the spectre and the sceptre

The Ghost and the Power

an inconclusive conclusion

This Untethered Buffoon or the Trickster in Everything

Documented Artistic Research Project
(Doctoral Thesis)

SQUIRM
the spectre and the sceptre

Stacey Sacks
‘To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.’

SAMUEL BECKETT
(Interview with T. F. Driver, 1961)
this pervious epilogue is posing as a beginning of the drawing towards an end, attempting to tie-up this malleable compendium, this elastic SQUIRM. the unfinishing constellation is a fragmentary portal, a slippery worm hole connecting temporalities, encountering spontaneous poetic bodies, which could be plastic (for want of a better word) and I mean fragile or soft structures (Emilia Kokko 2019), objects as bodies as porous and trans-corporeal (Stacy Alaimo 2018). a sketchy and fabricated collection containing graphic traces, disembodied clowters, tongues, insertions and concoctions evoked, dreamt and assembled over five years of making, listening, seeing, thing-king, dancing, provoking, apologising, note making, penetrating, capturing and gleaning (Agnès Varda 2000) experience, objects and encounters, working with what i have, who i meet and what i find. hacking through the thick white veneer i’ve had the privilege of being paid in a castle, in a fortress, near a tower, to splice into privilege through ars looking for ways to rewire the imperial mind but of course the questions still remain, which imperial and whose mind?
the ghost and the power
these are the poles and shadows of my clowters and trickoons
closures and openings
portals
ping-ponging between continents
and histories a
trans-generational haunting and flimsy po(o)king
of colonial logic and cis-gendered hetero-patriarchal
surveillance capitalist neoliberal white power.
or not.
a small crack or
thin split will
do for now
a hovering and a flopping
a rising and falling
a gaping and hopefully
an exhalation
let the inhalation
take care of
itself

at the end of all this
this is what i know
my clowters engrave and carve
characters of their own
bringing more voices
towards the always shifting core of
this carnage-ival.

not only bad people are racist.
if humxns don’t know and face our histories, if we don’t trace the past into
the present we cannot engage with geo-political conditions in ways that are
transformative
maybe
perceiving whiteness as a splintering of non-static categories has
transformative potential
but there is a huge messiness inherent in enacting an anti-racist practice, it’s
slippery and easy to fall
as a white
you’ll likely have to extract your foot from that mouth several times
there’s no doubt you’re complicit and culpable in some way
continuing to benefit from un/acknowledged privileges
sub/conscious racism and all other kinds of suppressed-isms

[speaking to herself]

even eternally volunteerist whites should know this about themselves
yet not to let that paralyse them from acts of solidarity and ally-ship
one paradox is there’s this urge to say something – to actively use the voice
i’m freely given for what i think is good which leads to taking space and
simultaneously the necessity of shutting up and shrinking very small and
becoming marginal a long while
the practice of shutting up is not conceding to some kind of failure just
as diving into the blind-spot is necessary sometimes
perhaps even a productive spot to be stuck
staring tongue level into the muck
a short while. best to
climb out while
still having
energy to
do so.

getting stuck too much in the loop
may just keep you there.

is this getting too didactic for you?

well fuck off
i’ve got the mic

this writing is selective, intuited, automatic and not, taking full advantage of
its precarity as research in the academy where so much is soaked in often
unacknowledged privilege which may just eat itself up and cough itself out
as a fur-ball or lick its own balls like a dog lounging on a shaggy carpet in
Goldcity on a thrusty windy Thursday.
can i be intrusive on the page
a literary pest or fly in the ear?
current multicultural and diversity projects seem to map the world according
to a rigid science of surface appearances with little room for nuance or complexity. i’m all for separating the layers, slowly peeling back simple complexities, simplicities
or complex simplicities
spinning on the idea of vivisection, it feels a distinctly visceral way of contributing to the decolonial project via intimate incisions into white power, slicing into the ungraspable ongoing aliveness of it all sticking a pin into the puffed up importance of it all deflating it all
all that
deeply rooted rotted ancestral muck
faced and
finally
fully
removed.
[audience claps wildly, they think it’s over but the author continues]
this is a removal.
this is a try.
this is acceptance
of failure.
this is an apology.
there’s something about trying too hard that can destroy things.
i know i try too hard.
i know when playing with masks that the masks themselves do a lot of work.
me doing less gives the mask space to do more.
there’s something about letting things develop and unfold without getting in the way, without interrupting, especially if you have nothing new to offer.
At the end of the PhD, this writing process has felt horribly reductive, the way squeezing performance onto the page can be. Yet here it is, finished in a thing. These performing essays are a way of making reflection explicit, allowing both an analytical distance from the material yet hopefully and simultaneously a deeper and alternative intimacy that live performance doesn’t always allow.

Etched into these pages are traces and remnants of polyphonic animaterial experiments in the studio, forests, graveyards, heaths and streets, shreds of histories and testimonies. Labour made present.

I’m hoping the multi-modal generates polylogues. But who knows.

This work/play will never be ready, never finalised, neither set nor stable. These narratives are slippery, pulsating between memory and imagination; history, fable and the everyday.

In relation to time, all feels laced with contradiction and paradox; the stopping of motion to understand action, the excavation of pasts to forge fertile futures, the facing of ancestral histories of sublimation, migrancy and domination to reflect on the same present histories-in-becoming, the covering up to uncover truths to make people laugh so it’s easier to cry.

Do I need to find some red-thread (vomit) gold thread (better?) coherence to synthesise and frame all these privileged experiments? Perhaps this cluster of confusions, moments saturated with spontaneous circuitry, are exactly where these experiments need to be. There’s an immense sediment that remains, mulchy debris that could be compostable.

Piles of accumulations potentially generative to look at for research purposes or not.

Set them alight. Let’s watch them burn.

After all this, this is what I know.

I come from a family of Nuts, Sacks, Kings and Gold Mountains.

I make people laugh so it’s easier to cry.
thing-king alongside the abstract for the 2019 Bergen Assembly titled 
*Actually, the Dead Are Not Dead*.1

In his ‘hauntology’ (*Spectres of Marx* 1993), the French
philosopher Jacques Derrida argues for a ‘being-with the not
presently living’: a being-with the spectre, which adheres to a
different temporality, a ‘non- contemporaneity with itself of the
living present’. It is about the recognition of and responsibility to
the past (no longer) and the future (not yet) – as precondition
for a more just world. For Derrida, this justice-to-come
(*a-venir*) lies in the permanent breaking open and changing of
the existing order, that is, in a genuinely parodic act. … This
attention to the dead - to our responsibility toward those who
are no longer or not yet here - is also understood as an act of
rejecting reigning necropolitical conditions: the subjugation of
life to the power of death (Achille Mbembe).

perhaps these performances and worming texts are me finding ways to
articulate porosities between the living and the dead. i’m hoping they thread
together, however loosely, the poetic, the political, the erotic, the personal and
the humorous. is writing performing a haunting of the future? is this how the
historical, the imaginary, the everyday and the literary interact?

i’ve been writing and performing all this while simultaneously navigating
my own journey through grief, facing racist inherited belief and PTSD. a
perfect cocktail for comedy. what at first seems a generous amount of time
for investigation, documentation, encounter and analysis, the whole body of
work, somehow needs at the end to be constrained into these thin slices of
time. how deep is the crack? is it big enough to contain and expose the depth
of the enquiry, can it contain all those imaginative hunches, cul-de-sacs and
lost meanderings, and should it?

parody and satire for me right now seem the only option for ethico-clowning
in a world where so many leaders are clearly imbecile and potentially
genocidal troglodytes.2

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imbecile is the only word in the family of fools i’ll concede to self-aggrandising narcissistic leaders and by imbecile i mean a humxn being with the mental agility of a tardigrade. actually let me take that back i don’t want to disrespect tardigrades, those mythological micro-creatures have provided me with an interminable amount of awe, they’re likely the most intelligent of us all. their segmented resilience has them surviving in extreme conditions from mud volcanoes to the Antarctic to outer space. let me definitely take that back. tardigrades must have some massive intelligence to have survived the ages. according to my best friend Wikipedia the Italian biologist Lazzaro Spallanzani named them *Tardigrada*, which means ‘slow steppers’. 3 slow steppers. that’s what we need more of in the world because PROGRESS IS SLOWING DOWN. perhaps then we too can survive the Sixth Mass Extinction and still exist 530 million years into the future.

let me unravel a bit here
memories can be shifty documents of shame
wobbliness and uncertainty key to unlocking
this poly-genre thing which could be an explosion of singularities (Deleuze 1990 via Lepecki 2015)
or not
epistemic buffoonery fraught with unruly ambiguity this burrowing spidery sprawl is not ahistorical though upside down, shifting, idio(t)syncratic and blurry it’s aligned with the always already here, the ongoing dead-ends and cul-de-sacs of history’s collective memory continuing to affect the vertical now
nowhere but here
haunting the future
anxious as ever, these interrupting techne-phantasms of splintering pasts and futures are made discomforted and alive through the sharpening web of the all-that-has-been and the not-yet-met

imaginaries of the im|possible
im|material engagements seducing muses and muscles of the all-of-a-sudden
and
and
and
and
and
now
i’m really trying too hard.
this is when seriously authentic pomposity sets in, me trying to be clever
queer academic clown, valiant do-gooder-white attempting ars-is-tic
philosophies in Sisyphean style scaling slippery epistemic ladders, falling
interminably to zero, to stupidity, to the fool stepping happily off institutional
cliffs in pure trust, after all what is fooling but footing without a crossed t?
the question is what happens after acknowledgments and apologies are made,
can radical subjectivities reveal vulnerabilities, as they rip off scabs to divulge
those deep wounds, genocidal games of mastery and servitude haunting our
collective pasts
can we in turn haunt delicious futures
sculpting collectivities
different alone together
and
can play and masks or clowters or trickoons or bufficksters help that
revelation to occur?
can we be lost together a short while
still caring for
with-nessing
each other
a long while?

witness here this uprooted trickster navigating
white panic under the comforting heavyweight beige blanket of mundane
safety
confronting memory and denial and erasure, sublimation and abuse
the shits hitting us all in the face
making visible invisible politics of othering and belonging
documenting the lived every-day and the poked and stirred past
an eclectic mash-up failing better (Samuel Beckett 1983)
on frames and on the edges
in awe of shapes of architecture, snails and every other body
at ease with collapsing trees and graveyards
TONGUE-ING the future, licking and carving space for soft futurities.
all from inside the body of this performer
a simplicity of
foolish poems and other performing essays experienced
through clowning in this academy.
have i said that before, is the aboutness getting to you too, yet?

but now
how to end
this ever worming thing
all these accumulations proliferations and confusions maybe lead nowhere
which is somewhere too, everywhere and nowhere like dramaturgy (Camilla Damkjaer 2016)
if so far this seems a handy toolkit for sensitising new
post-humxn white feminist queer discourse you
wouldn’t be far wrong despite muscular desire to escape category
clearly there are too many holes, so many chinks in the armour
but that’s just how the light gets in (Leonard Cohen 1992)
and cracks come as handy spots to hang onto when slippage is unavoidable

thing-king with Dean Hutton aka Goldendean (2018, p.216), ‘I stand here, now, because there is an urgent need for white people to recognise that we are a product of a five hundred-year-old mass dehumanisation programme known as whiteness and to begin to address the problematics of our white cultures,’
but

IF I’M WHITE AND A FEMINIST DOES THAT MAKE ME A WHITE FEMINIST?

when the footing crumbles
remember decomposition
happens from the inside
remember carpenter ants
benefitting from a dying tree
aiding its decomposition while
not actually the original cause of its demise.

BREATHE

(don’t you hate being told to breathe as if you had a choice in the matter)

BREATHE DEEPER

attentiveness is key to coping
with crumbling material and emotional economies
apocalyptic crises and political fuckery
hallucinatory detail prevents my devastation
it expands polyphonic imaginaries
and
being with clouds and drawing slugs helps
even in awkward stops and starts
inserting humour has
its slippery consequences and
‘Poetry is Not a Luxury’ (Audre Lorde 2007)

what does it mean to redefine the meaning of civilisation, to redefine the
meaning of happiness, to redefine the meaning of modernity, subversion and
politics

in Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene Donna Haraway
(2016, p.111) writes, ‘Shame is a prod to lifelong rethinking and recrafting
one’s accountabilities,’ and it’s true, this feels like a lifelong work. taking my
cue from Haraway, i wonder, how is it possible to produce with and for each
other the on-going-ness of making a difference?

what must i give more death to today
in order to generate more life
which bones must i unearth

4 ©Anastasia Moonpower
then sing for
then crush
then re-bury

and if not now,
when?

[The] the border between life and death is probably that utmost line
which finally defines human belonging or exclusion.

(Tlostanova 2013, p.22)

writing this right now near a sleeping
deep breathing dog
Pozzo
(Beckett all the way down)
Pozzo’s special thing when he’s awake is
licking the arm of the pinkish leather couch
for ages
i hope he doesn’t mind me filming this fascinating gesture
i ask for his consent but he ignores me and keeps on at it
i take his silence as a yes and pull out the camera but
part of me isn’t 100% sure
zooming in now
deeply close
the shape of his tongue is intriguing, it feels so huamn
so animal
intelligent bright pink
and agile
is this where this
documented artistic research project (doctoral thesis)
must stop, with a dog licking a couch on a Sunday
in Johannesburg, with
the comforting soundtrack of a not so distant cock crowing and
the neighbour’s house alarm going off and on
on and off repetitively
for hours and
hours on end?
in the end, from the beginning, we’re all at the mercy of the grand undeniable cosmic joke, the unspoken thing that has me howling into fires and running and screaming naked into icy Swedish forest lakes.
sorry to end so flummig.
sorry.
If we look carefully, we can already see the signs of this world-to-come in the present, although it is true that they are fragile. But exclusion, discrimination, and selection on the basis of race continue to be structuring factors of inequality, the absence of rights, and contemporary domination, notably in our democracies ... And we cannot act as if slavery and colonisation never took place, or as if we are completely rid of the legacies of such an unhappy period. Although there has been great effort to mask it, the transformation of Europe into a 'fortress' and recent legislation against foreigners put into place on the Old Continent are both deeply rooted in the ideology of selection among different human races.

Until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imaginations, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world-beyond-race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference. The celebration of difference will be meaningful only if it opens onto the fundamental question of our time, that of sharing, of the common, of the expansion of our horizon. The weight of history will be there. We must learn to do a better job of carrying it, and of sharing its burden. We are condemned to live not only with what we have produced but also with what we have inherited. Given that we have not completely escaped the spirit of a time dominated by the hierarchisation of human types, we will need to work with and against the past to open up a future that can be shared in full and equal dignity. The path is clear: on the basis of a critique of the past, we must create a future that is inseparable from the notions of justice, dignity, and the in-common.

(Mbembe 2013, p.177)


Goldendean, 2018, Plan B: A Gathering of Strangers (or) This is Not Working, iwaevabooks in collaboration with BayFinK (Bayerische Forschungs- und Informationstelle – Inklusive Hoch-schulen und Kultureinrichtungen) at the University of Bayreuth, Germany.

Haraway, D 2016, Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene, Durham NC, Duke University Press.


The Gleaners and I, Les glaneurs et la glaneuse (original title), produced and directed by Varda, A 2000, France, Documentary, 82 minutes.