

**OKWUI OKPOKWASILI IN *BRONX GOTHIC* OR
LIVING IN AN ONTOLOGICAL CRISIS¹ by leo²**

Synopsis: This text looks at the piece *Bronx Gothic* by Okwui Okpokwasili to investigate the possibility of knowing through flesh—the zero ground of conceptualization—and to inquire about the possibility of a World predicated by the Entanglement of *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*. Two movements of *Bronx Gothic* are analyzed and put in relation to subjection, the theory of gravity, and the transparent scientific subject so that the labor and work of minoritarian subjects in the making of the World can be discussed.

§ 0

She is standing in the corner of the room, shivering, quavering, and twitching in a vibrational movement that consumes her whole body. On her back, expanding from one extremity to the other, the impact of a force moves erratically but sometimes lingers on her waist, sometimes on her shoulders, sometimes on her legs. Before the official beginning of the piece, *Bronx Gothic* starts with Okwui Okpokwasili's convulsing flesh occupying space in the performance site. The first *thing* the sight of an audience member encounters is this shaking entity covered in sweat, jerking, jumping, twisting. Pounds of tall black femme flesh contorting herself, her sweat dripping on the floor and expanding her molecules throughout the room. This, for a long time, is all that's there to see.

Okwui Okpokwasili's piece *Bronx Gothic* begins before its beginning³ with the performer executing a durational movement that exists at the crossroads of a body in ecstasy, suffering and pleasure, violence and desire. The *quake*, the movement described in the last paragraph, is based on the amplification of a rotation or a vibration from one single point of a body towards other limbs. In *Bronx Gothic*, it extends itself for about 30 minutes, 15 of which nobody pays witness to. This scene, the text, the vocal performance, and the choreography of *Bronx Gothic* will be

¹ This is an unpublished manuscript. A beginning, in a way.

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³"This is a linear time measurement. The word beginning in itself cuts off anything previous. But what if it is not the beginning, merely rather a beginning of time? What we know as linear time has its beginning in measurement. [...] KMT, Joy. Creating Worlds in PHILLIPS, Rasheedah (ed.). *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice*, Vol. I. The Afrofuturist Affair/House of Future Science Books. 2015.

investigated here in a meditation of Okwui's performance piece, the homonymous film (*Bronx Gothic*, 2017), and the printed text, which the artist refers to as a *blueprint*⁴.

Bronx Gothic, the performance, is a 75 minutes long one-woman show performed and choreographed by Okwui Okpokwasili. Its premiere was in 2014 at Danspace⁵ (New York, USA) with direction, stage design, and music score by Peter Born. Structured around exchanged notes, the performance piece tells the narrative of two 11 years old girls growing up in the 1980s Bronx (New York, USA), their relationship with each other and the world, and their coming into sexuality. The feature film, directed by Andrew Rossi and produced in collaboration with Okpokwasili, not only follows part of the US tour of the performance but also offers an insight into Okwui's creative process and engagement with her audience. The *blueprint* (a script-like text) organizes the narrative and presents placeholders for the choreography unleashed in and through the activation of written⁶ language. Cruising these three modalities of writing, I will analyze here how *Bronx Gothic* creates a space in which the cry of Aunt Hester⁷ is staged to give birth to a new echo or, better, to tap into an *echo-world*⁸ that questions a historical association of catharsis to theater⁹ and uncovers the fragility of Western European ethics in the theatrical realm to make space for the often neglected possibility of knowing through flesh¹⁰.

⁴ Phone conversation with Okwui Okpokwasili on 09/29/2019. When not differently stated, all the information provided by the artist is from this contact.

⁵ *Bronx Gothic*, the performance was developed between 2012 and 2014. Different iterations of this piece were performed in residency programs and similars. The date offered here remounts the premiere of the complete piece at Danspace as a co-comission and co-presentation of COIL Festival with Danspace Project.

⁶ All the modalities of the performance will be referred to as writing regardless of the media in which they exist. The space of refusal of an alleged division and categorization of writing I found through Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, 1976 (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, 2003, and Rebecca Schneider's *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 2011.

⁷ HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making In Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press. 1997. Further references are from this edition.

⁸ GLISSANT, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation* (trans: Betsy Wings). The University of Michigan Press. 1997. Further references are from this edition.

⁹ ARISTÓTELES. *Poética* (trans. Eudoro de Sousa). Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda. 1994.

¹⁰ "But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. [...]" SPILLERS, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection. Summer, 1987, pp. 64-81. Further references are from this edition.

This study with Okpokwasili's work happens in three movements: first, you and I must think of how the *quake* speaks directly to/with Saidiya Hartman and escapes the representational field characteristic of works on stage. Then, we must attend Okwui's *broken body* in relation to physics and André Lepecki's exhausting dance¹¹. Finally, these considerations will encounter Denise Ferreira da Silva's critique of Western European continental ontoepistemology¹² to let us extrapolate *Bronx Gothic* and make space for the *thing* one sees twitching, quavering, and shaking at the beginning of Okwui's one-woman show. After crossing the *quaking/unleashing/howl/middle passage*¹³ or after being in the *belly of the world*¹⁴, I want to talk with you, reader, to dwell on a question omnipresent in *Bronx Gothic*: "Am I awake?"

§ 1

The *quake*, Okwui's durational motion opening *Bronx Gothic*, is based on the amplification of punctual movements, that is, the impact localized vibrations and rotations have on all members. Visually speaking, it looks like the performer is being contorted and twisted from the inside and in different directions. A deep U shape in Okpokwasili's knee-long purple dress in the piece exposes her back and muscular contractions throughout its execution, offering in the contortions of her flesh scenes of ecstasy, pain, suffering, but also pleasure: an unending composite of orgasms and torture.

An investigation of pain's complicated relationship with pleasure as it appears in the *quake* is not particular to Okwui's work. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century*

¹¹ LEPECKI, André. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. Routledge. 2006. Further references are from this edition.

¹² SILVA, Denise Ferreira da. *Towards a Global Idea of Race*. University of Minnesota Press. 2007. Ontoepistemology here refers to the impossibility of dissociating ways of knowing and being. It is the literal juxtaposition of ontology and epistemology. This vocabulary is borrowed from Ferreira da Silva and, I would add, gestures towards both Martin Heidegger's discussion of *Gestell* or *Enframing* in HEIDEGGER, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (trans. William Lovitt). Harper & Row. 1977; and Vilém Flusser's discussion of apparatus in FLUSSER, Vilém. *Filososofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaios para uma Futura Filosofia da Fotografia*. Relume Dumará. 2002.

¹³ There are six movements written in *Bronx Gothic*: *quake*, *broken body*, *mother*, *howl*, *unleashing*, and *middle passage*. In one specific part of the piece, Okwui combines four of them to convey a transformation from one state to a different part of the narrative. I can not attend to each movement now... those, which escape my analysis, do so only due to the limitations of this writing. The movements are in the blueprint: OKPOKWASILI, Okwui. *Bronx Gothic*. Unpublished Manuscript. Version of June 10th, 2019. Further references to this writing will be simplified.

¹⁴ This term is explored by both Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* and in HARTMAN, Saidiya. *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors*, *Souls*, 18:1, 166-173. We'll return to it by the end of this writing.

America, 1997, Saidiya Hartman dwells on the connection between the terrors of slavery and the pleasures enslaved folks would experience by scrutinizing the entanglement of these two economies. To reveal the intersection of pleasure and violence, Hartman inaugurates her book remembering what she names as the primal scene, the "terrible spectacle" in the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass*, a moment in which violence is established as central in the formation of the enslaved (HARTMAN, 1997, p. 03). Interested in the implications of this scene, Saidiya avoids a retelling¹⁵ of the event to dwell on "slave performance" and master-enslaved relationship. She writes:

"[...] it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish an absolute and definitive division between "going before the master" and other amusements. Moreover, this accounts for the ambivalent pleasures afforded by such recreations. [...] In "going before the master," the enslaved were required to sing or dance for the slave owner's pleasure as well as to demonstrate their submission, obsequiousness, and obedience. What was demanded by the master was simulated by the enslaved; yet the capitulation of the dominated to these demands must be considered as pragmatism rather than resignation since one either complied with the rules governing socially sanctioned behavior or risked punishment. [...]" (HARTMAN, 1997, p. 08 - my emphasis)

Under quotation marks, Hartman's "going before the master" emphasizes the parallel dynamics of master-enslaved and actor-spectator relationships the author is researching¹⁶ by describing a theatrical movement from off to onstage, a beginning of the measurement of enslaved performance. Since Okwui's *quake* starts before the audience's arrival and extends beyond the official beginning of the piece, it similarly exposes the movement from off to onstage, but now, in a conventional stage performance. However, she manages this by enacting movements engulfed by an ambivalence of pleasure and pain.

The *quake* as an initial movement appropriates and transforms Saidiya's comments on the establishment of a relationship (the "going before the master") and transposes the historian's critique into the realm Okpokwasili's body inhabits, that is, theater and dance conventions. Through Okwui, Saidiya's critical-historical account becomes

¹⁵ In *In the Break*, Fred Moten explores the potentialities of the scene untold by Hartman and searches for alternative and additional readings of Aunt Hester's cry. Indirectly, some of his readings influence this work by allowing both Hester's cry and Okwui's *quake* to expose and, perhaps, make a different World. For more, see: MOTEN, Fred. *In the Break: the Aesthetics of Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press. 2003.

¹⁶ The parallel between performative practices and Hartman's critical-historical writing seems obviously stated in the very title of the book, to say the least. The in depth relationship of both is explored in its second chapter under her investigation of enslaved performance.

a vocabulary to speak dance, theater, and performance practices via a return to Hartman's words a couple of pages before the quote above, where she states, "At issue here [in the book] is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator." (HARTMAN, 1997, p. 4). The "uncertain line between witness and spectator" is what Okpokwasili scrutinizes in *Bronx Gothic* since it is in the beginning and before the beginning of the piece that the *quake* takes place. Okpokwasili inaugurates the performance by channeling what Hartman refuses to retell, a moment in which inflicted violence (but here also pleasure) becomes what would be the grounds for the formation of a subject. Nevertheless, instead of offering a subject for the spectators who long for a conventional theatrical presentation sustained on representation, identification, and catharsis¹⁷, Okwui's performance asks: How long can one watch a contorting body sweat and drip in exhaustion? How long does it take to make a witness an accomplice of perpetrated violence?¹⁸ I am saying that Okwui's body in pain/pleasure enjoys the same status as the "primal scene" in the performance space as Aunt Hester's scream fills in *Scenes*. But in *Bronx Gothic*, the question of subjection appears with a *differance*¹⁹.

§ 2

After 15 minutes since the beginning of the piece, Okwui Okpokwasili, for the first time since the *quake* started, turns around and slowly moves, twitching, in the direction of her onlookers. Whereas performing in the corner, only her back is accessible to sight, in her approximation, Okwui turns around to make her face available, and as it becomes clear with her fixed look, she too sees each and every one of those who are here, sitting and looking.

This moment is of fundamental importance. If it is true that Okpokwasili replays the "inaugural moment in the formation of the

¹⁷ I won't pretend to address the complicated triad I am putting forward here. The historical connection between these three elements I encountered in the Aristotelian engagement with theater in the *Poetics*, which is the main reference here. Okwui's practice is of course not alone in her critical stand to this tradition and what it enables. For more see father and son: BRECHT, Bertold. *Epic Theatre in*; and BRECHT, Stefan. *Queer Theater*. 1978; and ARTAUD, Antonin (trans. Victor Corti). *The Theater and its Double*. 2010.

¹⁸ There is a fine line between this discussion of the theatrical space and participation in the public sphere. This line has been already addressed both in the work of Brecht and Boal, but I'll stick to the later as manner of recognizing the political nature with which he inhabited the space of theater. See BOAL, Augusto. *Teatro do Oprimido*. Cosac & Naify. 2013.

¹⁹ DERRIDA, Jacques. *Of Grammatology* (trans: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). Johns Hopkins University Press. 1976.

enslaved" in the confines of theater, she does so by invoking a look that functions like Annie Sprinkle's third eye²⁰, that is, a look that exists in an eternal return. Okwui's action of looking back suspends the one-way relationship expected of theater, bringing forth a break to the convention of a haunting, passive audience and placing on them (on us) the responsibility for watching and looking for so long. In the pre-given choice of a fictional separation between audience members and the performing body, Okwui chooses not to become the object of an invisible subject performed by the spectator and enacts a fugitive movement to escape from representation and identification²¹.

This refusal to become the object to the spectatorship means that Okpokwasili will not use her body to represent subjects with which the onlooker would empathize, which has profound implications for the piece and theater and dance practices. Okwui's undoing of subjection requires that *a priori*, "her" movements or "her" body during *Bronx Gothic* are not in pain, pleasure, or ecstasy. To be logically correct²², if her look interrupts the establishment of subject-object dynamics in the performance space, it becomes impossible for there to be a body since only one specific subject birthed through subjection can, in terms of the law, enjoy the necessary juridical-economic condition of ownership to possess his own flesh and become a person (HARTMAN, 1997). This means that the first words offered to speak *Bronx Gothic* were inaccurate. Perhaps it is not Okwui Okpokwasili's pain she makes the onlooker responsible for with her return look, which is to say the pleasure she suffers on stage is not "hers." If private property derives from subjection, in a subjectless world, ownership is unattainable. Then, Okwui's suffering and ecstasy are not *hers* insofar as they can not be owned. But it is a suffering and a pleasure, hence her ability to channel them. Moving away from the constitution of a subject, the *quake* as the inaugural scene changes the usual first questions a witness would pose

²⁰ What I am calling "Sprinkle's third eye" is the reflected look Rebecca Schneider experiences while looking in Sprinkle's vagina in *Post Modern Porn*. By fully inhabiting the position of an object under scrutiny, Sprinkle manages to reflect the look placed on her, at least according to Schneider in the chapter "Logic of the twister, eye of the storm" in SCHNEIDER, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. Routledge. 1997.

²¹ If, in light of Muñoz's writing, one is forced to think of this event as *disidentification*, I have chosen here to embrace this term by avoiding it, in order to give me space to dwell on this event further. This is not to say that Okwui's work isn't an exemplary case of Muñoz's concept. It's only to say that I decided not to abuse the term.

²² This logical "soundness" I am referring to in the articulation of this text exists only for you, reader. There was/is/will never be a body for the minoritarian subject. I will return to this in the last pages of this essay.

towards a work on stage from "Whose suffering/pleasure is enacted?" to an inquiry of the casual relationship at stake, that is, "Why is there pleasure/suffering?" and "Where is it coming from?" Before this, however, we must listen to Okwui.

§ 3

After executing the *quake* and returning the look of her witnesses, Okpokwasili keeps twitching and quavering, but now she moves towards a microphone in the center of the performance site. Once she arrives, she says: "I wanna share something with you. It's a note passed between two girls, at the tender age of 11, one of which was me." (OKPOKWASILI, 2019, p. 2). The first lines Okwui speaks apparently frame *Bronx Gothic* as an autobiographical work, distancing it from what we just attended. The performer uses, however, every occasion at hand to underline the fictional value of her performed "I" by emphasizing that the notes are not "hers," but rather, they exist as a composite of some of her experiences, friends' experiences, and stories she heard; all this framed by her interest in Gothic literature²³.

The fictional value of the performed "I" in theater and dance presentation is not a new critique Okpokwasili puts forward. An exemplary (yet unattended) moment of such in US-American performative discourse is Sharon Hayes' exploration of what she calls the "brackets of the theater space." Around the 1990s, Hayes would go on stage and state, before beginning her pieces: "Hi, I am Sharon Hayes." As the artist conveyed during a conversation²⁴, theater convention (representation) required that the "I" in the statement of her legal denomination on stage created a second "I," i.e., another subject. A subject, who did not conflate with her person, and, I would add, troubles the functioning of a proper name.

Similarly, in *The Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, 2004, André Lepecki argues that Jérôme Bel's employment of

²³ In a Skype-in session at the Alverno College on 4/9/15, Okwui entertains the question of the Gothic in the title of *Bronx Gothic* by listing epistolary novels she was interested while developing the piece. During our phone conversation, she clarified that the sign "Bronx" takes the position of an adjective for "Gothic." The Alverno Skype-in is available on Youtube at <https://youtu.be/qm6jxKGn3uU>. Accessed on 10/27/2019 at 7:08 PM.

²⁴ From 2018 to 2020 I've been a fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston at the Core Program. As part of the structure of the program, Hayes visited the fellows and delivered a lecture in the Spring of 2019.

performing bodies constantly changing subjectivities both in *The Last Performance*, 1995 and *Jerôme Bel*, 1998 functions almost as a glitch in the convention of representation in dance. Lepecki writes:

"Jerôme Bel's *Jerôme Bel* reminds us that, if representation allows for an experience of an outside, it is only in a subordinate relation to the inside that representation holds, preserves, and reproduces. And what representation endlessly reproduces is itself – representation reproduces the power for perpetually mirroring its self-embrace." (LEPECKI, 2006, p. 49-50).

Representation in this passage signifies the un-dressing, dressing, and re-dressing of a performer with multiple subjectivities, such as personas or characters. In Bel's *Last Performance*, this is explored by the dancers, who adjust their actions on stage according to the statement of proper names—for example, when a tennis player's name is called, the dancer executes the movements of an invisible match—highlighting in this manner, the continuous exchange of subjectivities expected of performing bodies in theater and dance. In *Jerôme Bel*, this calling of characters happens through another writing platform: the names written on a blackboard surface alter the subjectivity of the performing bodies. Bel's works, Lepecki suggests, trouble representation and pose an ontological question to dance:

"Jerôme Bel's opening up of the body and of subjectivity away from its self-enclosure proposes some methodological and epistemological challenges for dance studies. If the dancing subject is no longer considered a singular entity, if the visible body dancing on stage does not fully reveal its presence, how can dance studies give an account of what it is disciplinarily supposed to be accountable for: moving presence of bodies in the confined space of the stage? If the body is a pack, a rhizome, a body-image, if it is semantic as much as it is somatic, if it extends across time and space, then in which ways can critical writing access choreographic work built upon this splayed-out model of the body and of subjectivity? [...]" (LEPECKI, 2006, p. 51)

In a similar and yet different way²⁵, Okwui's non-autobiographical spoken "I," following her interdiction of subjection, challenges theater conventions and the upcoming scenes of *Bronx Gothic* by disarticulating the very idea of body and subjectivity. Given the interdiction of conventional subjection through the *quake*, the distance between Okwui and the spoken "I" accentuates that, in the space of the piece, no

²⁵ André Lepecki opens the *Exhausting Dance* with a discussion of solipsism that will, in a hauntingly manner, accompany every single chapter of his book. Although Lepecki thinks solipsism as instrumental for Xavier Le Roy's dance practice, I disagree with the importance he gives to the subject in the space of performance. This is to say, the similarities between Okwui's *Bronx Gothic* and *Jerôme Bel*'s critique of representation through the *Exhausting Dance* diverge in Lepecki's preoccupation with authorship and the place of the subject.

representation of pleasure/suffering is pursued, but rather, there is the presentation of a pleasure/suffering. *Bronx Gothic* exists in a space close to Lepecki's exhausted dance and offers, first in Okwui's look back at her witnesses and then in the fictional "I," an alternative answer to one of André's most pressing questions: "How can critical writing access choreographic work built upon this splayed-out model of the body and of the subjectivity?" he asks, and Okwui returning the question with her eyes fixed on him silently says: in Relation²⁶. It is through a discussion of *ethos* that performance practices can be addressed once subjection is interdicted. Through the third "I," in and through the shadow²⁷, the present/absent dispossessed comes to full fruition, and it is in this standpoint that it can be critically accessed.

This relation Okwui's look posits can easily be partnered with Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, 1997 both as a way to understand how the structure of theater (*language*) is reorganized and inhabited by Okpokwasili and also to address how performance has, in her work, the potential to interpolate the *ethos* of Western European Spirit and make space for a fall that may not stop on the floor. Since we will move toward the ground, I suggest we fall with Okwui.

"He still at your house?
Yeah. He watches me at night when my mother's at work.
Is he nice to you?
Yeah. He lets me smoke his cigarettes.
Does your mother know he does that?
Hell no!" (OKPOKWASILI, 2019, p.5)

A couple of notes pass in *Bronx Gothic*, and Okwui stands close to a microphone and reads NOTE #2, a conversation between the two girls about the shared intimacy of body discovery. By the end of a small discussion, one of the girls tells the other they will meet at a store to get

²⁶ "We shall guard against suggesting, parabolically, that beings would be solid and Being volatile nor that a variable mass of beings would assume, in contrast, the infinity of Being. We must, rather, abandon this apposition of Being and beings: renounce the fruitful maxim whereby Being is relation to consider that Relation alone is relation.

But Relation is not to be confused with the cultures we are discussing nor with the economy of their internal relationships nor with the projection of their external relationships nor even with the intangible results of the intricate involvement of all internal relationships with all possible external relationships. Nor is it to be confused with some marvelous accident that might suddenly occur apart from any relationship, the known unknown, in which chance would be the magnet. Relation is all these things at once." (GLISSANT, 1997, p. 170-171).

²⁷ "[...] She is asking the question of her own subject status, the representation which precedes her. Her standing separately from that object, her critical distance, is as distant as one ever gets from one's shadow, which is to say, not distant at all - even as it is, deeply critical. [...]" (SCHNEIDER, 1997, p. 184)

cigarettes for her mother's boyfriend, which prompts an inquiry about his presence at her home. Okwui's vocal performance deserves a moment of attention here. To differentiate between the two girls, one who seems more "experienced" and the other less, Okpokwasili navigates between voice spectrums, one an octave higher than the other. The bass gestures to the more "knowledgeable" girl, the high pitch to the less "knowledgeable" one²⁸.

The last line of the quoted conversation is delivered in the bass range of Okwui's voice with an extension of the word "hell" that marks an evident distance between the speaking girl's mother and the events at stake. After this, Okwui's flesh falls to the ground in a heavy drop and starts an aggressive movement against it. Facing the horizontal surface, she moves each joint separately and hits them, one after the other, over and over again, against the floor, creating a resonant sound. The movements are repeated. Okwui's jumping flesh flips on the floor as she turns around in a rapid twist. Now she seems to inhabit a sexual position, her legs spread open, her joints slamming the floor... it seems it will never end.

Okpokwasili refers to this set of movements as the *broken body*. It consists of the isolation of limbs and the slamming of individual joints (shoulder, knees, elbow, and so forth) on the horizontal plane. With the repetition of the movements, Okwui removes the performance from the pre-given verticality of theater and starts inhabiting the horizontal plane, but not in a converging manner, for each new joint that hits the floor exposes the existence of a vertical force upon flesh. This force points toward the ground and almost re-enacts the drop or fall of flesh executed by the verbal outburst surmounting the distance between the practice at hand and the child's mother's acknowledgment of it in the "Hell no!"

At first sight, Okpokwasili's repeated fall onto/into the ground with parts of flesh responsible for the mobility she enjoys appears to recount dance experiences focused on embracing the impact of gravity on one's body. Nevertheless, in the space of *Bronx Gothic* (with the interdiction of "subject" and "body"), the movement gestures to more than that. Okwui's motion in this subjectless world quickly becomes a *physical experiment*: the flesh hitting the ground is the apple falling from the

²⁸ This vocabulary of "experienced/knowledgeable" is a reproduction of Okpokwasili's mode of address of the characters.

tree, but it is also the movement of the moon around the Earth, the Earth around the sun. Okpokwasili's broken body reopens the question of gravity, but to think of it as a theory of relation²⁹.

Gravity, at least in its Newtonian formulation, is a theory of Relation only possible if, *a priori*, masses are separated and can not occupy the same space, hence a need for a universal theory of their relationship³⁰. As Andrew Janak explains in the introduction of *Newton: Philosophical Writings*, 2004, however, Newton (the "scientist") developed his work under the auspices of what was called "natural philosophy," interacting in his career with the writings of philosophers such as Leibniz and, most importantly, Descartes. It must be noted that the attraction force related to the mass of independent objects Newton addresses is not a mere abstraction. It is predicated by the belief and discussion that through *logos*, Man accesses *being* and can unravel the mysteries of the World.

A moment ago, I argued that Okwui suspends subjection in *Bronx Gothic* and, as its framework of emergence denounces, gravity presupposes the constitution of a Real based on *logos*, enforcing a subject-object relationship, in which the "scientific" subject discovers and conquers the World through thought. The question that remains about Okwui's engagement with this force, then, is: How can Okpokwasili's flesh hit the floor if it is not an object in subjection? And if it does, if flesh hits the ground... falls; What is this flesh doing?

A possible answer to this question is, in becoming an *experiment*, Okwui's fall proposes an engagement with gravity not *simply* as a fatalistic force that will push/attract objects but rather as a theoretical question, that is, a theory of the relation between masses conceptualized beyond and yet through the frame of Newtonian and

²⁹ GLISSANT, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation* (trans: Betsy Wings). The University of Michigan Press. 1997

³⁰ NEWTON, Isaac. *Principia*. Unknown date, in JANAK, Andrew. *Isaac Newton: Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge University Press. 2014.

Einsteinian theories surrounding this force³¹. In the same way as Okwui's look back as part of the *quake* gestures towards a necessity to exist in Relation and demands a critical engagement with her work that remounts an ethical inquiry and the dissolution of a hierarchical actor-spectator relationship, her *broken body* emphasizes how not only her flesh hits against³² the world but simultaneously the *#World*, over and over, presses itself upon her flesh. That is, being exists in constant relation with the (im)material: gravity is as much of an abstraction as an experience in the flesh.³³ Through choreography, Okwui transforms the space of theater into an investigation that pierces Einsteinian relativity and gestures to quantum physics, bringing her witnesses to take part in an *echo-world* that refuses a distinction between matter and thought, forgoing the separation of fields of knowledge and ways of knowing, so that the suppression of subjection can enact a new Real, One predicated by a commons.

What I am trying to say here is that Okwui's amalgam of performing and performance art strategies in *Bronx Gothic* speaks to theater, dance, and performance in the Western European milieu as Denise Ferreira da Silva speaks to science/philosophy and to the constructed "I" in the Introduction of *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, 2007. There, while thinking of the limits of "scientific," da Silva writes³⁴:

³¹ EINSTEIN, Albert. *Die Grundlage der allgemeinen Relativitätstheorie*, 1916 in *Annalen der Physik*, Vierte Folge, Band 49. 1916. pp 769-822; JANAK, Andrew. *Isaac Newton: Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge University Press. 2014. The similarity of this discussion with Saidiya Hartman's intervention on desire does not seem occasional to me. If the "always willing" enslaved female functions as the chauvinistic and yet lawful argument for the protection of the right of property by the "master" in *Scenes of Subjection*, perhaps in physics, gravity is the force against and through which the verticality of the modern subject I is transformed into the *Gestell* of science (to use the Heideggerian vocabulary). This is to say, through this theory of relation, experiences and the *ethos* of horizontality was pushed to the outskirts in favor of vertical relationship of subject-object. I cannot attend this now, but I hope to do so in a future project.

³² Of course the vocabulary I am employing is limiting of the Relation at stake. This *against* here addresses an idea of resistance beyond the linearity of language. The resistance I am interested in remounts the etymology of the word and allows for the prefix *re-* to convey the meaning of *anew*, placing resistance practices in a discussion of existence (i.e. *being*) given their shared root **sta-* meaning "to stand, make or be firm." See: ONIONS, C.T. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford University Press. 1966; PARTRIDGE, Eric. *Origins - A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1961; or https://www.etymonline.com/word/existence#etymonline_v_14062; https://www.etymonline.com/word/re-?ref=etymonline_crossreference; https://www.etymonline.com/word/resist?ref=etymonline_crossreference

³³ the distinction between abstraction and physical experience could be delivered more clearly. physics is already a mode of abstraction

³⁴ This is an excerpt of a longer discussion in which Silva engages with the idea of "scientific fabrication" as addressed by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 1999. I have chosen to focus solely on the reworking of "scientific" as it is the only thing of interest here.

"[...] For if one forgoes the desire for a Real that holds a historic (cultural subaltern) I and engages the Symbolic as the moment of production of the transparent I and its other, the scientific mill will have to be taken seriously as the very locus of production of the "name of Man" and of the "others" who fail to signify it and ask how scientific strategies, the alibis that sustain racial and colonial juridical domination and economic exploitation, populate the global space with a variety of modern subjects, who neither preceded nor are coetaneous with man, but have been produced using the same raw material assembled during the long period of his gestation." (SILVA, 2007, p. 12)

If Silva's questioning of the constitution of the "transparent I" problematizes not only the "scientific mill" as in the writings on science but rather an ontoepistemological mode of engagement with the World predicated by "the name of Man" as derived from thinking dissociated from feeling³⁵, quickly it becomes clear that Ferreira da Silva's philosophical critique bespeaks Okpokwasili's position, transforming the latter's engagement with the conventions of Western European performance practices into another affirmation of the fictionality of any distant observing subject. Okwui's *broken body* unveils the limitations of a subject predicated by *logos* through a display of the violent forces of the ontoepistemology of the West. Therefore, it enacts a critique of being that surpasses Heidegger's dismissal of Existentialism by bringing forth what that author couldn't, which is an intertwining of thinking and feeling. If the Heideggerian ontology is preoccupied with a Descartean (onto)logic rooting in thinking the truth of being³⁶, in the *broken body*, the dissociation of thinking from feeling is proven fallacious, enacting a Real determined not only by *logos* but One that refuses to distinguish between *pathos*, *logos*, and ultimately, *ethos*. Okwui's movement echoes (and perhaps there is no better word than this) the poetics Glissant addresses, putting into perspective that it is only in Relation that any *thing* comes about. But here... here, we need to stop and take a step back. I'm repeatedly talking about a World in Relation by remembering Glissant, but this did not come from him. In Real-ality, every *thing* is coming from *her*³⁷.

³⁵ I'm thinking here specifically of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* and his critique of the biding of his ontology with existentialism, and reaffirmation of thinking as the truth of being (reads man), in an ontology that repeats the Descartean exclusion by means of Hegel. Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Towards a Global Idea of Race* does a beautiful work of considering the problem of exteriority and interiority, towards which I am simply gesturing here.

³⁶ HEIDEGGER, Martin. *A Letter on Humanism*

³⁷ IRIGARAY, Lucy. *In the beginning: She Was*. Bloomsbury. 2013.

§ 4

"Black women, too, refused the conditions of work on the plantation, and Du Bois notes their presence among the "army of fugitives" rushing away from the fields. Yet, in the shift from the fugitive to the striking worker, the female slave becomes a minor figure. [...] The sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women's experience fail to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom." (HARTMAN, 2016, p. 167)

In *Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labor*, 2016, Saidiya Hartman turns her eyes to the labor involved in the making of the World to remind us that "Those of us who have been 'touched by the mother' need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return." (HARTMAN, 2016, p.171) *Mother* is also one of the movements Okpokwasili enacts in *Bronx Gothic*. In the piece, she is a set of gestures that looks like the rehearsal of a physical confrontation with an invisible [maybe transparent?] enemy.

I have consistently spoken here of Okwui as flesh, "pounds of tall black femme flesh," to pursue the steps of Spillers and Moten considering the *out_law, dispossessed, stateless*³⁸ flesh. It could be argued that I replay to some extent Hartman's worrisome acknowledgment of the failures of radical politics of liberation or philosophy of freedom by not attending to the sexual violence discussed in *Bronx Gothic*. In light of this valid assessment, you and I need to talk.

If in *Bronx Gothic*, Okpokwasili can enact the interdiction of subjection and a critique of the "transparent subject," the subjectless World she births is, evidently, dependent and in debt of her *labor/work*³⁹. On top of years of writing, choreographic development, rehearsals, and scoring of the piece, Okwui works intensively in suspending subjection through *Bronx Gothic*. Her sweat dripping throughout the *quake* is a clear indication of the physical demand of this movement. She works hard to enact the *broken body*, which lingers on her flesh through bruises after

³⁸ MOTEN, Fred. *Stolen Life*. Duke University Press. 2018; and MOTEN, Fred. *The Universal Machine*. Duke University Press. 2018.

³⁹ The brazilian philosopher José Chasin addresses work and labor enacted as "sensible activity." This translation, however, is a preliminary assessment of a longer project I am still developing, hence my usage of both words in the construction above to underline both Okwui's labor of care and work. For more see: CHASIN, J. Marx: *Estatuto Ontológico e Resolução Metodológica*. Boitempo, 2009.

the performances⁴⁰. In other words, Okwui labors and works to disarticulate theater and dance conventions. This way, the critique of these conventions always exists already in her practice as an organic intellectual⁴¹, in the work she enacts, and as the touch Hartman knows as unforgettable.

Okwui's work/labor and the labor/work of many in the art industry, like the fugitive evidence of black women refusing to work on the plantation, are often ignored or brushed off as mere narrative representations. In my eyes, this labor/work evades the violence of subjection and cares for a World of Relation; this way, it is impossible for me not to think of those operating in this realm as anything other than the *mother* Saidiya mentions. The care these *mother* enact engulfs and yet supersedes Hartman's acknowledgment of her touch: it is a care that laughs at Heideggerian ontology by carving a World in no-thingness, a World predicated by sharing, indeed, with no "expectation of reciprocity or return."⁴²

Although I have used Glissant's vocabulary of Relation and Entanglement as a compass through what Okwui does on stage, his words, the poetics which Hartman is expanding through the concept of *belly of the world*, are, for me, means to understand and dwell with a complexity that has been removed from Beings, that is, a way of being and knowing that encompasses more than just thinking, and of which I, as of now, see no exemplary figure beside the *mother* Saidiya reminds us about. If it's been through the name of Man that the transparent scientific I found ways to create the Other, I am inclined to believe that it is in *her* that a World full of no-thingness can be possible. Miss-reading and yet

⁴⁰ "[...] This state of expenditure, according to Victor Turner, is an integral part of performance process, for in the "breakdown" the individual is "reduced or ground down in order to be fashioned anew." However, the breakdown also illuminates the dilemma of pleasure and possession since the broken body by dance insinuates its other, its double, the body broken by the regimen of labor and (dis)possessed by the chattel principle. [...]" (HARTMAN, 1997, p. 78). If Hartman's book addresses the the dispossessed by gesturing to the chattel principle, I think it would be a fair comparisson to think of her dispossession in these lines as alienation too.

⁴¹ GRAMSCI, Antoni. *Prison Notebook: The Intellectuals* in GOTTLIEB, Robert. (ed.) *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukács and Gramsci to Socialist Feminism*. Oxford University Press. 1989; and MUÑOZ, José Esteban. *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press. 1997.

⁴² I wonder what a conversation between Stefano Harvey, Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten would look like. Is Hartman gesturing towards the genesis of Harvey's and Moten's debt, when talking about the unrecognized labor and work of *mother*?

paraphrasing the Combahee River Collective's Statement, as long as *mother* don't become the measure of the World, the struggle won't be over⁴³.

Okwui Okpokwasili must know of these lines, I wonder... This must be why the feature film bombards its witnesses with multiple images of contemporary subjection [that is, black death] to prepare the grounds for Okwui's exclamation: "We are living in an ontological crisis!"

Yes, Okwui, I agree. The crisis is to understand the centrality of *no-thing* in the World. The crisis is the recognition that (w)holes are being put in the texture of the universe⁴⁴. *Bronx Gothic* is a glimpse of this space, where we see Okwui shivering, twitching, and twisting her tall black femme flesh that creates the World. Her practice/knowledge is seen/heard/understood/felt throughout and at the end of the piece with the aid of a meditation exercise, which the less knowledgeable girl learned from her *mother* to control dreams and to have power over that Reality:

"Touch your tongue to your teeth
Now ask yourself, am I awake?
Run your tongue along your lower lip
Now ask yourself, am I awake?
Flick the corners of your mouth, where your lower lip
and your upper lip meet
Both sides
Flick the corners with your tongue
Is your skin cracking? Can you feel your skin cracking?"
(OKPOKWASILI, 2019, p. 23)

Touch your heart under your skin. Now ask yourself, am I awake? Disrupt subjection. Now ask yourself, is there an I? Touch your sex. Now ask yourself, is this a gender? Suppress the Spirit. Now ask yourself, is there a time? Touch your skin. Now ask yourself, is there race? "Is your skin cracking? Can you feel your skin cracking?" What is it underneath?

⁴³ "[...] If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." in section "3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminism" of the 1977 *Combahee River Collective Statement*.

⁴⁴ In a conversation between Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Cervenak under the title *Black Outdoors* at Duke University, Moten responds one of the questions of the audience with a deep meditation on death and its relationship to the World by suggesting that acts of violence against specific beings perforate the texture of the universe. This talk is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/t_tUZ6dybrc. Accessed on 10/27/2019 at 7:08 PM.