

ANCESTORS, ANIMACY & AVATARS IN THE WORK OF MARY SIBANDE & OWANTO

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores how French-Gabonese artist Owanto (b. 1953, Paris) and South African artist Mary Sibande (b. 1982, Baberton) visualize their ancestors as more-than-human avatars entangled with plants and critters in multi-media installation art projects. In her 2015 series *Feeding My Ancestor*, Owanto derives inspiration from the animism of the Gabon-based Bwiti to depict her grandmother Flavienne, and in her 2009-ongoing photographic and sculptural work depicting her ancestrally inspired alter-ego Sophie-Ntombikayise, Sibande echoes the presentism of ancestors in Zulu linguistics. I show how Owanto and Sibande's respective series model an openness to the spiritual interconnectedness of all planetary inhabitants based on ancestral immaterial epistemologies. By demonstrating multi-species entanglement and care, Owanto and Sibande push at Western understandings of time, space and animacy. Western philosophy has long derided animism, naming it immaterial in all senses of the term, however, Owanto and Sibande's artworks demonstrate that such a mode of being may be essential in expanding our reality beyond the urgency and destruction of the present.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary African Art; Animism; Interspecies Entanglement; Black Feminist Ecologies; Ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

“Instead of the West’s ‘stifling vision of reality – with its correlates of ‘truth,’ ‘facts,’ and ‘power,’ the Black fantastic looks to self-fashioned fictions, mythic worlds, African-originated knowledge systems and spiritual practices as a means of liberation.”

- E. Eshun (2022, 11)

“Is the poethics of Blackness an ethics that instead of trying to better the World¹ as we know it, aim at its end?”

- D.F. Da Silva (2014, 84)

This article discusses the mixed-media artwork of two artists who imagine an alternative to the oppressive and extractive understanding of space, time, animacy and species in the West through the visualization of immaterial and ancestral avatars engaged in plant and animal communion. Johannesburg-born artist Mary Sibande (b. 1982) animates relationality with three-generations of her female ancestors who labored as domestic workers during apartheid by embodying these matriarchs in her dynamic fiberglass, textile, and photographic artworks. Libreville-raised artist Owanto (b. 1953) imagines nourishing her grandmother Flavienne Agnorogoulé in her 2015 and ongoing embroidery, photographic and installation project *Feeding My Ancestor*. Intimacy with the spectral ancestor may be disparaged as paranormal in the West, but it is central and common to many local African traditions on the continent, though it is important to note that these traditions are diverse and not generalizable. In the Zulu language, for example, speakers utilize the present tense to discuss lost ancestors (Nel 2007, 71). “In Gabon,” Owanto explains, “ancestors have always played a great role in our psyche.” (Owanto 2021) Owanto, inspired by the role of animism in the culture of the Bwiti of her ancestral Gabon, and Sibande, echoing the presentism of the deceased in Zulu linguistics, visualize the spatial and temporal potential of their ancestors by employing digital artistic technologies to depict them as more-than-human alter egos and avatars entangled with plants and creatures. While in the West, the deceased cannot occupy the same space-time (the present) as the living, and rigid animacy hierarchies disparage the

¹ In this paper I will use the capitalized term “World” in line with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Tyrone S. Palmer’s utilization of the term referring to Western philosophy’s understanding of reality and the current and oppressive order of things.

vitality and value of plants and animals, Owanto and Sibande demonstrate an alternative and immaterial (by which I mean spiritual) way of being where the animate is much more complex.

Inspired by Ekow Eshun's (2022) concept of the "Black fantastic" which names the ways in which Black artists are rejecting and revising master narratives by creating and visualizing speculative alternatives, I argue that Owanto and Sibande's respective series model an openness to the spiritual interconnectedness of all planetary inhabitants based on an inherited ancestral epistemology. By demonstrating multi-species entanglement and care, Owanto and Sibande push at Western understandings of what is alive and valued. Animal studies scholar Mel Chen (2012) describes how this system of valuation creates animacy hierarchies which prop up the human (which really refers to white European males) and devalue all "others" namely non-white people, non-human creatures, and things on a perilous descending scale. Owanto and Sibande work at the intersection of animacy and animism², where animacy names a political practice, and animism an immaterial praxis that has material implications by investing all things with agency, life and essence. Philosopher Achille Mbembe articulates the intersection of animism and animacy in the hierarchization of our species when he explains:

The human...is distinguished from the nonhuman because of his or her presumably larger cognitive capacity...he has been able to free himself from a purely instinctive relationship with his environment...he is not only distinct from the animal. He is also distinct from the primitive, that is, the class of original humans who still live under the rule of animism. (2019, 94)

Western philosophy has long derided animism, naming it immaterial in all senses of the term (unimportant, irrelevant, primitive and spiritual), however, Owanto and Sibande's artworks demonstrate how such a mode of being may be essential in expanding our reality beyond the urgency and destruction of the present.

Eshun's "Black fantastic" (2022) explores how contemporary Black artists are fabulating visions of realities beyond our current one, replete with fantastical

² Based on Mel Chen's *Animacies* (2012, 4), "animacy" is more than just the state of being alive/animate, it is a Western philosophical and sociopolitical practice where being endowed with liveness directly impacts your access to freedom, agency and rights. Animism is the assignation of animacy and therefore value/agency to things such as stones or synthetic materials for example in addition to humans, animals and plants (categories typically understood as animate via Western philosophy). While animism is often defined as a belief system, Donna Haraway (2016, 165) underscores how animism is the only sensible mode of materialism meaning that insisting on the liveness and therefore value of all life forms has important material implications for being on this planet and amongst other species in ways that are not extractive/destructive.

and fictional scenes. While Eshun differentiates the Black fantastic from Afrofuturism (2022, 11), he does not confront scholar of Black critical thought Tyrone S. Palmer's Afro-pessimist critique that in "Black critical theory – there is an explicit desire for another World, one that somehow moves past this current order unscathed, that restores relational capacity and "humanity" without...questioning the genesis of these terms" (2020, 266). Owanto and Sibande's work does not restore humanity to their ancestors, rather these projects challenge the prowess and bounded nature of the human by visualizing the wisdom and agency of plants and animals. In this way their aesthetic engagements with ancestral avatars avoid the limits of binary Afro-pessimist approaches to worlding beyond, such as those put forth by Palmer, who also asks, "what does "thinking otherwise about the world," do when confronted with its brutal facticity?" (2020, 264) The "brutal facticity" of the world is, for Palmer, that it is fundamentally anti-Black. Similarly literary scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) argues that anti-Blackness is a total climate. Owanto and Sibande do not ignore this brutal fact. Both artists reference anti-Black systems such as colonialism and apartheid directly in the work under consideration. However, rather than simply representing the totality of such systems, they model inter-species entanglement as a way of deconstructing this brutal reality in which anti-Blackness and environmental degradation have been enacted concurrently. They do not move past this World order leaving it unscathed. Instead, they hold that World in view while still demonstrating the tools that are already extant in the present if we tap into immaterial ancestral knowledge to dismantle it and alter the future.

To illuminate the ways in which both artists formally accomplish this, I further discuss Palmer's arguments on the anti-Blackness of Western reality and consider ancestral worship in African cultures and art as immaterially undoing that supposed "universal" reality. I look to Denise Ferreira da Silva's concept of a "Black Feminist Poethic" (2014) which describes the concurrent activation of ethics (justice) and poiesis (creativity) in Black feminist praxis and artwork. For Ferreira da Silva Black Feminist Poethics, as demonstrated by the protagonists in Octavia Butler's literary oeuvre who time-travel and space-shift, aim to end the World (the Western order of things including planetary mass violence, anti-Blackness and environmental degradation) as we know it. I then elucidate the importance of avatar production in Owanto and Sibande's respective aesthetic experiments and finally

provide formal and contextual analysis for each series to conclude that they expand Western understandings of the animate, space and time as a mode of World-dismantling Black Feminist Poethics. This paper argues that Owanto and Sibande's aesthetic experiments are radically expansive and geared towards multi-species justice, rather escapist.

2. Anti-blackness and African worlding

Black studies scholars Denise Ferreira da Silva (2014) and Tyrone S. Palmer (2020) argue that our global norm coheres around a universal conception of reality that is dictated by Western philosophy and particularly metaphysics, a branch of Western philosophy that emerged in the sixth century BCE, to understand reality. As Chen identifies Aristotle was a canonical contributor to the field of metaphysics and he outlined the Western basis for animacy hierarchies when he created categories segregating humans from non-humans and animals, declaring rocks inanimate, and justifying enslavement and patriarchy as part of our "natural order" (2012, 47). The development of modern science during the Enlightenment period in Europe relied on categorizing human beings based on the animacy hierarchies initiated by Aristotle. Placing Europeans at the top, non-Europeans (particularly Black and Indigenous peoples), animals, plants, and objects at the bottom was made to seem natural and justified slavery, colonialism, the extraction of the industrial revolution, and ongoing anti-Blackness, species extinction, and environmental degradation. While Western scientific reason pretends to be a universal mode of knowledge, its operations are racialized and extractive, and these operations structured modernity and continue to perilously structure the present. Both Ferreira da Silva and Palmer identify this present order as "the World." This World, Ferreira da Silva (2014, 90) explains, is propped up by rational scientific and linear progressive conceptions of Space and Time³ understood to be universally measurable, objective, and absolute, that perpetuate coloniality and racialization. While many indigenous and Global South communities are based in knowledge systems that diverge greatly from the dominant conceits of Western scientific reason, and particularly its violent animacy hierarchies, these are devalued to uphold present power relations. This is

³ Following Ferreira da Silva (2014), I capitalize Space and Time here to refer to the firm and naturalized understandings of these concepts in Western philosophy. When they appear not capitalized that is because I am referring to these concepts in their potential fluidity beyond Western philosophy.

exemplified by the notion that Western thought is unable to conceive of the deceased in the present tense (i.e. in Western reality); instead by scientific logic, ancestors must be conjured from some other space and temporality, from a distant beyond or the past, and non-humans cannot have relevant cognitive capacity. Ferreira da Silva (2014) proposes that the goal of Black Studies must be to undo this World through a Black Feminist Poethics which mobilizes the creative tools that the category of Blackness already holds, one of which I argue might be the African-derived knowledge system of animism, to open the way to a just mode of being in relation to others and this planet. Black Feminist Poethics, such as Owanto and Sibande's aesthetic projects, image multispecies and ancestral "existence toward the beyond of Space-time" (Ferreira da Silva 2014, 91).

While my summary of the World has been primarily based on the work of scholars in diasporic Black studies, these concepts are also reflected in African philosophy. K.C. Anyanwu (1987) argues that African art has always operated beyond the Western horizon of scientific reason because of its metaphysical source. He articulates, "The world which science constructs is not only partial and fragmented, it is also not the whole world of our concrete experience" (Anyanwu 1987, 246). Anyanwu argues that African artists see the invisible and the immaterial as a way of coexisting with nature, not controlling it. Beyond coexistence with nature, African artists may also tap into a mode of time-keeping that is holistic in which moments from the past, present and future intersect with each other, which rejects the rigidity of industrialized global clock time. Mbembe describes the complexity of African temporality as "emerging time" which he explains "is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it...but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other present, pasts, and futures" (2001, 19). Emerging time explodes the linear and progressive Time of Western scientific reason. Its emphasis on relationality, openness and complexity debunks the standardization and rigidity of clock Time in the West, which as Ferreira da Silva points out, was standardized to globalize capitalism and increase the productivity of extractive, racially oppressive and Earth-degrading labor.

Both Anyanwu and Mbembe demonstrate how the space, time and understanding of reality in African thought and African art pushes at the World. When Owanto (2021) explains that "in Gabon, ancestors have always played a

great role in our psyche,” she articulates how despite the European encounter and the history of French colonialism, during which Western reality imposed itself in Gabon, Gabonese people continued to animate ancestral communion and a more nuanced understanding of space and temporality. Sibande (2016) too echoes Anyanwu’s argument when she states, “Africa is this umbilical cord that just goes around the globe.” Rather than a totalizing entity of which Africa is a part, Africa is spatially separate from the “globe,” the tool often used to teach Western geography. To further explore Sibande’s image we might consider how an umbilical cord connects a fetus to the placenta, which enables the fetus to breathe and grow in the uterus. Inside the umbilical cord comes the thing that nurtures the fetus during its development, its oxygen and food, as well as its abject production or fecal waste. The umbilical cord embodies both nourishment, what allows its source to grow, and contains the capacity to strangle it and, as such, put pressure on it. Sibande identifies precisely the way that African thought might nourish and strangle the World towards a more ethical mode of being. Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai describes the importance of the viewpoint of the Earth from beyond its atmosphere because it enables us to see our planet with awe and wonder and to understand it as a self-sustaining organism that exists within a much wider mass of space and longer sense of time than we often realize. Maathai writes “we may have forgotten the original majesty and awe in which that natural world was held and the ways our ancestors lived within it” (2010, 62). Similarly, in the imagery that Sibande constructs, Africa is not outside of the World because of some pre-modern or animalistic mindset that cannot comprehend its way of being (the violent trope about Blackness that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel espoused), but rather because its inhabitants actively choose to remain invested in diverse inherited, intuitive, and holistic planetary views (Jackson 2020, 89). From there, we wonder might these be the tools that the category of Blackness always held for imagining beyond the existence imposed by Western scientific understanding of space-time? And might ancestral relationality be one mode within African thought that can expand (as a way of undoing) our hegemonic categories?

In *Immaterial Archives*, Jenny Sharpe (2020) explores the work of Afro-Caribbean artists who incorporate intangible elements like spirits, dreams, and visions to challenge Western philosophical reality and to confront the legacies of slavery. Sharpe’s book informs this essay as it emphasizes how Afro-Caribbean

artists are haunted by their ancestors and legacies of slavery and work with the creolized cultural traditions developed in the wake of their ancestors' displacement from the African continent. In contrast however, Owanto and Sibande are influenced by Bwiti and Zulu ancestral traditions that remained on the continent and create art that reflects an ongoing relationship with their ancestors, rather than being haunted by them. While Sharpe emphasizes how enslaved Africans remade their shattered world through ancestral engagement, this paper highlights how valuable African worlds persisted on the continent despite the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonialism. Both Owanto and Sibande, like the artists whom Sharpe discusses, engage with ancestral intimacy and visions, slipping between reality (the brutal World) and virtuality (the immaterial or spiritual). Drawing on Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics, I see this slippage between virtuality and reality as a way to shift considerations of space and time, and therefore to imagine planetary existence differently. In this paper, virtuality represents the space of ancestors and digital aesthetics, allowing Owanto and Sibande to transcend and decenter the concept of the human. Through their art, they reveal a continuous connection with their ancestors, challenging Western frameworks of Time, Space, and the human subject. Owanto and Sibande demonstrate the ways in which African cultures offer emerging and interlocking conceptions of time, space, and multispecies engagement to decenter the World. Central to both series is the figure of the avatar which enables them to transcend and put pressure on the limitations of objective and measurable Space, and linear Time.

3. The role of the avatar

In *Feeding My Ancestor (Tobacco)* (2015) Owanto images her grandmother Flavienne as an extension of a Tobacco plant. Her profiled visage emerges as its largest leaf. Sibande pictures one of her ancestral selves, Sophie-Ntombikayise, in the position of a spider in *Caught in the Rapture* (2009), both caressing and emerging powerfully from its web. Flavienne, imaged in profile, looks away from us beyond the frame, negating our gaze while Sophie closes her eyes, uninvested in our reality as she dreams her own. To access Flavienne in this project, Owanto has tapped into the animist vision of the Bwiti of her ancestral Gabon, and specifically the *Ndjembé* society to which her grandmother and mother belonged⁴. She “feeds”

⁴ Information conveyed by Owanto in an interview with the author on December 4, 2021.

Flavienne through a gustatory aesthetic of relationality, reminiscing through involuntary memory sponsored by the ingestion and sensory experiences of chocolate, rice, rum, and tobacco. Owanto communes with Flavienne on a spiritual plane, just as Sibande animates her ancestors through dreaming, through their existence as alter-ego.



IMAGE 1. Left: Owanto, *Feeding my Ancestor (Tobacco)*, 2015, Photography and patchwork on canvas, 140 x 104 cm. Image courtesy of Owanto.

IMAGE 2. Right: Mary Sibande, *Caught in the Rapture* (from *Long Live the Dead Queen* series), 2009, Digital pigment print on textured archival rag with non-fugitive ink (Edition of 10 + 3AP), 90 x 60 cm. Photographed by John Hodgkiss. Image courtesy of Mary Sibande.

They did not need to imagine a new world to negate the World — that is, this plane of the sensorial, spiritual, and animist already exists in their local and ancestral traditions. In Owanto's outreach to Flavienne, and Sibande's sculptural embodiment of her matriarchs, they interlock their lived memories of these individuals with a present moment of relationality. Sibande sutures speculative moments of frustration felt by her ancestors in their historical work as domestic servants during apartheid, with new activities and modes of being, exploding them from their uniforms as spiders, warriors, priestesses, conductors, or larger-than-life queens. Owanto re-stages the consumption of tobacco, chocolate, and rum that her grandmother Flavienne enjoyed, despite her debilitating impoverishment during the colonial period, through the installation of *Feeding My Ancestors* around a central

banquet table replete with these alimentary treats. In its recent installation in France, Owanto invited school children in Paris to sit with her and drink hot chocolate, mimicking the activity she shared with Flavienne⁵.

Through the activity of drinking hot chocolate with children, Owanto embodies the role Flavienne played in her own childhood. She reactivates her grandmother's presence through this gustatory gesture of relationality with new generations. Flavienne's image above the banquet commands the space as her presence is reincarnated through Owanto in both an embodied and aesthetic form. Sibande describes Sophie-Ntombikayise as her alter-ego asserting a new version of herself by reworking her ancestor's pasts (Sibande 2019; Walters 2021). In this way, both artists experiment with what Uri McMillan calls "avatar production" (2015, 12). Scholar of performance and Black cultural studies, McMillan explains that the term "avatar" combines "the prefix *ava* ('down') with the base of *tara* ('a passing over'), its translation of 'downcoming' denotes the descent of a deity to Earth in order to be reincarnated in a human form" (2015, 11). McMillan explains that there are two connotations of "avatar" both "spiritual reincarnation and an alternate self" and he asserts that Black female artists enact avatars as "cogent and brave performances of alterity" (2015, 12). Owanto activates alterity through "avatar production" in her aesthetic reincarnation of Flavienne, while Sibande creates Sophie-Ntombikayise as an alternate self. Both *Feeding My Ancestor* and Sibande's works featuring her alter-ego place us in the space of the avatar, which is "between the spiritual and earthly as well as the abstract and the real," further cementing that we are not in the World, but in an immaterial zone (McMillan 2015, 11).

This immaterial zone creates both a unique spatiality and a specific temporality. Sophie-Ntombikayise's billowing, unfolding tulle skirt and the zig-zagging embroidered forms surrounding Flavienne's profile appear to be moving and alive. As representations of ancestors reincarnated in the present, these avatars exist in a recurring, reverberating time that, according to McMillan, "exceeds artificial distinctions between the past and present" (2015, 13). "Time" McMillan writes, "is polytemporal; what has come before is not contained in the past, but is continually erupting" (2015, 13). This sense of continual eruption is given aesthetic form in Sibande and Owanto's formal production of avatars. Owanto uses the

⁵ Information conveyed by Owanto in an interview with the author on December 4, 2021.

gerund in her project's title so that *Feeding* implies a continuous action and, therefore, a sense of ongoing time. While both Flavienne and Sophie-Ntombikayise appear frozen in place, their surrounding companions provide a sense of unfolding motion and vitality. These avatars also appear repeatedly through the seriality of each artist's work. In four different frames Owanto surrounds Flavienne with embroidery imitating the appearance of coffee beans, iboga leaves, flowers, and kola nuts. Sibande imagines Sophie-Ntombikayise in a myriad of actions, environments, and costumes. These avatars emerge in a constant state of becoming, echoing Mbembe's "emerging time" (2001, 9). They interlock, reverberate, and exist outside of any linear timeline. Moreover, the Bwiti and Zulu traditions do not speak of ancestors in the past tense but rather use the present tense, demonstrating the alterity of their temporal nature. By looking at each series individually, I will trace the multivalent strategies through which Owanto and Sibande produce their avatars, and the generative modeling these avatars accomplish for expanding our current reality.

4. The animist epistemology of Owanto's *Feeding My Ancestors*

Owanto first produced *Feeding My Ancestors* as a virtual rendering in 2015. This early rendering depicts a banquet scene featuring a dining table replete with vases of flowers, birds, bowls of fruits, and bottles and jugs filled with liquid refreshments inside an ornate dining room whose walls are adorned with five images. A green canvas with cursive writing atop a beige background surrounded by snaking plants hangs at the right. At the center of the wall hang four canvases featuring the black and white image of an elderly woman. Each frame features different materials — such as green plants, purple florals, and blue, white and red stripes — framing her image. Although the woman above this banquet looks away from the viewer, she retains a regal presence over the scene, as if an icon. This was precisely Owanto's goal when she found her maternal grandmother Flavienne Agnorogoulé's colonial identity card — to honor this ancestor who played a major role in the artist's upbringing in Libreville, the capital city of Gabon. Owanto was raised in Libreville by Flavienne, her Gabonese mother and French father. Central to the artist's praxis is a reckoning with colonial photography and the familial archive, which allows her to work with and through her bifurcated identity. In her ongoing *Flowers* series, she digitally enlarges and edits found photographs in her French father's belongings of

female genital mutilation rituals taking place in Gabon during the colonial period (Shoyer 2020).



IMAGE 3. Owanto, Digital Rendering of *Feeding My Ancestors*, 2015. Image courtesy of Owanto.

Europeans spread photographs of colonial Africa widely to perpetuate problematic and inaccurate narratives about colonial subjects (Geary 2008, 143). In this context, photography was a means to document, grid and demean certain “types” or categories of humans. The perception of the photograph as a factual scientific document supported the dangerous misperceptions of colonial and other alienated or fugitive subjects as non-humans (Geary 2008, 143). Theorist and photographer Allan Sekula details how the perception of the photograph as a scientific, evidentiary document turned the individuals represented into static and violated objects (Sekula 1986). The spontaneous finding of Flavienne’s black-and-white photograph inspired Owanto to create this series. As the image utilized to identify Flavienne’s subjugation to French colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century in what was then termed *Afrique Equatoriale Française*, the collective French colonial territories in central Africa between 1910 and 1959, this is a particularly poignant image to repetitively incorporate in each of the hung and embroidered components of the installation. In appropriating and animating the administrative colonial profile portrait in *Feeding My Ancestors*, Owanto subverts its static violence. By digitally enlarging the image, Owanto can play with the image, adding color, headdresses, earrings, and other embellishments to aggrandize her ancestor as an avatar. Signified by the purple crown and halos she applies to Flavienne’s

profile, her desire was to dignify this image of her grandmother, lifting her from colonial subject to icon. Digital editing technology enables Flavienne to exist beyond the confines of the colonial identification document, becoming queen-like and larger-than-life.

From November 6 to 12, 2021, *Feeding My Ancestors* exited the virtual realm into the physical realm as an installation at the auction house Bonhams in Paris⁶. Like its virtual rendering, the installation featured multiple components, including framed and embroidered images of Flavienne, the central banquet table, which the artist calls a “table of offering,” replete with kola nuts, cacao, various flowers, and plants, and lit candles. Speakers emanating the sound of the artist’s breathe were submerged between petals and leaves, providing the table with sonic evidence of life. The artist hung each framed image of Flavienne, surrounded by hand embroidery, on a central wall. Instead of placing the real and organic versions of the symbols of Flavienne’s alimentary vices around her image, Owanto surrounds her ancestor with artificial versions of iboga, rice, kola nuts, coffee, and rum. Tufts of intricately hand-sewn yarn form the shapes of kola nuts, detailed leaves, grains of rice, coffee beans, and flowers around Flavienne’s face. Hyper-aware of how the production of these goods is imbricated in the histories of enslavement, and its continuation in the present through forced agricultural labor, Owanto chose not to use the “real” goods but rather their aesthetic likeness in the form of yarn. Though the artist embroidered these forms in yarn instead of attaching them to live material, she still attributes vitality to them. Owanto expresses the series as an elaboration of “an animist vision,” and each of the hand-sewn embroidered elements surrounding Flavienne’s face are labeled “ritual elements.” Animism, as discussed, is the attribution of a soul and being to plants and objects, was integral to the artist’s upbringing.

⁶ Owanto, unlike Sibande (who has had solo exhibitions at the FRIST Museum in Nashville and Somerset House in London) has not had major institutional support in the West for solo exhibitions, though she has shown her work in group exhibitions at institutions such as the Paul Eluard Museum in Paris and Kunsthalle, Munich. As a large-scale, full-gallery installation Owanto needed space to show this project, which is why she partnered with Bonhams the auction house, who was willing to support the project financially. While not under the purview of this paper, delving into the capitalist mechanisms of auction houses in the dissemination of subversive African contemporary art is a topic worth discussion in the future.



IMAGE 4. Owanto, *Feeding my Ancestor (Iboga)*, (2015-ongoing), photography and patchwork on canvas, 140 x 104 cm. Image courtesy of Owanto.

While I discussed the worlding of the Bwiti in section two, it is important to clarify that Owanto's grandmother and mother were involved in a specific female-oriented, occult, and initiation sector of the Bwiti people called the Ndjembé. While Owanto was always hesitant to be initiated herself, this series reveals a formal engagement with their initiation ritual, which centers around the ingestion of herbs - specifically the iboga plant. In one of the framed elements titled *Feeding my Ancestor (Iboga)*, Owanto stitches iboga leaves around her grandmother's face. The Tabernanthe iboga is a sacred plant to the people of Gabon and contains psychoactive properties through its indole alkaloids which act on the central nervous and cardiovascular systems when ingested (Lavaud and Massiot 2017). Members of the Bwiti participate in eating the crushed roots of the iboga which causes them to fall into a healing trance. A central belief of the Bwiti is the continuity between life and death, the living and dead. They practice the veneration of ancestors because they believe that ancestors can assist the living in understanding life (Ndoua and Vaghar 2019). In causing a trance, iboga fundamentally shifts its consumer's state of consciousness, which the Bwiti believe can be healing. On her website, Owanto describes how Flavienne often ate iboga later in life as a respected member of her community. That Flavienne ultimately died from malnourishment brings great depth to the title of this series. In this series, Owanto imagines that she might nourish her grandmother, providing her with what she lacked in the repressive

French colonial system under which she lived for most of her life. Moreover, in depicting Flavienne as an extension of an iboga plant, Owanto imagines her ancestor as a consciousness-shifting alkaloid whose knowledge is capable of healing and changing the World, or the reality that subjugated her and led to her malnourishment. Owanto reincarnates Flavienne through this aesthetic animist ritual, enabling her mode of knowing through the iboga plant, to shift her viewer's understanding of reality. In the space of *Feeding My Ancestor*, Flavienne is not gone nor is she a victim of the system which subjugated her. Instead, she reigns over this banquet asserting the dominance of her way of knowing, making Western reality seem diminutive in comparison.

Owanto's aesthetic invocation of a reality-altering plant participates in her turn away from the World, or the notion of a self-evident, totalizing perceived reality. The Bwiti attribute intelligence and soul to the iboga plant. Its ingestion is a reception to the being of the plant, and that which it can teach, feminist scholar Donna Haraway might call this a mode of becoming-with another species (Haraway 2016). The worship and power of iboga demonstrates the Bwiti's disinterest in human-animal-vegetal hierarchies (Perrois 1985, 99). If anything, the plant figures more powerfully than the humans who consume it. Its knowledge base becomes part of the humans who ingest its crushed roots. This blurring of hierarchy between the human and the vegetal, an embrace of the natural, in this series activates what Chen calls "queer animacy," which "tugs at the ontological cohesion of 'the human'" and "participates in the very destruction of such categories" (2012, 98). In the mindset of the Bwiti, humans gain wisdom from communion with plants and ancestor who exist contemporaneously with us. Coexistence and contemporaneity with such "othered" beings – the vegetal and the ancestral – cannot occur in the World that centers the human (Barad 2007, 27). By animating her ancestor and the consciousness-altering iboga plant, Owanto presented her Parisian viewers with the space and time of the Bwiti, a cyclical and non-linear reality in which ancestral encounters are always possible in the present and where there are no spatial barriers or separate realms required for such encounters. In so doing, Owanto presented potentials beyond her Western viewer's presumed reality.

Pushing the boundaries of ecological categories even further than just the fusion of Flavienne and the iboga plant, Owanto also placed breathing speakers inside large flowers and plants on the table. The speakers were hidden and

embedded inside the flora, emanating the sound of the artist's breath. Invisible to the viewer, the speakers brought evidence of vitality to the entire installation demonstrating the Bwiti belief that the ancestor remains alive in the space and time of the present to impart necessary wisdom. The animist vision of *Feeding My Ancestors* not only pressed at its Western viewers sense of the human, but also their understanding of how categories of organisms live through the senses. Providing the floral with breath, providing her now-deceased ancestor with breath and nourishment, Owanto refuses to prioritize one sense over another, or one organism over another. She demonstrates nourishment as an ethical way of relating to others, to living and deceased members of our species, and to other species. Viewers could smell flowers, touch rice, taste hot chocolate, hear the breath of the seemingly inanimate and see the dignified and now well-nourished liveliness of Flavienne. The senses of course dictate our internalization of external environments, so by activating all five of them Owanto aims to amplify the affectivity of this installation. *Feeding My Ancestors* traffics in hyper-affectivity but not simply through the visual.

In the project description, Owanto emphasizes that Flavienne who “was blind...could see further than most” (Owanto, 2021). The artist's grandmother mobilized the power of hapticity when she, “would see me by touching me. She would touch my face and caress my skin, we would laugh and dance together. She had a very particular way of seeing and recounting things which were to inspire my storytelling” (Owanto, 2021). That Flavienne could see through touch demonstrates how she not only gained knowledge through the ingestion of iboga, but also through touch, a sense often relegated to the realm of the emotional, the subjective rather than the intellectual. Flavienne privileged touch and taste as methods of knowing and thereby decentered the visual as the primary sense for gaining knowledge. In the installation, Owanto also privileges senses that are often undervalued from a Western viewpoint. The taste and smell of the hot chocolate becomes a material component of the work's experience, as does the sound of breath, a sound puncturing the space of the installation and evoking the presence of Flavienne in the present. Owanto's sensorial experimentation with the pleasure of taste, the scent of chocolate, and the touch of her ancestor, proposes a new methodology beyond the measurable, objective, and vision-based Space and Time of the World. She reincarnates her ancestor to imagine a time and space in which Flavienne is now

nourished, and where her way of seeing and knowing, centered in the ways of the Bwiti, might be imparted to a wider audience and push at their very understanding of reality. Through *Feeding My Ancestor*, Owanto plays with the consciousness-altering possibility that she might be nourishing her ancestor and removing the pain of hunger from her belly. Confronting ancestral trauma and depicting interspecies entanglement is a central preoccupation for Sibande as well. In her depictions of Sophie-Ntombikayise, she imagines a domestic worker who can dream of different environments and possibilities for being beyond the pain of apartheid, and the cage of the human.

5. Mary Sibande visualizes a powerful monstrosity

Mary Sibande's female ancestors emerge as flesh and possibility in her work. The artist uses the anthropocentric body in her sculptures, but one that is porous and relational rather than bounded or individual. Typical for most Black South African families, three generations of women in her family worked as domestic maids: her great-grandmother (brought to life by the avatar Sophie-Elsie), grandmother (embodied by the avatar Sophie-Merica), and mother (conjured by the avatar Sophie-Velucia). Born in Baberton, South Africa in 1982, Sibande was the first woman in her family free to work outside of the domestic space. Sibande began embodying her foremothers through sculptural work when she studied fine art at the University of Johannesburg in 2006. Using her own body to mold figural sculptures of Black domestic workers in uniform costume and unconventional motion, the project began centered on anthropomorphism but in the last ten years has transformed beyond that (Walters 2021, 131).

In a 2013 sculptural work entitled *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene I* from the series "The Purple Shall Govern" two figures face off. One on the left is dressed in a magnificent bright blue Victorian gown. Scholar of literature and African studies Tracey L. Walters explains that the bright blue garb in Sibande's work is called the *isishweshwe*, which was "a textile worn by both slaves and German women during the colonial period" (2021, 131). Sibande studied fashion and textile before art school and the elaborate costumes that complete her sculptural works reflect this background. About the costume worn by the figure on the left in the *isishweshwe*, Walters writes, "Ultimately, both the textiles and the Victorian fashion serve as an appropriate metaphor for the confinement and oppressiveness of black women's

lives under colonial rule and apartheid” (2021, 131). The blue figure in *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene 1 (The Purple Shall Govern)* (2013), garbed in *isishweshwe* to symbolize the subjugation of Black women in South Africa, is Sophie-Ntombikayise. Sibande has animated Sophie-Ntombikayise as her ancestral alter-ego since 2006. The name “Sophie” was the enforced Christian name taken by all her ancestors whose employers could not be bothered to learn their Zulu names. “Mary” is Sibande’s Christian name while Ntombikayise is her Zulu name. While typically, Sophie-Ntombikayise appears as a solo figure, in this 2013 sculpture, she is accompanied by a second figure. Now, Sophie-Ntombikayise faces off with a figure in an other-worldly and erupting purple gown.



IMAGE 5. Mary Sibande, *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene 1* (from *The Purple Shall Govern* series), 2013. Fiberglass mannequins and cotton textile, 180 x 120 x 120 cm. Photographed by Anthea Pokroy. Image courtesy of Mary Sibande.

Writing about Sibande’s early work, Walters argues that it “redefined the image of the black domestic and placed her on a global stage, moving her beyond the confines of the kitchen and into the public sphere” (2021, 125). The purple figure, however, troubles this reading. Gone is the blue of the *isishweshwe* and the legible components of a domestic uniform: the white cap, apron, and Victorian dress. The purple figure is not dressed in an extravagant and unfolding blue Victorian gown; instead, she dons an exploding purple mass of fabric. Sibande chose purple for this figure’s costume to reference the Purple Rain anti-apartheid protest that took place

in Cape Town on September 2, 1989 (Sibande 2016). While marching to parliament, anti-apartheid activists were assaulted by a powerful stream of purple-dyed water stemming from a canon wielded against them by the police. The purple dye was intended to function as a surveillance mechanism so that as the activists dispersed, the police could identify them with monochromatic ease. Activists used this violent act of surveillance to their advantage, shifting their apartheid defiance campaign with the slogan, “The purple shall govern” (Archer and Stent 2011). Sibande activates the resistive symbolism of the color by naming the series “the Purple Shall Govern” to reference this defiant campaign.

Utilized as a method of violent surveillance during the anti-apartheid campaign in 1989, purple emerges as a defiant shield for the purple figure in *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene 1 (The Purple Shall Govern)* (2013). While her body is visible, her face is blocked by a helmet of purple tentacles. Just like the activists subverted the violence of purple dye in their anti-apartheid campaigns following the 1989 event, Sibande subverts its role as a tool of visibility. Not quite human or animal, but some form of threatening and therefore monstrous hybridity, this project, like Owanto’s *Feeding My Ancestors*, empowers through another mode of being. For example, the purple figure is covered in, and emanating, snaking purple tentacles. Sibande has described these tentacles as both creatures and the purple figure’s progeny (Sibande 2019). The artist has also identified the dynamic between the blue and purple figures in this sculpture as an intimate dance, a moment of violence and as a performance of the act of staring at oneself in the mirror. Sophie-Ntombikayise has transformed into the purple figure, who becomes her own alter-ego. While the blue symbolizes apartheid aesthetics, the purple signifies something resistive to that oppressive system of anti-Black dehumanization, surveillance and control. While Walters interprets the sculptures of Sophie-Ntombikayise as a strategy of recuperative visibility that restores humanity to Sibande’s ancestors, the purple figure transforms her ancestors from mere public representation to non-human, even monstrous, colossus.

Art historian Tashima Thomas describes how “monster-making is a technology of race that positions blackness as a convenient source of fear and horror in order to advance capitalist gains. The construction of monster-making is a kind of othering” (2022, 40). Why then would Sibande tap into such a project of othering by transforming her ancestral avatar into the monstrous purple figure? Author Leila

Taylor perhaps provides an answer for as she argues “the process of dehumanization is a process of monster-making. But monsters have power” (2019, 79). While Europeans have long described foreign and non-white peoples as monstrous since the travel-writing of the medieval period, Sibande transforms the designation of monstrous into a powerful and ethical vision mimicking other artists who Eshun traces are working within the Black fantastic (Eshun 2022, 24). Thin, undulating, and threatening, purple talons cover the purple figure from her helmeted head down past her feet. In addition to the countless snaking talons, a thick and voluptuous central cord emerges from the figure’s abdomen. That this cord emerges from the figure’s abdomen is an invitation to compare it to an umbilical cord, and to return to the imagery the artist described when she situated Africa outside of the World. The artist demonstrates that there is power in being deemed aberrant and outside of a European framework of value and knowledge. Perhaps it is only from such a position that this framework can even be destroyed.

While in *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene 1 (The Purple Shall Govern)* (2013), the talons roam free at the base of the sculpture, in other works from the series such as *Cry Havoc* (2013), the talons form a thick mass and connect to four red and menacing dogs. Such tendrils, connecting the interior of the anthropocentric purple figure with these beasts, undo any assumed ecological and categorical divisions between human and animal, as the dogs become the purple figure’s kin. In *Untitled* (2013), the talons emanate from the abdomen but find no source, ready to strangle or, like the umbilical cord, even nourish, whatever may cross her path. *A Reversed Retrogress: Scene 1 (The Purple Shall Govern)* (2013) explores a world in which monstrous figures can engender non-human beings. From ancestor in servitude to powerful and monstrous mother to dogs, Sibande’s purple alter-ego invites us to embrace the undoing of our reality through an intimacy with the animal and an embrace of the monstrous. Like Owanto, Sibande queers normative human/animal hierarchies. In *A Terrible Beauty is Born (Long Live the Dead Queen*

Series) it is a virtuality that enables Sibande to push at, and perhaps strangle, Western reality through monstrosity.



IMAGE 6. Mary Sibande, *A terrible beauty is born* (from the *Purple Shall Govern* series), 2013, Digital pigment print on textured archival rag with non-fugitive ink (Edition of 10 + 3AP), 110 x 321.5 cm. Photographed by Jurie Potgieter. Image courtesy of Mary Sibande.

Sibande utilizes digital editing to realize a horde of purple monsters in *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (*Long Live the Dead Queen Series*) (2013). Sibande is visible at the center wearing the costume of the purple figure. Her animated purple children surround her, levitating in the air and seemingly pulling off the symbols of her ancestors' subjugation, that of the apron and cap. Embodying the avatar of the purple figure, Sibande alerts us that a monstrous birth has occurred. In her reading of Wangechi Mutu's work on paper, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (2004-05), Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes, "Racism is an aesthetics and politics of aesthetics. It debilitates and seeks to transmogrify and produce blackness as grotesque: the material embodiment of abeauty" (2020, 166). Jackson argues that Mutu mutates such systems of racism through her transmogrified figures, composed as monstrous visual excess. In *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, Sibande, in both title and digital image, references abeauty (or in her words "a terrible beauty"), by also mutating systems of racism through an aesthetic of excessive and threatening monstrosity. As Jackson argues, abeauty is imbricated in perceptions of Blackness as aberrant, yet Taylor argues, monsters have power. Sibande, like Mutu, embodies abeauty to imbue her purple avatar with other-worldly power - undoing the very World that birthed that anti-Blackness.

Sibande renders this monstrous scene through digital editing and photography. In one digitally rendered scene of the purple figure within a forest

setting, she appears to be running towards the viewer, hand outstretched, as the purple talons, red dogs and winged creatures follow in her wake. While her gesture implies she is trying to reach out into our physical space, that of the viewer, her eyes remain closed implying that she cannot see us. The artist has explained that these ancestral avatars must close their eyes to enter a state of dreaming and activate a new reality beyond the confines of their domestic servitude (Sibande 2016). Closing their eyes engenders endless realities for these avatars, they can run, jump, become purple monsters who birth dogs and find power in deconstructing the World that way. Activating sense beyond vision and denying simple visibility as a method of empowerment, Sibande's ancestral avatars appear as monsters, embracing their alterity to undo Western reality instead. This purple figure is a nightmare for a World based in white supremacy, linear Time, observable Space, animacy hierarchies and extractive policies. Indeed, she is poised to strangle that World with purple talons.

6. Conclusion

Both Flavienne and Sophie-Ntombikayise do not look at their viewers. Flavienne glances away and Sophie-Ntombikayise is consistently featured with her eyes closed. We could interpret this as a sign of their disaffection, these avatars disinterest or turning away from us, from the World. But what if instead we saw this side glance and the shut eyelids as a negation not of the World, but rather of its reigning optic? While as American physicist Karen Barad points out, "the intertwining of vision and knowledge in Western thought...dates back to the Greeks" (2007, 86), Flavienne gained knowledge through touch and hallucinogenic-ingestion while visually impaired and Sophie-Ntombikayise closes her eyes to morph beyond the constraints of her apartheid uniform, and the boundaries of the human. These avatars, and the artists who created them, enrich their epistemologies through a threatening ancestral touch, plants, animals and that which emerges behind the eyelid. Such modes of knowing, and being, do not occur however, in some futurist or cosmic place, they are accessible now.

The imagery that Sibande offers does not describe an Africa floating in space and, therefore, entirely disconnected from the World. Instead, Africa is imagined as an umbilical cord wrapping around, and as I have argued, putting pressure on the World, yet still entangled with it. I depart from her imagery to argue that these

artworks are neither escaping the World, nor positioned as entirely opposed to it. Both projects make visual reference to the material conditions (colonialism, apartheid, and their constitutive anti-Blackness) of the World using the modern technology of digital editing while theorizing precolonial ways of knowing and being beyond it. Flavienne's bureaucratic colonial photograph is the ground from which the Bwiti-based ancestral and vegetal alterity of the series can expand. Sibande's alter-ego emerges initially in the uniform of the apartheid domestic worker and it is only from this outfit that the monstrous, post-human purple figure can expand beyond such confines. Indeed, Sibande and Owanto navigate a spiritual plane that challenges the World which gave rise to their subjugation as Black female artists producing work in a global context - but grounded in their Gabonese and South African loci. Owanto reaches the ontology of the Bwiti while Sibande mobilizes the presence of the ancestor in Zulu ontology to construct a world of the monstrous and resistive. Centered in feminine spirituality and receptive to inter-species engagement, these communions with maternal ancestry can also be interpreted as an active extension and opening of each artists self. Both artists challenge their viewers to do so too by modeling the benefits of openness towards the ancestral, the plant, the animal, and the monstrous. In this way they take advantage of Africa's position of alterity to the West. Using it to expand the Western World's domain of intelligibility, not to save that World, but to nourish it through its very undoing. Scholar of Environmental Justice Danielle Purifoy describes how Jamaican artist Deborah Anzinger's artworks (which also depict an openness to plants) are small gestures and acts of speculative fiction that might stretch our current reality beyond its devastating limits and failures by expanding our way of thinking (Purifoy 2021).

I see Owanto and Sibande's visualizations of animism and alterity as small gestures too, but gestures that nonetheless depict something unrecognizable to the World, which might one day help to dismantle it. For example, animism, while long racialized and deemed immaterial, is now a legal framework. Purifoy describes the "legal animism of non-anthropogenic life" as "the assignation of rights to the flora, fauna, soils, waterways, and microorganisms that comprise Earth's ecosystem" (2021, 39). Using the poetic potential of visual artwork, Owanto and Sibande model an ethics of relation based in animism and ancestry, where their avatars embody an otherwise option for being on this planet.

Materializing animacy and alterity in Western spaces even if just aesthetically, intervenes in the dominant and fundamentally anti-Black systems at work within them. As discussed, both projects generate from and displace images of coloniality and apartheid. Additionally, they use animacy and animism to confront the violence of goods and material production specifically in relation to capitalist extraction and Black female labor. Sibande addresses the system of domestic servitude that subjugated her foremothers. Owanto consistently acknowledges the relationship between the goods evoked by her embroidered portraits and systems of enslavement. Additionally, she calls attention to the impact colonial subjugation had on Flavienne's socio-economic status and her inability to feed herself at the end of her life. While both artists know that the World brutalizes Black people in material and psychological ways, entering the zone of the immaterial and the virtual enables Owanto and Sibande to imagine otherwise by undoing that World. Palmer asks, "Is there a possible world 'for' Blackness, or does the very notion of the World subsist through the foreclosure of a Black(ened) possibility?" (2020, 266) Owanto and Sibande seem to answer that there perhaps should no longer be a World, as it forecloses Black(ened) possibility, but that expansions of spatial, temporal and animacy realities exist already around and inside it, ready to undo it. In this paper I have endeavored to sketch the stakes of the Black Feminist Poethics that Owanto and Sibande's artworks, which tap into the Black fantastic, engender. As Purifoy and Ferreira da Silva demonstrate, material changes in our world become possible through such small aesthetic gestures.

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