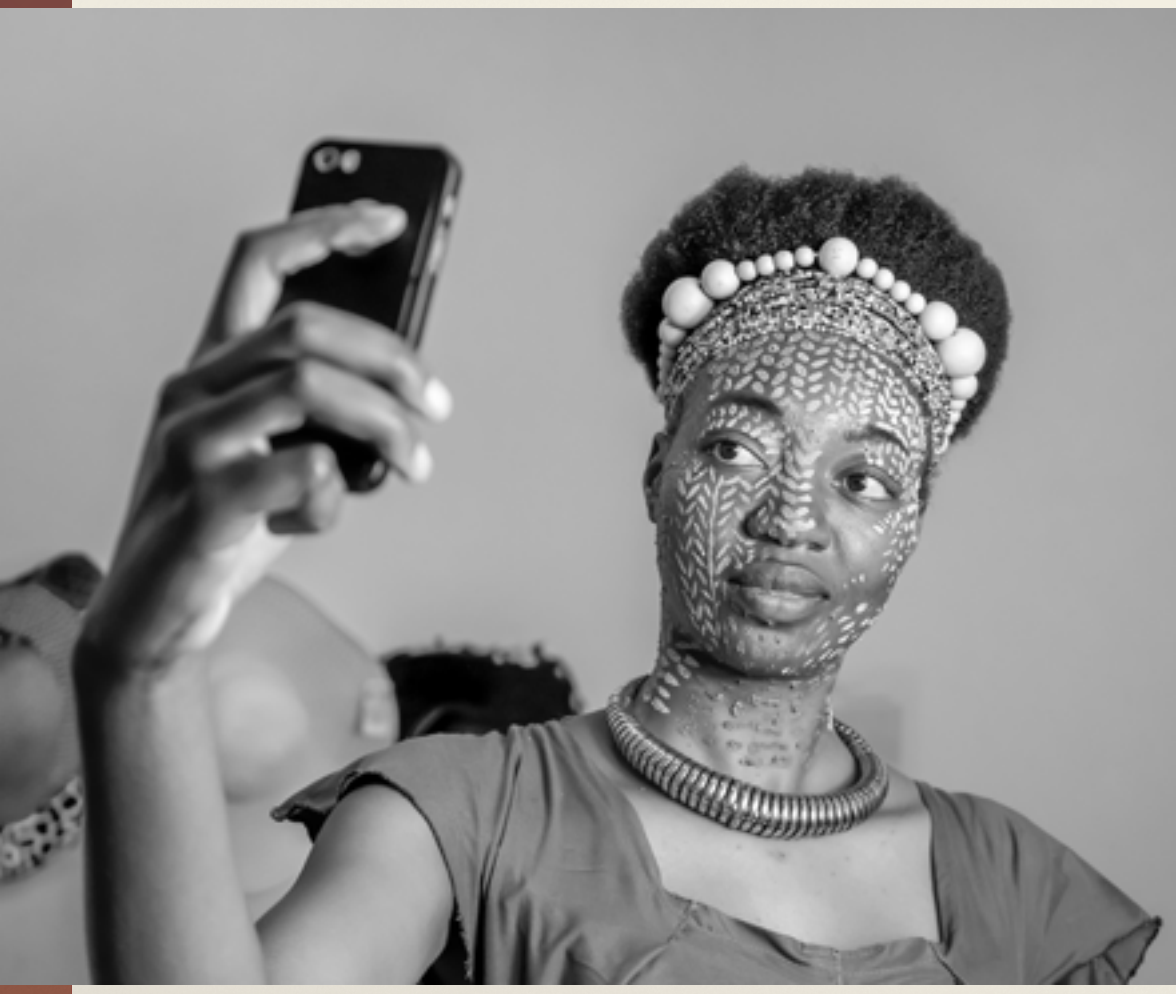

To Be Nsala's Daughter

Decomposing the Colonial Gaze

CHÉRIE N. RIVERS

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for the
disremembered

April, again

To my beloved children,
to my fellow wanderers,

A wise one once told me only a fool
takes a proverb literally. That was
the first gift.

The second was a map oriented not
to space, not to time, but to process.

Together these gifts gave me a certain
kind of courage – to court wisdom knowing
that my light-skinned long-locked body can
never afford to play the fool; to insist
that despite the frequent and frenzied
veneration of thought, process always, always
outweighs product as measure of value.

And for a time, that was enough.

But then came you, ushering in your
infinite wake the maternal gift of
reverent rage. And a riddle:
For to withhold these gifts (of proverb and
process) is to extinguish their power and
thus deprive you of your birthright. But
to unleash them is a cavernous risk against
which there is no guarantee.

I suppose this is why some see in every gift a curse. Indeed, to be allegiant to process is, to some, an invitation to be mistaken; to venerate process is, in one view, to be perpetually out of synch; to live with reverent rage is to rupture. Gift or curse, there is no guarantee.

But there is, perhaps, a hint of grace. For riddles, like proverbs, are mighty teachers. Among other things, they have the power to remind us what is at stake. And beyond the petty stakes of pride or fear of censure, what, to my mind, is at stake is the very prospect of possibility.

And here, precisely, lies the risk: there is no well-worn path to the possibilities I aspire to pursue and yet your life and being hang in the balance. And so it is that reverent rage compels me, without guarantee, to pledge allegiance to proverb, to process, and to possibility. So it is that reverent rage compels me, without guarantee, to bequeath to you a love of riddles, the knowledge that they are everywhere, and all the courage I can muster to live by the simple truth that how and why any particular wisdom came to be is infinitely more important than what anyone might try to convince you it is "about."

This practice has taught me that your birthright is not in fact a matter of gift but a matter of choice. Yours is a choice of blessing or curse, a choice of allegiance.

A choice I put, with love, in your hands.

Contents

Preface

In July 2016, a fight nearly erupted in the *Marché du peuple* in Goma (eastern Congo) over a pop-up exhibition of colonial photographs. The artists who installed the exhibition were enrolled in a workshop, Decomposing the Colonial Gaze, and wanted to see the public's reaction to the images that introduced the Congo to the Western world. Between fishmongers and mountains of used shoes, they hung pictures of slaves amassing ivory, missionaries instructing children in jungles, women and men with scarified faces. But the photograph that sparked anger was of a lone man with an imposing gaze. Art historians captioned it *Chief from Kasai*, but marketgoers questioned why a chief would be pictured without advisers and guards and, more urgently, who had the power to break cultural norms and isolate him.

Their critiques challenge scholarly interpretations of the photographs, of colonial history, and of visual representation. But they were, in effect, uttered in a vacuum—the photographer is long dead, and the scholars who study her archive are in distant institutions; thus their insights were limited to the crowds that chanced through the market. That is, until the artists decided to create new works that speak back—after more than a century—to the historic photographs.

Since then, these artists have produced a body of work that has been described as a "catalytic encounter between contemporary Congolese artists and the archive that codified the aesthetics of

atrocity in the Western world."[1] In the tradition of academic critique, this is an apt description of their works, for they are actively interrupting established ways of representing and intervening in Congolese life.

But there is more to the story than that. Indeed, when pressed, these artists insist it is the process—not any product—of Decomposing the Colonial Gaze that matters most. That it was the process (not any product) that forever changed how they perceive the world, that might change how others, too, perceive. I cannot tell their stories of process; those are theirs to tell. But I can vouch for their insistence on process because I, too, was forever changed by the process of Decomposing the Colonial Gaze.

Oddly enough, it was not my role as coauthor of the Decomposing curriculum that changed me, though that was certainly illuminating. Nor was it my role as coinstructor of the early cohorts, though that was a precious privilege. No, it was not until I applied the process of Decomposing the Colonial Gaze to my own self that I was irreversibly transformed. And that did not happen until I wrote this book.

Truth be told, I set out to write, at arm's length, about the artists and their works; to play my part in the choreography of critique by "theorizing a decolonial aesthetic narrative as it unfolds" (as I proclaimed in my bid for a prestigious fellowship). But when I sat down, in earnest, to write about Decomposing the Colonial Gaze, I found myself in the grip of a grave dilemma. Because, the truth is, Decomposing is not only about learning to recognize (or critique) the colonial gaze; it is about recalibrating one's imagination in order to perceive possibilities rendered invisible by colonial logic. And for all my reverence for the choreography of critique, I am not blind to its role in sustaining colonial invisibilities.

So I chose, instead, to recalibrate my imagination. And that forever changed me. That is, in part, because reckoning with colonial invisibilities robbed me of many familiar words. Gone was my ability to write, say, about "Congo" (or anywhere else branded by nation) without invisibilizing the many other ways of knowing that particular land. Gone, too, was my ability to write about things "past"

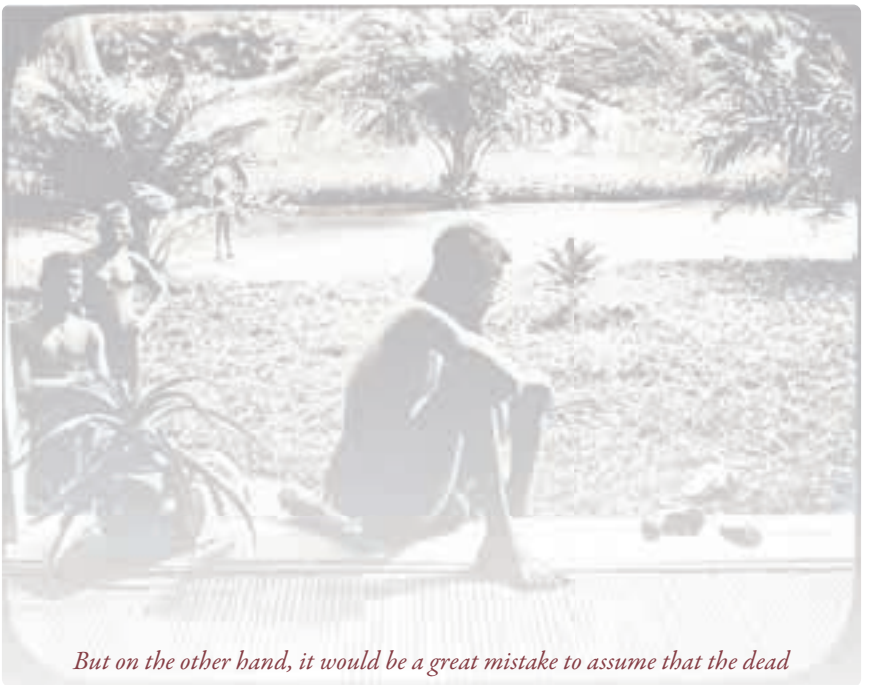
or "present" without invisibilizing the many other ways of knowing the directionality of time. Gone were so many ways of naming and claiming the "people," "places," and "things" about which my "expertise" "qualifies" me to produce "valuable" "knowledge." And gone was my ability—to say nothing of my willingness—to pretend otherwise. This last is, perhaps, the most important. For, thus destabilized in space and time, I found myself in need of new cardinal directions toward which to orient. So that is the story I wrote here—the story of my own reimagining.

Frankly, there is a certain vulnerability to publishing a record of this transformation. Yet that is precisely the urgency of this book: it is vulnerable, and, for those willing to engage the process it details, it is, potentially, transformative. As a Black woman with the privilege of sharing my perspective, my priority for this book is to aid and abet those who counterbalance the tradition of critique with equally robust emphasis on processes that enable—indeed demand—radical shifts of perception and thus of action.

So let me be explicit: this book is very much a process, not a product.

My hope is that courageous readers might engage it as a transformative, rather than an informative, text. That they might see this project not primarily as a disciplined, or disciplinable, scholarly study but an as "invitation to build a renewed imagination" (as one anonymous reader was kind—or keen—enough to suggest).

This matters to me because I have spent this lifetime in a Black body. I have spent it as a daughter, as a mother. And that has taught me, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that learning to see beyond (and beneath, and through) systems of normalized violence is prerequisite to learning to imagine—and to enact—possibilities that actually sustain life.



But on the other hand, it would be a great mistake to assume that the dead are absolutely powerless. They are powerless only to give the full answer to the new questions posed for the living by history. But they try! Whenever they hear the imperious cries of the people in a crisis, the dead respond.

Notes

PREFACE

Epigraph following: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 306.

1 *Transcend Exhibition Catalogue*, 2019, Yole!Africa Archives, Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

2. TO SEE NSALA'S DAUGHTER

1 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 13.

3. TO DECOMPOSE

1 Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 216.

2 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 274.

3 I invoke here Christina Sharpe's multilayered notion of wake: "the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness." Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 17–18 (see also 21).

4 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1991), 82–108.

5 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 36.

4. TO REPLICATE

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 8.

2 Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora," *Paragraph* 17, no. 3 (1994): 207–12.

3 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 8.

4 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 274.

5 Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 120.