Mother Nature in Distress: Contemporary Collages of the Black Female Body as Reflections upon Ecology

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the use of collage to portray the Black female body as intertwined with nature, to comment on the relationship between humanity, the environment, and the afterlife of colonialism. The current degradation of the environment calls for new approaches to connect ecology to political circumstances, such as the entanglement of colonialism in how society treats the environment. The fragmentation and restructuring that are inherent to collage form a strategy to visualise such entanglements, as well as the need for transformation. In three case studies, this thesis examines the work of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta AC Hinkle. These case studies discuss the shared history of colonial exploitation between Black women's bodies and the extraction of resources from nature. Besides, collage forms a critique on the harmful stereotypes of Black women. Existing literature on the three artists mentions Mikhail Bakhtin's figure of the grotesque and Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, of which elements are recognizable in the artists' collaged oeuvres. A comparison between these figures, collage, and their relevance to the topics of ecology and colonialism forms a central feature of this thesis.

This thesis aims to answer how and why Mutu, Hinkle, and Nkanga use collage to intertwine the Black female body with colonialism and environmental issues, as well as with the figures of the grotesque and the cyborg. Within this question this thesis addresses themes of motherhood, extractivism, capitalism, consumerism, ecofeminism, Black grief, Jane Bennett's *vital materialism,* TJ Demos' *political ecology*, Donna Haraway's *string figures*, the influence of colonialism in the formation of Western science, and the reclamation of the Black female body. The findings of this study conclude that within Mutu's, Nkanga's, and Hinkle's art, the act of collaging is crucial to portray how a shared history of exploitation connects Black women's bodies and nature. Collage forms a strategy to reclaim their agency through transforming media that represents their marginalisation, regeneration, and resilience.

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Introduction

Collaged Bodies: Activism Through Assembly

Collage: the cutting and pasting of images into a puzzle of fragments and symbols. Based on the reusing of images, collage combines snippets from different sources together. Any combination of re-used images converts their previous meaning into a new, layered, and complex entity. The act of transforming what already exists makes collage an appealing medium to comment on the dynamics of contemporary society. Collage creates the opportunity to abstract everyday images, to invite new ways of looking at the familiar. It furthermore allows existing figures, places, and objects to intertwine where they had been separated before. Since the start of Modern Art, collage has been utilized for political exclamations: from Dadaist critiques of the bourgeoise, to anti-war statements, and to women's rights movements (Etgar et al., 2017, 13). Collage can restructure images from day-to-day media sources in order to visualize a restructuring of political ideologies. By placing incongruent images together, the juxtapositions in collage take apart the conventions that are embedded in our perception of familiar images. It draws attention to perspectives that have been suppressed and challenges the viewer to rethink the ideologies they engage with.

Wangechi Mutu (b. 1974), Otobong Nkanga (b. 1974), and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle (b. 1987) are among the contemporary artists who employing collage as a critical tool. Each in their own way, they reflect on the enduring and painful impact of systemic racism. In their practice, they connect present experiences of racial injustice to the harrowing oppression that the European colonists brought to Africa. Starting in the nineteenth century, European colonists, among whom were the Dutch, the French, the Spanish, the English, and the Portuguese, occupied and exploited the colonized land and its native peoples. The violence that they inflicted has echoed on intergenerationally, through the persistence of racist and discriminatory ideas. One of the ways colonialism lives on in our current society is the representation of Black women in the Western media, like in magazines and pornography. Black women are frequently confronted with harmful stereotypes that portray them in demeaning ways, such as the "angry Black woman," the sexually promiscuous "Jezebel" or the nurturing "Mammy." Such stereotypes have harmful effects on Black women's freedom, creating social biases that impact how others treat them (Chemaly, 2018, 244-245).

By employing collage, Mutu, Nkanga, and Hinkle each critique the racist dehumanization of Black women within Western society over time. They comment on the societal othering of the Black female body by collaging it into a hybrid, alien figure. A dominant feature in how they create these hybrid figures is a recurring focus on intertwining the Black female body with natural elements.

Beside the psychological trauma that has continued intergenerationally, colonialism has left a substantial impression on society's relationship with nature. Our behaviours of producing and consuming resources highly influence the way we treat the environment, connecting ecology

and economy. Within the current capitalist economies that govern our consumerism, colonialism and capitalism are complexly intertwined in their history (Bhambra, 2020, 320; Blaut, 1989, 260; Staniforth, 2003, 34). During the European occupation, colonialism was part of a capitalist system where the Europeans exploited non-European labour, commodifying nature as well as people for profit. The European bourgeoise justified their consumption and imperialist practices through dehumanizing ideas of racial superiority. The growing demand for goods in Europe and the growing supply of resources from the colonized land viciously enforced each other. The colonial exploitation of people and land escalated Europe's expansion of wealth, playing a role in the foundations of a consumer-culture based on the advantage of market-holders (O'Hanlon, 2013, 3-5). As First et al. (2013, 182) described consumer-culture: "Consumer society is one in which the entire society is organized around the consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing." Consumer culture brings along pollution and depletion of resources, requiring large units of energy and materials. Overproduction and overconsumption are among the causes of the steadily escalating deterioration of our environment, resulting in extreme weather, wildfires, droughts, and flooding (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007, 3). The threatening direction in which our planet is headed calls for new approaches to understand and transform our relationship with ecology, looking across the past and the present to create a better future.

Considering the environmental crisis, an increasing sense of urgency emerges to visualize the relationship between humanity and ecology within socially engaged contemporary art (Demos, 2013, 9). Authors like David Banash, Gwen Raaberg, James M. Harding, Christine Poggi, Melissa Meyer & Miriam Schapiro have extensively discussed how collage, as an activist tool, forms one of these contemporary expressions. However, they have not directly explored how collage interacts with ecology as a political art form. In such an approach, how does collage connect and juxtapose imagery to challenge the viewer's perceptions of how humans and nature interact? As mentioned previously, the practices of colonialism have influenced this relationship: how is that intertwinement incorporated in contemporary collage artists' work? Mutu's, Nkanga's, and Hinkle's oeuvres relate in their content to these three aspects of collage, ecology, and the afterlife of colonialism, therefore presenting as relevant case studies.

As mentioned previously, collage has a history of activist engagement, which presents a reason to explore critiques of ecology and colonialism through this medium. Collage has further connections to the topic, namely through its link to the modernization of the 20th century. While a period of rapid industrial change further influenced the relationship between humans and ecology, collage reached its peak in popularity. As Banash described, collage gained ground at the start of the early 1900s. This was synonymous with the material excesses that came from the mechanization of labour and mass-production. Collage formed a reflection upon the processes of production and consumption, with the "ready-made" as its main material: a symbol of this consumer-culture (Banash, 2015, 12). Banash elaborated on the history of collage but did not connect this background to political approaches towards ecology.

As Meyer & Schapiro argued, collage additionally offers a perspective on the colonial exploitation of both nature and marginalized peoples through its status as a socially engaged artistic technique. It offers a voice to marginalized groups, who employ it to visually express the desired interruption of present ideologies and political systems (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 67). How does the art of Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle express the urgency of the impact that colonialism has had on generations of Black women?

Within the oeuvres of the three artists as case studies for this thesis on collage, a disclaimer is necessary when considering Nkanga's artworks. Visually, I argue that Mutu, Hinkle, and Nkanga each rely on collage as a predominant factor, based on the assembling of varied materials and snippets of media. This introduction previously described the prevalence of the "ready-made" as a prime feature of collage. In both Mutu's and Hinkle's artworks, the "ready-made" exists as photographs from magazines and postcards. Nkanga similarly assembles photographs into her tapestries, creating textile collages. However, beside these textile collages, Nkanga's oeuvre frequently incorporates a *collaged aesthetic* in drawing and painting, rather than physically merging separate media together. This aesthetic is based on the fragmented appearance of the elements within her artworks. Such fragmentation invites viewers to a similar engagement with the work as a collage would offer. Because of her strategy of linking separate elements together through an intertwining, it is therefore relevant to consider her drawings and paintings that present a collage-like strategy.

The Grotesque in Contemporary Collage

Another common denominator between Mutu's, Hinkle's and Nkanga's art is their inclusion of elements of bodily absurdity, as well as the merging of humans and machines. While writing a previous paper titled *Wangechi Mutu's The End of eating Everything: Devouring Hierarchies Through Collage* (2023), I encountered that existing literature recurringly compared the figures in Mutu's art to two literary figures: Mikhail Bakhtin's *grotesque body*, and Donna Haraway's *cyborg*. The elements of the grotesque and the cyborg are not visually recognizable to the same extent in each of the artists' oeuvres, with Mutu's art most prominently including characteristics of both figures. However, in Hinkle's as well as Nkanga's art, arguments can be made towards their inclusion of the cyborg and the grotesque. Therefore, the analysis of these figures recurs in the case studies of this thesis, to support the examination of how collage renders the relationship between nature, colonialism, and the Black female body.

How do the figures of the grotesque and the cyborg align contextually with the narratives of both collage and environmentalism? The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin described the grotesque body in his study of François Rabelais' works. Besides evoking elements of horror and carnival, the grotesque is a figure that is deeply connected with nature. Chelsea M. Frazier (2016) included Jane Bennett's *vital materialism* in her analysis of Mutu's art: an environmental perspective that approaches all beings and non-living things as on a non-hierarchical plane, each as valuable as the other. For example, humans become framed as a

bundle of bacteria, rather than a superior protagonist. Although I have found no literature that specifically connects vital materialism to the grotesque body, I argue that there is an overlap between the two concepts – as I will discuss further in chapter I. Both create a perspective in which there is an equitable symbiosis between the beings in an environment, where limits are blurred between species.

The second figure, the *cyborg,* was described by theorist Donna Haraway in the 1980s, when technology was advancing rapidly. The cyborg is a hybrid between human and machine, invincible in its superhuman capabilities. With the connection between industrialisation and the deterioration of the environment, elements of the cyborg participate in the visualisation of the relationship between humanity and ecology. Elements of the cyborg frequently overlap with the grotesque, although they relate to various aspects of the relationship between nature and humanity. Importantly, both the grotesque and the cyborg are fragmented, asymmetrical, hybrid figures and all these inherently show parallels to the aesthetic of collage.

In relation to Mutu's art, existing literature has referred to the grotesque most frequently to emphasise the othering of the Black female body in society. However, there are evident gaps in previous literature in how the Black female body is portrayed as a vessel to depict the relationship between humanity and ecology, particularly through collage, and including the corresponding elements of the grotesque and the cyborg.

For example, Scholar Bettina Papenburg specifically compared Mutu's oeuvre to the grotesque body in 2012. While Papenburg wrote her article before Mutu's more recent art, she focused strongly on the collage's reframing of the representation of Black women, and not on the ecological narrative. On the other hand, Chelsea M. Frazier's (2016) article on the ecological perspective in Mutu's art did not include the necessity of collage as the method to convey the relationship between humans and their environment.

Kanitra Fletcher (2014) discussed Mutu's and Hinkle's collaged disruption of the colonial gaze on the Black female body but left any examination of the relationship between this body and ecology aside. In the literature on Hinkle, there is a large gap that connects her collages to a portrayal of the relationship between humanity and nature. Studies like Fletcher's, as well as Bridget R. Cooks' article *The Black Index* (2020), explore how Hinkle employs collage to engage with the afterlife of colonialism and the commodification of Black women's bodies, without mentioning the history of collage within capitalism, or the artworks' ecological elements. Within the literature on Otobong Nkanga, her art is most frequently connected to discourses on ecology, out of the three artists mentioned. Monika Szewczyk (2014) is among the authors to expand on Nkanga's ecological perspectives most elaborately, but she did not discuss Nkanga's collaged aesthetic as a means to do so. Neither does the literature show a focus on Nkanga's centralization of the Black female body as grotesque and link it to the history of collage.

Research Focus

The above-mentioned examples show how within the existing art historical, critical and theoretical approaches to Wangechi Mutu's, Otobong Nkanga's, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's art, there are aspects missing to fully answer these questions: Why is the Black female body specifically portrayed through collage in relation to ecology? How does the method of collage relate to both environmentalism and postcolonialism? How do the grotesque and the cyborg link to ecology, postcolonialism, and collage?

This leads to the question that is central to this thesis: *How and why is the collaged Black female body intertwined with colonialism and environmental issues, as well as with the figures of the grotesque and the cyborg in the collaged works of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle?*

To compartmentalize this question into smaller parts, it can be formulated in the following questions: How does collage form a crucial technique in representing the impact of colonialism on environmental issues in the work of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle? How do artists Mutu, Nkanga, and Hinkle subvert Black women's bodies to move beyond a colonial narrative of nature and its connection to the female body? How does collage relate a contemporary image of Mother Nature to Black women's bodies, incorporating aspects of the grotesque and the cyborg?

By elaborating on these aspects and comparing the three artists, I aim to deepen the analysis of a collaged intertwinement of humanity, colonialism, and environmentalism. The first chapter of this research expands on the theory that has been introduced so far, engaging with literature by T.J. Demos on the intersection of ecology and politics, Donna Haraway's concept of *string figures* and her *Cyborg Manifesto,* and Huey Copeland's studies on the artistic portrayal of the Black female body – for example referring back to Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Chapter I furthermore builds upon postcolonial theory, the history of collage, and the characteristics of Bakhtin's grotesque. This chapter is followed by the three individual case studies on Wangechi Mutu's, Otobong Nkanga's, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's collaged artworks. The case studies approach how the artists portray the Black female body as a vessel, to represent the complex history of the relationship between humanity and nature. In this analysis, several themes emerge: the theme of motherhood, the memory of objects, commodification of the female body, critiques of photography as a medium to capture an objective truth, the intertwinement of Western science and colonialism, futuristic imagery, ambiguity and movement, grief, and emphasising the right to female pleasure by obstructing the male gaze. To deepen my analysis, I attempted to contact Otobong Nkanga, but unfortunately without response from the gallery that is the main contact for the artist.

In this thesis I therefore investigate how the Black female body is portrayed through collage in order to question ecological practices and stereotypical representations of the Black female body. The topic links the past, present and future together, and incorporates elements of the

grotesque and the cyborg – to form a contemporary image of our relationship to nature, a contemporary Mother Nature.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that due to my own situatedness as a white European woman, my interpretation of these artists' work and their approach of depicting Black women, which reflects upon their lived experience as Black women, will inherently have blind spots.

Theoretical Framework: Towards a Collaged Ecology

Introduction

The current environmental crisis calls for innovative approaches to redefine the relationship between humans and nature. There is an increasing sense of urgency to visualize the ecological distress in socially engaged contemporary art (Demos, 2013, 9). One such form of contemporary art is collage, a term derived from the French verb *coller* – to glue. Although its history likely goes back to around 200 BC in China, the technique gained massive popularity in the twentieth century (Adibi, 2021, 1). Its primary principles are to take found images out of their context, juxtapose, and repurpose them in new settings, bringing forward new meanings that were previously latent. As a result, collaged images lead double lives, suspended between their original narrative and their new meaning (Etgar et al., 2017, 13).

Although it was a different use of collage than what is now associated with the technique, the use of collage spread from China to Japan in the tenth century. There, it was used to glue paper together to write poetry. Three centuries later, the Europeans began to practice collage, applying gold leaves, gems, and precious metals to embellish religious imagery. In the nineteenth century, collage became a popular way for hobbyists to decorate memorabilia like photo albums (Adibi, 2021, 1-2). The start of collage in Modern Art is frequently accredited to Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963). In 1912, Picasso pasted a scrap of oilcloth textile with a design of a chair onto his artwork titled *Still Life with Chair Caning*. In the dominant narrative that art historians proposed, artists such as Picasso employed collage as a postmodernist way to critique Western art traditions. As Christine Poggi (1992) and Gwen Raaberg (1998) explained the history of collage, after the Cubists picked it up in 1913, the Futurists and later the Dadaists and Surrealists all turned to it as a meaning making practice. For example, Dadaist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) created photomontages that assembled images to comment on gender, politics, and mass media. The Surrealists, like Max Ernst (1891-1976), used collage to transform ordinary materials into surreal scenes (Onibere, 2024, 3). Collage went against the unity and symmetry of traditional art as these were common artistic conventions during the Renaissance. The rejection of the rigid ideals of classic beauty were supposed to have a thwarting effect on the viewer. The way that collage undermines conventional imagery was an attractive route to shock the viewer into new social, political, psychological, and aesthetic perspectives. The experience and interpretation of collages will nonetheless be different for each viewer, who looks at them with their own set of meaning making schemas, so it is no inherent quality of collage to have the same effect (Poggi, 1992, 5-10; Raaberg, 1998, 164).

Collage is historically linked to societal modernisation since it gained popularity at the start of the early 1900s. In this era, there was a significant shift in artistic expression, marked by the rejection of traditional artistic restrictions. At the time, the societal changes because of rapid industrialization led artists to seek ways to react to these shifts. One such change was the

fragmentation of society, and the material excesses that came from mechanization (Onibere, 2024, 1). As David Banash explained in *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (2013), collage reflects on the fragmentation of modern society. Before the Industrial Revolution, trades were learned through craftmanship. Workers specialized in creating the products of their expertise from start to end, resulting in a market of local and handmade goods. Instead of continuing the idea labour as an artisanal craft, the Industrial Revolution brought with it the concepts of Taylorism and Fordism. Taylorism and Fordism cut up labour into small, sterile tasks that demanded little to none of the skills traditionally necessary to create the same products. This compartmentalization of craftmanship into standardized repetitive tasks was a means to maximize profit (Banash, 2013, 15). The sped-up processes of production led to a vast amount of goods, presenting the masses with seemingly infinite choices of what to buy – although these goods were mass-produced with a lifeless sameness. A consumer-culture erupted, where consumption was associated not only with social standing, but also with the formation of rapidly evolving trendy identities. Products have become a way to buy who you want to be, and this had led to the spread of the signs of consumption all around us: in flashy advertisements on screens, and even in the trash found out in nature. The fragmentation of society has thus emerged through changes in both production and consumption (Banash, 2015,16). Although artists like the abstract expressionists resisted the effects of consumer culture, whereas artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol directly engaged with it (Banash, 2015, 12).

Collage opposed certain traditions in art history. It defied the artistic conventions of perspective, harmony, and cohesion. Its readymade materials opposed the high-quality paints and canvasses, blurring the line between the exclusivity of fine art and the regularity of daily life. Besides, collage points out the importance of the process of cutting and assembling, instead of only emphasising the finished artwork (Banash, 2015, 27-29). Since the Ancients and up to the Romantics, art was supposed to mirror nature and its beauty. The rhythm of life depended on the seasons, and art reflected this close relationship to nature. Additionally, this closeness could sometimes be found in the use of raw artistic materials such as wood, stone, inks, and oils. These materials are still used nowadays but are mostly acquired as ready-made store products (Banash, 2015, 20). The use of collage often prioritized materials which were recognizably ready-made. Banash argues that the idea that art follows nature becomes inept when our environments have become industrially regulated by artificial light and temperatures, and products are ready for sale day and night (Banash, 2015, 20). Collage, in contrast to more traditional art forms, offers a reflection on a society that has become intertwined with the ubiquity of the commodity. By assembling ready-made materials, collage artists can make individual statements that criticize capitalism from a position that is embedded within its symptoms: collage mirrors and reproduces the processes of consumerism (Banash, 2015, 20).

Since the start of the twentieth century, collage has repeatedly been employed to engage with historical changes as a political visual strategy. For example, during World War I and II, Berlin-based Dadaist John Heartfield (1891 – 1968) used collage to comment on German and Italian fascism, using satire to leave anti-war statements (Arslan, 2018, 75). Later, during the

boom of second wave feminism in the 1970s, collage accompanied the feminists' societal critique, visually gathering pornographic imagery, violent scenes, advertisements, and anything related to the at the time mainstream masculine discourses (Etgar et al., 2017, 14). As in these cases, collage can be considered a political tool: it is visually disruptive of fixed meanings, comparing imagery of what is usually incomparable by placing it side by side. In light of the current ecological crisis, how is collage used as a method to reflect on related political matter?

The cultural critic TJ Demos explained how the environmental crisis is above all a political crisis. He introduced the intertwinement of ecology and politics with the term 'political ecology.' He argued that it is necessary to approach the environment as intertwined with socio-political and economic forces. The lack of commitment in addressing concerns about climate change, systematically and comprehensively, is a global issue. According to Demos, it goes hand in hand with a failure to make sustainable living more accessible (Demos, 2016, 12).

In a political approach to ecology, the impact of colonialism surfaces as an influential aspect of how we treat the environment. Demos emphasised how the exploitation and violence of colonialism have left a profound impact on both colonized peoples and their land. It has lasting effects in present day societies. Capitalist economies have used colonialism to expand and gain wealth, creating globally dominant systems of exploitation which are based on market profit. In a consumerist society where resources, products and labour forces are acquired and discarded left and right, it accumulates to a detrimental effect on the environment, connecting political ecology to colonialist history (Demos, 2016, 15). Postcolonialism, which dissects the cultural and ideological legacy of colonialism, is a recurring theme in contemporary reflections upon the environment. It examines the consequences of slavery and the exploitation of native people and their resources. While the main focus of postcolonialism lays on the effects of imperial power on people, colonization manipulates not only the people in a region but also the land itself (Demos, 2016, 15).

Authors Jane Bennett, Chelsea M. Frazier, and TJ Demos highlighted the importance of acknowledging the effects of colonialism on ecology. Doing so, they commented on the subjectivity of Western ecological knowledge: by which is meant that the Western approach to ecology is based on cultural history and ideas. It is not an objective truth, as Western science may claim to be, but it is deeply intertwined with practices of knowledge creation. Such practices of Western knowledge creation were enacted upon during colonialism: to gain knowledge of all that was unknown to the European "explorers." The European colonists categorized anything and anyone foreign to them – people, objects, and materials – into Western archives and knowledge systems. However, Western concepts and categories cannot be applied to any global object or being because they have been formed as a product of Western culture, time and place. This means that this categorization of objects and beings can fall short (Cooks, 2020, 14). For example, artist Kader Attia (b. 1970) criticized the missing categorization of repaired African objects in the museal archives in Paris. The objects were hybrid: their owners had attached materials from the Western colonists to them. Their original owners had repaired damages with French colonial Vichy textile, buttons, or pieces of mirrors.

Because of this hybridity, these pieces could not fit into the set categories of ethnographic objects and the French museums who possessed them excluded them from public display (Attia, 2018). This shows how colonial systems of knowledge live on in the contemporary age. Wanting to control the world by strictly categorizing it goes against trying to understand it. When international politics approach the environment from a perspective in which the Western man is the measure of humanity, they ineffectively address the global problem of environmental degradation. The idea of the Western man as 'the human species' is inextricably the foundation for capitalist and imperial ethics, which have repeatedly served to exploit anything and anyone seen as 'the other'. In medical care too, men, mainly of European descent, are used as typical test subjects. Such centring can have detrimental effects for the wellbeing of those who are not similar to "the standard measure" (Chemaly, 2018, 174). By uncritically relying on such a perspective in environmental rehabilitation and conservation, environmentalists reinforce the issue they are fighting (Frazier, 2016, 44).

Sylvia Wynter, a renowned author on postcolonialism, pointed out that we cannot create a renewed environmental politics by reforming mainstream environmental discourse, and neither can it be renewed by expanding its racial inclusivity. The history of colonial violence is too engrained within Western ecological ethics to do so. Therefore, she proposed that it is crucial to deepen our understanding of relational human subjectivity in order to restructure a global approach to ecology (Frazier, 2016, 47). When discussing the proposed end of political systems, collage falls back into the picture. To quote from Etgar et al.'s publication *The Ends of Collage* (2017): "By its very nature collage is inherently drawn to ends – whether they be the physical edges of images or the divisions in history. Above all, collage offers the means to an ideological end, critically examining the material and visual culture of a period, questioning and expanding its horizons (Etgar et al., 2017, 15)."

How can collage, with its history of as an activist strategy, visualize an end to the current way we interact with the environment, intertwining the past and the present with the hope for a better future? When representing the end of an environmentalism that is grounded in colonialism and capitalism, *vital materialism* is a key concept in the start of a postcolonial approach: a concept that can be linked to the principles of collage.

In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009), political theorist Jane Bennett argued that vital materialism creates a postcolonialist alternative to traditional environmentalism. Vital materialism claims a horizontal relationship between humans and everything non-human. It transforms the environment into an active agent, drawing out how humans are not that distinct from our surroundings because of our bacterial and mineral bodily contents. Given the history of racialised exclusion in traditional environmental discourse, vital materialism seems to not only counter the systemic hierarchies that distance humans from their passive environments, but it also challenges the political hierarchies that have repeatedly framed Black subjects as other in Western modernity. Vital materialism questions human dominance over not just other beings but also objects and materials, which criticizes the colonial exploitation of resources (Frazier, 2016, 46). This concept thus offers a postcolonial perspective on the relationship between humans and nature within the grand scheme of our entire environment, including all living and non-living things. Demos similarly

recounted philosopher Michel Serres' earlier proposal for a 'natural contract' that conceptualized a new equality-based environmental relationship (Demos, 2016, 16). This natural contract aims at decolonizing nature through no longer placing humanity at the centre of the universe and to stop portraying nature as a source of endless profit (Demos, 2016, 19). As biologist and cultural critic Donna Haraway framed it, a decolonized ecology would mean that science approaches both nature and humans as a multiplicity of life. Like a collage of bacteria and organic matter, humans are enmeshed within a multispecies environment (Demos, 2016, 20). Haraway's concept of string figures aligns with Demos' argument, meaning that the actions of each being influence each other, leading to a larger network of interconnectedness. This calls for a collective approach to making environmental choices (Haraway, 2015, 161).

In order to stop framing the Western man as the protagonist of life on Earth, Demos stated that we need new methodologies to acknowledge historically oppressed voices. By strengthening solidarity around ecological concerns about capitalism, we can then get closer to practicing a vital materialist way of living. Demos proposed several steps to the decolonization of nature: to decolonize our research methods, thereby tracing the history and violence in the past of Western academic knowledge and theories, and to aim for more cultural inclusion. For example, Demos asked to take seriously the critiques of native thinkers themselves, as when anthropologist Kimberly TallBear challenged Jane Bennett's vital materialism; Bennett neglected to mention that the cultural traditions of many Indigenous peoples included similar perspectives (Demos, 2016, 22). The forementioned authors each argue for a more inclusive and politically engaged approach to environmentalism, one that acknowledges the legacies of colonialism and centres the perspectives of marginalized communities in efforts to address ecological crises. Through the analysis of contemporary art, it can be demonstrated how creative practices can contribute to broader struggles for environmental justice and decolonization. Specifically collage, with its conceptual connections to vital materialism, appears as a strategy to visualise the enmeshment of humanity within its environment, and the exploitative effects of colonialism and capitalism.

In the case studies this thesis presents, women – and specifically women of colour – play a central role as protagonists in the collages of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle. Their artworks show Black women intertwined with nature, creating a visual equality between the figures and the natural elements. The connection between Black women and nature has a longer history in art and in terms of societal stereotypes. When portraying this relationship, the colonial gaze comes back into view. This gaze refers to how colonizers viewed and depicted colonized peoples, cultures, and lands from a position of dominance and presumed superiority. As explained previously, colonization is inherently linked to the idea of the 'other': both in inter-human relationships and between humans and the environment. Western society has centred the Western man as the main perspective in the connection between human and nature, while the 'other' is thereby left apart. Such an approach correlates marginalized groups of people – such as Black women – with all non-human things in our environment.

Black Women's Bodies and Nature: An Ecofeminist Perspective

When considering the colonialists' tendency to equate nature and Black women, ecofeminism offers a perspective of resistance. Ecofeminism, first introduced by author Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, centres the speciality of each living thing, stating an integral equality to all forms of life. It argues that the systemic violence against women and against nature are connected in a patriarchal origin: a masculine mentality of dominance present in society (Mies, Shiva & Salleh, 2014, 14). This is not to excuse the contribution of women to the environmental crisis. However, ecofeminism argued that these problems stem from a systemic capitalist patriarchal root. Mies, Shiva, and Salleh (2014) related masculine culture to a desire to overpower one's surroundings. Although not all men express such a desire, the need to dominate is a trait that stereotypical masculinity praises– and it is thereby often cultivated in men. The authors argued that such a desire easily escalates into the occurrence of war and sexual assault: which in turn embody a violent desire to possess and control land and women. Mies, Shiva, and Salleh supposed that it is the same will to subordinate nature to the human hand that lies behind colonialism, a will that is present in the historical – and ongoing – actions of humanity. This will is dominantly enacted upon by white men, who are often more enabled to do so because of their systematically privileged position in society (Mies, Shiva & Salleh, 2014, 18). In her article *Introduction: Men and Nature in Environmental Media* (2022), Michelle Yates connected the white male domination of nature to racism and sexism, citing work by Carolyn Finney (2014) and Mei Mei Evans (2002). Finney argued that Black Americans are more often than not excluded from contemporary media representations of nature, where whiteness is centred. In Finney's study of Outside magazine's editions from 1991-2001, she found that of the 4,600 photos that depicted people in them, just over a hundred featured Black Americans. Besides, those were mostly famous male athletes. Finney's work *Black Faces, White Spaces* featured sources from three decades ago, meaning that such representations may have shifted since Finney's publication. Besides, Finney focused her study on the image of Black people in nature, leaving out research on the representation of Asians and other marginalized groups in Western media. However, Finney's study remains indicative of Black people's exclusion in the media on the topic of ecology. Such exclusion transfers to an exclusion in environmentalist discourse and in elitist environmentalist organizations. As both a result and a cause of this underrepresentation, Western society has often unjustly framed Black people as not interested or concerned by ecological issues (Yates, 2022). Yates recounted a recent wave of social science studies on 'the white male effect' which shows how white men are more accepting of ecological degradation and more inclined to refuse scientific consensus towards climate change than any other societal group. Nature and wilderness have been claimed as a site for hetero-masculinity, which Greta Gaard (2004) claimed is linked to erotophobia, a fear of the erotic. She argued that the oppression of nature is linked to patriarchal anxieties towards nature and anything associated with it, like women, the body, emotions, and sexuality. To control these feelings, there is supposedly a masculine urge to dominate the 'wild', both referring to unknown objects and territories as well as women's bodies and agency. This expresses itself in the construction of masculinity where men want to operate big destructive machinery to

demolish and rebuild their surroundings. The same desires to dominate can be found in the idealization of cowboys and pioneers, in which the peak of manhood is tied to control over the wilderness around them (Allister, 2004, 4). This pattern does not indicate that heterosexual men inherently have this trait, it forms a general expression of social norms that reflect larger systematic sexisms in the relationship between man and nature as portrayed in culture.

The association between women and nature stems from the desire to oppress women and nature alike, bringing them on equal foot within the hierarchies of the heterosexual patriarchy. It has strong ties to colonialism and its idealization of white men's colonization of land and women's bodies. Besides gender, race plays an important factor in the 'logic of domination', as it connects Black people's bodies with nature through the history of colonial exploitation.

When rethinking the portrayal of humans and nature, ecofeminism draws attention to artists who reflect upon the colonization and domination of Black women's bodies. For example, Kara Walker, Otobong Nkanga, Shoshanna Weinberger, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Octavia Butler have emphasised the importance of reclaiming the Black female body in their work (Van Veeren, 2019, 488; Frazier, 2016, 40; Richardson, 2012, 3; Copeland, 2010, 484; Fletcher, 2014, 194). Many contemporary artists have incorporated the way that Black women are represented in Western media in their work, to reflect on the idea of them being 'other.' This is connected to the correlation between colonizing land and colonizing the bodies of the women who lived on that land. The representation of the colonization of the Black female body and nature can be dialled back to modern art, where it was grounded in racist stereotypes. As Huey Copeland argued, colonialism has left many racist tropes that characterized the Black female body as grotesque, aggressive and scary, submissive, and nurturing, or overtly sexual (Copeland, 2010, 483). It thus exists in contradictions of repulsion and desire, within the white gaze. Historically, Western (male) artists have captured the Black female body in an exoticized and fetishized manner, often leaning into the dynamic between repulsion and desire. "Primitivist" notions in for example Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso's art represented women of colour in relation to the colonized land they symbolized: as wild and claimable territory. They saw these women, visualized with flora and fauna, as 'pure' because of their perceived close relationship to nature (Solomon-Godeau, 2018, 315). This trope can be found not only in art, but in Western media and in pornography too: through a manner of objectifying, eroticizing and 'othering' Black women's bodies in a similar way. Rather than diverting from the hypersexualized and grotesque visualization of the Black female body, contemporary Black artists such as Mutu, Hinkle and Nkanga take this 'othering' a step further. They present a similar or exaggerated representation of Black women in popular media by transfiguring them into alien creatures.

In Huey Copeland's essay on the presence and absence of Black women at the MoMA, he explained how the representation of the Black female body carries the violence of colonialism (Copeland, 2010, 483). There are reminders of the objectification of Black women during the colonial slave trade in sexualized performances within modernist art. Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* famously showed the marking of the Black female body as aggressively sexual. With African masks on their faces, the women pose as prostitutes. Alfred H. Barr, the founder of the MoMA, coined the painting as the start of modern art. *Les*

Demoiselles and its recognition perpetuate a caricature which has been around since the seventeenth century: that of the Jezebel. The Jezebel plays into the idea that Black women are inherently ill-mannered and promiscuous, leading to a presumed availability to sexually objectify their bodies. This figure was a foil to the ideal Victorian (white) woman, who was naïve, dreamy, adorable and above all fragile. The 'Mammy' was an alternative to the Jezebel, as a caricature of Black women that framed them as submissive and nurturing, but again available to white people's gaze (Richardson, 2012, 3). The othering sexualization of Black women is persistent in popular media, which often portrays them as 'exotic' because of their features, making them a 'sexual fantasy' (Fletcher, 2014, 188).

When comparing the oeuvres of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, they each reclaim the Black female body. They resist the colonial notion of access to this body, and abstract stereotypes to ridicule and emphasise their existence. The three artists predominantly use collage for their reclaiming of the Black female body. Collage, as an activist art strategy, has a deep connection to feminism. The history of collage as a method to express the voices of both women and marginalised groups is relevant when exploring Mutu's, Nkanga's and Hinkle's employment of the technique.

Femmage and Diasporic Fragmentation

Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro's influential essay *Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Woman Saved and Assembled* (1978) proposed collage as an artistic practice for women and marginalised artists to collect, restructure and hold on to pieces of identity. Collage has predominantly been framed as the invention of Picasso and Braque, but it has been a particularly useful artistic technique for marginalised artists to express political ideas. One such technique that stems from collage is *bricolage*, the creation of collages by assembling the materials at hand in an improvisatorial manner. For example, in Caribbean colonial history, bricolage served as a way to articulate Creole identity and to mourn the losses suffered through colonial domination (Knepper, 2006, 71). Bricolage involves the adaptation of fragmented beliefs, cultures, and experiences, creating an uneven mixture. It holds similarities to the complex adaptation necessary to survive under the violent processes within colonial control, leading to the forced mixing of cultural identities (Knepper, 2006, 73-74). Creole art does not present a seamless unity of separate fragments, but shows a multiplicity of segments. According to scholar Wendy Knepper, such multiplicity reflects the fragmentation of Caribbean identity such as in language, music, cuisine, and religion. The result of bricolage may be a tool, a building, or a reformulated myth, not necessarily leading to a physical object. In the process of bricolage, the end product is not a set goal, but rather the process acts as an adaptative way of living in one's surroundings.

Meyer and Schapiro described a similar practice of improvisational collecting and collaging in their text on *femmage*: feminist, women-made collage. In Modern Art, collage has received much criticism as an artistic practice because of its entanglement with postmodernism (Raaberg, 1998, 164). Although postmodernism was supposed to be critical of the established

society, Fredric Jameson explained that postmodernist artists had too little distance from Western postmodern culture and its privileged position in late capitalism to criticize it successfully. Meyer and Schapiro proposed *femmage* as a more successful critique of the dominant culture, because women, non-Western artists and folk artists created their critique from a marginalized position within this culture (Raaberg, 1998, 164). The authors did not claim that there is an inherent femininity attached to collage, but by making visual observations of many artworks made by women in the past, Meyer and Schapiro came to the following conclusions. They proposed that women have historically acted as collectors, saving scraps of material for its repurposing into nourishing leftovers. Women saved and combined materials into crafts and handiwork as acts of pride to create something beautiful and out of necessity to create a useful object. The usefulness of the object did not necessarily have to be that of a functional tool but could also be the way that holding on to material scraps signified their place in the artist's life, as reminders of what they once were and meant (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 67). Important characteristics of femmage were this diarylike use, its creation by saving and collecting, and the intimacy of showing it to an audience of familiars. Although art historians have continually devalued the creation of collage by ethnically diverse women by focusing on white male dominated art styles, femmage played an important foundational role in the creation of new feminist art in the 1970s. Femmage confronted the standards in a male-dominated society by breaking with the traditional aesthetics that devalued women's position in art history. Hannah Hoch's art forms an example of how collage can be used in decolonizing practices too: her collages of African and European men and women challenged the ideals of western beauty and cultural hierarchy (Kerr, 2004, 28). Collage thus queers the world that is discussed by showing it as multi-layered, relational, and subjective (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 68; Raaberg, 1998, 171; Kangas et al., 2018, 359).

The reoccurrence of collaged aesthetics when representing the female body and nature Is connected to feminist and decolonial politics. In the work of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, the human body is frequently collaged together with non-human parts, both made out of organic and mechanical material. This brings in two other important concepts to this framework of the collaged 'mother nature': the literary figures of Donna Haraway's cyborg and Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque. The cyborg and the grotesque do not occur to the same extent in the oeuvres of all three artists which are discussed as the case studies of this thesis. However, the importance of these figures in representing the relationship between humans and nature is relevant when considering the contemporary view of portraying a collaged perspective on ecology.

The Cyborg and the Grotesque: a Dialogue Between Technology, Nature, and Humanity

Donna Haraway (1944) is well known for her theories in cultural and feminist theory, although she was trained as an experimental biologist. Because of this background, she often brought in ecological perspectives in her work. Her most famous text *A Cyborg Manifesto:*

Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism (1985) presented the postmodern figure of the cyborg: an ironic spin on the merging of technology and humanity that brings new possibilities for society (Pohl, 2018, 11). The cyborg is a hybrid between human and machine, reflecting on the increasing mechanization of labour which emerged in the 20th century. The figure became prevalent in science fiction at the time, showing both the anxieties towards further technological advances and the idealization of it. Haraway identified several science-fiction writers who influenced her, for example Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney (Pohl, 2018, 23). Instead of stirring up socio-feminists to revolt against the dystopic prospections that the cyborg carried, Haraway framed the figure as a positive change.

One of the aims of the manifesto was to diminish the strong boundaries between disciplines and to focus on their intersections (Pohl, 2018,19). As Haraway's influence Luce Irigaray framed it, fixed definitions of concepts and language were consequences of patriarchal domination. The wish to define all things would stem from the need to control and dominate them: supposedly linked to the masculine urge to repress marginalized groups from gaining equal, or superior, ground. Haraway criticized Western academia, arguing that the boundaries between human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical were fading (Pohl, 2018, 19). She was critical of first- and second wave feminism too. Like the feminists who arose in the 1980s, she thought that many radical feminists were too strict in their thinking, evading race and class out of the gender equation. In her Manifesto, Haraway proposed the cyborg as a figure of postmodernism: a posthuman invention that was supposed to challenge the boundaries between human and technology and between the idea of the self and the other. Contemporary collage shows parallels to this figure in the mixture of human and technological forms. Is the cyborg still a relevant symbol in the current environmental crisis when comparing it to its high time in the 1980s?

In her essay *Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs* (2006), Sara Cohen Shabot wrote on the failure of the cyborg in areas where the grotesque body succeeds. She argued that the cyborg led to anxieties around presenting the figure as non-binary in gender and sexuality. Shabot proposed that when the distinctions in one category are blurred, there is a tendency to make up for its chaos in another category. This meant that in popular science fiction adaptations, the cyborg would make up for this ambiguity by having a recognizable, conservatively reinforced cis-gendered heterosexual body – for example with metal breasts, technically unnecessary for a half-robot being (Shabot, 2006, 225). Besides, the cyborg is linked to hierarchical notions of power: it is an invulnerable, developed, and strong figure, capable of and inclined towards the domination of its surroundings. Shabot argued that the cyborg is presented as escaping from its human side by not being able to get sick, hurt, or die (Shabot, 2006, 227). The cyborg is portrayed as invincible because it represents the weaknesses of humanity as being dominated by the cyborg's technological side. The cyborg is thus more powerful because of its inhumanity, idealizing a drift away from what makes us human.

The grotesque body is in many ways a foil to the cyborg. The grotesque figure is organic, unfinished, and open, sick and dying, birthing and being born itself. It is frequently represented in an air of disgust and intrigue by its unsettling, sometimes horror-esque

appearance. It is inherently connected to the world through its constant state of change and creation, and it forms a cosmic representation of the planet and all that lives on it. The grotesque body was written on by the Russian philosopher, literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) in 1968. He analysed the grotesque as an aesthetic, performative medium to critique the established politics and social conditions, incorporating an element of carnival and specifically leaning into notions of beauty. Bakhtin's perception of the grotesque was a figure that denied the closed, smooth, and untouchable surface of the perfect sculptures from the Renaissance. It has cracks, cavities, and excesses, it is an asymmetrical, multiplex, unlimited body (Bakhtin, 1995, 226; Shabot, 2006, 229; Papenburg, 2012, 158; Russo, 1995, 1).

Shabot argued that the grotesque forms a development from the cyborg to a figure that is successful in challenging hierarchies in the way that Haraway intended the cyborg to be. The grotesque body is inherently organic: it is fleshy, ill, creating and perishing. It is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, as the limits between the body and its environment are blurred. Bakhtin proposed that the grotesque promotes all that is human, the good (food, sex, movement) and the bad (pain, sickness, aging, death). It is a figure that represents humanity and subjectivity, by being diverse yet connected to its surroundings (Bakhtin, 1995, 227). When considering contemporary representations of humans and nature, there are frequent visual references to the grotesque. This is especially the case when incorporating vital materialism, which rescales humans as a collection of bacteria and minerals, no different from the environment we share with other beings and objects. For example, Australian artist Patricia Piccinini moulds hyper realistic sculptures that dissect and challenge what separates humans from nature. Her silicone sculptures cross the boundaries between human and animal, creating unsettling yet charming creatures and environments.

The principles of the grotesque and collage have many commonalities, both in the layering of imagery and the rejection of traditional artistic ideals. They share a visual disruption of hierarchies, forming an asymmetrical and mixed-up image. In collaged portrayals of humans and nature, this translates to the junction of human parts and natural elements with a disturbing aesthetic.

The examination of collage as the primary method to present the Black female body and humanity's relationship to nature thus leads to several insights. Collage has a historical connection to consumerism and mass-production, situating the practice within capitalist developments. On the other hand, from this enmeshment with modernity, it allows for activism and critique. Collage can be employed as a political strategy to express resistance against the systems that marginalise peoples, and to call for societal transformation. As a symptom of this, the visual merging of fragments allows for a destruction of the Western portrayal and exploitation of the Black female body. When looking at collage as a way to reframe how we interact with ecology, the reclamation of the Black female body presents a crucial point of interest, because of the colonial trauma present in both this body and nature. The exploration of figures of the cyborg and the grotesque have shown how these figures, who are representations of the relationship between humanity, nature, and technology, are visualised in a way that is connected to collage. In the following chapters, the case studies of

the work by Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle take into account how collage interacts with the afterlife of colonialism, ecofeminism, and vital materialism, while incorporating elements of the grotesque and the cyborg.

Case Study I: Wangechi Mutu

Wangechi Mutu – An Introduction to the Artist

A handful of eyes peers out from beneath layers of cut out legs, car engines, soil and leaves pasted together in Wangechi Mutu's collaged artworks. Combined with glitter, ink, and soil, Mutu's collaged figures are monstrous and alien. Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972) is an internationally renowned contemporary artist based in Nairobi, Kenya, and Brooklyn, USA. Mutu builds up her collaged creatures out of an unsettling mixture of organic and man-made elements, inviting the viewer to take in every detail. Collage is Mutu's primary technique, and multimedia assemblage can be found in her sculptures and video art too. Through collage, Mutu offers us her take on consumer culture and the othering and eroticization of Black women in Western media, pop-culture, and pornography. Her mixing of natural elements and women's bodies creates a hybrid aesthetic of humanity, nature and all things produced by humanity. How does she portray the relationship between the three aspects of humanity, ecology, and technology? In describing this dynamic, the impact of colonialism on the exploitation of both the environment and humanity is crucial. Mutu specifically reflects on the exploitation of the Black female body and its relationship to nature. How does Mutu visualize this equation between Black women's bodies and ecology? How is ecofeminism involved in these artistic expressions? And how does Mutu, through her collages, create a figure that represents this complex dynamic between humanity and the environment, as a type of contemporary Mother Nature?

During her time as an art student at Cooper Union in New York, Mutu drew inspiration from the assumptions that her peers made about her and her work. They thought that because of her African background, Mutu had grown up in an undeveloped area and that her sculptures inherently reflected on the ancient culture of Africa. She would play into these ideas by creating purposely imaginative totem figures. The misconception that Africa is "archaic" and "primitive" has remained a stubborn trope, one that Mutu continues to challenge. The Western perception of Africa has been so grounded in colonialist notions that its tropes can still be recognized in contemporary media. Mutu transforms these ideas of Africa by cutting up contemporary Western media and assembling them into dystopian, alien creatures. Combining folklore and science fiction, the otherworldliness of Mutu's figures strongly presents them as Afrofuturist portrayals of African and diasporic identity. They hereby portray diasporic identity as radically other. It reflects on how the racist and discriminatory treatment of Black people has led to a persistent trope in Western society that Black people do not fit in based on their appearance or cultural upbringing. Mutu's work correlates with Afrofuturism on many grounds, further including the contemporary global challenges such as overconsumption and environmental degradation (Eshun, 2022, 6-10; Elia, 2014, 83-85).

Mutu's own history of diaspora has been a major influence in her art. Mutu was raised in Nairobi but moved to Wales as a teenager. She attended the United World College of the

Atlantic, after which she relocated to New York City in the 90s. Although she grew up as a self-described city kid in Nairobi, her origins lie with a farmer family from Nyeri, the town of the Kikuyu people. In her essay *The Power of the Earth in my Work* (2013) for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Mutu explained how her parents lived through the reclaiming of the Kenyan land in the 1960s. Since the 1890s, the British colonists who occupied Kenya forced people out of their homes: the colonists had declared all occupied and unoccupied land in the East African Protectorate part of their empire – expanding over Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar, and Tanganyika (now Tanzania). The Brits, but also many white South Africans, enforced large-scale farming of mainly coffee and tea plantations in the area, brutally enslaving African labourers of Kikuyu, Kalenjn, Luhya, Masaai and Luo descent (Veit, 2019, 1-2). The most successful uprising against the British colonial government was marked by the Mau Mau militant movement that started in October 1952 and lasted until the 1960s, mainly composed of Kikuyu labourers who revolted (Veit, 2019, 5). Because of the struggle to gain back their own land, the act of "returning home" has been a powerful symbol in Kenyan culture. It reminds the Kenyans of their freedom and what they have fought for, even though the "home" they returned to has undoubtedly changed because of the decades of political affairs. In the decades when Mutu grew up, it was a struggle for many Kenyans to define their cultural identity, after having experienced the ongoing violence and drastic changes since colonial rule. Besides, the influence of British colonization had mixed with traditional lifestyles. This had created a greater gap between life in the country and in the urban areas, leaving Kenya inherently altered (Mutu, 2013).

This background has led to a clear focus on the impact of colonial violence on both people and nature in Wangechi Mutu's art, in which she continuously centralizes the Black female figure. This thesis therefore presents her art as a case study on the portrayal of a collaged Black female body to explore the complex contemporary relationship between humanity and nature, tainted by colonialism. The following questions remain central: how does Mutu present this interaction between the bodies of Black women and nature? How does Mutu respond to the colonialist practice of connecting and equating Black women to nature? How do Mutu's collages correspond with ecofeminism? Do her artworks reflect on the current mentality towards ecology and how do they compare to the history of interactions between humanity and nature? There are several visual motifs that occur throughout her art which form the basis of my arguments, such as hybrid interspecies bodies, sexual autonomy, the acts of consumption, birth and destruction, and references to the biblical story of Eve. Central in these visuals is the combination of the grotesque body and the use of collage.

"Females Carry the Marks"

Photography is the main medium of Mutu's collages. She extracts her images from sources such as the National Geographic, fashion magazines, vintage medical illustrations, and pornography magazines like *Black Tail*, *Playboy* and *Player's Girl Pictorial*. These media

often portray Black women in ways that convey the residue of a colonialist gaze. A typical scene in staged ethnographic images of African women presents them in front of clay huts, baking bread or grinding plants while wearing close to nothing (Papenburg, 2012, 162). When the media spread such images of African women, they reinforce stereotypes of African cultures that reduce them to "primitive" settings. Staging photographs exclusively in such settings denies the urban and modern realities of Africa and misrepresents the variety of African societies. Besides, without providing content, such portrayals tend to strip the people photographed of their agency, instead depicting them in a way that fits the photographer's narrative (Papenburg, 2012, 162). In erotic magazines and on billboards, Black women tend to be positioned with opened legs and complacent expressions. The commodification of Black women on postcards, wall-calendars and in coffee table books too shows a gaze that diminishes Black women to icons of "unbridled nature," simultaneously adding a touch of "wild" sex appeal in the show of skin and cleavage (Frazier, 2016, 64). The tropes of the "Jezebel" and the "Mammy," as described in the previous chapter, still resonate with the consequences for the representation of Black women in and outside of Africa. It leaves the portrayal of Black women mostly in terms of sexuality or maternal caregiving – as objects of desire and as mothers. How does Mutu engage with these tropes in her art? As Merrily Kerr quoted Mutu in her review of Mutu's art: "Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body" (Kerr, 2004, 28). This burden on the Black female body is intertwined with the societal pressure to look a certain way, which favours stereotypical European notions of beauty. How does Mutu play with the ways that female bodies are transformed under capitalist pressure, where it is possible to buy beauty through clothes, accessories, make-up, and even plastic surgery?

By cutting apart photographs of faces, limbs and breasts, collage can be compared to the modification of bodies through cosmetic surgery. This surreal subversion emphasises how absurd the pressure to fit into rigid patriarchal ideals of attractiveness is. It comments on the idea that women's attractiveness equals their worth. To comment on the absurdity of such ideals, Mutu subverts the desirability of women's bodies by mixing human and non-human elements, like in *The Screamer Island Dreamer* (2014, fig. 1).

Figure 1: Wangechi Mutu, *The Screamer Island Dreamer*, 2014. Collage painting on vinyl, 173.83 x 203.68 x 8.9 cm. Victoria Miro, London. © Wangechi Mutu

Although its dainty legs swirl upwards, *The Screamer Island Dreamer* curls its bold human lips to flash a dazzlingly sharp set of teeth. The figure's grin is as imposing as the mountain range of spikes on its back. Its long lashes, bright blue eyes and full lips are markers of stereotypical beauty ideals, cut straight out of media that present them as the peak of femininity. The figure is monstrous and threatening, juxtaposing the constriction that femininity equals stereotypical beauty.

The collage is a reference to the *Nguva* from East-African folklore. The Nguva, a mythical coastal creature, pretends to be a regular woman as it lures people to their doomed end in the sea. It is thought to be derived from the dugong, a related species to the manatee and one of the most endangered mammals in East Africa. People catch dugongs for their meat, which they often referred to as Nguva meat (Willis, 2014). The Nguva's mixture of animal and womanly features can be recognized in Mutu's collage. The human parts, such as the eyes, lips, and teeth, are mixed with animalistic and plant-like forms and textures: the limbs end in what looks like tree branches. It is this hybridity of species that connects humanity, and specifically women, to ecology by physically submerging the imagery of animalistic, plant-like and human elements. The Nguva's toothy grin evokes the association to the vagina dentata, a recurring comparison in art history of a grotesque vulva adorned with teeth. The motif stems from the Freudian idea that sex with women will lead to men's castration, causing

men to fear sexually promiscuous women (Duncan, 1989, 175). Mutu combines this misogynist trope with Black women's bodies to play with the caricatures that were visualised in "primitivist" modern art, such as in George Overbury Hart's *Nude Negress, Souvenir of the Tropics* (1922) and Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) (Copeland, 2010, 483). Here, Black women were represented as aggressive, promiscuous, ugly and scary. This trope derives from racial grotesquerie, a combination of racial fear and the fascination for the "other" body (Richardson, 2012, 3; Van Veeren, 2019, 489). The grotesque body in Mutu's art exaggerates this image of Black women to a point of abstraction. The grotesque Black female body is pointed out as being overtly fictional, it is reclaimed in its autonomy to show how problematic the caricature is.

In an interview with Deborah Willis in 2014, Mutu explained how the Nguva is believed to be a real creature in coastal Kenya. Women make sure not to leave their kids alone at the beach in case the Nguva lures them into the water, and agricultural "freak shows" sometimes claim to have a Nguva on display. For Mutu, the Nguva represents a belief system that functions and that is intact, a system that is passed on through generations of culture. This belief system has evolved independently from Western knowledge and its scientific rationality. Although Mutu stressed the importance of scientific rationality, she emphasised that not everything can be understood through it: "We've—often for modernity's sake, as a race, as humans, as a colonized people, as colonizers, however you want to say it—we have disrupted those ways of thinking because it doesn't jive with the new logic, with the Enlightenment, with scientific development. But there are ways of thinking that actually promote another way of being conscious, and being empathetic, and being human, and being intellectual that I actually think are worth looking at. Nguvas are actual animals, believe it or not." Mutu's critique of Western belief systems also challenges the way in which Western culture repeats stereotypes of Black women. By creating complex collages of the Black female body, Mutu points out how rigid and powerful those beliefs are, as she presents a counter-narrative that celebrates exaggerated hybridity and individuality. Mutu's distortion of media portrayals of Black women's bodies mirrors the way these media perpetuate inaccurate and harmful images.

The pornographic sources that Mutu assembles in her collages repeat a problematic view on women and their autonomy. Pornographers often shoot stereotypical heteronormative porn for the pleasure of the male gaze. In doing so, they subvert the female body for men's sexual satisfaction. Pornography frequently has a misogynist underlining, where the sexual pleasure of women is either neglected or diminished to a performance of what men deem attractive. Such media reinforce the practice of valuing women as indispensable objects rather than as human beings (Fletcher, 2014, 186). The cut-up deconstruction and collaged reconstruction of these elements redeploys the women from these magazines into a critique of this very culture – how does Mutu convey this commentary on stereotypical pornography in her art?

Madam Repeateat (2010) shows the portrait of a two-faced woman, covered in moss and algae, combined with cut-out exposed legs and breasts (fig. 2). As Fletcher noted on Mutu's other work, the collaged body parts refrain the viewer from seeing the Black female body as available to objectify. When the bodies overlap and interrupt each other, they are kept from

full visibility as in *Madam Repeateat*: on the left side of the figure, breasts, arms and legs are puzzled together just below the right eye.

Figure 2: Wangechi Mutu, *Madam Repeateat*, 2010. Mixed media, ink, spray paint and collage on Mylar, 138.11 x 135.57 x 1.59 cm. Victoria Miro, London. © Wangechi Mutu.

The collage denies the viewer full access to the female body parts, making it an unsatisfying image for the typical male gaze. Instead of seeing another nipple or a collarbone, the viewer meets the figure's right eye. Through these interruptions, Mutu creates imagery that reclaims the autonomy over Black women's bodies. Collage hereby comments on the media that present Black women in an exploitative way by depicting their bodies as consumable objects of desire. Collage reduces their bodies to individual parts, easy to consume, which relates to how dehumanizing such media portrayals can be. The collage, as the title *Madam Repeateat* indicates too, has clear parallels to the theme of consumption. *Madam Repeateat*'s right mouth is chewing on some metal while her left mouth growls hungrily at the viewer. Especially because the collage places "consumption" in relation to the ecological composition of the figure, Mutu seems to comment on the relationship between overconsumption and the environment. The act of overeating, of overconsumption, is highlighted by the two faces, one dazedly staring at the viewer while the other appears irritated. While one appears to be in a state of detachment, the other is in distress: possibly portraying the constant adaptation and resistance needed to navigate a consumerist society. The work presents a repeated cycle of

consumption, hinting at an endless appetite to consume material goods, social roles of femininity and stereotypes of Black women.

Madam Repeateat has a maximalist aesthetic, due to the chaotic assembly of images and other materials that is recognizable in Mutu's other multimedia collages too. The maximalism in Mutu's collages can be seen as a commentary on the fast overconsumption of media and objects, where items are constantly bought and thrown out without consideration for sustainability. The collages are composed of imagery from fashion magazines, which both endorse and are symptomatic of such overconsumption. Fashion magazines market on the social profit of buying new trendy clothes, often without regards for the contribution of the fashion business to global pollution. The mechanical parts enveloped in Mutu's collages add to the appearance of waste. As mentioned in chapter I, the industrialization of society has led to greater environmental escalation of pollution and depletion, exploiting nature for its resources and creating a surplus of waste. Technological elements recur in Mutu's collages, leading to cyborg-like figures, such as in *The Screamer Island Dreamer* and in *The Forbidden Fruit* (2015, fig. 7).

Mutu's figures intermingle nature and technology, two aspects that oppose each other. The mixing of both proposes of a junction between the forms of life and non-life that aligns with Bennett's description of *vital materialism*. In Mutu's collages, the fragments of living beings are in symbiosis with non-living objects, forming one hybrid organism. This shows "living within nature" as an alternative to the way we live currently live around nature and extract from it. A vital materialist way of thinking promotes a more mindful approach to the environment within industrial production. Although such symbiosis sounds harmonious, there is a violent energy present in Mutu's art: her figures have threatening expressions and appearances. This grotesquerie shows the brutality of nature, and it reflects even more strongly on the interspecies damage that humanity has left behind historically. Mutu's figures, as representations of humanity and nature, are no beacons of health. Anatomically disrupted, mouldy and with parasitical growths, they seem ill. For her collages, Mutu used illustrations from the medical books of her mom, who is a nurse. In an interview with Deborah Willis in 2014, Mutu said that "there is nothing more insanely visually interesting and repulsive than a body infected with tropical disease; these are diseases that grow and fester and become larger than the being that they have infected, almost. It's different from temperate diseases, which seem to happen inside of the body. Tropical diseases—elephantiasis, polio, and worms that grow in people—create new worlds and universes on your body (Willis, 2014)." Mutu uses the human body not as an invincible protagonist but as a canvas for microbes to take the stage. This fits into Bennett's view of vital materialism: rather than being superior to other forms of life, to be human means to be part of a bigger ecosystem. It means to be a part of the background for this universe of smaller organisms too. Collage functions as a vessel for vital materialist ideas here through its ability to visually disrupt such hierarchies.

An Interspecies Eve

In Mutu's collages, a recurring theme is her tendency to portray a symbiosis between women and trees. In *A Shady Promise* (2006), a tree trunk is attached to a female figure, her pelvis exposed towards the viewer (fig. 3). The roots of the tree appear to reach out of the woman's body as she leans back.

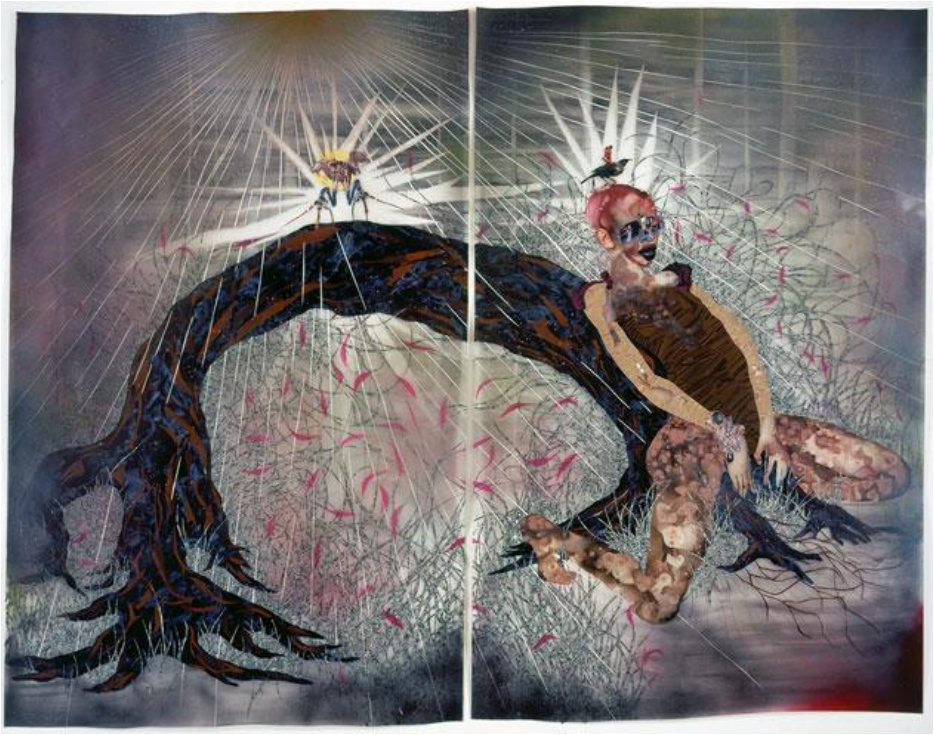

Figure 3: Wangechi Mutu, *A Shady Promise*, 2006. Mixed media on Mylar, 222.2 x 144.1 cm. © Wangechi Mutu.

In a recent publication, author Caroline Edwards described how Mutu's junction of trees and women can be interpreted through their shared associations with fertility and reproduction (Edwards, 2023, 5). A tree offers fruit, shade, and water to its environment much like a female body can nurture a child. Edwards furthermore emphasised the role that trees play as sentient agents in forest ecology, which she compared to the typically feminine role of caregiving in society (Edwards, 2023, 6). Trees are known to co-operate with their environment through fungal networks, also called the *wood wide web.* The webbing enables them to share resources and chemical information with other trees. This important shift in arboreal research in the past two decades has led to perspectives in cultural anthropology which reconsider humans as part of a network of human and non-human dynamics (Edwards, 2023, 6). The idea of interspecies-interconnectedness is grounded in the communication between flora and fauna. Edwards exemplified such communication by describing the Ávila people, who are indigenous to the Upper Amazon region of Ecuador. The Ávila frame their lives around information they gather from the forest: for example, they copy the decision making of insects

and study the ways jaguars hunt. In terms of art history, this idea of actively living with nature, giving it equal importance as humanity itself, breaks with the traditional idea of nature as a background to the human figure. Instead, an equilibrium in formed in who has agency: collage presents both nature and humanity as the protagonist (Edwards, 2023, 6-7).

Another way in which trees are significant in Mutu's collages is that they frequently reoccur in combination with snakes and the biblical character of Eve: the first woman, made by God from Adam's rib. She can for example be found in *Le Noble Savage* (2006, fig. 4), *Even* (2014, fig. 5), *Forbidden Fruit Picker* (2008, fig. 7), and *Yo Mama* (2003, fig. 6). The depictions of her allude to the Christian iconography of the seduction of Eve in the garden of Eden. In the story, God tells Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit, but a snake tempts her to break from His command. How does this recurring scene in Mutu's collages relate to the topic of decolonizing nature and the Black female body? To answer this question, some biblical context is necessary. When Eve bit into the forbidden fruit, she gained the wisdom of God. She spread this knowledge to Adam, for which her punishment was to experience the pain of childbirth and to be ruled over by Adam. With particular interpretations of Christianity as a backbone, the biblical subordination of women to men has historically been used as an eery justification for the exploitation of women. A societal favouring to male leadership has marginalised women within religious institutions and broader society and has led to limited autonomy over women's rights (Froehling, 2017, 7).

Eve is again a hybrid of species, collaged from human parts and animal fur in *Le Noble Savage* (2006). Eve functions as a tree trunk and its roots, flaunting a set of purple palm leaves that flourish from her left arm. The snake circles around her arm, seeming peaceful and complacent. The title reflects the dehumanizing perception that colonists had of Black people and Native Americans: as "wild" and "primitive". However, this Eve is merged with the tree of knowledge, offering her a powerful position to counter the derogative colonial representations of Black women.

Figure 4: *Le Noble Savage*, Wangechi Mutu, 2006. Ink and collage on Mylar, 233 x 137.2 cm. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, Scarsdale, New York. © Wangechi Mutu.

Figure 5: *Even*, Wangechi Mutu, 2014. Collage painting on vinyl, 184.8 x 154.9 cm. © Wangechi Mutu.

The sense of danger is visible too in *Even* (2014), where a feminine creature sports long red hair, leopard print skin, and hooves reminiscent of platform heels. The figure has a calm yet direct look as she vigorously devours the snake head-first. With this action, she asserts herself by rejecting the temptation of Evil. The violent scene presents a shift in the Biblical narrative: Mutu offers an interpretation in which the woman's autonomy is centralized. Even the land itself is fighting back: the creature is surrounded by plants that blossom into knives. The diptych *Yo Mama* moves one step further in the narrative that Mutu presents of Eve's rebellion. Eve has bitten off the snake's head, she is wearing glittery tights, a leotard, and a stiletto heel, piercing into the decapitated snake's head below her. African raffia grass surrounds her and her skin is reminiscent of patterned fur. Eve stands on a different planet than where the snake is heading out from, indicating that she is no longer in paradise. But rather than looking regretful about this fact, Eve's pose is suggestive – she has spread her legs open – and exudes power and determination. Again, Mutu's Eve rejects the burden that society has put on Black women: she is both promiscuous and powerful, she exudes agency. The act of eating occurs again in these scenes. It presents consumption as an act of violence, which highlights the detrimental consequences of overconsumption to our planet.

Figure 4: *Yo Mama*, Wangechi Mutu, 2003. Ink, mica flakes, acrylic, pressure-sensitive film, cut-and-pasted printed paper, painted paper on paper, diptych, 150.2 x 215.9 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Wangechi Mutu.

The daunting story of Eve presents what knowledge can cost us. It can be seen as a meditation on the European colonists who justified their violent practices by treating their voyages as a search for knowledge. To spot a grotesque Black figure as Eve, a rebellious figure, in Mutu's

collages therefore speaks to the reclaiming of Black female power. As with the rule of man over women, so have colonialists brutally ruled over Africa, its peoples and its land. To visualise this, a common allegory was the domination of white men over the land as a virginal woman, untouched, innocent and "primitive". Mutu's image of Eve commands total control, guarding the land both as its inhabitant and as a part of the land itself. Perhaps Mutu's figure of Eve simultaneously hints at this anthropomorphism of Africa as an exploited and confined woman before biting into the apple, which is the scene that can be seen in *Forbidden Fruit Picker.* The collage morphs Eve with organic and mechanical forms, making her part of both humanity and the colonized land. The trauma that humanity has caused to the land can be seen on her body: she is missing half a leg, physically bearing the scars of the colonial exploitation of Africa and its women.

Figure 5: *Forbidden Fruit Picker*, Wangechi Mutu, 2015. Photo montage from printed sources, collage, spray paint, cut fabric with ink on Mylar and paper board, 99.7 x 148.6 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. © Wangechi Mutu.

A Grotesque Motherhood

As can be seen in *Yo Mama* and *A Shady Promise*, Mutu's figures frequently feature their genitals or a spreading of their legs. Rather than coming across submissively, the women stand firm and assertive. The figures' sexuality is emphasized not only through their poses, but also their collaged elements from pornography. The figures are built up from Black women's images, while their desirability is emphasised through the stereotypically promiscuous clothing: stilettos, leotards, leopard print. Meanwhile, the autonomy they possess

over their sexuality can be seen as off-putting, in combination with their non-human features, almost monstrous and bestial. The collages cut and reframe the burden of that Black women's bodies carried from the colonial gaze: a gaze which simultaneously portrayed them as desirable and repulsive, which lead to drastically abusive consequences. The idea of Black femininity as such was articulated to establish a European sense of racial superiority (Edwards, 2023, 12).

There is a contradiction in this feeling of sexuality, caused by the theme of motherhood in Mutu's art. The figures are both erotic and, in some cases, literally in labour: in *Sprout* (2010, fig. 8) and *A Shady Promise* (2006) for example.

Figure 6: *Sprout*, Wangechi Mutu, 2010. Mixed media, ink, paint, collage on Mylar, 137.16 x 129.54 cm. © Wangechi Mutu.

The title *Yo Mama* has a clear reference to the theme too. Besides, the character of Eve is seen as the essential mother-figure of the bible. Mutu explained the connection between Black women and motherhood by dating it back to human ancestry. She commented that there is this inherent global knowledge that humans originate from Black Africans. In this argument, she framed colonialism as an attempt to destroy the Black female body as the source of all power and life (Willis, 2014). With a hint of Freudianism, Mutu connected racism to a desire to destruct this body that is no longer needed, like a child might want to reject their own mother. In the meanwhile, this body is mutilated and put on display: colonialism showed both a

European desire for the Black female body and a repulsion for it (Willis, 2014). The idea of the mother as a source of creation has parallels with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque. A key element of the grotesque figure was its state of constant creation. This gory fertility is recognizable in Mutu's characters too, their motherhood is bloody and raw, animalistic even. Mutu's depiction of a Black woman as the intertwining of humanity, nature and technology is thus deeply connected to the theme of motherhood. Her figure of Mother Nature is grotesque, through her collaged look, and because she carries the scars of the colonial exploitation of both Black women and the land.

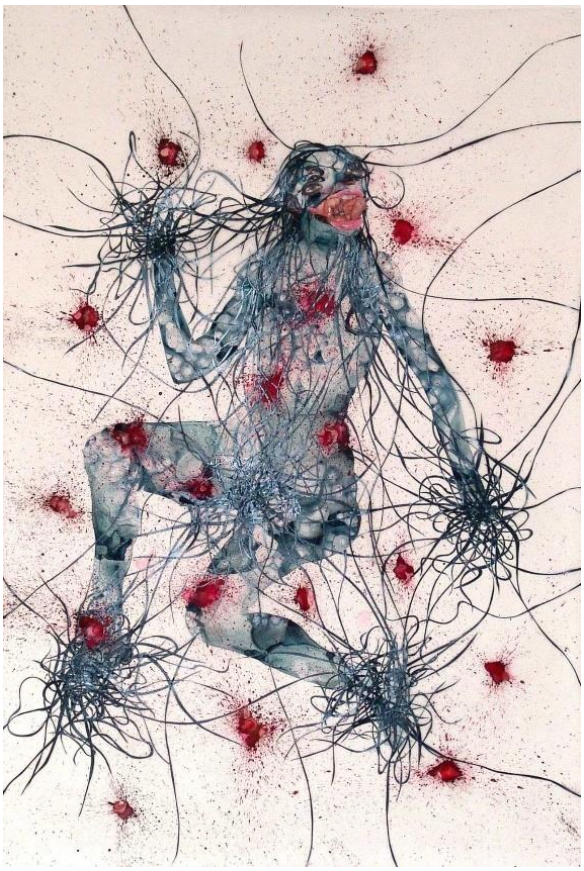

Figure 7: *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse*, Wangechi Mutu, 2005. Ink, collage, contact paper on Mylar, 196.85 x 130.81 cm. Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles. © Wangechi Mutu.

In *Royal Blue Arachnid Curse* (2005, fig. 9), the theme of creation and motherhood is further connected to a grotesque figure. An arachnid woman calls to mind Louise Bourgeois' sculptures of spiders, which represented maternal protection to Bourgeois. Spiders are creating non-stop, since they patiently fix any tearing of their web. This act of repair is at odds with the practice of collage. Mutu cuts up perfectly realistic photographs and places them in asymmetrical, unnatural combinations. The resulting disorganization seems to have the opposite effect of repair. However, in the chaos of collage, Mutu creates a repairing of the portrayal of Black women's bodies. By using collage to create the grotesque, she inverts the Western male gaze into a *Black gaze*, as Dr. Tina M. Campt would call it: a gaze that

‘produces radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness – ways of seeing that historically depict blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness (Campt, 2021, 99).’

This is a persisting quality of Mutu’s figures, since they parody stereotypical perceptions of Black women: the figures are grotesquely repelling as well as intriguing. Mikhail Bakhtin’s characteristics of the grotesque are recognizable in these portrayals: the creatures are a hybrid of species, and they are in states of birth, illness, and decay. Through the theme of motherhood, Mutu’s figures are in physical transformation – pregnancy – and become a source of renewal. There is an openness to the world, since the figures are cavernous, intertwined with the earth through collage. The unfinished look of collage fits into the grotesque too. Furthermore, the figures’ sexual poses, exposed genitals and eating behaviour are in line with the grotesque: Bakhtin described that the grotesque places an emphasis on the lower regions and the bowels. These organs are in contact with the external world in one way or another, either through defecation, consumption, or sex. This emphasis strengthens the connection between the figures and their environment. Through the grounding experience of basic human and animal functions, these bodies are reinforced in their materiality, in their earthliness.

Like Bakhtin’s grotesque, Mutu’s figures do not only create, but also destroy. A persistent stereotype that exists within society is that of “angry Black women.” As Soraya Chemaly described in *Rage Becomes Her: the Power of Women’s Anger* (2018), adults see Black girls as less innocent and less in need of protection, starting in early childhood. They label them as “disruptive” and “angry,” which leads Black girls to be expelled and disciplined five to seven times the rate of their classmates, depending on where they live. Such biases push Black girls into school-to-prison pipelines, a threat which leads many girls to avoid expressing their anger in school environments, even in self-defence (Chemaly, 2018, 16-17). Mutu transforms the harm such stereotypes can cause by presenting ragingly angry figures. They mostly carry this out through the act of consumption, as described before. In Mutu’s video *The End of eating Everything* (2010, fig. 10), popstar Santigold’s face enters the frame and birds flock on the other side of the screen. As the camera zooms out, it reveals a crown of Medusa-like snakes and a long neck. The character sneers at the birds and eventually gives into the temptation, lets out an industrial sounding scream and attacks the birds, eating them. As the blood gushes out from her mouth, the screen unveils the rest of her body: the figure is an enormous asymmetrical mass. Black arms erupt all around it, waving like tiny wings. The creature’s rear end is the intersection of a volcano and an exhaust pipe, letting out steam as if it is a factory. Like in Mutu’s other collages, the body is composed of an overload of mechanical parts and organic elements. While it continues to eat the birds, the body swells and contracts, eventually imploding into a cloud of smoke. It ends with Santigold’s face spinning in a clear blue sky. Mutu’s use of collage in combination with the theme of consumption creates an aesthetic of maximalism. As a cautionary tale to what capitalism can lead to, *The End of eating Everything* symbolises the planet. The figure of Earth has accumulated pollution, clustered masses of people, and sensory overstimulation. It is much different from a society in which people

connect to each other and to nature, in which there is a harmony between humans and their environment. The drastic ending is a warning, a call to rethink the way we treat the planet.

Figure 10: *The End of eating Everything,* Wangechi Mutu, 2013. Video animation, duration: 8 minutes and 10 seconds. © Wangechi Mutu.

There is humour in Mutu's collages too, in the surreal scenes and funny-looking creatures. This element of parody is one of Bakhtin's assets of the grotesque: a sense of humour that can serve as a way to break from societal norms and hierarchies. The grotesque can offer a form of resistance against these hierarchies, by using the viewer's laughter to promote the imagination of an alternative society. Furthermore, there is an overlap between Mutu's use of humour and Donna Haraway's irony in her figure of the cyborg. According to Haraway, irony is "about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true (Pohl, 2018, 29)." Both the cyborg and Mutu's figures hold together a hybridity. The cyborg was a contradiction in itself: it was both a symbol of absolute control of technology over humanity, and a symbol of a pleasurable symbiosis between humans, animals, and machines. If Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg projected a cynical take on humanity and technology, what does Mutu's grotesque Mother Nature say about humanity and nature?

Mutu and Haraway both portrayed the ambiguous boundaries between human and non-human. Its added technological advancements make the cyborg's humanity invincible; the figure is unbreakable and cannot be harmed. Haraway intended the figure to challenge the traditional distinctions between human and machine, and thereby the idea of the self and the other in the 80s. As Sarah Cohen Shabot argued in 2006, the success of the cyborg did not last long. The ambiguity of the figure's divide between humanity and machine reinforced other structures to be less ambiguous, so that the cyborg would not become total chaos. This meant

that in practice, the cyborg was often represented as overtly gendered, leaving stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity intact. The cyborg therefore was still linked to systemic hierarchies. Mutu's figures contain the same mechanical elements as the cyborg, which draws a visual parallel. However, the bodies are even more ambiguous, in the addition of natural elements which the cyborg lacks. Cohen Shabot framed the grotesque as a response to the cyborg, since it takes a step further towards the breaking of hierarchies (Cohen Shabot, 2006, 225). Whereas the cyborg is invincible, the grotesque is both vulnerable and dangerous. The strength of the creature is in its aliveness, in its constant decay and reproduction. Mutu's grotesque breaks with hierarchies of gender, by subverting stereotypes of beauty, race, and femininity. Rather than a femininity that is passive, traditionally beautiful, and modest, Mutu's image of Mother Nature is brutal, violent, promiscuous, maximalist, and gorgeously repulsive. In Mutu's portrayal of the mixture of humanity and nature, the human and non-human parts of her grotesque Mother Nature are equally alive and vibrant. Mutu's figures comment on the relationship between humanity, technology, and the environment, while showing the history of violence that is intertwined with this relationship through colonialism. The impact that this has had is visible in the rendering of the Black female body, which acts as a symbol of how society views 'the other'.

Mutu strongly emphasises the feeling of otherness through the use of collage and the image of the grotesque. The figures both present familiarity and unfamiliarity in their human and otherness, reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny: a mixture of these elements awakens a feeling of unease. The uncanny rests upon a fear for ambiguity, opposite to a sense of clarity when clear boundaries have been put in place. When it comes to humanity and our systems of class, gender, and race, the fear for ambiguity can be recognized in racism, transphobia, and homophobia. A blurring of conservative values frightens people for the identities that are in-between what is stereotypically Black and White, male and female, straight and queer. The clear-cut categorization of the world, as was broadened in the colonialist era, fails in a society where these boundaries are frequently merging. With the world becoming more accessible through planes and the internet, knowledge has become as postmodern as our society: a complex multiplicity of available perspectives makes it unable to distinguish one true way of perceiving what is around us. When examining Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, the merging of humanity and technology created an idealist character of superhuman abilities (Pohl, 2018, 29). The merging of human form and the environment on the other hand shows our surroundings as alive and as possessing agency. It draws a perspective of humanity as intertwined with all living and non-living things, portraying a vibrant materialist view. Through the acts of birth, consumption, and sex, these bridges are crossed, to make clear that humanity shares its position as a protagonist with all other beings on the planet. The lack of visual clarity in collage fits in with the lack of clarity between human and non-human too, and challenges western one-way thinking where everything needs to be strictly classified. The content that Mutu cuts up is important in this argument: she uses imagery that commodifies women's bodies, such as pornography and ethnographic imagery which is centred towards a white gaze. Besides that, illustrations from medical books and photographs of animals aid in the creation of a hybrid, grotesque body. The sense of violence, both in cutting imagery and in the scenes that represent consumption and production,

functions as a warning sign: the destruction in Mutu's collages represents the reckless behaviour that comes with strict boundaries between what is seen as human and less than human. Mutu's collaged grotesque Mother Nature helps to visualise and construct a new ecology that disrupts the hierarchies and racial, gendered and spatial order of the world.

Case Study II: Otobong Nkanga

Otobong Nkanga – An Introduction to the Artist

The relation between ecology and the Black female body stands central in the art of Otobong Nkanga (b.1974), a Nigerian artist based in Belgium. Nkanga, a descendant of the Ibibio people, has an international background. Born in Kano, she moved to Paris as a teenager and returned to Nigeria to study at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife. Afterwards, she studied both in Paris and Amsterdam, taking on many international residencies and presently working from Antwerp (Nkanga, 2024). Nkanga's drawings, installations, photographs, sculptures, as well as her performances centre on the relationship between humans and their surroundings. She emphasises the impact that colonialism has had on this relationship. This includes the history of colonial rule and the residue of colonialism in present-day society. These traces of colonialism linger on, through the continuing of systematic racism and the exploitation of both human and natural resources. Nkanga engages with the collective trauma that Black people face due to generations of violence. Through reflecting upon colonialism, she explores the commodification of the African land and its people, particularly women. She takes an interest in the value of nature and the destructive attitude that humans express towards it. How do we as a society continue to deplete the limited resources available, as we keep disconnecting our present generations from the bigger ecosystem that we are a part of? In Nkanga's art, a dystopian view of the future is mixed with the lingering presence of the past. Nkanga's work is influenced by Afrofuturism: she reclaims Black diasporic heritage by centralizing the Black subject in imagery with a futuristic aesthetic. Her art is often set in outer space and there is a continual depiction of dystopian technology. Nkanga creates these fantastical, alternative worlds in which she responds to the constructed character of race and transforms the present cultural hierarchies. With her focus on the extraction of resources, she challenges the ways we as a society approach environmentalism through Western perspectives of ecological knowledge. Meanwhile, her artworks are an expression against the "othering" of the Black female body, highlighting its alienation within society. With clear links to ecofeminism, Nkanga places the Black female body at the centre of attempting to repair and heal the African land from the effects of colonialism. To execute these artistic aims, collage forms an important characteristic of Nkanga's art. Nkanga frequently uses photography, tapestry making, drawing and painting to create multimedia artworks with a collaged aesthetic. There is a strong focus on natural resources in her choice of materials, as she often incorporates minerals and plants. The human figures in her art appear cut-up and overlap with other elements, drawing on this collaged aesthetic. In these figures, the environment, technology, and the female body merge into hybrid beings. Although some of her artworks included in this thesis may not appear to be collages at first glance, they represent a collaged aesthetic. Nkanga employs collage as a strategy, to get across the message of her art by connecting separate fragments. As can be seen in the collage *Preliminary Recipe for a Support System* (2016-2017), Nkanga frequently

invites the viewer to engage with a collage of objects, connected to each other through a network of strings (fig. 11). Through guiding us along these images, she challenges the viewer to connect the narratives stored within the relations between these objects. *Preliminary Recipe for a Support System* shows Nkanga's approach to collaging fragments together to visualise economies of exchange and exploitation. Although of Nkanga's drawings and paintings are not primarily collages, in contrast to *Preliminary Recipe for a Support System,* they depict the same act of combining fragmented elements. Therefore, her art can be interpreted to have this collaged aesthetic.

Figure 11: *Preliminary Recipe for a Support System*, Otobong Nkanga, 2016-2017. Digital drawing, collage, and acrylic on paper, 42x28cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

The following questions are central in this chapter: how does Nkanga employ collage to address the current ecological crisis? What role do women play in her imagery? How are her figures connected to ecology and colonialism through the characteristics of the grotesque and the cyborg? How do Nkanga's collages create a contemporary representation of the relationship between humanity and nature?

Important visual themes that help me to explain my arguments are the portrayal of maps and networks, the fragmented female body, the interaction of objects and memory – through the alienation of everyday objects and an emphasis on the labour-intensive harvesting of organic materials. An exploration of Nkanga's installation and performance art is helpful to explain how she portrays the relationship between humanity and the environment. Therefore, this will

precede the analysis of her artworks that predominantly feature a collage. The intentions that Nkanga portrays in her performances and installations seep through in her two-dimensional artworks, creating a thread through her oeuvre.

The Memory of Materials

Nkanga's artistic practice often incorporates organic materials such as soil, wood, rocks, and edible objects such as the kola nut. She physically includes these in her installations, although imagery of them can be found in her collages too. Besides their connection to nature, these materials hold meaning in their origins and their importance as resources. Otobong Nkanga intentionally picks materials for their history. During a residency in Paris, she would collect resources from the former experimental colonial gardens, *Les Jardins d'Agronomie Tropicale*. During this residency but in the rest of her oeuvre too, Nkanga explored and resisted colonial forms of accumulation and display in her art. She continually questions the manner in which Western museums collect, archive and display their ethnographic objects. Western institutions frequently prioritize the mapping and cataloguing of the world. In doing so, they have a tendency to structurally exclude research into the practices and rituals associated with objects (Szewczyk, 2014, 41). Nkanga emphasised the importance of the knowledge that can be gained from the actual use of materials that have been collected by institutions through colonial practices. This active mode of interaction with the objects is an alternative to leaving them in "drawers of institutional critique", as author Monika Szewczyk framed it (Szewczyk, 2014, 49).

Szweczyk connected Nkanga's care for objects with Karl Marx' discussion on the commodity in her article *The Imaginative Economies of Otobong Nkanga* (2014). The concept of the commodity was central in Marx's analysis of capitalist society. Marx described the commodity as an intellectual currency that remains in circulation, but at the expense of considering other options. A commodity is an object that can be bought, sold or exchanged. It has two different values: the first is based on how the object is used and how necessary the human need for this use is. The second value depends on social standards for how much this object is worth compared to other objects. An important facet here is that in a capitalist society, the appearance or existence of the commodity masks the amount of labour that goes into its creation. This disparity leads people to value the commodities more than the effort put into its production. In this way, objects become (predominantly) carriers of social power and intrinsic value, rather than a result of human creation. Marx termed it a fetishism of commodities, which leads to the appearance that objects have a life and power of their own, and that they are independent of the labour that produced them (Billig, 1999, 315). To build upon Szewczyk's argument, the commodity can be used to partially explain the overexploitation of resources. The relationship between humans and objects is valuable to keep in mind when assessing how we treat the environment. When considering our contemporary interactions with the environment, how does Marx's theory of commodity fetishism translate to the present age?

In late capitalism, objects are valued for the action of consuming them, rather than for the labour behind their production. Their value in relation to other commodities is also not deemed as important. The fetishism of the commodity then becomes a driving factor behind the ease with which we acquire and discard products. This wastefulness of resources originates from a disconnection between the object's consumption and its production. To quote Billig (1999, 317), "In consumer capitalism people's sense of personal identity is bound up with the regular acquisition of material possessions." Similar to Marx's timely description, the contemporary fetishism of objects makes us forget how value is produced. It leads us to focus on the pleasures of consumption rather than the realities of production (Billig, 1999, 317). This is especially telling in how we repress that the object's production often involves forms of exploitation, for example in the mining industry.

When natural resources are framed as commodities, the dismissing of their scarcity or the depletion that their harvest causes can be explained in the same manner. It becomes easier to discard the necessity of preserving nature when the commodity is not perceived as resulting from such a valuable source. In a capitalist society, where nature is valued primarily for its exchange value, there is less appreciation for its intrinsic ecological function or its long-term sustainability (Demos, 2013, 18-20). The commodification of nature has as result that forests, animals, water and minerals are exploited and traded on the market without sufficient consideration of their ecological limits and regenerative capacities. The drive for profit which is central to capitalism encourages the extraction and exploitation of natural resources at an unsustainable rate. Companies prioritize maximizing short-term gains over considering long-term environmental consequences. The consequences, such as deforestation, overfishing, mining, and fossil fuel extraction, lead to the depletion of natural resources and the deterioration of ecosystems (Demos, 2013, 9; 18-20).

To challenge the way capitalist society treats the commodity, Nkanga shifts the dynamics between humanity and object in her installations, performances and collages. By analogy, she looks at and starts in the museum space, where ethnographic objects can be interpreted as commodities. When museums take objects and images out of circulation, they are discarded as a currency of discussion and can no longer be exchanged or swapped (Szewczyk, 2014, 49). Szewczyk pointed out that the idea of global knowledge is endangered by how much knowledge is based on exchange, much like capitalism is based upon exchange: when objects are left out of physical exchange, they are abandoned in the exchange of knowledge. Nkanga disrupts the stillness of museal objects, creating opportunities for new exchanges of knowledge. Instead of allowing humans to possess objects, she shifts the focus to the possession that objects have over us. This engages both aspects of the surreal and of the science that these objects can teach us.

Nkanga broke from normalized Western methods of museum display in her installation *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories* (2009, fig. 12). During this project, which was focused on objects and memory, Nkanga sought an interaction with the public: visitors were invited to apply minerals to their skin. In a darkened room, four separate tables were placed under spotlights. On the tables lay mica, black soap, a plant called *Cassia fistula,* indigo dye and alum minerals (Szewczyk, 2014, 42). These are elements that Nkanga encountered in her

childhood, of which the sensations of smell and touch bring back memories (Elderton, 2014). The physical interaction with objects can trigger powerful sensations, since the senses are connected to our memories and emotions. Conventional museum displays would not allow for the audience to physically engage with materials. However, Nkanga's display actively transmits knowledge which would be obscured otherwise. Although the visual of an object might convey information, it does not represent the full truth of that object. Using the senses to explore the object further, the audience may come to a completely different understanding of it (Elderton, 2014). When engaging in a physical dialogue with the objects, they are brought back into circulation as commodities (Szewczyk, 2014, 42). Instead of following the pursuit of consumption, the visitors interact with the objects purely as objects of contemplation. Through this exchange with natural resources, the artist aims to reconnect the visitor to the effort that is put into obtaining these objects and into the creation of the products that source from them.

Figure 12: *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories*, Otobong Nkanga, 2009. Installation. Photo: Raphael Fanelli. © Otobong Nkanga.

A similar focus on minerals can be found in Nkanga's installation *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), a feature of the 8th Berlin Biennale. In two video performances included at the installation, Nkanga brought her body into contact with objects, plants and glitter. The artist was interested in non-written evidence of our relation to objects, and thus our environment. Nkanga referred to memory as a principal factor when considering how objects leave traces. She once more highlighted the importance of intangible factors like smell to the formation of our memory (Mutumba, 2014, 50). *In Pursuit of Bling* examined the exploitation of resources and the continual human pursuit for "the better". This time, the artist used her own body to show her interaction with the objects, instead of letting the audience engage themselves such as in *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories.* She encountered the objects from *In Pursuit of*

Bling in 2011. Nkanga worked with the African artifacts in the ethnographic collections of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main. She examined them by comparing the present museal context of the artifacts and their original cultural setting. Nkanga focused on jewellery, weapons and money: objects of monetary exchange, which she held in gloved hands in her video performance. Like in *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories,* the artistic engagement with these objects highlights qualities that would otherwise go unnoticed. Their meaning changes into objects of contemplation. Complementary to the installation, Nkanga distributed texts on the context and function of objects from her own Nigerian cultural heritage, both to audiences in Frankfurt and Nigeria – since she assumed many Nigerians would not immediately recognize the objects either. In *In Pursuit of Bling,* society's obsession with minerals and metallics is explored through the colonial pursuit of these resources. This pursuit was exemplified by Heather Davis in her essay for Afterall Journal 48 (2019). Davis explored the topic of *extractivism*: the harvesting of resources from the earth. Extractivism means the commodification of the earth, which is deeply rooted in the colonial conquest of land and resources in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The concept entails that all aspects of our environment can be turned into commodities, valued for their symbolic presentation of power and wealth. Central to Davis' argument were the aesthetics of cobalt blue, as she explained the poor qualities of its mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Here, workers dig out cobalt by hand with limited safety measures and oversight. Davis' case study showed how resources can cause local poverty while bringing prosperity to the owners of the foreign companies who trade them: "the resource curse" (Davis, 2019). Nkanga's art recentres the production processes behind the physical appearance of objects. Through showing objects that have social value – objects of 'bling' – in a different light, the audience is invited to question their aesthetic value in relation to their production value. Nkanga places the focus on the tangibility of objects and how they engage the senses. This connects the audience to the objects' emotional value, for example through memory. In doing so, Nkanga challenges society's tendency to forget the long-lasting ecological impact that unethical production has on the earth.

The way humans can get caught in unethical systems from which they benefit can be brought into connection with Donna Haraway's concept of "string figures". Haraway wrote on how objects and people become entangled due to violent and complex social structures in her text *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2015). Haraway illustrated how knowledge and meaning are produced through collaborative processes that involve multiple perspectives. Haraway's "string figures" portrayed the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, and technology. These connections are multi-layered: our perspectives of life are collectively constructed through ongoing interactions between agents. Through these interactions, knowledge is produced. Haraway proposed that interspecies relationships lead to a collective shaping of each other's existence and our understanding of the world (Haraway, 2015, 161). This challenges traditional notions of autonomy and individualism, promoting an image of the world as a network of interdependent relationships. The idea of this network calls for a collective responsibility to take care of the environment and all beings on it. Haraway proposed the "Chthulucene," a term for the Anthropocene that introduces a new period, focusing on living and dying interconnectedly on a damaged planet. Haraway's theory

can be recognized in Nkanga's art: in the active exchange of knowledge through handling objects, as in for example *In Pursuit of Bling* and *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories*. The disruption of structures of knowledge reoccurs in Nkanga's work *Limits of Mapping* (2009-10) which shows needles piercing through a map (fig. 13).

Figure 13: *Limits of Mapping*, Otobong Nkanga, 2009. Synthetic polymer paint and stickers on paper, 42 x 29 cm. Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland. © Otobong Nkanga.

The penetration of the landscapes on the map symbolically reiterates colonial tactics. The bare, clean visual aesthetic of *Limits of Mapping* gives the cartography an unemotional objectivity, like a scientific data set. However, the map is pierced, conveying the power dynamics that are inherent in where the cartographer has the authority to define and categorize spaces and their inhabitants. The needles permeate the geographical perspective of the world, portraying a resistance to conventional Western knowledge creation and its colonial roots. Szewczyk argued that Nkanga's art aims to look for connections by working *through* colonial tropes, therefore including images of needles. Yvette Mutumba referred to Nkanga's frequent use of needles too: for example, in the 2008 installation *Contained Measures of Land* and in *The Operation* (2008). The needles and the holes they leave symbolize the precise destruction of landscapes, and the simultaneous creation of holes as new constructions. With this dynamic, Nkanga explores how we damage and rebuild our environment (Mutumba, 2014, 54). Within our constant destruction and creation, Nkanga presents a multi-linear temporality. Our actions of the past are intertwined with the present, and our present is deeply influential for the future we are building. The past, present and future are in a dialogue through actions of resistance and repair, for example in Nkanga's performance video *Remains*

of the Green Hill (2015). The artist repeated the journey of four traders who settled at Otavifontein in Namibia in 1875. Upon Nkanga's arrival at a green hill that once was the Tsumeb mine for the mining of copper, she starts a series of interactions with the land. The video includes scenes of the artist beginning a series of poses reminiscent of yoga at the edge of the former mining pit. Nkanga's physical gestures manifest a healing of the land through connecting to its past trauma in the present. During the video, the audience hears an interview that Nkanga conducted with the last managing operator of the mine, Andre Neethling. Neethling wanted to commemorate the mine by encircling it with a wall to form some sort of monument in the negative space of the excavation site (Davis, 2019). By incorporating her own body into her artistic exploration of the land, Nkanga creates an intimacy that feels like a ritual to commemorate the extracted copper. In this commemoration, she acknowledges the lethal and industrial elements of contemporary capitalism by engaging with the memory of the land. Her performance created an opportunity for repair by reconnecting the human body to nature, simultaneously serving as a call for a different approach to environmental care.

Hybrid Perspectives

Nkanga relied on memory as an important device in bringing the evidence of information – and how subjective it is. She pointed out the relevance of a multitude of perspectives to form knowledge, in contrast to colonial forms of the strict categorization of knowledge. Several of Nkanga's artworks explored the memory of landscapes that have been scarred by the excavation of resources. Curator Skye Arundhati Thomas underlined Nkanga's incorporation of ancestral Ibibio traditions that intertwine the past with the present day: these understandings of time challenge conventional Western ideas of temporality (Arundhati Thomas, 2020, 2).

Nkanga's practice emphasizes systems of care and repair, focusing on alternative pathways towards decentralized wealth and power and a more interconnected inhabiting of our environment. Mutumba mentioned Nkanga's use of her own body in her performances as a landscape on which stereotypes and fantasies were projected. By using her voice and sitting in the exhibition displays, she directly engages with the audience (Mutumba, 2014, 57). This interaction with the audience is present in several of Nkanga's performances. In *Diaspore* (2014), one to three Black women entered the room while wearing a plant called the *Queen of the Night* on their heads. The work featured a different group of women with a Sub-Saharan African background upon each performance in Basel, Shanghai and Berlin. They moved across a topographical map on the floor over the span of 45 minutes. The women hummed rhythmically, facing the public and turning away from them. *Diaspore* reflected Nkanga's polyphonic approach towards representing history, connecting to past narratives of diaspora in the present moment. Besides, the work proposes ways of connecting with earthly matter through the holding of the plants.

In her art, Nkanga refers to the memory of our environment, equating it to the subjective human memory. The afterlife of colonialism is prominent here, the memory of its violence

present and acknowledged in Nkanga's art. This 'material emotionality' draws upon the audience's openness to learning how objects can communicate history. As Katrin Pahl wrote on Nkanga's art, "plants are world makers and stones are experts in taking stress. As such, they have a lot to offer to those creatures who pride themselves on the faculty of language while flailing about with their destructive and defensive impulses (Pahl, 2021, 241)." Such thinking centres the vital materialist idea of living *with* nature, to adapt to surrounding circumstances by imitating nature, instead of exploiting nature to adapt to modern human society. The theme of memory in Nkanga's art comes to the foreground as an important means of sharing and archiving knowledge. Where Western methods would see memory as unreliable and impermanent, Nkanga argues that some things are meant to be lost. When knowledge is approached as the product of multiple perspectives, it bears an ambiguity within this plurality of different truths. There is an ongoing dialogue between these truths, revealing contradictions that mean both the loss of a singular truth, and the birth of a hybrid knowledge. Within Nkanga's practices of performance and collage, there is a similar junction of loss and the gain of knowledge. The impermanence of performance art means that there is a moment in which information is transmitted to the viewer, but the performance itself ceases to exist outside of the viewer's memory. Although the artwork is no longer physically present, it leaves the viewer with the gaining of knowledge. In collage, the creation of knowledge is dependent on the assembly of images. The overlapping media make singular fragments hard to discern, disrupting their full observation. With this action of obscuring, collage rids images of their original meaning. Its trace remains in the resulting collage, but its meaning is forever transformed by the addition of multiple sources. A quote from authors Lotte Bode and Timmy De Laet relates to this interpretation of Nkanga's practice: "Rather than mourning the gaps that pervade either archival or embodied forms of documentation, Nkanga suggests embracing these cracks and rifts as openings towards new reactivations and reincorporations that enable the work to live on (Bode & De Laet, 2021, 168)." Bode and De Laet similarly frame Nkanga's work as moving away from the idea that clarity is knowledge. An openness to the loss of the transparency of knowledge is an invitation to regain a new kind of knowledge, by allowing it to be opaque and to explore its ambiguity.

The main themes In Nkanga's art show an engagement with colonialism and environmental exploitation within a broader critique on capitalism. Her art raises awareness about the detrimental consequences of the exploitation of resources. There are clear efforts to challenge the dominant narratives of history and ways of creating and archiving knowledge. The past is not erased but acknowledged, aiming towards a polyphony of perspectives. Nkanga implements this through emphasising intangible evidence through memory, and by establishing an active dialogue between herself, the objects and the audience. A key visual connection between nature and the Black female body is Nkanga's embodied approach to materials. She integrates sensory interactions into her practice, stressing an alternative and more connected mode of coexistence between humans and their environments. The exploitation of the land is made coherent with the exploitation of Black women, connecting the two through the history of colonial trauma. This strongly aligns with Afrofuturist reimagining of the future, challenging dominant narratives of ecological degradation and centring the Black body in this vision. Nkanga employs her own body to portray the necessary

connection between human and land, healing and breathing the body into an interwovenness with nature. There are common motifs in Nkanga's art such as the representation of needles, pins, grafts, and the collaged body containing human plant and machine parts. They emphasise the reoccurring disruption of hierarchies in Nkanga's work: Nkanga rephrases the connection between humans and their environment in a cyclical existence, calling for equality and symbiosis rather than an exploitative dynamic. Haraway's critique of anthropocentrism called for an acknowledging of the agency of other living beings. Her argument for interconnectedness between species and their environments recalls Judith Bennett's theory of vital materialism. They both referred to the complex entanglement of humans and non-humans and aimed towards the cultivation of sustainable alliances between species and the Earth through the breaking of hierarchies. They both emphasized the importance of embracing ambiguity and multiplicity. Although Haraway was mentioned in the existing literature on Nkanga, her figure of the cyborg was left out. Nkanga's image of the Black female body centres it in an active dialogue with nature, acknowledging the memory of trauma that the land holds by connecting it to the trauma of colonialism within the Black female body. The comparison of the cyborg with an Afrofuturist ideal, in which humanity and nature are in a grounded dialogue of repair, offers a stark contrast. How do Nkanga's collages connect to the cyborg?

Besides, the figure of the grotesque is not mentioned in the discussed literature either, even though the ecologically cyclical and hybrid nature of Nkanga's figures is emphasized, which have parallels to the grotesque. The non-hierarchical and anti-capitalist theme in Nkanga's art appears to align with Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque, which both feeds on its environment and brings new elements into circulation. How does the hybrid human body in Nkanga's art use the grotesque form to reconnect humanity to nature? What do these comparisons say about Nkanga's portrayal of the Black female body as connected to nature, how does she depict the current relationship between humanity and the environment through it?

Collaged Universes

As mentioned before, the merging of the human body with non-human parts is present in Nkanga's art. This is either done through a collaged aesthetic, or through a network of grafts. At Basis voor Actuele Kunst (BAK) in Utrecht, Nkanga installed *We Could Be Allies* in 2017-18. This installation contained a mural of circles that portrayed grafts, which exchanged liquids between human and vegetable parts. The installation was accompanied by a poem under the same title, *We Could Be Allies* (Pahl, 2021, 253). The poem starts with the line "I could graft myself to you" and recounts an unfair symbiosis in its third stanza:

"I can poison your roots
suffocate your lungs
I will leave you hollow
So I can thrive without you"

Pahl argued that Nkanga referred to plant-like parasitic behaviour as a metaphor for the colonialist exploitation of humans and resources. A human-vegetable graft is again visible in Nkanga's painting *Landversation: The Eco-Psychologist's Soul* and in *Broken* (2009), where the parts are mechanically attached. Nkanga proposes a non-hierarchical grafting where humans and plants are allies, offering a self-sustaining circular ecology between deeply intertwined organs and vegetation. With her perspectives on human and plant relationships, Nkanga portrayed the importance of the histories of ecological violence that materials can convey: this communication and contact with nature aim to nurture a non-hierarchical dialogue between humans and their surroundings. The fragmentation of Nkanga's human figures, combined with their non-human features, relates them to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body. They are dismembered, unfinished, and in dialogue with the environment through this incompleteness. Besides, the dismembered limbs can be interpreted as physical manifestations of the scars of colonial trauma. In the figures' futuristic aesthetic, which simultaneously refers to the cyborg, the bodies are alien and presented as other. The cyborg-like elements that contribute to this dynamic project Nkanga's imagery into the future. Additionally, these elements challenge whether the way we treat nature is humane, or if we have reached a stage of capitalism where we are acting like production-focused machines ourselves.

The intertwinement with nature in Nkanga's collages presents Bennett's ideas of vital materialism. The hierarchy between humans and environment is shifted to a horizontal relationship, where one is not superior over the other. Instead, there is a symbiosis between humanity and nature. When considering Pahl's choice of language, 'parasitic', there is a reference to the grotesque body; this body is no beacon of health. Instead, it is sickly, constantly changing shape through its illness and decay. The blurring of the boundaries of what creates a human figure is the main parallel when considering the elements of the grotesque. Additionally, Nkanga's figures are connected to processes of regeneration and renewal: through their emphasis on the production of resources and the labour required to produce. The visualisation of Black bodies as cyborg-like units of labour forms a visual exaggeration of the horrid colonial exploitation of Black people, adding the grotesque aspect of carnival. The only aspect of the grotesque that is not explicitly met in Nkanga's figures, is an emphasis on bodily processes and the body's lower regions. Besides, the grotesque is associated with a dirtiness, an ugliness, that the clean surfaces in Nkanga's art lack. This brings into question the different gradations of the grotesque: can Nkanga's art still be considered grotesque without this visual expression of monstrousness? At first glance, Nkanga's art appears cold, through its flat surfaces and plain colours. The sterile appearance, as well as the stringed networks, evoke an association with scientific graphs and data. There is a distance between the appearance of the artworks and the narratives they represent through this scientific atmosphere. In Nkanga's art, the horrors of colonialism and the exploitation of women and nature are visualised in a less expressive way than in for example Wangechi Mutu's grotesque art. However, the cleanliness of Nkanga's art brings a sense of discomfort when the viewer uncovers the narratives of exploitation through connecting the fragments in her collages. The emotional distance in Nkanga's visual style perverts the grievance it evokes; the weight of colonialism is highlighted through the absence of intensity in Nkanga's artistic

expression. This cold appearance seems similar to the uncaring attitude that Western society has held towards the pressing issues of colonialism and its afterlife, as well as the destructive effects of capitalism on the environment. The interactivity in Nkanga's networks of images leads the viewer to realise a terrifying ugliness when following the narratives she presents. The monstrosity of the grotesque is not present in its visual form, but in the exploration of the artworks' contents. In combination with the strong connection between the earth and humanity, plus the brokenness and incompleteness of Nkanga's figures, her art therefore presents multiple characteristics of the grotesque.

In the series *Filtered Memories* (1990-92), these elements of both the grotesque and the cyborg can be found.

Figure 14: *Survival,* Otobong Nkanga, 1990-1991. *Filtered Memories* 1990-91 Series. Painting, acrylic on paper, 29.7 x 42 cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

As can be seen in *Survival* (1990-91), a painting with a collaged aesthetic, a Black woman is intertwined with natural elements and household tools (fig. 14). As is this figure, many of the bodies in Nkanga's collages are incomplete, with parts disembodied or missing. They are hybrid mixes of human organs, prostheses, plants, soil, everyday objects, architecture and dolls. The fragmentation of these elements, its disjunctions and asymmetry, add to the creation of the grotesque in Nkanga's art. It results in the unnatural bodily figurations that can be seen

in *Survival*. Nkanga often creates figures with missing limbs, which in this case are the figure's hands. The missing limbs can be seen as a reference to the colonial dehumanization of the Black female body, framing it as an instrument of labour above its status as human. Simultaneously, in *Survival,* figure is multi-armed, with rather robotic extra limbs. Her multitasking state and her mechanical body give way to a hectic atmosphere, illuminating a domestic workload which is typically placed on women. Besides the exploitation of resources and people, Nkanga's collages are connected to themes of domesticity, belonging and possession (Mutumba, 2014, 53). In *Survival,* the woman outsizes the map of a domestic space. Her arms occupied with gardening tools; she takes care of this home-environment. In terms of possession and belonging, *Survival* highlights how women are framed to belong to the domestic space, while simultaneously emphasising how their lives can be possessed and confined by this labour. The home, which is supposed to be a safe environment, then becomes another place of dehumanization through the exploitation of labour.

In Nkanga's art, the collaged fragmentation of objects, places and bodies can be seen as a reference to Nkanga's mixed identity in terms of living in both Nigeria and Europe (Mutumba, 2014, 53). Collage can be linked to diaspora through the accumulation of fragments of places and cultures. As Meyer and Schapiro wrote, collage can serve as a way to hold onto memories (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 70). When collaging memories together, it creates a collage of different moments in time, forming a sense of identity. In the visualisation of diaspora, a zooming out occurs, bringing separate locations, memories, and identities into one frame. This act of zooming out is visible in many of Nkanga's artworks. It can for example be found in the tapestry *The Weight of Scars* (2015), made for Nkanga's solo exhibition *Bruises and Lustre* at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Belgium (fig. 15). The tapestry renders a satellite map, where mechanical and human body parts are combined with photographs of mining locations in the Northwestern part of Namibia. The locations currently lay abandoned and drained (Dyveke Styve, 2023, 303).

Figure 15: *The Weight of Scars*, Otobong Nkanga, 2015. Woven textile (yarns: viscose bast, mohair, polyester, bio cotton, linen, acrylic) and inkjet print photographs on 10 laser cut Forex plates, 253 x 612 cm. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp. © Otobong Nkanga.

Researcher Maria Dyveke Styve looked at Nkanga's work to aid in the understanding of the complex relationship between mining finance in London and the underlying systems of racial violence that come with mineral extraction. The author criticized the lightness that is often present at conferences of international mining companies, which are largely white and male spaces. Once a mine is established in the ground, the project cannot be relocated even when national politics change. With changing taxations, this makes mining a financial risk (Dyveke Styve, 2023, 304). Dyveke Styve contrasted the relaxed atmosphere in the mining finance world by emphasizing the historical consequences of the mining industry in South Africa. The colonial discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1860s and 1870s led to a great expansion of the British economy. This mining industry disposed African landowners of over 90% of the South African land and forced Black men into labour under exploitative racist conditions. The production of gold and platinum still requires dangerous manual labour in the mines. The structural roots of violence have persisted to the current political economy of South Africa, and in a global context. During a strike against a London-based company in 2012, police forces killed thirty-four Black mineworkers while they were protesting against their exploitation (Dyveke Styve, 2023, 304). In *The Weight of Scars*, two figures hold the ends of a network of photographs that show mining sites. There is a clear dystopian atmosphere in the collage: the background is situated from outer space and the figures are dismembered and mechanical. They tug on a string that connects different abandoned sites of mining, where the land as well as its people have been exploited. The photographs are linked to each other to form a constellation of scars that colonial capitalism has left on the earth.

Nkanga presents a collaged mix of photographs and a map of the earth. Her continual references to maps can be connected to the colonial endeavour of mapping the world. During the colonial era, the drive to gain and knowledge was used to justify colonialists' voyages to find natural resources that could be capitalised on in Western society. The idea that the Western mapping and categorizing of the world is the objective truth is one that has been criticised by postcolonial theorists such as TJ Demos, as has been discussed in chapter I of this thesis. Nkanga's collaged maps challenge the presentation of the Western perspective of the world as an objective truth. The fragmentation and ambiguity of collage challenges the objectivity of Western knowledge. It shows how colonialism and its long-lasting residue in the current capitalist consumption-based society impact our environment. Not only are its effects on the Earth visible, but on its people too. The industrial appearance of the figures portrays the commodification of Black people's bodies for the labour they can perform. They are both machine and human, creating a parallel to Haraway's figure of the cyborg. The same mixture of industrial and human parts can be found in *Double Plot* (2018, fig. 16), *Revelations* (2020, fig. 17), *The Apprentice* (2014, fig. 18) and *Loss* (2018, fig. 19).

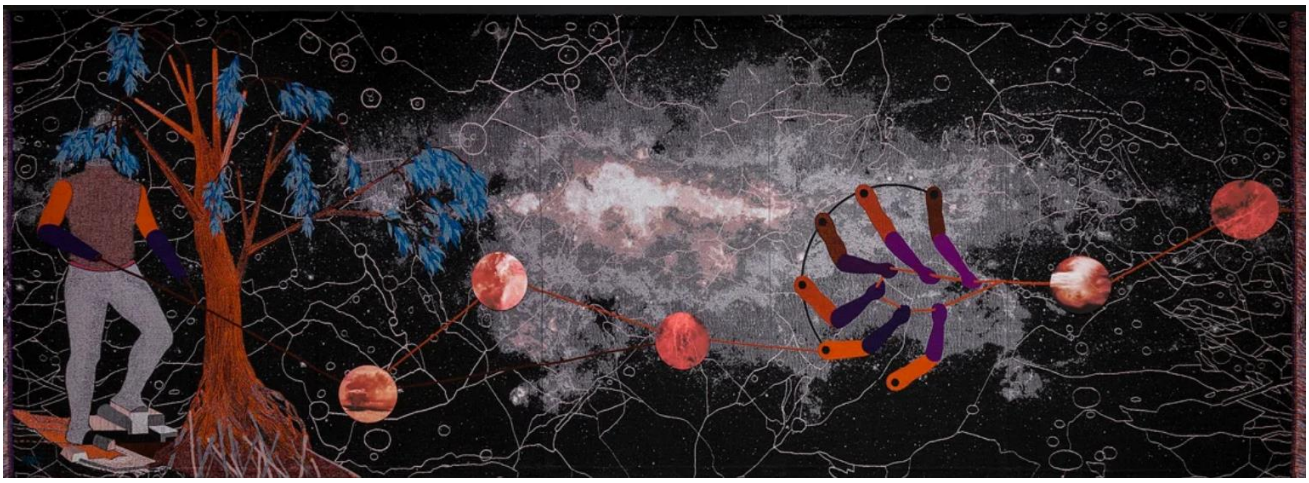

Figure 16: *Double Plot*, Otobong Nkanga, 2018. Woven textile (yarns: viscose, polyester, organic cotton, cashwool, acryl), inkjet prints on 5 laser-cut Forex plates, 265 x 770 cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

Like *The Weight of Scars,* the tapestries *Double Plot* and *Revelations* show photographs of contemporary scenes of nature and violence. *Double Plot* depicts an image of the solar system that NASA took in 2011. The light of this solar system hit NASA's cameras after a journey that lasted thousands of years, capturing long-dead stars. Four photographs show civil unrest. The zoomed-out perspective of the solar system highlights how our planet and humanity are a smaller part of a larger ecosystem, contained within a vast universe. On the left side, a gigantic cyborg-like figure stands observing the scene in Nkanga's universe. As curator and writer Tom Morton quoted Nkanga in his publication on her work, *Double Plot* portrays African philosophy about time (Morton, 2023). Instead of a linear understanding of time, Nkanga presents time as a flat surface on which all events are intertwined. Like the light of ancient stars that hits us centuries later, our ancestors are as much a part of the present as we are. Merging the timelines of the past, present and the future stresses the impact that our actions have on our surroundings: the future is dependent on our present ways of living. The

cyborg-figure, with its futuristic connotations, calls our ancestors as well as the future version of humanity into the present.

A similar call for action can be recognized In *Revelations,* where a woman's head is covered by a collaged cloud of photographs of nature and money. Her mechanical arm attaches to a net full of heavy rocks. Although humans are absent in these images, the manufactured products as well as the damage to the earth are the lasting traces of their presence. The trauma that colonialism has caused is visualised as a heavy sack of rocks, while the mental burden it has left is presented as a burdening cloud. The women depicted in *The Apprentice* (2014) share the mechanical arms visible in *Revelations,* paired with missing legs and feet. Their outfits appear futuristic, because of how the gradient of colour transforms them into a shiny metallic plane, together with geometric patterns.

Figure 17: *Revelations*, Otobong Nkanga, 2020. Woven textile (yarns: cotton, viscose, linen, arnica, techno, elirex, polyester, sidero), 18 photographic images on Forex, 240 x 180 cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

Figure 18: The Apprentice, Otobong Nkanga, 2014. Painting, acrylic on paper, 42 x 30 cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

The image of humans as machines, as in Nkanga's oeuvre, shows a recurring theme that reflects upon the exploitation of human labour. A key factor of capitalism is the idea that

human labour can be commodified and profited on. Before the Industrial Revolution, trades were learned through craftmanship, which meant that workers specialized in creating the products of their expertise from start to end. Instead of treating labour as an artisanal craft, the Industrial Revolution brought with it the concepts of Taylorism and Fordism. Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) strove to maximize profit through cutting up labour into standardized repetitive tasks. These tasks were then analysed individually to figure out how they could create as many products in as little time possible. Through Taylorism, each worker becomes an expert in executing their task at maximum productivity, under the strict control of their supervisor. Henry Ford's (1863-1947) Fordism is related to Taylorism, but it extends the concept to optimizing mass-production in assembly-line factories. Fordism promotes the low-cost production of standardized products in high quantities. Both Taylorism and Fordism led to a dramatic decrease in the knowledge workers needed in order to do their jobs, which allowed employers to pay them lower wages for their labour. Although the work pace and productivity picked up, Taylorism and Fordism had many negative consequences such as poor health and a lack of the development of skills (Börnfelt, 2023, 25-33). The exploitation of human productivity over their well-being can be recognized during the rise of machines in the Industrial Era. Nkanga's artworks feature elements of the cyborg that draw a parallel between how both colonialism and the Industrial Revolution have led to the exploitation of humans and nature. Their collaged aesthetic can be related to the narrative of these two forms of exploitation. The Industrial Revolution increasingly led to the fragmentation of modern life. The peak of collage as a popular artistic method was reached during the rapid modernization in the twentieth century, as can be seen among the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and the artistic expressions of feminism in the 70s, as is explained in Chapter I. Collage's focus on the ready-made can be framed as a response to the breaking apart of labour too. It turned work from a coherent whole into alienated components, losing the personal connection between the producer and the mass-produced product. The development of a ready-made consumer culture caused customers to feel more disconnected from the production and origins of what they were buying. The mass-production of goods withdrew opportunities for the expression of individuality from everyday life, creating a more impersonal relationship between humans and objects. This loss of connection shows a strong link to systems of exploitation, both of human labour and of natural resources. Nkanga's art points out what lays at the foundations of capitalist production, by merging humans, machines, the earth, and the products of exploitation – be it objects or colonial trauma. This merging of machine and human with nature is visible in *Loss* (2018) from the *Scaffolding Series* and *The Embrace* (2014, fig. 20).

Figure 19: *Loss*, Otobong Nkanga, 2018. *Scaffolding* Series. Acrylic on paper. © Otobong Nkanga.

Figure 20: *The Embrace*, Otobong Nkanga, 2014. Acrylic on paper, 42 x 30 cm. © Otobong Nkanga.

In *Loss,* mechanical arms, rocks and minerals are collaged onto a woman's figure. The network of strings connects discs which tell a story of exploitation and pollution. A map of the land equally intertwines with a human figure in *The Embrace.* The figure is holding the land tightly with two sets of arms, attempting to repair the damage done to it. The consoling embrace installs a symbiosis between humanity and nature. Nkanga's art continually calls for this symbiosis, showing the dangers of the environmental crisis and the responsibility of humanity to be more connected to the actions that are causing nature's demise.

Collective Ecologies

In *Choices we make*, a part of the series *Social Consequences* (2009), an abundance of lone arms is on display, which either end in an instrument or in a gloved or prosthetic hand (fig. 21).

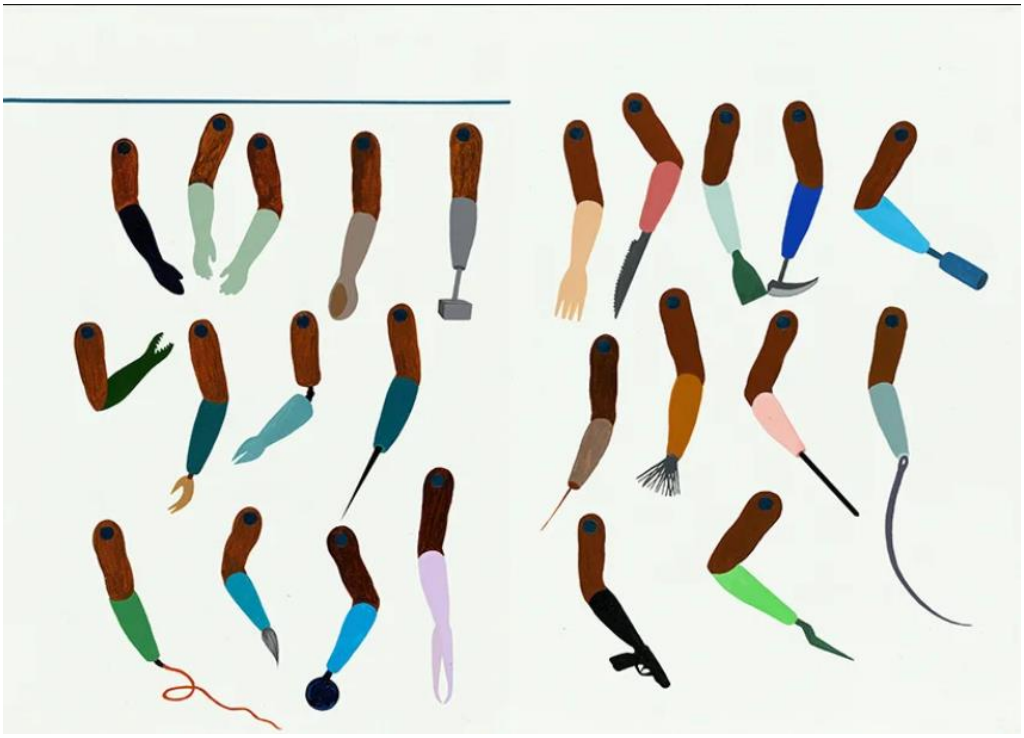

Figure 218: *Choices we make*, Otobong Nkanga, 2009. *Social Consequences* Series 2009-2021. Stickers, acrylic on paper. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp. © Otobong Nkanga.

In reference to the title of the work, these arms and their instruments represent choices we make when interacting with our environment. The instruments are defined by the way we use them to manipulate objects and beings around us: there are tools to mine, scoop, drill, and to inflict damage, such as knives and guns. When bringing in Donna Haraway's theory on string figures once more, *Choices we make* can be related to this concept. The idea of string figures emphasises the entanglement of individual choices in a larger whole. Singular human actions

have a collective impact on the environment. Here the environment can both be considered the space that we occupy on this planet, and the dynamics of race and class in society. String figures are continually visualized throughout Nkanga's artworks, where the human body is shown as a small fragment of a larger universe. Coincidingly, the collages *The Weight of Scars, Double Plot, The Apprentice,* and *Loss* depict networks of strings, visually connecting the fragmented parts of this universe.

Nkanga's use of collage to create alien, hybrid bodies links it to capitalist exploitation, both recognizable in colonialism and in the Industrial Revolution. Her reiterations of a symbiosis between human, nature and machine call for an attentiveness to other forms of life that do not have a voice as we do. Within her practice, Nkanga brings into question the subjectivity of human memory and the idea that objects hold memory. Through focusing on the embodied engagement with objects, she attempts to redirect humanity to contemplate the value of their production. Nkanga merges the social value of consumption with the value of production. Her artworks imagine a physical connection between the resources used in production, the products, and the human body. In doing so, she rejects how society represses the processes of production from our consumption.

By using collage, Nkanga imposes characteristics of the grotesque form and the cyborg on the Black female body. As Bakhtin wrote on the grotesque: "The bodies are merged with each other or with objects and with the world. A tendency toward duality can be glimpsed everywhere. Everywhere the cosmic, ancestral element of the body is stressed" (Bakhtin, 1995, 231). In Nkanga's art, a cosmic zooming out is deeply connected to Bakhtin's description. Besides, the merging of the female body with land and commodities fits the first line. Through this cosmic representation and bodily hybridity, Nkanga critiques the existence of vertical hierarchies which allow both the exploitation of Black lives and of natural resources. Through the history of collage within the modernization of society, and through the visual rendering of the cyborg, Nkanga's fragmented figures emphasise how the Black female body has been subverted to a unit of labour in colonialism. Black women's bodies were valued for their productivity, where the birthing of children meant that their children would be taken from them and sold as commodities. The carrying of children meant to carry emotional and physical trauma. This still resonates into the present, for example in the medical treatment of pregnancy. As Soraya Chemaly wrote in *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (2018), the intersections of gender, ethnicity and class influence health care treatment, in which women of colour specifically experience significantly degraded health care, correlating with the long-lasting effects of systemic discrimination (Chemaly, 2018, 55). A 2015 report of over sixty studies across thirty-four countries found that women internationally go through "poor treatment during childbirth, including abusive, neglectful, or disrespectful care" due to a persistent "lack of respect for women" (Chemaly, 2018, 104-105). Women of colour, as well as trans women and pregnant people, specifically experience treatments where their health concerns are not taken seriously and medical procedures are carried out unethically (Chemaly, 2018, 105).

Nkanga connects the image of Black motherhood as industrial productivity to nature, giving the figure of Mother Nature new meaning. The hybridity of nature, humanity and technology

envelops her in an ambiguity that reflects upon the dehumanization embedded in colonialism and capitalism.

A parallel can be drawn between the ambiguity of the grotesque and the ambiguity in rejecting the colonially influenced Western categorization of knowledge. As Tina M Campt discussed in dialogue with Rolando Vázquez Melken at Campt's lecture *Blue-Black and Blur: Carrie Mae Weems and the Afterlives of Images,* held on June 6th 2024, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the transparency of knowledge is ingrained within a white gaze. This gaze consists of the assumptions that underlie racism, namely the boundaries to which Blackness can exist in white people's stereotyping (Nielsen, 2011, 363; Yancy, 2013). The idea that information needs to be clear and consumable has the implications that anything that falls outside of these consumable categories becomes 'other'. In Nkanga's art, our relationship to each other and ecology does not have to be determined by clarity. The rethinking of maps and scientific data challenges the perception of Western knowledge as objective. Visually, her networks show cause and effect between colonialism and residual trauma through collage. By presenting a collaged grotesque figure as the hybrid merging of nature, humanity and technology, the relationship revels in ambiguity. There is a harmonious act of healing and repair in her work, such as in *The Embrace* and *Remains of the Green Hill.* At the same time, the afterlife of racial and ecological violence is grippingly present through a collaged interweaving of the past, the present and the future. Nkanga's withholding of clear distinctions can be seen as an attempt towards connection between humanity and nature, as a call for a different, multi-vocal approach towards dynamics of race as well as ecology.

Case Study III: Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle

Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle – An Introduction to the Artist

Archival portraits of Black women and children are distorted, their bodies covered and obscured by the addition of natural elements in Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's collages. Black women play the central role in Hinkle's art, as she reflects upon the ways their bodies carry the afterlife of colonialism. Hinkle, born in 1987 in Louisville, Kentucky, is also known as Olomidara Yaya. Based in Los Angeles, the multidisciplinary artist creates performances, text, and visual art. Hinkle received a dual MFA in Art and Critical Studies as well as in Creative Writing from the California Institute of the Arts, and her BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Painting. She was the youngest artist to present her work at the *Made in the LA* 2012 Biennial. Hinkle has performed and exhibited her work at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, CA, Project Row Houses in Houston, TX, and The Studio Museum in Harlem in New York (Hinkle, 2023). Notable works by Hinkle include *The Evanesced* (2016-) series, a project titled *Kentifrica* (2010-), the *Tituba Black Witch of Salem* (2013-) series, and the *Uninvited Series* (2008-). Her artworks reflect upon the condition of Black life in the United States, incorporating experiences with racism, motherhood and the afterlife of enslavement. In the *Uninvited Series,* collage is the primary method to reflect upon these themes. Hinkle transforms photographs of West African women and children that French colonists once sold as postcards and cartes-de-visite. French colonialists took the photographs in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, staging their subjects into their poses. They mass-produced the cards and distributed them globally. Hinkle's collages distort the photographs, making the figures appear infected with disease and mutation through her additions – introducing elements of the grotesque. By observing how we look at these images both in the past and in the present, how do Hinkle's collaged interventions change the dynamic between the viewer and the viewed subject? How does the historical photographer's colonial gaze interact with society's view of the Black female body in the present? How does collage critique the colonial gaze with which the photographs were taken, incorporating aspects of the grotesque?

A relevant term which Hinkle refers to in her practice is "the historical present," in which the traces of colonial history are examined in the present (Hinkle, 2023). How do Hinkle's collages engage with this residue of the past? How do they visualise a reconstruction of the narratives of exotifying and commodifying Black women's bodies? When looking at her collages, Hinkle includes imagery of nature, through the flowering, organic shapes and textures that she collages onto the photographs. This connection to nature, and the parasitical way the collaged images overlap evokes the aesthetic of Mikhail Bakhtin's figure of the grotesque body. What is the significance of collage in Hinkle's oeuvre? How and why does she incorporate elements of the grotesque? How do these aspects relate to a perspective on ecology?

When considering the residue of colonial history through looking at the exotification and commodification of the Black female body, grief plays a dominating role. To examine the traces of colonialism, means to examine the perseverance of racial terror against Black people. While mourning the impact of colonialism considers the losses of the past, it is intertwined with a mourning of the lives affected by it in the present and the future. As Claudia Rankine argued in her text under the same title, "The condition of Black life is one of mourning." She followed it up by saying that "There really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a Black person, you can be killed for simply being Black (Rankine, 2020, 17)." The loss of Black lives is often societally dismissed and erased (Rankine, 2020, 17). There is a lack of protection compared to white lives, while the loss of Black lives is not valued as grievable because of racial dehumanization (Butler, 2020, 11). When mourning the dead as a way to acknowledge the urgency of political change, grief turns into grievance. As Judith Butler wrote in her text *Between Grief and Grievance, a New Sense of Justice* (2020), grievance is a call to justice. It erupts when there is a disparity between the weight of grief and the recognition of that loss. Although there is a yearning for repair and rectification, its justification is not guaranteed to resolve the grief. And yet, public acts of mourning can form a resistance against the power structures that decide whose lives are valuable. Rankine and Butler described a need to intertwine mourning with our day-to-day lives, in order to keep a grief dynamic going in society. It can acknowledge how Black lives exist in a state of precariousness (Rankine, 2020, 19). Why does Hinkle opt for collage to engage with this expression of grievance, connecting the portrayal of the Black female body to natural elements?

Uninvited

Hinkle enacts upon grievance through several reoccurring themes in her work, which can be related to her choice to use collage: by questioning the objectivity of photography, by visualising the fragmentation of diasporic identities, and by obscuring the Black female body in order to resist its commodification. How do these themes come about in Hinkle's oeuvre, besides in the aforementioned collaged *Uninvited Series*?

The Evanesced is Hinkle's collection of a hundred drawings and seven paintings that engage with the *#SayHerName* Movement. "Say Her Name" gained a platform in 2015, when Kimberlé Crenshaw questioned the circumstances of Sandra Bland's death. Police officers arrested Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman, during a traffic stop. She died in a Texas jail cell four days later (Adegoke, 2016). Hinkle's series is a social commentary on the ongoing disappearance of missing Black women in the American and African Diaspora, due to colonialism, human trafficking, homicides and other forms of exploitation and abuse. Because the media devastatingly underrepresents the lost lives of Black women, Hinkle's portraits channel their presence, giving them a voice in her work. *The Evanesced: Embodied Disappearance* is a series of live performances attached to the drawings, further exploring the narratives of Black women's experiences of erasure. Each performance commemorates a

particular case of erasure, in which Hinkle enacts improvisational dance to blues, hip-hop, and Baltimore Club music. The music is accompanied by recorded whispers, shuffles, and snippets of pop-music (Hinkle, 2023). *The Evanesced* invokes an evident example of grievance. Through emphasising the narratives in their singularity, they collage together to show the magnitude of collective Black grief. By paying homage to the individual stories of erasure, Hinkle merges personal losses into a societal grievance. She calls attention to the erasure of Black loss as the loss of valuable lives.

The Kentifrica Project is an ongoing work for which Hinkle collaborated with the students and faculty from the University of Lagos, Nigeria, while she worked there as a Fulbright fellow. *Kentifrica* is Hinkle's concept of a collaborative space where diasporic identities can be examined. Hinkle portrays the space as a utopian geography, fictionally located between South America and Africa. Through exploring a "Kentifrican identity," the project constructs an engagement with collective and personal histories of migration and its effects on perceptions of race and culture (Hinkle, 2023). As mentioned in chapter I, Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro's essay *Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled* (1978) laid out several key points of collage that can be connected to the experience of diaspora. First of all, the assemblage and reconfiguration of elements reflects the fragmentation of identities, creating a sense of plurality within the content (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 70). This resonates with the fragmentation of diasporic lives and the simultaneous creation of a merging of multiple cultural identities. The practice of collage furthermore involves the collecting and the safeguarding of material that holds personal and historical significance (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 70). The connection of collage to objects from everyday life, and to the memory of objects, can be interpreted through the diasporic integration of artifacts and imagery from the past in new present cultures. In relation to diaspora, the preserving of personal heritage can create a visualisation of their multi-site experiences. Meyer and Schapiro's argument that collage represents the overlooked contributions of marginalized voices, can be attached to diaspora too. Collage becomes a medium in which diasporic artists can assert themselves and address issues of displacement and othering experiences (Meyer & Schapiro, 1978, 70). In Hinkle's collage *The Mutation* (2014), satellite photographs of different locations cover a woman's body, a visualisation of diaspora (fig. 22). The woman carries the traces of these locations, and the white hand that is collaged over hers may present a merging of cultures. When referring to the title of the work, diaspora creates the mutation of identity, creating a collage of memories and culture. In *The Armor* (2014), fragments of different landscapes similarly cover a woman's body (fig. 23). She is wearing the fragments like an armour, in the shape of a protective suit with a helmet. The covering of the women's (partially) nude bodies through collage can be seen as a comment on the trend within art history that nudity conveys a sense of timelessness (Fletcher, 2014, 191-2). However, in contrast to the idealised beauty of the nude body in the Renaissance, in these colonial photographs nudity represents a sense of access to observe the body under the scheme of ethnographical science. Besides, through "primitivist" ideas, the idea of timelessness and nudity can be related to the colonial experience of temporal othering. Within the Western perception of non-Western people, there is a predisposition that they do not live in the same temporality, denying the modernity of African women in this case. The

attitude that Africa is archaic and primitive leads to a “denial of coevalness,” a concept termed by anthropologist Johannes Fabian (Fabian, 1993, 30). According to Fabian, any “otherness,” such as in race or gender, appears to place a figure outside of the progression of linear time. In *The Armor,* the appearance of the woman’s armour is reminiscent of a medieval plate armour, amplifying this placement in the past.

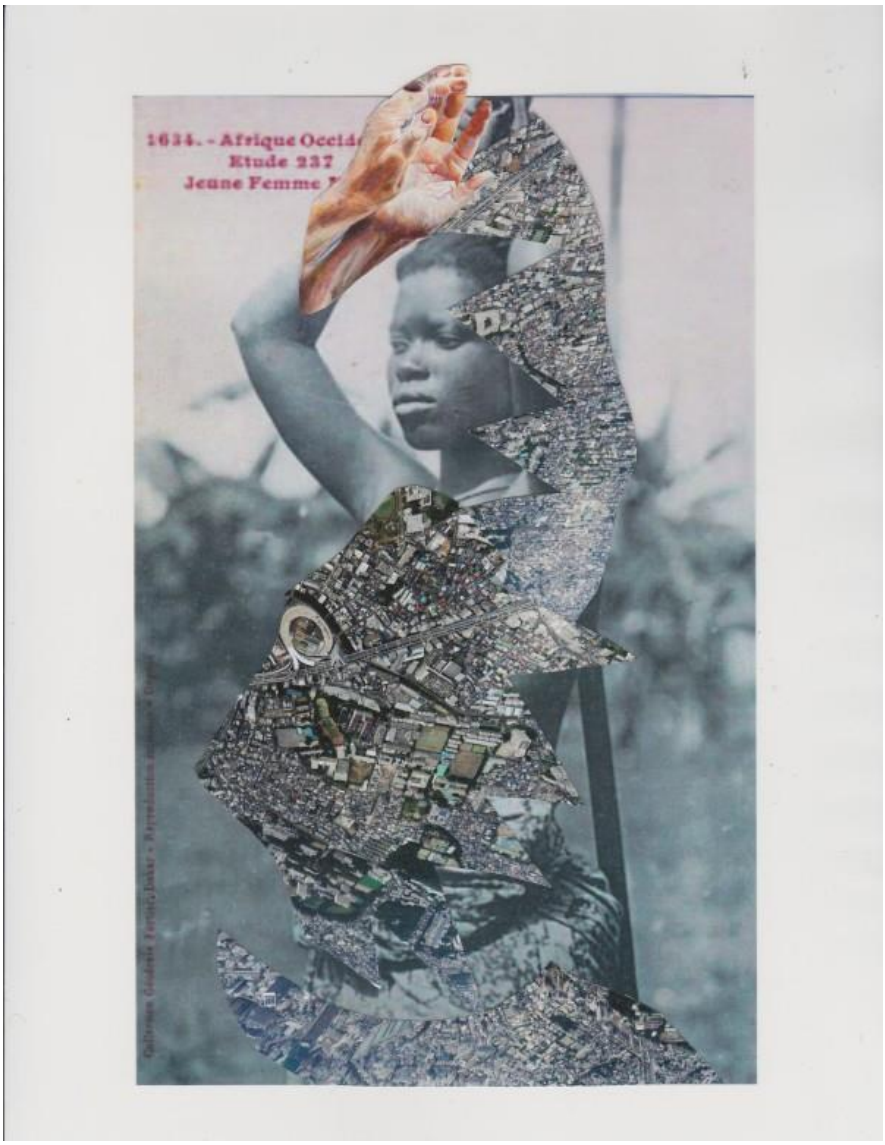

Figure 22: *The Mutation*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2014. *The Uninvited Series*. Collage on polyfilm, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

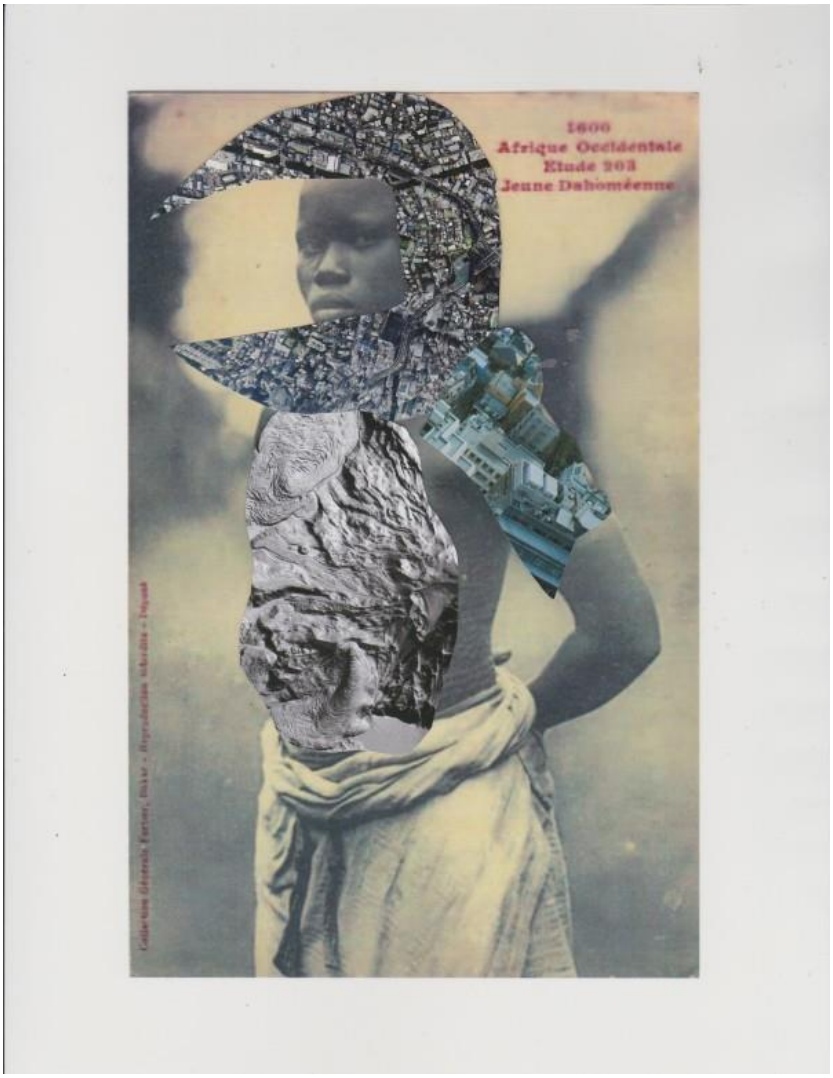

Figure 93: *The Armor*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2014. *The Uninvited Series*. Collage on Transparency, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

In *The Armor,* the woman appears pregnant, which is a theme that reoccurs in Hinkle's work, like in her *Tituba Black Witch of Salem* series. In this series of drawings, Hinkle refers to Maryse Condé's novel from 1992: *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*. Condé's historical fiction centres on Tituba, an enslaved woman of colour who was a crucial figure in the Salem Witch Trials. Hinkle reflects on how through racism, Western society uses the body of the "other" to project fears and fantasies upon (Westin, 2015). She intertwines her experiences of feeling "other" as a pregnant Black woman with the conviction of Tituba for witchcraft (Hinkle, 2023). The grim intersection of misogyny and torture in the history of the witch trials emphasises the dangers of creating scapegoats in society, on which any blame can be passed. The public degradation and violence towards convicted women shows a similarity to the impact of racism on Black lives. Besides the connections to the unjust persecution of Black people, the demonization of female sexuality holds relevance too. A parallel can be drawn to the combination of desire and repulsion around witchcraft and how the colonial gaze has viewed and represented the Black female body. While presenting her *Tituba* series, Hinkle

said about the Black female body that “It’s this body that people don’t know what to do with, and some of that discomfort is important to kind of keep in there but I don’t want to make it into a ‘this is a repulsive body’ because that is what already happens (Museum of the African Diaspora, 2018).” Hinkle’s painting *Tituba’s Titties* (2014) refers to this othering of the Black female body, specifically related to pregnancy and motherhood (fig. 24). Although Hinkle aimed to steer away from portraying a repulsive figure, she did include elements of the grotesque. The figure is all breast, revelling in a carnivalesque absurdness. A similar theme can be seen in Hinkle’s collaged work *The Dress Up* (2014), from the *Uninvited Series* (fig. 25).

Figure 24: *Tituba’s Titties*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2014. *The Tituba Black Witch of Salem Series*. India ink and watercolour on arches cover paper, 152.4 x 113.03 cm. Jenkins Johnson Gallery, New York. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

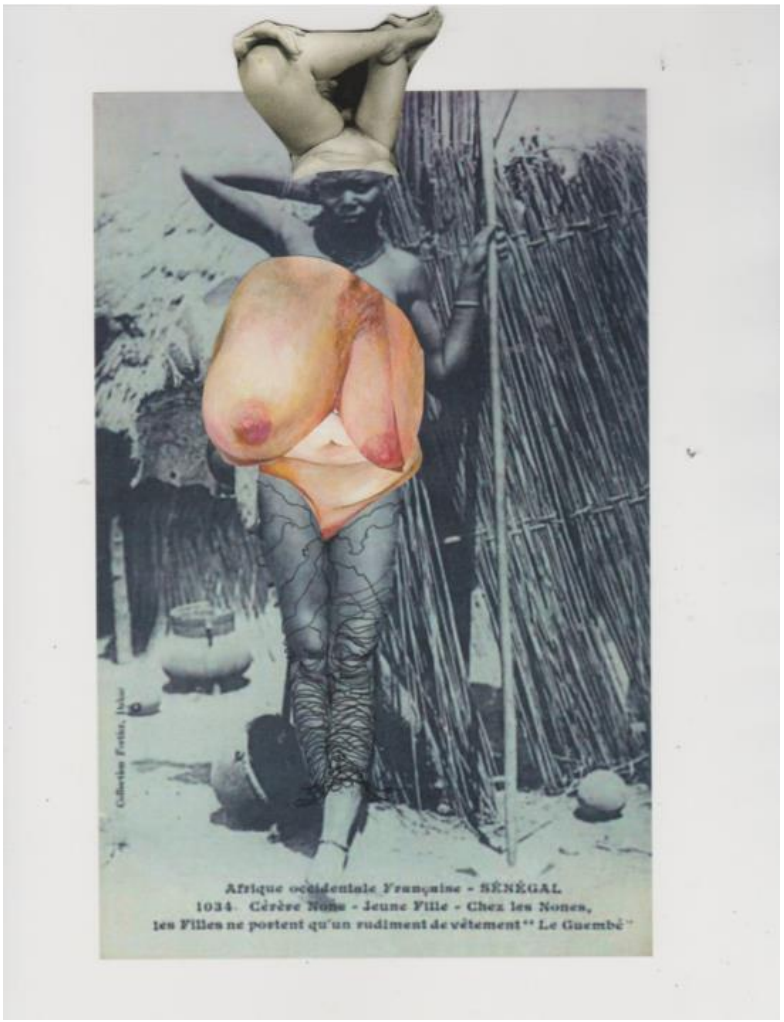

Figure 105: *The Dress Up*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2014. *The Uninvited Series.* Collage on transparency and India ink, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle

In *The Dress Up,* a nude Senegalese girl poses for an ethnographic photograph, for the French colonists to spread her image on postcards. In the bottom, the inscription writes "chez les Nones, les Filles ne portent qu'un rudiment de vètement" (translated by the author: among the Nones, the girls only wear rudimentary clothing). The collaged beige breasts cover the girl's torso, her head crowned by the image of a woman's nude body, neck-down. Hinkle has drawn lines on the girl's legs, appearing to either confine her with ropes or to cover her body. Hinkle's intervention shifts the dynamic between the viewer and the viewed, compared to the original image. The colonial gaze with which the French colonists photographed this girl took an interest and pleasure in her nudity, as the inscription of the card conveys. The exotification of her nude body also plays into its commodification, being sold on postcards. Through collage, a visually overpowering pair of white breasts interrupts the viewer's access to the girl's body. The white breasts address the white gaze with which the photographer shot the photograph. The white gaze, rooted in colonialism, reflects the dominant norms of white society that misrepresent and marginalize people of colour. The white breasts turn the sexualizing gaze towards the white body, making viewers aware of their expectations of access. By restricting the visibility of the body and holding a mirror to the white gaze, Hinkle

confronts the viewer with the dehumanization of Black women that is inherent to this photograph. In *Dress Up* and *Tituba's Titties*, Hinkle addresses the stereotypes that exist of Black women. Her alien figures point out the absurdity of their sexualization, and the emphasis on breasts can be interpreted as a reference to the Black female body as nurturing. This idea is related to the colonial exploitation of Black women's bodies for childbirth and nursing. The image of the Black breast recounts the narrative of the babies that colonists took away from Black women and immediately sold as units of labour, the women unable to feed them their milk. In these circumstances, motherhood meant the dehumanization of Black women as units of labour, the autonomy taken from their fertility and subverted into productivity. As Soraya Chemaly described through many well-documented examples, the conditions under which women experience pregnancies are still underlined by dehumanizing attitudes in many cultures (Chemaly, 2018, 107). As she argued: "A gestating girl or woman is perceived by many people as a carrier, a baby machine, a vessel, or as an Oklahoma state representative asserted recently, a 'host' who 'invites' a baby in. Women are not hotels, or inns, or beakers, or vials, either, even if they are treated as though they are (Chemaly, 2018, 108)." Besides, many laws concerning sexual assault as well as abortion rights are still at the mercy of people, mostly men, who severely lack knowledge about the female body. In the United States in 2014 for example, a state legislator stated that "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try and shut that whole thing down (Chemaly, 2018, 109)." Additionally, reproductive rights movements have historically often alienated women of colour by prioritizing the perspective of white, heterosexual, cis-gender women (Chemaly, 2018, 111). The way in which Hinkle recurringly centres the dehumanization of the Black pregnant body engages with a dialogue on the securing of women's rights, including the recognition of the women whose choices and needs are sometimes heavily constrained by their race, class, identity, or abilities.

Collage obscures the access to the Black female body as a source of maternal production in Hinkle's works *The Seer* (2015, fig. 26) and *The Sower* (2015, fig. 27). In *The Sower,* a mother is carrying a child while both look into the camera. A drawing, appearing as a clot of gritty texture, covers the woman's breasts, spreading out like an infection across her and her child. Flame-shaped drawings connect the tops of their heads, swirling outwards like golden crowns. The drawings visualize the impact of the colonial gaze with which the French colonists took and spread these photographs, reflecting their afterlife in the generational trauma of Black people. The colonial gaze upon them has infectiously spread, not only by the commodification of the woman's nurturing body, but also in its psychological impact. It may represent the internalization of the white gaze, where individuals start to believe in the negative stereotypes about their racial background. The drawn elements simultaneously represent a parasitical gaze upon their bodies, and visually protect them from being seen by that gaze. As Hinkle states on her website, her reference to sickness creates a metaphor in which she compares the entrance and spreading of a disease in the body to the French occupation of Africa and its abuse of the Black female body (Hinkle, 2023).

Figure 26: *The Seer*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2015. *The Uninvited Series*. Collage, India ink, polyfilm, acrylic paint on wood panel, 12.7 x 12.7 cm. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

Figure 117: *The Sower*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2015. *The Uninvited Series*. Collage, India ink, polyfilm, acrylic paint on wood panel. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

In *The Seer,* the figure is almost completely concealed within the collage. Incapsulated by whirling shapes, she gazes back at the viewer. The coral and orange toned fragments are recurring through several of Hinkle's collages. They are shaped like sperm, trying to find their way through the collage. *The Seer* confronts the sexualized gaze, reflecting on the impact of sexual violence against women in colonized areas. The collage creates a sense of discomfort through the figure's disdained and sad expression. The viewer is uninvited, the collaged sperm persevering violently.

Hinkle presents the Black female body through a lens that acknowledges the afterlife of the exploitation and possession of Black lives, which has been perpetually present in photographic viewing strategies. Through her drawings and collages, she intervenes with the depiction of Black women in the photographs of the *Uninvited Series.* As the title suggests, Hinkle renegotiates the feeling of access to the Black female body that was inherent to colonialism (Westin, 2015).

Collage: A Blurring of the Edges

Since the start of the European occupation of Africa, the Western representations of the continent have been organized through a Western perception of the world. As Bridget R. Cooks wrote in *The Black Index* (2020), the international spreading of imagery of Black people was reliant on depictions made by racial scientists, artists, and anthropologists, with the intentions of identification, categorization, and containment (Cooks, 2020, 14). This categorization created a false sense of racial hierarchy, since any physical differences were described as "self" or "other". Photography has the image of being objective, supposedly creating a transparency between the viewer and the captured scene. However, the precision of photography conveys a false sense of factuality. What lies hidden is the relationship between the photographer and the captured, and how this dynamic results in manipulated poses, compositions, and perspectives: all factors that dilute the objectivity of photography. Among Black American photographers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as Richard Samuel Roberts, James Latimer Allen and James VanDerZee, there was a demand for self-representation, to counter the colonialist images (Cooks, 2020, 14). Cooks termed this form of alternative representation a *Black Index*:

"The Black index is a strategy to contest the overwhelming number of photographs of Black people as victims of violent crimes that are circulated with such regularity and volume that they no longer refer to the persons they depict. Instead, the photographs become a non-event that marks the monotonous, unremarkable, and numbing condition of the normality of Blackness as death. The Black index creates new synapses, perceptive inroads into conceiving Black death as loss – loss to be mourned and remembered. It argues the loss of something that existed in the full complexity of form and spirit that is not presented in the daily march of photographs of Black death (Cooks, 2020, 14)."

As in Cooks' quote, the colonialist postcards were spread with such regularity that their violence was normalized. Hinkle's collaged interventions counter how such photography overlooked the humanity and individuality of Black people. Instead, the collages create complex mixes of imagery that demand the individuals' lives to be mourned fully and separately, instead of as faceless masses. When considering Hinkle's art as an expression of grief, the significance of collage as Hinkle's method of choice can be linked to philosophical ideas of the survival of images. Within her collages, she intertwines the past with the present through incorporating the ethnographic postcards with the present-day grief caused by the afterlife of the colonial gaze. When objects such as photographs connect us, in the present, to the losses of the past, Aby Warburg's understanding of *Nachleben* comes to mind. Art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was interested in how images persist interculturally across time. Specifically, he discussed how images visually embody emotional states, which can still be accessed in a different moment (Didi-Huberman, 2005, 13). To quote Georges Didi-Huberman's *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain Art History* (2005):

"The history of art invented by Aby Warburg combines, in its fundamental concept – *Nachleben:* 'afterlife' or 'survival' – precisely the powers to *adhere* and to *haunt* that inhere in

all images. By contrast with phenomena of 'rebirth' and the simple transmission through 'influence,' as we say, a *surviving image* is an image that, having lost its original use value and meaning, nonetheless comes back, like a ghost, at a particular historical moment: a moment of 'crisis,' a moment when it demonstrates its latency, its tenacity, its vivacity, and its 'anthropological adhesion,' so to speak (Didi-Huberman, 2005, 22)."

How does the act of collaging interact with Warburg's idea of *Nachleben*? How does the surviving image lose its original value through Hinkle's collaged interventions, and how is this value transformed through a rebirth that occurs in her work?

The French colonists took the photographs that Hinkle uses with a sense of regularity, through which the 'objective' ethnographic lens presents a distance from the heavy psychological weight it caused. Through Hinkle's acts of cutting, covering, and intertwining the photos, she transforms the original images into something new and complex. The afterlife of the unresolved trauma that the images hold is no longer obscured but expressed through the vessel of collage. Through a grotesque visualisation, the colonial gaze materializes upon the Black female body. Collage forms a strategy to propose a different sense of time: the past and present bend to each other. A horizontal timeframe stages the persistency of colonialism and racism between the past and contemporary experiences as intertwined. Through a collaged merging, these issues are shown as continuous and intergenerationally traumatic, rather than as separate historical events. This sense continuity has a feeling of movement to it, that can be found in the collage *The Contagion* (2012, fig. 28).

Figure 128: *The Contagion*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2012. *The Uninvited Series*. India ink, photograph printed on cotton paper, 21.59 x 26.67 cm. Jenkins Johnson Gallery, New York. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

In *The Contagion*, the photographer captured an image of a child both frontally and from her profile. The two shots are presented side-by-side, as Hinkle's drawings cover the child. The drawn appendages are not in the same spot in both images, suggesting a sense that it is moving, spreading, shifting around her body. Hinkle's collage moves the image back and forth between the past and the present, revealing and concealing alternate parts. This sense of temporality can be seen in a state of blurriness and ambiguity. Motion itself is not something that we are supposed to encounter in photography, as Mary Ann Doane argued in her text *The Afterimage, the Index, and the Accessibility of the Present* (Doane, 2002, 83). A blurriness would prevent the precise perception of subjects, threatening photography's supposed ability to portray an objective truth, a transparency. The idea that motion, in the form of ambiguity, goes against traditional artistic ideals, has its parallels to the practice of collage. The overlapping of images, the obscuring of their objectivity, has a similar effect. The collaging in *The Contagion* both inhabits the viewer from a clear perception, and allows for the engagement with multiple perspectives and temporalities, creating a more complex whole. As Fred Moten theorized in his book *Black and Blur* (2017), blurriness is an indistinction that has to be read. It contains an extraordinary amount of information, offering the opportunity to engage with the unknown (Moten, 2017, 234-5; 241). When Tina M. Campt related this text to the perception of the Black body, blurriness both creates and resists the ability to categorize and stereotype the ambiguous person (Campt, Stedelijk Museum, 2024). Through blurriness, the image of the body is obscured, meaning that its objective truth cannot be fully discerned like Doane discussed. It therefore blends into a larger idea of what the blur might conceal, hanging onto familiar definitions of the figure. On the other hand, blurriness creates a cloud of perspectives, an array of complexity that highlights the individuality of what goes unknown. In Hinkle's collages, the Black body is blurred, blended with collaged fragments to challenge the viewer's access to the photographed subject. Through the hybridity of their bodies, Hinkle's figures become grotesque, a quality that is deeply intertwined with blurriness and ambiguity. Besides the visual covering and overlapping of the figures, the sense of movement present in blurriness can be found in Bakhtin's grotesque character too. The grotesque body exists in a state of movement, because of its ever-changing, hybrid shape-shifting nature, consistently in creation and destruction. As in *The Contagion,* through employing collage to create this sense of grotesque blur, the multiplicity of images creates new complex meanings. It expresses an urgency to voice different perspectives, and to acknowledge the existence of Black lives as diverse. By leaning into movement and blur*,* Hinkle reflects upon and rejects the assumptions of both the past and the present. She described her idea of the 'Historical Present' as the following: "The term the 'Historical Present' to me signifies the residue of history and how we are all chained to each other through the past and present (Westin, 2015)." This concept resonates with Warburg's *Nachleben*, blurring past and present together, creating a response to their interconnectedness. She intervenes with photography as presenting an objective truth about the captured Black subjects. Correspondingly, the white paint used in the *Uninvited Series* is White-Out Correction Fluid, used to cover errors (Westin, 2015). Using this fluid, Hinkle's interventions emphasise the erroneous nature of the images.

When considering the errors of the colonial gaze, a reflection on the "primitivist" tendency to see Black women as 'wild' and 'savage' can be recognized in Hinkle's work. Beside the

organic, flowering shapes that represent disease, she incorporates photographic imagery of animals and plants. In *The Arrival* (2016), the eyes of a leopard are collaged behind the female figure (fig. 29). The animal stares at the viewer, confronting them with a 'wildness' that Western stereotypes project onto the Black female body. In *The Mane* (2016), A child has a brightly coloured shape bellowing from her head (fig. 30). The title of this collage portrays this shape as a mane, similarly evoking a sense of animal-like features that the colonial gaze categorized Black subjects with.

Figure 139: *The Arrival*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2016. *The Uninvited Series*. Yupo paper, cotton paper, acrylic paint, panel. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

Figure 3014: *The Mane*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2016. *The Uninvited Series.* © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

Hinkle's comparison of the Black female body to animals correlates with the strong connection of the grotesque body to nature. Likewise, the earlier discussed works *The Mutation* and *The Armor* associate Black women with imagery of the earth. Additionally, in *They Became the Forest and the Forest Became Them* (2014), collaged images of plants cover a nude Black woman's body and mouth (fig. 31). The collaged coverings symbolize the parasitical colonial gaze on their bodies, while also visually offering protection against this gaze. When comparing the relationship between humans and nature, our liveliness is protected by nature's regenerative supply of resources, although our parasitical exploitation of the earth will lead to its destruction, as well as our own. A parallel can thus be found between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of the Black female body. Their collaged merging places them on equal standing, visualising a horizontal relationship between the two.

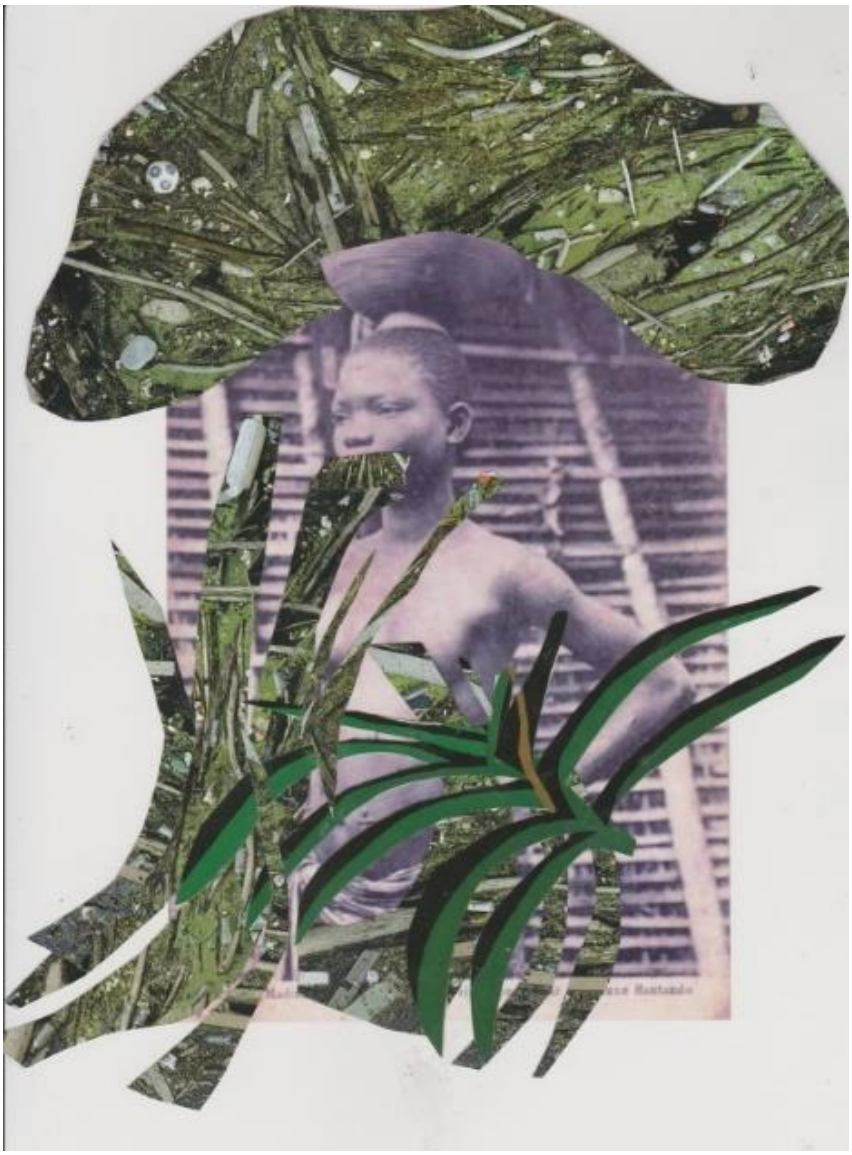

Figure 31: *They Became the Forest and the Forest Became Them*, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, 2014. *The Uninvited Series.* Collage on polyfilm, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. © Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle.

The horizontal placement of time is an element of Hinkle's collages that this thesis discussed previously. The collaged aesthetic allows the photographs to create a different relationship to time. Collage blurs the presence and absence of an objective truth that the photograph captures, through the intertwining of the past and present. As a third temporality, Hinkle's collages show the persistency of the effects of colonialism, not only through the trauma of the Black female body, but also through the exploitation of nature. There is a sense of grief present in the relationship between humanity and nature. We presently continue the exploitative capitalist afterlife of colonialism into the future, of which the future loss of our habitat becomes increasingly tangible.

When relating collage to the future, the hybrid figure of the cyborg comes to mind. Visually, the cyborg plays a less explicit role in Hinkle's work than in Wangechi Mutu's and Otobong Nkanga's oeuvres. In Hinkle's collages, the visualisation of the cyborg is not presented

through futuristic imagery. There is a conceptual attachment to the figure however, when considering how Hinkle emphasises on the afterlife of the moment when the Black female body became exploited and perceived as a unit of labour. Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg contains a sense of blurriness too, since it blurs the boundaries between human and machine, creating a sense of ambiguity. Valued for her capability to produce, rather than for her humanity, colonialism framed the Black female body like a machine. The afterimage of this dehumanization is inherent in the formation of the cyborg.

Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's collaged interventions in photography show how the moment when the Black body became no longer human, but a unit of labour, reverberates into the present. Even when Black people have gained rights, the constraining afterlife of colonialism forms a fundamental distinction where Western society does not value Black people as much as the white subject. In this inequitable relationship, colonialism resonates like a parasite that limits Black people from inhabiting equal possibilities and equal access to safety. Hinkle's use of collage offers a way to turn grief into grievance, calling for recognition of the perseverance of the past with the emergency needed to tend to a fast-spreading disease.

The expression of grief is present throughout Hinkle's oeuvre: in *the Evanescence* through the erasure of lost Black lives; in the *Kentifrica Project* by imagining a space that holds the memories of lost places and fragmented cultures; in the *Tituba* series through emphasising the societal othering of the female Black body. In her collages of colonial photographs from the 19th and 20th century, Hinkle creates an active dialogue between the past and the present. The photographs were part of the Western categorization of 'the unknown', spreading staged images of Black women and children as depictions of their objective truths. They represent the commodification and dehumanization of Black women, experiences which haunt into the present. Through cutting, correcting, and combining, Hinkle's collages invite a sense of multiplicity to counter the singular truth that the photographs seemingly depict. In many collages of the *Uninvited Series,* the women are abstracted from their backgrounds, singled out against a backdrop of a bold colour. Hinkle brings their afterimage to the present, as she blurs the distinctions between these women's narratives and the contemporary conditions of Black life. Through metaphors of disease, natural elements, and ambiguity, Hinkle's figures align with the grotesque. The multiplicity in the grotesque challenges the viewer to enter a blurriness, to unravel the intertwining of historical perspectives through the strategy of collage. Hinkle's artistic responses to the past highlight how a phenomenon that is no longer physically present is very much alive in the cognitive presence of society, framing the past not as the past, but woven into the present. The afterlife of colonialism is then visualised through a collaged interweaving of its effects on humanity and nature in the past, the present and on-living into the future.

Conclusion

In this thesis, three case studies explored how Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle use collage to portray the Black female body and how they use it to comment on the relationship between humanity, ecology, and colonialism. Central to this exploration were elements of the grotesque and the cyborg, two concepts which can be connected to the collaged depiction of the intertwinement between humanity and the environment. The main research question of this thesis was the following:

How and why is the collaged Black female body intertwined with colonialism and environmental issues, as well as with the figures of the grotesque and the cyborg, in the collaged works of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga, and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle?

This was explored through a set of secondary questions, discussed in three separate case studies: How does collage form a crucial technique in representing the impact of colonialism on environmental issues in the work of Wangechi Mutu, Otobong Nkanga and Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle? How do artists Mutu, Nkanga, and Hinkle subvert Black women's bodies to move beyond a colonial narrative of nature and its connection to the female body? How does collage relate a contemporary image of Mother Nature to Black women's bodies, incorporating aspects of the grotesque and the cyborg?

Overview of the Case Studies

The first case study of this thesis examined Wangechi Mutu's collaged oeuvre. Mutu's choice of sources for her collages – ranging from photography from the National Geographic and medical illustrations to pornography and fashion magazines – creates a critical lens through which she examines the residue of the colonial gaze. These sources emphasize the overarching theme of consumption: the consumption of media, of resources, and of the Black female body – the latter through sexualizing and stereotyping Black women. A colonial gaze can be found in each of these parts. Colonialist practices of knowledge-making and scientific categorization have influenced the Western media we consume. They have determined what is seen and reproduced as the norm, centring the Western white man and marginalizing others – and similarly, defining the Black female body by a harmful set of stereotypes. In Mutu's collages, the critique of Western belief systems can for example be found in her depiction of the Nguva from folklore. Furthermore, her depiction of the biblical Eve reclaims autonomy and knowledge, while responding to the colonial violence inflicted on the Black female body. Additionally, the sources Mutu uses highlight the relationship between such effects of colonialism and the deteriorating environment. Since these sources are steeped in capitalist consumerism, they reflect the cycles of overproduction and overconsumption that aid the ecological decline.

Mutu's maximalist collages decentre the human form as a protagonist, by transforming it into a grotesque body: overloaded with images of mould, soil, plants, bacteria, and animals. Such symbiosis recounts the thought of vital materialism, it expresses the importance of inhabiting a space as part of an ecosystem instead of dominating the system and being its main protagonist. Mutu's figures are ambiguous because of their collaged form. They intentionally break down hierarchical structures of species, and comment on socially constructed racial hierarchies. The fragmentation inherent to collage encourages this re-evaluation of such systemic norms. Besides, it functions to redefine the existing narratives portrayed on Black female bodies. Mutu emphasises otherness through the collaged grotesque, dismantling pervasive stereotypes and beauty ideals. Collage serves as a method to offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of Black womanhood, intertwining it with broader colonial and ecological themes. For example, Mutu depicts spiders and trees as symbols of communication and repair within an ecosystem, in which she centres the Black female body as a source of repair and resilience. Its resourcefulness is emphasised through the theme of motherhood as well, symbolizing endless creation to juxtapose colonial – and environmental – destruction. However, this position is not without violence, clearly showing the impact of colonialism on this body through its grotesque form and its merging with manufactured technological objects. The figure of the cyborg returns in Mutu's collages through these mechanical elements, reflecting on the colonial treatment of Black lives as units of productivity. She uses collage to present figures that reflect on the afterlife of colonialism on the Black female body, connecting it to nature and consumption through elements of the grotesque and the cyborg.

The 80second case study examined how Otobong Nkanga's artworks use a collaged aesthetic to portray the Black female body, and how this reflects on the dynamic between humanity, nature, and colonialism. Nkanga's collaged tapestries and paintings create visual networks, where grafts connect the human figure, often a Black woman, with natural elements and manufactured products. The artworks have a clean look, compared to the maximalist collages of Mutu. This leads to a detached feeling, where the lack of expressiveness does not match the heaviness associated with the narrative the art presents. The viewer is challenged to follow the networks Nkanga presents to untangle the legacies of colonialism. This disparity creates an uncomfortability, amplifying the grotesque content of the artworks. Adding to the grotesque, Nkanga's figures appear broken down and reassembled, mixed with natural and mechanical parts. The figure of the cyborg is recognizable in Otobong Nkanga's art too, where it returns in a much sleeker aesthetic than in Mutu's collages. The figures resemble parts of a machine, because of their mechanical nature. A critique of capitalist production and consumption plays a large factor in the artworks' narratives. Nkanga comments on the commodification and alienation present within capitalist systems, where people and nature are exploited for profit. Here, collage blurs the boundaries between the technological and the organic. It transforms the Black female body into a commodity of capitalist and colonial systems, exploiting it as an interchangeable mechanic part. Capitalist exploitation parallels colonialist practices, which Nkanga emphasises through the continual "zooming out" in her artworks: her art portrays cosmic scenes in which timelines and realities are blended. She depicts the ongoing violent relationships between humanity and ecology through a larger understanding of interconnectedness, fitting into Haraway's concept of *string figures.* Besides, the cosmic

perspective decentres humanity as the centre of the universe, tying it into a vital materialist mindset too. The collaged aesthetic aids in the blending of timelines, and it allows the art to reflect on diasporic identity. As in *Loss* (2020), *Revelations* (2020) and *The Weight of Scars* (2015), the fragmented parts connect together to portray an identity made up of different cultures and places. Collaged maps reveal multiple geographical identities, and reflect the historical process of cartography and colonization, where fragmented and frequently distorted perspectives of "the other" were imposed on the world. The collaged fragmentation and incompleteness in Nkanga's artworks contrast with the theme of regeneration that her art presents. Through reconnection with the environment, Nkanga proposes a healing of the relationship between humanity and our surroundings, as in *The Embrace* (2014). Collage presents both the destruction and (re)construction of this relationship, pushing for a dialogue on ecological approaches that is built on postcolonial perspectives.

Lastly, in Kenyatta AC Hinkle's art, collage challenges the surviving image of the colonial gaze upon the Black female body. The integration of natural and animalistic imagery portrays the impact of colonialism as a disease spreading on Black women's bodies. By using collage, Hinkle transforms colonial photography, recontextualizing the interaction between the photographer, the viewer and the subject in the present. Hinkle's concept of the "Historical Present" underlines her approach to exploring the lasting effects of colonial history in contemporary society. The continuous metaphor in which colonialism is presented as an infection connects to Bakhtin's grotesque figure. Hinkle's use of the grotesque overloads the Black female body with images of land, natural elements, and organic shapes. It emphasises the parasitical nature of colonialism and suggests a sense of ecological regeneration and resilience in both this body and the colonized nature. It highlights the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, centring the collaged Black female body to visualize the horrific impact that colonizing and capitalist endeavours have had on both people and nature.

Hinkle's collages play with the viewer's expectations of access to the Black female body, using collage to reclaim agency in pregnancy, motherhood, and nudity. Collage furthermore creates a commentary on the assumed objectivity of photography, where its transparency is blurred through fragmentation and a sense of movement. The dynamic nature of collage additionally enhances the sense of movement inherent to diaspora. Aside from that, it challenges the static and reductive stereotypes of Black women. The ambiguity of both collage and the grotesque elements allows Hinkle to reflect the complexity of individual experiences. Meanwhile, the blurring of timelines highlights the way colonial history persists intergenerationally. The act of collage creates a form of mourning and remembrance, where loss is represented in a layering of images that invites a dialogue between the past and the present. It makes visible the enduring impact of racial terror and the commodification of Black women, offering a space for recognition of ongoing injustices.

A Comparison of Collages

Across the three case studies, there are differences in how the relationship between humanity, ecology, and colonialism is addressed by collaging the Black female body and overloading it with natural and mechanical elements. First of all, the three artists' oeuvres each lay the emphasis on different aspects of this relationship between humanity, ecology and colonialism. For Mutu, collage predominantly forms a way to challenge stereotypes of Black women that dehumanize and eroticize their bodies and take away their agency. Mutu's collages include folklore, biblical references, and the narratives that multiple media sources present of Black women. All together, these aspects visualize the stereotypes and fantasies that Western society creates of Black women. Mutu highlights the adaptability of the Black female body, by exaggerating its versatility in the form of collaged fragmentation. This leads to the distinctly "other" and grotesque bodies in her artworks. Additionally, Mutu comments on environmental degradation through the theme of consumption. Consumption returns in several ways, such as the visual motifs of eating and biting, but also the consumption of the Black female body. This body is consumed through reductive media presentations, but has also historically been consumed as a resource, both for reproduction and labour. Production and consumption form a cycle which is recognizable as a characteristic of Bakhtin's grotesque body, as it visualises the Black female body in an open dialogue with the environment. The two are connected through their shared trauma caused by colonialism and exploitation. She explores the symbiosis of humanity and nature, with the Black female body as a symbol for the resilience of the people who have been dehumanized and exploited in a comparable way to how society exploits non-human beings.

Not all artworks in Nkanga's oeuvre are strictly defined collages, but her way of connecting narratives by presenting them as fragmented yet grafted together creates an aesthetic that is similar to collage. She uses collage to reflect on the scars left by colonialism: through the extraction of resources from nature and the exploitation of human labour. Materiality is a recurring theme in Nkanga's art: she emphasizes the ongoing impact of colonialism through questioning our relationship to minerals, landscapes, and industrial remnants. Through a "zooming out", Nkanga replaces the importance of such materials on equal grounds as humanity's assumed authority in the universe. She portrays the interconnectedness of ecosystems, and how colonialism disrupts their livelihood. In these artworks, Like in Mutu's artworks, the Black female body portrays the resilient nature of the colonized land and its inhabitants, through their shared trauma of exploitation. Nkanga emphasises a dialogue between of the Black female body with nature as a symbol for repair, to highlight both the scars left by our toxic relationship to the environment and to call for a healing of this relationship.

In Hinkle's artworks, collage transforms colonialist photography of Black women and children to reclaim identity and agency. Collage creates an ongoing dialogue between remnants of the past and the present, inviting a space for commemoration. The addition of organic shapes and textures frames the Black female body as a site to visualise the parasitic relationship between colonialism, ecology, and humanity. The collaged images create a play

of access and blurriness, protecting the Black female body from the colonial gaze and highlighting its harmful effects. Hinkle's collages place the emphasis on grief and loss, suggesting a connection between the dehumanization of Black women and the exploitation of nature. The fragmentation and assemblage at work within collage creates a recurring focus on the need for a comprehensive approach to repair, to heal the physical, psychological and ecological impact of colonial history.

Elements of the grotesque and the cyborg recur throughout the discussion of the three oeuvres, although their features differ across the case studies. The inconsistency of the elements of the grotesque and the cyborg across the three case studies is one of the limitations of this thesis, although arguments can be made that the figures are present conceptually where their visual representation lacks. While Mutu and Hinkle create figures that have distinct visual elements of illness, asymmetry, horror, ambiguity, and sexuality, Nkanga's figures are of a much cleaner aesthetic. However, the grotesque is expressed through their fragmentation and the narratives they portray. Collage shows parallels to the grotesque through its ambiguity, asymmetry, fragmentation and incompleteness. The grotesque functions as a way to portray vital materialist ideas of forming alliances between species and non-living things, engaging deeply with postcolonial ecology. The creation of the collaged grotesque visualises a breaking down of ecological hierarchies and confronts racial othering. In Mutu's and Hinkle's work, the grotesque figures reclaim Black women's agency through multiplicity and a critique on their portrayals in the collaged media sources. The sickliness and incompleteness of the figures in the three oeuvres presents the scars left by colonialism, and their ongoing impact. When combined with elements of the cyborg, the grotesque figures create a complex commentary on consumerism, ecology, and exploitation. The cyborg is most clearly distinguishable in Mutu's and Nkanga's figures, through their partly mechanical bodies. However, in Hinkle's artworks, the idea of the cyborg is present only through the narrative behind the collages. The cyborg comments on how colonialism dehumanized the Black female body and valued it as a reproductive engine. Such dehumanization resonates into the present, for example in the medical treatment of pregnancy, in which ethnicity plays a role in how care is provided to patients.

Besides, since especially Nkanga and Hinkle focus on a blending of timelines, the cyborg projects the collaged figures into the future. Aside from connecting the present to the past, Hinkle, Nkanga and Mutu's collages relate contemporary societal issues of racism and ecological degradation to an imagined future. In this future, specifically Nkanga and Mutu prospect a reality of ecological despair. A critique of approaches to Western science plays a role in this prospection: all three oeuvres employ collage to visualise the persistence of colonialism within Western science, and how its assumed transparency is situated in a colonial gaze. Simultaneously, Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle call for repair and interconnectedness: they use collage to let grotesque and futuristic imagery inspire a move towards sustainability in the present, in how we act towards each other and the environment. To quote Mikhail Bakhtin: "In the grotesque body, death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation. The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of

intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image (Bakhtin, 1995, 230).” Similar to Bakhtin’s quote on the grotesque, collage presents a simultaneous persistency and rebirth of images. This combination of the importance of the past and the need for renewal visualises a transformation of the global approaches to ecology. It emphasises the lingering effects of colonialism, while it proposes a vital materialist way of equating humanity and the environment.

The three case studies portrayed a contemporary artistic expression of the relationship between humanity, nature, and colonialism. Although their emphasis lays on different aspects, the three oeuvres of Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle refer to the same narrative: the collaged rendering of the Black female body becomes a symbol for the harmful relationship between humanity and ecology, centring the exploitative colonial trauma that Black women and nature share. This is not to say that the polluting of the environment carries the same psychological and physical harm that Black women have endured intergenerationally. Instead, Black women and nature are connected in their regeneration and resilience, and collage is used to reclaim their agency when the voices of Black women are repressed in Western media, similar to how the existence of non-human parts of our environment is dismissed. In the artworks discussed in this thesis, collage creates a social critique on the intergenerational realities of Black womanhood, reclaiming narratives, identities and spaces damaged by colonialism. Through depictions of motherhood, visualizations of stereotypes, expressions of destruction and rebirth, collage underlines a complexity and multiplicity of Black women, which rejects their objectification and reduction. By overloading the Black female body with natural elements, collage renders a depiction of a Mother Nature that is intertwined with vital materialism, postcolonialism, and ecofeminism. The urgency of environmental concerns overlaps with the urgency of Black grief, in which collage forms a way to express these concerns and their intergenerational impact.

Discussion of Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis has some limitations, such as the boundaries of what can be defined as collage in Nkanga’s artworks. An interview with the artist would have been useful to investigate her artistic approach as a collaged aesthetic further, but unfortunately there was no response to the email I sent to her representative gallery. It may have also offered insights on the conceptual inclusion of grotesque elements in Nkanga’s art. Furthermore, Hinkle’s art lacks visual aspects that that are similar to the figure of the cyborg. This creates a gap in the comparison of cyborg-elements across the three case studies.

There are parallels between the case studies which have not been addressed in each of the chapters separately. For example, Warburg’s idea of *Nachleben* is mainly discussed in Hinkle’s case study, whereas similar connections can be made between the idea of “afterlife” and Mutu’s and Nkanga’s art. Mutu’s collages portray the lingering colonial gaze in contemporary Western media. Nkanga focuses on the afterlife of colonialism through how we interact with objects and materials. Their collages present a reworking of the past too,

although Hinkle most clearly takes colonial imagery from the past and transforms it. Her work is therefore most fitting to recognize Warburg's idea of *Nachleben*.

For future research, Walter Benjamin's text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) could provide an insightful addition to collage and the idea of *Nachleben*. Benjamin discussed the "aura" of artworks, in the light of the development of film and the modernization of society. With the photographic nature of Hinkle's collages for example, the idea of the artwork's aura could be discussed when linking photographs from the past to the present trough collage. Benjamin's text could provide a discussion on how collage interacts with such "aura", and, invertedly, how the afterlife of mechanically reproduced artworks reverberates into the present.

Aside from that, a deeper discussion of the history of collage, Afrofuturist art, as well as ecofeminist art, land art and bio-art would have been an insightful addition to this thesis – such as an exploration of Hannah Höch's depiction of "the racial other" in collage. Additionally, there are several other artists whose oeuvres connect to that of Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle: such as Chelle Barbour, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, and Shoshanna Weinberg. A comparison could be made with any of these artists' collages, to create a broader perspective of the collaged Black female body and its relationship to ecology. Besides, within the oeuvres of Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle, there are multiple artworks which are not included in this thesis due to a limitation on space and time, although their content would have strengthened my arguments.

Within the use of collage, humour and irony could also be further discussed as strategies to reflect on socially engaged topics such as the intersections of race, gender, and ecology. Satire is a part of the grotesque figure, of which more context could have been provided too. For example, how it interacts with not only notions of beauty but also anti-aesthetics, further connecting it to collage through its parallels with Dada.

The theme of repair recurs in this thesis, since It forms a bridge between ecology and colonialism, and between the past and the present. Besides, collage is in a way an act of repair. Repair does not always provide a healing of the pervasive damage done in the past. Within this disparity between intentions and results, there is a similarity to how Judith Butler described the effectiveness and urgency of societal grievance: "Some gap opens between the experience of loss and the appeal to repair and rectify that loss, for there is no guarantee that justice can rectify or resolve a loss (Butler, 2020, 11)." This thesis could connect to 'repair' further through an in-depth discussion of actions of decolonization and repatriation, for example by relating it to artist's critical oeuvres such as that of Kader Attia and Renzo Martens. Connecting to the persistency of colonialism, a discussion of Afro-pessimist theory would have been a valuable addition to this thesis. Afro-pessimism forms a critique of the nature of systemic racism, specifically in the United States, where both Mutu and Hinkle are working from.

On the topic of ecology, more (postcolonial) theories could have been presented to approach the global issue, broadening out from mainly a vital materialist perspective. Besides, the interactions between gender and environmental attitudes present interesting themes for further

research, such as the portrayal of male domination over nature. The history of portraying Mother Nature in art is another aspect which could be added to this study in future research. As Catherine M. Roach wrote in *Mother / Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics* (2003), the passions of humanity towards nature – the urge to love, to destroy, and to heal nature – can all be found in the depictions of Mother Nature (Roach, 2003, 8). A comparison of such depictions over the course of art history may provide insights into how our relationship to ecology over time has been expressed artistically.

Furthermore, the connection between colonialism and capitalism is a complex narrative which is not completely included in the brevity of this thesis. The two have ongoingly been linked throughout history, reverberating in how our society acts in consumerism and our relationship to the environment. The psychological processes that drive consumption were a compelling aspect which came up in the case study on Nkanga. In her artistic approach, she challenges the ways in which we forget or repress the realities of production behind consumption. What psychological processes drive us to value the satisfaction of consumerism over the longevity of our planet and the wellbeing of the people around us? Billig's study explored this through citing Freudian psychology, but since his arguments are from 1999 it would be interesting to include a more recent perspective.

Lastly, as stated before, my perspective as a white European woman means that my interpretation of these artists' work and their approach of depicting Black women, which reflects upon their lived experience as Black women, will unavoidably have blind spots. A more intense dialogue with these artists can limit these shortcomings.

Concluding Statement

This thesis aimed to contribute to the gaps in previous literature on the work of Mutu, Nkanga and Hinkle, by reflecting on the relationship between collage, ecology, and colonialism in their art. Both the marginalisation of Black women and the environmental crisis are contemporary issues with roots in the history of colonialism. Artistic expressions such as Mutu's, Nkanga's and Hinkle's offer relevant perspectives on how postcolonial ecology is crucial in addressing the intertwinement of these issues. Through the three case studies, this thesis explored the ways collage can be used to propose a transformation of ecological approaches, including elements of the grotesque and the figure of the cyborg. By centring the Black female body as intertwined with nature, the three artists depict the lasting effects of colonialism on how we treat the environment. Collage forms a crucial visual method to deliver this message, through its acts of destruction, rebuilding, and repair.

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