



DEKHOOT - 1841 - 1842

Displacement

Picturing captive women in Brazil

Angela Vanhaelen

In this play of paradox, only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject.

–Hortense Spillers, ‘Mama’s baby, Papa’s maybe’¹

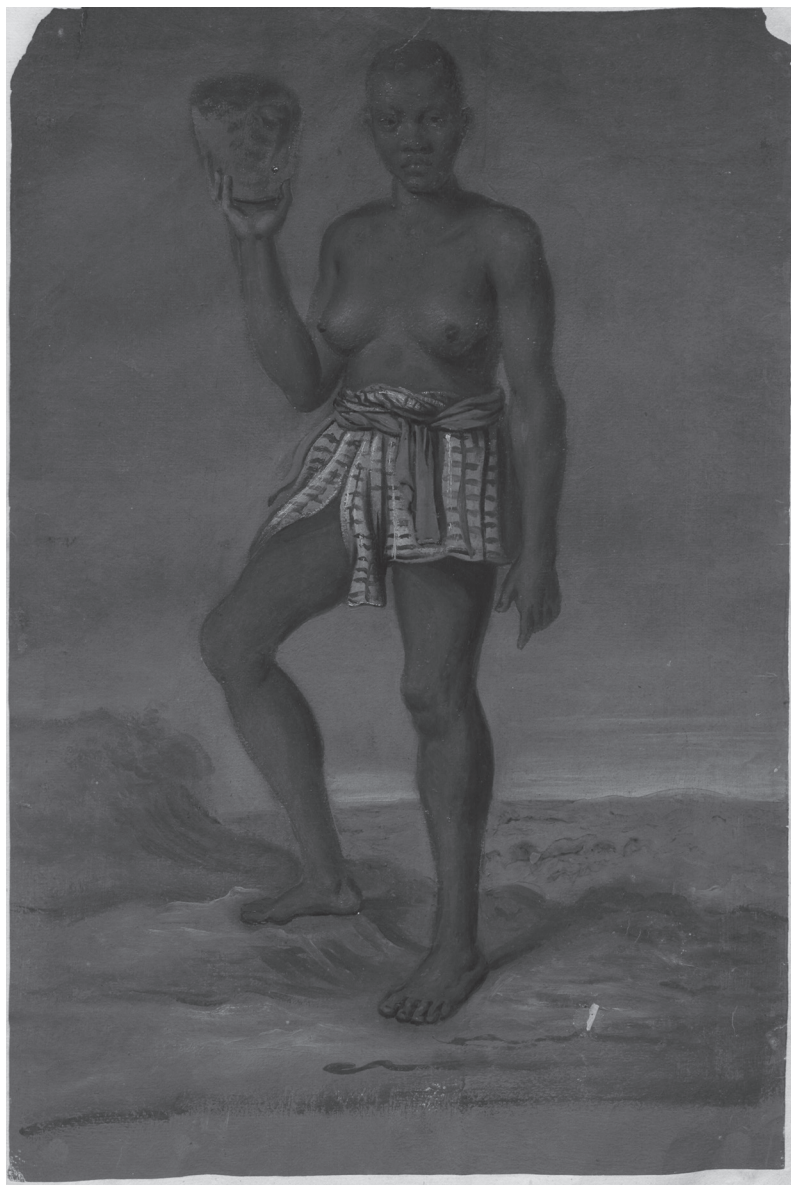
Detail fig. 4

This essay focuses on three interconnected images of a woman in Dutch-occupied Brazil: a preliminary sketch, a finished painting, and an amateur sketch copied after the painting. These pictures are elusive: the indeterminate qualities of the sketch are difficult to decipher; the painting’s plethora of divergent symbols resists decoding; and the copy of the painting confusingly alters the original.² Instead of endeavouring to resolve pictorial ambiguities, this article interrogates the artistic processes deployed by artists in their attempts to invent racialized and gendered categories of human identity for women who were being taken captive and forcibly displaced from Africa to Brazil by the Dutch West India Company (WIC). As Hortense Spillers has argued, representations of enslaved women are themselves a mode of displacement, as they place these women ‘out of the traditional symbolics of female gender’. Artistic displacement disavows but also replicates the atrocities that were committed against untold numbers of women whose lives, communities, and worlds were devastated by the agents of the WIC. While the imagery attempts to reduce a captive woman to the status of a living piece of property, in what follows, I ask if pictorial irresolution can also direct awareness to what Spillers calls ‘the *insurgent* ground’, which is a place that lies beyond the descriptive powers of the violating image.

Displaced. *Woman on beach*

A woman stands on the shore (fig. 1). Behind her is the greyish-blue Atlantic and under her bare feet, the yellow-brown sand of a Brazilian beach. Nothing is known about the woman who might have served as the artist's model for this study, or, indeed, if there ever was such an encounter. The sketch creates the impression of an individual tasked with posing, but we can only speculate about the actual historical existence of this person. We cannot recover her name, birthplace, ancestry, natal language, or cultural background. The blue-and-white striped fabric wrapped around her waist offers a clue, as this type of cloth was used by Dutch and Portuguese enslavers in Brazil to indicate the enslavement of its wearer.³ The artist has oriented the figure within colonial geography to face inland toward the 'New World' with her back turned to the ocean and away from lands beyond the sea. We might imagine that – like many captive women in seventeenth-century Brazil – this woman represents a person who had been abducted and transported in the hold of a European ship from the coast of West or Central Africa. In addition to relating this oil sketch to the intentions of the artist and his patron, we could also consider how each newly arrived captive had to face a new life in an evil new world, and the unimaginable vastness of the expanse that separated them from home, family, and former lifeways. Evoking the perspectives of the people who made this journey, Édouard Glissant describes the 'New World' as a 'nonworld' for those who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic: 'Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt'?⁴

The way that the artist positioned the woman's right foot on higher ground widens her stance so that the cloth wrap pulls apart at the thigh, with its loose end hanging between the figure's legs. The poet M. NourbeSe Philip makes a connection between a displaced enslaved woman and the space between her legs, which she calls 'dis place': "Dis place": the result of the linking of the inner space between the legs with the outer place resulting in "dis placement". "Dis place" – the space between. The legs. For the Black woman "dis placed" to and in the New World, the inner space between the legs would also mutate into "dis place".⁵ Enclosed by the legs of the woman on the beach is a landscape vignette of the sand, the ocean, the horizon, and the sky. To consider colonial geography thus framed encapsulates the Middle Passage as both the external and internal space of violating displacement. Landscape and bodyscape interpenetrate in this image. NourbeSe Philip considers the paradoxical negation and resilience of the enslaved female body dislocated to this coast: 'Unlike all other arrivals before or since, when the African comes to the New World, she comes with nothing. But the body. Her body. The body – repository and source of everything needed to survive in any but the barest sense. Body memory bodymemory. The African body. Including the space between the legs, the *raison d'être* of her importation to the New World (...) impelling her to flee, run from, subvert, the institution of slavery'.⁶ When a displaced person sought her bearings in displacement, she had only her own body to start from. NourbeSe Philip's poem gives a sense of how much was at stake



1

Albert Eckhout, *Woman on beach*, c. 1641, oil on paper, 36 x 24 cm, *Theatrum*, vol. 3, f. 21, Krakow, Jagiellonian University Library (Photo: Liber picturatus A34, Jagiellonian Library Krakow)

in the sketch of the woman on the beach, as the claims that it makes on an enslaved woman's body come up against the urgency of her own claims to her own body.

The artist, Albert Eckhout, worked in the service of a high-powered patron: Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen, a nobleman who was appointed by the directors of the WIC as governor-general of Dutch Brazil. Nassau was an influential perpetrator of Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slavery business. He brought a group of artists and scientists with him to Brazil, commissioning them to study, record, and classify the people, flora, and fauna of the region in a concerted attempt to harness knowledge production to his colonizing mission. Eckhout is remembered for the series of eight large-scale paintings that he executed to catalogue

the non-European inhabitants of the colony. He created these pseudo-ethnographic pictures for display in one of Johan Maurits's Brazilian palaces. The sketch of the woman on the beach was likely made as a preparatory drawing for works in this series, particularly Eckhout's painting of an African woman and child, discussed below.⁷

During his stint in Brazil, Eckhout undoubtedly encountered the indescribable treatment of enslaved persons. The sketch could thus be viewed as a trace of Eckhout's journey toward becoming an artist-perpetrator as he contended with the directives of his job, which entailed making pictorial sense of incommunicable horrors for a patron who endorsed the violence. Some awareness of the enormity of the atrocities committed by WIC governors and employees against captive peoples is conveyed by another unusual sketch, which depicts people being bought and sold by European traders in the town of Recife in around 1641 (fig. 2). The man who made this sketch was a WIC employee named Zacharias Wagener, who also worked in the service of Johan Maurits and was acquainted with Eckhout. An amateur artist, Wagener kept a sketchbook. In it, he attempted to picture some of the after-effects of the Middle Passage on persons who had survived being treated as nonhuman cargo by the WIC ships' crews and were brought by the human traffickers into the dehumanizing transactions of the marketplace.⁸ The masses of people in the town square are closely huddled together, as if their bodies have not yet lost the cramped formation imposed by being confined in the ship's hold. In the right foreground of the image is a figure who crawls on hands and knees, apparently unable to stand or walk; a similar figure appears in the left background, inverted in a crab-walking pose. Many are shown sitting doubled up with knees drawn up to their chests in an ingrained posture of taking up as little space as a body can.

Wagener included a brief explanation with his sketch: 'Here, through this modest drawing, I wished to show how they are taken to Brazil and sold again'. Wagener wrote that each ship brought a minimum of 300 people 'who are immediately unloaded and lodged for a few days (until the day established for the market) in an old row of houses'.⁹ While he refrained from expressing anything like compassion or outrage, Wagener did observe that people were 'half dead from hunger and thirst'. He also recognized that the traders were treating people as if they were like 'pigs or sheep leaving the pen'.¹⁰

In the ships and markets, European merchants and sailors callously worked to dispossess displaced persons of their former social lives. Hortense Spillers writes that the deliberate racialized violence of the Middle Passage and the market aimed to produce 'undifferentiated identity',¹¹ which is indicated by Wagener's image of naked bodies crowded together into a mass of unindividuated human flesh. Also shown in Wagener's 'modest drawing' of large-scale atrocity is the way that 'Portuguese and Dutch traders examine them in front and behind',¹² dividing the group into 'pieces' (*peças* in Portuguese) for purchase. Once selections were made, Wagener notes that 'the trader undertakes to pay for each one of them'.¹³ The traders handled human bodies as fungible pieces (*peças*) of property. As Spillers writes of the captives: 'they were the culturally 'unmade' thrown

in the midst of figurative darkness that 'exposed' their destinies to an unknown course (...). Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as *quantities*.¹⁴ Spillers calls this process 'ungendering'. By denying and violating people's gendered subjectivity, the enslavers sought to annihilate their previous social identities, redefining them as physically alive but socially dead.¹⁵ Here it is important to emphasize that the terms 'social death' and 'ungendering' do not describe the self-understandings and self-actualization practices of enslaved persons. Rather, they define the status of 'the slave' as a piece of living property who was not recognized by the enslaving group as an autonomous social being. The women who were trafficked from Africa to Brazil would have considered themselves in terms of the gendered roles assigned to women and girls within their specific social networks of family, community, and kin, and they would have carried within themselves the embodied memories of these roles. They also created new social identities for themselves, even within the privations of enslavement. These vital social connections were what the traders sought to annihilate with violence, sexual abuse, hard labour, and the abstracting calculations of the market.¹⁶

Wagener's sketch exposes the cruel machinations of the market that formed the basis of the economic system of Dutch-occupied Brazil, which depended on the coerced labours of enslaved people. Cedric J. Robinson has developed the concept of 'racial capitalism' to analyze how systemic anti-Black racism and global capitalism were co-emergent and co-constitutive.¹⁷ Wagener's drawing illustrates the basic principles of racial capitalism in

2

Zacharias Wagener, *Slave market*, c. 1641, watercolour on paper, 212 x 335 mm, *Thierbuch*, Dresden, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (photo: Art Resource, NY)



which all of the traders are white European men whose profits derived from the exploitation of Black African women, men, and children. This private amateur sketchbook image discloses information that was not publicized in professional art, which is usually displayed and discussed in relation to the interests of its patrons. However, we should not interpret Wagener's personal observations as censorious of the slavery business. Instead, he apparently took note of the potential for his own self-advancement within the system of racial capitalism, since later in his life, he opted to make money by becoming a trafficker of enslaved African people.¹⁸

Like Wagener, Eckhout no doubt understood the viciously imposed place of enslaved peoples in the colony. When Eckhout's sketch is put in dialogue with Wagener's, it could be viewed as a preliminary attempt at working out a system of representation to convey the culturally unmade status of an enslaved woman. To this end, Eckhout outfitted the woman with some props and a costume. With these, he engaged his creative power to take undifferentiated identity and remake it into a figure of meaning. The woman holds up an unidentifiable item with her right hand.¹⁹ This open-ended attribute signals the artist's as-yet unresolved process of deciding on a symbolic object that he could use to transmute flesh into allegory.

Despite the apparent immediacy of this image, Eckhout was implementing Northern European visual conventions for making sense of the world and its peoples. A sketch is a think-piece, a means of working through various possibilities. It is likely that the artist was thinking with images like the frontispiece of Abraham Ortelius's late sixteenth-century atlas, in which female personifications of Africa, Asia, America, and Europe embody geographic and cultural regions (fig. 3). Each figure holds up an attribute of their locale with one arm, a contrived pose that is echoed in Eckhout's sketch. Eckhout thus appears to have been contemplating the implementation of pictorial codes of allegory, specifically the convention of using a female body to stand in for a region and its inhabitants. He probably considered printed images like the female embodiment of Africa on the frontispiece of Ortelius's atlas, as well as other cartographic imagery, costume illustrations, travel books, and emblems that visually classified the peoples of the world.²⁰ However, none of these available pictorial formulae could quite apprehend an enslaved woman who had been geographically displaced and culturally unmade. The image of an enslaved person could not personify a cultural group or birthplace, since the institution of slavery deliberately negated any claims to a stable identity rooted in the customs of a place of origin.

Looking again at the object that the woman grasps, we note that its size and shape vaguely evoke the thing held up by the allegory of America depicted at the bottom of Ortelius's atlas frontispiece (fig. 3) – the severed head of a bearded European man. Possibly Eckhout was thinking about reworking the amorphous shape in his preliminary sketch into a symbol that his viewers might have associated with the inhabitants of both Africa and America, as a means to situate the female figure within African as well as Brazilian frameworks. He would not be the first to conflate Africans and Indigenous peoples of the Americas within the derogatory category of the cannibal.

Scholars have responded to Eckhout's sketch with divergent perceptions of the racialized ethnicity of the depicted woman, who has been catalogued as West African or Central African, or as an Indigenous Brazilian woman, labelled as either Tupinamba or Tapuya. As Rebecca Brien concludes, the inability to categorize the figure results from the indeterminate qualities of the sketch.²¹ Classificatory uncertainties arise from the dearth of identifying accessories, and from misguided attempts to interpret the figure's reddish-brown skin tone as a legible signifier of race.²² The figure's nonconformity with established modes of visual categorization seems to have confounded art historical attempts to fix the woman's racial identity. Instead, the irresolution of the image reveals the artistic processes at work in creating such fictions.



3

Abraham Ortelius, *Frontispiece*, engraving, 370 x 230 mm, Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Antwerp, 1571), KB | National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

The ambiguities of this image have larger significance within the historical and art historical development of racism. Conflicting interpretations of the sketch demonstrate that race is not inherent, but continuously produced by a battery of forces, which include violent dispossession as well as taxonomic systems of knowledge produced by controlling images and texts. A European theory of biological race was nascent but unresolved in the 1640s, and we might see Eckhout's sketch as an attempt to codify mutable understandings of racialized identity. This image discloses not the identity of the woman, but the fraught and uncertain processes of race-making itself. As Jennifer Morgan asserts: 'An emphasis on the fluidity of early racial thought is crucial to the arsenal for dislodging racist inevitability'.²³ Following from Morgan, we might consider the indeterminacy of this sketch as evidence of the indefiniteness of early attempts to visibly racialize the condition of enslavement.

The woman, the setting, and the thing that she holds remain unidentifiable. As noted, her enslavement is indicated by a recognizable fabric called 'guinea cloth'. In global networks of trade, Europeans procured this blue-and-white striped cotton cloth in South Asia and then sold it on the 'Guinea Coast' of West Africa in exchange for enslaved human beings. Carrie Anderson has examined cargo lists that record how guinea cloth was shipped alongside captive people. This distinctive and inexpensive type of fabric was used in Brazil to clothe captive people and make their enslaved status visibly legible.²⁴

Clothing and accoutrements were the central means of reifying social and cultural differences in the early modern period. People's gender, age, status, and place of origin were signified by their outer attire.²⁵ In Wagener's Recife market scene, distinctions between the enslavers and the people they enslaved are designated not just by skin tone, but also by apparel. The European men wear jackets, breeches, cloaks, shirts, boots, hats, and swords. The captive people who are being put up for sale, by contrast, are naked. Persons who have been purchased, like the group in the foreground, are partly clothed in scant loincloths or skirts. Anderson points out that the Black man who walks behind the European man on horseback in the left foreground is carrying a piece of blue-and-white guinea cloth over his shoulder. Probably this indicates that the enslaver had paid for both the man and his clothing at this market.²⁶ This scenario is in keeping with the observations of the Jesuit priest André João Antonil,²⁷ who recorded that 'it is customary to say in Brazil that three "p's" are required for slaves, that is: *pão*, *páo*, and *pano* (bread, a stick, and a piece of cloth)'. Antonil urged enslavers to make sure that food and clothing were given as abundantly as beatings, and he berates the 'master' to not deny 'four or five yards of cotton and a few yards of rough cloth to the person who sweats away his life in his service (...) so that they do not go about nearly naked in the streets'.²⁸ These comments reveal that physical violence was unrelenting, whereas food and clothing were commonly withheld. To be stripped of clothing was to be stripped of social and cultural identity.²⁹ The denial of fabric and garments was a dehumanizing strategy, part of the arsenal of physical and social deprivation that enslavers deployed to immiserate bodies.

The denial of adequate clothing problematized gender and emphasized sexuality. Alexander Weheliye argues that historical representations of Black people are characterized by either an excess or a complete lack of sexuality. He concludes that 'regardless of whether deficit or surplus, what remains significant is that the histories of racial slavery (...) have constitutively incapacitated Black subjects' ability to conform to hegemonic gender and sexuality norms'.³⁰ Spillers accentuates the difference between the 'body', which is socialized into normative gender roles, and 'flesh', the raw material of gendering. She singles out this distinction 'as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh", that zero degree of social conceptualization'.³¹ Spillers coins the term 'pornotroping' to describe the (always incomplete) process of reducing a person to flesh.³² 'Porno' is derived from the Greek word for enslaved people who were purchased for sex work; 'troping' evokes the repeated figuration of this violated body, which is itself a sadistic sexual practice. Saidiya Hartman writes that the routine display of ravaged bodies in enslaving societies turned suffering into a spectacle, arousing a complicit mixing of pleasure with discomfort as spectators considered flesh that could be possessed and used for their own enjoyment.³³ To represent pornotroping is to enact it, and this is the case with Eckhout's picture. If we consider the possibility that the model for this sketch was an enslaved woman, then we understand how the process of making this image violated its subject, apprehending her as a possessable object, standing exposed in the open. Captive flesh, as Spillers writes, represents captured sexuality. To have dominance over the captive activates an excess of sexuality. Apprehended as a disempowered and defenceless piece of property, enslaved flesh became the object of violent and sexual impulses.³⁴ In Spillers's terms, an image like Eckhout's sketch could be viewed as a 'materialized scene of unprotected female flesh, of female flesh "ungendered"'.³⁵

It is this problematizing of gender – the denial of the body's embeddedness in socially gendered roles and its redefinition as an enfleshed piece of property – that displaces enslaved women 'out of the traditional symbolics of female gender' into a place that Spillers calls 'the *insurgent* ground'.³⁶ As I have suggested, Eckhout's sketch represents a process rather than an identifiable person – it is a record of artistic procedures designed to dispossess women of the rights to their own bodies. The paradox of slavery, however, is that its terrors created conditions of insurgency. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's concept of 'potential history' offers a way to rethink the past by insisting that people's refusal to comply with regimes of oppression have as much historical importance as violence. Potential history is alive to the uninterrupted existence of people's dissenting practices and worldviews as competing valid options that are not sealed off in the past but continue in the present: 'The point is not giving voice to a silenced past and making the invisible visible but releasing the past from its "pastness" and letting it assume the vitality of what has always been there'.³⁷ At the risk of overinterpreting Eckhout's indeterminate sketch, we might acknowledge how a captive woman would have stood in opposition to the artist's view of her. We could look

at this image and see what Eckhout saw but try not to see *how* he saw her. The woman takes her position on the sand, she looks at the white man as he looks at her, and she holds onto something that is indefinable.

Allegory of conquest

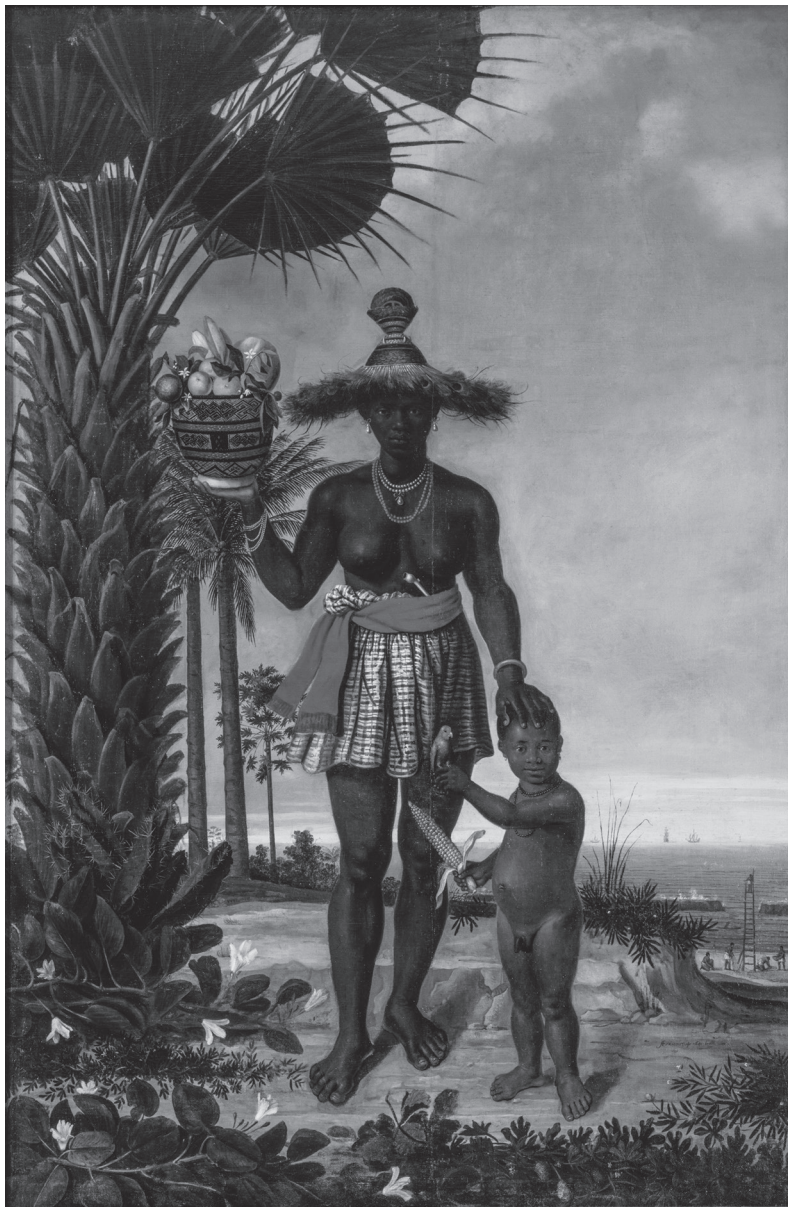
Eckhout likely drew from the sketch of the woman on the beach in the execution of a finished work. Dramatic in scale, his 1641 painting *African woman and child* is over nine feet in height, so that the figures appear life-sized (fig. 4). As noted, this painting was part of a series installed in the reception hall of Johan Maurits's palace, visualizing the governor-general's desired command over the non-European inhabitants of his colony.³⁸ The series is an elaborate adaptation of the allegorical tradition of representing non-European peoples of the world in subservience to a figuration of Europe, as depicted by Ortelius (fig. 3) and many others. Each figure within Eckhout's series brings various goods and services as tribute to Johan Maurits. While there are multiple points of connection and comparison between the different people, accessories, flora, fauna, and settings within these highly detailed works, the significance of each part to the whole only comes into full resolution when related to the central body of the ruler. Surrounded by imagery of the deferential peoples of his colony, Johan Maurits presided in a setting of princely power, where he would greet, entertain, and negotiate with diplomats, ambassadors, dignitaries, and WIC officials. In this context, Eckhout resolved some of the ambiguities of his sketch, remaking the figure of the woman on the shore into an attribute of Johan Maurits's sovereignty.

Serving the governor's colonial agenda, the ambiguous placeholder object in the woman's right hand has been turned into a symbol of exotic transcultural fertility: a Central African woven basket filled with tropical Brazilian fruits. The painting also depicts a variety of indigenous plants together with species transplanted from other parts of the world. Next to the woman is a boy who holds an African bird in one hand and a cob of American corn in the other. He suggestively points both symbolic objects to the space between the woman's legs, which has been narrowed. To the right of the figures, the land drops to the shore, providing an active view of colonial busyness: at the water's edge is a group of enslaved workers supervised by an overseer on a high surveillance platform; the horizon above them is punctuated with the masts of ships, which are likely bringing enslaved people in and taking sugar out.³⁹ The woman and boy are thus situated in a colonial landscape that shows their past and future – not as part of the lifecycle of parents and children, or ancestors and descendants – but within the narrow horizons of their captive labour, deemed necessary for the desired progression of productivity that the governor-general wanted to showcase to his guests.

In planning the elaborate symbolism, Eckhout no doubt consulted with his humanist patron, who is remembered (among other things) as a prolific curiosity collector. From Johan Maurits's collection, they likely selected two artifacts from the region of Central Africa – the basket and an elaborate woven hat adorned with peacock feathers.⁴⁰ They might also

have visited the count's menagerie to consider the aviary, settling on an African lovebird. And the governor's extensive botanical gardens likely yielded specimens of various fruits and vegetables like melons, limes, oranges, bananas, and corn. These gardens were especially renowned for their transplanted coconut palm trees, which bore large quantities of fruit despite being uprooted and replanted.⁴¹ Fertility and relocation are key themes of this painting, emphasizing the profitable connections between Brazil, Central Africa, and the Dutch Republic.

There is much written about this work, and scholars generally agree that its multiple symbols, especially the woman's clothing and accessories, cannot be resolved to indicate a single, coherent cultural



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Albert Eckhout, *Woman and child of African descent*, 1641, oil on canvas, 282 x 189 cm, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen (Photo: CC-BY-SA, John Lee, National Museum, Denmark)

identity. Like Eckhout's sketch, the painting does not quite fit with European visual conventions of representing a costumed female figure as the personification of a specific place and its people.⁴² Instead, it presents a contradictory cultural mishmash of clothing and accoutrements. While the guinea cloth skirt signified enslavement, the elaborately crafted Central African hat and basket would not have adorned the body of an enslaved person. The woman's jewellery also is incongruous: the pearl necklace and earrings were familiar attributes of the wealthy merchant's wife, depicted in Dutch portraits and genre scenes to visualize the prosperity garnered from Dutch involvement in global trade. As Brienens concludes:

Although carefully rendered artifacts are generally used to demonstrate the 'authenticity' of the ethnographic portrait, here, in a rather remarkable manner, they instead highlight the African woman's artificiality and hybridity. In Eckhout's painting, the primary attributes of the main figure and her son are African, but they wear and carry other ornaments and objects that are recognizably European or American.⁴³

While the indeterminacy of Eckhout's preparatory sketch offers very few signifiers of cultural identity, the finished painting, by contrast, overdetermines the figure with a proliferation of symbolic accessories from diverse cultures and locations, notably Central Africa, Brazil, and Europe. While the images are different in approach, each has defied attempts to categorize the central figure in terms of the conventional pictorial codes that early modern artists used to classify the peoples of the world.

As discussed above, while Eckhout may have struggled with the artistic challenge of how to represent an enslaved woman, he ultimately responded to indescribable violence with more violence, using his sketch to pornotrope the body of a captive woman into a possessable sexualized object. The finished painting is also an image of sexual violation, but one that I argue makes specific reference to the military exploits of its patron. In 1641, Johan Maurits sent a fleet to conquer the slave trading port of Luanda in Angola. The count's forces had captured the fortress of Elmina in 1637, and with these two conquests, the WIC considerably expanded its involvement in the transatlantic slavery business. While a range of opinions about the ethics of African enslavement were publicly expressed in the Dutch Republic in the early seventeenth century, anti-Black racism hardened noticeably after the WIC conquests of Elmina and Luanda. As Dutch profits from the exploitation of enslaved African and African-descended labourers increased, public expressions of dissent diminished and theories linking enslavement with innate racialized characteristics began to proliferate.⁴⁴

Created in this context, Eckhout's painting adapts allegorical traditions of mythologizing political conquest in terms of sexual violence. As Margaret Carroll has shown, the notable escalation of imagery depicting the physical domination of men over women expressed a shift in European political theory, which increasingly championed force as the prerogative of sovereign male rulers.⁴⁵ The mystification of violation in allegorical

artworks both validated and veiled the abuses committed by conquering forces to subjugate the people they attacked.

In line with this genre of sexual and territorial conquest imagery, the female figure in Eckhout's painting could be interpreted as an allegory of Johan Maurits's capture of Luanda. In fact, Johan Maurits lobbied the WIC directors to consolidate the rule of Brazil and Angola as an integrated economic region under his sovereign control.⁴⁶ Conceivably this painting would have allowed him to argue his case to visiting officials in his princely reception hall. Its varied symbols, which integrate a semi-naked female personification adorned with accessories from Central Africa into a productive Brazilian landscape while emphasizing Dutch prosperity, support such an argument. Urging the WIC directors to increase their commitment to the transatlantic slavery business, the governor-general asserted: 'The presence of slaves is essential to Brazil, and in no way can we operate without them: if any man feels offended by this, his is a useless scruple. As Brazil cannot be cultivated without blacks, and as it is essential that there should be a large number of them (...), it is most important that every means possible is brought to bear to ensure the traffic along the coast of Africa'.⁴⁷ Eckhout's painting buttressed this agenda and thus participated in the violence of conquest. Without scruples, it allegorizes the negation of people's autonomous lives as necessary for attaining Dutch prosperity.

Allegory of reproductive slavery

Like Johan Maurits's transplanted coconut palms, which 'took root very well in the fertile soil and bore large quantities of fruit',⁴⁸ the emphasis of Eckhout's painting is on the fecundity of the woman's body, especially its reproductive capacities as represented by the child. Gendered subject positions like mother and son do not pertain here, however. The child's lewd handling of the phallic cornucob in the opening between the woman's thighs punctures the maternal-filial bond, evoking instead the relationship of Venus and Cupid.⁴⁹ The inclusion of an African lovebird could be interpreted as a callous in-joke. While a pair of lovebirds was a common symbol of marriage, a single lovebird signifies a broken bond, thus prompting speculation about the absent father of this child. Scholars have noted that the rendering of the child's lighter skin tone raises questions about paternity and implies a white father.⁵⁰ If the main purpose of the painting was to thematize the fruits of Johan Maurits's sexualized and racialized territorial conquest, as I am suggesting, then symbolically, this child is represented as his child. The painting situates the governor-general as the 'master' of the enslaved African and African-descended people in his colony. The symbolism of sexual conquest and fertility celebrates the masculine potency of the conquering sovereign.

The female figure in Eckhout's painting may appear to place a possessive hand on the child's head, but the painting's intended viewers would have known that enslaved mothers had no lawfully recognized claims to their own children. The lewdly gesturing child signals the role of reproduction in enslaving societies. In his sketchbook, Wagener explains how the bonds between enslaved women and their children were broken and disrupted

by property relations. He writes that ‘when a Portuguese or Dutchman has carnal knowledge of some slave belonging to a neighbour or friend and the slave gives birth, that greatly pleases the man to whom the slave belongs’.⁵¹ The enslaver was ‘pleased’ because he could profit from either the future labour or the sale of the infant. The offspring of enslaved women were legally defined as the property of the enslaver. Women were thus stripped of their rightful recognition as mothers. Wagener’s comments reveal that babies born to an enslaved mother were treated as the products of her reproductive labour, and that they represented surplus value for the enslavers. A captive woman’s children were classified by the enslavers as alienable and fungible commodities. While sometimes women and their babies were kept together, this was a precarious relationship as children could be sold away from their mothers if this was deemed profitable by the enslaver.⁵²

Even when the father was a free man, if the mother was enslaved, then her children were born into enslavement. Wagener explains that a ‘lascivious father’ had no claim on his progeny, and that if ‘the father does not ever want to see the miserable, dreadful condition of his own son, he must buy him for a goodly sum from his neighbour and the child moves from slavery to freedom’.⁵³ This was a particular kind of manumission in which the enslaver of the mother could sell her offspring to the child’s father, who would then be considered the ‘owner’ and could choose whether or not to grant freedom. Wagener implies that this rarely happened; most children of enslaved women and free men were treated like the offspring of two enslaved parents: ‘like the other slaves, they are condemned to spend their lives in the worst bondage’.⁵⁴

While the language of the market imbues accounts of reproductive slavery, it was not in fact a profitable endeavour. As Stuart Schwartz has shown, the enslaved population of Brazil had a very low fertility rate and a very high mortality rate because enslavers found it more cost-effective to work enslaved people to death and replace them with the purchase of more captives than it was to nurture enslaved children to an age when they could do the heavy labour of sugar production.⁵⁵ Morgan argues that the practice of enslaving the children of captive women did not primarily serve economic aims but was a strategy to racialize enslavement. As the transatlantic slavery business became central to European economic development, perceptions of race based on skin colour were virulently asserted as signifiers of enslaveability. In this manner, the institution of slavery was redefined as a hereditary condition, passed down from dark-skinned mothers to their children. Newly arrived captive women thus had to come to terms with ‘dawning recognition that their reproductive lives would be the evidence of racialized dispossession’.⁵⁶ The space between the legs, as emphasized by Eckhout, accordingly became a conduit of racialized human commodification.⁵⁷ The painting’s themes of fertility and displacement come into sharper focus when put into critical dialogue with the insights of NourbeSe Philip, who writes, ‘In the New World the African woman creating life and seeing the men – the white men – taking away her children and selling them (...). Body and place. Fertilized. Cultivated. Harvested. In the same way. Between parent. And child. Mother. And child.

Father. And child. Rupture. Umbilical cords to centuries of learning and culture severed (...). The inner space between the legs linked irrevocably to the outer space of the plantation'.⁵⁸ Despite the flowery embellishments of emblem and allegory, Eckhout's painting promoted Johan Maurits's ruthless agenda of relocating large numbers of African women into bondage on Brazilian sugar plantations, where their compulsory labours included forced reproductive labour.

The woman in the painting thus stands, in Spillers's terms, as 'both mother and mother-dispossessed'.⁵⁹ With severed connections to kin and ancestors, enslaved people had little hope of generating future lines of kinship.⁶⁰ Arriving in WIC-controlled Brazil, each captive faced the realization that the social roles of mother or father or daughter or son were not recognized in enslavement, only the relations of the market. In Wagener's market scene, we see young children being bought and sold as families were separated and dispersed. In response to these inhumane practices, infanticide and abortion were extreme acts of resistance carried out by women who refused to generate future 'slaves'.⁶¹ Antonil admonishes enslavers to take better care of enslaved children in order to forestall this possibility: 'Otherwise, slave women deliberately attempt to abort themselves so that the children inside their bodies will not be made to suffer what they have suffered'.⁶² Such abortions register the impossibility of living in an unliveable anti-Black nonworld.

Eckhout propagated the colonial view of reproductive slavery. The symbolism of a child pointing a phallic cornucob and holding up an African lovebird near the genitals of a mother figure clearly operates as a pornotrope to emphasize her sexuality and procreative capacities. However, as Hayden White reminds us, 'tropes are deviations from literal, conventional or proper language use (...) deviation from one possible proper meaning and deviation towards another meaning'.⁶³ As a symbol of separation, a solitary African lovebird deviates toward irreparably severed bonds. Antonil might have recognized the symptoms of intolerable losses when he urged enslavers not to separate enslaved people who had formed affective relationships: they 'should not be sent elsewhere against their will, because they can easily succumb to grief and die'.⁶⁴ While the priest may have seen suffering, the enslavers saw nonhuman commodities, and the enslaved assessed their limited options, including choosing death over bare life in enslavement. Morgan emphasizes how different actors navigated the emotional terrain of the transatlantic slavery business: 'While European expansion and all that it entailed had significantly altered the geographies of trade and affect in which they lived, the ability to read the parameters of that expansion was arguably a tool widely available: to slaveowners and merchants calculating worth (...) or to the mother of a newborn who saw in the body of her child evidence of the interdependency between her receding horizon and her newly calculated value'.⁶⁵ In Eckhout's composition, emphasis on the space between the legs encapsulates the woman's narrowing horizon and her colonial usefulness. The symbolism in this painting does not resolve into a fixed cultural identity, because this is an allegory of reproductive slavery.

This place. The insurgent ground

Rarely do we discover seventeenth-century interpretations of paintings. Eckhout's series is unusual, since Wagener's sketchbook includes drawings of the eight paintings accompanied by text that describes the place of each figure in colonial society. Wagener's explanation of Eckhout's painting titled *Molher negra*, or *Black woman* (fig. 5), makes no attempt to decipher the painting's allegorical plethora of symbols and attributes or to connect the image to the geopolitics of conquest. The figure of the boy is included in the sketch, but not discussed in the text, which makes no reference to the woman's sexuality or childbearing capacities. Instead, Wagener observes that there was no gendered division of labour in slavery: 'Black women are (...) not spared, having to work in an exhausting manner in the mills and cane-fields just as the men and children do'.⁶⁶ Wagener draws attention to the convoluted status imposed on enslaved people: the assertion of binary differences between men and women or adults and children were not economically useful.⁶⁷ In the plantation system, the bodies of enslaved women, men, and children were treated as en fleshed tools whose value was equal to the amount of labour that they could provide to ensure maximum profits from sugar production.

Wagener apprehends the woman in Eckhout's painting – not as the allegory of a people or place – but as an enslaved person who has been sent out to sell the enslaver's produce. He does not romanticize or feminize this task but recognizes that it was just as hazardous and terrifying as toiling in the mills and fields: 'Some of them know Spanish and Dutch money well, so their owners send them into the streets to sell chickens, birds, dried fish

5

Zacharias Wagener, *Molher negra*, c. 1641, watercolour on paper, 212 x 335 mm, *Thierbuch*, Dresden, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (photo: Art Resource, NY)



and all form of magnificent fruit, all well counted one by one; when however the Black is careless and takes false money or only a small amount, when she gets home she then gives poor account to her master for the goods. She is immediately bound and soundly whipped; so they prefer to be employed in other more tiring service than to be involved in that dangerous trade.⁶⁸

Wagener briefly acknowledges the business acumen and skills of the market women. He also indicates that when unscrupulous buyers took advantage of an enslaved vendor's vulnerable position, it was the woman herself who was blamed and brutally punished by the enslavers for false dealings in the colonial marketplace. It is impossible to say whether Wagener meant for this narrative to epitomize the egregious injustices of the slavery system writ large.

Wagener follows this account of market practices with information about a new policy on branding: 'Our people, like the Portuguese, recently decided it would be a good idea to put certain signs or marks on men, women and children, with a hot iron on the chest or on the neck (...) because when they run away from their masters, which frequently happens, the men charged with finding them (...) as soon as they lay hands on them recognise them and tie their hands behind their backs, go to hand them over in return for a fixed reward, to their original owners, who receive them and welcome them back with many a sound beating.'⁶⁹ The branding iron registers the ruthless policies of the Dutch colonial administration, and the text exposes the unrelenting violence perpetrated by enslavers against captive persons. Although Wagener omitted most of Eckhout's symbolic flourishes, he notably inserted a new symbol in his copy of the painting: the monogram of Johan Maurits, a stylized I and M surmounted by a crown, is burnt into the skin just above the woman's left breast (fig. 6).⁷⁰ This insignia brands her flesh as the possession of the sovereign. If she signifies his power, though, then her branding also marks the ruler himself as the chief perpetrator of a colonial topography of torture.

Obliquely, Wagener also recognized the brand as a signifier of insurrection. He describes the WIC decision to implement branding as necessary since people 'frequently' escaped from bondage.⁷¹ The people who fled formed self-governing rebel communities hidden in the inland forests. These villages were called *mocambos* – the Mbundu word for 'hideouts'.⁷² Their number and size increased during the period of Dutch colonial rule, as people seized opportunities to escape by taking advantage of the chaotic conditions created by the ongoing war between the Dutch and Portuguese.⁷³ The inhabitants of the *mocambos* engaged in warfare against the plantation system. One observer reported:

This people has the custom of fleeing to the woods and joining in hideouts where they live by attacks on the settlers, stealing livestock and ruining crops and cane fields which results in much damage and many losses beyond that of losing their daily labor. And many of these [fugitives] live for many years in the forest never returning and living in these *mocambos* which are places or villages that they have made deep in the forest. And from there they set out to make their assaults, robbing and stealing and often killing many, and in these attacks they seek to carry off their male and female relatives to live with them.⁷⁴



6

Zacharias Wagener, *Molher negra*, c. 1641
(detail), watercolour on paper,
212 x 335 mm, *Thierbuch*, Dresden,
Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunst-
sammlungen (photo: Art Resource, NY)

The mocambos were threatening to Johan Maurits, who sent a military expedition of over 1,000 armed men into the interior in a failed attempt to find and destroy one of the largest settlements.⁷⁵ Wagener's mention of the pervasiveness of escape in relation to the brand mark thus alludes to the existence of substantial opposition to the institution of slavery in Brazil.⁷⁶

Wagener reinterpreted Eckhout's painting in other ways, dramatically reducing and reworking the symbolism of fruitfulness. The lone lovebird and offensive corn cob remain, but the stunning peacock feather headpiece is reimagined as a frazzled straw hat. The fruit in the basket looks brown, and, most noticeably, the lush landscape vegetation has been cleared away. No longer on the coast, the woman and child stand on a deforested hillock with cultivated fields in the distance. The exuberant wax palm tree has not just been left out of the picture – it has been chopped down. Its scaly tree stump fittingly characterizes an unliveable place and reproductive slavery's truncation of motherhood. This unusual image apprehends enslavement not as a natural state or a triumphant conquest, but as the outcome of wilful processes of destroying life.

By removing the allegorical overdetermination of Eckhout's painting, Wagener's stripped-down copy reveals how people were forced out of the domain of humanity. Eckhout conveyed something similar in his *Woman on beach* sketch: the devastated terrain that forms the ground zero of the human. As noted, Spillers calls this displacement from normative understandings of the human 'the *insurgent ground*', and her challenge remains relevant: 'it is our task to make a place for this different social subject'.⁷⁷ This place lies outside of traditional symbolics and is wider than the strictures that were fabricated to define gender, sexuality, race, and slavery.⁷⁸ Eckhout and Wagener were among the first European artists who attempted to make pictorial sense of the place of captive women in Dutch-occupied Brazil, an artistic process that involved being confronted by people's nonconformity with the definition of enslaved status. The ambiguities of these images thus might represent their failure to make a place for women who defied racialized and sexualized delineations of persons as property.

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Notes

- 1 Spillers 1987, 80.
- 2 Brien 2006, 144-154.
- 3 On guinea cloth, see Anderson 2022, 62-65.
- 4 Glissant 1997, 7.
- 5 NourbeSe Philip 2017, 254.
- 6 NourbeSe Philip 2017, 266.
- 7 Brien 2006, 149-153.
- 8 Studies of the Middle Passage include Rediker 2007, Smallwood 2007, and Mustakeem 2016.
- 9 A facsimile of Wagener's sketchbook is reproduced, transcribed, and translated in Ferrão & Soares 1997.
- 10 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 195.
- 11 Spillers 1987, 72.
- 12 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 195; Massing 2011, 171-172.
- 13 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 195.
- 14 Spillers 1987, 72.
- 15 Patterson 1982.
- 16 Weinbaum 2024, 32-34.
- 17 Robinson 2000; Weinbaum 2019, 2-3; Weinbaum 2024.
- 18 After his service in Brazil, Wagener worked his way up the hierarchy and became governor of the Dutch Cape Colony in South Africa, which was also a brutal enslaving society. Boxer 1957, 153.
- 19 Brien 2006, 152, 258 (note 83); Mason 1998, 45; Whitehead & Boeseman 1989,

171. Whitehead and Boeseman speculate that the object could be a sugar loaf.

- 20 Brien 2006, 145-146.
- 21 Brien 2006, 152; Mason 1998, 44-45.
- 22 Brien 2006, 152.
- 23 Morgan 2018, 2.
- 24 Anderson 2022, 62-65.
- 25 Key studies of early modern costume include Rublack 2010, Wilson 2007, and Jones & Stallybrass 2000.
- 26 Anderson 2022, 76-77.
- 27 Excerpts from Antonil's text are translated and cited in Conrad 1983, section 2.1, 'An Italian Jesuit advises sugar planters on the treatment of their slaves (1711)', 55-60.
- 28 Antonil, as cited in Conrad 1983, 57-58.
- 29 Anderson 2022, 71.
- 30 Weheliye 2014, 41-42.
- 31 Spillers 1987, 67.
- 32 Spillers 1987, 67; Weheliye 2014, 109.
- 33 Hartman 1997, 3-4, 26. See also Hartman 2008, and Weheliye 2014, 91.
- 34 Spillers 1987, 67; Weheliye 2014, 90-91.
- 35 Spillers 1987, 68.
- 36 Spillers 1987, 80.
- 37 Azoulay 2019, 305.
- 38 Brien 2006, 199.
- 39 Buvelot 2004.
- 40 Brien 2006, 148; Massing 2011, 160-164.
- 41 Van Baerle 2011, 141.
- 42 Brien 2006, 149.
- 43 Brien 2006, 148-149.
- 44 For overviews of 17th-century Dutch texts on racial theory, see Archangel 2020, Van Groesen 2017, 107-112, Massing 2011, 395-399, and Brien 2006, 84-88.
- 45 Carroll 1989, 5-6.
- 46 Monteiro & Odegard 2020, 15; Brien speculates that the peacock feather

hat and woven basket may have been acquired as booty in the attack on Luanda; see Brien 2006, 148.

- 47 This wording is from the 1638 Report of the High and Secret Council, over which Johan Maurits presided. Translated and reproduced in Schwartz 2010, 245.
- 48 Van Baerle 2011, 141.
- 49 Brien 2006, 153.
- 50 Brien 2006, 153; Massing 2011, 102.
- 51 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 180.
- 52 Weinbaum 2024, 29-32. Thank you to Carolina Monteiro for discussing with me her dissertation research concerning enslaved mothers and children in Brazil.
- 53 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 180.
- 54 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 180.
- 55 Schwartz 1992, 40-42.
- 56 Morgan 2018, 2, 6.
- 57 Morgan 2018, 6-8.
- 58 NourbeSe Philip 2017, 268.
- 59 Spillers 1987, 80.
- 60 Spillers 1987, 74.
- 61 Morgan 2018, 8.
- 62 Antonil, as cited in Conrad 1983, 60.
- 63 White 1978, 2; Weheliye 2014, 90.
- 64 Antonil, as cited in Conrad 1983, 56.
- 65 Morgan 2018, 17.
- 66 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 175.
- 67 Spillers *et al.* 2007, 304-305.
- 68 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 175.
- 69 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 175-177.
- 70 The brand mark always identifies the 'owner' rather than the enslaved person. Johan Maurits was in fact working against the WIC by engaging in the illegal smuggling and selling of captive people for his own personal profit. Monteiro & Odegard 2020, 20.

- 71 Ferrão & Soares 1997, 175.
- 72 Schwartz 1992, 125.
- 73 Conrad 1983, 368-369.
- 74 Cited in Schwartz 1992, 105.
- 75 Van Baerle 2011, 237.
- 76 See, among others, Schwartz 1992, Sweet 2003, Brown 2009, and McKittrick 2021.
- 77 Spillers 1987, 80.
- 78 Spillers 1987; Snorton 2018, 57-59; Spillers *et al.* 2007, 304; Weinbaum 2024, 36-37; Bey 2017, 279.

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