Inventories, Catalogs, and Venuses: Excavating the Archive in Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus*

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In the first Catalog of the long poem “Voyage of the Sable Venus” by Robin Coste Lewis, we are supposed to read “relief” in its aesthetic sense: a mode of sculpture where figures are distinguished from the surrounding plane surface; more broadly, any sharpness of outline due to contrast. Yet the contextual evidence of this reading cannot evacuate the more readily available meaning of the word: the removal or lightening of something oppressive, painful, or distressing; assistance, welfare, release. The word appears only a handful of times, but nonetheless remains crucial to understand the underlying project of the collection. The context of the poem highlights just how significant this polysemy is: in the “Prologue,” Robin Coste Lewis describes “Voyage of the Sable Venus” as “a narrative poem comprised solely of the titles, catalog entries, or
exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present” [35]. If relief must be found then, it means release, if possible, from the aporia of the transatlantic archive(s) of Blackness, and Black womanhood in particular.

The rest of the collection (its first and third sections) also attends to the complexities of the archive(s) of Blackness, slavery, girl- and womanhood, and U.S. history, albeit from different perspectives and through different forms. It is infused with autobiographical overtones, and Lewis’s experiences clearly shape both the content and the poetics’. The collection’s title is derived from an eighteenth-century engraving by Thomas Stothard, “The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies,” itself based on a poem by Isaac Teale. Both the engraving and the poem hinge on the violent and forceful control of Black women’s bodies. In this perspective, writing *Voyage of the Sable Venus* in 2015 allowed Lewis to comment on the persistent dehumanization of Black women, and Black people in general, in an era of relentless violence against Black bodies.

What runs throughout the collection is what Christina Sharpe has called wake work, which consists in “imagin[ing] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” [32]. This echoes what Saidiya Hartman looks for in narrative, asking what stories can afford: “A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self?” [3].

How does one find relief from oppression? Specifically, how does one find relief from historical oppression that has ramified and persisted into the present, overtaking and excluding one from the very definition of humanity? Relief from perpetual mourning, which Claudia Rankine calls the condition of Black life in the United States? When the archive persists in denying one’s humanity and in rooting one’s existence in death, how does one respond to the archive and provide relief for oneself and for others caught in the wake? Through their attention to the possibilities writing (narrative and poetry) offers, Sharpe and Hartman both make it clear that the question is not just who/what gets represented but also how: confronting the archive(s) means accepting that horror has completely permeated quotidian life in the United States. This, in turn, means developing an ethics of seeing [Sharpe 132] that affects the very poetics of the text.

*Voyage of the Sable Venus*, the collection, confronts and reconfigures memorial work, both in its intimate dimension, through the experiences of the poetic subject and her family, and in its public, archival dimension, through its engagement with the texts and discourses produced by and around Western art. Thus Lewis highlights the collusion between art and power in the specific context of Black womanhood as it was created, shaped, exhibited, and reified in the West. *Voyage of the Sable Venus* locates the traumas of the past and the present through a transhistorical perspective and questions the possibilities of representation in the wake of trauma, performing one potential answer to Hartman’s burning question: “how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?” [3].

Sharpe writes that she is “interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially” [28]. In this article, I argue that Lewis’s confrontation and reconfiguration...
of the archive(s) is one such example of disrupting the immi/a/nence of Black death and moving beyond. *Voyage of the Sable Venus* helps perform memorial work in line with Sharpe’s concept of wake work, that is, memorial work that does not seek to resolve or pacify a traumatic past that keeps spilling over into the present but that tries instead to imagine something else — a new way of contending with the violence of the archive(s), a new mode of subject formation for Black women, a new way of making art in the wake. I will discuss how Lewis exposes the archive(s) of Western art as a normative tool of the state, enforcing a certain History of the nation and of the individual, and a site of possible resistance and reckoning. Resistance against hegemonic erasure and violence acts here as a dynamic bridging individual and collective memory. It is notably materialized by the process of individuation that runs throughout the book: the poems push back against the homogenizing dynamic that stripped African slaves and their descendants of individuality and thus of humanity, but they refrain from providing resolution in the form of a stable, unified, authoritative subject that would underlie the memorial narrative. I will end by highlighting how memorial work within poetry becomes an experimental site of both regulation and liberation, activating a collective function of memory that serves to provide relief from trauma and conjure new modes of thinking and representing Blackness.

**The Silent Colonial Archive(s) of Slavery**

7 Etymologically, the archive is the State: its prime repository, which consolidates and legitimates its power. It is at once a material object (a legal document, a photography, a recording), a place, and a practice. However, its proliferation in historical and popular discourses is recent, as Terry Cook has argued in “The Archive is a Foreign Country.” Cook builds on the argument David Lowenthal made in *The Past is a Foreign Country*: until the nineteenth century, “the historical past was generally thought much like the present,” so that history became “a source of useful exemplars” [Lowenthal 4]. With notably the rise of Romanticism and the quest for legitimacy by emerging nation-states, this shifted to seeing the past as an estranged country that could be shaped into myth and from which nations and individuals could claim heritage. This spurred efforts to collect and preserve the past, with the rise of archival practices and studies.

8 The significance of this is threefold. First, the archive(s) is tied to the idea of legitimacy. Thus, it is of primordial importance to nation-states, which see and seek in the archive(s) a way to secure their mythical origins and contemporary political legitimacy: a way to craft, feed, and naturalize the national imaginary. The nineteenth century brought along political and economic transformations in the West: the expansion and consolidation of empires; the maintenance and subsequent abolition of the slave trade and of slavery; the Industrial Revolution. In this context, the archive(s) became the site where the national imaginary was forged, all the more crucial since the United States was still a young nation at the time. Indeed, even though a large portion of the art objects in *Voyage of the Sable Venus* date back to the Antiquity, it is the Transatlantic trade and chattel slavery that haunt and filter every single representation of Blackness. This use of the national archive(s) highlights how, from its very beginnings, the violence and horror of slavery anchors the U.S. national imaginary. Even though Lewis excavates Western art archives, then, her project is not
to merely show the collusion between art and power, but to confront the very foundations of Western national constructions.

Second, as Cook explains: “This new collecting mentalité and reverence for a distant past led to the establishment in Western countries of ‘public’ museums, galleries, libraries, archives—even zoos—as major state institutions to preserve artifacts, specimens, images, books, and records” [604]. That museums and zoos would be mentioned alongside archives is hardly coincidental: these are all sites predicated on the constant flux between power and display. The nineteenth century saw the growing emergence in the imperial Western world of human zoos, where the Other was exhibited and definitely rendered non-human. In their introduction to Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Empire, the editors highlight how, even though “the Other has always been exhibited, shown and staged,” these human zoos, sometimes called “Venus shows” when they foreground black female bodies, added the specificity of scientific research — and the alleged legitimacy it conferred upon the resulting scientific racism — to the system of domination in which they participated [4]. They provided a space where living humans could be studied and classified, and thus reinforced “[t]he scientific rationalization of alterity” [8]. Thus, when Lewis is turning to the archive(s) of Western art, and unearthing the Venuses it has consumed, she is calling upon a complex heritage, which mobilized a project that was as much aesthetic and cultural as it was scientific, political, and colonial.

Third, these transformations in the apprehension of the past required a distinction between the archive, singular, and archives, plural. Archival scholars such as Cook and Michelle Caswell have elaborated upon this distinction. The former functions “as a metaphoric symbol, as representation of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group or culture” [Cook 601]. The latter refers to “collections of records, material and immaterial, analog and digital [...], the institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the processes that designated them ‘archival’” [Caswell §3]. Lewis mobilizes both meanings: she is not just delving into the archive (the metaphor, the imaginary, the collective national and individual memory) of slavery; she also excavates archives of a particular kind (here, art museums and galleries) in order to tether her confrontation with archival silence to materiality.

Slavery, like most historical cases when a minoritized group is methodically erased from or minimized within the national narrative, is characterized by archival silence and confusion. As Nancy Peterson pointed out, it then becomes all too easy, through post-structuralist theory, to consider that “history is only a text, a narrative construction of the past that has little or no relation to what really happened” [1]. Lewis re-embeds this narrative construction into materiality: many poems are ekphrastic, based on photographs that are not included in order to mimic the intentional lacunas of the archive(s). The material referent is there and not-there; the dual dynamic of presence and absence parallels the very constitution of the archive(s), which hinges on acknowledging what is there and what is not. Archival excavation must also be tethered to the materiality of the body: “Perhaps the true museum, the most honest archive—the eternal exhibit—occurs and reoccurs within our own bodies” [150]. The archive(s) is intimate before anything else: forgetting this means re-erasing trauma.
Confronting and Unsettling the Archive(s)

12 How does one go about confronting and finding relief from an archive(s) that explicitly hinges on a colonial project of domination and that is structured by silence and omission? Can anything be said in the face of this silence? Hartman explored this question, and Lewis asks it again in her epilogue: “It was an exercise in the redemptive power of silence. The art challenged me to stop speaking”, adding later on, “What more was there to say? What could possibly be said?” [149-150]. Archival silence can be hegemonic (as in, intentional obliteration). But it can also result from the observation that the archives speak for themselves, that these silences are crowded with the rustling and communication of what can never have a proper voice: “The paintings talked to each other” [149]. Silence must be reclaimed, and that is the first step in unsettling the archive(s): knowing that “the archeological act of writing” will always fall short of what is there [157].

13 Lewis turns to museums because they put on display the circumstances and consequences of the colonial project of slavery on representation, and thus create a panorama of the evolution of representational modes. By excavating and exposing the archives of Western art museums (and by listing them over three and a half pages at the end of the section), Lewis renders visible the complicity between art and museal spaces on the one hand, and on the other, imperial projects and hegemonic memorial discourses. She also foregrounds the failure of museums to properly memorialize trauma that cannot be relegated to the past, something Sharpe pointedly highlights: the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? [...] Because how does one memorialize the everyday? [34].

14 This last question animates the entire project of the collection, which unsettles the legitimizing and authoritative aspects conventionally ascribed to the archives by centering the ways in which the latter can become a site of (re)invention and speculation. One such intervention by the poet appears not in a poem but in the prologue to “Voyage of the Sable Venus”, where she notes that in an effort to correspond to current ideological evolutions, curators and museums tend to obfuscate past traumas by changing words:

I realized that museums and libraries (in what I imagine must have been either a hard-won gesture of goodwill, or in order not to appear irrelevant) had removed many nineteenth-century historically-specific markers—such as slave, colored, or Negro—from their titles or archives, and replaced these words instead with the sanitized, but perhaps equally vapid, African-American. In order to replace this historical erasure of slavery (however well intended), I re-erased the postmodern African-American, then changed all those titles back. That is, I re-corrected the corrected horror in order to allow that original horror to stand. My intent was to explore and record not only the history of human thought, but also how normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been in participating in—if not creating—this history [35].

15 “Correcting” the register was not enough to repair trauma insofar as it was mainly done for the comfort of the dominant class: it reduced to a textual subterfuge the
trauma of words used to categorize and reify humans. The “re-correction” identifies and does not let us ignore the initial horror.

In “Catalog 3: The Womb of Christianity,” sections XII and XIII mainly consist of anaphoric lists centered on the image of the Virgin Mary. Section XII hinges on the various attributes of “Our Lady”: “of Presentation”, “of the Confession”, until the very end: “Our Black Virgin / of Recollection” [67-68]. Section XIII hinges on place, starting with “—of Vladimir —de Lourdes —de Guadalupe— / Nossa—Nuestra—Notre—Nera—” [69]. The list frequently mentions “Black Madonnas,” closing with “Black Mary Magdalene of Palestine / Black Madonna Czestochowa, Queen of Poland” [70]. With these lists, along with the destabilizing of temporality through the ordering the various catalogs, Lewis reorganizes the archive, disrupts its usual teleology and staging how the trauma of slavery is not and cannot be relegated to the past. The very last poem in “Voyage of the Sable Venus” makes up the entirety of the final catalog, “Catalog 8: The Present / Our Town.” It is relatively short and sparse:

Still:
Life
(of Flowers)
with Figures—
including
a Negro servant [110].

The use of outdated racial/racist vocabulary is a jarring anachronism; the rest of the poem seems to reenact a scene of subjugation: the Black figure is a servant located within a still life, therefore silent and immobile. The violence of the original archive(s) of slavery is ceaselessly borne back into the present.

This confrontation with the archive(s) is not restricted to the second section. Poems in the first section are written around photographs or excerpts from speeches, glossing oft-overlooked archival remnants of the past. Two poems in the first section, “From:/To:” and “Beauty’s Nest,” which follow each other, gloss on two photographs that crystallize the irony of racial relations in the era of WW2: first Black American soldiers who were fighting in Europe and wrote “FROM HARLEM TO HITLER” on the shell of a bomb; then Black American soldiers who return from the war to segregation and Jim Crow laws. The soldiers are the immediate descendants of those who were dispossessed of their freedom and humanity and who survived the apocalypse of the Middle Passage; they fight for freedom and against genocide on another continent, only to return home to a system that methodically disenfranchises them. Once again, forcing open the archive(s) reveals how trauma cannot be contained in the past.

Another mode of unsettling the archive(s) is by queering it, a project made explicit in the prologue: “I also included work by black queer artists, regardless of gender, because this body of work has made consistently some of the richest, most elegant, least pretentious contributions to Western art interrogations of gender and race” [35]. Thus queer influence may only appear implicit at first, since only a few titles can be traced back to queer artists (most of them occurring in section XXII). However, it is not simply the content of Voyage of the Sable Venus that is queered, but also the very methodology deployed by Lewis to engage with these archives. Jamie A. Lee has argued for the possibilities queer/ed methodologies open up when interacting with archives and oral histories, and articulated the concept of (un)becoming, “the simultaneous becoming and unbecoming” (5), in order to discuss the imaginative possibilities enacted by this constant movement within and throughout the archive(s).
Lewis enacts several strategies, some of which she lays out explicitly in her prologue and epilogue, that push back against normativizing narratives and bring to light the (un)becoming inherent in Blackness. She removes the authoritative framework by removing the (authorial) source, the consequences of which are twofold. First, she prevents whiteness and white artists from laying any further claim to the representations of Blackness it generated, and situating Black artists within an intertextual, transhistorical net of resonances that can serve to build heritage and legacy. Second, she also blurs what can be traced and verified (regarded as fact) and what cannot (classified as fiction): the archive(s) can no longer be recuperated as a site producing a straightforward, univocal narrative of the past. Lewis also foregrounds community histories marked by orality, depicting the complexity of the odyssey of Black childhood in Southern California in “Frame” or highlighting in “Second Line” the kinship between her father, a WW2 veteran, and herself, and what her father gifted her — “this deep black joy” [128]. The latter arrives toward the end of the collection, yet another moment of relief, a defiant gesture toward rooting Blackness in something else than death. Thus, unsettling the archive(s) and finding relief from it also convey the project of restoring some form of (un)becoming subjecthood to the central figures: the Black women, the Venuses and the Madonnas.

“Just the Sable Venus and me”: Individuating the Venus

The abundance of “Anonymous” and “Untitled” in the second section, along with the recurring use of anaphoras, is the direct materialization of what Lewis calls the “female namelessness” [149] and what Sharpe calls the “ditto ditto” of the archive of slavery. Names, these most immediate markers of identity, have been lost, often on purpose as humans were reduced to a number and a set of characteristics to be then more easily transformed into property. *Voyage of the Sable Venus* exposes this, acknowledging and integrating within the very fabric of the poems what Hartman observed when she tries to trace back the stories of the “Venus”: “Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world” and everywhere “she is called Venus. // What else is there to know? Hers is the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all” [1-2].

The modern Western subject, as created by Western philosophy, emerged from the context of the colonial frontier in the Americas and of the Transatlantic Slave Trade [Patel & Moore 200]. The first U.S. citizen is a white male landowner; throughout the history of the country, he is constantly defined against a gendered and/or racialized Other: the Native, the African slave, the Asian or Latino immigrant: “[h]istorically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against” (Rankine). Slavery and antiblackness, along with the aesthetic representations they generated, infuse the construction of the (white) self in the United States. In this context, the “Venus” has little to no agency or leeway in the construction of her identity: she is what she is represented as, and this representation is most often authored by a white subject, writing from a position of domination toward a subjugated, objectified Other. *Voyage of the Sable Venus* interrogates the legitimacy of these representations by removing them from their
authorial source and replacing them in a context centered on the process of providing access to subjehood and individuality to Black female bodies.

The figure of the “Venus” — the Black woman put on display — is thus crucial to the process of subject formation throughout the collection, but her appearances are multiple and varied, and subjectification never results in a stable, delineated self. Instead, what the Venus reveals is the impossibility of establishing a univocal self, echoing what Barbara Smith’s black feminist criticism and its successors have discussed in their exploration of the multiple subjectivity of Black women. The second and middle part, which also happens to be the longest, acts as the pivot for the rest of the collection: it materializes the process of disembodying, scattering, collaging, and remembering voices and is most directly concerned with representations of historical Black women. Lewis establishes the conceptualization of her project in a prologue: subject formation is thus explicitly built on the othered black female figure, and follows her manifestations both in time and in space. She then goes on to explain the formal rules she set, explicitly using the pronoun “I” — this paratext reminds us then that there is indeed a subject at work here, actively parsing a specific corpus of texts and images, selecting and rearranging elements into a new structure that deconstructs and produces new meaning. However, any idea of a straightforward, authoritative self is dismantled. ‘I’ does appear several times in the catalogues, but it is scarce at first, and either cannot necessarily be traced back to a clear referent, or continually shifts in identity. For example, while the first ‘I’, in “Catalog 3,” is associated with the miraculous birth of the black female body, the second ‘I’, appearing in “Catalog 5,” presumably belongs to a white French woman. From this point on, the manifestations of the ‘I’ become more frequent, as do those of the ‘you.’ This is a direct result of a shift in the way artworks are perceived and titled, but it also draws parallels between the birth of the modern subject and the chronological progression toward modernity and our contemporary era.

In sections XII and XIII of “Catalog 3,” through a racialized reconfiguration of the conventional Madonna/Whore dichotomy, the “Black Madonna” is centered as a counterpoint to the recurring Venus. The former is revered for her holiness; the latter is rendered grotesque and dehumanized by the Western gaze. Both are everywhere. This emphasizes the complexity of subjehood for Black women throughout history (“Black Madonna Czestochowa, Queen of Poland”), pointing to the necessity of a transnational discourse that would take into account the fluctuations of diasporic Black identities. The list form reappears notably in section XXII of “Catalog 7: Modern Post,” introduced by “Silence. / Poise. Prayer:” and closing with “(Thirteen ways of looking at a black girl)” Thirteen Venuses are enumerated, from “Tinted Venus” to “Venus of Tan-Tan.” The reference to Wallace Stevens’s famous poem highlights the multiplicity inherent to Black female identity, a sign of both dispossession (Black women do not have access to stable selfhood the way Whiteness does; this “black girl” can be anyone) and defiant reclaiming: the enumeration must be uttered as a “prayer,” sacralizing these girls and their unknown identities. Saidiya Hartman explains:

There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with
names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history [2].

From death sentence and tomb, Lewis forces the archive(s) open to render the Venuses sacred and have the asterisk take up the entire narrative.

The first and third parts seemingly engage autobiographical subject formation more explicitly, but Lewis reminds us of the risks of assigning an autobiographical referent to the poetic ‘I’: “perhaps Voyage is a kind of autobiography, an autobiography without an I. [...] Or Voyage is an autobiography where the i isn’t significant, isn’t the protagonist” [151]. Indeed, the opening poem, “Plantation,” immediately prevents us from assigning any clear referents to pronouns ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘we.’ The ‘you’ is particularly unstable, slipping in and out of various identities: “Every now and then you’d change / from a prancing black buck / into a small high yellow girl” to then become “the girl’s mother” (3). This slippage in turn affects the ‘I,’ whose true nature remains elusive, predicated on indeterminacy. While “On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari” seems to be rooted in a real-life experience the poet had while traveling in India, the ensuing epiphany highlights the metamorphosis of the self, its multiple and contradictory iterations, rather than any stable, cohesive entity: “I was pregnant. / I was dead. / I was a fetus. / I was just born” [14].

Other poems in the first and third parts are ekphrastic or persona poems. “The Wilde Woman of Aiken” gives a voice to a black woman whom J. A. Palmer photographed as part of “a satirical photo shoot” [161]. Deriding Oscar Wilde’s idea that anything could be beautiful, Palmer chose and staged “objects he found to be inherently repugnant: highly patterned fabrics, an ornately upholstered chair, a sunflower, and a face vessel, and a black woman” [161]. The poem opens with “I am not supposed to be / beautiful” [17] and ends with “You / cannot / prevent me” [18]: the woman acknowledges her dispossession but pushes back against objectification, signaling she exists in excess of what white supremacy considers her to be. Affirming her humanity in a system that actively works to deny it at every turn enacts a form of individuation, which remains limited here since these are not really the words spoken by the woman but those imagined by Lewis. However, this ventriloquism also multiplies the possibilities of identification and individuation, since it is predicated on a Black woman reimagining another Black woman into being across history.

Lewis also roots her poetics of memory and individuation in an examination of the body, exposing how the black female body has been historically and violently reified, and disrupting this reification. Many of the poems in the catalogs enact a metaphorical dismemberment of the body [18], with parts scattered throughout the lines and never coalescing into a whole: “Knees and Oversized Head / with Half-Open Eyes / and Semicircle Mouth” [45]. The body is a ruined site, with portions often missing: “Statuette of a Black Slave Girl / Right Half of Body and Head Missing” [43]. Elsewhere, the black body is quite literally mechanized, transformed into an automaton: “When the Woman’s Left Ear / Ring is Pulled / Her Eyes Recede / And a Mechanism Rises” [80]. It can be integrated within everyday, utilitarian objects such as vases, combs, or mirrors: “mirror / with handle / in the form of a young Nubian / female standing” [49]. Recurring mentions of animals such as monkeys serve to further blur the definition of humanity and act a potent reminder that the black body has
systematically been relegated to the status of animality, so as to better legitimate its subjugation. The poems ceaselessly expose this perpetual violence while refusing to resolve the tension through the advent of a stable self-made whole again: trauma has permanently mutilated the body. This process finds an echo in the first and third parts, where violence against black women's bodies is woven into the intimate life of the subject. The very space of the home becomes unsafe and traumatic, either because of childhood rape or violent racist policies.

The black woman's body is never wholly hers. It is constantly overlaid with historical trauma and hegemonic categorization. Thus, tracking Lewis's process of subject formation throughout the collection reveals that, while it is rooted in the interpellation of the Venus as the model of the racialized female Other, it also precludes any possibility of a unified and clearly bounded self. Voyage of the Sable Venus pushes back against the violent erasure of homogenization by finding and creating individuality; it inscribes the representation of the Black body within a constant linguistic remodulation, that materializes the body's state of (un)becoming, exposes the violence that has been wrought upon the body, and refuses to resolve, as in pacify, the tension brought about by this violence because the historical trauma is ongoing. As painful and unresolved as it may be, individuation nonetheless remains necessary, because it is the crucial step toward enacting a form of communal memory and a process of healing, or at the very least, reclaiming.

“\textit{We want your company}”: Collective Memory and Experimental Poetics

Once the 'I' is rendered singular against the homogenizing and reifying violence of slavery, it can re-enter into a dialog with the 'we', precisely because it remains an open, multiple, and unstable construction. This renewed oscillation between individual and community, between personal and collective forms of memory, is anchored in the experimental aspect of the poems, which integrates elements of the conventional lyrical subject while displacing and subverting them.

Questions of collectivity and lineage are abundantly interrogated in Black women's writings, as numerous scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Cheryl A. Wall have pointed out. Spillers defined tradition as "a matrix of discontinuities" for the black women's writing community [251]. In Worrying the Line, Wall calls upon the works of Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker among others, to further explore the multifaceted function of kinship as something that must be both criticized and reclaimed through feminist, queer, and Black scholarship [12-13]. More recently, Sharpe's wake work attends to the wake, as aftermath, as disturbed flow, and as watch, vigil. As such, it requires communal memorial work, stemming from a collective that is not the unindividuated series of “dittos” crowding the ledgers of slavery, but a community oriented toward and predicated on care and justice: “we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance” [Sharpe 132].

This ethics of care means memorial work cannot merely perform reparations through the rehearsed vocabulary of “injustice, suffering, tragedy, inspiration, and
transcendence” [Sharpe 71], which pacifies and reorders the historical narrative into a cohesive, teleological whole, from tragedy to redemption. Instead, memorial work must draw on experimental poetics and explore the impossibility of resolution as the grounds for a collective reckoning and for a radical re-imagining of Blackness.

The materiality of language and literature allows Lewis to eschew assigning final authority to the memorial work performed by the multiple subjects in the collection. The memory of the black women she has painstakingly untangled from the web of Western aesthetic discourse in which they are caught, cannot be solidified into a conventional discourse of memorialization; otherwise it loses its radical emancipatory and imaginative potential. Lewis achieves this by rooting her poetics in experimentation: shifting pronouns; preventing the reader from tracing the source of her citations and thus from constructing an authoritative framework in which historical discourse could be stabilized; and integrating the dual dynamic of “redaction and annotation” [Sharpe 121].

Sharpe perceives “[r]edaction and annotation” as a new grammar of Blackness that locates the writers and artists she studies (NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Charles Gaines) in a movement “toward seeing and reading otherwise; [...] toward seeing something beyond a visuality that is, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) argues, subtended by the logics of the administered plantation” [121]. In this respect, Voyage of the Sable Venus is a project of redaction and annotation that allows Black womanhood to live and be seen/represented in excess of what has been captured and recorded in the archive(s). The second section is most visibly associated with redaction: it wrenches the texts from their context so that we are unable, for the most part, to locate the art objects to which they refer. Only the more modern works, with distinctive titles, can eventually turn up in a search, but Lewis integrates them all within a text that has transformed their original grammatical structure: “No title could be broken or changed in any way. While the grammar is completely modified—I erased all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented” [35]. This results in a disarticulation from the referential framework and a disruption of expectations, most visible when the poems consist of anaphoric lists, as with sections in “Catalog 3” and “Catalog 7.” Section XIII, in particular, contains a striking line: “Nossa—Nuestra—Notre—Nera—” [69]. The homophonic proximity of the first three words, meaning “our,” and the last one, meaning “black” (gendered as female), is another subtle gesture toward the need for a collective reappropriation of Blackness.

The first section of “Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial” also exemplifies this process by using line breaks to constantly shift our way of seeing. Opening with “Alabama Sketchbook,” the poem starts with an ekphrasis of a seated Black woman drawing:

- half-length image
- of a Young Negro Woman
- wearing a Dress with an Empire.
- Waistline and pear,
- earrings and necklace [71]

This act of inserting a full-stop where there was none, and thus of opening up a title that contained the Black body it described within a certain form of violence to new imaginings, occurs several more times in the poem, signifying a quasi-ontological shift: “Negro Man strapped to a ladder, Being. / Lashed” or “Negro Man at right, Being. / Held by the collar” [72]. The full-stop and the line break after Being force a pause to
reflect on this sudden image of a Black man in a state that slavery negated: just “Being.” What follows then reasserts the full force of the violence perpetrated on the Black body, but this pause (this small relief) creates an aperture in the representation and in the archive, an opening through which could be articulated another vision of Blackness.

The first and third parts, in turn, perform annotation: they frame the core text and offer a more personal exploration of what Black womanhood, and Blackness in general, may be. We start within a position of intimacy (the very first poem, “Plantation,” articulates the complex grammar of race, gender, and sexuality), move toward the disembodiment generated by Lewis’s specific treatment of the archive(s), and back into the intimacy of personal trauma, sensual and religious experiences, and the lacunas of family trees. The closing poem, “Félicité,” reflects on the lineage of the poetic subject who confronts a truth she has long sought to avoid (and to avoid uttering) by any means possible: “The black side of my family / owned slaves” [133].

Marie Panis, a “femme de couleur / libre” [133], married her son to “her ‘favorite’ slave: a girl named Félicité” who had a twin sister named Françoise [135-136]. The existence and fate of the latter remain a mystery, so the poet reimagines her as a type of hummingbird, the “Ruby Throated,” which alone “crossed / the Mississippi” [132]. We can read in this metamorphosis both the conventional trappings of bird imagery, as a symbol of flight, freedom, and the heavens, and a retelling of the folk figure of the Flying Africans — slaves who had the power to fly and escape slavery [22]. Gay Wilentz analyzes the symbolism of flight within this myth, showing it “functions not merely as an individual or ‘universal’ symbol of transcendence, but as a collective symbol of resistance by a specific group within a socio-historical context” [21]. The authors Wilentz studies have all integrated this myth into their works, and thus “present an alternative reality in opposition to the hegemonic myth-making of eurocentric white, Western culture” [21]. Closing Voyage of the Sable Venus on this image — the Black woman turned hummingbird — situates the poems in a certain literary and cultural lineage that provides relief from the archive(s) by suggesting new imaginaries rooted in collective folklore.

Each poem of the collection also performs, internally, the dual dynamic of redaction and annotation. For example, “Lure” opens with “I was not there” and closes with “any longer.” Its long middle section consists of one long parenthesis, which runs across several indented stanzas, where every sentence is negative. “Lure” recounts one episode of sexual assault the subject had to endure as a young girl, at home, at the hands of an older male relative. The grammar of the poem keeps insisting it did not happen, seemingly redacting the event from memory; yet the lengthy parenthesis, itself an additive punctuation mark, accumulates the details of the non-event and materializes the dissociative state of mind the subject finds herself in, both as a child and as an adult remembering the event. The poem is an exercise in how traumatized memory works: negating yet reaffirming the event, through syntactic detours and subterfuges. It also conjures other figures — the grandmother, working on her sewing in another room; the mother and the father who were outside the house at the time — and the mother in particular who is also a victim of sexual abuse by the rapist referred to as ‘you’. This constellation of figures is needed for the subject to identify the pain and violence she suffered and to confront the memory — and the ongoing trauma it created.
In the first section, “verga :” takes a quote from a Kenyan refugee: “...women don’t want the men to go into the bush because the women will only be raped but the men will be killed...I have seen a woman who was caught in the bush by several men. They tied her legs to two trees while she was standing. They raped her many times and before leaving her they put stones in her vagina...” [16]. The poem then dismembers and recomposes the grammar and the vocabulary in fourteen lines that make sense grammatically but not semantically to illustrate the absurdity of the sheer violence deployed against Black women: “Before leaving her they put stones in her vagina / The men will only be raped but the stones will be killed / The bush caught many men to go into the stones” [16]. The word “woman” never appears throughout the poem: her absence (her redaction) from the text repeats the erasure perpetrated by sexual violence in the original quote, since rape, predicated on power, seeks to annihilate the selfhood of the victim. In parallel, the Oulipian-like reconfiguration of the initial quote acts as annotation on this violence, and the use of the sonnet form highlights the tension between a set formal structure and the impossible containment of the violence, as it is linguistic, physical, and systemic. The poem speaks to the specific forms of violence occasioned by forced displacement, war, and sexual domination; the abundance of plural nouns points to the need for an understanding of how this violence is perpetrated and could be resolved collectively.

The dual experimental dynamic of annotation/redaction activates here a personal reckoning, with the poetic subject tackling the complexities, lacunas, aporias, and permanent silences of her family archive(s), and paves the way for a collective form of memorial work by bringing in other members of the subject’s community to confront and explore the familial and communal heritages. Archives have obvious limits; one individual cannot alone recover what is missing in order to recover and repair historical memory: this is where the collective reckoning of memory must intervene, since it brings in a multiplicity of voices running counter to the univocal, hegemonic narrative of nation and self. In turn, “[t]his investment in the text, then, creates the possibility of transferring historical memory to a community of readers, a community with the potential to construct and nurture collective memory” [Peterson 14]. Lewis makes this transmission from writer to reader manifest, stating “we want your company” in her epilogue [157]: the poems enact a form of collective memorial work as a blueprint for their readers to translate it into the present of the wake.

**Conclusion**

As an epigraph to the long list of museums that provided the material for her poems, Lewis writes: “Art hurts. / Art urges voyages—”, a quote by Gwendolyn Brooks [111]. The quote is layered (haunted) with echoes: Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “History is what hurts” [88], and the resonance of the term voyage, deeply associated to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The past is trauma. Through her exploration of Western art archives, Lewis confronts the collusion between Western art and these doomed voyages, but also gestures at possibilities of evasion, resistance, and transformation through a type of memorial work that restores individuality to those who have been historically dispossessed of their humanity and that recenters a collective, communal construction of identity and imagination. Her writing reflects this process: predicated on experimentation, irresolution, multiplicity, and polyphony, it seeks to reimagine
what Black womanhood (and Blackness more broadly) is in the wake, and what it could be beyond the wake.

Nancy Peterson highlighted the crucial role of literature in confronting the silences of the archive(s) because, unlike history, it hinges on “imaginative speculation”, and thus is “essential, if not to restore the record through speculation, to mark the spaces, gaps, aporias that cannot be filled” [9]. Saidiya Hartman goes further and interrogates the ethical concerns behind reconstructing a narrative or a poetics out of the archive: “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?” [4]. She concludes by stating: “We begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world”, even when we must accept “the ongoing, unfinished and provisional character of this effort, particularly when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue” [14].

We find the strongest materialization of this process in Black women’s writings, which tackle the archive(s) of slavery in order to reclaim the process of reparation for themselves. The archives to which they turn are of various and often intersecting natures: legal records (as in NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!), science-fiction and speculative literature (as with Pauline Alexis Gumbs’s M Archive), or aesthetic, as with Lewis. And yet, all these archives yield one common conclusion: excavating, resisting, and disrupting them implies a radical refashioning of identity and temporality. Only by confronting and disrupting these archives can the writers “imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (Hartman 4). “Art hurts. Art urges voyages—”: Voyage of the Sable Venus’s own art reclaims and urges voyages of another kind — into the depths of historical and ongoing trauma, into the violence wrought upon Black women’s bodies, and out onto wholly new shores that writers such as Robin Coste Lewis are imagining into existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Lewis 54.
2. I will come back to this spelling in my first part; I follow here the distinction that scholars in archival studies such as Terry Cook and Michelle Caswell have made between ‘the archive’ and ‘archives.’ The spelling ‘archive(s)’ allows to hold both meanings simultaneously.
3. Lewis grew up as a Black girl in Compton, California; as an adult, she suffered from an accident that caused brain damage, kept her bedridden for two years, and ultimately redefined her very relationship to writing (Chen).
4. 2014 was the year Michael Brown was shot by a police officer. He was not the only victim of police violence and anti-blackness that year, but his death sparked what is now known as the Ferguson riots, and the Black Lives Matter movement formed in its wake, highlighting the need for a national reckoning.
5. The collection was immediately acclaimed for its scope and methodology, and won the 2015 National Book Award, signaling that Voyage of the Sable Lewis had garnered sufficient recognition for the U.S. literary establishment to take notice of and to center such a pointed commentary on race, gender, and history.
6. Sharpe uses this contracted version of “imminence” and “immanence” to materialize how they function together [133].
7. Lowenthal may at times judge modernism and postmodernism a little too quickly for making ‘truth’ “passé” in the revised edition of his monograph; but his main argument, about the shifts in understanding the past in the Western world, remains persuasive [3-15].
8. The twenty-first century furthers this shift: scientific developments have deepened our understanding of the “deep” past of the planet; geopolitical events have significantly transformed our perception of the world and of ourselves as social and cultural entities; and new technologies have accentuated a visual turn in history, with images saturating our grasp of the past [Lowenthal 12-14].
9. “National myths are concrete, material, and intimate” because they require the archive(s) to shape it [Patel & Moore 203]. The emergence of nation-states correlated with the development of print capitalism and an untethering from sacred, religious authority in the Western world, as Benedict Anderson has argued in Imagined Communities.
10. Sara(h)/Saartje Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa and perhaps the most famous “Venus.” Often called the “Hottentot Venus,” she was exhibited in European human zoos and attracted attention because of the size of her genitalia, perceived as grotesque. She was the object of scientific curiosity; after her death, her body was dissected by Cuvier, and was used by Western scientists to legitimize their claims of scientifically-bolstered racial hierarchies (Gordon-Chipembere 4).
11. Museums and monuments remain, after all, loci of power. Along with the recently opened National Museum of African American History and Culture (a Smithsonian institution that was established in 2003 and opened in December 2016), the Memorial On April 26th, 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (which opened in Montgomery, Alabama in April 2018, and is informally known as the National Lynching Memorial) is one of the very few places in the United States that directly engage with Black history on the national level. To this date, however, there is no national memorial of slavery.
The museums are overwhelmingly located in the West, with a few exceptions, such as Sudan, Egypt, and Brazil.

Not necessarily a white male subject, since white women have been involved in the editorial and publication process of life-stories by Black men and women. As Jean Humez has discussed, “important and complex issues of unequal power over representation of women’s experience arise in studying and teaching those nineteenth-century African American women’s life-history texts that were produced in collaboration with white political allies” [29].

Barbara Smith’s influential 1977 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” articulates the need to recognize “the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class [as] crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women” [170]. The ideas contained in the essay have been largely discussed and refined by thinkers such as Deborah McDowell, Michelle Wallace, Hortense Spillers, or Hazel Carby.

In an epilogue added to the paperback edition of Voyage of the Sable Venus, Lewis notes her joyful astonishment at finding how widespread reverence for “the Black Virgin” is: “the Cult of the Black Virgin is one of the largest active goddess cults on the planet” [153].

Other deities, such as Isis and Sekhmet, also appear in the poems.

Wallace Stevens, who infamously used a racial slur when he saw a photograph of Gwendolyn Brooks (Jackson), and was known for his anti-Black and anti-Semitic language.

As always, the figurative violence is rooted in a physical, historical violence: slaves were routinely mutilated and dismembered.

In an interview with Angela Chen from The Guardian, Lewis declared, “I would like to go into the desert and write about salamanders and the Grand Canyon, but history keeps rupturing my experience because politics are everywhere”.

I take ‘experimental’ here to broadly mean any writing that departs from conventional and dominant modes of representing and thinking, even occasionally. The modes of experimentation differ from writer to writer, but there are recurring characteristics: these writers explore the visual and aural aspects of the text; disrupt conventional grammar, syntax, and phonetics; resist dominant narratives of the nation and of the self-fixated on purity and teleology.

Nancy Peterson writes: “This investment in the text, then, creates the possibility of transferring historical memory to a community of readers, a community with the potential to construct and nurture collective memory” [14]. While the texts she analyzes, all novels by U.S. women writers of color, may not seem experimental, I would argue that by virtue of being written women of color, these texts fundamentally depart from conventional literary traditions (themselves articulated through the works of white male writers) and thus are indeed experimental.

The lore of the Flying Africans, most often tied to the mass suicide of Igbo slaves in 1803, is widespread as a narrative of resistance. More broadly, birds have provided a complex source of symbolism in Black American literature. Maya Angelou’s famous autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings takes its title from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy.” Ishmael Reed named the protagonist of his novel Flight to Canada, Raven Quickskill; Charles Chestnutt’s stories feature characters transformed into birds. Pre-1900 Black poetry, starting with Phillis Wheatley, has been dismissively nicknamed the “Mockingbird School” [Gates xviii, 43]. The undeniable symbolic place of birds, both positive and negative, in Black literature has been discussed by several scholars. Valérie Barda notes how, in Owen Dodson’s Amistad, birds are “used as both symbols of fading memory and cultural disconnection and at the same time as emblems of freedom” [51]. Susana Vega González has analyzed the appearance of birds in Toni Morrison’s works, noting the territorial and maddening aspects of the hummingbird in Beloved [81-82].

An online database called Voyages (slavevoyages.org) documents almost “36,000 slaving voyages.” In the paperback’s epilogue, which Lewis titles “Boarding the Voyage,” she highlights how the collection came about, and the implications of her search for the Venus across the
world. There, she disrupts and complicates the images of the sea, the ship, and the voyage, these symbolic loci of the project of slavery, by re-imagining the voyage as a ship where all the Black female bodies she comes across can embark. The ship transforms into a pirate ship, "an invisible ancient ship of black women," "an Ark" [156].

ABSTRACTS

This article discusses archival and memorial work in the poetry collection *Voyage of the Sable Venus* by Robin Coste Lewis. I track Lewis’s experimental poetic strategies to confront and unsettle archival silences and erasures when it comes to Black female bodies in the archive of Transatlantic slavery. These strategies resonate with Christina Sharpe’s wake work and Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of an ethical engagement with the archive. By striving to individuate the figure of the Black woman in history, and by predicating memorial work on a collective engagement with the past, Lewis paves the way for a radically new articulation of Black womanhood that shatters and goes beyond the hold of the archive.

Cet article traite du travail d’archive et de mémoire dans le recueil *Voyage of the Sable Venus* de Robin Coste Lewis. Je mets au jour les stratégies que déploie Lewis dans sa poésie expérimentale pour confronter et déstabiliser les silences et oubli qui caractérisent la présence de femmes noires dans les archives de l’esclavage transatlantique. Ces stratégies font écho au concept de *wake work* de Christina Sharpe et à la discussion menée par Saidiya Hartman sur l’éthique de l’intervention en archive. En s’efforçant d’individuer la figure de la femme noire à travers l’histoire, et en faisant d’un engagement collectif avec le passé la base même du travail mémoriel, Lewis ouvre la voie pour une articulation radicalement nouvelle de la féminité noire, qui brise et dépasse le carcan de l’archive.

INDEX

**Quoted persons:** Hartman (Saidiya), Lewis (Robin Coste), Sharpe (Christina)

**Keywords:** American poetry (21st century), Black poetics, archives, experimental poetics, memory, slavery, Venus, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, *wake work*

**Mots-clés:** archives, esclavage, mémoire, poésie américaine (XXIe siècle), poésie expérimentale, poésie noire américaine, Venus, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*

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