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Foreword: Transfiguring Again — When Bodies Matter

Boehmer, E.

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FOREWORD

Transfiguring Again—When Bodies Matter

The body is the most loaded of iconic symbols. It has always been the canvas on which the pains and distresses of the oppressed, the othered, the voiceless, have been marked. But, by the same token, the body is also a primary site of resistance, where the unvoiced finds through some form of language, a voice. Or, where ‘the figured begins to figure by figuring the Other, itself’, as I once put it, several decades ago, in words that continue to resonate for me, though I might like now to add: where that ‘itself’ is always taken to be multiple and various.¹

Under empire, the other was the physical, the corporeal. In the present-day, under continuing conditions of inequality world-wide, the body remains a primary place of abjection. The body of the other is still made to represent its own difference from the norm, as black or female or queer or trans or steatopygic or disabled, and so on.

Yet, where the body speaks its own experience, as in testimony or analysis, it becomes the subject of its own narrative. Uttering its wounds, whether in spoken or in written language, whether in symbol or in sign, it negates that

1 Elleke Boehmer, “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Narrative,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26.3 (1993), 268-276.

inflicted muteness. The story of the self becomes self-recuperation. By signifying, the once-silenced, apparently ‘timeless’ subject-body places itself within diachronic narrative—the syntax of history. It steps out of the cyclical time of empire. It becomes manifold. Its story is transmogrifying.

Within some transformative stories, words re-embody the life even when the body is no longer here to speak. In NourbeSe Philip’s haunted and haunting long poem *Zong!* (2014), the terrible history of the titular late eighteenth-century slave ship is narrated through the broken voices of those who were cast overboard to obtain a return on an insurance claim.² Yet, though the bodies may be lost, their spirit endures, called up by the poem. Their ghostly presence speaks their bodies’ pain and anguish through the poet who gives them voice. The epic relays to the reader through this insistent susurrations what it is to experience such terror, yet also what it is to participate in community and survival.

A similar re-membering of the lost through poetic commemoration is found in South African poet Diane Ferrus’s ‘My naam is Februarie’ (2016). This response to the 2015 discovery of the wrecked slave ship *Sao José* off the coast of Cape Town, is presented as if spoken by one of the drowned slaves, Februarie.³ Reminiscing, Februarie ticks off the body parts of the lost—breasts, eyes, brain—that ever and again break apart, with each new storm that strikes, as does the surrounding wreck on the seabed. The poem gathers the fragments back together, performing with each iteration what Toni Morrison calls a “truth invention”—an imaginative act that “[yields] up a kind of truth”, here a submerged history restored to utterance.⁴

In a different medium, the Nigerian-born British artist Mary Evans uses disposable materials—brown-paper cut-outs, tinfoil—to reflect on how the Black body has been treated in history, right up to the present-day: “shipped, broken, consumed, disposed of and feared”.⁵ ‘Gilt’, Evans’ 2023 exhibition at the Zeitz

2 Phillip NourbeSe, *Zong!*
(Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2008).

3 Quoted as Afterword to: Jaco Boshoff, Jaco Jacques, Lonnie G. Bunch III, Paul Gardullo, Stephen C. Lubkemann, *From No Return: The 221-Year Journey of the Slave Ship São José, 1794* (Washington D.C.: National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2016). See also: Charne Lavery, “Diving into the Slave Wreck,” *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 6.4 (2020), 1-15.

4 Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83–102.

5 Mary Evans, “Curatorial Statement,” *Gilt* exhibition, Zeitz MOCAA gallery, Cape Town (16 February-29 October 2023).

MOCAA art gallery in Cape Town, plays on the homonyms *guilt* and *gilt* to probe the fragility rather than the resilience of Black survival. At the same time, she reminds her audiences that the Black figures in her work, framed in gold tinfoil, stand for all of humankind.

The voices of *Zong!* and the figures in Evans' work are restlessly plural. Februarie's memories in Ferrus's poem are at once singular yet representative of many other enslaved Africans lost at sea. Assertions of plurality comprise an important technique in queer writing, too — writing in which the binary oppositions that structure gender representation within western culture, are collapsed and mashed together, their polarity destabilized.

For the Kenyan activist and writer Binyavanga Wainaina, the release of a polyphony of voices has the force to upturn the colonial myth of the corporeal and objectified other. In his talks collectively entitled 'We must free our imaginations', he calls for bodies and minds to be disobedient, unruly, quintessentially queer. Only in this way can they resist the restrictive, top-down impacts of a colonial education: "People are dying in exactly the boundary that the *mzungu* made [...] that's a bankruptcy of a certain kind of imagination".^w

Against this, he urges, "We are in charge of our fate, and in charge of our future". To make new things, the experiences of many different bodies and many different minds must be endorsed and affirmed. We need to celebrate conceptual *and* corporeal plurality to encourage imaginative freedom. We need ever and again to proclaim that our bodily realities are divers and strange.

Elleke Boehmer
Oxford University, Oxford, UK

6 Elleke Boehmer, Archie Davies, Zimpande Kawanu, "Interventions in adolescent lives in Africa through story," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 24.5-6 (2022), 821-40.