RETREAT AND RECLAIM

DENISE RYNER

Walker Art Center

RETREAT AND RECLAIM: KANDIS WILLIAMS'S VISIONS OF THE BLACK BODY AS A CONTESTED PLOT

by Denise Ryner

This body whose flesh carries the female and the
male to the frontiers of survival bears in person
the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been
turned outside.

— Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:
An American Grammar Book"[1]

For if the history of Caribbean society is that of
a dual relation between plantation and plot,
the two poles which originate in a single historical
process, the ambivalence between the two has
been and is the distinguishing characteristic of
the Caribbean response. This ambivalence is
at once the root cause of our alienation; and the
possibility of our salvation.

— Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot
and Plantation"[2]

After that she was able to build a spiritual earth-
works against her husband. His shells could no
longer reach her. Amen.

— Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat"[3]

1 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67.
2 Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (1971), in *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Decolonising Essays, 1967–1984*, ed. Demetrius L. Eudell (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2022), 295.
3 Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat" (1926), Biblioklept.org, January 21, 2013, https://biblioklept.org/2013/01/21/sweat-zora-neale-hurston/.

Fig. 1
Kandis Williams: A Field, 2020, installation view, Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–2021

ANNEXATION TANGO

The captivity and racial ordering of enslavement during the Middle Passage erased boundaries between Black laborers and the crops they produced. The indifference and menace of the captors, investors, and planter class dissolved captive workers' identities and traditional kinships, so they used indigenous memory to turn that loss of the boundary between laborer and field, the legal and social obscuring of their human-ness, and even the ever-present terror of death into sites of resistance to control and captivity. What Kandis Williams so effectively illustrates in her work is that this dynamic of erasure and resistance that flourished under racial capitalism continues to reproduce itself within each new field of wealth extraction, the commodity market, and the increasing peril of ecological catastrophe.

In Williams's 2020 series of works that make up the installation *A Field* (fig. 1), photographic collages of bodies are framed by representations of plant life, lawns, and fields.[4] Resting on a bed of artificial grass are sprouting, broad-leafed plant sculptures that carry on their leaves collaged images of the limbs and bodies of Black figures in midmotion related to dance, labor, and pornography. The lawn and commercially manufactured fake potted plants evoke a space of consumer leisure, sport, and surplus property. In the midst of this is a slick, industrial-looking greenhouse. A cutout turns the structure into a frame for viewing Williams's video *Annexation Tango* (figs. 7–10), based on her research into two former correctional facilities in Virginia, the Lorton Reformatory and the Virginia State Prison Farm, where both male and female inmates, many of whom were charged with transgressing vagrancy or vice laws, were made to do unpaid farm work.[5] *Annexation Tango* overlays footage of the institutions' agricultural fields with that of a Black dancer, and the instrumental tango soundtrack refers to that musical form's origins in the culture of enslaved African plantation workers transported to South America.

A Field draws together the relative leisure and comfort of American life for many and the stolen labor of transatlantic enslavement. That stolen labor was subsequently reproduced through the prison system and remains part of contemporary consumption under increasing wealth gaps, transnational empires, and global oppression, invoking cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter's observations that "plantation-societies," the primary example being enslaved field workers in the Caribbean, "came into being as adjuncts to the market system; their peoples came into being as an adjunct to the product, to the single crop commodity."[6] For Wynter, the flip side of this reduction of captive labor—indivisible from property and capital, bound to the industrialized plantation and the ordering of the owning class—is the plot: a place of sustenance and resistance where the laborers' folk culture, the score and choreography of their world-reordering, is cross-pollinated and takes root.[7]

4 *A Field* was commissioned by the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, where it was on view November 6, 2020, to September 12, 2021.
5 "In Discussion: Kandis Williams and Amber Esseiva," Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQAnBuDv61Q.
6 Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," 291.

COLD SWEAT

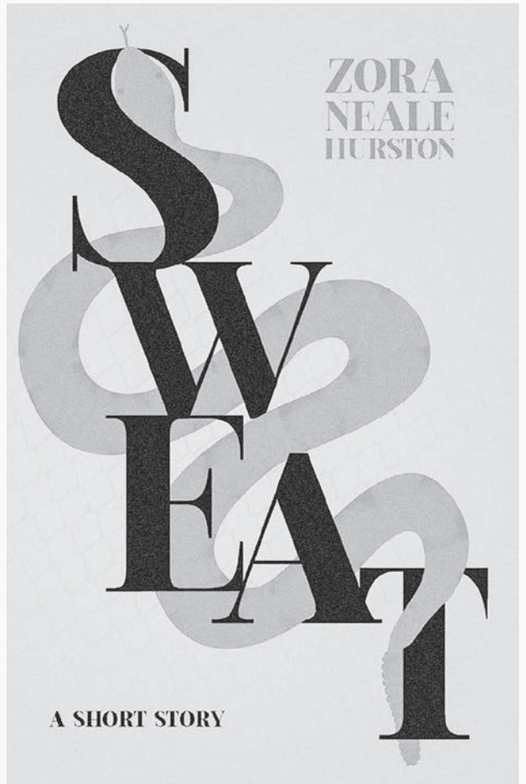
She squatted in the kitchen
floor beside the great pile
of clothes, sorting them
into small heaps according
to color, and humming a
song in a mournful key,
but wondering through it
all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her
horse and buckboard.

Just then something long,
round, limp and black
fell upon her shoulders
and slithered to the floor
beside her. A great terror
took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried
her mouth so that it was
a full minute before she
could cry or move.[8]

About one average human lifespan after the signing of the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery in the United States, Zora Neale Hurston published her 1926 short story "Sweat" (fig. 2), which centers on a series of events that lead to the empowerment of a Black Floridian washerwoman named Delia. She is abused, betrayed, and publicly humiliated by Sykes, the husband who survives on Delia's labor. Sykes relies on violence, poverty, and fear to control Delia, who is numbed by terror when confronted with anything serpentine, from earthworms to snakes to the bullwhip that Sykes tricks her with in the story's opening scene. Yet it's through the very instrument of her torment—the snake—that Delia will be brought peace.

As an impoverished Black woman in the Southern Jim Crow era, Hurston's heroine is fated to

Fig. 2 Cover of Zora Neale Hurston, *Sweat* (Read & Co. Classics, 2022)



7 Wynter, 295.
8 Hurston, "Sweat."

sweat through the feminized, racialized labor of washing and delivering laundry for white households. She's also condemned to the cold sweat of fear. Delia is always described as squatting, stooped, carrying, and fetching, with barely any distinction made between her and the laundry that Sykes kicks and grinds into the ground. The legacy of life reordered after colonization and the Middle Passage is that mass industry, leisure, and markets have always been dependent on non-white women who, like Delia, are reduced to dust and expiration, their bodies dissolved until there's no more than the sweat on the surface of their skin.

SILENT SCREAM

The culture of racial capitalism's reordering, which withholds a binary female-ness as well as human-ness from bodies reformed by hard labor and remade as property, and which also idealizes female-ness as protected womanhood, leisurely, subdued, desirable, and available, is central to Williams's photomontages. Many of the film stills that make up *Pins and Needles* (2016) come from the golden age of the horror and B-movie genres (fig. 3). They're collaged with photo-documentation of women diagnosed with hysteria; at the center of it all is a retinal scan of an eyeball, subtly layered with and connected to similar medical imagery taken through hysteroscopy and esophagrams that are more prominent in Williams's other photomontages. The selected constellation of images emphasizes the history of medical and pop cultural imaging that stigmatizes women as oriented toward

Fig. 3 Kandis Williams, *Pins and Needles*, 2016, vinyl adhesive on plexiglass, fluorescent light, 48 × 90 ¼ in. (121.9 × 229.2 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Jen Rubio and Stewart Butterfield (M.2022.96a-b)

irrationality, whether expressed as fear, violence, or insanity. The work's title, *Pins and Needles*, evokes both medical intervention and emotional tension, and the repeated motif of the wide-open screaming mouth carries multiple meanings. In some images, the scream is that of being terrorized, the realization of impending danger and death at the hands of an unseen menace. In others, the scream is that of a terrorizing, vampiric fervor at the sight of the next victim. Both meanings, alongside the images of women in alleged fits of hysterics, also represent the margins of what is human. Their loss of control is associated with the absence of reason, civility, and restraint that defined the human in the wake of the European Enlightenment.

The photomontages that make up *Pins and Needles* are composed exclusively of images that read as white women, even if they are vampires and generally "othered." There is no visibility of Black women in these works, but they are not absent; in fact, the non-white woman is the frontier and measure of what is being limned as those pictured approach the border between the human and the invisible human. Despite the range of conditions, personalities, and eras depicted, these photomontages exhibit the enclosure of gender under racial capitalism.

In the photomontage *Esophagus Pin-Up* (2016; pages 90–91), we move past the open mouth and farther down the throat with medical-scope imaging of the inside of the human gullet. Each image features a woman posing either suggestively or dramatically. The central grouping of images features a quartet of women in various states of beckoning the viewer, separated from their original image context of advertising or pornography, offering themselves as part of a consumptive act. They are some of the most digestible images in terms of their unambiguity, compared to others featuring women in various states of undress or costumed performance that may derive from fashion or profile photography, photo-documentation of sex workers and psychiatric diagnosis, critical protests, or swoons of religious ecstasy. *Cervical Smile* (2016) follows suit with a similar layout

around an internal endoscopic image, surrounded and overlaid with the smiles, with or without faces, of white women, evoking Hollywood publicity campaigns, cosmetic surgery, medical procedures, or torture (fig. 4).

Pins and Needles, *Esophagus Pin-Up*, and *Cervical Smile* were first shown in Williams's 2016 solo exhibition *Soft Colony* at Night Gallery in Los Angeles. The association of softness with leisure, protection, and fragility also traces out the racialized enclosure of new genders and classes of softness that was instrumentalized during the height of European colonial expansion to develop the cultural grammar that first excluded and then pressed Indigenous, African, and other non-white women into invisibility and forced labor through enslavement and indentured servitude, followed by sharecropping and continuing today through relegation to menial labor and otherwise precarious forms of employment.

Fig. 4 Kandis Williams, *Cervical Smile*, 2016 (page 85)

PLOTTED RESISTANCES

Literary critic and scholar Hortense J. Spillers, writing about the "theft of the body" under the reordering of the Middle Passage, considers the disappearance of gender difference that accompanies the loss of agency and the territorialization of African and Indigenous bodies constricted in the holds of slave ships, subjected to punishing violence, and forced to labor under brutal conditions in the fields:

> That order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.[9]

The *theft* that Spillers refers to is a rupture from Indigenous culture, place, and kin that continues to be experienced as a collectively dismembered and exiled body over which cultural and political maneuvers continue through state violence, stolen labor, and incarceration—all of which are part of the physical and psychological disfigurement of the Black body as no longer gendered and human. We see and experience this in Williams's sculptural montages and in *Annexation Tango*. The plantation haunts the bodies and the bodies haunt the plantation: disembodied Black limbs stretch across the waxy surface of leaves, and a dancer writhes in a void, superimposed over images of the prison and plantation, until grabbed and anchored by the work fields. Once the body has been lost and unmade through the violence of forced captivity, race, and commodification, refuge arrives not by making the body whole but rather by releasing the controlled and captive body, by dissolving the boundaries that enable the body to be desired and kept as territory. Hurston again: "After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks." The body escapes capture and turns its mutilation, death, and exile into folklore, turns the violence of its territorialization into an indigenization by an irreversible rupture and haunting. The territorialized and exploited body turns poison into fits of rejuvenation.

Sykes lies dying from a rattlesnake bite as Delia rests and observes: "She crept over to the four-o'clocks and stretched herself

9 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67. Italics in the original.

on the cool earth to recover."[10] Delia goes numb one more time as she loses control of her legs, not out of fear but from her long-awaited respite from torment. She shelters under the chinaberry tree, a plant with fruit known for toxicity rather than a fecund abundance that can be exploited. This type of death that Delia witnesses is also her refusal of the rational human will toward individualist productivity, a *Homo economicus*; instead, she resorts to *spiritual earthworks* of being unmade and remade as the less-than-human collective and the field.

Fig. 5 Émile-Antoine Bayard, "Reputed Mode of Curing Tarantism," in *The Mediterranean Illustrated* (T. Nelson and Sons, 1880)

SEDUCED AND RECLAIMED

Returning to the mass-media and archival images of women in the grips of hysteria, reclassified at the edges of human and gender by medical and cultural institutions, brings us to Williams's interest in histories of mass psychogenic illness (MPI). She has researched accounts of collective hysteria expressed as compulsive actions, writhing, and dancing or similar behaviors, which in early instances were absorbed into regional folklore. The site of mass hysteria is often the space of the working classes, congregated in fields and later in factories. One of the earliest recorded instances of industrial MPI occurred in 1787 in a Lancashire cotton mill when a young girl who greatly feared mice and was confronted with one tossed at her by a coworker started an epidemic of mass convulsions among twenty-four workers.[11] But the most widely known historical case is tarantism (fig. 5), which emerged primarily among peasant women in the Apulia region of Italy in the fifteenth century and was attributed by "victims" to the bite of the tarantula:

> The afflicted, upon being bitten by the spider (which often was not seen), would run to the marketplace and begin dancing riotously. The behavior included animal-like squealing, obscene shouting, and a desire to be tipped over in the air. While the poison was said to remain in one's system for many years, the dancing mania occurred only at the height of summer. The afflicted might dance for days until exhausted, and the only cure was music, for which purpose the tarantella was written.[12]

10 Hurston, "Sweat."
11 Peter A. Boxer, "Occupational Mass Psychogenic Illness: History, Prevention, and Management," *Journal of Occupational Medicine* 27, no. 12 (December 1985): 868.

Contemporary afflictions of MPI have followed low-status workers into the office cubicle, where collective headaches, dizziness, and nausea have replaced dancing and convulsions.[13] A 1985 study in the *Journal of Occupational Medicine* found that non-white women, especially those living and working in precarious circumstances, were overrepresented in instances of MPI.[14]

In Williams's *Annexation Tango*, not only does the dancer invoke the mass affliction of the field dancers but the video's title and soundtrack also index tango's origins in the gatherings of enslaved African workers in Argentina—a dance culture that emerged from the plot—and the transporting of the social ordering of African dancing societies that affirmed self-governance and Black culture (fig. 6).[15] Camera close-ups of the dancer in *Annexation Tango* reveal individual beads of sweat gathering in the contours of their skin, making their face, limbs, and palms shine like a perspiring screen. These visually tactile beads establish an additional surface to Williams's work that discourages trying to fix the body of the dancer within a defined space and time separate from the viewer's. Writer and film theorist Laura Marks

Fig. 6 Photographer unknown, "An Afro-Argentine Family of Buenos Aires," *Caras y Caretas*, March 28, 1908

12 Boxer, "Occupational Mass Psychogenic Illness," 868.
13 Boxer, 868.
14 Boxer, 870.
15 Elizabeth M. Seyler, "Review: Revealing the African Roots of Argentine Tango," *Dance Chronicle* 31, no. 1 (2008): 108.

Fig. 7 Kandis Williams, *Annexation Tango*, 2020 (video still; detail) (pages 138–143)

notes that such experiences of haptic visuality, which involve the viewer's body in the process of seeing, combined with optical visuality, enact a shift and "a dialectical movement from far to near."[16] For Marks, "haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than plunge into depth, tends not to distinguish form so much as discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus."[17] In this way, the subject of viewing is obscured and the viewer is encouraged to relinquish both the mastery and the separateness that are associated with optical viewing.[18]

OVERTURNED

The tidy grids of property, with houses framed by expanses of trimmed lawns, in the opening shots of *Annexation Tango* are at the other end of the spectrum to the catastrophic events in the closing scenes of the video (figs. 7–10). Though only the first scenes of settlement and property lines have been naturalized through settler-colonialism, both sequences represent the upending of worlds and devastating, planetary-level disruptions.[19] The dissolution of the division between human

16 Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Screen* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 332.
17 Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," 338.
18 Marks, 341.
19 *Annexation Tango*, Vimeo, uploaded by Morán Morán, October 4, 2022, https://vimeo.com/756994858.

and nonhuman, and the capture of land, the body, and its descendants as commodity through Europe's colonizing empires and racial capitalism call for no less than a second (or yet another) total overturning of worlds. This overturning, or undoing, requires an invocation of equally destructive forces, and perhaps is even already put into motion as the eventual outcome of the Anthropocene era's environmental devastation. As if to image this undoing, *Annexation Tango* features clips and image-reversals of fires and violently contracting and expanding storm (or smoke?) clouds, consuming, respectively, the ground from below and the heavens from above.

What this re-worlding and dehumanization looks like in Wynter's description is the forced agricultural labor in the "plantation area" of the Caribbean as "adjunct to the product," where not only are beings and bodies configured as twinned with commodity production but also lives and land are totally subsumed into and dominated by the needs and market value of the single-crop plantation. According to Wynter, such is the cultural legacy of the region's alienation, uninterrupted by abolition and independence in the postcolonial Caribbean, which is "without exception still 'enchanted,' imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality," brought into existence through colonialism's

Fig. 8 Kandis Williams, *Annexation Tango*, 2020 (video still) (pages 138–143)

narrative arcs and fictions that reordered Indigenous, African, and beyond-human worlds into hierarchies of economic and human agency.[20]

The containers of extracted labor, sweat, and fear—the field and the factory—transform the body into an asset without agency. Necessary to surviving the plantation is the plot, a space for underclass subsistence, dominated by crops as use-value for sustenance.[21] It is through exhaustion, toxicity, and breakdown that the hopeless and brutalized find the capacity to begin the process of turning both body and plantation, or the captive and the territory, into reclaimed social and cultural spaces for the rooting of identity and kinship lost through exile.

Figs. 9.10 Kandis Williams, *Annexation Tango*, 2020 (video stills) (pages 138–143)

20 Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," 291.
21 Wynter, 291.