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ARTICLE

Global Black Speculative Collage

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Abstract

Since the turn of this century, artists of African descent have worked to refract the relation between Black Studies and African Studies, often blurring the lines between these two fields. Braiding together the speculative mode and the practice of collage, Chino Amobi's 2017 electronic music album *Paradiso* and Wangechi Mutu's 2014 multimedia painting series *Nguva na Nyoka* cultivate opacity, otherworldliness, fragmentation, and disorder. The author examines how these works offer singular lenses into questions of gender, antiblackness, and global black belonging that reframe distinctions between blackness and Africanness in our time.

Résumé

Depuis le début de ce siècle, les artistes d'origine africaine ont œuvré à redéfinir la relation entre les études noires et les études africaines, brouillant fréquemment les frontières qui séparent ces deux disciplines. Le mode spéculatif, la pratique du collage, l'album de musique électronique *Paradiso* de Chino Amobi (2017) et la série de peintures multimédias *Nguva na Nyoka* de Wangechi Mutu (2014) favorisent l'opacité, l'outrance, la fragmentation et le désordre. L'auteur analyse comment ces œuvres présentent des perspectives distinctes sur les problématiques du genre, de l'antinégritude et de l'appartenance à la diaspora noire, redéfinissant ainsi les distinctions entre la noirceur et l'africanité à notre époque.

Resumo

Desde o início do século xxi, vários artistas de ascendência africana têm procurado alterar a relação entre o campo dos estudos negros e o dos estudos africanos, muitas vezes esbatendo as fronteiras entre estes dois campos. Numa abordagem que articula o modo especulativo com a prática da colagem, o álbum de música eletrónica *Paradiso*, de Chino

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Amobi, publicado em 2017, e a série de pinturas multimédia *Nguva na Nyoka*, da autoria de Wangechi Mutu, de 2014, cultivam a opacidade, a sobrenaturalidade, a fragmentação e a desordem. Neste artigo, o autor analisa a forma como ambas as obras oferecem perspetivas singulares sobre questões de género, antinegritude e o sentido de pertença negra a nível mundial, as quais reconfiguram as distinções entre negritude e africanidade na nossa época.

Keywords: speculative; collage; Global Black Studies; Chino Amobi; Wangechi Mutu; crisis; aesthetics

It seems like our contemporary moment is always characterized as a sedimentation of crises. The accelerating effects of climate change. Rising nativisms and autocracies. The killing of unarmed black and brown people. And on and on. Stuart Hall famously called moments like this "conjunctural": "a period during which the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape." For him, "what drives [a conjuncture] forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed" (Hall and Massey 2010, 57). Denise Ferreira da Silva lays out a critical subset of our contemporary crises in precisely these terms of consolidated contradiction: "As the local and regional wars of global capital and the havoc of global warming have been displacing an increasing number of persons from their homes in the global South," she says, "in the global North we find this reemergence of fascism with [protective claims] now against precisely those displaced, who are the descendants of former colonized populations" (2024, 427). Importantly, though, for Hall, crises are also "moments of potential change" even if "the nature of their resolution is not given" (Hall and Massey 2010, 57). In this essay I'm concerned with how this condensing of contradictions and the latent potentiality of crisis in the twenty-first century inflect the relationship between Black Studies and African Studies today. Increasingly, much of the theory, criticism, and scholarship in our present conjuncture, I want to suggest, lies at the confluence of these two fields, which is to say, in the growing, multidisciplinary field of Global Black Studies.

Aesthetics in the last quarter century, in particular, has proven to be a critical mechanism that exposes the fault lines of this volatile conjuncture, signaling vital nodes in the expansiveness of Global Black Studies. The black artists who produce this work—ranging from the Haitian Canadian filmmaker Miryam Charles to the Dominican dancer and choreographer Ligia Lewis to the Nigerian British installation artist Yinka Shonibare—run the gamut in the ways and the degree to which they address politics, culture, and history. These artists together "[reimagine] the formal parameters of traditional artistic media—such as painting, sculpture, and photography," (2009, 30) as Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu characterize contemporary African art. Or they adopt "relatively new forms such as video and sculptural installation in order to … examine real or imagined personal and collective histories, as well as dialectical tensions between old and new cultural practices, between political systems and individual subjectivities" (2009, 30). Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu may have written this

statement over a decade ago, but it remains remarkably apt to the African and diasporic artists whose work excavates our most pressing global concerns today.

My contention in this essay is that there's a type of artist whose work not only reframes the relation between Black Studies and African Studies, but establishes singular ways of fusing the two fields, allowing for visions and connections that we might not glean otherwise. I have in mind a specific category of artwork, one that's dynamic, growing, and influential, that I call *speculative collage.* By this, broadly, I mean aesthetic objects in any medium that imagine the world otherwise by means of disparate fragments and layers of ideas, images, forms, and/or media. In the work of Thato Toeba (2023), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2018), Canisia Lubrin (2024), and others, collage and the speculative mode have become forms of our time, vehicles of global black cultural expression. As Jayna Brown puts it, the black speculative mode enacts a "alternative world-making" capacity that refuses the "terms by which selfhood and subjectivity are widely lived and understood" (2021, 8). Along similar lines, for Elza Adamowicz, collage, specifically mid-twentieth century surrealist collage by artists like Max Ernst, is "a creative act of *détournement*, through the subversive manipulation and creative transformation of ready-made elements, forging the surreal out of fragments of the real" (1998, 17). The way collage and the speculative converge in our contemporary conjuncture, I argue, produces a politically radical aesthetics: a global black anarchist aesthetics. A disruptive, disorderly aesthetic mode aimed at world building, at "*eradicating* rather than *reforming* systems, discourses, and institutions that structure life and livability" (Bey 2020, 90). It's a political aesthetics borne of the crises we're living through, but one that remains open to possibilities, searching for ways to create in that path of eradication.

Crucially, global black speculative collage and its attendant anarchist politics show us potential ways out of the determining frames of Black and African Studies—the discourses each of these fields has historically encompassed, but also elided. The aesthetics and politics to which I'll soon turn, in other words, reach through and beyond geographic and disciplinary limits. This is, in a way, analogous to how Richard Iton writes about the necessary work of "troubling" the boundaries of the "politics/popular culture matrix" in post-civil rights America, in particular how "popular culture troubles formal and institutionalized politics," allowing black creatives to shape political discourse in meaningful ways beyond the official political arenas that have been closed to them. The "black fantastic," for Iton, refers to "the minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant" (2008, 16, 17, 289). In this essay, I'm interested in a related breakdown in the boundaries that have often separated—and tended to balkanize—Black Studies and African Studies. Global black speculative collage, as a practice of cultural and aesthetic suturing, reveals critical blind spots that we often don't notice when we're working within the bounds of these fields. It shows us how Black Studies, for instance, brings framings of race and constructions of blackness to African Studies, which as a field has historically favored questions of ethnicity and (post)colonial antagonisms over those of race.[1] Likewise, speculative collage exposes the ways Black Studies as a field often doesn't see beyond its insularity, its isolation in American Studies discourses. It also shows how certain

aesthetic forms don't have to be dominant in any one field. Diasporic and African musics, for example, can be put into generative global relation, layered and spun around in collage's practice of cutting, remixing, gluing, and recoding. Global black speculative collage, as anarchic practice, is like those "minor-key sensibilities" that Iton speaks of, searching for the connective tissues between Black Studies and African Studies while acknowledging difference when it manifests.

I want to pause here at the outset to add substance to this idea of global blackness. I've come to recognize a generative resonance in the notion of "repair" that guides much of the practice of the contemporary Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia. Across photography, sculpture, multimedia installation, and indeed, collage, Attia is interested in the way the "non-Occidental world," particularly African cultures, enact repair not to "return the broken object to its initial state," but to give the object "a different form, creating a new aesthetic vocabulary." Included among his diverse "research materials" are Congolese Kuba fabric with holes mended with French "Vichy" cloth patches, and a Congolese Vili mask with a "missing eye that has been repaired in its original environment with a European button" (Attia 2018, 16, 29, 30). He translates this practice to his own wide array of sculptural works, such as *Untitled* (2020), a cracked decorative ceramic plate sitting on a metal stand with bright orange epoxy resin running along the fissures to hold it together.

What if the global black world—wherever black life may exist on and beyond the continent—were that plate, that fractured whole? In this allegory, the cracks have been wrought by the violent histories of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism. Repair in this instance—the orange epoxy running along the fissures, similar to the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*—is an enactment of a desire for the pieces to cohere, to belong, to be whole. But the plate is still in pieces, and the brilliantly colored cracks are visible for all to see. There is no returning this plate to its originary form. Wholeness will always be incomplete. Manthia Diawara suggests that Attia's practice reveals both the "difference" and the "proximity" of the repaired object's pieces. These objects and sculptures, he says, are where "ways of knowing are neither opposed nor complementary but densely intertwined" (2014, 167). That dense intertwining, I want to suggest, is how we might conceive of the myriad component parts of global black life, in all its difference, separateness, proximity, affinity, and desire for belonging.

There's also an important temporal dimension here. In the object's simultaneity of both "damage" and "repair," Attia's method offers an "enduring recognition of what is broken," Misha Twitchin suggests, undoing "any simple sense of a state of before or after" (2021, 54, 60). The "damage" inflicted by slavery, colonialism, and their entwined afterlives, we might say, is likewise visible, palpable, and enduring in the structure of global blackness. "Attia's thought-figure of repair appeals," Twitchin continues, "to a decoloniality that exposes the neocolonial present to a future in which historical and ethical fault lines, ruptures and anomalies, are recognized and worked with" (2021, 60). My contention is that there's an analogous working through of fault lines in the idea of global blackness, and indeed, the relation between African Studies and Black

Studies. The conceptual tool of repair opens us to the necessary navigation of rupture and difference, driven by a desire to cohere, however imperfectly or contingently.

Attia's objects and methods of repair owe much to the practice of collage. In the Vili mask with the button affixed to its missing eye, we find a disparate juxtaposition that allows us to hold and witness the damaged fragments, but we simultaneously see "a different form," as he says, "creating a new aesthetic vocabulary." Like collage, the edges and sutures are visible. Like collage, each fragment has a history, a prior life that's no longer fully accessible in the context of the new form. If we integrate the worldbuilding and disorienting tools of the speculative mode into this notion of collage, as so many black artists around the world today are doing, the boundaries that so often keep African Studies and Black Studies in discrete categories become simultaneously all the more visible and all the more unstable. We suddenly see these fields, in myriad ways, as proximate, relational, and "densely intertwined," as Diawara puts it. The spinning, otherworldly operations of speculative collage open us to new ways of understanding global black study.

In what follows, I begin by gesturing to a preliminary genealogy of this speculative collage work, teasing out the continuities that link twentieth-century artforms to the present, despite clear historical differences. I then turn to contemporary artists, specifically the Kenyan American multimedia artist Wangechi Mutu and the Nigerian American electronic musician and visual artist Chino Amobi. Through a synthesis of the speculative mode and the practice of collage, Amobi's 2017 album *Paradiso* and Mutu's 2014 series *Nguva na Nyoka* help us conceptualize the intimate proximity of Black and African Studies today. These works cultivate opacity, otherworldliness, fragmentation, and disorder, offering singular lenses into questions of gender, antiblackness, and pan-African solidarity that reframe distinctions between blackness and Africanness in our time. Finally, I conclude by bringing together this essay's disparate threads—constructions of global blackness, collage form, the speculative, and the layering of crises—to show how Mutu and Amobi's artistic practices resemble a kind of anarchist aesthetics that's singularly of our global historical moment.

Early formations

I'll spend most of my time in this essay on contemporary aesthetics and politics, but I want to signal a few possible ways to frame the antecedents of this work. One route would be to look at the variegated history of black collage practices, highlighting the foundationally influential collages of Romare Bearden, or the collage-adjacent work of Ishmael Reed's fiction, quilting practices of Faith Ringgold, or El Anatsui's tapestries made of found and discarded materials. Another would be to focus on artists who have sought their own singular fusions of Africa and the diaspora, in turn requiring a critical lens at the intersection of Black and African Studies. My approach here will be a combination of methods, specifically looking at work by two artists that not only enacts this geographic and disciplinary crosspollination, but reveals traces of collage and the speculative.

Initially serialized in *The Colored American Magazine* in 1902 and 1903, Pauline Hopkins's novel *Of One Blood* is one such work. Articulating a global blackness *avant la lettre*, even as it centers the United States, its construction of Africa is fascinatingly inseparable from speculative imaginings. The novel tells the story of a black American medical student who joins an expedition to Ethiopia (in modern-day Sudan) in search of the concealed remains of a vaunted ancient African civilization—specifically, the pyramids of the city of Meroë, today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Reuel Briggs and his fellow travelers seek priceless treasures, but he ends up encountering the descendants of those ancient Ethiopians living—thriving, even—in autonomous isolation. And what's more, Reuel is regarded as their direct royal ancestor and long-lost king, instantly becoming revered and adorned in the treasures he had sought. Though decidedly melodramatic to contemporary readers, the novel, ultimately, is Hopkins's discursive effort to use the knowledge she had at her disposal of the Kingdom of Kush and other African civilizations to argue for the African origins of modern art, science, and civilization, rejecting Euro-American civilizational supremacy. The book presents an early twentieth-century politics of racial uplift: "[To] give to the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people" (Hopkins 2004, 139).

If Reuel is the novel's connection between America and northeast Africa, though, that connection is made possible by his singular ability to harness aspects of nineteenth-century mysticism. Early on, while still in Boston, to the astonishment of the physicians around him, Reuel "reanimates [a] body after seeming death," having experimented with "animal magnetism" on dogs and cats (Hopkins 2004, 29). Later, "mesmeric forces" reveal to him that letters from his wife had been withheld from him by a member of the expedition. These supernatural abilities come to a head when Reuel reaches Ethiopia, and the people's leader, Ai, shows him their centuries-long practice of seeing into the past and future with water and a mirror-like disk, and the two "have a technical conversation on the abstract science of occultism and the future state" (2004, 143). It was through these technologies that Ai knew Reuel was their king and his arrival was imminent. Since childhood, we learn, Reuel had "carefully hidden his Ethiopian extraction from the knowledge of the world" (2004, 125). From his mother "he had inherited his mysticism and his occult powers": "The nature of the mystic within him was … but a dreamlike devotion to the spirit that had swayed his ancestors; it was the shadow of Ethiopia's power" (2004, 126). Deborah McDowell is right to call *Of One Blood* a fantasy novel, but, crucially, its fantastical elements serve to fuse Africa and the diaspora at a historical moment when Jim Crow violence was endemic in the United States and accurate historical knowledge of the continent was relatively limited (McDowell 2004, xvi).[2] The text's global worldview, not to mention its emphasis on what we would now call the speculative, mark it as an important forerunner to the contemporary aesthetics to which I'll soon turn.

On the surface, the other forerunning artist I'll highlight has little in common with Hopkins, but this genealogical sketch of speculative collage affords them a certain proximity. Born thirty-one years after *Of One Blood*'s publication, the South African jazz pianist and composer Abdullah Ibrahim also evinces a global

blackness, but instead of nodding to the speculative, his work leans toward collage. Coming to international prominence in the 1960s and 70s when he was introduced to global audiences by Duke Ellington, Ibrahim initially cultivated a kind of "African bebop" as a "pianist *après* Thelonious Monk who combined American and African styles" (Lucia 2002, 126). This was discernible to an extent in the music, but also in his song titles, such as "Fats, Duke & the Monk," "African Portraits," and "Msunduza"—the latter named after the largest township outside the capital of what's now Eswatini. While in exile in New York during this period, due to both musical and political persecution under the apartheid regime, Ibrahim was exposed to 1960s American black radical politics and avant garde jazz musicians like John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Don Cherry. That physical and psychic distance of exile also led him to take a stronger interest in combining South African and American styles of music, leading to an iconic, threshold-marking performance at Carnegie Hall in 1967—an extended improvisation that threaded his musical upbringing in Cape Town into the American jazz idioms he had been so preoccupied with to that point. "Everything flooded back," he said afterward. "I played through District Six, up Hanover Street … Windemere, children's songs, up Table Mountain, through the hills of Pondoland, my mother, father, sisters, brothers—everything" (Mason 2007, 30).

The way Ibrahim bridged his American and South African influences, I argue, approached collage. An assemblage of disparate fragments creating ever-changing wholes. This is effectively how critics Molemo Ramphalile, Thabang Manyike, and Gregory Maxaulane frame what they call Ibrahim's "black sonic geography." It's a kaleidoscopic aesthetics of influence, in their view, "inclusive of the indigenous Khoi Khoi and San, Cape Malay and other slave community roots, as well as Southern African cultures, and the cultures of the black people of the diaspora" (2023, 48–49). This assemblage certainly isn't conspicuous on everything Ibrahim recorded, though. Indeed throughout his career Ibrahim has moved among periods of heavier influence of one culture or another. But there are crucial pockets that reveal this black sonic geography, such as his groovier, funkier phase in the 1970s. On his 1975 release, *African Herbs*, for instance, Ibrahim plays an electric piano, reminiscent of the modal grooves of Miles Davis's electric bands, or Joe Zawinul's soulful keyboard on Cannonball Adderley's 1966 hit tune "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy."[3] The titular track on *African Herbs* still has the hallmarks of distinctly South African styles, notably Marabi: the song's cyclical structure; Ibrahim's gospel keyboard voicings; drummer Gilbert Matthews driving the medium tempo shuffle with his brushes; Ibrahim and Basil Coetzee on saxophones oscillating between unison and harmony. But the electric piano gives the entire track a sense of ethereality, of floating. And in the song's head, or primary melody, is a quick, post-bop-like double-time flurry of the saxophones in unison that disrupts the otherwise easy-going melody, recalling a range of influences, but perhaps most of all the contrasting flurry in Ron Carter and Miles Davis's composition "Eighty-One" on Davis's landmark 1965 album *E.S.P.* In Ibrahim's music, the subtle confluence of genres, of cultural geographies, combining and recombining, I argue, takes on a form that resembles collage, even if the disparate elements are tightly sutured together.

This notion of *resembling* collage, of being tightly stitched, is important. It raises the question of how exactly we discern, on a given album, a given track, what's "black" from what's "African" in Ibrahim's music. In his influential essay, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," Stuart Hall tries to put his finger on the constitutive components of blackness in black culture: "In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local." But ultimately, he suggests, "these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding" (1993, 109, 110). The music of Chino Amobi might be a special case here, because it's so often identified as "sound collage," with discrete elements, some of which are—seemingly—discernible and less "subterranean." But in Ibrahim's music, and perhaps jazz more broadly, the disparate cultural, historical, and ethnomusicological components are far less amenable to disentanglement, especially when we consider the question of influence. Even if we can occasionally decipher traces of marabi, mbaqanga, or Miles Davis on a track. As if speaking to Hall's point, Kippie Moeketsi, the influential South African saxophonist—and Ibrahim's formative collaborator—effectively collapsed South African and American styles when he told Ibrahim that Monk's music was "the same type of sound you could hear in so-called tribal music up in the Northern Transvaal" (Kelley 2012, 140). In the end, the degree to which we can discern blackness and Africanness may come down to the question of the specificity of aesthetic form and genre. Contending with what Hall calls "the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding" requires a different set of operations for the sonic, the visual, and the literary, and each of these will perhaps carry embedded influences and elements that simply aren't fully accessible to disentanglement.

My point in drawing this provisional and insufficient genealogy is not meant to identify direct precursors to Amobi and Mutu's contemporary work. It is, rather, to suggest—in artwork that spans global black geographies—that we can find *traces* of collage and the speculative in earlier forms that bear some kind of relation to this recent work. Hopkins and Ibrahim are part of a constellation of artists that comes before, that make the experimentalism, the speculations, and the anarchist inclinations of Chino Amobi and Wangechi Mutu possible, however indirectly. The four of them, we might say, set out to construct new worlds, new ways of knowing, perceiving, and living. In Amobi and Mutu, I'll show, innovations in form and radical reimagining come to the fore, challenging audiences to tease out the affect and the politics that respond to our time. In their own media, politics, and cultural contexts, Mutu and Amobi gather disparate shards in order to fabulate, to bring otherwise worlds into existence.

Mutu's global black beings

In her work on collage, identity formation, and black women's literature, Elizabeth Alexander describes the practice of collage and its distinct palimpsestic

temporality as "constructing wholes from fragments in a continual, referential dialogue between the seemingly-disparate shards of various pasts and the current moment of the work itself, as well as the future the work might point toward." Collage, she suggests, whether as a model for artistic practice or intersectional identity formation, is a kind of "gyroscope" that "spins and recombines" (1992, 18, 25). For the Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu, this spinning gyroscope continuously evolves in its otherworldliness. For more than two decades, Mutu's "little surgeries," as she calls her collages, have set out to disrupt hierarchical and mythologized tropes of Africanness, blackness, and the black female body using an array of materials, from fabrics to jewelry to cut-out magazine images (Enright 2008). In these disparate magazine fragments, she says, "I've encountered incredibly strange things," while "looking for myself, my people, my idea of where it is I came from" (Louisiana Channel 2015). Part of what interests me in Mutu's work is the way the speculative—the fantastic, the nonreal, whatever we want to call it—emerges from these disparate components, which on their own are not at all speculative. The collage units may be drawn from a larger context of exaggerated, hypersexualized, even racist tropes—so in that way they may not be "real." But through Mutu's assembly of disparate fragments into hybrid, mutated figures—what Sarah Cervenak incisively calls "dis/figures"—she "allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative world," as Sami Schalk characterizes the work of speculative fiction (Cervenak 2016, 395; Schalk 2018, 2).

Mutu's work is sprawling. Since the 1990s, it has spanned video, sculpture, performance, and of course, collage, but here I want to concentrate my discussion on her *Nguva na Nyoka* series, a 2014 solo show at Victoria Miro Gallery in London. In the series, which translates to "sirens and serpents" in Kiswahili, the artist undertakes her own mythmaking practice by reimagining the mythical *nguvas*, or water women, who are thought to inhabit the waters off the coast of East Africa. They're believed to live in the ocean, Mutu says, but they come on shore to find human weakness and drag men into the sea. This is, though, not just an East African project. As Adrienne Edwards notes in the exhibition monograph's introduction, these mythical water beings have been distributed by the circuits of capital throughout the world, through the pathways of slave trades and colonial incursions. "Mutu departs from Kenya," Edwards says, "takes that right at Kongo, passes straight through West Africa, then to the northeast of Brazil and the sea islands of South Carolina, and ultimately in doing so, circumnavigating the entire African Atlantic world" (2014, 9).

Consider "If we live through it, She'll carry us back," which evokes both the middle passage as well as African cultural geographies (Figure 1). The ship, set against a mauve sky, has been taken over by African iconography: masks, primates, elephants, flowers, trees. The tangled trunk on the right could very well be a liana or a rubber tree. The largest flower is certainly a bird of paradise—a perennial, Jamaica Kincaid reminds us, native to southern Africa. In one reading of the image, this African flower is brought across the Atlantic on this ship and distributed throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. The British took this and other "tropical" flowers from their colonized lands and created gardens in places like Kincaid's native Antigua, composed entirely of flora from



Figure 1. "If we live through it, She'll carry us back," 2014. Collage painting on vinyl. 171.29 x 201.77 x 8.9 cm. © Wangechi Mutu. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

every corner of the British empire. A kind of reminder, embedded in the veneer of beauty, of colonial power and control (Kincaid 1991, 135).

If the dis/figure cresting at the water's edge doesn't seem alive, the title of the collage suggests life and agency. Zooming in, the fragments of this dis/figure and the composition of the water come to the fore. The water surrounds and encompasses her, the pieces of lace transformed from their domestic associations, seemingly doubling as undulating aquatic motion and birds flapping their wings in flight. The leopard and leopard print, the hand for a nose, the flowers, the mountain range—all create this otherworldly being who inhabits these waters and may very well be carrying this ship to some indeterminate place that almost certainly is not a plantation in the Americas, if the nguva has anything to do with it. The collage, it seems, refuses history's course, charting its own way to some elsewhere. The image has the larger representations of an African takeover of the ship, and perhaps an nguva guiding it, but each fragment, as David Rosand suggests of collage, has a "biographical quality—the sense of the immigrant unable to shed the memories of a previous life and inevitably marked by his accent—[a quality] that enriches the expressive potential of the transplanted unit," establishing an operation of "allusion and recollection" (Alexander 1992, 42). In the "spinning and recombining" of this particular gyroscope, as Alexander would put it, I want to suggest that Mutu is also spinning and recombining blackness and Africanness, in the process unsettling the boundaries of African Studies, Black Studies, and for that matter, Caribbean Studies, pressing us to think through a more expansive global frame.

Other images in this series do similar work, though perhaps with more entangled African and diasporic elements. "Killing You Softly" is one (Figure 2.).



Figure 2. "Killing you softly," 2014. Collage painting on vinyl. 222.09 x 171.29 x 8.9 cm © Wangec hi Mutu. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

Here two dis/figures sit below the water line, surrounded by vertical green and gold strips, the water taking up most of the frame. The larger creature has human-like blue eyes, menacingly sharp teeth, a long mermaid-like fin. Its body is composed of disparate objects and cutouts, including a large coiled snake, flower blossoms, and a horned African mask. The second figure, half the size of the first, looks like it's being held up underwater by the larger one, at its mercy. In contrast to the larger figure, this second has small human feet and multicolored, though mostly red, streaming fabric making up its body, further suggesting some kind of violence. Like in many of the pieces in this series, there's a sense of the grotesque in this image. Not simply in the sense of abjection or disgust, but in the way Geoffrey Harpham describes how the "grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else … [t]he sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (1982, 11). For Harpham, the grotesque is marked by a kind of anarchic upending of order, category, and composition. In "Killing You Softly," there is, perhaps, a grotesque "illegitimacy" in the placement of those blue human eyes, in the protruding horned mask. Adding additional layers, above the water's surface, is a landscape of angular objects that resemble buildings and structures. And among these structures are silhouetted figures that suggest a kind of generalized Africanness: slender black figures wearing patterned fabrics, arm and wrist bangles, the one carrying a vessel on its head. So far we seem to be in largely African iconographic

space. Given the proximity to the shore of the menacing larger creature underwater, it's not hard to imagine this dis/figure to be an nguva gazing up at the shore, plotting her next move to lure men into the sea.

Another perspective comes from the title, "Killing You Softly," which evokes both Roberta Flack's and Lauryn Hill and the Fugees' Billboard chart-topping recordings of "Killing Me Softly."[4] Comprised of African American and Haitian American rappers and singers, the Fugees—which Mutu would have heard in her mid-twenties when the group's album *The Score* was released in 1996—stretch our conception of the collage to multiple nodes across the Atlantic. In the title, Mutu subtly inverts the lyric to fit her nguva world, invoking the cunning and mercilessness of this water-being in East African, and indeed, global black mythology. Inverting the first few lines of the song's lyrics extends what Mutu calls the "frightening and powerful" nature of these beings: "Strumming [his] pain with [my] fingers / Singing [his] life with [my] words / Killing [you] softly with [my] song." Like a siren, the nguva has unmistakable power if we grant it the seductive and deadly force of Mutu's lyric inversion. At the end of Binyavanga Wainaina's surrealist and utterly singular poem in the *Nguva na Nyoka* exhibition catalog, he essentially brings together this collage and these inverted lyrics, linking them to a famous West African deity in the process: "The Nguva, accompanied by pythons in vinyl land, feral in a weave, and starving after sinking and bursting over the Atlantic," he writes, "meets Mami Wata posters as she walks through West Africa and Congo and swims across the lagoon to Mpeketoni, to Lamu where Nguva looks to eat again" (2014, 20). Here, the nguva charts the Atlantic space suggested by the distance between the Fugees and the conspicuous visual semiotics in "Killing You Softly." But for Wainaina there's a desire to consume, to lay waste, which "Killing You Softly" evokes in the relation between the two creatures, not to mention the blood-like red splatter that rises from the cityscape.

"Killing You Softly" may not have as many of the disparate elements so readily identifiable as African and diasporic like "If we live through it, She'll carry us back," but it shares that quality of fragmentary assemblage. It creates the otherworldly out of the worldly in its spinning and recombining of disparate shards. In their multivalence, these images collapse norms, hierarchies, and dominant conceptions of identity and history. All the while blurring the lines of global black geographies.

Interlude: Collaging crisis

In Mutu's spinning and blurring is a sense of crisis that needs to be brought forward, and in turn, linked to Amobi. For Mutu, it's a crisis, at minimum, of representations of blackness, of the black female body, of capitalist consumer culture, of what she identifies as "any ascending order of knowledge" (Schmuckli 2021, 42). In her suggestion of a desire to "learn" from the "misery, the crisis and the chaos we created," we're led to read Mutu's collages as ensconced both in this current conjuncture, with all its "condensed contradictions," as Hall would put it, but also the disparate historical threads that have culminated in this moment

(Nasher Museum of Art n.d.). Indeed a similar framing could be made of Chino Amobi's work, in the way collage and a sense of crisis operate hand in hand. I want to give substance to this collage-crisis nexus, and in turn add layers to the theoretical framing of collage with which to put Mutu and Amobi in conversation. While it may seem culturally and historically distant at first glance, the work of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg is instructive here. Similar to Mutu and Amobi, these twentieth-century German Jewish thinkers were led by social, political, and historical crises to the juxtaposition of ideas and images as philosophical practice.

Walter Benjamin, of course, wasn't concerned so much with collage as with one of its conceptual and aesthetic kin: montage. In his famously sprawling and unfinished *Arcades Project*, which he worked on from 1927 until his death in 1940, Benjamin set out to articulate a materialist philosophy of history through the lens of nineteenth-century Parisian culture. Comprised of disparate citations and notes on topics as far ranging as advertising, world exhibitions, prostitution, and different forms of consumer culture, the project developed during the rise of fascism in Europe, which Benjamin experienced as a "personal crisis." If fascism sought to "recaptur[e] the past in a pseudo-historical sense, as myth," Susan Buck-Morss suggests, "the pedagogic plan of the *Passagen-Werk*, a presentation of history that would *de*mythify the present, had become all the more urgent" (1991, 36). Benjamin's dialectical method of montage, she argues, enacts a kind of "epistemological instability," between objective reality as it appears in a given fragment and the subjective control over meaning. For Benjamin, it "allowed the superimposition of fleeting images, present and past, that made both suddenly come alive in terms of revolutionary meaning," breaking them out of "fictional and falsifying" narratives of progress (218, 220). The collision of ideas and images in the *Arcades Project* was meant to jolt awake a society rapt in a kind of dream state, leaning dangerously toward fascism through its experience of mass culture.

Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*—a kind of visual encyclopedia of hundreds of disparate images spread over dozens of cloth-covered wooden panels—was a kindred endeavor. Like the *Arcades Project*, it remained unfinished at Warburg's death in 1929, after years of study, curation, and assembly. Warburg's project centered on what he saw as the reemergence of classical antiquity's symbolic and cosmological valences in modern European culture. It indexed, in kaleidoscopic fashion, the enduring horrors of World War I and the postwar coming-to-prominence of fascism through disparate photographs and reproductions: astronomical maps, Japanese corporal punishment, Italian Renaissance frescos, newspaper advertisements, Zeppelin airships. "The ambition behind *Mnemosyne* was to reedit and piece together again a world that had been dismantled by the disasters of history," writes Georges Didi-Huberman. "To retie the memory threads beyond its episodes" (2018, 219). For Didi-Huberman, *Mnemosyne* can't be reduced to a synthesis: "everything that bursts forth as new evidence—a new affinity, a new configuration, new relations—also flees as a new mystery, a new question to confront, and a new problem to construct." Rather than finding answers, the panels instead ask us to "prolong our thought," to sit with questions, uncertainties, and paradoxes (2018, 227, 235).

We can think of Mutu and Amobi's speculative collage practices along related lines, despite the remove. Mutu and Amobi are likewise working in a time of acute societal crisis. From France to Brazil to the United States, fascism is ascendent, white supremacy is emboldened, xenophobia is entrenched. As Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, and others so convincingly reveal, the legacies of slavery and colonialism remain, shifting guise transnationally over decades and centuries. Antiblackness, transphobia, Islamophobia, among other pernicious societal forces, saturate life in our century globally. Like Buck-Morss's framing of Benjamin's project, Mutu and Amobi's collages each have ways of flashing listeners and viewers into another order of consciousness, seeing the past and present simultaneously, searching for ways to demystify—demythify—the ideologies that encircle us. There's also something in the way Didi-Huberman characterizes Warburg's *Mnemosyne*—not as a search for resolution or synthesis, but an effort to sustain lines of critical inquiry—that resonates with Mutu and Amobi's work. In their contemporary collages, there are no answers, only continually renewed relations, enigmas, and questions. In the kaleidoscopic juxtapositions of each artist, there's an allied sense in which "everything that bursts forth as new evidence" simultaneously flees any firm grasp in the next breath, transforming into myriad vectors of prolonged thought.

The culmination of this collage-crisis nexus, as I detail in the concluding section, is a kind of anarchist political aesthetics. A refusal of the stratification and ordering that governs today's layered crises. This is certainly the case in the seemingly boundless aesthetics of Houston-based artist Chino Amobi. If Mutu's work provides a kind of foundation for thinking an anarchic practice in a medium closely associated with collage forms, it effectively prepares us for navigating the anarchic world of the Nigerian American artist's sound collage. There are indeed distinct affordances in the works by Amobi and Mutu that I present here, offering singular lenses into this collage-crisis relation, this anarchist aesthetics. Collage—and the speculative, for that matter—modulates as it moves across art forms, performing different kinds of work. Visually, in Mutu's *Nguva* series, the sharp juxtaposition of contrasting colors, or a set of human eyes placed next to an image of a literal piece of meat, arrests the viewer in a way that feels consonant yet distinct from the sudden appearance of a police siren, a scream, or ambient street conversation on Amobi's *Paradiso* album. These projects, in the affordances of their formal architectures, provide unique access points into this intersection of collage, speculation, and crisis. Like Benjamin and Warburg, they extend us into further lines of questioning. They arrest us out of sedimented assumptions and ideologies. Together these forms provide a larger scope, a broader view on the world and how it might be imagined otherwise.

Amobi's sonic chaos

Much like Mutu, one thing is clear: Chino Amobi's work is hardly limited to one medium. In the last several years alone, he has undertaken an ambitious and sprawling *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a collaborative multi-platform universe based on his 2020 experimental three-language (English, Mandarin, Sanskrit) cyberpunk

novel *Eroica* (2020). To date, the ongoing project spans live performance, film, sculptural installation, AI-generated oil painting, electronic music, and even clothing and jewelry design. It's clearly a project too large to account for here. What I want to do instead is focus on an earlier, more consolidated project that has immediate resonances with *Nguva na Nyoka*: Amobi's 21-track album *Paradiso*, released in 2017 to widespread critical acclaim in avant garde electronic music circles. The album, importantly, was produced in collaboration with NON Worldwide, the collective Amobi cofounded—along with Congolese artist Nkisi and South African artist Angel-Ho—comprised of queer, trans, and nonbinary artists of African descent who use sound to disrupt the norms of global white supremacy and the power structures that exclude black artists and black critical voices. NON has since disbanded, but the politics of the collective remain vital to this album's experimental aesthetics.[5]

Spanning noise, spoken word, hip hop, industrial, glitch, and Afro-Latin music, and an array of everyday sounds, from emergency sirens to explosions to chicken clucks, *Paradiso* is a relentless barrage of juxtapositions, the amalgam of which is a kind of militant club music. Amobi's music, and the work he put out previously under the moniker Diamond Black Hearted Boy, is often referred to as "epic collage," a genre of electronic music that came to prominence in the early 2010s in which short audio fragments are assembled to produce "a highly curated stream of microedits, voice drops, hooks, and texture beds that flow through clear movements, creating a sense of 'epic' scope and storytelling purely through sampling and mixing" (Melodigging n.d.). As critic Adam Harper puts it, in the work of epic collagists like Elysia Crampton (a.k.a. Chuquimamani-Condori), Ashland Mines (a.k.a. Total Freedom), and Amobi, "each juxtaposition of sound-objects becomes a surrealist image framed by its own curious insistence, and each sample becomes an element in a dreamlike cipher" (Harper 2014). In this vein, Amobi describes *Paradiso* as "design fiction," "questioning what is and speculating what could be," with the album set in a "gothic global south," "populated by a cast of sirens, demons, angels, imps, priests, hierophants, monsters and peasants" (Juzwiak 2017). As the ID on the album cover indicates (Figure 3), *Paradiso* suggests a chaotic urban setting on the seacoast, but it's also a "burning world in flux," Amobi explains, whose "sweltering, volatile soundscapes" evoke "postcolonial heat, displacement, and resistance" (Amobi 2025).

Consistent with the practice of epic collage, Amobi thinks of his role largely as a curator-producer, assembling the disparate pieces of sound and poetry that his collaborators from around the world have composed and sent to him, suturing these fragments with his own voice and composition. The opacity in his work is dense. Most of the tracks on *Paradiso* have lyrics, but they're often so distorted or washed out by other sounds that they become legible only in flashes.[6] Amobi describes an almost Benjaminian objective: "I use sounds that people hear in daily situations, but [I] use them in a repetitive and trance-like way that forces people to think critically about the sound they're hearing in a new context. Using cacophony and unusual sonics, I reject the passive experience of listening, and try to use sounds that are active to wake the listener up and to bring them into the moment." The "beautiful," the "ugly," and the "unmarketable" weave in and

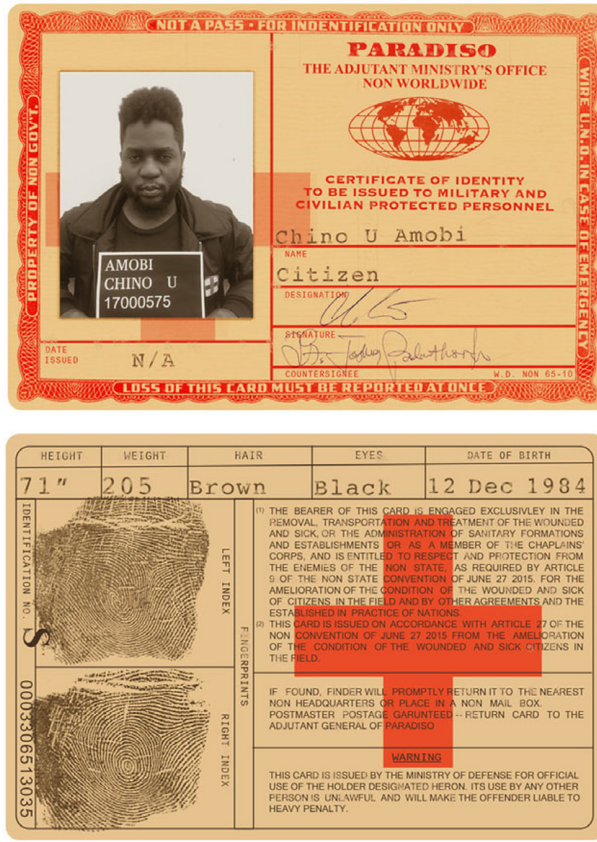


Figure 3. Album cover for Paradiso, 2017. © Chino Amobi. Courtesy the artist.

out of one another on the album, cultivating a tension in which the listener feels both comfortable and destabilized (Remi 2016).

Even with his strident cultivation of black queer politics and solidarity, by way of NON, part of what interests me in this work is Amobi's refusal of categorization. In particular, his insistence on using sounds that "aren't traditionally thought of as black or African." Instead, Amobi's interested in the constantly fluctuating convergence of disparate elements, "which allows people to enter with their [own] experience" (Remi 2016). There's a generative resonance here with Evie Shockley's framing of black experimental poetry. In *Renegade Poetics*, Shockley writes that her task is to "destabilize the assumption that, if race is going to be significant to a poem by an African American, we will be able to tell at a glance." She instead looks for the subtler racialized registers of poetics, examining the ways a writer might write "with, against, around, about, or in spite of issues of race" (2011, 9). As I've made my way through the opacity of Amobi's sprawling body of work, I've found it useful to see how Shockley—

through the study of metaphor, subtext, an artist's biography—"looks beyond the 'recognizably black' in search of a black aesthetics." To be sure, occasionally on Amobi's albums blackness or Africanness surfaces in unequivocal and even sustained ways, like on the opening track of his 2023 album *French Extremism*, which features archival audio of an early anticolonial speech given by the former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. But far more often, when we can identify blackness or Africanness on these albums at all, it's in those subtler registers: in a fleeting accented voice, in the music genres Amobi cycles through, in the allusion to an Atlantic submarine world. In many ways, it's less a single element than the accumulation of these subtle traces that establish some kind of thread of racialized meaning.

Let me detail a few tracks from *Paradiso*, to provide some sense of how collage, the speculative, and the suturing of blackness and Africanness manifest across the sonic tapestry of the album. "The Failed Sons and Daughters of Fantasia," for instance, begins with the static-like sound of moving water. A deep rumbling bass and a piercing high-pitched siren enter, both of which repeat throughout, the former resounding like underwater signals. These sounds, like many on the album, seem designed to induce anxiety, even panic. Against these repeated textures we hear a short text by the trans artist and model Aurel Haize Odogbo:

> Whispers from the bottom of the Atlantic that echo and become shouts are all that's propelling me forward and up. The water around me starts to move in a spiral motion. But I tread still. I feel hands that vary in size on the base of my feet, on my waist, and all around my legs. But they aren't dragging me down; they're picking me up. The wind around me has picked up to terrifying speeds yet I can see through it. My hair hasn't moved and my skin is dry. I feel the rain, the wind, I see the lightning, the debris, yet I remain unscathed. Why?

Presented to us in the first person, this figure supernaturally unaffected by the thrashing of the sea is one of *Paradiso*'s speculative foundations. In the "whispers from the bottom of the Atlantic," in the ethereal presence and support given to the speaker's body, it's almost as if Mutu's nguva in "If we live through it, She'll carry us back" is present in this account of otherworldly oceanic life. Odogbo's poem repeats three times on the track as the background sounds modulate through different electronic beats, cow bells, and sirens. The culmination is a sense of oceanic submergence and sustained life, effectively putting Amobi's *Paradiso* in a long line of black artists and thinkers—from Mutu to Rivers Solomon to Drexciya to Olaudah Equiano—who imagine some kind of autonomous world in the sea in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.[7]

If we consider the album's titular track, the sense of collage begins to accumulate. "Paradiso" opens with synthesizer horns repeating a descending melody, layered over by mallets pounding a bass drum, crows cawing, horses neighing, heavy breathing, and a voice singing "Paradiso." When the danceable beat hits, we hear layers of lyrics, spoken and sung. A low, exaggeratedly distorted voice repeats, "I'm not an animal." Odogbo returns with a short opaque poem, giving us further dimensions to the dark seaside metropolis of Paradiso:

"The beauty that doubles as the beast, the one who strikes terror in their hearts and curiosity in their brains, the masses sit back in abject terror as those same skyscrapers that you spent so much time building are collapsing and rising at the same time." A male voice then enters, singing, with the sea still not far removed: "Might I sit and wait, and climb the colors of the sea, so close I came to frying, and I'm glad that it's not me. I'm glad that it's not me." On the rest of the track, with its thumping dance rhythms, occasional screams, and sketches of the speculative dystopian city, we get flashes of Africanness and blackness. At one point, a women's voice, in clearly West African accented English, says, "Wait, wait, wait, N-O-N. Is that how you people say it? 'NON'?" At another, ballroom culture enters the sonic landscape with a woman emphatically saying, "Yas, bitch, yassss! And work! Yes!" The song, in its fragmentary collage form, establishes little distinction between black and African. Instead these identity formations are put into that collagist "gyroscope" that Alexander describes, spinning and recombining over and over again.

In the process, these fleeting moments recode that earlier repeated statement by the distorted, almost monstrous voice: "I'm not an animal." On the surface this seems like a straightforward refusal of the historical animalization of black life. Plugged into recent influential black critical theory, though, there may be a larger view to take. Hugo Canham, for instance, in his study of Mpondo life, culture, and cosmology in South Africa, recognizes that "black people have always been treated like animals," and that there's an "unhumaning that occurs with animalization." But he's also interested in the "porousness" of this historical animalization, "what occurs when we embrace our consignment to the status of the animalistic" (2023, 181). Similarly, in her study of African diasporic cultural production, Zakiyyah Jackson argues that global black aesthetics doesn't seek "inclusion into liberal humanist conceptions of 'the human' but, rather, frequently [alters] the meaning and significance of being (human) and [engages] in imaginative practices of worlding from the perspective of a history of blackness's bestialization and thingification" (2020, 1). Perhaps in the exaggeratedly distorted voice that recites "I'm not an animal" there's something of this embrace and engagement with the bestialization of blackness. Amobi's broader aesthetic certainly isn't about any kind of conformity or inclusion. Drawing on an array of actual animal sounds on the album, set against myriad others, perhaps Amobi is indeed seeking out that imaginative worldbuilding potential that isn't simply a repudiation of the African's "unhumaning."

It's impossible to encapsulate, let alone catalogue, the range of sounds across *Paradiso.* Some of the tracks are beautiful and immanently danceable, like "Antikeimenon," which has an Afro-Cuban groove reminiscent of the Buena Vista Social Club, overlaid by Amobi's heavily reverbed voice and the sounds of shattering glass. "Dixie Shrine" has a calm, low pitched rumbling groove that features someone singing into a voice changer, the lyrics entirely illegible, with police radios sounding in the background. The penultimate track, "Kollaps," by contrast, is dark, filled with echoing synthesizer sounds, chicken clucks, screams, bells, and trap hip hop sirens, all of which make Amobi's list of isolated and seemingly random spoken words and phrases over the course of two minutes move in and out of legibility, like an anarchic refusal of order and assumed

association: "Dummy dirt," "obliterator," "endless," "organ paste," "grinding," "zero carcass," "effacement," "gassed out," "fecal rot," "beauty," "meat grinder," "compressor," "shadow eat," "endless hole." If we think of the speakers and vocalists on the album as characters, or figures, then the persistent illegibility of their words on tracks like "Kollaps" is perhaps analogous to Mutu's *Nguva na Nyoka* dis/figures: revelatory of broken, distorted, and remixed ontologies that reorient our view of the world. This list from "Kollaps" and the sonic textures that support it also recall the Benjaminian method of "demythifying," shocking listeners into awakened consciousness, or Warburg's effort to curate new affinities only to let them flee into new puzzles and questions. Ralph Ellison's take on the work of Romare Bearden half a century ago likewise strongly resonates with Amobi's disparate ebb and flow: a "combination of technique" that's "in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history" (1977, 680). All of Amobi's distortions, fragments, and layers that make up his epic collage sound, though, evince a *global* blackness. One that bespeaks a deliberately cultivated opacity, one that traffics in the speculative, and one that, as Shockley would put it, moves "with, against, around, about, or in spite of" questions of race and ethnicity (2011, 9). It's a global blackness that refuses easy identification as global blackness.

The anarchy of speculative collage

There's something anarchic, I've insisted, about the contemporary music and artwork presented here. Anarchism, I want to suggest, is a generative way of folding in the different threads of this essay. First and foremost, if anarchy, broadly construed, is a refusal of hierarchy and imposed order, Mutu and Amobi, we might say, present collage as a kind of anarchic form. It's in *Paradiso*'s assemblage of sounds, genres, and artistic voices. In Amobi's juxtaposition of animal noises, police radios, children playing, screams, and the Muslim call to prayer, alongside spoken poetry, synthesizers, and the manipulation of the human voice through electronic voice changers. It's in what he calls the "excess of diversity" in his music (Ribakoff 2017). Similarly, in Mutu's work, we find "new mutations of humanity," but also an upending of the "racial, spatial, and gendered ordering of our present world," as Chelsea Frazier contends (2016, 60). Cervenak explicitly calls it an "anarchy of form and texture" (2016, 397). "I have worked with milk, wine, high heels, soil, trash bags, tea leaves, hair nets, buttons, cow horns, shells, moths, panties, and crystals," Mutu says, "to represent the beauty and potential of this diverse world" (Fossi 2023). In the collages of both, there's a kind of disordered order, an order wrought by excess, a refusal of a center and hierarchy.

Importantly, anarchism has a history and a present in Black and African Studies that makes the turn to this analytic apt. As Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey have argued, anarchism as a body of thought may be relatively new to African contexts, but its practice on the continent is not at all recent. They draw on the work of Samir Amin, Walter Rodney, Bade Onimode, and others to elucidate the

precolonial anarchic forms of communalism that existed throughout the continent, predating the rise of the Songhai and Mali Empires, among others, in and around the fifteenth century. Using case studies of the Igbo, the Tallenasi, and the Niger Delta peoples of West Africa, they point to the historical absence of social stratification, governmental apparatuses, and commodified labor. Among other features of this period were horizontal, consensus-building, and self-managing political structures organized around the leadership of elders. While many aspects of communalism persist, Mbah and Igariwey say, especially in rural areas, "by the turn of the fifteenth century, several African societies were undergoing a transition from communalism to a class system. Social stratification formed the basis for the eventual rise of classes and the development of antagonistic social relationships, culminating in the establishment of empire states with centralized forms of government in some parts of Africa" (Mbah and Igariwey 1997, 27–33).

In diasporic contexts, there's a deeper lineage of anarchist thought that extends from thinkers and activists like Lucy Parsons in the late nineteenth century to the present. Like Mbah and Igariwey point out, the Black Rose Anarchist Federation (2016, 2) crucially highlights the historical racism of anarchist thought: "The deceptive absence of Black anarchist politics in the existing literature can be attributed to an inherent contradiction found within the Eurocentric canon of classical anarchism which, in its allegiance to a Western conception of universalism, overlooks and actively mutes the contributions by colonized peoples." But as the work of Marquis Bey, Sam Tenorio, Zoé Samudzi, Saidiya Hartman, and others demonstrate, there's been a resurgent interest in black anarchist thought in our own century. In her study of young black women seeking new life in early twentieth-century America, for instance, Hartman writes of the desire of Mattie Nelson, in her journey from Virgina to New York City, "to embrace the anarchy—the complete program of disorder, the abiding desire to change the world, the tumult, upheaval, open rebellion—attributed to wayward girls" (2019, 62). Relatedly, in Tenorio's recent contribution, they write that "the Black in *Black Anarchism* signifies an exertion against and beyond containment, an introduction of racial disorder that undermines the material and epistemological governance of antiblackness." It "appeals to new geographies of Black life that refuse to labor through a mere reconfiguration of the current order" (2024, 10). Indeed it's not difficult to see the disorderly aesthetic forms of Mutu and Amobi providing a kind of visual and sonic register to the radical politics Tenorio and Hartman describe.

Of the two, it's perhaps Amobi whose politics and work are most revelatory of a kind of global black anarchist aesthetic, largely due to the discursive engagement he and NON have had in various interviews and statements. To think of Amobi and NON's work in this way is not straightforward, however. On the one hand, NON says that their intent is to "run counter to current Western hypercapitalist modes of representation and function, exorcising the language of domination through the United Resistance of policed and exotified colored bodies," "us[ing] sound as a weapon to destabilize and deterritorialize our audience" (Iadarola 2016; Leight 2015). But in interviews, NON collaborators at times speak of NON as a literal nation-state—even calling themselves

"citizens"—which clearly is not an anarchist endeavor (Gorton 2016). Each of these mentions of a state, though, feels like a kind of parody—including Amobi's ID on the *Paradiso* album cover, with his personal biometrics, and the explicit language of a NON surveillance state. There's a sense of militarized order, control, even coercion on this album cover that's in stark contrast to the fluctuating radical disorder that animates much of album's sonic collage. If we see these NON nation-state assertions as parody, then what Marquis Bey calls "anarcho-Blackness" seems an apt framing of NON and Amobi's work. Bey describes "a Black queer feminist anarchism" that seeks to disorder the "mechanisms that hierarchize and circumscribe" black and brown lives, an "immersive rebuk[e] of capitalism, imperialism, white and cis male supremacy," ultimately seeking "an order that arises by way of ungoverned disorder, an order that is more accurately … an ensemblic swarm that supplants the order of the State" (2020, 6, 12, 32). In NON's desire for collectivity and mutual aid, in the generalized disavowal that they inscribe in the name "NON," and, of course, the "excessive diversity" built into the architecture of Amobi's sonic collage form, we find a singular black anarchist aesthetics.

The relation between these anarchist traditions and the speculative is also a generative one. In a broad sense, if we take "fantasy" to be a category that moves in and through the category of the speculative, Rosemary Jackson's framing of fantastic literature seems to have a clear anarchic impulse. "It opens up, for a brief moment," she suggests, "on to disorder, on to illegality, onto that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (1981, 4). Perhaps more specific to our focus here, this relation between the anarchic and the speculative is in anarchism's refusal of this world, its insistence on another. Bey effectively adumbrates the work of the speculative when he writes that "the prefixal 'anarcho' describes a world-making, a creative imaginative praxis reliant upon a pervasive un- that erects as much, even more, than it destroys." "It prefers instead an openness to possibilities," he says, "it prefers what ifs, perhapses, possibles, and maybes" (2020, 91, 102). By the same turn—even combining Bey and Jackson—there's a valence of the anarchic in the way Jayna Brown and Alexis Lothian (2012) frame speculative thought: "Instead of universal truths and a stable universe," they write, "speculations inhabit a breach, a space of disobedience, of awe." Speculation, for Brown and Lothian, has a special meaning for those who "refuse to give its logic over to power and profit." "To speculate, the act of speculation, is also to play, to invent, to engage in the practice of imagining" (Brown and Lothian 2012). There's an interanimation of these two aligned paradigms in Amobi and Mutu's work, in the imagining of new worlds by way of that gyroscope that "spins and recombines" in the making of collage.

Inside the anarchy of speculative collage, blackness and Africanness cannot hold. There are of course flashes when we're able to differentiate the two, but their absolute distinction collapses into a global blackness: a global practice of solidarity, refused antiblackness, and acknowledged difference. Even without the paradigm of an anarchist aesthetic or the contemporary crises that animate Mutu and Amobi's work, Hopkins's fiction and Ibrahim's music stand as

precursors to this entanglement of blackness and Africanness in their own times. The afterlives of slavery and the ancient mysticism of northeast Africa are not far removed from one another in *Of One Blood.* Likewise there's a kindred braiding of influence in Ibrahim, from the sounds of Miles and Monk to the music of his childhood in Cape Town. With the layer of the black anarchist tradition, this transnationalism deepens, as the former political prisoner, former Black Panther member, and anarchist activist, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, contends:

> We wish to build an international Black organization against Capitalism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and military dictatorship, which could more effectively fight the Capitalist powers and create a world federation of Black peoples. We want to unite a brother or sister in North America with the Black peoples of Australia and Oceania, Africa, the Caribbean and South America, Asia, the Middle East, and those millions of our people living in Britain and other Western European countries. (2016, 44)

There's an alignment here with Mutu and Amobi's work and ambitions, even if they don't claim anarchism for themselves. We might also layer on top of Ervin's framing Kader Attia's notion of repair as an allegory for global black life: the desire for solidarity and wholeness despite the enduring damage of "capitalism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and military dictatorship." Repair as a conceptual tool allows us to understand that the vestiges of these devastations will always remain, despite that desire to belong across fracture, across difference. There is no returning to an originary African world, only the creation of a new one marked by proximity, affinity, entwinement, and collective struggle.

Situating Amobi and Mutu's aesthetics inside black anarchist thought ultimately brings us back to Stuart Hall's notion of the conjuncture. Collage, the anarchic, and the speculative converge in the interstices of crisis and possibility. This political and aesthetic confluence keeps us in the present, while acknowledging the legacies of the past, keeping us from turning away from the crumbling world around us. They push us in search of new ways of comprehending the crises of our time, evoking the otherworldly and the unfathomable to see a way out, to glimpse a new world order that might arise from the entanglements of their swirling fragments and juxtapositions. And they bespeak a need to continuously, ongoingly, work through the contours of global blackness, and what constitutes global black study. These aesthetic forms take stock of and archive the contours of this growing field, but they also push it outward and forward, toward new solidarities, new becomings, and new world orders.

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Notes

1. Except, of course, in Southern African contexts. For more on the question of race in the field of African Studies, and the relationship between race and ethnicity in the exertion of colonial hegemony, see Pierre's *The Predicament of Blackness* (2023, xi–xv, 11–36).

2. For more on the way the continent was thought of and projected upon by diasporic artists and scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, including Americans, see Irele (2005).
3. *African Herbs* was released under the name Dollar Brand; Ibrahim continued to record under the name Dollar Brand for some years after his 1968 conversion to Islam.
4. "Killing Me Softly with His Song" was originally composed by Charles Fox with lyrics by Norman Gimbel and Lori Lieberman in the early 1970s.
5. *The Wire* named *Paradiso* album of the year for 2017; *Rolling Stone* named it the third best avant garde album of 2017. The album was partly named after the club of the same name in Amsterdam where the three founding members of NON first met. In 2018, Amobi released a 14-minute 3D animated film, "WELCOME TO PARADISO (CITY IN THE SEA), featuring music from *Paradiso.* Directed by Rick Farin (also known as Eaves) and created with Unreal Engine 4, the short film simulates a cinematic role-player video game experience in which the camera/viewer moves through a digitally rendered world of abandoned highways, tropical forests, and burning, flooded, and riot-destroyed city streets.
6. In correspondence with Amobi, the artist confirmed that this movement in and out of legibility is deliberate, and that no lyric sheets exist for any of the tracks on the album (personal communication, March 4, 2024).
7. See Drexciya's *The Quest* (1997), Solomon (2019), and Equiano (2001). For a sense of the oceanic relation between Drexciya and Equiano, see Omelsky (2023, 19–22).

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