapiro (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), pg. 81.

⁷⁷ Adrienne Edwards, “Nguva Na Nyoka,” in *Nguva Na Nyoka*, by Wangechi Mutu (London: Victoria Miro, 2014), pg. 4.

⁷⁸ Alondra Nelson, “Afrofuturism: Past- Future Visions,” *Colorlines: Race, Culture, Action* 3, no. 1 (2000).

such as Sun Ra. Afrofuturist strategies in the visual arts grew out of a need to address the past, present, and future experiences of difference, and Afrofuturist discourse was applied to explore the ways in which African diasporic artists “engage with the nebulous notion of ‘tomorrow’ and who belongs there.”⁷⁹ Artists began using visual symbols of science fiction, fantasy and mythology to “imagine and reimagine lost pasts and new futures for alienated, black ‘others.’”⁸⁰ Conceptions of Afrofuturism have changed since the term was coined by Mark Dery in 1994⁸¹, and the discourse has expanded from its initial concerns of addressing the complicated reality of African-American identity and history to encompass the entire African diaspora and the African continent itself. Presently, Afrofuturist literature critically address issues that include “postcolonialism, neocolonialisms, transglobal identities and transcultural identities,”⁸² and current iterations of Afrofuturism focus on reimagining and resignifying black identity and the future of African people.

Frequently referencing “the history of the future” in his writing, Kodwo Eshun extrapolated the concept of Afrofuturism to encompass the greater diaspora and the

⁷⁹ Thelma Golden, "Foreword," foreword to *The Shadows Took Shape*, by Naima J. Keith and Zoe Whitley (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), pg. 8.

⁸⁰ Tiffany E. Barber, "Cyborg Grammar? Reading Wangechi Mutu's *Non Je Ne Regrette Rien* through *Kindred*," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-blackness*, by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pg. 11.

⁸¹ In an interview entitled “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” Mark Dery introduces the term Afrofuturism thusly: “Speculative fiction that treats African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture - and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future - might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism.’”

⁸² Pamela P. Sunstrum, "Afro-mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices," *Para-doxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, no. 25 (2013): pg. 114.

postcolonial African continent. His understanding of Afrofuturism revolves around the observation that all Afrodiasporic subjects live “the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision,”⁸³ and thus, must be concerned with the potential for intervention within the predictive, projective, the virtual, the anticipatory, and “the future conditional.”⁸⁴ Eshun’s inquiry pushes Afrofuturism past what describes as “the regressive compensation mechanisms of Egyptology, Dogonesque cosmology, and the totalising reversals of Stolen Legacy-style Afrocentricity” towards “a lineage of competing world-views that seek to reorient history.”⁸⁵ He sees Afrofuturism that examines and adapts African history, especially as is perceived in the Western world, as integral to a discussion of an evolving African future.

The only scholar to provide discursive analysis on Mutu through an Afrofuturist framework is Tiffany Barber. Her “Cyborg Grammar?: Reading Wangechi Mutu’s *Non je ne regrette rien* through *Kindred*” offers an engagement with Afrofuturism, exploring the artist’s approach to black female subjecthood through a lens the author terms “transgressive disfigurement.”⁸⁶ Barber also identifies cyborg imagery and impulse in Mutu’s work, and her writing links the visually disturbing, exaggerated black female bodies of Mutu’s collages to the historical violence inflicted upon the bodies of enslaved

⁸³ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): pg. 298.

⁸⁴ Eshun, 293.

⁸⁵ Eshun, 297.

⁸⁶ Barber, 4.

black women. She argues that aesthetic choices Mutu makes in her collages mirror the literary decisions made by Octavia Butler in her seminal neo-slave narrative *Kindred*.

Where Barber focuses on Afrofuturist strategies of rupture and disfigurement, I am less interested in what in what has been broken apart and fractured and more interested in what has been formed. My analysis details Mutu's adoption of cyborg imagery, but I will apply her adoption of hybrid, boundary-crossing subjects that are simultaneously human, animal, plant, and machine in the context of the African mythology that does not look towards fragmentation itself as productive. Instead, I find the combinations of disparate parts and temporalities to be the most interesting way to address Mutu's Afrofuturist narratives. It is not just that Mutu builds from fragments but that she is building the nguva and the cyborg. In *Beneath lies the Power*, Mutu connects the mythological with the immediacy of the present, rendering of a reimagined, possible future that presents a critical "re-seeing"⁸⁷ of Afro-mythology. She concocts these creatures through the act of collaging - an artistic practice that mirrors the Afrofuturist impulse of African diasporic culture to "find[s] its own uses for things."⁸⁸ Mutu's collaging retrofits, reworks, and willfully misuses images from the to manifest her science fiction inflected future. Thus, Mutu's work uses the aesthetic and conceptual language of Afrofuturism to create an alternate narrative for a specific kind of racialized and gendered body - the black, African woman.

⁸⁷ Sunstrum, 113.

⁸⁸ Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (1993): pg. 185.

What Lies Beneath: East African Nguvas

To understand the female Mutu proposes for the future, it is important to examine the (sometimes) living Kenyan legends she references in *Beneath Lies the Power*. In an interview with Deborah Willis, Mutu describes the *nguvas* of the East African coast. She explains: “Nguvas - water women - as they’re called...are female, fish-like creatures. Sirens, essentially, that have both a terrestrial and an aquatic existence. I don’t know the mythologies of what sirens or mermaids do elsewhere, but in our part of the world, nguvas live in the ocean, but also come out and pretend not to be sea creatures.”⁸⁹ Two elements of *Beneath lies the Power*’s dark, finned nguva harken to it’s a power of human transformation. First, Mutu articulates an eerie second set of fins through the addition of rectangular x-ray like images of bones that look somewhere between hands and fins. The rigid geometry of the rectangular second set of fins contrasts with the more fluid, organic cuts of the other collaged materials. Second, the nguva’s face is manifested with a jumble of human features fashion magazines. Its mouth is a bright pink pout, and its eyes are encrusted jewels and gemstones in addition to the makeup that rims one blue and brown eye each, leftover from the fashion magazine ads from which they might have been sourced. Long wisps of eyelashes sprout from the corner of each eye. The folkloric nguva of the East African coast exist as half human, half fish, and they are similarly an enigmatic mixture of the mythological and the real. The folkloric nguva of the East African coast exist as half human, half fish, and they are similarly an enigmatic mixture

⁸⁹ Wangechi Mutu, "Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis," interview by Deborah Willis, BOMB Magazine, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000052/Wangechi%20Mutu>.

of the mythological and the real. The Kiswahili word for mermaid, *nguva* or *samaki-mtu*, explains not only fabled sirens of the deep but also the dugong.⁹⁰

The dugong (Figure 9) is a marine mammal related to the manatee that populates the warm coastline waters of the Indian and Pacific oceans⁹¹, and it justifies the existence of the *nguva*. The animal itself looks chimerical with its combination of a hippo face, a fish tail, and dolphin fins; the animal blurs the line between land animal and fish. The species' idiosyncrasies continue in a few other ways as "dugongs breathe air with lungs and give birth to live offspring that are nurtured until maturity. Female dugongs suckle their young, cradling them in their dexterous forelimbs to their teats, which are situated on the front of their chests. They have small hairs all over their thick gray skin, and when they get excited they shed tears."⁹² Hunted and prized for their supposedly delicious meat, the dugong possesses an intimidating power, and the fishermen who hunt them must perform in cleansing ceremonies to "remove dark forces associated with the *nguva*."⁹³ Dugongs allegedly present such a temptation to a fishermen, who claim that the female *nguvu*s (dugongs) have sexual organs that resemble a human's vagina in size and shape, that the fishermen must swear an oath to not have sex with the *nguvu*s to ensure that only pure meat is sold in market.⁹⁴ Myths of the *nguva* emerge from the stories and

⁹⁰ Eileen Moyer, "Death of the Mermaid and Political Intrigue in the Indian Ocean," in *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, by Henry John. Drewal and Marilyn Houlberg (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008), pg. 451.

⁹¹ Thomas O'Shea, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "Dugong," June 20, 2003, accessed January 2, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/animal/dugong-mammal>.

⁹² Moyer, 452.

⁹³ Moyer, 460.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

rituals surrounding the hunting of actual animals, and Moyer points out, most stories of the nguva as perplexing yet enticing sea animals come from people who live in areas where nguvas are still regularly hunted. However, “as you go further up the coast, dugongs become more rare and stories about nguva tend to be more mythically inclined.”⁹⁵ Mutu positions her interrogation of the nguva here - at the intersection between story and experience, myth and reality, and she manifests a dual creature in her collage.

Mutu utilizes the materiality of collage to offer an interpretation of the animal at the fulcrum of the nguva mythology. Swimming in a school of fish in the bottom portion of *Beneath lies the Power*, the collage’s nguva epitomizes the dugong’s visually discrepant nature; it is part fish, part winking lady, and part amorphous dark swirl. Large swaths of textures and materials builds up the creature’s body which helps conjure a medley of references. The netting of the animal’s fins suggests the sea and the dugong’s relationship to fishermen, and the rough felt of the nguva’s tail mirrors the coarse hairs that dot the dugong body. Leathery bits offer a shiny cap to the creature, and fill out its torso, suggesting the slickness of a body submerged in water. Two photographs of pearlescent pink shells nestle together with a metallic silver section of paper where the nguva’s body joins its tail. The brightness of the shells stands out against the nguva’s enigmatic black body and emphasizes the area. Harkening to the tales of fisherman being enticed by the animal’s sexual organs, the seashell genitalia reiterates the dugong’s human-like quality as the can be also interpreted as human.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

The cyborg human-like conglomeration of collaged pieces emerges on the back of the dugong surfacing as the mermaid nguvas do in myths and plays on the duality to the nguva folklore where the water women are equally mysterious and human or beast form. Mutu recounts how the fantastical mermaid nguvas trick people in their human form: “They are able to find human weakness and utilize their power to drown people, to drag people into the ocean.” She continues, “They’re frightening and powerful because sometimes you are unable to distinguish them from real women. In fact, that’s where their power comes from, because a weak character might be convinced by this woman, by her face, her features. And then, before you know it, you’re walking out in the watery wilderness and into the water with her.”⁹⁶ The animal nguvas shift to women in stories in myths, and Mutu articulates this metamorphosis in her work by joining the cyborg female and the mermaid nguva in the center of the composition, under the surface of the water, even as the female figure stretches up and away from the dugong’s aqueous confines.

In her catalogue essay “Nguva and Nyoka,” Adrienne Edwards provides a feminist reading of the nguva mythology where she finds the stories to provide a space for women’s agency in the folkloric versions or the nguva origin story. She explains “One account of the version refers to *Siri ya mangu* (a secret of God), and the other tells of a fisherman who has two wives.”⁹⁷ Both stories are cautionary tales of women who become selfish and angry and leap to the sea in an attempt to punish men who have failed them. The tales align with each woman being disciplined for their impudence through their transformations into water women. Edwards explains that the moral imperatives of

⁹⁶ Wangechi Mutu, “Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis,” interview by Deborah Willis, BOMB Magazine, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000052/Wangechi%20Mutu>.

⁹⁷ Edwards, 1.

the nguva myths are hinged on rigid conceptions of gender stereotypes of women being hysterical, demanding, and forever on the edge of irrationality. However, the myths also proffer a kind of agency for the women who determine their own fates, choosing independence by leaping into the sea, and when left to their fate in the ocean, the nguvas are allowed to possess a kind of malevolent power.

An important component of Mutu's decision to adopt and remix the folkloric nguva is the way in which the tale of the nguva still functions within East African society. The particularities of the nguva's living mythology, one that is not ancient or unearthed, suggests the potent possibilities of the gendered creatures. In an interview, Mutu explains that the nguvas are part of a real historical and lived cultural component, not a " 'once upon a time scenario' ...the fact that women have this option to turn into these myths, these powerful indefinable creatures - especially in places like the coast of Kenya where the traditionally patriarchal cultures of the African Mijikenda tribes prevail - is such a testament to all the possibilities of what a woman can do in a place where she is not actually permitted to do much."⁹⁸ The implied gendered power of the provides the basis for Mutu's critical re-seeing of Afro-mythology that is central to Afrofuturist discourse. Mutu's suggestion for cyborgian future is rooted in the power of the nguva, and it is central to her inquiry as an artist. Harnessing a mythology based on feminine corporeal fluidity between human and animal, Mutu supports the nguva cyborg figure of her collage with the dugong nguva, and this interplay between myth and speculation, human and animal, science and fantasy, is directly referenced in the title of her work.

⁹⁸ Joyce Bidouzo-Coudray, "Wangechi Mutu Takes On Transmutation As a New Form of Existentialism," *Another Africa*, October 13, 2014, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.anotherafrica.net/art-culture/wangechi-mutu-takes-on-transmutation-as-a-new-form-of-existentialism>.

Beneath the water and beneath the futuristic cyborg is a font of mythic power to assemble into a nguva for the future.

The Cyborg: A Creature of Reality and a Creature of Fiction

Knees bent, turning slightly at the waist to look out at the viewer, the second figure of *Beneath Lies the Power* epitomizes the post-human cyborg outlined in Donna Haraway's seminal posthumanist, feminist text, "A Cyborg Manifesto." The cyborg in Mutu's collage is part machine, part plant, part animal, part mythological creature, and very much only partially human. Donna Haraway wrote "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in 1991 as an objection to biological categories of gender in a time when "the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all being called into question ideologically."⁹⁹ Her manifesto broaches a wide range of topics, but she suggests that in a time of biological doubt and technological advancement, the body that is born becomes less important than the body that can be built. Haraway asserts that "a cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity,"¹⁰⁰ and Mutu's nguva inflected cyborg, inculcated with the nguvas mythologically attributed nearly malevolent nature and biologically transformational abilities, concretizes this very idea.

The cyborg's right foot is wheeled and composed from a web of metal pipes cut out of a motorcycle magazine. Images of the heads of both a hippopotamus and bull fill

⁹⁹ Haraway, 302.

¹⁰⁰ Haraway, 315.

out her body in the curve of her seat, and wide photographic fragments of an orange, yellow and black spotted snakeskin form the gentle curve of the figure's back. Her shoulder is outlined in a swath of an image of indigenous African beadwork repeated in many of Mutu's collages. Constituted from a similar composite of cutout images as her body, the figure's face hosts a green snake head for an ear, and the mane and snout of a lion approximates the figure's nose. Layered atop this lion is the excised left half of the splayed body of a woman from a pornographic magazine. An elaborate headdress of tree branches blooms from the top of the woman's head, perhaps as an extension of the woman herself as she transforms from machines at her feet to fauna at her temples. A portion of a photograph of a bright red slab of meat anchors the branches into place, and the glinting victual references the delectable yet forbidden meat of the dugong or the way women can be consumed in society.

Like the nguva below it, "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence,"¹⁰¹ and Mutu materializes her in this work peering out amongst the stars.

Haraway describes the cyborg as a utopian creature that can be disassembled and reassembled again and again based on its needs and environment, and Mutu's cyborg figure remains as unencumbered by human-machine borders as the mythological nguva is by human and animal borders, rising from the sea when convenient, the machine components of her body intertwining with more organic material. However, Mutu's cyborg diverges from Haraway's posthuman future in one key way. Haraway looks for a way out of patriarchal power structures through the cyborg as a way to negate gender

¹⁰¹ Haraway, 292.

altogether - her cyborg is not female. The bodies Mutu creates for the future are necessarily female as evidenced by the folkloric stories she connects them to and the features she gives them - the female faces and the curve of her breast. The cyborg becomes a “site of possible being” that “exists in excess of the real. But it is also imbedded within the real”¹⁰² of the female body but inflected by the myth of the nguva. It is important that the cyborg is feminine because Mutu sees the female cyborg as a productive futurist entity, and their power seems to stem from and flow through their feminized bodies.

Mutu’s cyborg, filtered through nguva mythology, becomes the cybernetic organism that “appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.”¹⁰³ Mutu’s use of collage serves as an apt medium of the visual representation for her cyborg. Gonzales explains how collage “allows apparently ‘real’ or at least indexically grounded representations of body parts, objects and spaces to be rearranged and to function as fantastic environments or corporeal mutations.”¹⁰⁴ The figure in Mutu’s collage is an amalgamation of references presenting the threads of female power forged to transgress patriarchal society, situated in a new world of the future. Mark Dery’s defining interview “Black to the Future” addresses the idea of an Afrofuturist cyborg. In conversation with Dery, Tricia Rose conjectures: “If women were reimagining science fiction, ‘they might treat technology differently, placing it in a

¹⁰² Jennifer Gonzalez, “Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes From Current Research,” in *The Cybertcultures Reader*, by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2007), pg. 540.

¹⁰³ Harraway, 293.

¹⁰⁴ Gonzalez, 544.

different relationship to the organism, and then what would cyborgs look like?”¹⁰⁵ Mutu’s collage provide an answer to that, and the process through which Mutu goes about creating her cyborg - the remixing, hybridizing, and blending of disparate parts and influences to literally embody a creature that surpasses the confines of the African, female human body emblemizes the Afrofuturist aesthetic.

Between the Ocean and the Sky

While I have oriented my discussion of Afrofuturism around the central collaged nguva/cyborg figures in *Beneath lies the Power*, I would like to end this chapter by pointing out the work’s background. It is dominated by two vast expanses; a dark sky twinkles above and behind the cyborg, and a delicate water blue swirls around and behind the nguva. A few plants sprout on a hinting of embankment along each side of the work, but the world surrounding the figures in this collage is nondescript and without a single identifiable feature. Without the context of the exhibition title that accompanies the work, it appears that the conglomerated figures of this collage inhabit a space between the unexplored voids of the sea and the sky, caught between lands.

A similar imaginative potential exists in both the ocean and space alleges Ruth Mayer in “‘Africa as an Alien Future’: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds.” She argues that the underwater world, the submarine, garners attention from Afrofuturist artists and writers because it contrasts the charted and mapped high seas, and the deep sea - “this world below emerges a realm beneath existing lines of power and signification” that is “neither European nor Caribbean, neither metropolitan

¹⁰⁵ Dery, 217.

nor colonial, neither within the 'West' nor without it, as Ian Baucom wrote - a fantasy space which is always as much of the future as it is of the past."¹⁰⁶ The fantasy space of the deep sea fosters the future's cyborg in *Beneath lies the Power* where the cyborg figure emerges from the watery depths. The nguva mythology, a subject of fantasies and speculation, launches a different kind of creature towards the stars, towards a deep space that is similarly uncharted and outside the borders of countries and ideologies. We associate space with science fiction and the future a distant other world free from the power structures of our current planet. Mutu's collage cyborg mirrors the utopian ambitions outlined by Haraway, building on the power of the alien and the outsider to articulate a gendered power that finds its roots and its trajectory entirely outside of Western influence. It is if the history, the stories, Mutu wishes to recover and bring to a wider audience creates the future in its recuperation. With her collaged cyborgs, Mutu is building the women for a utopian future, and she has claimed a space of the Afrofuture.

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Mayer, "'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 45, no. 4, Time and the African-American Experience (January 01, 2000): pg. 561, accessed February 06, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/41157608?ref=search-gateway:503d1389696fdc4efb9bf2fb61bc3e89>.



Figure 8
Wangechi Mutu
Beneath lies the Power, 2014
Collage painting on vinyl



Figure 9
Example image of a Dugong

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The collaged bodies in Wangechi Mutu's work reference colonial and precolonial histories. They depict the complexities of present day identities, and they offer conjectures for alternate futures. Collaging ambivalent temporalities out of a *mélange* of materials, Mutu builds bodies to do all of this simultaneously. She explains, "the body has been a central part of my work and thinking...like a restless, mutating pivot on which almost all my ideas are placed and gravitate."¹⁰⁷ Throughout this thesis, my analysis has scrutinized the ways Mutu hinges an ever-shifting sense time on the female body. I have explored how the bodies she constructs address themes of diaspora and science fiction, pornography and postcards. Mutu's collages depict a monstrous and magnificent fracturing, but they are also the product of her meticulous facture. From conglomerations of mass media detritus, sequins, and thin layers of paint, Mutu creates bodies that challenge the viewer and history, proffering a new vision for the future and a rethinking of today.

¹⁰⁷ Wangechi Mutu, "The Feminist Future: Wangechi Mutu" (lecture, The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts, Museum of Modern Art, New York), accessed February 17, 2017, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/16/179>.

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