ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies

The Machete Must Not Go: Disarming Political Affect after Plantations

Mat Keel

Yes We Cannibal
mat@matkeel.net

Abstract

Trauma is increasingly representationally overworked but conceptually undertheorized. This paper intervenes by arguing that the post-traumatic trigger is best understood as a diagram rather than a representation, not a symbol of trauma but a material component of it. Two ethnographic vignettes ground a speculative examination: in 2023, cane machetes were removed from a New Orleans gallery exhibition, and my third-grade son in Baton Rouge was censured for asking why his school sold chocolate made by enslaved labor during Black History Month. Across both, institutions manage political affect (the capacity to affect and be affected) as if the machete were a symbol whose danger follows from what it means and could therefore be contained by subtraction. I name this operation *representational foreclosure*: the preemptive withdrawal of an object from relation. The movement performs as protective care, but like the ongoing absence of a National Slavery Museum, which Sharpe (2016) argues is itself epistemic, this withdrawal does not shield the wounded; it only redacts violence. The operation also does not map to its stated object. The trigger operates diagrammatically, by threatening to re-enact the force-assemblage of which the machete was a material part, not by signifying. The plantation assemblage persists without the machete present; foreclosure manages the symbolic register while leaving untouched the diagrammatic capacity it cannot reach. The vignettes foreground a political technology in which institutions operationalize a representational model of trauma to foreclose on the conditions of their own disassembly.

Keywords

plantation geographies, representational foreclosure, political affect, machete, diagram (Deleuze)

Published with Creative Commons licence: Attribution–Noncommercial–No Derivatives

> Before the war in this village, if a boy or a young man were walking on the path with a machete, it would be only looked at: that boy was coming from a farm. … now when you see a young person carrying a machete, people are afraid to pass them on the path, because holding a machete now has *a newer way that you look at it*. So, how do you change that image? How do you stop looking at it that way?
> Ishmael Beah, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, February 21, 2007

> Deleuze proposes that thinking consists not in problem-solving…but on the contrary, that given the real (though virtual) existence of problems in the world itself, true thinking consists in problem-posing, that is, in framing the right problems rather than solving them. It is only through skillful problem-posing that we can begin to think diagrammatically.
> Manuel De Landa, "Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Genesis of Form" (1998)

Introduction

How does absence become intensity? The question emerges from a point of divergence with the frameworks of Freudian repression. This paper is structured around the figure of a machete that did not appear. It wonders why a thing which we have heretofore understood as an object begins, in its disappearance, to appear as what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called a diagram. It is approached in a series of questions about how trauma is represented and how these representations become operative. From this position, trauma begins to appear as a mode of politics, one that constitutes what is allowed to circulate in the social/material field. The paper insistently returns to one point of intervention: the trigger is not a symbol of trauma; it was always a material component of it.

In recent years, trauma has been representationally overworked while remaining remarkably undertheorized. The paradox is particularly clearly registered in the scalar movement from conceptualizing individual psychological trauma to conceptualizing collective or social trauma, an overture that activates the grammar of space and spatialization. In contemporary anthropological and geographic thought, the plantation serves as a privileged intermediary form in this movement. Recent critical geography, in particular, has made a productive insistence that the plantation be understood not as any historical residue but as a persistent and mutable assemblage. The conceptual labor of plantation afterlives, contributed by McKittrick (2006, 2013), Woods (1998, 2017), Wright (2020), and Bledsoe (2017; Bledsoe and Wright 2019), and grounded in foundational accounts of plantation spatiality and its persistence (Gilmore 2002; Hartman 1997; Wynter 2003; Yusoff 2018), is not limited to explaining historical continuity. It also articulates the founding and repeating spatial and semiotic operations of the plantation form as it insinuates contemporary affects and landscapes.

The machete that appears and disappears in this paper extends this geographic insistence. It attends to how the institutional removal of ontological potencies enacts what I name *representational foreclosure*: the preemptive withdrawal of the machete's diagrammatic capacity to make the plantation sensible. At the same time, it points to the inescapable intimacy of the plantation in its afterlife, as both a precedent for ongoing and

deeply embedded strategies of spatial and cultural resistance, and a continued progenitor in the production and stabilization of racialized affects (Berg and Ramos-Zayas 2015).

What follows is a series of ethnographic vignettes, gathered in sometimes incidental encounters: attending an art opening, participating in studio visits, interviewing a gallerist, emailing with my son's elementary school teacher, touching a collection of cane machetes. Before these encounters, it was not apparent that these sites belong to one assemblage or shape a shared problem. They do not share a thematic category or narrative grammar, yet nor do they cohere only through my assembly; this is not an autoethnographic account (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). The present work is an exercise in thinking diagrammatically, for which the unit of analysis is the operation, not the subject. The revelation of the sites' shared assemblage indexes a convergence between method and theoretical apparatus: a progressive commitment to encounter the object as a diagram rather than symbol. While the titular machete is the figure at the heart of the two most important vignettes, it does not appear - as an object - at the site of either, but as a configuration of forces that organizes an assemblage and that determines what can become intelligible within it. This paper is not about what the machete means as a symbol of plantation violence, but what it can do as a diagram that organizes plantation violence. What can it assemble? What can it disassemble? How does it persist? What happens when it is removed?

Subtraction

In February 2023, my son's third-grade teacher emailed to tell me that, earlier that morning, he had raised his hand in class to ask, "why are we celebrating Black History Month but selling chocolate made by slaves?" This had distressed some students, she said, and asked me to talk to him about why the question was not "appropriate." Earlier in the year, I had denied him permission to participate in the school's chocolate bar fundraiser. The company providing the chocolate has been scrutinized for labor tactics that are overtly predatory. Their raw product is well-known to be harvested with forced labor.[1] I had told my son, as gently as I could, about children of his age forced to work long hours into a state of exhaustion, hacking into the tough fibrous cacao pods, and how the machetes often leave their bodies disfigured with many bearing permanent scars, some even missing limbs. I never announced to him that there was a connection between Black History Month and cacao plantations or his school, which sits less than a mile from the site of Magnolia Mound, one of the most historically prominent plantations in this city that we moved to when he was five years old.

Shortly after the opening of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, artist/writer Hannah Black wrote an open letter to the museum, demanding the removal and destruction of *Open Casket,* a painting by Dana Schutz which visually re-imagines Emmett Till's murdered body by passing it through the artist's signature style of abstraction. The letter operates by a strong analogy between the painter's process and extraction in general: "it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time," she wrote (quoted in Greenberger 2017). Black's choice of the

[1] The name of the company is withheld. It is only one of many that has continued to use child labor in the decades since the Harkin-Engel Protocol (2001), an international agreement towards ending forced labor, including child labor, in West Africa.

word transmute is pivotal. In aesthetic terms, the word can indicate a phase shift - some change in form or another essential quality - but it also has another distinct juridical meaning in which it names the reclassification of an asset in a manner that changes the terms of the asset's ownership. The argument was animated by its reference to Cheryl Harris's (1993) paradigmatic argument that whiteness can be understood as an ensemble of racialized property rights including, in this case, unfettered creative license. Black's letter suggested two processes working at once through the same object: first, in an aesthetic register, and second, in a juridical register.

Art, she continued, should function foremost as a reparative imaginary towards living in a manner that is not founded on the "barbaric realities of racial and gendered violence," which she contrasted with lesser modes of thinking about art that rely on "empty formalism or irony." The painting was reified as an unequivocal act of appropriation, preempting any ability to speak to the relationship between representation and violence.[2] One operation, in the aesthetic register, was foreclosed while another, in the juridical register, was essentialized.

The painting might have said something else. It might have spoken within the long lineage of critical aesthetic engagements with violence. Francis Bacon, for instance, acknowledged that violence and the deterritorialization of the figure in his work operated as a strategy to "unlock all kinds of areas of feeling and possibility" (Hyman 2008), while Deleuze (1981[2005]) wrote an entire book in dialogue with Bacon's work to articulate his own theoretical framework of sensation and non-representationalism. The painting might have been a natural party to this dialogue about abstraction and violence where it relates to painting and representation at large, and as Schutz evidenced a reflexive occupation with violence and the ethics of representation. While her comments about motherhood, empathy, and shame were widely scrutinized, her engagement with the former conversation and its historical context was mostly ignored.

But this paper is functionally ambivalent about the painting, the artist, and even the argument made by the letter writer. The episode is raised here as the first example of an institutional response to a piece of ultracontemporary art that involves racialized violence but was preemptively assimilated into an enveloping social field, breaking the frame of its governing institution. Where Black and others, such as Christina Sharpe (2016), have performed critical interventions at the scale of the museum, this paper attends to a much leaner incident of curatorial trouble which took place at a commercial gallery in New Orleans in the spring of 2023, discovering its resonance with the episode in my son's classroom in Baton Rouge.

The artist in New Orleans, sculptor Dawn DeDeaux, was part of a separate episode of curatorial trouble thirty years earlier. During a breakout moment in her career, works from her series *Soul Shadow* were included in Thelma Golden's landmark *Black Male* (1994) show at the Whitney Museum. The exhibition opened two months after the publication of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's discredited tome *The Bell Curve* (1994) and just two years

[2] See Coco Fusco's (2017) response to Hannah Black: "Whether [she] intends it or not, her dismissive treatment of Schutz's painting, her essentialist position on Black and white racial identities, and her use of offense as a rationalization for censorship reinforce elitist and formalist views that ethical considerations don't belong in the aesthetic interpretation of art."

after presidential candidate Bill Clinton infamously appeared at Stone Mountain, the site of both an annual Ku Klux Klan gathering and a replica plantation inspired by *Gone with the Wind*. Campaign staff staged a photographic scene in which the candidate visually offset himself and a small group of white advisors against neat rows of imprisoned Black men in all-white uniforms. His opponent in the Democratic primary, Jerry Brown, remarked that Clinton looked like a "colonial master," but a corollary truth went unsaid – the prisoners must, in turn, have looked like slaves (Robinson 2016).

The pieces that Dawn DeDeaux showed in *Black Male* had been made during a two-year collaborative relationship with a group of incarcerated Black men. Working with her jailed collaborators, the artist produced a series of portraits that played with embodiment and cultural stereotypes of heroic white violence, performing an aesthetic citation of figures like John Wayne and others. But when the series was installed at the Whitney, a collection of audio recordings that the artist had made in dialogue with her collaborators was absent. The portraits were operatively decoupled from their processual documentation, allowing the viewer to read the images as the unidirectional gaze of a white woman upon a group of Black men.

Some critics perceived her focus on violence and regalia as predictable, arguing that she had failed to probe the problematics of representation and Black masculinity with any subtlety. One remarked on the "ardor" of her photographic gaze, implying that a barely latent eroticization had corrupted the work, which evoked taboos about the expression of sexuality between white women and Black men in the American South. One critic was more positive, intoning that an image "shed new light on paintings like Poussin's *Narcissus*," suggesting that the photograph's subject had "offer[ed] up his lovely, doomed body to the spectator like a gift on the surface of the picture plane" (Nochlin 2017). But another writer offered a more negative take, lamenting the lack of a clear "critical edge" that might follow from "posing him" as such (Kimmelman 1994). Removing the accompanying documentation produced a double bind: either the doomed subject had served himself to the viewer or he had been coerced without agency. Curatorial subtraction did not just remove context; it also created an interpretive epistemic framework.

In April of 2023, two months after the episode in my son's classroom and nearly three decades after the *Black Male* show, Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans opened DeDeaux's *Bitter Sweet Crust*. The show marked the artist's first solo exhibition following a major retrospective at The New Orleans Museum of Art, featuring an aesthetically and conceptually ambitious new body of work exploring the agencies of sugarcane in the globalization of agriculture as well as its historical roots in the Gulf Coast.

When I saw the artist at the opening, I told her that I had been especially drawn to one piece, *Portrait of Curved Blade in Indigo*, an intimate macroscopic photograph of a cane machete that she had chosen to print on aluminum. A slight constriction registered in her brow; she told me that she had originally intended to include many more machetes in the show, and I sensed that something important was absent. When I visited her studio several months later, she told me that *The Armory Room: Tools and Workers*, the installation from which the machete portrait came, had never been completed. DeDeaux had intended to install a row of old machetes in the gallery, but the plan was abandoned at the last minute during installation. From her description, I pictured a form like the saber arch at a military wedding, a tradition rooted in early 19th-century white romanticism. DeDeaux had filled the

absence by replacing the machetes with macroscopic photographic portraits of retired agricultural tools, each one printed on aluminum and paired with a framed period postcard from a 19th-century plantation.

There is some disagreement about what exactly led to the machetes being removed from the show, but the basic facts are not disputed. A couple visiting during an early viewing before the opening reported to gallery staff that the machetes upset them. Neither the artist nor the gallerist was present in the gallery when the report was made but they reached a working agreement to remove the machetes from the exhibit. Both the artist and gallerist relayed to me that the couple said they were "triggered" by the work, but these reports are hearsay and the chain of relay is not reliable.

In the reflective space of her studio, DeDeaux shared the cane machetes with me. I found myself softly mesmerized by their oblong shape, how they distributed their weight, and the latent sense of force they prompted in my palm. They all had a similar patina despite originating from various global regions, suggesting a kind of convergent material history. I wondered what stories were burnished into their blades. I wondered if they contained traces of DNA from those who had handled them. For a moment, the unseen collection became an archive. Then it became an armory.

Diagram

The first citation of a *Plantationocene* occurred in a 2014 conversation between Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway, though the concept recapitulated the foundational commitment of political ecology to refuse passive construction in any explanation for anthropogenic ecological impact that does not attend explicitly to socio-political phenomena (Mitman 2019). The new cognate saturated social and political thought quickly, both as a simple strategy to foreground imbrication between processes like racialization and monoculture and as an ethical stance. If the Anthropocene implied a universalized human subject, its new cognate indicted the plantation system as a diagram for organizing labor, land, and life, its connective capacity affording a way to name how Black bodies have insistently and repeatedly been conscripted to signify both violence and labor, and, indeed, to signify at all.

The machete conducts the same operation.

Fanon writes:

> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships … (Frantz Fanon quoted in Anderson 2014)

When the machete appears, it arrives as a diagram of the sugar plantation complex, organizing forces and relations that disrupt existing structures and generate new combinatorial possibilities. If it began as a material singularization from a precedent diagram, it has been metabolized back into itself repeatedly.

When I visited the gallerist to discuss the machete incident not long after I visited the artist in her studio, his admiration for her work was clear; the real problem, he maintained,

was a matter of taste. Collected objects simply do not pique his interest, he told me. When I asked if there had been other instances in which armaments were exhibited at the gallery, he told me about exhibiting James Drake's glass weapons, conveying his appreciation for their polyvalence, which he described as representing "oppression as well as revolution."[3]

This multivalence also characterizes the machete. A formally elemental object, thickly and repeatedly imbricated with the politics of land and colonial geographies, the machete is too closely associated with uprising to be defined solely by its agricultural function or as an instrument for labor. Across time and often within the same geographic contexts, the machete has been alternately coded as a tool and as a weapon; each use containing the memory of its other. The machete carries the threat of violence and simultaneously reminds the powerful of their dependency on labor, a tension that converges most clearly during the Haitian Revolution, the largest successful armed rebellion by enslaved people in Atlantic colonial history. In Saint-Domingue, cane machetes like those in the artist's studio played a catalytic role. In Louisiana, the cane machete was similarly catalytic for the German Coast Uprising led by Charles Deslondes in 1811, which, in 2019, became the subject of the artist Dread Scott's massive vision, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*.[4]

When I first learned about the machete's removal, my mind immediately flashed on Scott's performance, but then on Chris Rock's farce, *Top Five* (2014), in which Rock stars as Andre Allen, a successful Black movie actor facing mid-life. The character struggles with his antipathy for fame, his tenuous sobriety, and his desire for critical respect, as he prepares to release his first independent feature, a lurid historical melodrama about the Haitian Revolution. Allen has cast himself as Dutty Boukman and a brief clip from the film-within-a-film is almost all machetes. In the equivalent of a dream sequence within a farce, the blades appear voluminously. Their meaning and origin – as an externalization of rage and that which it is formed in relation to – are clear: "the people want to see you in that bear suit," his agent tells him on the occasion of the film flopping, referring to the blockbuster action-comedy movies about an ursine cop which made his fame.

Andre Allen is forced to circulate on terms that are not his own, a misalignment that recapitulates the condition at the heart of the Blues epistemology theorized by Clyde Woods, a Black tradition native to the Mississippi Delta which produces knowledge that refuses and escapes the plantation bloc's total capture of life. In her posthumous introduction to his work, Gilmore (2017) writes that Woods abandoned his original inclination to theorize a Blues ontology. Her suggestion of this ontological register is the recuperation that compels this paper: what does the machete do when it appears, not as a question of meaning but as an operation that makes the plantation assemblage intelligible as well as vulnerable to dismantling?

To understand why the machete's absence unsettles both gallery and classroom, it is imperative to ask how trauma organizes systems of representation and how institutions control that movement, beginning with the proposition that trauma is a mode of politics, not merely its subject. The sugar plantation complex, for instance, does not cohere without the

[3] Arthur Roger, personal conversation. May 2024.
[4] See: Laughland, Oliver. "'It makes it real': hundreds march to re-enact 1811 Louisiana slave rebellion." *The Guardian*. November 11, 2019.

machete. But it is not a simple binding agent; it originates with the violence that holds the assemblage together and also holds the possibility that it might be undone. The machete sutures disparate parts like sugar, race, and plants into something to be narrated, theorized, mourned, and resisted. It conditions the possibility of assembling that thing as legible. Yet the machete does not just sustain the complex materially or historically; the machete also makes it intelligible as an object of thought. Wynter (1971) identified an analogous function in the subsistence plot – not as a site of armed resistance but as a space within the plantation where the condition of enslavement could become known. The machete occupies the same position: where the plantation becomes intelligible, it becomes vulnerable to disassembly.

Notably, the complex does not become similarly thinkable through chocolate, a commodity that is severed from origin and that obscures the plantation from view and prevents its recapitulation. Chocolate also moves within geographic and historical circuits, but it does not prompt connections across time and space or between the plantation landscapes and labor practices of Central Africa and the Gulf South.

The machete enacts and mediates force-relations: it cuts, threatens, harvests, and compels. Alternatively, chocolate is produced by this repertoire of plantation violence but does not participate in its force relations. It can be traumatized while the machete cannot. It bears no traces of labor or the constantly mediated threat of violence native to the sites of its production. The chocolate bar is stripped of memory, its originating temporality is excised and replaced by a mode of circulation native to the socius where it is consumed. This suggests a hypothesis: commodities in general are not simply alienated from their production nor do they simply mediate social relations - they are traumatized. Chocolate operates as an intensity of dissociation.

Christina Sharpe (2016: 20) asks: "how do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead understand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture?" The machete suggests that we cannot: the conditions of its presence have been actively withdrawn.

In his classic work on the sugar plantation complex, *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz (1986: xxiii) describes his Puerto Rican advisor searching for authentic and exotic machetes to impress his friends back in the continental United States: "he examined countless machetes in the island stores … but was dismayed to discover that they were all manufactured in Connecticut - indeed, at a factory only a few hours' drive from the New England school he and his friends were attending." This movement from the core to the periphery is inverse from that of the chocolate bar. The machete is never fully captured as simply a symbol of violence but operates as a potential rupture, a point at which the dissociated temporality of the commodity might stutter or break open. My son knew about the machete; it organized his question - whether or not he knew it – even though he never named it and merely asked about chocolate.

In Baton Rouge, as in New Orleans, the machete never appeared but the question – simple, ethical, and yet taboo - was enough to activate an institutional reflex, as if my son had begun to perform a remembering that was not supposed to happen. As if the removal of the machete argues that violence was incidental, not constitutive. And, in turn, that violence is not necessary to de-constitute anything now.

Foregrounding sugar as an agentive force in colonial networks while excising the machete and its oscillatory mediations of labor and violence resembles the commodity chain itself. Both the machete and Black bodies are regulated through signification, part of the dominant operation by which the plantation system organizes all things: bodies, objects, landscapes, temporalities. The concept of Black fungibility names this as "the treatment of the Black enslaved body as an open sign that can be arranged and rearranged for infinite kinds of use" (King 2016: 4). This disrupts common essentialist emphases on how Black bodies get coded with labor and violence, focusing instead on the condition itself of being made insistently available for mutable but repeated acts of signification in the exercise of what W.E.B. Du Bois (1920[1999]: 33) named "whiteness [as] the ownership of the earth forever and ever."

Neither my son nor his teacher ever mentioned a machete. But I see it immediately when I recall the episode. It is true that we had spoken, at home, about machetes and that his question might be read as the result of transmission, the generational relay of historical consciousness rather than as the machete's own persistence. But the scene does not require adjudication. The episode shows not that he independently discovered the object but that the object remained available to organize the scene. When my son asked his teacher about chocolate and slavery, the plantation assemblage was delivered to the present moment of the chocolate bar fundraiser as the temporary convergence of two dissociated parallel streams, not the production of repression and return – a temporal gap that Freud (1895) named *Nachträglichkeit* - but the instantiation of an assemblage that never stopped at all. The institutional reflex of representational foreclosure does not operate by preempting traumatic recall; it works by foreclosing on the convergence of dissociated streams of unassimilated material as parallel operations that run on the same object. Representational foreclosure then sustains dissociation as a political condition. It is an institutional technology that imposes the grammar of repression onto a field that is structured by dissociation.

The machete is present.

It is the thing that interrupts the rhythm of the school day, an agency that momentarily disorganizes the boundaries of acceptable speech. The legibility of the machete as weapon is prohibited in colonial regimes of signification; its appearance disrupts because it is not forgotten.

The gallery episode then functions as an archetypal performance of the same libidinal movement as in my son's story. The conditions of possibility for assembling or disassembling the plantation are withheld at the gallery and active at the school. The removal of the machete from the gallery is a disarmament. But the maneuver also recapitulates a founding colonial operation described by Fanon. The world is “cut in two” and “inhabited by two different species" (Fanon 1963: 39-40). Where the force operation splits the world, my son’s question threatens to re-suture it. In both cases, these are not merely institutional reflexes but complex spatial-ontological operations – practices that manage what can appear where and under what conditions, that regulate what worlds can be made. The difference between an object of thought and a political overture collapses. In its curatorial subtraction, the machete is subjected to representational foreclosure, while the school incident shows that it persists. The machete appears less like an object than a diagram recursively organizing its conditions of intelligibility and legibility.

Triggers

> Whilst encounters may generate something different as elements come together Fanon teaches us that encounters do not float free from spatially/temporally extended relations, nor are they immediate. Elements from elsewhere or elsewhen will be active participants in how an encounter happens… (Anderson 2014)

Where the present paper deals with affect, it is concerned with force-capacities for affecting and being affected, rather than with interiority or a primary engagement with what happens to bodies and subjects. The distinction is pivotal; the political management of affect here pertains to the regulation of its distribution within possible encounters, or what Anderson (2014) calls apparatuses and conditions. Yet any bifurcation between capacity and circulation is too rigid: affects also stick and accrete (Ahmed 2004), and thus the working concept of affect here names how bodies and objects are arranged in excess of how they appear. Accordingly, the machete's affect is not determined by a privileged identification of its capacity to affect a viewer, but by its semiotic-material capacity to activate assemblages which may include the viewer. How does the plantation appear in the room as an active force-capacity from elsewhere or elsewhen?

In New Orleans, it was not any uprising that caused offense or provoked objection. Before the show opened, an attendant had communicated to the gallerist that a couple visiting the show reported the machetes "triggered the suffering of [the enslaved] in the fields." These words belong to the gallerist, and the report is secondhand for him, so while it is possible that "triggered" was a direct relay by the attendant, it seems equally likely it was the invocation or performance of a concept. In either case, an uncomfortable reaction to historical proximity was swiftly translated into an institutional concept of trauma, then routed into a minor exercise of curatorial discretion, a regulatory political mechanism that presumes the machete operates epistemically.

Colloquial language generally reifies trauma as equivalent to shock: an exceptional act of violence, one that destabilizes the organism and holds it in a state of disequilibrium. The word itself originated in the milieu of the 19th-century surgical theater, giving a name to life-threatening intrusions into the body but was appropriated by the emerging field of psychoanalysis, used to name an overwhelming event of psychic disruption (Leys 2000), and coincident with liberalism by which it comes to mean a disruption to individual sovereignty. Freud amended the concept of trauma to depend on a dialectical process between two events; the first event might still resemble a systemic organismal shock, but trauma emerged only later through a second event in which the subject retroactively comprehended the meaning of the first. In this framework, trauma was not the wound itself but the memory of the wound, deferred and later reconstituted as meaning (Leys 2000). Focusing on the production of meaning forecloses on understanding trauma as a mode of politics, rather than its subject. His focus was on the relationship between memory and subjectification, but his thinking also importantly gestured toward trauma as it is imbricated with - and productive of – temporal multiplicity, correctly and essentially associating trauma with time.

Two different understandings of trauma determine its orientation to the past or the future. In the first view of trauma as epistemic, the trigger is a symbolic operator that plays the role of the narrative structure of an order that inflicted harm. In the second view of trauma as

enactment, the trigger is the catalytic operator of a phenomenological relation; it reactivates the trauma by re-instantiating an experiential link between environment and subject. This indexical, non-signifying account of the trigger follows Janet (1889) rather than Freud to presume that dissociation is primary (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1991). The trigger cannot serve as the preemptive object of legislation for a collective public because it does not operate through symbolic or semantic content. It exceeds capture. It is unpredictable. It operates by indexing to a body, and by contiguity: when a fragment that was present in an assemblage reappears, it catalyzes the constitution of that assemblage and its forces. Someone who experienced a physical assault can be triggered by the color of eyes, the visual texture of a bush, the smell of jasmine, or the quality of light at a particular hour - incoherent elements bound only by the particularity of their shared assemblage, otherwise having no symbolic or narrative relationship with violence in general, nor with the specific event of violence they experienced except that they were materially co-present with it. Both the blossom and the machete connect through material presence in the assemblage, not through what they symbolize. When collective past harm is reframed as scalar or social trauma, the founding relationship between trauma and a body to which it is indexed is replaced with a categorical and symbolic conceptualization of trauma that operates in the register that is managed by representational foreclosure.

In curatorial and institutional settings, sensitivity to trauma is performed with an emphasis on symbolic content over affective shock. Following Guattari's (1984; Genosko 2016) asignifying semiotics, the trigger does not operate within the order of meaning at all.[5] Rather, it is a machinic effect - a break or a charge within a system of signs that bypasses all interpretation and meaning. Its force is not tethered to any regime of representation, but to what it does and its capacity to reroute attention, disrupt cohesion, or activate a latent intensity.

By nearly any definition, trauma creates unassimilated libidinal material that must be integrated or resolved or defused through placement within narrative. However, the very performance of sensitivity that is encoded in institutional protocols relies on narrative, such as the predictive capacity to identify and preempt triggers. When the concept of the trigger is subject to this kind of forced translation from the therapeutic dyad into unidirectional regulation by the institution, affect is paralyzed in a move that aligns with broader cultural shifts toward computational anticipation and predictive foreclosure of libidinal economies.[6] In the case of the gallery or museum, if the work of art arrives already assimilated, it is already resolved. It comes after its own time is over. Similarly, at the point when trauma can be legislated by narrative alone, trauma is integrated and no longer capable of disruption.

The institutional reflex is epistemic. It deals in meaning and narrative. It is managed by warnings or by appeals to sensitivity that ostensibly contain trauma by anticipating and managing it. Yet trauma must be understood ontologically. What does the machete do? What can it assemble and disassemble? What can it make possible? Removal of the machete fails to disarm it. Its force is present in the operation of censure. It does not operate at the level of

[5] See: Genosko, Gary. *Critical Semiotics: Theory, from Information to Affect*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
[6] See: Keel, Mat and Lessner, Liz. "Space to Freak Out: On the risk of the subject and the deferral of Philip Guston" in *Refuse* (2021).

meaning. The assemblage still activates; my son never saw a machete, but he still asked the question.

Wright (2020) proposes a spatial grammar of fugitivity across plantation landscapes; he extends marronage beyond historical reference as the name for an ongoing practice of refusal, a prominent spatial imaginary. His topological commitment to exteriority - a constitutive outside agentively produced as autonomous space - more closely allies with repression (e.g. displacement to an elsewhere) than with dissociation as this paper has engaged. Wright's grammar assumes displacement by a geographic subject who flees to persist intact elsewhere, within an economy of rearrangements. But representational foreclosure names a different operation organized around simultaneity without exteriority. The example of the machete points to gaps, black sites, and asignifying remainders that never cohere into the kind of political subjectivity that could undertake flight in the first place. The plantation relies on a representational foreclosure that prevents flight by preempting the very conditions under which escape becomes legible for what it is. Wright's central invocation of marronage as an ongoing spatial practice rather than a historical event points to the machete: not simply a memory of rebellion but the persistent possibility of disassembly.

In this paper, the identification of the machete as diagrammatic was arrived at by questioning how trauma is deployed in institutional operations. In the case of the machete, representational foreclosure does not deny that slavery happened or claim that the structural violence of the plantation complex was not real, or that the 1811 revolt did not happen. But it prevents that encounter in which historical fact could reassemble as present force. When institutions regulate (or curate) using the syntax of the trigger, they operate within a symbolic register. Certain objects and images represent categories of harm, and their appearance is managed because their representation is assumed to activate distress. This familiar grammar presumes that the relationship between a trigger and a trauma is essentially algorithmic; it says that one can predict traumatic activation by semantic content. The machete represents plantation violence and thus may trigger distress about plantation violence which can be preempted by warning or removal. This is not censorship, which suppresses a content judged dangerous in what it means; foreclosure withdraws an object judged dangerous in what it can do, prior to and independent of meaning. Nor is it Butler's (2009) management of precarity, which tracks the differential distribution of vulnerability across populations; foreclosure concerns the management of a single object's relational potency. And it is not ordinary risk-aversion: it is keyed to ontologically potent objects, and the act of removal is itself the admission of that potency.

The classroom censure was a minor affair, but it illustrates how institutions reproduce by repeatedly foreclosing upon the potential for their disassembly. To treat the machete as an instrument within sugar's dominion - whether by speaking sparingly about it due to its association with slavery or simply continuing to sell chocolate - is an act of disarmament. To withdraw the object from relation is to remove its potential for re-enactment. Allowing artwork to speak of sugar as an agentive entity in colonial networks while censoring the material that embodies both labor and rebellion threatens to erase the very dual signification process it seeks to engage, but with the outcome not determined.

The decision to remove the machete from *Bitter Sweet Crust* and my son's censure in a third-grade classroom are not isolated incidents explained by institutional sensitivity.

Instead, they tell us something important about how institutions regulate association - how they reinvent trauma as a rationale for the management of political affect.

Institutions work with the trigger as symbolic - the machete represents violence and therefore triggers trauma about violence. Yet the trigger operates diagrammatically: the machete was never a symbol of a traumatic assemblage but a material component of it. It doesn't represent plantation relations but was part of the force-assemblage that constituted them, repeatedly, across Haiti, German Coast, Louisiana, West Africa (Bledsoe 2017). The transformation from object to diagram occurs through this accumulation: it becomes saturated by its temporal-historical deployments. When the assemblage persists but the trigger is absent, no threat is neutralized.

Conclusion

> Shall we imagine plantation futures as the forever repeating articulation of bifurcated social categories that precede racial violence, or as oscillatory and unstable not-yet-foregone conclusions (McKittrick 2013)?

By insisting on the disjunctive characterization of the material machete as a diagram, this paper has positioned it against representation, not as a mere symbol of plantation violence but as the very organizing principle that allows plantation systems to become intelligible as objects of thought. Notably, this intelligibility cannot be decoupled from either constitutive or dismantling violence. Whereas commodities are characterized here as traumatized objects, amnesic to their own history, the machete alternatively demands temporal continuity between past and present exploitation.

Institutionalized trauma discourses manage collective political life. When gallery visitors report being "triggered" by the machetes or my son's teacher determines that his question is "inappropriate," trauma becomes the mechanism by which institutions translate moments of historical proximity into therapeutic problems. This enacts a shift from trauma as a mode of politics – the inhabitation of unassimilated historical violence - to trauma as a form of governance that forecloses on such inhabitation.

The pattern extends across various scales as institutions remove or reposition material objects that could activate historical connections. These are not acts of censorship but the attempted exercise of what I have called representational foreclosure, the systematic withdrawal of objects from relation to disarm their political potentiality. As Bledsoe and Wright argue, "anti-Blackness is not incidental to but constitutive of global capital" (2019: 9), a constitution that also unites historical materialist and theoretical registers (Yusoff 2018). This is what the force operation of the machete makes legible and threatens to cleave. What emerges is a framework for understanding how institutions reproduce by managing historical materiality through subtraction. Yet in its afterlife as diagram, the machete organizes possibilities for both assembling and disassembling plantation systems, even when institutions work to contain its appearance.

Where Hannah Black asked for removal to stop appropriation, the machete's persistence suggests that political possibilities also emerge through attending to what institutions prevent from appearing at all. The machete that never appeared haunts institutional spaces as a principle capable of reorganizing the boundaries of acceptable

thought and speech. To inhabit trauma as a political mode rather than excise it through therapeutic mistranslation demands that we attend to these gaps.

The plantation's disassembly is not yet a foregone conclusion.

The machete must not go.

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. "Affective economies." *Social Text* 22(2): 117–139.

Anderson, Ben. 2014. "The Imbrication of Affect." In *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, 77-103. Farnham: Ashgate.

Beah, Ishmael. 2007. "On Child Soldiers, War And Writing." Interview by Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*, NPR, February 21, 2007. Audio.

Berg, Ulla D., and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas. 2015. "Racializing Affect: A Theoretical Proposition." *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 5: 654–677.

Bledsoe, Adam. 2017. "Marronage as a Past and Present Geography in the Americas." *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1: 30–50.

Bledsoe, Adam, and Willie Jamaal Wright. 2019. "The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 1: 8–26.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War*. Verso.

De Landa, Manuel. 1998. "Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Genesis of Form." *ANY: Architecture New York* 23: 30–34.

Deleuze, Gilles. 2005. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. London: Continuum. First published in France 1981 by Editions de la Difference.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1999. "The Souls of White Folk." In *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, 31-47. Mineola, NY: Dover. First published 1920 by Harcourt, Brace, and Company.

Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4: 273–290.

Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1895. "Project for a Scientific Psychology." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 1, 281–391. London: Hogarth.

Fusco, Coco. 2017. "Censorship, not the painting, must go: On Dana Schutz's image of Emmett Till." *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2017.

Genosko, Gary. 2016. *Critical Semiotics: Theory, from Information to Affect*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2002. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1: 15–24.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2017. "Foreword." In *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, by Clyde Woods. London: Verso. EPUB.

Greenberger, Alex. 2017. "'The Painting Must Go': Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work." *ARTnews*, March 21, 2017.

Guattari, Félix. 1984. *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Originally published 1977.

Harris, Cheryl I. 1993. "Whiteness as property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8: 1707-1791.

Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray. 1994. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press.

Hyman, James. 2008. "Violence and Sensation: Francis Bacon and the Remaking of Appearance." *James Hyman Gallery*, September 5, 2008.

Janet, Pierre. 1889. *L'automatisme psychologique: Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*. Paris: Félix Alcan.

Keel, Mat and Liz Lessner. 2021. "Space to Freak Out: On the risk of the subject and the deferral of Philip Guston." *Refuse*.

Kimmelman, Michael. 1994. "Constructing Images of the Black Male." *New York Times*, November 11, 1994.

King, Tiffany Lethabo. 2016. "The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)." *Antipode* 48, no. 4: 1022-1039.

Laughland, Oliver. 2019. "'It makes it real': hundreds march to re-enact 1811 Louisiana slave rebellion." *The Guardian*, November 11, 2019.

Leys, Ruth. 2000. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2013. "Plantation Futures." *Small Axe* 17, no. 3: 1–15.

Mintz, Sidney W. 1986. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin.

Mitman, Gregg. 2019. "Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing." *Edge Effects* 18: 1-19.

Nochlin, Linda. 2017. "From the Archives: Linda Nochlin on Black Male." *Art in America*, February 16, 2017.

Robinson, Nathan J. 2016. "Bill Clinton's Stone Mountain Moment." *Jacobin*, September 16, 2016.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

van der Kolk, Bessel A., and Onno van der Hart. 1991. "The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma." *American Imago* 48(4): 425-454.

Woods, Clyde. 1998. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. London: Verso.

Woods, Clyde. 2017. *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*. Edited by Jordan T. Camp and Laura Pulido. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Wright, Willie Jamaal. 2020. "The Morphology of Marronage." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110, no. 4: 1134–1149.

Wynter, Sylvia. 1971. "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation." *Savacou* 5: 95–102.

Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3: 257–337.

Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.