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Body Controlled
By Vagner Mendonça-Whitehead

The panel WOKE New Media – Borders and Bodies (its original title), was organized and curated by Mina Cheon. Mina invited me to present and provide a conclusion to the panel; this essay combines elements of the original presentation, portions that were excluded from that presentation due to time constraints, and notions I brought up during the discussion time.

In my art practice, I utilize self-expression to analyze, process, and confront complex ideas that surround me; often times I work from instinct, rather than concept, and retrospectively I articulate the meaning of my work and to find a context for it. Because I often employ representations of my physical self, which falls outside whiteness, shallow interpretation and criticism often repudiate my work as “too personal” or passé. Identity work, until recently, belonged to a small subsect of art works produced in the post-modern period of the last century. While I do not have a problem with that, as the personal is political (especially the personal “other”), I do not consider my work to fall in these categories (personal and identity-based) – I am an actor who holds the mirror for the audience to look at themselves, and not look at my own reflection. What motivates my artistic production is the multitude of stimuli and circumstances I intersect, which I then visually translate through the lens of a queer brown middle-aged immigrant cis man living in the West in the 21st century.

I find this knee-jerk reaction to put my work into the limited “identity” box (gay/brown, must be struggling with his identity), signals a more pervasive problem in the Art World, which bleeds into its New Media Art subsect. Both realms reflect a broader cultural landscape and social portrayal, one that aims to continue to subjugate people who inhabit bodies and places similar to mine. With this in mind, in our current socio-political times, the conversations brought forth through the WOKE panel remain crucial. It is my hope that this essay documents this instance and engenders further dialogue.

Border as shape

I have always been fascinated by the gestural fluidity of political borders, because, in most of the world, they seem to be defined by mutable geographical features (such as rivers and mountain ranges), rather than through visible political/military/human-made force or intervention (US states, with their boxy nature, seem to be an exception). These borders, mostly invisible from the ground, affect the transit of actual bodies in actual space and time.
In terms of representation, bodies seem to be constantly defined, controlled and (re)presented by more rigid borders, as an inheritance from photography’s portrait/vertical and landscape/horizontal rectangular formats (white outlines above have been added by me). These confinements often include textual captioning to complement or inform the accompanying images, either visually or auditory. In my art practice I aim to transgress and defy these rigid borders that confine certain bodies through the use of representations of myself. I will further address photography at the end of this essay.

Vertical Triangle

Letters to the Past (1994), gum bichromate print from digital composite negative, 11" x 7" (L); Persoentage (2006), inkjet prints and two channel video, dimensions varied (R)

In the early part of my career I explored the vertical rectangle in a variety of early digital and photo-based projects, often presenting more than one inadequate descriptive system (thanks, Martha Rosler!), within the same pictorial space. I do not consider these, or any one of my works, to be self-portraits, because very little about my essence is actually revealed. But I cannot assume that I can speak for others; I hold responsibility only over my own body, and the implications that sharing it in public settings may entail. While the vast majority of my viewers (critics and supporters alike) seemed to pigeonhole my work as a process of searching for identity, or wanting to be included in a larger narrative that excludes people like me, I often find this interpretation serving only my white audience’s anxiety when visually confronted with my self/work, and works of practitioners that have been traditionally underrepresented (they do not acknowledge their discomfort or realization that I can only be understood as exotic, rather than average). My goal has always been to confront, confound, and question the spaces and traditions that try to define my work and myself. Rather than affirming any sort of monolithic framing for myself, I have always sought to present the mutability and contingency of being. This potentially paradoxical stance to some extent aims to control and affirm difference, rather than give into the mainstream stereotyping for people of color.

Letters to the Past (1994), was a one-off experimental piece I completed in college, which ended up resonating, many years later, with strategies I have applied since then. In it I digitally combined an enlarged photograph of myself undressed and bent over,
in a position that did not follow the standards for the representation of the male nude body in Art and popular culture back then; this pose did not necessarily fit into pornographic conventions of the time, either. The background of this piece displayed the sequence of images or documentary context from which the larger one was extracted – all of which were juxtaposed by an original poem, written in the first person of speech, that alluded to a fantastical, dreamlike conversation with a mythical past. The work is presented unmated and unframed to show the dissolving borders of the piece and transgress the (then) traditional way to present photographic works.

Twelve years later, during an artist residency at The Center for Photography at Woodstock, I produced the installation titled Persoentage (2006). The impetus for this work was a feature offered through the www.ancestry.com website, which allowed anyone to upload a photograph of themselves and receive a celebrity comparison. I came across this widget while investigating my family history, which was prompted by people's constant pursuit of knowing what my ethnic background I fit into (“how come you do not look like your name?” is a question I still hear at least once a month). Because it seemed so ridiculous that a genealogy-themed website (pre-social media) would want to explore celebrity resemblance, I aimed to expose and test its idiosyncrasies. I uploaded 24 different images of myself, all with different hairdos and makeup, photographed in a neutral, ID-like background and collected the results. I video-taped the makeup and photo sessions (which took place in a few consecutive days), where I started with a fresh face and then slightly manipulated my appearance. Additionally, slogans from beauty products, makeup bi-product waste, Google-search portraits, and quotations alleged to resulting celeb-matches, were composited into the same pictorial space.

All but one image provided a celebrity comparison (even the initial fresh-faced one resulted in a similarity with Mark Ruffalo). The most altered image provided no comparison whatsoever (0% matches found), thus earning the subtitle of “100% Vagner.” I also screen-captured the uploading of images onto the ancestry site and presented all images and videos in the same exhibition space, as an expansion of revealing the creative manipulative process of photography, hypermedia, and cultural identity construction, as it intersected the available technologies of the time.

Horizontal Rectangle

While the vertical rectangle alluded to a tangible form of representation (traditional print photography), in my art practice the horizontal rectangle often displays ephemeral time-based media (relating both to television, cinema, and spirituality). I am fascinated by the ubiquity of the unengaged authority of the one-way telelocutor in video broadcast. Through the medium of video I negotiate both attempts at reclaiming power and control, as well as the giving up of autonomy through objectification and dissolution.

Many of my video works completed in the past twenty years often reverses big media practice by providing a person with no voice or context, in one hand, or oversaturated textual content that provides more undigested information that leaves its viewer with work to do.

Before I began working with video in grad school, my experience in front of the camera included some acting and modeling gigs while in college. My earliest video works were shot and edited in analogue, linear fashion. Headshots was my first non-linear digital video work, where my appearance changed through simple alterations of backgrounds, in-camera effects, repetition, and time compression. Technology mirrors culture; technology is not impartial in its distortion of non-white skin.
For the original six-hour performance, I covered my studio in white materials and constructed jewelry and costume with white, silver, and transparent items. I also bleached my hair blond and painted my nails with silver polish. Viewers could enter the space through one door, a few at a time, and stand behind a white rope, away from the subject in display. On the opposite wall, a looped video projection showed a submerged body in water, in the fetal position, rolling in and out, inhaling and exhaling, suspended between birth and death. Looped 90’s techno music and 80’s Italian opera played within the space, simultaneously, through different devices. During the performance I applied silver makeup onto my face and body. While completely silent, I also interacted with the audience, by painting their finger nails (if visual clues were given as permission), or kissing their hands (leaving silver traces), while tearing off pieces of my garment and environment. Fragments of these encounters were decentralized as the performance progressed and audience members left with my gifts to them; the space was emptier at the end, and I was partially nude.

The Anthropophagic Manifesto, written in 1928, has influenced my strategies in artmaking. Often reduced to a simplistic form of cultural cannibalism, to me it delineates a complex understanding of post-colonial strategies for survival, assimilation, and protest. I align it with sampling and appropriation expressions I witnessed in my youth in popular culture, which, along with a multi-lingual and multi-cultural upbringing, have affected my creative perspective. For this piece, I merged three distinct, and distinctively contested narratives: the history of the banana trade, the rise and fall of Carmen Miranda, and my 30 years of existence in the Americas and Europe.
For *Inheritance*, I video-documented myself spitting into a tube, that was sent to an early for-profit DNA sequencing service funded by a well-known search engine. A few months later the results arrived via email. My DNA makeup or composition did not seem to match people’s perception of my outer appearance (96% European, 3% Asian, and 1% African). Going against everyone’s advice, in this work I fully disclosed all results (including medical data), provided to me in late 2007, through the green text scroll seen above. Along with the scrolling text, an audio narration problematizes the whole process. My goal was to destabilize a given audience’s expectations of what any of this could mean, individually and to a broader context.

As it turned out, which I predicted back then, DNA sequencing is also contingent information, and not definitive proof; my results have changed multiple times since then. By September 2020, At the time of this writing, I have "become" 87.2% European (52% Iberian, 8% Italian, 3% British, 1% Franco-Germanic, .5% Ashkenazi, and the remainder "broadly European"), 4.1% East Asian and Native American, 2.6% West Asian and North African, .5% Central and South Asian, 1% Sub-Saharan African, and 4.5% unassigned (here’s hoping it is octopus or alien DNA). After my immediate family (50% DNA shared on average), my closest genetic “relative”, an unknown 3rd cousin once removed, is a woman born in 1962 in the US (less than 2% similarity). I do not see these results as a source of celebration nor shame, as they do not adequately convey how the outer shell interfaces with the world.

![Golden (2009), silent, color, 9 minutes, looped](image)

After 11 years of working with mostly with layered single-channel videos, I returned to the confrontational silence that simultaneously concealed and revealed a representation of self, thus closing this era of my artistic production. I would not return to a head-and-shoulders format until 2018, when I moved into projected installation work that purposefully abstracted my body, which will appear towards the end of this essay.

![Present (2018), single-channel video, silent, color, 12 minutes, looped](image)

In 2016 I moved to Texas, which coincided with the escalation of negative rhetoric on brown bodies in the public sphere, an increase in the visualization of violence against Black bodies, and the eventual election of the current federal administration. This seemed like the right time to include my transgressive presence in my art practice, which began with two-dimensional mixed media works on fear and violence. By 2018 emotional, psychological, and cultural distress had become manifested into my life in the form of pain, illness, and a series of hospitalizations. In *Present* (which can be pronounced both as verb and noun), the silent figure is merged with MRI imagery, a presidential rally, and a police shooting (seen above, with an outlined perplexed, and mustached, figure, who eventually screams to no one, as no one listens.)
Once I decided to return to the front of the camera, I also became more hopeful for the future. Growing up gay in the 70s and 80s, I never expected to survive past the age of 25. Because I had produced similarly composed videos for three decades now, I thought it would be interesting to visualize myself thirty years into the future (my nod to Max Almy’s Leaving the 20th Century). I thinned my own hair and worked with a special-effects makeup artist, who studied photographs of family members in their 60s. While surprised by the results (only 45 seconds of the original footage was usable), this work gave me permission to become the change (in our world), that I wanted to see. My current work directly reflects a specific form of visual critique, which I will address towards the conclusion of this essay.

I would be remiss to not mention that the Covid-19 pandemic has given a broader slice of the public a similar fear of an invisible killer, much like HIV and AIDS working in the gay community in the 80s (with similar inaction from the powers that be, we once again loop back again). For the first time in a decade I now consider that I might not live to old age, once again, so this work may also only exist in the imaginary, rather than a prophetic view of my future.

Vertical/Horizontal Intersections

In retrospect, the repetitive use of the square shape reflects my tendencies for intersecting vertical and horizontal constraints. It alludes exclusion of edges while providing balance, and a safe space within. The square also perfectly accommodates a circle or loop.

One of my earliest digital works, Untitled - eye I #3 was created by combining two photographic processes separated by time and technology. I had access to a now rudimentary (but cutting edge then) film recorder that allowed me to create large format film negatives from digital composited images I created with the original version of Photoshop. I completed three pieces with this process in the last decade of the 20th century, and printed with a 19th century technique. This early piece also displayed some repeating motifs in my work, such as the use of hands and first-person narrative.
The symmetry of this square, expressed as an equilateral cube, provided nine points of entries in an encapsulating safe space. *A casa e/é o corpo – The house and/is the body* created boundaries on how I chose to represent my trajectory, which at the time I defined as fluid or in flux. While the exterior space featured vertical rectangles in the form of doorways, the interior area housed the horizontal rectangle of the television screen, which played 18 single-channel videos (or points of entry) on a perpetual loop, all of which were surrounded by three-dimensional representations and biproducts of my body and home. In my view, those walls I built expanded (and not constricted) what selfhood could be(come).

I created an alter ego, Dr. Weisskopft (his last name purposefully misspelled). A non-American con-artist posing as an unspecified expert of sorts, this doctor postured his authority through clothing and accented speech. Borrowing tropes from self-help books and infomercials, this video-play aimed to conceptually brainwash its viewers into complete media submission, while enclosed in a chained space. The single-channel component has been exhibited on its own, but it is meant to be paired with a live performance, where my video-self commandeers my actor-self into many absurd activities, including the kissing of my own proverbial video-ass. At the end of the video segment, everything goes back to normal, with the simple sound of a hand clap, my actor-self exits the confined space and leaves the building. Members of the audience are invited to voluntarily submit themselves to hypnosis, which in this case is a form of self-erasure; few people agree to participate, even though this is a free service I provide.

Between 2009 and 2016 I created a seven video installation works under the Prefix of a color with the word “code” in their title. They represent the aforementioned gap of my acting (out) in art. The most prominent of these pieces were the “silver code” and “white code” installations that merged traditional media on paper with projected video abstractions. These works also incorporated visual representations of Morse, braille and American Sign Language. With them I aimed to collapse space and time and create contemplative experiences. The impetus for these works were to display conflating meaning and code-switching found in transcultural experiences, which became a conscious strategy I embraced after earning tenure in 2009, and followed by an artist residency in Argentina in 2010.
Silver Code: *T.A.N.G.O.* (2011), mixed media drawing on paper, 20" x 110", and video projection, 11 minutes, black and white, silent, looped

*Silver Code: *T.A.N.G.O.* presents a male dancer performing accurate moves on his own. Rather than finding a partner, he is faced with his own digital duplication and multiplication, eventually tangled in a hypnotic symmetrical abstraction.

White Code: *H.O.M.E.* (2011), mixed media drawing, 28" x 88", and video projection, 14 minutes, looped

Three spaces triangulate in this work: the place of my birth, the place I reside, and my body. Three forms of representations shape this work: Google Earth simulations, webcam footage, and handmade renderings.

White Code: *V.I.E.W.* (2012), graphite drawing, and video projection, silent, color, 25 minutes, looped

I was invited to participate in the first installment of *D-lectricity* in Detroit – the city’s version of overnight lights festival a lá Nuit Blanche. Detroit as a city provides an incredibly wonderful snapshot of American culture. Delineated by a mile system of road demarcations (the movie 8 Mile refers to the edge of the city with its mostly white suburbs), this border invisibly demarcates privilege and lack thereof. I drove from the 8-mile border all the way to the water’s edge (where once can easily see Canada in the south), and back, with a camera attached to my dashboard. I also employed satellite imagery of the site, in the middle of the art’s district, and a gazing eyeball that mirrored a billboard I had in the same location a year prior.

During the Miami Art Basel week, I premiered a two-channel synchronized projection piece that round up the “white code” series. The road, my hands, animated digital drawings, and an outdated dictionary were projected onto the paper renderings that incorporated hand-written transcriptions of the same book (the C letter, on the top left, included all C-words in the tome). Where the two projections met, the spine of the book aimed to align itself.

The last installment of the "code" installations, Flight/Risk, took place in 2016. Unfortunately, this work - two 9’x 18’ drawings with three channels of projection - did not survive their deinstallation.

Square as Intersectional Space

Once the edges of intersecting triangles are removed, squares may serve as intersectional markers. Here I (re)define intersectional as when a location - its histories and occupants - shifts their experiences, conventions, and interpretations through juxtaposition, difference, and proximity. They are not quite monolithic, but their contingency is more contained, much like a snapshot may be only proof of a space/time light capture, but not proof of truth or defined meaning.

Me.mo.ri.al (1994-2008), artist book and printed folio, 8"x 8"

These square images serve both as memories and locator of places.
Iconographs (2007–8), acrylic on canvas, 15” x 15”

Pixels, text, and icons removed from, and referring to computational space.

Selfie Blankets (2016), digital print on woven rug, twin-sized

Selfies, the distorted descendent of the artistic self-portrait, are celebrated, scrutinized, and often demonized. For Selfie Blankets I culled my most “liked” selfies from my personal Instagram account, and printed these selections into woven pieces (such as “selfies in bathrooms” or “selfies with cat”), through a big box retail online store service. The ephemerality and portability of the mobile/smart phone viewing greatly contrasts with the bright, unmanageably soft, and large scale in this presentation. Rather than consider selfies as a psychological flaw or display of incompleteness, I argue that these images are markers. They serve as witnesses of someone’s presence in space and time (the “I was there” or eventually the “he’s dead and he’s going to die” that Barthes mentioned as a significant component of the photographic phenomenon). I also see these blankets as potentially protective covers, or a different way to mark existence within one’s own safety boundaries.

Fame/Fate (2019–21), oil on canvas, 40” x 40”, and performance, 10 minutes
In 2019 I performed Fame/Fate at Penland School of Crafts. On a beach volleyball court, I wrote two columns of text: fame (and five alliterations) on one side, and fate (and five alliterations) on another, with a large wooden branch I found in my morning walk. This stick was both a nod to video/performance artist Joan Jonas, and Padre José de Anchieta, a Portuguese Jesuit priest who “helped” settle one of the first colonial sites in the Americas in the early 1500s, or present-day city of São Paulo (my hometown). Anchieta was known for writing ephemeral poetry in the sand of the beaches of southern Brazil. Once my lists were completed, I used the stick to draw a very large circle around myself, spinning nonstop until I collapsed from exhaustion onto the sand. I then rearranged my body to resemble Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. The photographic documentation of the performance is the base for a series of 12 large scale paintings I hope to complete by 2021. All these references allude to inclusion and exclusion from larger canonical (and problematically manipulated) narratives.

After the Pulse Nightclub shooting took place in 2016, when I learned more details about its victims, the first thought that crossed my mind was “it could have been me”. This has been a recurring theme in my social anxiety towards random violence. I often assume that every mass shooting in America takes place in an educational setting, because so many of them happen in schools, and I work in such an environment. As many have described with more eloquence, most people of color live under constant transcultural PTSD.

When the prominence of narratives arose in mass media about the detaining camps on the southern borders of the US, the same “it could have been me” thought returned to my consciousness. After three years of living in Texas, it was very clear to me that, despite having arrived in this country flying business class, my status was constantly questioned – and the assumption that I crossed the border on foot to steal someone’s job was directly expressed to me multiple times. In 2019, as a means to create an empathic space within my art practice, and utilize whatever privilege I may have, I began the photo-based series Children_in_Cages, viewable in an eponymous Instagram account. The eventual goal for this series is to recreate one of the cages in real space, attach my images onto its exterior, and program/promote activities in its interior space to engender more first-person visual narratives on bodies of color traversing transnational borders and spaces. The eventual goal would be to replace my work with the works produced by other people, or whatever others affected by our predatory immigration practices decide to be the best way to create a record of our times.

Instead of using images of the actual children incarcerated, which has been suggested to me on more than one occasion (but I believe it to be unethical), I am repurposing photographs of myself (between zero and 18 years of age), from my personal archives, and juxtaposing them with a series of texts and unique surface manipulation. Each image is treated uniquely and reflects my state of mind and current events (often reliving or recollecting past experiences of migration); most recent additions refer to our global pandemic, although the entire project has come to a halt due to my lack of access to materials and equipment. I am not sure if this project will ever see the light of the day, as it seems to veer so far from contemporary photographic practices, or if it will be allowed to be displayed in public (as I can see how it could trigger negative responses). This story is still in progress, this square has not been completely closed yet. But they do mark a new beginning in my art practice.

Post-Script: On Photography and photography

At the end of my presentation, which was supposed to serve as the conclusion of the panel, a point I raised with the group turned out to be more controversial than I intended or anticipated. I asked a broad question to the participants regarding why they thought that, in a panel about WOKE New Media Art, most of the work presented was anything but new media (art), and more specifically photography. The unintended result was the perception that I was a) criticizing/devaluing their work, or b) that I have a beef with Photography. This could not be further from the truth, as Mina and I, from our earliest conversations, aimed to use this
opportunity to promote a new generation of artists. I hope that, by the time my essay is read, you will have already examined the incredibly important works by Christopher Kojzar, Victor Torres, Allana Clarke, Antonio McAfee, Kei Ito, and Andrew Keiper.

While I will acknowledge that I have had a checkered past with the Photography community, as my work has quite often been placed in a “not really photography” box, and my views on diversity, inclusion and advocacy - for the need of both new technologies and LGBTQ+ representation in the so-called “Photo World” - have alienated me from that community, I actually love the medium of photography itself, because of what I perceive to be its malleability, ubiquity, and persistence.

Having said that, photography is indeed a historically problematic medium, one steeped in oppressive colonial practices (see phrenology, physiognomy, surveillance, and colorism for starters), and, at the end of the day, it is not a new medium. Maybe I was too literal? In retrospect I could have made the same argument with performance art or video art (two other prominent modes of expression in the panel, not new by any means, but not as pervasive as photography in terms of what the artists produced).

Between the time of the presentation and the dinner that followed, most feathers were unruffled. But since the many months from our event I have pondered into the question of why these artists of color, myself included, are using traditional media (at best under the auspice of media arts) as the main visible thrust of their work, as opposed to the cutting-edge new technologies that so many (white, often cis male) artists/presenters/practitioners seemed to embrace in New Media Art events. I addressed a similar concern on a previous essay on Queering New Media Art. There and then I posited that the new/modernistic aspect of the genre excluded practices that were intermedia/intersectional by nature, and that this inter-disposition aligned itself very well with the decentering of the artist or self, and community survivalist values. Could it be that the “new” aspect of New Media Art also reinforces white supremacy? Or that any practice that has the canon as destination will automatically embrace the privileged and exclude the subjugated? I will not attempt to answer these questions in this space. I will, however, provide an alternative response or clarification for my concern, that aligns with my own art practice and disposition.

I will pose that the anti- and post-colonial practice of anthropophagism, of absorbing, swallowing, chewing, and spitting out the “old” in order to reinvent a “new,” or at least a “now,” is more sympathetic to the plight and perspective of intersectional artists, who often have to constantly renegotiate multiple environments and stimuli in order to find footing in a world that aims to exclude us. This strategy finds many points of entry, a commonality with the mainstream, while allowing for unique adaptations, critique, transgression, protest, and staking claim. If you examine the art production of my fellow panelists you will note that, while at times employing conventional materials, their works are anything but traditional.

Post Post-Script: On exclusion

While the vast amount of my art works included in this essay represent but a small portion of my artistic production in the past three decades (where I have produced more than 35 single-channel videos and dozens video installations, in addition to many two-dimensional and three-dimensional bodies of works), my inclusion of so many works in this essay, which relate to the delineated reframing as borders and bodies to varied extents, aims to overwhelm and pinpoint my absence in a broader New Media Art historical context. Like many underrepresented intersectional artists, our trajectories risk disappearing from broader narratives if our pervasive exclusion continues. The usual argument of the significance or validity of one’s practice, as in not good enough (or the fact that said practice does not exist or is worth noting), often comes up as the justification for this exclusion or erasure, as opposed to considering that one’s work might be too brown, or too gay, too isolated or Midwestern (in my case), to be valid or visible. But, of course, this is how privilege (or lack thereof), plays out, even/especially in the Fine Arts.

New Media Art will not become “woke” by simply including a few token “woke” practitioners (toke?) every once in a while. Equity must follow inclusion, along with access and sustainability. Someone else, besides us, needs to do the heavy lifting.

Until the most powerful institutions - the ones that have the ability/funds to include/collact/study the artistic practices of traditionally underrepresented/intersectional/artist on the fringes – wake up, dismantle their inherent white supremacist structures, put into practice anti-racism approaches to their organization and curation, are held accountable for their past, and foster the many difficult conversations they have helped to conceal, this situation is likely to be perpetuated for quite some time, and continue to exclude and erase artists like myself. You’d better wake up!
This incredible artwork was installed in downtown Detroit, MI, as part of the exhibition Manifest Destiny curated by Ingrid LaFleur, at the same time as the NMC Symposium BORDER CONTROL took place at the University of Michigan Stamps School of Art and Design, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. LaFleur also participated on the panel Digital Detroit: On Borders & Activism at the BORDER CONTROL symposium. My goal was to end my presentation and invite people to attend LaFleur’s panel, and pilgrimage to Detroit for the exhibition on the following day. But unfortunately, I had to cut it from the presentation to stay within the time frame (another border constraint?) we were given.

While I have limited leverage in the Art World, it is my mission to cede the little level of privilege I may have to make/foster inclusive spaces, whenever possible. As such, it makes me happy to end this essay with this powerful piece, and rectify my omission at the symposium.