



HETEROTOPIC ECOLOGIES —

Art Exhibitions as Sites of Activist Intervention / Imagination

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MA Museum Studies Thesis

Cover Image Noel W Anderson,
Invagination (detail), 2016-2017.

Heterotopic Ecologies: Art Exhibitions as Sites of Activist Intervention / Imagination
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University of Amsterdam, MA Museum Studies Thesis
 Submitted 31 January 2021

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of art in the (dis)reconciliation of unjust sociopolitical realities, specifically that of Black oppression in the United States and the climate crisis. Analysis is guided by the research question: What spatial and temporal mechanisms are at play in the contexts of activist art exhibitions, and how is the museum/exhibition space (as heterotopia) figured as a site of resistance? Two temporary art exhibitions are used as case studies. The first case is a solo exhibition by print-media and textile artist Noel W Anderson titled *Blak Origin Moment*. Framed by the question “When did you know you were Black?”, *Blak Origin Moment* reflects on representations of Blackness as they are heightened in media and instances of police brutality. The second iteration of the show was staged in 2019 at the Hunter Museum of American Art (Chattanooga, Tennessee USA). The second case study is a collaboration between lawyer and academic Radha D’Souza and visual artist Jonas Staal called the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes (CICC)*. The *CICC* will be presented at Framer Framed (Amsterdam, NL) in the fall of 2021, during which it will host evidentiary hearings for the prosecution of corporations’ crimes against human, non-human and more-than-human life. Reflecting on these two cases, this thesis positions the art space, enriched by its heterotopic character, as fertile ground for the negotiation of public sensibility—constructed through aesthetics and temporality and configuring modes of perception and meaning around social issues.

Keywords

Activist art, heterotopia, politics of time, the sensible, museum, climate crisis, police brutality

CONTENTS

On Reflection / Preface	5
Introduction	6
Methodology	
Chapter I: Situated Art—Time and the Sensible	12
1.1 The Space of Art	
1.2 Political Time	
1.3 The Museum in Resistance	
Chapter II: <i>Blak Origin Moment</i> (Chattanooga, Tennessee US)	24
2.1 Counter / Held Space	
2.2 Leaking Landscape	
2.3 Re-Threaded Time	
Chapter II.b: Figuring (The Black Body and the Police)	43
Chapter III: <i>Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes</i> (Amsterdam, NL)	50
3.1 Constructing Utopia	
3.2 Other Kin	
3.3 Intergenerational & Static Time	
Chapter IV: Inter-Section	71
4.1 Destabilized Ecologies	
Conclusion	78
On Grief	
Acknowledgements	85
Bibliography	86
List of Figures	88
Interview Appendix	90

Some art—particularly the possibilities certain art rehearses by presenting concepts, images, actions, and ways of being not yet expressed in instituted culture—points to a way forward...But art like this exercises its critical function at a distance from the everyday and the real. At the end of the encounter, it's we who must return and face the day, enriched by how we have been made to look and to think.

Darby English¹

¹ “To Describe A Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror,” 2019, xi.

ON REFLECTION / PREFACE

I have been taught, in my study of art history, to write about art in the present tense. The painting *juxtaposes* rather than *juxtaposed*. This is in fact similar to how books are written about—catching their narratives and characters in endless motion. I have always understood this way of writing, the present-ing of artworks, as a tactic for making your writing sound more urgent and thus more convincing (another linked relationship we can interrogate). However, as I began to think and write about this project, I started to see this trick of tenses differently. I realized it spoke in itself to a confluence of time. Because what we do when we write about art and various acts of creation in the present tense is actually to render them ongoing. We conjure artworks across space and time. We bring them here to reflect and act within a present that is not their own.

So, we've brought art alongside us to face an increasingly troubled present tense. Now, what can it do?

INTRODUCTION

The subtitle of this thesis reads *Art Exhibitions as Sites of Activist Intervention / Imagination*. This thesis is written to both theorize what activist art ‘could do’ in the context of its presentation, as well as interpret what activist art does do in two cases. The case studies chosen are exhibitions that confront two of the most pressing issues of social justice today: Black liberation (especially in the context of the United States) and the climate crisis. Taking these cases together has not been a coincidence; I write from the entanglement, the knot of ecocide and genocide—positioned by Gene Ray as the predicament of modernity.² We saw this knotting in the slave laboring of farms in the Southern United States: the economized subjugation of Black people and earth timed in rhythm. We see it today in the tear gas released to harm protestors enraged by the loss of Black lives and left in residue to alter the environment in an extent not yet known.

The first case study is a solo exhibition by artist Noel W Anderson titled *Blak Origin Moment* and framed by the question “When did you know you were Black?” The exhibition was initially mounted in 2017 at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Its second iteration, which this thesis explores, took place at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee from October 2019 to January 2020. The second case study in this thesis project is titled *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes (CICC)*. The *CICC* is a collaboration between lawyer and academic Radha D’Souza and visual artist Jonas Staal, which will be presented at Framer Framed in Amsterdam during fall of 2021. The exhibition will see the installation of a large-scale tribunal infrastructure, a site that will host evidentiary hearings for the prosecution of the crimes for which it is named. Reflecting on these two cases, this thesis asks: What spatial and temporal mechanisms are at play in the contexts of activist art exhibitions, and how is the museum/exhibition space (as heterotopia) figured as a site of resistance?

I have named the two exhibitions, *Blak Origin Moment* and *CICC*, as ‘activist’ because of their politically engaged content. Further, their makers inarguably act within social issues, as they seek to reconstruct the systems of knowledge and sensing which have produced them. For D’Souza and Staal’s *CICC*, this act, as will become clear, is

² Gene Ray, “Writing the Ecocide-Genocide Knot: Indigenous Knowledge and Critical Theory in the Endgame,” *South as a State of Mind* #8 [documenta #3] (Fall/Winter 2016).

intentionally political as they seek to intervene in imaginaries of justice as sought through legal frameworks. The case of Noel W Anderson and *Blak Origin Moment* is trickier to qualify. Anderson surely considers the political ties running through his work, crafting them with intention, but we should also keep in mind the inherent political charge in representing Blackness. Roshad Demetrie Weeks, in a short, yet pointed essay titled “The Bond of Live Things Everywhere: What Black Nature Might Look Like”, 2020, refers to the assumed political subjectivity of Black figures, even when represented without political markers (i.e., clear indications of socioeconomic status or ties with activist movements). Calling on a concept by Kevin Quashie, Weeks attributes this to the “overrepresentation of those who are Black as political subjects always already responding to the state and society[, leaving] little room, if any at all, for the [subject] to be his own self”.³

Holding these two case studies together places me in a particular relationship to the different time scales of their presentation. I look back toward Anderson’s *Blak Origin Moment* with a year having passed since its time at the Hunter Museum. In contrast, the *C/CC* exhibition has not and will not take place before this thesis is ultimately finished, placing its physical presentation in a future to come. Interestingly, my situation in writing about these two cases mirrors the way their political issues are often framed in the social landscape.

As I write this, it has been over 315 days since the murder of Breonna Taylor. This ever-rising count of ‘days since’ has been a temporal frame especially used for proclaiming the injustice of Taylor’s murder but is also common for other victims of police brutality. Similarly, we proclaim the years and hundreds of years it has been since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the desegregation of schools, and the ratification of the 13th Amendment. The major rises and falls in the struggle for Black liberation in the US are constantly being placed behind us. This may inhibit the fight to account for racial injustice and Black death in the present, contributing to the cyclicity of the fight toward emancipation.

³ Roshad Demetrie Weeks, “The Bond of Live Things Everywhere: What Black Nature Might Look Like,” *African American Intellectual History Society*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-bond-of-live-things-everywhere-what-black-nature-might-look-like/#fn-66821-2>.

The popular framing of the climate and ecological crises situates them as problems that belong to our future; contrasting the scale of Black oppression, time here seems to run the other way. According to the Climate Clock, which urges its viewers to ‘act in time’, we have just over seven years to take structural action to mediate the effects of global warming.⁴ For climate change, material also becomes important with attempts to measure the tons of carbon we have left to emit, the degrees of warming we can afford. Thus, the framing for the climate crisis proclaims time and material ‘until’. Such projections of the climate crisis as a problem of the future, something we have yet to witness, have been derided as of late. How can we have time left when the fires burning across Australia and California tell us climate change is already here? How can we have time left when the loss and extinction of life caused by our exploitation of the environment scream that the climate crisis already happened?

This thesis approaches and understands the sociopolitical issues bound up in its case studies as stretched across time, with roots in violent histories and effect for our future worlds. Accordingly, I look to how *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* disrupt the popular and chronological narratives of Black oppression and climate change to render the spectator’s interpretation and experience of them anew.

Methodology

To point to my research methodology, the conclusions of this thesis draw from formal analysis of the artworks and exhibitions of each case study, also considering them within their institutional and geopolitical contexts. Additionally, a wide breadth of reading and literature review have helped to shape the interpretation of various aspects of the exhibitions as well as my understanding of the potential of art to act as a medium for activism. Specific methodologies were shaped according to the individual case studies. For *Blak Origin Moment*, I was able to review exhibition materials including the catalogue of its Cincinnati iteration, as well as press reviews and visitor responses courtesy of the Hunter Museum. Alongside these materials, I conducted interviews and conversations with Noel W Anderson, Monique Long, an independent curator who

⁴ As of 4 October 2020 on <https://climateclock.world/>.

advised on the exhibition's installation, and the Hunter Museum's chief curator Nandini Makrandi. I was also able to review online content, such as recordings of presentations and discussions, where Anderson spoke about his work for *Blak Origin Moment*.

The types of materials I could review for the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* were quite different and evolving as the exhibition developed in planning. This thesis inevitably attends to D'Souza and Staal's project more on the level of concept than in practice. However, I was given special access to the *CICC* because I helped with research and preparation for the exhibition on behalf of Framer Framed, so I was included in the meetings to discuss the *CICC* in the lead up to its production. During these meetings, I could listen to D'Souza and Staal and hear their conceptualization of the project. I was also able to review sketches for the design of the court and information on the cases to be prosecuted. With these, I could develop my thoughts on the *CICC* more easily. At the same time, it is important to make clear my close relation to the project, which implicates me in turn.

Thinking through implication, it is also necessary for me to consider the situated perspective from which I come toward these projects. In the introduction to a panel on affective responses to the climate crisis, its narratives and effects, artist Clementine Edwards asked the audience "At which point did climate change touch you, and how does that speak to your implication?"⁵ This notion of when crisis, change, pain were felt pointing to the implicability of an individual can be expanded to many other social injustices. Before beginning to unpack these projects, I must be blunt about the privilege with which I approach them. As a white, imperialist subject, my gaze is bound up in legacies of oppression. I hope not to cause more harm in assuming a voice on the issues central here. It is a result of privilege that I am able to look and keep looking at the images of these exhibitions, to conceptualize histories of pain without being traumatized enough to have to turn away. As you read, consider—when did you wake up to these issues?

The body of this thesis begins with a first chapter laying out my theoretical framework, as it builds on concepts surrounding the imaginative potential of art (with

⁵ Clementine Edwards, "Crisis Imaginaries Chapter 3: Climate Feelings," Online panel from Framer Framed, Amsterdam, 25 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gvDFOVXUYc>.

regard to aesthetics and sensibility), the politics of time as mediated by the activist, and the revolutionary potential of the heterotopic art space. This review includes insights from scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Judith Barry, Lara Khaldi, and Rolando Vázquez. This framework orients the rest of the thesis, as a lens through which to evaluate each case study. I then move into respective chapters for the two case studies, wherein I analyze how heterotopia is advanced through the art exhibition; I also explore the temporal specificities of each exhibition with an eye to how social constructions of time are disrupted. Between these case study chapters, I have included a sub-chapter to make space for a closer look at Noel W Anderson's reflections on identity, specifically posed in police encounters, and the implications of this within the museum. A short fourth chapter follows the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* case study, in which I draw a comparative analysis of the two exhibitions based on my findings for each. Finally, I come to my conclusion to briefly summarize the insights of each chapter and situate these cases in a broader framework of art and social justice.

CHAPTER I: *SITUATED
ART—TIME AND THE
SENSIBLE*

The theoretical framework of this thesis grows from three branches of thought: firstly, the world-making possibilities of art, secondly, the situation of time and activism, and lastly, the heterotopic role of the museum. This framework is laid out here to explain my view of the activist artist in exhibition, as it derives from scholarship on the three themes above. In the first two sections below on aesthetics and time, we start from the trouble (à la Donna Haraway). Here Rolando Vázquez has been crucial for my understanding of modernity as it relates to ongoing colonial violence.

Vázquez often writes modernity and coloniality in tandem as “modernity/coloniality” to emphasize the indispensability of the colonial as it constitutes modern life; to exist today is to be a product, agent, subject of colonialism. The dash between the two then represents the dividing line; that which sets certain bodies and ways of living outside of modernity’s dominion of experience. This setting outside, or exclusion, occurs both through aesthetics and time. As explored at length below—for aesthetics, this occurs through control of representation and thus experience of reality. Modern/colonial time, on the other hand, controls through its understanding of time as a chronological progression and the over-valuing of the contemporary. Following this elucidation of the coloniality of aesthetics and time, I move toward consideration of the artist or activist more generally; what is their position here, what means do they have to intervene?

I then come to the third pillar of my theoretical framework, which revolves around the notion of a museum in resistance. I draw here on Lara Khaldi’s study of museums and their objects as they respond to political revolution. How does the museum function as a site of resistance? The characteristic I propose as crucial in enabling such construction is the position of the museum as heterotopia. Heterotopia, in my formulation, derives from Michel Foucault and develops further from Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter’s study of heterotopia in ‘postcivil’ society. By exploring the enacted or imagined roles of art, the museum, and politics, both independently and as they cohere in politically engaged art exhibitions, I come to a theory of how sociopolitical realities are (dis)reconciled through art’s presentation.

1.1 *The Space of Art*

Modern aesthetics appears then, not just as a concern with the beautiful and the sublime, but as the domain that shapes the life experience of the subject and comes to constitute his⁶ horizon of experience, his historical reality...Aesthetics is for us that field in which the formation and enclosure of the modern subject becomes concrete. Aesthetics is also the field in which coloniality comes to light as the power to exclude from experience. If the modernity of modern aesthetics is the control of representation and experience of world historical reality, then the coloniality of modern aesthetics is the exclusion of other worlds of sensing and meaning from world-historical reality.⁷

This quote comes to us from Rolando Vázquez's long-form essay "Vistas of Modernity: decolonial aesthesis and the end of the contemporary", 2020, wherein he advances a decolonial critique of modernity as it is dominated by Western epistemology and aesthetics. The quote above succinctly describes the role of modern aesthetics in defining experiences of reality through its control of representation. As modern aesthetics sets some modes of experience and sensing within reality, it simultaneously casts others out. This results in the colonialist exclusion of other forms, or worlds, of sensing and meaning-making. Vázquez, through his decolonial approach to the modern order of aesthetics, illuminates the controlled nature of historical and social reality.

Jacques Rancière writes on a similar paradigm in his essay "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics", 2000.⁸ What Vázquez terms the modern order of aesthetics, Rancière names the "distribution of the sensible". This concept refers to the organization–distribution–of everything in social life that is visible, or sensible, to us, which Rancière asserts to be at stake in politics. The sensible, which might also be understood as social construction, is the shared understanding of something as simple as a table and how to make use of it. To give a more complex example, this distribution, is at work behind our understanding of gender identity and roles, which then are maintained, even violently so, through social norms of behavior. Furthered by Vázquez, the precarity of aesthetics becomes clear as not only how we perceive and understand the world around us but, in the first instance, *what* we perceive. The distinction of *what*

⁶ Vázquez employs the pronoun 'his' to refer to the male subject as the dominant subject of modernity.

⁷ Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: decolonial aesthesis and the end of the contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 23-24.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, "Foreword," and "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London; NY: Continuum, 2004), 9-19.

important for Vázquez's decolonial framework because he highlights the colonial exclusion of entire worlds of sensibility.

Having defined the controlled nature of the order of aesthetics, or sensibility, we can now theorize the interventionist potential of art and the artist. It is within the sphere of perception that Rancière considers the role of the aesthetic or artistic act as it collides with politics. Rancière describes artistic practices as "'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making [and further positions] aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity."⁹ Here he ascribes art the potential to disrupt the patterns of visibility inscribed in sociopolitical life by offering new ones. Simply put, art allows us to imagine otherwise. To turn toward the prefacing quote of this thesis by art historian Darby English: art presents modes of seeing and experience which may not yet appear to us in 'instituted culture'.¹⁰

Rancière's text extends as we read it alongside Judith Barry's "The Space that Art Makes", 2007. As Rancière focuses much attention on aesthetics, it is easy for the reader to become too situated in the solely visual presentation of art; here Barry helps to bring us back to the physical, experiential aspect of art, specifically installation art in her analysis. Barry asserts that installation art reconfigures the conventions of looking at art away from a fixed point of perspective—traditional for viewing paintings. Instead, "the viewer is often dispersed through a space that is not meant so much to be viewed, as to be experienced."¹¹ The spectator thus "coheres" the work from a variety of points in space. This dispersal of point of view, in Barry's frame, allows for the contrast and collage of elements physically separated, which produces a wholly new experience and meaning. Therefore, the space that art makes is both a physical and imaginative space. It refers to a new composition of reality that very much asks for and involves the participation of the spectatorial body.

⁹ Rancière, "Foreword" and "The Distribution of the Sensible," 13 and 9.

¹⁰ Darby English, *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), xi.

¹¹ Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: In Pursuit of Public Terrain*, ed. Sally Yard (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007), 28.

The space that art makes, which is essentially a moment of interruption in the distribution of the sensible, separates art and the experience of viewing it from routines of daily life to pry open a space to think and move differently, to imagine differently. This then inserts new or different modes of experience into instituted culture. Thinking with Vázquez, we can understand ‘instituted culture’ as modernity or the modern order of aesthetics. Thus, artistic re-distribution of the sensible can insert modes of sensing and meaning that have been excluded by the colonality of instituted culture. As later applied in two case study exhibitions, where artists consciously produce political artworks, it becomes clear that this space of art can be mobilized intentionally as a tool for destabilizing social constructions and political subjectivity.

1.2 *Political Time*

The second pillar of my theoretical framework thinks through the politics of time, especially as this concept relates to activism. The normative, Western conception of time, deriving from the European Enlightenment and imposed across the world, outlines time as progress. Time, in this domain, can be understood as an arrow pointing forward with only our present situation being accessible and worthy of contemplation. Within activist (art)work, especially that which acknowledges the time scales it works between, there is an ‘other’ time accessed. This step outside of the frame of chronological time is critically necessary for activist thinkers today because to step outside of chronology is to resist a temporality that has subjugated bodies since the beginning of colonial enterprise.

Rolando Vázquez’s essay “Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time” elaborates on time’s relation to oppression.

“On the one hand we have the hegemony over visibility in the spectacle of modernity, the phantasmagoria of modernity, and on the other, we have coloniality’s strategies of invisibility, which impose oblivion and silence and erase the past as a site of experience. The condition of possibility of these strategies over the visible, the monopoly of the sense of the real, is grounded on the modern notion of time...”¹²

¹² Rolando Vázquez, “Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time,” *Errant Journal* 1 (September 2020): 19.

In accepting the duality of modernity and coloniality, we can begin to understand how our modern/colonial understanding of time oppresses across time scales. What Vázquez means by the erasure of the past as a site of experience goes hand in hand with his idea of the monopoly of the sense of the real, which is very much tied to Rancière's distribution of the sensible. Chronological timeframes oppress by imposing a universal present and by rendering this present the only tense of value. The monopoly of the real as being present is also deeply entangled with the notion of the contemporary. The contemporary, especially within art historical discourse, is another means of enforcing modern/colonial normativity by over-valuing that which belongs to it and, at the same time, delineating the other as 'primitive'.¹³

By declaring the present/contemporary as the only scale in which thought, action, or pain are valuable, coloniality hurls its past trespasses into oblivion. The histories of oppression we may seek to call up in our derision of colonialist power are rendered inaccessible and unimportant: the past is not a viable site of experience. The politics of time can be understood as colonialism's mediation of our understanding of the present (as universal), the past (an ongoing site of erasure), and the future (a progression not fully under our control).

Understanding the politics of time, we come to ask: how can oppressive temporalities be subverted? In her book *What's Wrong With Rights?*, Radha D'Souza (one of the initiators of the *C/CC* exhibition) describes the temporal tension inherent to activism as it mediates between past and future:

By temporal tension I mean a tension between the situation that activists have inherited which is not of their own making, but which nonetheless circumscribes what they can or cannot do, and the ways in which their actions, and responses to the situation reify, modify or change future structural contexts.¹⁴

It is this description of activism that leads me to be so interested in how time functions in *Blak Origin Moment* and the *C/CC*. While put quite simply in her text, D'Souza's concept of temporal tension actually opens various pathways of subversion. What does it mean

¹³ Vázquez, "the end of the contemporary" in *Vistas of Modernity: decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 57-66.

¹⁴ As cited in Radha D'Souza, *What's Wrong With Rights? Social Movements, Law and Liberal Imaginations* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 22.

to understand oneself as an activist individual or artist who operates and is implicated within different time scales? To understand oneself as affected presently by the past and indebted to a malleable future is to be set outside the forgetful enclosure of Western chronology.

The activist, through their recognition of the interdependence of time scales, fights against normative constructions of time to ascribe the past with present value, with the intention of influencing future contexts. Vázquez describes the critical thinker of time as the one who seeks not to conquer but to salvage time by means of reception and listening, by more humbly experiencing time.¹⁵ The proceeding case study chapters use this frame to explore and document how Noel W Anderson, Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal attempt to salvage time in their respective exhibitions by confronting historical, future and present tenses of systemic pain.

1.3 *The Museum in Resistance*

We have explored the 'trouble' with the aesthetics and temporalities inherent to modernity and described the potential of the activist artist to intervene. It is now important to connect these instances of intervention to their sites, or at least the sites with which I am concerned: the museum or exhibitionary space of art. These are crucial grounds for intervention due to their role in reifying modern aesthetics through representation and shaping the spectator's understanding of time (as a history lining their walls). In addition to their unique relation to time and representation, I propose the heterotopic quality of art spaces, such that they are inherently other, as key to their mobilization as sites of political critique.

Foucault's theorization of heterotopia is fundamental for the framework advanced in my consideration of spaces of activist art. Outlined in his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", 1984, Foucault describes the unique situation of certain cultural sites as 'other spaces' characterized by their relation with all other sites, while at the same time contradicting the sites that they designate and reflect.¹⁶ Foucault

¹⁵ Vázquez, "The Politics of Time," 23.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, trans. Jay Miskowiec (October 1984): 1-9.

distinguishes heterotopia from utopia by asserting that heterotopias are in fact physical sites in the cultural landscape rather than utopias, which hold no real place.

The 2008 anthology *Heterotopia and the City: Public space in a postcivil society* offers crucial insights into the function of Foucault's heterotopia today. Its editors Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter situate their reader within the 'postcivil society': one which has accepted its own brutality.¹⁷ A critical perspective as it aligns with those of Noel W Anderson, Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, who take this brutality as a starting point in their respective exhibitions. In the introduction to the volume, Dehaene and De Cauter position heterotopia at several crossroads shaping public space today. One of these crossroads is the spread of the camp, a space in which law is suspended:

The camp is, in other words, the situation in which the division between private and public is suspended. It is the space where the city is annihilated and the citizen reduced to 'bare life'. Today, more and more people are exposed to the conditions of bare life: the homeless, illegal immigrants, the inhabitants of slums. From military camps via refugee camps and from labour camps to detention centres and secret prisons, the camp is the grimmest symptom of a postcivil urbanism, which follows the disintegration of the state. Heterotopia, so we argue, is the opposite of the camp and could be a counterstrategy to the proliferation of camps and the spread of the exposure to the conditions of bare life.¹⁸

The camp thus emerges as one of the worst faces of today's society—the situation in which the citizen becomes less than, underserved and undervalued by the state and society. Heterotopia, according to Dehaene and De Cauter, stands in the face of this juncture with the potential to slow the proliferation of the camp. The writers further, "Heterotopia holds the promise of a city in which the other is accommodated - a city of pluralities and heterogeneity."¹⁹ Heterotopia here becomes a tool against the disintegrating, fractured society through its capacity to hold contradiction and re-integrate heterogeneity into the postcivil society.

To elaborate on the role of heterotopia and, specifically, the heterotopia of the museum as a counterstrategy to the conditions of the camp we can look to the temporality of the museum as it accommodates the other. I further this example by

¹⁷ Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, "Heterotopia in a postcivil society," in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a postcivil society*, ed. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

reading Foucault and Lara Khaldi in conversation. Throughout this thesis, I am especially interested in exploring and extending Foucault and Khaldi's assertions of the function of spaces of exhibition in relation to time and history, as it layers with politics of time discussed above. Reflecting on the museum, both writers draw on the notion of the institution being 'outside of time', but they use this characterization toward different ends.

In her essay, "We're still alive, so remove us from memory. Asynchronicity and the Museum in Resistance", 2020, Lara Khaldi reconstitutes the museum as a site for political enactment. She grounds the museum in its political context by documenting institutions and their objects' relationships to revolution and memory. Khaldi writes, "Naturally, we all know that the museum (and any other conduit for hegemonic ideology for that matter) is not omniscient and that it leaks, breaks and falters."²⁰ This propensity toward leaking or faltering exposes the museum to the geopolitical situation outside of it, opening a potential for resistance. Key for Khaldi's formulation of the museum in resistance is its position of asynchronicity—such that the museum possesses a time scale adjacent to that of its context. She describes this museum time seeping out in some instances to infect citizens with the belief that revolution is a thing of the past. In others, she sees cracks in the museum formed through the objects themselves as they speak to ongoing political circumstances.

Interestingly, Foucault employs a similar notion of art spaces' temporal deviance in his characterization of these sites as heterotopia. Foucault offers the museum along with the library and the festival as exemplifying the different qualities of time in heterotopia. The common characteristic across them is that individuals arrive in heterotopia "at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time."²¹ Essentially, time, like space, here is other. Museums, as well as libraries, are sites of time's infinite accumulation, where decades and (depending on the museum) centuries pile up on one another. Conversely, the festival offers a different set of relations wherein time is characterized by a fleeting quality. Here we experience "time in its most flowing,

²⁰ Lara Khaldi, "We're still alive, so remove us from memory. Asynchronicity and the Museum in Resistance," *Errant Journal* 1 (September 2020): 53.

²¹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 6.

transitory, precarious aspect”.²² I see this quality of time as more akin to the experience of a temporary exhibition, especially in an exhibition space such as *Framer Framed*, which exists in repetitive periods of temporal precarity with exhibitions constantly mounted and disassembled.

Contradicting Khaldi, Foucault sees museum asynchronicity, or its quality of other time, as an apolitical stance. He describes the project of housing and maintaining time’s indefinite accumulation as an idea belonging to modernity: “an idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages.”²³ However, Foucault concerns himself with the whole more than its parts when thinking of the institution. He neglects to consider the temporal capacities of museum objects, which becomes clear as we read him in conversation with Khaldi. In her formulation of a museum in resistance, Khaldi lays out the condition in which museum objects relay and influence the museum’s political context and vice versa. This becomes especially visible in *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, as they consciously utilize the agency artworks possess to illustrate and subvert a multitude of time scales.

The relationship between the museum, time, and revolution cannot be wholly summarized as it is so uniquely mediated by site, objects and context. It will therefore have to be revisited in reflecting on the specific case studies of this thesis to parse out what asynchronicity gives rise to in each site. If we do wish to speak in overtones—through Khaldi and Foucault, we can read the quality of time as other in the museum or exhibition space as opening a channel of re-evaluation through its dissonant relationship to the time of the everyday. This elaboration of time provides a pointed example of the heterotopia as counterstrategy, advanced by Dehaene and De Cauter. The museum as heterotopia, in its capacity to accommodate the other by holding heterogeneity, stands in the face of the spreading conditions of the camp (in which the citizen is less than, exposed to bare life).

²² Ibid, 7.

²³ Ibid.

Conclusion

The theoretical frame for this thesis attempts to draw together three lines of thought coalescing in activist art: the world-making capacity of art, the politics of time in activism, and the heterotopic sphere of the museum. Art can offer a space that is other, an interruption in coloniality's routines of sensibility. For this thesis' consideration of activism, I would like to put this in terms of time. Art offers a different way of experiencing time, one placing us outside of violent chronology. Historic and future time scales become accessible, valuable, tangible. The past, as well as the future, become reinstituted as sites of experience, and, in the process, our present moment (as it is construed by coloniality) is negated.

What does the museum or exhibition space do here? The museum as heterotopia offers a site with a unique relationship to time; history is more accessible here and different moments in time can be held next to one another. It may then be a particularly apt space for activist intervention and negotiating temporal tension. The museum is also an authoritative space with regard to the formulation of representation. It is a space within which people, visitors, are constructed to contemplate and to believe. Objects and events reflected on or placed within its walls become inscribed in the monopoly of the sense of the real—at least temporarily. Art spaces' distinct relation to the construction of what is sensible and visible centers these sites of display in the activist re-appropriation of representation and storytelling.

Foucault writes on the joint utopic/heterotopic experience of the mirror:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface...that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze...I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.²⁴

I would like to tie this portrait of the mirror, the simultaneous experience of utopia and heterotopia, to the encounter with art. In its own way, art operates as a sort of mirror, as a vector for self-reflection. It is, however, necessary to complicate Foucault's experience

²⁴ Ibid, 4.

of the mirror, as a white man moving through the world with a privileged, unmarked identity. One should keep in mind how subjects carry their social and political subjectivity to the mirror and across that plane of the placeless place. For the encounter with art, we can also consider this as the situated perspective or knowledge from which the spectator perceives the art object. The mirror, and art as its parallel, is not neutral and thus does not offer an experience severed from subjectivity, which Foucault might overlook.

We can ascribe this suture of utopia and heterotopia to the experience of art as situated in the museum. Sited in the space of the museum, the material of art exists in reality, shaping quite literally how we move in the space around it. But art also creates a window to a placeless place through the thought world of its subject matter. It allows us, through various avenues, to occupy a space where we are not. An unreal, virtual, and fleeting space that opens behind the surface of a museum. And here we come to the moment of reconstitution: *I begin to reconstitute myself there where I am*. What other way is there to describe the experience of seeing or imagining yourself where you are without than as a moment of change, an altering of self and perception of the world around us—and is this not an intrinsic objective of social activism? To look at art is to look elsewhere, to other times, to other worlds of sensing and meaning, and recognize yourself there, only to return to the ‘real’ as other, reconstituted.

CHAPTER II: *BLAK ORIGIN MOMENT*

*Where to begin, where to begin... Ah! Let's begin with a death.*²⁵ So opens a lecture by Noel W Anderson in which he discusses his practice and the exhibition *Blak Origin Moment* during its installation at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee from October 2019 to early January 2020. Accordingly, the solo-exhibition is rife with images of Black pain and death. Black joy is not on show here; this is not the experience of Blackness that Anderson chooses to set before the eyes of the museum. The eyes peering out from, most likely, white heads. Happiness and love are perhaps too precious, too precarious, to be given up here to an extractive gaze. Rather Anderson represents the experience of Blackness in racial discrimination, implicating across color. Here we see Blackness as it is distorted by whiteness.

The proceeding chapter begins by positioning *Blak Origin Moment* as 'counter-public' through a modern framework of heterotopia defined by difference or deviation. This section also traces the exhibition's staging of re-distributed sensibility through its foregrounding of Black subjectivity. Subsequently, I turn to objects from Noel W Anderson's archive to examine the various discourses and histories the artist's work is bound up in. I first document how Anderson reflects on and confronts the spatial situation of *Blak Origin Moment*, both in a wider framework of its geopolitical moment and the immediate sociocultural context of the Hunter Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Finally, I consider how Anderson experiments with constructed and perceived time both through historical narration and by physicalizing the malleability of time in his tapestry works.

Anderson resists the urge of modernity/coloniality to orient us away from histories of subjugation. Rather, it is from within these histories that *Blak Origin Moment* speaks to us by documenting and rooting Blackness in its confrontations with white supremacy. To point briefly to an example—in the series *Escapism*, 2016-17, Anderson digitally fuses the faces of young black men with the police officers who killed them: Michael Brown and Daren Wilson (Ferguson, MI 2014), Eric Garner and Daniel Pantaleo (New York City 2014), and Samuel DuBose and Ray Tensing (Cincinnati, OH 2015). The portrait of Michael Brown is perhaps most recognizable, as his graduation cap and

²⁵ "Noel W. Anderson: Blak Origin Moment," Performance lecture from the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN, 4 November 2019. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d46o3eIGj-M&t=14s>]



Fig 1 Noel W Anderson, *Escapism* (detail), 2016-2017. Fused portrait of Michael Brown and Darren Wilson.

gown remain undistorted in Anderson's digital intervention (Figure 1). This recognition stops the viewer, drawing them into what they think will be Brown's face only to push them back out in reactive realization of Anderson's distortion: Darren Wilson's round, blue eyes. Oscillating between the familiar and the unknown, the image draws us back to search for the truth of the face, the singular individual who is absent. The image is disturbing in its disfigurement; we could stare forever without being able to sort out exactly where Brown ends and Wilson begins. By merging Wilson and Brown together, Anderson speaks to how

the two men will remain tethered together in cultural memory.²⁶ The thought of one impossible without the other, also in the cases of Garner/Pantaleo and DuBose/Tensing.

The duality of *Escapism* can be understood as similar to Rolando Vázquez's coupling of modernity and coloniality. Across modes of discourse, Vázquez and Anderson assert that we should not see one without the other. In other words, as modernity should be understood as constructed by and through coloniality, Blackness should be understood as by whiteness. *Blak Origin Moment* insists on reading Blackness in relation to whiteness, which is pictured in its mistreatment of Black Americans. Each person and position (white and Black) is incomprehensible individually. Together they are perverse, frightening. They push us to ask: What have we done to each other? What have we made of one another? These questions are essential to *Blak Origin Moment* as it faults representation of Black identity on a cultural scale, culminating in moments of heightened racial tension and police brutality.

²⁶ Noel W Anderson, LeRonn P Brooks, and Steven Matijcio, *Blak Origin Moment*, (London: Black Dog Press, 2017), 29. [exhibition catalogue]

2.1 Counter / Held Space

Blak Origin Moment departs from a question about a moment; “When did you first know you were black?” Noel W Anderson then turns this moment into a spectrum. In response to this question, this invitation to tell a story, he creates an archive.

I found myself at the Black archive. *Blak Origin Moment* searches for an origin by way of this archive. Within this abyss, searching through materials related to African American experiences, this work mines historical and contemporary sources to establish a black root.²⁷

Anderson makes use of the capacity of heterotopia to juxtapose contradictory space; the artist creates a space of dissent through the juxtaposition of an archive centering Blackness in a site (the museum) and society in which whiteness is norm. *Blak Origin Moment* thus forms a heterotopia of difference, which, as explored below, becomes activated as an interstitial counter-public and space of negotiating identity and representation.²⁸

Blak Origin Moment is heterotopic by nature of its location in the museum, but in its materiality, the exhibition becomes another type of ‘other’ space: the heterotopia as defined by deviation. In its original conception, Foucault described heterotopias of deviation as spaces occupied by, for example, old people in nursing homes or menstruating women; these heterotopias are other because those that inhabit them are in a state outside the social norm. Marco Cenzatti, in “Heterotopias of Difference”, 2008, updates the quality of this other space with a more critical eye to the social power dynamics which create them.

With the development of capitalism ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes’ is in part regulated by disciplinary power expressed through the imposition of the law and, eventually, by force... Modern heterotopias, then, are ‘other spaces’ on the one hand because they are made other by the top-down making of places of exclusion; on the other hand, they are made other by the deviant groups that live in and appropriate those places.²⁹

²⁷ Wall text, *The Black Archive*, the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN.

²⁸ For reference on interstitial, or ‘held’, space see Helen Molesworth, “Art is Medicine: On the work of Simone Leigh,” *Artforum International* 56, no. 7 (March 2018).

²⁹ Marco Cenzatti, “Heterotopias of Difference,” in *Heterotopia and the City: Public space in a postcivil society*, ed. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Caeter. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 77.

Cenzatti asserts that individuals who are made to reside in heterotopias of difference remain excluded from society even as they return to 'normal' social roles. This contradicts Foucault's elaboration of deviance as a somewhat temporary condition. Importantly, Cenzatti, also makes clear that the delineation of difference occurs at a societal level by referencing the "top-down making of places of exclusion".

Understanding how exclusion has worked in the context of Black oppression is crucial for recognizing the radical re-distribution of sensibility in Noel W Anderson's work (and that of any artist foregrounding Black subjectivity). James Baldwin writes in his seminal *The Fire Next Time*, 1963:

For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been no language. The privacy of his experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech-hence the Negro idiom-lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it. And, in fact, the truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, *has* been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions.³⁰

Baldwin speaks perfectly to the political significance of *Blak Origin Moment* by highlighting the legacies of denial and willful ignorance that have obscured much of Black experience. We can read the discourses of Vázquez and Rancière tracing through Baldwin here as he discusses Black experience being hidden or unrecognized in official speech. The obscuring of Black historical reality appears as part of a distribution of the sensible defined by a white hegemonic modernity. Combatting this, *Blak Origin Moment* gathers material and image in an effort to further the recognition of systemic racism as it takes shape and is heightened, especially in media representations of Black men and in police encounters

On a more local level, *Blak Origin Moment* disrupts the predominantly white archive of the institution, bringing the viewer into its inherently other space. The chief curator at the Hunter Museum, Nandini Makrandi, describes *Blak Origin Moment* and its confrontation of political subject matter as the most visible version of something that the institution has already been doing.³¹ She refers to a concerted effort undertaken since she began working at the museum in 2004 to acquire more works by women, artists of

³⁰ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 62.

³¹ Nandini Makrandi, in communication with author, 2020.

color and indigenous artists. Despite this, Makrandi concedes that the majority of the Hunter's collection is and will always be held by white, male artists. Situated by such a collection, I do not view *Blak Origin Moment* as being outweighed by it. Rather, the exhibition's content speaks even more viscerally to the legacies of white supremacy that bring the Hunter, and nearly all other art institutions, to hold racially skewed historical registers.

Cenzatti draws a parallel between heterotopia as delineated by difference and Nancy Fraser's concept of the counter-public. Fraser's elaboration of the counter-public arose through critique of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere, which she problematizes for its exclusion of women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals and undocumented immigrants.³² Fraser argues that the exclusion of these identities from the official public necessitates the creation of counter-publics in which individuals can cultivate their own interpretations of their identities. Counter-publics inevitably become sites of contestation through their inherent critique of the public sphere from which they are excluded or in which they are mis-represented.

The immediate identifier of *Blak Origin Moment* as counter-public, or counter-space, is held in its title, specifically in the word 'Blak'. With this Anderson delineates his frame of reference, the portrait of Blackness that he presents before we step into the archive. The use of the alternative spelling of Black – Blak – situates the exhibition in a discourse of Black liberation the world over. Most commonly known for its use among Aboriginal Australians, and beginning in the work of artist Destiny Deacon, Blak skips the 'C' as a way to evade the oppressive, historical constructions ascribed to Blackness by those outside of it and to reclaim language as a means of self-representation.³³ The use of 'Blak' makes known the relation of the speaker to the story told and positions Anderson's work within a framework of Black radical tradition.

The heterotopia, as Foucault points out, is capable of juxtaposing multiple contradictory sites at once.³⁴ *Blak Origin Moment* accordingly interposes a site of Black self-representation within the historically white institution of the museum. Whether

³² As cited in Cenzatti, "Heterotopias of Difference," 83.

³³ As of 2 November on <https://sites.google.com/site/australianblakhistorymonth/extra-credit>.

³⁴ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 6.

labeled as a deviant ‘other’ space or counter-public, within *Blak Origin Moment*’s archive it becomes clear that the heterotopia of difference can be consciously occupied to forge, through re-distributed sensibility, a space of active dissent. Framed by this overarching picture of *Blak Origin Moment* as akin to a counter-public, the next two sections look to specific works to see how geospatial and temporal dynamics compound its dissident otherness.

2.2 *Leaking Landscape*

The proceeding section examines how Noel W Anderson prompts inter-reflection between *Blak Origin Moment* as staged within the museum and the larger historical and cultural landscape outside its walls. I do this through an analysis of two artworks: one inside and one outside the museum. The two works activate the museum in resistance—as formulated by Lara Khaldi—through their interplay between the museum as site of display and the political circumstances beyond it.

Anderson describes the geo-architectural form of the Hunter Museum as integral to his mounting of *Blak Origin Moment* in Chattanooga. For him, the earlier staging of the show in Cincinnati in 2017 was a more intimate experience because he had grown up there (although he is originally from Louisville, Kentucky) and so was more familiar with the city’s set of sociopolitical conditions. Reflecting on the cultural context of the Hunter Museum as he related to it, Anderson recounts:

As soon as I visited and saw this institution was on top of a hill, like a plantation, everything just made sense. All of the colonial attitudes that are circumscribed by that architectural space resonated and, quite frankly, amplified their way through me.³⁵

Thus, the historical vestiges of colonialism and slavery that trace through this site in the Southern United States become inherent to *Blak Origin Moment* in Chattanooga. To understand more fully how *Blak Origin Moment* intervenes in the imaginative and physical landscape of Chattanooga, we should look at the Hunter Museum as an architectural whole (Figure 2). The Hunter Museum’s unique architecture is comprised of three buildings of distinct style, in which we can read the juxtaposing of contradictory sites key to heterotopic constructions.

³⁵ Noel W Anderson, interview by author, Amsterdam (by phone), 28 September 2020. See Appendix.

The museum's original building—a neoclassical mansion—occupies the middle and rises above its architectural counterpoints. The mansion professes a sort of immovability in its broad, symmetrical form. From the walkway in front of the building, which most visitors will pass to enter the Hunter, we are made to look up at the form erected higher than us on its own hill and set back from the public realm of the street. The mansion represents a colonial era of architecture, replete with towering, intricately formed Corinthian pillars, and a distinctly American material language of red brick and wood painted a stark white. Framing the mansion to the left is the building's most recent addition, a 21st Century style building consisting of glass and steel. This architectural limb is likely meant to assert the Hunter's closeness with other modern institutions of art. It houses the temporary exhibition space and the entryway, featuring a large glass window that furnishes a view of the river as soon as one passes through the museum doors. The eastern wing of the Hunter Museum holds the majority of its permanent collection, both on show and in storage. This 1975 addition features a Brutalist architectural style with thick concrete components.

Anderson confronts the architecture of the Hunter Museum—its most public mediation with the surrounding cultural context—head-on through the installation of *Untitled*, 2019 (Figure 3). The tapestry is a staggering 20 by 17-feet (6.1 by 5.2 meters) and depicts two white police officers in riot gear holding down three Black men, who appear to be bent over a surface (perhaps a police car) and handcuffed. The image derives from the period of protests in Los Angeles incited by the beating of Rodney King in 1991.³⁶ Anderson cites an initial desire to hang *Untitled* on the Hunter's neo-classical mansion. This request was likely denied for potential issues with damaging the façade of the building. Additionally, I imagine this would have been a statement too radical for the Hunter Museum. It would have directly related the type of power that affords a brick and column mansion on a hill to the type of power that bends Black bodies over the hoods of police cars.³⁷ This was perhaps deemed vision of the mansion—a reflection on its history—unfit to remain in cultural and digital memory.

³⁶ Monique Long, in communication with author, 2020.

³⁷ In fact, we would have been speaking about imperialist power. Before becoming a museum, the mansion was owned by the Thomas Hunter family, one of the founders of the Coca-Cola bottling company. [<http://www.huntermuseum.org/history>]



Fig 2 Aerial view of the Hunter Museum with *Untitled*, 2019, installation (bottom right corner).



Fig 3 Noel W Anderson, *Untitled*, 2019. In site outside the Hunter Museum.

Ultimately, *Untitled*, 2019, came to hang on the Brutalist, eastern wing of the Hunter Museum. The work is undeniably well activated by this architectural frame. We feel more the juxtaposition of material as the malleable tapestry drapes over rigid concrete. The severity of the architecture and the image amplify one another, while the cotton fabric, its tattered bottom edge, introduce corporeality and softness to the scene. The horizontal and vertical axes of the building mimic the two axes of the image enforced by the upright cops pressing the restrained protestors toward the horizontal. In certain installation views, we can see how the tapestry cast shadows on the building at a given hour of the day. These shifting shadows make us more aware of the curves already inscribed in the building's brutal rigidity—through its cylindrical components to either side of *Untitled*. This emphasis of roundness anchors the building as it rests beside a hill sloping up toward the centered mansion (perhaps we can read here femininity in the hyper-masculine, earth in the mechanical).

The installation of *Untitled* on the outside of the museum interrupts the patterns of daily life as they occur in a majority-white city in the Southern US. Placed on Chattanooga's historic waterfront, where countless numbers of individuals and families pass by, the work's presence highlights how the safety of the white everyday depends on and exists in despite of Black oppression. Anderson's *Untitled* thus opens onto a different distribution of sensibility. One that tracks white bodies rather than Black. Whiteness is made to feel itself through a prompted awareness of how it moves through space with an ease afforded by violence.

Untitled offers an instance of the 'leaking' museum Lara Khaldi describes in the previously quoted essay entitled "We're still alive so remove us from memory. Asynchronicity and the Museum in Resistance". Khaldi writes, "Once the objects are exposed and re-used, the museum's time seeps out of its doors, infecting all its citizens, trapping them into a loop."³⁸ Khaldi is discussing the exhibition of a military tank in a museum in this quote. This seeping out of museum time is negative to Khaldi because it traps the community in a time of civil war and stasis.

For *Blak Origin Moment*, something different occurs in the asynchronous relationship between the museum and external reality as it is perforated on both sides

³⁸ Khaldi, "Asynchronicity and the Museum in Resistance," 50.

by objects. In a socially progressive sense, the Hunter Museum becomes ‘ahead’ of its surrounding context through its exhibition of *Blak Origin Moment*. The Hunter Museum, by exhibiting Anderson’s work, could be qualified as resisting the hegemonic forces that would try to erase the aspects of Black identity which *Blak Origin Moment* draws into relief. Through *Untitled*, and *Blak Origin Moment* as a whole, the Hunter Museum and Noel W Anderson claim the relevance of issues of Black (mis)representation and police brutality. The museum’s asynchronous resistance then leaks through the cracks of the museum into the everyday, to affect the mind of citizens—occurring both as they visit the exhibition and as they simply pass the building where *Untitled* hangs.

Untitled’s outside installation sees the museum leaking outward, but where do we see reality seep in through its doors? *Blak Origin Moment* also brings objects in, not only through the images it reproduces but through material objects in the vein of the readymade. One such object is *Zip*, 2017 (Figures 4-5). For this work, Anderson mounts a police barricade to a wall, effectively defunctionalizing it but retaining some of its ability to shape movement. Within the gallery, the barricade restrains the visitor to an extent by distancing them from the wall.

The title and vertical orientation of the barricade reference the work of Barnett Newman and his use of vertical bands of color, which he called ‘zips’.³⁹ The zip first appeared in his 1948 painting *Onement, I* in which an orange line made up of thick, rough strokes of paint divides a darker mauve background in two (Figure 6). The zip denotes the structure of the painting, creating a point of relation between its two halves. As I look at *Onement, I*, the zip forms a point of tension with a more dimensional quality—separating it from the flatness of its background. Newman’s zips feel as if they simultaneously stick out from the canvas and offer a vector of space the viewer can gaze further into.

Anderson, with *Zip*, 2017, renders one of Newman’s paintings in a three-dimensional field. The barricade starkly contrasts the flatness of the gallery walls—blue pushing out of white. *Zip* re-constitutes the police barricade as the viewer recalls its function outside the museum. A barricade denotes structure and relates that on either side of it. As used within political demonstrations, it is the point of tension, the mediation

³⁹ As of 2 November on <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79601>.



Fig 4 (top left) Noel W Anderson, *Zip*, 2017. Installation view.



Fig 5 (top right) Noel W Anderson, *Zip*, 2017. Installation view [detail].

Fig 6 (bottom left) Barnett Newman, *Onement, I*, 1948.



of power between two opposing sides: protestors and the police. Anderson employs an art historical and museological frame to act, through imaginative reconstitution, on the use of the police barricade in protests, commenting on the power relations of those it keeps apart. The outside comes seeping in.

In the instances of *Untitled*, 2019, and *Zip*, 2017, we can read Noel W Anderson's attempt to bring *Blak Origin Moment* and the heterotopic, contemplative art realm in which it circulates closer to sociopolitical realities of racial injustice and police brutality. With *Untitled*, this occurs by placing the art object within reality, such that it critically activates the colonial history of the institution and present cultural context carrying on around it. Conversely, *Zip* brings reality, via the readymade object, into the art space, inciting sustained reflection on the object's role in enforcing power dynamics between police and protestors. Through both works, Anderson sets his counter-archive in closer contact, and inevitable conflict, with the social hegemony that led to its making.

2.3 *Re-Threaded Time*

Having discussed select materiality of *Blak Origin Moment* as it creates sociopolitical reverberations within and outside the museum, I now move to an exploration of time in Noel W Anderson's archival exhibition. Anderson experiments with time predominantly through his construction and manipulation of tapestries as images. The image, a reconstruction of a moment, inevitably flattens or reduces our comprehension. This occurs through the act of framing—setting some things or people within and others outside of our visual and conceptual grasp; it delineates our frame of reference (our sensibility). Thus, the static image is always misleading on account of its cropped nature. *Blak Origin Moment* questions the meanings of images as constructions of the Black body, especially through media, and as reflections of our present moment. The works experiment with the image as it endures various rounds of reproduction of form and material—and subsequent changes in meaning.

According to Noel W Anderson, “the image can't be real because the image is flat whereas real life, love and hate are dimensional.”⁴⁰ He shifts away from flatness through tapestries which simultaneously track time through weaving and take on

⁴⁰ “Blak Origin Moment,” Performance lecture.

dimension—their surface not a singular plane but a rotation with tufts of fabric and loose strings. This can be understood as an attempt to bring his work closer to the dimensionality of real life—to transform the image into an ecology. But not to transform, *to return*. Because an image always was an ecology. A moment captured as static when really it was a buildup, a coming together of an infinite number of other moments. The ecology of an image, as a moment, refers to the pre-conditions of its making. In this way the tapestry form speaks very simply but beautifully to the whole endeavor of *Blak Origin Moment*: to bring together an archive of the objects and events (the threads) that build, through their relation, the instance of recognizing oneself as Black.



Fig 7 (left) Noel W Anderson, *Untitled*, 2019.

Fig 8 (above) Noel W Anderson, *Hands - Up*, 2016-17.

Anderson then communicates the malleability of a moment through his manipulation of the tapestries, such as pulling their threads by hand, which leaves a sort of wound on its surface that also makes bare the production of the object. The artist builds upon his distortion of the picture plane—through digital warping—as he hangs the tapestries. Many of the works, including the outside artwork, *Untitled*, and another *Untitled* tapestry from 2019, are hitched up rather than hanging fully stretched out (Figure 7). This creates drapes in the fabric, echoing the already-curving picture plane

and bringing the object closer to sculpture than painting. These hitches structure the readability or accessibility of the tapestry's representative subject matter. We are further and further away from the original moment. Through these interventions Anderson demonstrates how a moment can always be re-shaped. A moment or a history is what we represent it as. By taking on this discussion within the museum, Anderson makes us consider: Who frames this moment, who places it before us, and who is the 'us' looking at it? Anderson at once makes use of and negates the history-making capacity of the museum in the process of constructing and staging his archive.

Blak Origin Moment plays with time in other instances as well, most notably, in the sole video work for the Chattanooga iteration of the exhibition: *STOOR*, 2016-17. The video takes material from the 1970s American television show *Roots*, based on the book by Alex Haley, wherein he traces his ancestors' path from Gambia, West Africa, and through slavery in the American South.⁴¹ Anderson re-envisions this story as he reverses footage and audio from the series; he titles the work "roots" spelled backwards. We see a whipping in reverse, flesh healing. People walk through the world backwards; their speech is clipped and incomprehensible. Speaking on the impulse for creating the video work, Anderson recounts,

Donald Trump was saying make everything great again. I thought, what does that even mean? What does that kind of anti-modernist position mean? Anti-modernist in the sense that, if in fact we were in modernism, someone says, well, we can't be in modernism, we have to go away from it, which at one time meant go back. What does that mean to go backwards? I figured out how to play the [video] backwards or record the [video] backwards, so that it would play backwards forwards, forwards backwards...And I thought this is return to home—to Africa—but that return to Africa has to go through the womb. You have to go through the violent act of a rebirth, which is the whipping. Or it's really the removal of the whip marks, which itself looks like a whipping. The idea of going back somewhere, if it's for Black people, then there's always going to be a trauma.⁴²

STOOR reverses history and its projected narrative—cause and effect become blurred. The video takes on Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' rallying cry, which pushes conservative (as tradition-oriented) politics to an extreme. *STOOR* does not speak for or against this return but rather documents what such a reversal would entail:

⁴¹ Anderson, *Blak Origin Moment*, 35.

⁴² Noel W Anderson, interview by author.

the re-experience of trauma but toward an end in which wounds are healed, deaths undone.

Within the space of *Blak Origin Moment*, *STOOR* is isolated from the other works, set apart in its own black box. Monique Long, an independent curator who advised during the installation of the exhibit at the Hunter Museum, describes the importance of this staging for the video, citing that she wanted people to be fully immersed in the moment of watching the work.⁴³ Within a black box, the viewer is more easily wrapped up in the work. They become less aware of the public and social dynamics maintained by the gallery setting outside of this dark space. *STOOR* certainly plays with this notion of immersive experience; the work helps us experience the history playing out before us, while negating this experience through its visual and auditory incomprehensibility. The video moves toward Rolando Vázquez's critical call for the reconstitution of the past as a site of experience—picturing what history might look like if it ran backwards forwards, forwards backwards.

Noel W Anderson frames reversal as breaking time. He asserts, “we gotta break time to break ourselves.”⁴⁴ Breaking time, specifically chronological, clock-oriented time, in the context of Black oppression is a powerfully subversive move. It scratches away at time as a force used to colonize and regulate bodies for and under capitalism, which the Antebellum South was not exempt from.⁴⁵ Anderson breaks or deconstructs time throughout *Blak Origin Moment*, as we have seen in his tapestry and video works. To cite another example—the *Hands-up*, 2016-17, series pictures the hands of Martin Luther King and a traditional African sculpture side by side, citing them equally and coevally as origins of Blackness (Figure 8). Overarchingly, *Blak Origin Moment* seeks to draw our attention to lines of connection across history, so that we may begin to see origins differently. Not singular but spectral, woven together.

⁴³ Monique Long, in communication with author, 2020.

⁴⁴ Noel W Anderson, interview by author.

⁴⁵ Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Conclusion

Blak Origin Moment reverberates through various material and theoretical angles. Predominantly, Noel W Anderson acts upon images as (mis)representations of Black identity so as to enable his viewer to see these representations and their role in social life differently. This re-ordering then extends to Blackness in daily life, its relationship to others and itself. Discussing *Blak Origin Moment* in relation to today's political situation and political movements including Black Lives Matter, Anderson asserts:

The ambition I think for me in that regard is to define a world that we don't even exist in that might be better than this world. I'm not putting in the world images that I'm like, yeah, these images are the way to the future. I'm putting instances or collaborations of experiences in the form of tapestries and other stuff that question the experiences that we live through now. With the hope that in the future—because there will be a future—and hope that in the future we will have already solved the bullshit we should have solved 400 plus years ago.⁴⁶

Much of the time we think of the activist or artist as pointing to a way forward, toward a better future—this is of course important work—but, in Anderson's own words, this is not the work of *Blak Origin Moment*. The exhibition and its amassed archive do not dream up a world in which racism and violence do not exist, or where we have achieved racial equality. Rather, it incites reflection on the present moment by making the viewer aware of how instances of racial violence repeat over time and by drawing into relief the power dynamics at play in these events. As viewers, we begin to see how such power structures shape our way of seeing, today and historically in *Blak Origin Moment's* images. Anderson takes as his object the photographic and material archive of Blackness, especially images of Black pain and death. Present constructions seek to locate this suffering in the past, erasing it as a site of experience, so Anderson combats this through reproductively returning his archive to the present. His act of reproduction simultaneously deconstructs these images through material tactics such as warped imagery, torn tapestry threads or reduced visual access through hitched hanging.

In her discussion on the museum in resistance, Lara Khaldi urges “For the oppressed, the present and the everyday are determined by struggle and resistance. Thus, a deferral into the future constitutes self-denial.”⁴⁷ An understanding of future-

⁴⁶ Noel W Anderson, interview by author.

⁴⁷ Khaldi, “Asynchronicity and the Museum in Resistance,” 55.

orientation as a position of self-denial is perhaps why Noel W Anderson does not point forward with *Blak Origin Moment*. Khaldi comes to this notion through reflection on Marina Vishmidt's essay "All Shall Be Unicorns: About Commons, Aesthetics and Time" 2014. Here Vishmidt discusses the commons as a temporal framework adjacent to capitalist time, despite existing within capitalist hegemony. Within the essay, she considers this notion of existing within (being imminent) as suspending time:

This priority of immanence does not so much oppose the present as propose an active reconstruction of it from within...Because there is no notion of a future as a contingent outcome of a break with the present, there is also no notion of transition, leaving time literally suspended.⁴⁸

Here we read echoes of Anderson's assertion of the timelessness and placelessness of his archive: *to define a world that we do not even exist in*. I propose this manner of seeing *Blak Origin Moment's* archive—as operating, or reconstructing, from within injustice and oppression, critically reproducing and taking apart Blackness as it is construed in social life. A dissenting heterotopia working from inside unchanged power structures.

Perhaps this places *Blak Origin Moment* in a precarious position, pitted against a monolith system that might seek to erase its insights. Reflecting on the installation of *Blak Origin Moment's* outside tapestry work, *Untitled*, 2019, Monique Long hints at the Hunter Museum's fear of putting the work outside the museum. That the tapestry could potentially be vandalized or stolen. Long takes a different stance, asserting that nothing could be done to the work that would not add to it.⁴⁹ Any attempt to deride this archive only furthers its proposition. This is because such derision is rooted in its own fear: that of acknowledging *Blak Origin Moment*, in all the appalling violence of the history it archives, as true.

⁴⁸ Marina Vishmidt, "All Shall Be Unicorns: About Commons, Aesthetics and Time," *Open! Platform for Culture, Art & The Public Domain* (September 2014): 2-3.

⁴⁹ Monique Long, in communication with author, 2020.

When a white man faces a black man, especially if the black man is helpless, terrible things are revealed. I know. I have been carried into precinct basements often enough, and I have seen and heard and endured the secrets of desperate white men and women, which they knew were safe with me, because even if I should speak, no one would believe me. And they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true.

James Baldwin⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “Letter from a Region in My Mind” 1962.

CHAPTER II.b: *FIGURING
(THE BLACK BODY AND
THE POLICE)*

Before moving to my second case study, I would like to consider more thoroughly the figures populating *Blak Origin Moment*'s archive. This is in order to investigate how these figures are reflected and what this may enact within the museum—and the domain of art history by extension. I will do this by reading Anderson's works in relation to those of Kerry James Marshall, especially through their stances toward the medium of painting and in their depictions of Black police officers. Kerry James Marshall, who is one of the most prominent Black artists working figuratively today, also works archivally, describing his paintings as seeking to establish a counter-archive.⁵¹ However, as we will see, Marshall's archive is wholly different to *Blak Origin Moment* both in its positioning and address.

In her essay "Thinking of a Mastr Plan: Kerry James Marshall and the Museum", 2016, art historian Helen Molesworth positions "Marshall's project as a form of institutional critique, a profound querying of the museum through its most privileged object: painting."⁵² According to Molesworth, Marshall takes aim at the lack of Black subjects in the history of painting as it is staged and maintained by the museum, thus highlighting the roles of the museum and art history in upholding racial frameworks hinged on the exclusion of Black artists and subjects. By painting exclusively Black figures in the manner of history painting, Marshall builds a legacy of painting that privileges Blackness rather than whiteness as the standard of beauty.

Blak Origin Moment also critiques the historically omnipotent medium of painting. For Anderson, pulling his tapestries across stretchers is a means of getting closer to painting as an art historical ancestor.⁵³ This makes a work such as the 9 by 13-foot (2.7 x 4 m) *Line Up*, 2016-17, appear more as a painting until we close in on its fabricated surface (Figure 1). Anderson describes this dialectic with painting as dealing with accessibility. He sees the tapestries on stretchers as more accessible than those that are draped, which reflect more on how the body forms and reduces access. However, we should not overlook accessibility's sneaky presence in the tapestries on stretchers, which are perhaps more visually accessible in Anderson's view. We can question the

⁵¹ As cited in Helen Molesworth, "Thinking of a Mastr Plan: Kerry James Marshall and the Museum," in *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016), 38.

⁵² Ibid 37.

⁵³ Noel W Anderson, interview by author.

accessibility here both in terms of the classed nature of the museum public, often enforced by steep entrance fees in many countries, and for art as a mode of expression perhaps not entirely readable to those who have not been versed in its history (necessitating whole other worlds of privilege).⁵⁴ Interrogation of accessibility is echoed in Kerry James Marshall's practice through highlighting the historical lack of access permitted by institutions of art to certain bodies both as artists and subjects.

Marshall and Noel W Anderson effectively populate the museum with Black figures, but the different moments of where and when these figures are captured points to the critical difference between the two artists' projects. Looking to the artworks which Molesworth highlights in her analysis, Marshall often portrays Blackness in scenes of daily life, in social and happy atmospheres—as in his Garden Project paintings or the moving *Untitled (Club Couple)*, 2014. Anderson's archive is darker, more difficult. *Blak Origin Moment* pivots to the Black body in moments of 'heightened racial tension', which explains the predominance of representations of police brutality. With equal merit, Anderson and Marshall confront the museum on different terms at different remove from those terms set by the institution.

Furthering a comparison of these two archivist artists, we can look at their different portrayals of similarly positioned individuals: Black police officers. Noel W Anderson depicts such a figure in *Line Up*, 2016-2017 and Kerry James Marshall in *Untitled (policeman)*, 2015. However, we first should take a step back to evaluate how police are portrayed more generally in *Blak Origin Moment*. Police are disfigured at the hands of the artist through visual interventions, like the erasure of individuality discussed earlier in *Escapism* or warping an image to make limbs bend at unnatural angles. Police are degrading (in *Line Up* and *Untitled*, 2019), they are unjust (*Invagination*, 2016-17), and they are violent (*Escapism*, 2016-17 and throughout). And they are a *they*, rather than singular. *Blak Origin Moment*, at every turn, figures the police in acts of violence, or following these instances, such as in *Escapism*. This is not the moment where Kerry James Marshall asks the viewer to imagine his cop.

⁵⁴ Let's not forget the issues of physical accessibility and lack of welcoming for differently abled individuals, which is not an issue that can be adequately/appropriately addressed by this thesis.



Fig 1 (top middle) Noel W Anderson, *Line Up*, 2016-17.

Fig 2 (middle right) Noel W Anderson, *Line Up* [detail], 2016-17.



Fig 3 (bottom left) Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (policeman)*, 2015.

Art historian Darby English writes incisively on Marshall's *Untitled (policeman)*, and much of his description is helpful for contextualizing the Black policeman who appears in Anderson's *Line Up*. According to English, the artists ask "us to hold the ideas "black" and "policeman" at the same time, and, further, to hold this possibly excruciating pose. [Excruciating because the bringing together of "Black" and "policeman"] presents assailant and victim in an indissoluble identification, such that we cannot say where one ends and the other begins."⁵⁵

English asserts that *Untitled (policeman)*'s meditative portrayal of its subject—an on-duty cop poised on the hood of his police car—does not argue for anything, but rather presents this figure for a moment of sustained reflection. This reflection is meant to induce recognition of the presence of this individual, his humanity, as someone who exists to be seen rather than to signify.⁵⁶ The policeman is alone and pressed to the forefront of the image plane; it is just us and him. This sort of human-to-human interaction between viewer and subject is described by English as an, albeit difficult, "invitation to revise received knowledge." What he refers to as received knowledge is the understanding of the police as a force rather than a group of human individuals. He rightly characterizes this understanding as a reaction to the feeling that the police are targeting some more than others.

Anderson, on the other hand, presents his Black policeman in the moment of what English calls 'special targeting': pressing a line of Black men against the wall during a strip search. The notion of un-just police violence is already here, unlike in Marshall's rendering where the viewer brings this knowledge to the frame. What else can we see in *Line Up*? There are eight men pressed against the wall, their hands handcuffed behind them, their bare feet on concrete. Just left of the image's center stands the Black policeman, brandishing a gun over half his height. Behind and to the right of this figure stands a white officer turned away from the camera. Which officer's weapon is more frightening? Yes, the Black officer holds a much larger gun, but the chances of it being used feel smaller. He holds the gun with only one hand and towards his waist, as if resting it there. His stance and grip would need to change significantly to

⁵⁵ English, *To Describe a Life*, 29 and 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid 41.

follow up on the shotgun's threat. The finger of the white policeman already curls around the trigger of his pistol; one swift, downward flick of the wrist and one less body would stand against the wall.

Line Up has been manipulated by Anderson's characteristic warping. This accentuates the pose forced upon the men against the wall. Their backs arch against the brick building, their legs bulge out behind them, as if pulled in opposing directions. The wall rounds out toward each pair of legs to push against them—Anderson's acknowledgement of the structural forces at work here. And look at the rounding of the Black officer's body; he bends in the same way as the men in front of him, shaped by the same forces. The body of the white officer instead fills the gaps of those in front of him, rounding in the opposite direction at each point. He is not subject to what bends the Black bodies. Rather, he is part of it.

As in Marshall's portrayal, Anderson presents the figure of the Black policeman as an indissoluble union of perpetrator and victim. However, *Line Up* holds an intensity divergent from *Untitled (policeman)*. It is historical, it is violent. It is something we have probably seen recently in a similar form. Darby English analyzes *Untitled (policeman)* through a quote by Simone Weil:

The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him, nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence.⁵⁷

Both artists offer us this much needed reflection, but it is inserted into different moments toward alternate ends. As *Untitled (policeman)* offers consideration of the individuality of the Black policeman, *Line Up* invites reflection on the whole of the situation before our eyes and how it affects bodies differently.

Helen Molesworth writes of Kerry James Marshall: "His population of the painterly field with exclusively black figures points to the yawning and inexcusable lack of black protagonists in the history of painting and, subsequently, their absence in the museum as an institution that helps form the fabric of the public sphere."⁵⁸ We should

⁵⁷ As cited in English, *To Describe a Life*, 38.

⁵⁸ Molesworth, "Thinking of a Mastr Plan," 32.

understand this fabric Molesworth cites as another moniker for Rancière's distribution of the sensible. Thus, Black figures are painted and exhibited in the museum to shape our sense of life around us, especially visceral in their portrayals of Black police officers. Noel W Anderson also works (quite literally) with this fabric. He brings dissident, harsher depictions of Blackness into the museum, tactfully reshaping his viewer's understanding of their social reality as it is permeated by racial violence and police brutality.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Why are Marshall and Anderson's artistic ends so different? It would not be fair to answer this definitively, but I would like to suggest a closer look at the dates of *Untitled (policeman)* and *Line Up*. 2015 and 2016-17, respectively. They were only created two years apart, but these two years were a sort of precipice. The nomination of a different president, and the acceptance/validation of his trafficking in racist rhetoric.

CHAPTER III: *COURT FOR
INTERGENERATIONAL
CLIMATE CRIMES*

But people have no idea what time is. They think it's a line, spinning out from three seconds behind them, then vanishing just as fast into the three seconds of fog just ahead. They can't see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of Now depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died.

Life will cook; the seas will rise. The planet's lungs will be ripped out. And the law will let this happen, because harm was never imminent enough. Imminent, at the speed of people is too late. The law must judge imminent at the speed of trees.

Richard Powers⁶⁰

⁶⁰ *The Overstory*, 2018, 446 and 619.

As the first case study opened in considering *Blak Origin Moment* as heterotopia of dissent, I propose we begin by thinking of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* as akin to another kind of heterotopia: the cemetery. Foucault writes:

The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery...[F]rom the moment when people are no longer sure that they have a soul or that the body will regain life, it is perhaps necessary to give much more attention to the dead body, which is ultimately the only trace of our existence in the world and in language. In any case, it is from the beginning of the nineteenth century that everyone has a right to her or his own little box for her or his own little personal decay...In correlation with the individualization of death and the bourgeois appropriation of the cemetery, there arises an obsession with death as an 'illness.' The dead, it is supposed, bring illnesses to the living, and it is the presence and proximity of the dead right beside the houses, next to the church, almost in the middle of the street, it is this proximity that propagates death itself.⁶¹

Foucault traces the shifting cemetery, from its location inside the city with little individualization to outside the city with high individualization, as it reveals a changing relationship with our dead. He comes to the conclusion that, as society moved away from belief in an afterlife, the burial of bodies was emphasized and individualized—think of named and epitaphed headstones. The subsequent shift toward building cemeteries outside of the city creates an other city, that of the populous graveyard. According to Foucault, this heterotopic site then links to all other places through familial relations between the dead and living.

The dead take presence in the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes (CICC)* visually in renderings of animal and plant species now extinct and aurally through stories of witnesses left to speak of those killed by climate criminal activity. This court brings us together with our dead to watch a common scene: a trial. *Each individual has relatives in the cemetery*, and here we see our more-than-human ones, as viewers sit beside fossil specimens and portraits of extinct species. Still Foucault is perhaps too limited in his description of the ways the living can be related to the dead. For the case of the *CICC*, we should consider how life may be responsible for death.

By whatever means we come to relate to, to remember or, more likely, to forget these dead, within the *CICC* we find ourselves in a sort of proverbial cemetery. Radha

⁶¹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 5-6.

D'Souza and Jonas Staal create this site, this exhibitionary graveyard, not in order to highlight our being alive in contrast to others' lack of life—but rather to assert our closeness to a similar kind of death—the death of extinction. *Proximity to death propagates death itself*—in many ways this statement is correct, think of closeness to an ill patient, but in other ways it avoids a more difficult truth. Our death is inevitable regardless of how we stow away our dead or at what distance from them we hold ourselves. The *C/CC* brings its audience side by side with the dead and foregrounds our own closeness to death to prompt contemplation, a change in flowing thoughts. The question here is not if we will die but how. What will we learn from the deaths abounding around us? How do we understand our death and the deaths of non-human others, and can we change this course? Such questions guide our way through the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. What might happen if we held these deaths differently, if we understood ourselves, our needs, to be as small as we perceive those non-human others?

This chapter explores three main aspects of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*—firstly, the morphological setup of the court as it reflects the concept of the project and works as a manifestation of heterotopia. Here I also consider how the design of the court influences viewer interaction and how it compares to other installation projects of visual artist Jonas Staal. Secondly, I discuss the relationship the *C/CC* poses between humans and non-human or more-than-human others, as it extends the spatial, ecological setup of the court and comments on histories of environmental destruction. Finally, this chapter explores how time is layered within the court. Starting from its intergenerational frame and moving toward the viewer's temporal experience (of duration). I close in considering the timing-specific relation between the *C/CC* and the current political context, as it shapes the viewer's temporal understanding of the climate crisis and social life more broadly. Together these aspects demonstrate how the *C/CC* intervenes in routine narrations of the climate and ecological crises to propose new paths of action toward climate justice.

To introduce the form of the project—the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* is an exhibition set to take place in fall of 2021 in Framer Framed. Located in Amsterdam East, Framer Framed is an exhibition space founded in 2009, which

organizes a number of temporary exhibitions each year in addition to public programs on critical practice and theory. For the course of the *C/CC*, *Framer Framed* will see the installation of a large-scale tribunal infrastructure. The court will host five evidentiary hearings in which ‘climate criminals’, corporations who have caused environmental harm, will be brought to justice by those affected by their actions, including destruction of human and non-human species and colonial histories.

In their collaboration, Radha D’Souza and Jonas Staal approach and inform the project through their respective practices. Staal, as a visual artist who often works through socially engaged installation art, can be seen as the driving force behind the design of the court. D’Souza, with her background in legal scholarship and as a legal advocate for social movements, drives the *C/CC* in concept. D’Souza’s 2019 book *What’s Wrong With Rights?* inspired the project through its critique of the human-centered and state-building role of rights in neoliberalism. This is to the extent that rights no longer serve social movements—a situation which D’Souza observed in her work with activists and the law. She cites this struggle to activate law on behalf of social justice as inspiring her to work with Jonas Staal, in an effort to broaden justice through its artistic re-imagination.⁶² D’Souza and Staal, informed by their individual activist practices, do work closely in collaboration. Thus, by taking conceptual and design decisions together, the *C/CC* becomes a space in which meaning structures form and vice versa.

The cases to be prosecuted during the *C/CC* focus on corporations with a Dutch connection in recognition of the trials being hosted in the Netherlands. As I write this, the cases identified include Royal Dutch Shell, Unilever, ING, Bechtel and Airbus. Shell and Unilever are perhaps the more obvious choices for climate criminals—with long histories of mobilization against them. The remaining corporations have been chosen to tactfully demonstrate how finance and arms trade play a (in)direct role in environmental devastation, in the cases of ING and Airbus, respectively. Bechtel, a company which migrated to the Netherlands under a bilateral investment agreement, brings a pointed critique of how corporations’ rights to citizenship and migration aid them in committing

⁶² Radha D’Souza, in conversation with author, 2020.

climate crimes. Affording companies, by means of the state, more rights to mobility than the individuals harmed and displaced as a result of their actions.

In concept, the *C/CC* plays on the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopting its scope of international jurisdiction and culpability. In *What's Wrong With Rights?*, Radha D'Souza describes the critical ideas formalized in the ICC as including the principle that individuals can be held to account for acts deemed criminal by international law—making them responsible to “an international community of states beyond their own states and fellow citizens.”⁶³ The ICC also operates based on the notion that government's acts against their own people are international crimes. However, the *C/CC* diverges from the ICC in significant ways in order to re-frame criminality and justice. D'Souza further notes of the ICC:

The ethical rationale for the ICC is that ‘unimaginable atrocities’ against millions ‘deeply shock the conscience of humanity’. Conceptualised in this way, the systemic causes of atrocities become irrelevant. Individual punishment for ‘abuse of power’ reduces international crimes to individual deviance and delinks it from the economic causes for civil wars and conflicts.⁶⁴

Conversely, the *C/CC* seeks to highlight the systemic and systematic nature of climate crimes. Additionally, in marking environmental violations and the denigration of human rights they often coincide with as criminal offenses—which has not long been the case—the legal frame of the *C/CC* furthers the changing of public perception crucial for changing laws themselves. The *C/CC* therefore holds corporations to a standard of justice that they routinely sidestep and readjusts our frame of reference for prosecutable crimes as ‘intergenerational’ rather than only those happening in the here and now. Climate crimes cannot be held to a statute of limitations when corporations' actions bleed throughout history, into the present and through the future in waves of environmental chaos.

3.1 *Constructing Utopia*

The design of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* balances between various assertions. D'Souza and Staal must represent simultaneously its distance and proximity

⁶³ D'Souza, *What's Wrong With Rights?*, 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* 124.

to practicing legal courts today. Also key to the design is constituting the space as an ecology comprised of relationships between those present whether human or non-human. This and the next sub-chapter explore this notion, with this section focusing predominantly on the structural design of the court as it mediates relationships between its human constituents. Additionally, this section draws parallels between the *C/CC* and previous projects of Jonas Staal, especially drawing into relief the function of the court as a utopian heterotopia.

Looking to visual artist Jonas Staal's oeuvre—it is evident that this sort of heterotopic world-making is fundamental for his practice. For years he has experimented with the form of the parliament as a mode of political inquiry and as a sort of testing ground. His projects routinely operate on behalf of political minorities, who might in daily life be excluded from such spaces. Speaking in the context of his project, *The Scottish-European Parliament* (2018), Staal states: "I felt that if we, as artists, have this competence of giving form to power, why could we not create parliaments? [Describing such constructions as] an example of the way art, design and architecture can participate in the imagination of political alternatives."⁶⁵ Throughout the same interview, Staal appeals to the imaginative potential of art as the source of its power, firmly grounding him within the discourses of Jacques Rancière and Judith Barry on the ability of art to imagine otherwise. Thus, we see how Staal routinely appropriates spatial constructions native to governance—the parliament, the court—in an attempt to reimagine their congregations from the point of view of the political outsider.

In the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, D'Souza and Staal seek to reconstitute the audience's understanding of a court and, through this, their understanding of justice. Expanding, as a result, where their audience believes justice can be undertaken and by whom. This is similar to what Noel W Anderson enacts through his readymade *Zip*, 2017. By resituating an object or construction, in the case of the *C/CC*, inside an exhibition space the artists allow viewers to critically reflect on and even reimagine its use in daily life. With regard to the court form, this prompts reflection

⁶⁵ Adam Benmakhoulouf, "Jonas Staal's plea for utopian realism," *The Skinny*, 6 June 2018, <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/interviews/jonas-staal-the-scottish-european-parliament>.

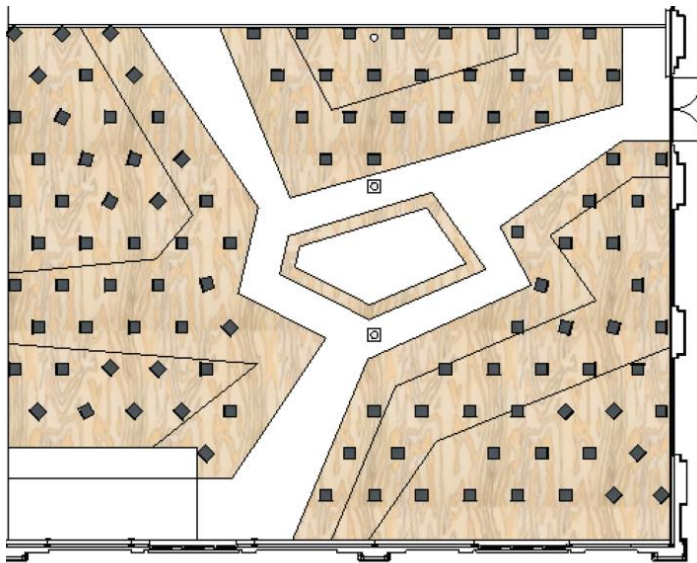


Fig 1 (above) Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes, Study*, 2020.

Fig 2 (left) Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes, Study*, 2020.

on the limited scope of justice, as well as the social and power dynamics played out within practicing legal courts.

Within the layout of typical courts, space denotes individual roles and the power dynamics between these different roles. With separate tables for the prosecutor and defendant, a clearly delineated set of seating for the jury, and an elevated position for the witness (declaring them as someone to be listened to). Finally, the judge, as the highest authority, sits on a bench raised above the rest of the court and centrally located

at the back of the space. Important to note in traditional courts is the division of the public from the actors of the court mentioned above—usually by a railing cutting between them and the main area of the court.

Perhaps the most distinct aspects of D'Souza and Staal's court are its circular nature and relatively flattened construction as it fills the gallery space, which can both be understood as moves to 'democratize' the space of the court (Figures 1 and 2). The court expands out from the central, pentagonally shaped lectern construction. This lectern is where the *C/CC*'s main actors will be seated during the trial. In this way, the *C/CC* retains the distinction of the roles of judges, the court clerk, prosecutor/presenters, witnesses, and the accused. However, the design of the *C/CC* attempts to melt down the scales of distance between the public and these actors as a means of blurring their roles—making the audience feel themselves as closer to judges, witnesses, and jury. Who is guilty and who has the authority to make a declaration of harm?

The circular construction of the *C/CC* works to consolidate the focus of its audience, forging a collective gaze. Opposite to the typically dispersed attention set by a museum or exhibition space, with viewers looking at different artworks and often with their backs to one another. Viewers are gathered together in the *C/CC* to share and listen to a story; they are rendered vulnerable to each other's gazes. This spatial structure creates more of a relationship among the audience. Helping them to understand the space they inhabit as an ecology, or assembly—perhaps an attempt to emphasize collectivity as a pathway to collective action.

The notion of heterotopia is critical to bring in here, as it illuminates the construction within which D'Souza and Staal situate their spectator. As the viewer takes their place in the *C/CC*, they are within a court complete with all the main actors of those courts they have perhaps been in before or even seen on television. Within their recognition of this space as court, there is also the knowledge that this is situated within an art space. It is not a 'real' court and yet it is, as the site for a trial. Real in that they can move around within it—returning us to Judith Barry's elaboration on the space that art makes, which can be understood as a simultaneously imagined and physicalized space enabled by the capacity of art practice to subject the viewer to simulated

experience. Thus, a layered situation of sensibility manifests for visitors in the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, as they become ensconced in a dual heterotopia. The art space, delineated by Foucault, is already an ‘other’ space operating outside the rhythms of daily life. Within this space D’Souza and Staal insert their court. A construction that prompts us to consider concrete evidence and legal actions that might be taken against climate criminal corporations. The *CICC* mediates spectators’ conceptions of the other ‘real’ world through an experience that is essentially performance. Here we see the true revolutionary potential of art in its ability to institute sites of the ‘real’, however heterotopic they may be, within the fabric of public and social space.

In “Smooth new world: Agency and Utopia”, 2017, Runette Kruger takes as her main case study Staal’s 2014 *New World Embassy: Azawad*, produced in collaboration with Moussa Ag Assarid as an embassy for the newly independent, but unrecognized, ‘stateless state’ of Azawad. Kruger categorizes *New World Embassy* as both critical utopia and heterotopia.⁶⁶ The qualification of ‘critical utopia’ depends on Kruger’s elaboration of utopia as a site of agency through methods of social critique. This re-institution of agency in the utopia is perhaps a surprising turn as the defining quality of utopia is its non-existence. She counters:

Broadly considered, utopia functions as a critical reappraisal of a given sociopolitical order, and thus as constructive sociopolitical critique...Furthermore, in foregrounding the sociopolitical function of utopia, the common criticism of utopia being ‘unrealistic’ is inverted. As a mode of social critique, its ‘unreality’ is what makes utopia useful and necessary.⁶⁷

Thus, utopia can be politically engaged by working within and in response to sociopolitical circumstances. For the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* this can be seen as D’Souza and Staal’s appropriation of the court infrastructure and the prosecution of those accused built on histories of actual crimes committed by real-world corporations. Kruger describes *New World Embassy* as a utopia manifested as

⁶⁶ Kruguer also qualifies *New World Embassy* as a manifestation of ‘smooth space’, a concept deriving from Deleuze and Guattari. For the purposes of this chapter section, I focus on her elaboration of the project as utopia / heterotopia.

⁶⁷ Runette Kruger, “Smooth New World: Agency and Utopia,” *Culture, theory and critique* 58, no. 3 (July 2017): 2.

heterotopia, essentially referring to the fact that the project exists within physical reality. Kruger's reading of this previous project of Staal's is extremely helpful for understanding the heterotopic role of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. The *CICC* similarly functions as a utopic form of social critique—by producing a court in which the environmental devastation caused by companies such as Shell is justly prosecuted.

Foucault describes one of the principles of heterotopia as its existence in relation to all other sites. However, he leaves the form of this relationship open-ended. Cases such as D'Souza and Staal's *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* highlight how heterotopic constructions, as manifestations of critical utopias, can function in a relation of destabilization with other sites. This propensity to destabilize hinges on the proximity of the utopic heterotopia to the sociopolitical circumstances it seeks to upend. The *CICC* implicates binding legal courts and governments in their lack of action against corporations as long-standing climate criminals, undermining them through its appropriation and re-imagination of the spatial form of the court. The critical utopia, staged in reality by means of heterotopia, functions to subvert political and social reality by adopting its forms and using them otherwise.

3.2 Other Kin

There are other presences populating the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, watching what their human counterparts might do. As explored in the previous section, D'Souza and Staal experiment with the spatial form of the court to interrogate where and against whom action can be taken. However, by tactfully filling the *CICC* with non-human and more-than-human others, they also comment on who environmental justice should be carried out on behalf of. In a preliminary sketch of the court, depictions of extinct animal species rise from the backs of spectator's chairs, evoking a material language of protest through their poster format (Figure 1). Extinct plant species printed on glass sheets and ammonites—a fossilized species of squid—sit between the court's human spectators. Considering the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* as an ecology, a web of relation, it is crucial to consider how humans are positioned in relation to non-humans and to what end.

A core supplement to the *CICC* is an archive of animal and plant species titled *Comrades in Extinction*, which records all the known species that have gone extinct as a result of the climate crisis and the activities that engender it. This archive draws from the Red List of Threatened and Extinct Species database produced by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). As the IUCN list tracks all extinctions regardless of cause, it is D'Souza and Staal's own intervention to focus on those caused by climate change and human activity. Another key aspect of the archive is its time frame. D'Souza and Staal mark extinctions caused by climate change as beginning nearly 400 years ago in the colonial era, when industrial activities including raw material extraction and widespread deforestation began. This expanded time frame counters the notion that climate change has only begun recently—in the last 30 years—and rather posits that the roots of our current crisis reach back into histories of colonial subjugation. Thus, as they account for species destroyed in the making of the current climate crisis, D'Souza and Staal readjust the audience's understanding of what has caused such loss.

Comrades in Extinction is the basis for the inclusion of plants and animals within the *CICC* through the different means of visual representation mentioned previously. Both the plant and animal species are shown together with the word 'comrade' printed above or below them in different languages (Figures 3-6). 'Comrade' here functions as a naming or identification system. The use of 'comrade' instead of scientific or common names can be seen as an act of resistance to the process of colonial naming, which goes hand in hand with species extinction. Those named species are more susceptible to the violence and destruction of human activity.⁶⁸ Collapsing time scales, 'comrade' positions humans and non-humans, whether alive or extinct, as allies in the same all-encompassing fight.

⁶⁸ Jonas Staal, in communication with author, 2020.

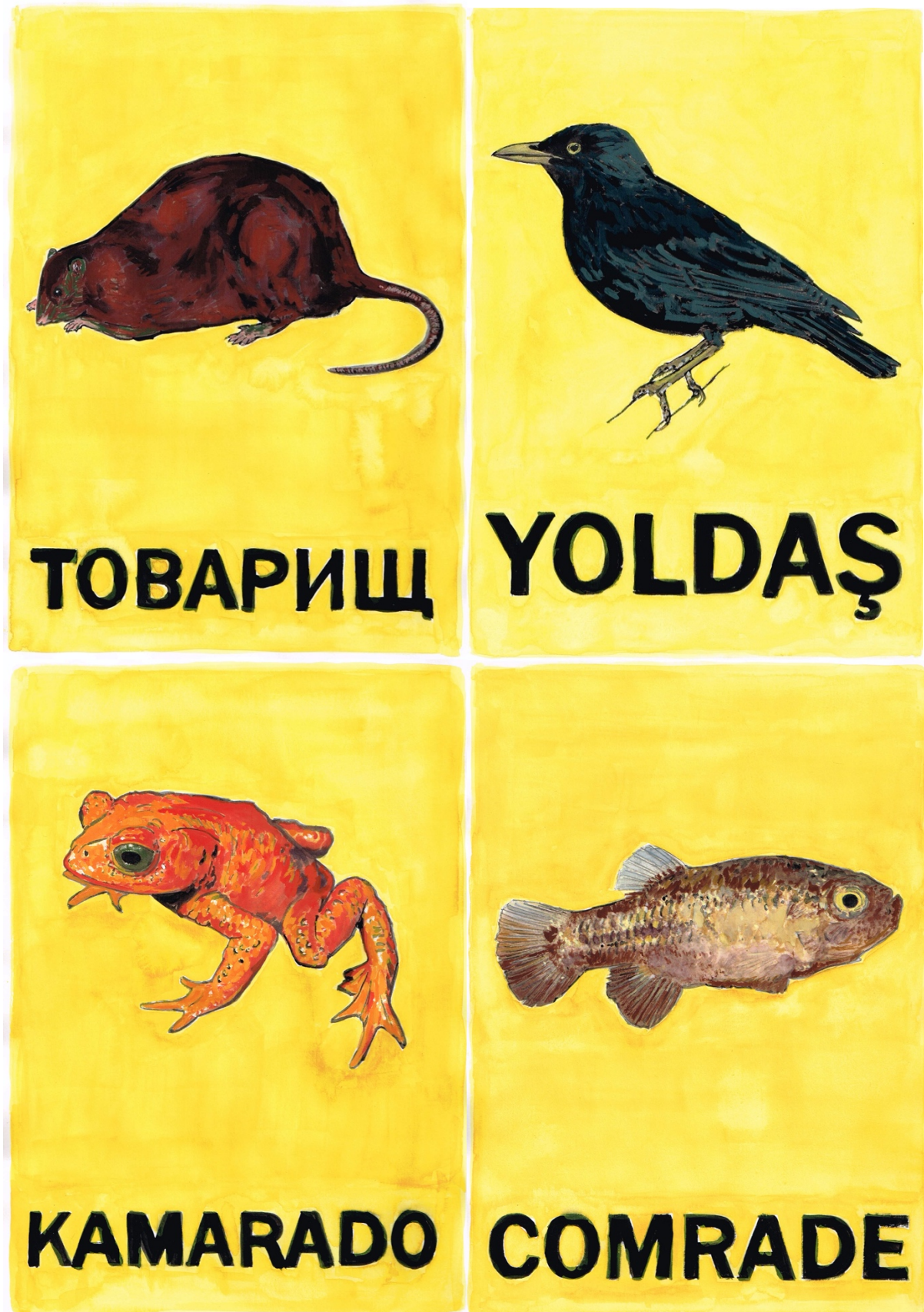


Fig 3-6 (clockwise) Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Comrades in Extinction, Study*, 2020.

Ammonites constitute another non-human presence in the *CICC*'s more-than-human assembly. Staal, in a concept note for the project, writes on the role of ammonites in the court:



Ammonites are family of octopus and squid that lived from 300 to 66 million years ago, before they perished in the 5th mass extinction. As different as our evolutionary process and lived time might be, ammonites witnessed the 5th mass extinction, as we are witnessing the 6th; they are fossils, and we are fossils in the making. In the *CICC* the ammonite fossils act as both *evidence* of an extinction of the past, while simultaneously acting as witnesses to the extinction of a present. And it is of course the very same disintegrated bodies of the ammonites, that co-constitutes the oil and gas that fuel our current climate collapse.⁶⁹

Fig 7 Jonas Staal, *Interplanetary Species Society* [detail with ammonites], 2019.

We can expand much of this description of the ammonites to the plant and animal species visually rendered in the *CICC*. For example, the evidence/witness role also applies to animals and plants that have already died in the process of the 6th mass extinction now threatening human life. In the last sentence of the quote above, Staal points to the ammonite fossils as an example of the material that is used for fossil fuel empires. The burning of a deep past for a now which prohibits a shared, deep future.⁷⁰ Here we see how life is responsible for death in the *CICC* as cemetery. Extinct species simultaneously evidence and fuel the climate crisis because our continuing way of life both produces and depends on their death. *The thinnest skin of Now depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died.*⁷¹

The presence of *Comrades in Extinction* within the *CICC* draws into relief the immeasurable loss already endured due to the climate and ecological crises—effectively expanding the viewer's understanding of environmental justice. As the viewer gazes around the court, they are confronted at each angle by non-human comrades. An experience that can potentially change the way individuals see the ecology of physical

⁶⁹ Jonas Staal, *CICC* concept note, 2020.

⁷⁰ Jonas Staal, in communication with author, 2020.

⁷¹ Prefacing quote. Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 446.

reality they return to, with greater recognition of how it is inhabited by and dependent on non-human and more-than-human organisms. This enacts a re-distribution of the sensible, which encodes non-human lives with a worth removed by the progression of modernity/coloniality. D'Souza and Staal thus propose a form of collectivity to shift us away from human-centered ways of anthropocentric living.

3.3 *Intergenerational & Static Time*

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed the problematic temporal framing of the climate crisis, which often situates it as a future issue. This relegation to the future delegitimizes the devastation caused by climate change in the present, predominantly impacting indigenous frontline communities, and the histories of subjugation that have created the crisis. In such historically blinkered framing, we can read the erasure of the past as a site of experience, which Rolando Vázquez identifies as a symptom of modernity/coloniality's monopoly of the real.⁷² This erasure enables corporations and governments to delay action and continue various forms of climate-altering violence. Disrupting this temporal (mis)conception is crucial to D'Souza and Staal's project, visible in the 'intergenerational' orientation of their climate tribunal and the crimes it seeks to prosecute. The conceptualization of time in the *CICC*, discussed further below, can be understood as building from D'Souza's previously discussed notion of activism's temporal tension.⁷³ Such that activists inherit a situation from the past, to which they respond in the present, modifying future contexts.

To act intergenerationally in the *CICC* is to act with respect to both the past and the future. This means to acknowledge the vestiges of colonialism that continue to govern power dynamics between the Global North and South. D'Souza and Staal attempt this acknowledgement through the prosecution of Dutch companies for environmental crimes carried out predominantly in Global South countries, and especially in former colonies such as Indonesia. Additionally, by marking the beginning of the climate crisis as simultaneous with that of colonial empire within *Comrades in Extinction*, the *CICC* attempts to collapse the differences of time scale that might inhibit

⁷² Vázquez, "The Politics of Time."

⁷³ See Chapter I, Section 3: Political Time. D'Souza, *What's Wrong With Rights?*, 22.

its audience from understanding the full extent of the climate and ecological crises. Regardless of whether a species went extinct two or two-hundred years ago, they come to the *C/CC* as comrade with equal stake in the fight.

D'Souza and Staal also importantly highlight the intergenerational quality of climate crimes with regard to future worlds, as their full effect remains to be seen. Staal writes in an exhibition concept note:

Another fundamental challenge awaits us with regards to the ecocide that is currently outsourced into the future. Climate criminals make use of cognitive dissonance, by engaging in life threatening extraction processes of oil and gas in the present, of which the full consequences will only be visible in the future. Storing one's crime in the future is a strange equivalent to the use of the tax haven, as it is a space beyond our present jurisdiction.⁷⁴

The *C/CC* aims to overcome the cognitive dissonance of climate crimes stored beyond the present to picture environmental justice today as a shared fight for a livable future. We therefore become more embedded in future worlds through a gained recognition of our ability to influence them. This enriches the audience's experience of D'Souza's temporal tension—stretching implication, both in terms of criminality and the responsibility to act, across and between generations. While the radical intergenerational foundation for the *C/CC* is clear in its conception, as the exhibition has yet to happen, we will have to wait and see how these concepts play out in practice.

It is possible, however, to pre-emptively discuss certain constructions of time inherent to the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. Namely, that of static, or durational, time as experienced by the viewer. The *C/CC* is a performative exhibition with trials akin to political theater. In the windows between these trials, it will still be possible to visit *Framer Framed* to see the infrastructure of the exhibition, but the true weight of the project lies in its activation as a site of prosecution. Thus, the intended temporal experience of the *C/CC* is durational, such that viewers will sit through lengthy court proceedings, witnessing and participating in turn.

Bojana Kunst discusses duration in performance in the “Slowing down Movement” section from her 2015 book *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*,

⁷⁴ Jonas Staal, *C/CC* concept note, 2020.

wherein she examines the politics of work in performative art as it exists in capitalist modes of experience. On slowing time, Kunst writes:

[D]uration literally intervenes into the subject [who] suddenly feels that he/she has been dispossessed – and needs to slow down and wait. This slowing down and waiting is frequently felt in contemporary culture when the dispositives that regulate and organize our flexible subjectivities no longer work: for example, the protocols of moving through the city, social networks, airports, motorways, mobile phones. These kinds of halts in motion or slow-downs have a direct influence on the body as they appropriate the temporality of the subject...In moments like this, we say that we are stuck, with little else to do but hang in there and become powerless observers of our own chronological time...Perhaps the affective response is a consequence of the fact that it is duration that shows that we ourselves are actually not moving, but are being moved, that our inner perception of time (the time of someone who freely and flexibly projects their own subjectivity) is in fact heavily socially and economically conditioned.⁷⁵

What Kunst highlights here is the opposition at which static time, experienced by the subject as duration, stands in relation to the routines of movement in urban, capitalist life—as it prioritizes near-constant activity and work. She further asserts that this slowing enables recognition of our own chronologic time as being governed by structural forces: social and economic. The subject is dispossessed—opening new paths of subjectivity.

Duration therefore functions in the vein of art's redistributive capacity within sensibility (the sensible figured here as chronologic time). Within the *C/CC*, viewers move differently, which is to say that they do not move at all; they are still, watching, listening. And we should not forget here the quality of heterotopia as it opens onto temporalities outside the norms of daily life.⁷⁶ This experience of 'other' time, static time for the *C/CC*, can arguably open the viewer's eyes to the controlled quality of movement and attention in social life, which masquerades as free-choice and flexibility. Structural control seeks to orient subjects away from certain ways of moving that might threaten it—i.e., moving collectively toward ecological justice. The durational quality of the *C/CC*'s performative trials stimulates static time, allowing spectators an opportunity to observe and reformulate, to decide on a different path of movement.

To position time in the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* as solely durational, however, would be to focus too narrowly on its performative activation during

⁷⁵ Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016), 60.

⁷⁶ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 6-7.

the trials, which obscures a more contextualized understanding of the exhibition in its site. Framer Framed, as a temporary exhibition space, has a heterotopic quality of time more like that of the festival or fair, which is to say that it is cyclical, running out. Thus, an inherent quality of the site becomes its fleeting nature. This experience works in opposition to the endless accumulation of time in the museum, as described by Foucault. One's first inclination might be to see cyclicity of time as a weakness, meaning that being temporary makes the *C/CC* less impactful. However, I propose to understand cyclical time instead as pointed time. Think of fairs, economically timed for those first few weeks of summer, or winter markets, popping up just as people crave hot drinks and warm, yellow lights. Cyclicity can function as poignance.

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera describes her artistic practice as 'political timing specific'—a play on the notion of site specificity in art to foreground the importance of political context in her work.⁷⁷ Bruguera urges:

It is time to make art for the *not yet* and the *yet to come*. Art should intervene at the moment when politics and policies are taking shape...Form is defined in political-timing-specific art by the political sensibility of the time and place for which it is made...The window opens and closes very quickly: You have to enter with precision, during a brief moment when political decisions are not yet fixed, implemented, or culturally accepted. Political-timing-specific artworks happen in the space between the imaginary of a new political reality and politicians' existing control of that imaginary.⁷⁸

Reading the *C/CC* as political timing specific helps to establish its cyclical temporality as a pointed aspect of its function, rather than an outcome of its situation. Bruguera writes on the importance of acting at the moment when policies are taking shape, which can certainly be said of the *C/CC*. The project takes form during a period where international environmentalist movements often call widespread attention to the climate crisis and the need for climate justice. Importantly, recent years have also been a time where the burden of action against of climate change has been planted more firmly with governments and corporations, including the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement and the

⁷⁷ Claire Bishop, "Rise to the Occasion: Claire Bishop on the Art of Political Timing" and Tania Bruguera "Notes on Political Timing Specificity," *Artforum International* 57, no. 9 (May 2019): 198-206.

⁷⁸ Bruguera "Notes on Political Timing Specificity," 205.

landmark 2019 Urgenda case, which found the Dutch government guilty of endangering its citizens by its lack of action to curb the effects of climate change.⁷⁹

Political timing specificity also speaks to D'Souza and Staal's adoption of a court infrastructure. Bruguera writes that the political sensibility of the moment defines the form of political timing specific art. For the *C/CC*, this points to the use of the court form because it is where justice is sociopolitically constructed as taking place. In the moment when actions begin to be taken toward environmental justice, the *C/CC* functions to push the political imaginary further through the pointed or politically specific nature of its temporality. D'Souza and Staal seek to aid in the imagination of a climate justice that condemns states and corporations while acting in a delicate balance between the rights of humans and non-humans, present and future generations. They effectively propose a legal framework which acts with respect to different time scales and life forms.

Conclusion

As the quote prefacing this chapter asserts, we, as the planetary collective impacted by climate change, need to restructure our conception of immanence—the notion governing which legal actions need to take place urgently. Ultimately, Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal's *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* is an experiment in this restructuring. The *C/CC* radically appropriates the legal court, reconstituting the form as a more-than-human assembly and seeking to tilt back the scale of climate justice, which has stood unbalanced since the beginning of colonial enterprise. Within this 'other' court, humans are posed as fossils in the making and comrade to non-human presences. History, present, and future are collapsed into one another by the nature of intergenerational climate crimes. Viewers bear witness, a durational experience of listening, at the political moment when it is needed most. And all of this is done to change our minds, to re-distribute sensibility. So that we, as the collective creating and enduring the climate crisis, may begin to see and act differently, informed by a new framework for understanding the chaos, change and extinction around us.

⁷⁹ As of 19 November 2020 on <https://www.urgenda.nl/en/themas/climate-case/climate-case-explained/>.

Many will speculate on whether the *C/CC* will have any ‘real’ political outcome. Perhaps preempting this type of dismissal, D’Souza cites the Commission of Inquiry (Col) as a political form that her climate tribunal takes inspiration from:

They ‘inquire’ into all aspects of an issue, including the wider context, the circumstances that produced the problem...The most important feature of the Col is that its decisions are not binding on the government. It is up to the government to adopt the report, reject it or adopt parts of it. Thus, enforceability is a major issue. Nevertheless, the findings establish truth and influence politics.”⁸⁰

Just because something does not bind, does not mean it cannot move us, does not mean we should not choose to adopt its truth. Perhaps the greatest evidence for the power of the *C/CC*, identical with the imaginative power of art, is that I write about this project before it has taken place. And yet, it has already managed to alter my frame of reference. Might it alter yours?

The immanent function of the *C/CC* lies in its ability to highlight and grapple with the societal transformations necessary to address the climate crisis. Reflecting on these transformations and on the question of how art, environment and law can come together, Radha D’Souza positions art as the new realm of philosophy.

One of the things that neo-liberalism has done is completely undermine the spaces for philosophy, and it is philosophy that unifies and underpins those three things [art, law and environment]. All those three things, and many others for that matter, are underpinned by a common world view. And in each sphere we need to look at the underlying philosophical premises...Today in fact most universities, at least in the Anglo-American world, have closed down philosophy departments, and so people like me have to look for artists like Jonas [Staal] to talk about philosophy because there is no other space to talk about these things. What is human purpose? Why are we on this world? What [are] our ethics? What is our duty to each other? These questions, which are so fundamental—what is human existence? These questions we no longer have a space to talk about. And this is what the knowledge systems have done—removed our capacity to think about our condition, to think about human purpose, to think about human destiny, and I think we need to create the spaces to bring them back.”⁸¹

D’Souza rightly points out that humans have a need to address existential questions for the sake of our continued existence. And because current sociopolitical structures have obscured both this need and the spaces in which it can be undertaken, new forms of

⁸⁰ Radha D’Souza, *C/CC* concept note, 2020.

⁸¹ Radha D’Souza, “Crisis Imaginaries Chapter 1: Climate Transformations,” Online panel from *Framer Framed*, Amsterdam, 16 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNRIUM4zFzg>.

congregation and questioning are necessary. D'Souza and Staal, through their construction of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, acknowledge this need, and, in turn, offer a space which can bear the weight of existential, intergenerational thought.

CHAPTER IV: *INTER-SECTION*

I have chosen to present each case study in a more stand-alone reflection; thus, this thesis would be incomplete without a moment for comparative analysis of the insights drawn from *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. This section looks to that comparison, focusing on the heterotopic and temporal qualities of each site and their relation. I also reflect more generally on the premises of each exhibition, as they respond to the sociopolitical issues which conditioned their making.

The issues taken up by *Blak Origin Moment* and the *CICC*—Black oppression and the climate crisis, respectively—see their intersection in environmental racism. In an article entitled “Slow violence and toxic geographies: ‘Out of sight to whom?’”, human geographer Thom Davies tracks the intersection of slow violence and structural violence. On the definition of environmental racism, Davies refers to a pattern in which environmental risks (water or air polluting-activities, fracking etc.) are placed nearest to communities who have “the smallest reserves of political, economic, and social capital.”⁸² These communities—Black, brown, poor—come to have little capital or political agency due to the effects of structural violence, which we can also term as institutional racism in the context of Black oppression in the United States. The term ‘slow violence’ was coined by Rob Nixon in 2011 to qualify the effects of environmental degradation and climate change.⁸³ Deemed ‘slow’ because it is a form of injustice whose harm unfolds over years, which makes its effect harder to recognize.

Thom Davies documents how structural inequality can mutate into slow violence. He asserts that classifying slow violence as invisible erases the experiences of those living within ‘toxic geographies’. These geographies being communities who live with the effects of environmental degradation to the extent that this harm becomes, albeit slowly, visible to them—a deadly sort of situated knowledge. On the intersection of structural and slow violence, Davies writes:

Indeed, both slow and structural theorizations of violence locate sources of brutality within the routinized workings of society itself, through a systemic normalization of that

⁸² Thom Davies, “Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies: ‘Out of Sight’ to Whom?” *Environment and planning. C, Politics and space* (April 2019): 8.

⁸³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

suffering...[W]e can see that slow violence is not simply about time and the uneven velocity of social harms; rather, it is also attuned to the uneven structures that allow such brutalities to gradually propagate.⁸⁴

Davies draws into relief the common denominator in structural inequality and environmental degradation in their normalization by a society that permits them to endure. This occurs by means of the routine patterns of life that obscure such violence. When thinking on “routinized workings of society”, we should keep in mind Vázquez’s elucidation of modernity/coloniality as it subjugates through its control of sensibility and experience (both in terms of aesthetics and temporality). Seeing that the issues of climate change and institutional racism are so deeply intertwined, it becomes all the more crucial and exciting to examine the *CICC* and *Blak Origin Moment* together. Their comparison documents what tactics (whether similar or different) manifest in activist art as its makers react to forms of injustice reaching across to one another, brutally entangled.

4.1 *Destabilized Ecologies*

The following brief comparison of this thesis’ case study exhibitions focuses on the two paradigms which have defined much of my theoretical analysis thus far: art spaces as heterotopias and artists’ navigation of constructions and perceptions of time. I therefore use these elements more broadly to evaluate *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* in conversation.

To begin with heterotopia—both the *CICC* and *Blak Origin Moment* take on heterotopic qualities by nature of their situation in art spaces. This is because the temporary exhibition space and the museum both constitute ‘other’ experiences of space and time that are different from that of life outside of them. More specifically and informed by Runette Kruger’s analysis of a previous installation work by Staal, I have positioned Radha D’Souza and Jonas Staal’s *CICC* as a critical utopia manifest as heterotopia. The *CICC* appropriates the form of the court to reimagine its function and that of climate justice by extension. Viewers become situated within an ‘other’, utopic court, which critiques and destabilizes real courts for their limited scope and inclusion—

⁸⁴ Davies, “Slow Violence,” 5-6.

both of the marginalized human and non-human or more-than-human victimized by climate crimes.

Blak Origin Moment rather takes the shape of heterotopia defined by difference, or as a manifestation of Nancy Fraser's counter-public. Here we see movement and narration oriented away from patterns of sensing and meaning which reinforce white supremacy and toward recognition of systemic racism and Black oppression. Noel W Anderson creates a spatial archive in which the subaltern political body speaks loudest. *Blak Origin Moment* prompts a deeper reflection of instances of anti-Black violence and police brutality as they are allowed to repeat through history. It is not utopia, but it is critical of the society that allows such an archive, as well as the moments it collects, to come to being.

Whether as space of dissent or utopic construction, *Blak Origin Moment* and the *CICC* evidence the ability of heterotopia to be consciously and actively appropriated by political agents, being artists or activists in other forms. This activist adoption of the heterotopia is built as an experience of space and temporality that exists in dis-relation to the routines of the everyday. In other words, the two exhibitions render configurations of experience outside of instituted culture.⁸⁵

One of the instruments which I propose enables the activist heterotopia is the readymade. In *Blak Origin Moment*, the readymade takes shape in the police barricade of *Zip*, 2017, while the *CICC* takes the political form of the court as its readymade object. This perhaps suggests a changing role for the readymade as it is re-contextualized in spaces of art. The readymade, via Marcel Duchamp, was first an everyday object made to critique the arena of art itself. But as the artist becomes more entrenched in politics, it expands. The readymade becomes a politically charged object or form that is adopted in a new setting to reflect on—and critique—its use in daily life. In both cases, the readymade brings the exhibition space closer to the political sensibility of the current moment, thereby engaging a more activist formulation of heterotopia through a critical proximity to the real. Ultimately, *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* showcase emerging tactics for appropriating space and form as activist intervention at the hands of the artist.

⁸⁵ See section 1.1 *The Space of Art*.

Excitingly, we may see (in the example of the political readymade) these tactics building through art historical frameworks.

As art spaces are re-appropriated through the object, disrupting temporality takes on time/history and its narration as a core function of museums or other sites of exhibition. The quality of time in the *CICC* is inherently different from *Blak Origin Moment* because of its performative nature. The *CICC* adopts a durational temporal situation through the multi-hour trials it will host. Duration necessarily disrupts the temporality which the spectator would experience before and after the trials, consolidating attention in an instance of bearing witness. Within *Blak Origin Moment*, temporality is manipulated on a somewhat smaller scale, constituted most evidently by works such as *STOOR*, 2016-17. Further, I see Noel W Anderson's tapestries as a sort of mapping of time through weaving. This threaded ecology comes together as a representation of the image as moment—only to be disrupted through digital warping or hitched hanging. It is important to bear in mind, however, that time is certainly other within the museum, as it accumulates through collections. Museum time, even empty of performance, is also somewhat durative—with viewers cued to spend a certain amount of time looking at each artwork.

The overarching relationship *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* pose to time, especially chronological time, is one of destabilization. Chronological time, as upheld by modernity/coloniality, portrays present actions as if in a vacuum, distinct from unreachable pasts and futures, and imposes a violently unsustainable focus on progression. *Blak Origin Moment* and the *CICC* seek to disrupt this narrative of time as a whole, and more locally as it inhibits action against their sociopolitical issues. Disruption is performed by removing viewers from routine time, placing them in durative or manipulated time—even time that runs backwards.

The temporary exhibitions work to re-institute the past as a viable site of experience, critical in Vázquez's politicization of time.⁸⁶ Re-institution, in *Blak Origin Moment*, occurs through works such as *STOOR*, 2016-17, but also through the active reproduction of an archive comprised of past experiences. Within the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, re-institution goes hand in hand with expanding the

⁸⁶ Vázquez, "The Politics of Time."

timeline of the climate and ecological crises, with witness testimony to focus on the historical dimension of these crimes and deaths that began 400 years ago. To make the past present is to make visible, sensible its knowledge and pain. For the exhibitions I have studied, this is done in order to change future contexts or to picture why change is necessary.

Conclusion

Blak Origin Moment and the *CICC* see common ground in their makers' efforts to destabilize frameworks of time. But one of their most interesting distinctions is their directive stance toward a changed future. Noel W Anderson, in his own words, does not point to a way forward, while Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal inarguably and intentionally do. I find it difficult to say why this is. It feels a too-personal stance to analyze because the artists hold these issues differently than I do, especially in the case of Noel W Anderson who draws from lived experience. However, I focus below on two additional differences of approach within these cases, which may—or may not—inform an understanding of why one activist art exhibition points forward and one does not.

Firstly, I would like to draw attention to the notion of political timing specificity in art practice, as coined by artist Tania Bruguera. Political timing specificity is a characteristic of art practice that acts decisively in a period of change in order to direct that change. I have applied this lens in the case of the *CICC*, qualifying D'Souza and Staal's construction of such a project as a pointed response to the current political moment, with regard to corporations, law and the climate crisis. However, I am reluctant to adapt this framework to Noel W Anderson's exhibition. It seems reductive to frame his work within the immediate political moment even as it has seen international mobilization for Black lives in response to a heightened atmosphere of tension and hate under the Trump presidency. My reluctance arises from my view of *Blak Origin Moment* not as an quick, pointed strike but more a digestion of time, of a history of oppression that defies time by its generational span.

The final difference I propose to consider is the 'other' quality of these exhibition spaces. Has this otherness been chosen or imposed? In both *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*, we see heterotopia appropriated as a

political and inherently critical sphere. An activist space with the potential to exist in a destabilizing relation to all other sites. But in comparing *Blak Origin Moment* and the *C/CC*, it is crucial to consider how this otherness has come to be. For D'Souza and Staal, I see more an active construction of heterotopia. A choice to be other in (dis)relation to 'real' courts as sites of limited justice. A Black / Blak archive is fated to be other within white hegemony, an all-encompassing reality. While the position of Black other can still be actively, radically re-claimed and re-appropriated—and is by Noel W Anderson—this claim should still be understood as it comes from years of existing within that position by force.

CONCLUSION

I think about patience and its stupid song.
I can't wait— Yes, I'm always looking back
at my dead.

Tiana Clark⁸⁷

⁸⁷ "After *Orpheus*" in *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*, 2018, 49.

This thesis has explored the role of art in the (dis)reconciliation of unjust sociopolitical realities, specifically that of Black oppression [in the United States] and the climate crisis. My analysis has been guided by the question: What spatial and temporal mechanisms are at play in the contexts of activist art exhibitions, and how is the museum/exhibition space (as heterotopia) figured as a site of resistance? I was originally drawn to these two qualities—heterotopic art space and time—as they structure spectator experience within sites of art’s presentation. Additionally, working through these paradigms has helped ground my exploration of *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* more firmly in the politics which contextualize them.

On the question of the museum or exhibition space and its role in enriching activist art practice—my analysis has positioned the heterotopic museum as a fertile site for such intervention. The artists I discuss seek to shift the subjectivity of the viewer and their understanding of a given sociopolitical issue by offering different experiences of space, time and collectivity. Museums and exhibition spaces provide an apt site for this type of intervention because of their capacity to hold juxtaposition and otherness. A capacity deriving from the fact of their own inherent ‘other’ quality. At the same time, the museum is a crucial arena in which to take up issues of social justice because of its stake in the representation of community and society.

Spaces of exhibition have unfolded in this thesis predominantly through Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. The position of the art space as heterotopia is grounded in the experience of art elaborated by Jacques Rancière and Judith Barry—essentially the claim that art can formalize new modes of sensibility in which the spectator forms new interpretations. This new or dissident quality of art in relation to everyday sensibility ultimately forms its character as an ‘other’ space. However, I have necessarily drawn on more recent scholarship to update and further Foucault’s rather broad formulation of heterotopia. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter’s *Heterotopia and the City* has been key in this. Dehaene and De Cauter approach heterotopia—in its capacity to re-integrate heterogeneity—as the counterstrategy to a proliferation of the camp within a disintegrating society. Their positioning of the urban heterotopia within postcivil society (one which has accepted its own brutality) aligns with the approaches

of Noel W Anderson, Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal as their exhibitions critically figure and respond to this brutality.

Lara Khaldi's concept of the asynchronous museum in resistance has been helpful for grounding the heterotopic museum in its relationship to the society outside its walls. Khaldi clarifies the porous relationship between the institution and the everyday, which allows objects to influence viewers and vice versa. Runette Kruger's assertion of utopia's potentially critical stance toward the 'real' has been crucial in my analysis of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*—such that utopia can be manifest in art installations by means of heterotopia. Effectively inscribing utopic critique in the fabric of public space. Marco Cenzatti has likewise illuminated my analysis of *Blak Origin Moment* by speaking more directly to how subaltern identities may reside within heterotopias of difference, forming counter-publics as a sphere of self-representation and identity re-formulation.

I have attempted throughout this project to hold my evaluations of time and art spaces as heterotopias at a distance from one another, despite their simultaneity. As we move through space, time moves with us and moves us. However, reading time in its own frame has been useful in illuminating the complex political dimensions at play in each of my case study exhibitions. My interest in time and the balance between time scales is inspired by Radha D'Souza's framework of activist temporal tension—such that activists are bound by and acting between situations of the past, present and future.

Rolando Vázquez's politics of time has been crucial for my understanding of modernity, or modernity's ascription of chronological time, as a subjugating force which obscures histories of violence. His notion of the critical thinker of time being one who seeks to salvage time by humbly experiencing it has helped me to characterize the works of Noel W Anderson, Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal. One such form of salvaging time which the artists draw on is the re-institution of the past as a site of experience, rendering it viable in the present as a site of harm and injustice. Finally, on time—Bojana Kunst's introduction in my second case study provides a clear picture of how capitalist life moves us in time, while maintaining an illusion of free choice. This gives way to the notion that experiences of duration or slow time—at play in both *Blak*

Origin Moment and the *CICC*—reveal this situation of urban time while potentially dispossessing subjectivity.

The theoretical framework laid out above comprises the many lenses, discourses and modes of thinking which have informed my analysis of *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. In *Blak Origin Moment*, we see the instance of recognizing oneself as Black—framed by Anderson as in the moment of racial violence—re-constituted as an ecology rather than singular. This ecology, a spectrum of experience constructing Blackness, is then rightly represented as coming to form through oppression as it repeats through generations. Noel W Anderson weaves moments together only to pull at their threads, to render them inaccessible, as a means of revealing their role in constructing identity. A role that turns violent as Black identity is (mis)framed at the hands of white hegemony.

Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal's *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* pushes the political imaginary of justice to identify the corporate crimes, as permitted by the state, that have brought on the climate and ecological crises of today. D'Souza and Staal propose a new form of assembly within a re-imagined court. This new assembly poses human, non-human, and more-than-human in the relationship of comrade—blurring distinctions of generation, of evidence, witness, or jury; in this they mirror the totalizing force of climate change. Overarchingly, the *CICC* positions art as realm of philosophy and political inquiry. Spectators can question and newly comprehend human experience as they participate in the creation of new framework of legal action and climate justice.

Thom Davies, by drawing into relief how slow and structural violence envelop one another, provides a basis for why these two cases should be considered in tandem. In doing so, we see the overlaps and disjunctions between *Blak Origin Moment* and the *CICC*, which reveal the expanding role of the activist artist. The paths for politically engaged art practice are not yet molded. And yet, their comparison sheds light on potential new forms and tactics of activism as conducted through art practice: in the political readymade and in the critical activation of heterotopia by or for the sake of the political other—whether human or non-human, harmed now, in history, or in an increasingly precarious future.

On Grief

In looking back on this thesis, I notice that I have seemingly unconsciously begun each chapter with death. This is a heavy place to start; the weight of these cases compounds the longer I sit with them. However, heaviness is appropriate for the content of my two case studies. Both *Blak Origin Moment* and the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*—as with all issues of social justice—begin with the suffering of people and beings, human and non-human. To engage with these projects is to mourn. And thus, we come to grief.

In an expansive symposium engaging with the modern philosophical and social aspects of grief, Judith Butler reminds us that grief should not be taken for granted. Asked to reflect on her concept of the differential distribution of grievability (which bodies are mournable and which not?) as it manifests in her early book *Gender Trouble*, 1990, Butler recounts emphatically:

What was most salient to me at that point was the AIDS crisis and the number of losses from AIDS that were not publicly mourned, and it seemed to me that the social movements that emerged then...had as at least one of their goals to mark those losses...Why did they do this? Well because so often there was a stigma attached to being gay or even being a sex worker or taking drugs through injection that this whole community that was suffering disproportionately from AIDS was a stigmatized and abjected community. So the losses of those people were no losses in the public eye...So the right to mark the loss as a loss was, I think, really important. And of course since I came out, or was outed, at the age of 14 without a community or a network of solidarity, my early loves were not nameable. When a relationship would break up, I couldn't even proclaim that it had broken up. My parents and my family didn't even know what was happening because it was unthinkable that I was a lesbian. And my love was no love, and my loss was no loss...I think when AIDS hit public mourning became politically imperative because it was a way of saying 'this was a life'. Do not act as if this is no life.⁸⁸

I have included this quote of Butler in its entirety because it is deeply sad and poignant. Although she reflects on the context of the AIDS crisis and anti-gay stigma, which cannot be directly translated to my two case studies, Butler's words are able to speak more broadly to mourning as it constitutes a political act.

⁸⁸ Judith Butler, "The Culture of Grief: Philosophy, Ecology and the Politics of Loss in the Twenty-first Century," Online symposium by Aalborg University, 3 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JBQik2-x8>.

The notion that a love or a death are not nameable is heartbreakingly fit for the countless Black lives lost to white supremacist violence and the entire species and cultures destroyed in generations of climate crimes. So let's start from death. Let's mark and mourn and rage at death. And where is better suited to such memorialization than the museum? The museum, which since its inception has operated as an extension, a tool, of the Western or Global North nation-state as it seeks to project history from its own point of view. The museum is exactly where we should confront our own brutality, to become postcivil. And here is where the activist artist can help by marking death in reproduced images of racist violence, by claiming environmental destruction and extinction as a crime to be prosecuted. In grief we commit a political act—by naming life as life, loss as loss.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisor Mia Lerm Hayes for her enthusiasm for this project and guidance during my writing process. Additionally, I would like to thank Sanjukta Sunderason for taking the time to be my second reader in only her first week at UvA. And many thanks to Jean Medina, my unofficial third reader and a great support during my writing.

I am very thankful to Noel W Anderson, Monique Long and Nandini Makrandi for their openness in discussing *Blak Origin Moment* with me. The insights from these conversations were crucial in bringing the exhibition material to life during my research. Thank you also to the staff of the Hunter Museum, who were so kind to share exhibition materials with me. Thank you to Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal for dreaming up the *C/CC* and for bringing me in to collaborate on it—I am so looking forward to experiencing it in the real. Thank you also to Framer Framed for the work that they do and for making space for me to be a part of it.

A warm thank you to my friends in Amsterdam, New York and Chattanooga for always being there to talk and listen, and to my sister Courtney in Norfolk for her example in writing and life. I am very thankful for the welcoming arms of my new family in Leersum, and, above all, to my family in Chattanooga—Mom, Dad, Ryan and Blake—for strengthening me across an ocean and a six-hour time difference. I miss you.

And, of course, to Simon for his belief in me and his steadiness.

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List of Figures

Cover

1. Noel W Anderson, *Invagination* [detail], 2016-17. Close up of tapestry with torn threads. Courtesy of <https://www.nwastudios.com/blakoriginmoment>.

Chapter II

1. Noel W Anderson, *Escapism* [detail], 2016-2017. Fused portrait of Michael Brown and Darren Wilson. Courtesy of <https://www.nwastudios.com/blakoriginmoment>.
2. Aerial view of the Hunter Museum with Noel W Anderson's *Untitled*, 2019 installation (bottom right corner of the image). Courtesy of the Hunter Museum of American Art.
3. Noel W Anderson, *Untitled*, 2019. Installation shot of tapestry hanging on the outside of the Hunter Museum. Courtesy of the Hunter Museum of American Art.
4. Noel W Anderson, *Zip*, 2017. Installation view of the vertical police barricade. Courtesy of the Hunter Museum of American Art.
5. Noel W Anderson, *Zip*, 2017. Installation view detail. Courtesy of the Hunter Museum of American Art.
6. Barnett Newman, *Onement, I*, 1948. Painting with Newman's vertical 'zip'. Courtesy of the MoMA Online Collection [<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79601>].
7. Noel W Anderson, *Untitled*, 2019. Installation shot of tapestry hung with hitched points. Courtesy of the Hunter Museum of American Art.
8. Noel W Anderson, *Hands-Up*, 2016-17. Series of four tapestries with images of raised hands. Courtesy of <https://www.nwastudios.com/blakoriginmoment>.

Chapter II.b

1. Noel W Anderson, *Line Up*, 2016-17. Large tapestry depicting a police strip search with eight men lined up against a wall. Courtesy of <https://www.nwastudios.com/blakoriginmoment>.
2. Noel W Anderson, *Line Up* [detail], 2016-17. Cropped image focused on a Black police officer holding a shotgun. Courtesy of <https://www.nwastudios.com/blakoriginmoment>.
3. Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (policeman)*, 2015. Painting of a Black police officer sitting on the hood of his car. Courtesy of the MoMA Online Collection [<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/199591>].

Chapter III

1. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes, Study*, 2020. Digital rendering of the court with posters from *Comrades in Extinction* series. Image courtesy of Paul Kuipers and Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.
2. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes, Study*, 2020. Preliminary floorplan sketch of the court in Framer Framed. Image courtesy of Paul Kuipers and Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.

3. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Comrades in Extinction, Study*, 2020. Painting of a Hispaniolan Edible Rat (*Brotomys voratus*) with the word 'comrade' in Russian. Gouache on paper, 21x29.7 cm. Image courtesy of Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.
4. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Comrades in Extinction, Study*, 2020. Painting of a Mysterious Starling (*Aplonis mavornata*) with the word 'comrade' in Turkish. Gouache on paper, 21x29.7 cm. Image courtesy of Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.
5. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Comrades in Extinction, Study*, 2020. Painting of a Catarina Pupfish (*Megupsilon aporus*) with the word 'comrade' in English. Gouache on paper, 21x29.7 cm. Image courtesy of Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.
6. Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Comrades in Extinction, Study*, 2020. Painting of a Golden Toad (*Incilius periglenes*) with the word 'comrade' in Esperanto. Gouache on paper, 21x29.7 cm. Image courtesy of Jonas Staal. Produced by Framer Framed, Amsterdam.
7. Studio Jonas Staal, *Interplanetary Species Society*, 2019. Installation view detail with ammonite fossils on pedestals. Courtesy of <http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/interplanetary-species-society/>.

Interview Appendix

The following transcript has been included with the permission of Noel W Anderson. It records a phone conversation between the artist and me on 28 September 2020. We discuss his practice, Blak Origin Moment, and the ethics of time.

Ashley Maum:

How did you think of the show's transition from Cincinnati to Chattanooga as different cultural contexts?

Noel W. Anderson:

One is a little bit deeper South. Cincinnati straddles, the Mason-Dixie or Grits line as I would call it. I grew up in Cincinnati, so it had a different, more intimate meaning for me. Also it was in an area that is being gentrified, so it was interesting to have this conversation about the subjugation or economizing of black peoples by white authorities within a city that was actively doing it.

AM:

So in Chattanooga it must have felt very different to not be as intimate with the space.

NWA:

The intimacy was not the same. But as soon as I visited and saw this institution was on top of a hill, like a plantation, everything just made sense. All of the colonial attitudes that are circumscribed by that architectural space resonated and, quite frankly, amplified their way through me.

I put forth some effort to make myself intimate with that space. I always require institutions to figure out how I can do public programming in the cities, mostly with Black students. So that gave a familiarity with that space, and I could identify with the Black folks that I met there.

AM:

Nandini [Makrandi] had told me that you did a lot of work and went to schools. Did you do art classes with them or more presentations?

NWA:

We did a talk and an art project together. With the ambition of installing, resurrecting or re-imagining what potential they may believe they have.

AM:

Compared to having it in an exhibition space in Cincinnati—Did having *Blak Origin Moment* in the Hunter Museum and it being contextualized within that kind of space and its collection change something?

NWA:

I don't know if the collection was my concern. I was cognizant and quite pleased that I would be in the same building that Rauschenberg was hanging in. There's other great work in the space. That made a big difference.

I thought at one point, I was going to pull something from the collection and hang it in the show, but that did not happen. I was conscious of how that was going to work within the space, but like I said, once I got there, I realized there were vestiges of colonialism in terms of its architecture. And that made more sense. And then we hung the large tapestry outside and that made even more sense.

AM:

That's one of the works I'm especially interested in. I talked a bit about it with Monique [Long] because she said she was helping with the installation of that. Was that your first public artwork?

NWA:

Yes.

AM:

How did you feel to install it there?

NWA:

It was my brainchild, and I made it for that purpose. I wish they would have been able to put it on another building, but I liked the fact that it had that space, and it hits you when you see it.

AM:

Monique said you had wanted to put it on the neoclassical building—the mansion. Instead it's with the more Brutalist architecture, which I think still sets it off really well.

NWA:

It's a good frame. That kind of hyper-masculine framing element. It's brutal as fuck, the brutalists were right.

AM:

Some of your tapestry works are left hanging or kind of draped and then some of them are wrapped over stretchers. Is there an impulse behind that?

NWA:

I'm trying to get closer to painting, which is the historical ancestor. Others I'm trying to get close to how the body forms and reduces access. All the work is always about, whether on a micro or macro level, it's always about access. Who has it and who does not, which is also attached to weaving. This kind of high-end weaving that I seem to have access to. There's a lot of deep political historical shit there.

I always work with cotton and that's significant because the threads are re-worked through by hand in my studio. So I'm picking cotton in my studio. We can add that to the conceptual history of the work. Looking through a Marxist lens it's a critique of the function of material in the subjugation of people. Cotton itself was used to organize quantify black bodies. Then that gets pushed into hyper production, where America becomes the leader, driving what we now know as capitalism. And it doesn't stop with black bodies. Cotton bales were shipped up to New England where white girls and women are working in factories spinning it. It gets tied to gender, class and it gets woven into a whole ecological history that is beyond belief.

AM:

Since you mentioned hand-weaving—are the tapestries mechanically made?

NWA:

I do both, so they're produced in both ways.

AM:

I was wondering, how are they cleaned or are they?

NWA:

Do you clean a painting?

AM:

You do clean a painting, but not for a very long time.

NWA:

There you go. I was actually watching a video the other day of a Morris Lewis painting being cleaned. I watched them wash it. I guess you do have to clean a painting.

AM:

I was thinking for your works because the materiality, maybe they collect more dust.

NWA:

They might, that's not my concern. That's what a painting does. You have to adjust the way you're thinking about the objects. People keep seeing them as between a tapestry and a painting. If it were up to me, I wouldn't call them tapestries anymore, I'd call them... I don't know what I'd call them, but I like the fact that they don't really have a place.

AM:

The *STOOR* video really stood out to me because it's the only video work and by being set apart in the black box. How did it come about as the only video work?

NWA:

It was the only video work for the iteration [in Chattanooga]. The other video work [in Cincinnati] was of Mike Tyson. It's a play on Nam June Paik's Buddha watching himself on TV. It's a video of a speed bag on its harness, and the harness is on the floor. So it looks like a head and shoulders. It becomes a torso and it's in front of a video I made of Mike Tyson beating up white people. The speed bag and harness are black. So you essentially watch this black form witness the person who beats him up beat up other people.

With *STOOR*--Donald Trump was saying make everything great again. I thought, what does that even mean? What does that kind of anti-modernist position mean? Anti-modernist in the sense that if in fact we were in modernism, someone says, well, we can't be in modernism, we have to go away from it, which at one time meant go back. What does that mean to go backwards? I figured out how to play the thing backwards or record the thing backwards, so that it would play backwards forwards, forwards backwards. Then when I watched it in my studio alone, I thought this thing was fucking amazing. I thought it was one of the greatest things I'd ever made. Just because it was fucking me up in the studio and the sound was amazing.

I have a white person speaking backwards, and it sounds like Arabic. Then I dug in more after watching it over and over again. And I thought this is return to home to Africa. But that return to Africa has to go through the womb. You have to go through the violent act of a rebirth, which is the whipping. Or it's really the removal of the whip marks, which itself looks like a whipping. The idea of going back somewhere, if it's for Black people, then there's always going to be a trauma. Who the fuck wasn't going through trauma anyways? Putting things in reversal breaks time. We gotta break time to break ourselves.

AM:

That's the reason why the work really stood out to me is because I plan to talk about time as one of the main things related to activism. So it's nice to hear that that's present in your thinking with the work.

NWA:

What do you think about time?

AM:

I'm mainly working off this idea of lawyer and writer Radha D'Souza. She has this idea of how in activism there's temporal tension because you're acting in the present based on past situations. Then your actions have effect for the future, so I'm looking at how that gets mediated within the museum. Especially as the museum is able to hold these time and layer them, so it could make the museum a good space for reflecting on social progress or activist movements. It is kind of about the connection between different timescales and the blurring of chronological time, as a decolonial framework. It's about breaking down the idea of chronological time as an arrow, which is of course oppressive and how bodies have been regulated throughout time.

NWA:

There's a lot of good writing about how people redistribute time and make time not a line. Time's not a line, time's like a circle. No time's a fucking spiral. I think more in a Derridean understanding of time and ethics. More like there's never a now. That fucking metaphysics of presence or whatever. There's never a now, and there's never really a then. And we're fully indebted to all those times and time scales, you dig? So there's an ethical principle for me to breaking time.

AM:

I'll have to look into Derrida's writing then.

NWA:

For me there's just an ethical understanding about how time functions.

AM:

The first iteration of *Blak Origin Moment* happened after Ferguson, and to my understanding arose out of a reflection on Black Lives Matter after Ferguson. And since the closing of the exhibition at the Hunter, we've had another mobilization of Black Lives Matter. I wonder how you've thought about your work and the exhibition as sandwiched between those two moments and how you've reflected on it now, since what's happened after its closing?

NWA:

I think it's problematic to qualify the works as made in relation to those events. They weren't. I've been making that work for years, just nobody knows about it. That would require me to think that I wasn't radical before this. And I was.

In terms of its correlation to what's happening now—it's not new. The imagery is not new. The delivery is new because it collapses all of the bullshit of the materialism of race, class, and identity into unknowable spaces and unknowable objects. The ambition for me in that regard is to define a world that we don't even exist in that might be better than this world. I'm not putting in the world images that I'm like, yeah, these images are the way to the future. I'm putting instances or collaborations of experiences in the form of tapestries and other stuff that question the experiences that we live through now. With the hope that in the future—because there will be a future—and hope that in the future we will have already solved the bullshit we should have solved 400 plus years ago.