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# WRITING (NOT IN BETWEEN) REALITY

> Imagine an artist searching in a box of buttons and pins of different shapes and colors, iridescence and opacities, not thinking too much but wanting to match a pair or several into a constellation that "makes sense." The different buttons and pins are events that happened in the past. The artist jumps over time to make the match that makes sense, ignoring what happened in between (Taussig, 2020: 424).

This rather mundane textual image, through which Michael Taussig figures Walter Benjamin's anti-method-as-method of "citing" history in such a way as to yank the elements cited out from the presumption of History's chronological order, also serves to introduce the approach taken herein to our encounters with Taussig's writing over the years. Cited from an essay by Taussig (2020), "Unpacking my Library: An Experiment in the Technique of Awakening," its initial title itself cites that of a short essay by Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library," first published some nine decades earlier. If the repetition of that title thus figures as a button in Taussig's box, the immediately following colon interrupts the time intervening between the essays, even while placing the reader squarely in the "experiment" to which the subtitle alludes. Let us follow suit here, by photographically citing and thence begin to "unpack" Taussig from one — and thence both — of our own libraries.

Perhaps the crux of the buttons-and-pins figuration of the (anti-) method cited above lies in what it would mean to ignore "what happened in between." The sentence immediately following that figuration in Taussig's essay, wherein he quotes Benjamin affirming that "for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them" (Benjamin *apud* Taussig 2020: 424), certainly provides a strong clue: while it precludes a chronological link between past and present, it figures their potential relation in *tactile* terms at the same time. If then, on the one hand, Benjamin's anti-chronological conception of history, as figured by Taussig, rules out a linear account of the cause-and-effect sequence of things happening "in-between" events, on the other, it draws attention to how past and present only come into contact in and through the very *things* — images, texts, archives, and the like — that do in fact stand *between* them in a more enigmatically material and immanently sensate sense. Such things, moreover, stand *between* past and present in the double sense of both interrupting their relation and rendering it, well, *tangible*. Benjamin, following Taussig (2020: 424), thence places the reader — of history no less than of his writings — in the heart of this Marxist-inspired perceptual paradox: "the very history that we are setting out to examine influences how we will perceive that history and understand it." In what follows, we suggest that Taussig can be read as refiguring anthropology's approach to writing — its manner of conjoining ethnography and theory and their relation to time — in a manner both akin to and intercut by the Benjaminian approach to history so briefly sketched above. Yet, what would it mean to "ignore what happened in between" not only in historical writing but also in writing of a more anthropological bend?

**Photo 1 –** Unpacking our (packed) library...

Taussig
THE DEVIL AND COMMODITY FETISHISM IN SOUTH AMERICA
Chapel Hill
TAUSSIG
MIMESIS AND ALTERITY
ROUTLEDGE
TAUSSIG WALTER BENJAMIN'S GRAVE
CHICAGO
THE CORN WOLF MICHAEL TAUSSIG
CHICAGO
O diabo e o fetichismo da mercadoria na América do Sul
Michael T. Taussig
Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man
MICHAEL TAUSSIG
CHICAGO
TAUSSIG
THE MAGIC OF THE STATE
Defacement
TAUSSIG
STANFORD
I SWEAR I SAW THIS
MICHAEL TAUSSIG
Chicago
THE NERVOUS SYSTEM
TAUSSIG
MIMESIS AND ALTERITY
ROUTLEDGE
Palma Africana
MICHAEL TAUSSIG
CHICAGO
Michael Taussig
my cocaine museum
CHICAGO

A central fiction and conceit to Taussig's writing as we read (and write on) it here — or, if not central, at least oft-repeated and returned to, like a spiraling musical motif — lies in its removal of the preposition conventionally inserted between 'writing' and 'reality' to describe ethnography, history, and other modes of "non-fictional" writing: writing ~~about~~ reality. What could such writing be like once it is no longer written "about" that which it purports to describe or narrate but rubbing right up against its still-unresolved materiality as something — or some *thing* — that in more than one sense, already *says* what is to be told? It bears noting that, for one, the writing itself would be one more thing among others, not on its own: very much a part of the world it purports to describe. The "reality" in "writing reality," as we take it through our readings of Taussig, is always partially an effect of its reading, it is the creative, magical act performed by the illocutionary force of description, never reducible to something "in" the text itself. It is a provocation to be read otherwise than as a representation of something. It prods at existing limits, poking holes through which figments of reality might seep rather than propose some new form of delimitation.

This is by no means a new or original conceit. "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement," we read in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* by James Agee and Walker Evans (197*: 13), first published in 1941.

**Photo 2 –** One of our copies of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Could it really be called a 'copy' in its present time-and-finger-worn state, overflowing with sticky-tabs? It looks almost as though that first photographic section is about to come tumbling down like a wave, miraculously merging back into the (rest of the) text from which it has become separated at the spine...

Agee's writing itself rubs up against the 62 caption-free photographs presented prior to any (non-photographic) writing. Shot and organized by Walker Evans, these photos turn out to comprise "Book I" of their collaborative volume, with photos and writing alike working to interrupt the very journalistic conventions governing the portrayal of the lives of sharecropper families they had been hired to portray.[1]

Turning to the comparably quite recent collection of essays (all by anthropologists) *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (2017: 3) suggest, along a similar vein, the radical possibilities implicated if one were to take up

> writing as a practice immanent to the world, rather than as a detached reflection upon the world and itself. Imagine the novel possibilities for thought and action that might come with a deferral of critical distance, in pursuit of a less guarded, even reckless contamination by circumstance. Imagine ways of writing that might put ourselves more deeply at risk than what we have tried till now. What could such experiments look like, and what, if anything, might they achieve?[2]

If, ethnographic (and other 'non-fiction') writing is all-too-often treated as if it were a more or less transparent window onto the described reality and/or narrated events (see Jackson Jr., 2012: 481-482), here, in taking up some of Taussig's writings and slicing and splicing them with that of others (including certain ethnographic realities around which our own writing revolves), we seek to avoid merely inverting that perspective and focus on the writing "in itself" (its formal characteristics, mode of constructing "ethnographic authority," or the like). We also seek to avoid simply writing "about" a mode of writing that, we argue, eschews or at least complicates such "aboutness." We would rather ask what sort of reality has *impressed* itself into that writing and the images that both comprise and interrupt it and what, in turn, could it or they be trying to *tell* us...?[3] Prior to turning to this matter as it presents itself in Taussig's writings, let us first make an extended detour through the essay "Not in Between," by Fred Moten (2017).[4] As with most detours, the reason for taking it only presents itself along the way, or sometime thereafter, so please bear with us.

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Just after introducing its subject-matter — "the lyrical, ethno-historiographic, painterly encounter between Tshimbumba Kanda Matulu and Johannes Fabian" (Moten, 2017: 1) and their respective modes of engagement with the postcolonial past and future embodied in the memory of Patrice Lumumba, as presented in their collaborative ethnography, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Fabian, 1996) — Moten's text itself proposes a "detour" of its own. Namely, it makes an extended historical foray into the work of C. L. R. James' (1989 [1938]) *The Black Jacobins: Touissant Lóuverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. So, it turns out, one detour leads to another.

Taken initially from James' opening comments on the writing of history, Moten allows the "not-in-between" to take on multiple valences, something like a musical motif, but also akin to an interruptive noise. First standing for the

Caribbean itself as approached by James, this conceptual realm — less definite than a realm, more real than a concept — takes form in the history he recounts through "the material interplay between writing and speech, narrative and lyric..." and "the Afro-Diasporic traditions' long, meditative, and practical concern with spacing, incommensurability and rupture" (Moten, 2017: 2). Proceeding to cite several long passages from James' historical account of — and lyrical rapture on — the San Domingo revolution, Moten (2017: 6) then links the "not-in-between" to "those moments in James's historiography when meaning is cut and augmented by the very independent syntaxes and outer noises — conveying new and revolutionary content, mysterious and black magical politico-economic spells and spellings — that James would record".

Moten then plunges us into an equally dense and intense discussion of Cedric Robinson's (2000) take on James' historical account in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* — a tradition Robinson carefully locates at the intersection between race and class struggle even as he places them — as Moten (2017: 9) terms it "not in between them and at the same time as in excess of their oppositional limitations." Having repeatedly pointed to varied ways in which "stylistic" matters come to mark this irreducible *excess* of that tradition, Moten (2017: 10) creatively displaces both such stylized historical forays into an uncertain, unnamed, and yet rhythmically refrained future:

> There and not there, not hybrid, not in between marks the presence and loss of Africa. Blackness and black radicalism are not in between but neither one nor the other. New things, new spaces, new times demand lyrical innovation and intervention, formal maneuverings that often serve to bring to the theoretical and practical table whatever meaning can't. Phrasing, where form — grammar, sound — cuts and augments meaning in the production of content, is where implication most properly resides.

With that, let us return from the detour Moten took us via James, to our own detour through Moten, wherein he recounts the encounter between anthropologist Johannes Fabian and painter-historian Tshibumba Kanda Matulu as played out in central Africa in the country formerly known as Zaire (and presently as the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Honing in on a fragment of conversation recorded in Fabian's text wherein Tshibumba accepts both the attributions of artist and historian through a phrase whose punctuation interrupts their identity: "I am an artist, yes. I am a historian." Moten notes how that "broken phrasing" also marks the unassimilable difference between what Tshibumba says and does and their transcription and description in Fabian's text. Here, Tshibumba's twice-doubled work as painter-historian—his paintings portray "history and nothing but history" — and as artist/ethnographic interlocutor moves "in a kind of contrapuntal surplus and disruption of the project Fabian rightly and problematically sees as collaborative" (p. 14). Moten notes how, in Fabian's account, "the richness that cuts and augments every such encounter, making it always so much more than most ethnographers ever realize in their recording and analysis, is given in a more or less explicit and conscious way by the ethnographer" (p. 13). At the same time, Moten repeatedly points (in never the same way) to Tshibumba's double refusal to presume either a division or a totality between the *aesthetic* and *political* dimensions of his work — dimensions at times conjoined in Fabian's text through the questionable anthropological concept/conceit of "culture."

Here, *time*, as both Fabian and Tshibumba go to great pains to elaborate (albeit from unassimilable angles), lies at the crux of the matter. Far more is involved than the (in itself far from simple) matter of how to figure the relation between ethnographer and interlocutor and their respective cultural-historical figurations as belonging to the "same" time, pace Fabian. As Moten writes, "it's not just the time of the ethnographer that Tshibumba cuts; it's the time of neocolonialism as well, moments and progressions that are not but nothing other than the same. The noncontemporaneity of these mo(ve)ments is crucial" (Moten: 15). What is specifically at issue is the historical memory of Patrice Lumumba in the doubled-over context of President Mobuto's own claims made about the "authenticity" of the national past and those of Tshibumba's paintings and commentary as depicted, transcribed, commented on, and *contained* in Fabian's text. Taken as overlapping and mutually interrupting performatives, as utterances that enact that of which they speak, Moten writes no less performatively as to how "the content of Lumumba's life and speeches — which is to say the essence of Lumumba's politics, the essence of African political rationality — depends upon the lyrico-narrative singularity of what cuts, augments, *accompanies* his utterance" (p18). Moten's own writing thus lyrically interrupts a content-oriented reading of Fabian's text through its sonic reverberations with Tshibumba's paintings and words and with the postcolonial future emanating from Lumumba's still-resonant history as portrayed not in between them.

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It is possible to understand Taussig's work as an artistic form akin to Tshibumba's work, a form of creative nonfiction — or, as Taussig prefers, ficto-criticism. Michael Agar's (1990:78) appreciation of the modern modality of ethnography as creative nonfiction can give us some clues on how to read Taussig's work:

> Writers show rather than tell. Situations are recreated for the reader, so that he/she can see and hear, smell and touch, listen to the dialogue, feel the emotional tone. Detailed scenes pull the reader in, involve him or her in the immediacy of the experience. In [creative nonfiction] there is an added draw — the scenes are real, not imagined.

We would sustain, however, that in Tshibumba's and Taussig's work, as much as in Benjamin's style of narrating, the artist — as writer or painter — *shows* and *tells* or *tells by showing*. The reality here is not simply represented but (re)created through the performative act of narrating. The detailed scenes are not a thick description (Geertz, 1993 [1973]) of experience and reality but a composing part and active component thereof. The reader is immersed in the immediacy of the scene by being drawn into and thence becoming wrapped up in the visual and/or textual narrative of events and scenes.

In Taussig's reconfiguration of ethnography, the task of writing about culture — which is also very much a matter of writing *against* culture even if not in quite the same way Abu-Lughod (1991) had in mind — is animated by things (surreal entities that populate everyday perception) and the everyday perceived as fantastic, as with the recurrent references to donkeys and their world-shattering brays in *Palma Africana* (Taussig, 2018). It extrapolates the hierarchy between textual and visual representation and makes us rethink the notions of portraying and capturing or creating scenes, which are so deeply entrenched yet are often treated as if at odds with one another in the visual arts and ethnography.[5] In Taussig's work, drawings and pictures emerge as a continuation of, — or, if you like —, as a reframing of narratives; as a form of narrative in themselves even as they interrupt conventional approaches to ethnographic narrative. This aspect of his work translates the illocutionary act of writing reality and experience through depiction in a broad sense.

The imagetic element in Taussig's work and his fascination with scenes and pictures — still and moving pictures — is evocatively elaborated in an essay in which he analyzes the capability of ordinary things to tell powerful stories, "The Stories Things Tell and Why They Tell Them" (Taussig 2015). This essay immerses us in scenes of a documentary, a novel, and a movie to reflect on the storytelling power, respectively, of an arrow being tethered, a winch and a furnace, and a tire. Let us limit ourselves here to the first instance, wherein through a 1970s documentary on the Yanomami, he considers how the imagetic framing of an arrow being decorated by a young man is constantly alternating places with the filmmaker to become the storyteller. Questioning Benjamin's claim that "storytelling died away with the demise of craft and with the accelerated pace of life in the big city" (Taussig, 2015: 17), Taussig claims that stories and storytelling are alive and can be found in the places in which people perform crafts.

Following Taussig, the arrow in Downey's documentary on the Yanomami tells a story of craft and beauty, of how the human body is "the workshop of the world" (Taussig, 2015: 16). The arrow dominates the screen in crucial moments, being rolled forward and backward by a young man who tethers a blue feather to it. In the images of the documentary and in Taussig's writing alike, art and craft are mobilized to produce an effect, to compose a story by — following Moten — lyrically cutting and augmenting the narrative. The arrow, the young man, and Downey's artistic technique take turns in telling this story, not so much through as alongside Taussig's writing:

> *It is as if the arrow is thinking*, inseparable as it is from the human body as both tool and beauty. First the right hand moves back and forth along the naked thigh, back and forth, rolling fibers into a thread, that will be used to bind the feather to the arrow. The thigh is an anvil, a device for rolling fibers into one braided thread. Then the body becomes a vice, holding the shaft of the arrow tight in the axilla. Body and arrow are unified. Epitome of ease, the man sits as if on a low stool, his body the workshop of the world (Taussig, 2015:15-16, emphasis in the original).

As Taussig shows us, such storied things have much to tell us about the power and feel of storytelling and how words and images can create lyrically infused narratives, as threads spun into fabrics with one's eyes and hands as much as with words — all the more real for the sensations they provoke. We also argue that such writing creates scenes and folds visual and tactile elements within itself, inviting the reader to flesh out images, both moving and still, in their mind, eyes, ears, and hands.[6]

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Insofar as James's Caribbean history of Blackness and Black radicalism cuts and augments Moten's discussion of the ethnographic encounter between Fabian and Tshibumba (and thus our take on Taussig's take on stories and — other — things), it also stands not in between Taussig's writings and our own engagements with Black/African-Diasporic practices in Jamaica and Brazil. In what follows, we do not attempt to articulate our writings with Taussig's in a direct or in the same manner. We hope to make something of this non-fit, this interruptiveness, not in between his writing and our own — and, we should add, not in between our own writings and the respective realities impressed into them.

**Photo 3 –** Bobo Shanti High Priest on his way to sweep a classroom in 2015.

In April 2015, Felipe spent some time with Bobo Shanti Rastafarians in their camp, in the outskirts of Kingston (Araujo, 2018). They call their camp *Jerusalem*. One of the recurring activities in which Felipe engaged himself involved reading different versions of the Bible with some young Bobo Prophets by candlelight. Electricity in Jerusalem is provided by generators that, for thrift reasons, are turned off a few hours after sunset. One morning, after a cup of coffee with young Rastas in their cabin, the Prophets began their usual routine of cleaning their rooms, sewing, and ironing clothes. Sacred Rastafarian music, called Nyabinghi (Bilby & Leib, 1986; Merritt, 2017), was playing in the speakers; the one-two sound of the drums guiding the singer's words on the Exodus toward Ethiopia, the Rastafarian holy land. Felipe moved to the porch so as not to disturb them and sat on a chair, watching them immersed in their tasks. At one point (interrupting them without interrupting them),Felipe told them that all that dedication to cleanliness and order was fascinating and that he had not seen such attention to cleanliness among other Rastas. Prophet Aaron, who was sweeping a room, stopped swaying his broom and, looking Felipe in the eyes, asked:

> "Other Rastas? Who are the 'other Rastas' you are talking 'bout, My Lord?"
>
> "I'm referring to the brethren who are part of other Mansions, like the Nyabinghi and the brethren of the Twelve Tribes or those from the Judah Coptic Church," said Felipe.
>
> "My Lord! Let mi tell you about a time when I went to a Twelve Tribes meeting. I remember that it was di 23rd of July. How can I remember the date?" he asked. Felipe did not answer.
>
> "His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I the First, was born on that day," replied one of the Prophets. Prophet Aaron continued:
>
> "Most naturally, My Lord!" "Emmanuel I! Selassie I! Jaaaaaaah," shouted one of the Prophets, to which the others responded in unison: "Raaaaastafari!"
>
> "My Lord," continued Prophet Aaron, "I went to a Twelve Tribes binghi to celebrate His Imperial Majesty birthday. I was outside the compound and could hear music playing. They were playing this reggae tune and that reggae tune and a next reggae tune. So I get inside and wait for the drumming session. The drums were there on the ground but no one would play them. They kept on playing reggae." The Prophets who were engaged in the reasoning shook their heads in disapproval. Prophet Aaron continued:
>
> "My Lord, do you know that the only music that His Imperial Majesty would dance is Nyabinghi music? His Imperial Majesty does not dance reggae. Only Nyabinghi drums and chant would make Him dance. So I ask how they want to celebrate His Imperial Majesty without singing and chanting Nyabinghi?"
>
> "Judgement! Fyah!" shouted one of the Prophets.

> “Fyah bun dem!” shouted another one.
>
> “True!” continued Prophet Aaron. “They must get burnt ‘cause they do not move with righteousness. They consume flesh and bone. They celebrate Emperor Selassie I’s birthday and for refreshment they have chicken and goat and fish! They chant Rastafari and have rotting carcass for food. They are wicked!”
>
> “Fyah! Judgment!” shouted a Prophet again.
>
> “Emmanuel I! Selassie I! Jaaaaah!” shouted another prophet, followed by a unison chorus: “Raaaaaaaastafari!”
>
> “That is why I tell you, My Lord: beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves,” said Prophet Aaron, quoting the Gospel of Matthew (7:15).

The scene above retells a Rastafarian ritual performance known as reasoning (Chevannes, 1994; Homiak, 1995). Reasonings are key events in Rastafarian liturgy during which the speech of participants is notoriously marked in its tone, choice of words, expressions, narratives, motifs, and scenes that are mobilized to create and convey meaning. Following Turner, one could say that reasonings are oral performances that intensify the social dramas Rastas experienced historically and still do daily. But how to pursue such an approach without *dampening* the very intensity that one sets out to analyze or explain? During these performances, they invoke biblical verses and images, mobilize the Shakespearean language of the King James Version of the Bible, and recite striking phrases by Haile Selassie I (the former Ethiopian emperor they acknowledge as God in Flesh) and Marcus Garvey (the Jamaican Pan-African activist regarded as a prophet). This imagetic mode of language is mobilized to create meanings of Blackness; of the place and belonging of Black people in history and mythology. The images invoked and evoked in Rastafarian reasonings tell stories of injustice, violence, and redemption. Slavery, in its biblical and modern transatlantic iterations, is a recurring theme of reasonings; images of its violence are mobilized to poetically and politically articulate the present, past, and future. It operates as a memorialization device that relies on the retelling of stories to articulate reality.

The performative power of Rastafarian reasoning on slavery goes hand-in-hand with the thingliness of their language mode: it (re)creates experiences and (re)imagines temporalities while telling stories about the past, present, and future. Rastafarians stories and language can craft and *refashion* the future of Black people — to use Scott’s (1999) notion. This modality of narrating reality by storying, it through the mobilization of biblical images has, of course, its imprint in Felipe’s way of retelling the stories so crafted. The theme of slavery inhabits the pages of his field journal and his writing on Rastafarians. It frames the way he meditates on the Rastafarian notions of Blackness and belonging, on their desire for physical and metaphorical return to Africa. The recurrence of the theme of slavery in Rastafarian narratives, intertwined with the desire to highlight how Africans are God's chosen people, points to how "telling and retelling of stories is critical to the development of a collective memory" (Hanchard, 2008, 52).

This telling and retelling of stories as a modality of Black memorialization is a form of "mak[ing] claims in contemporary life about the relationship between present inequalities and past injustices" (ibid.:46), and evoking biblical scenes gives visibility to experiences that "would have been otherwise forgotten or neglected" (ibid.: 48; see also Trouillot 1995). The Shakespearean language and the biblical motifs in Rastafarian reasonings tell stories themselves; they bring history and mythology into the present and the future. They actualize prophecies, expectations, and desires. As Bobo Shanti's recurrent practice of sweeping surfaces to get rid of dust and dirt, language cleans the confusion of historical experience and creates order and righteousness. Reasoning is not a notion or a performance related to a Western modality of exegesis. It is a creative process, and the craft of the storyteller is to create reality through speech and gesture, tone of voice, chosen words and grammar, and facial and bodily expressions "cut[ing] and augment[ing] meaning in the production of content," to follow Moten (2017: 10). Again, as Taussig would have it, the body is the workshop of the world.

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> She is inside, in Malaysia, becoming palm.
>
> I am outside in a village of 144 houses built on sandy soil on an island in the swamplands of northern Colombia.
>
> Here the great rivers of Colombia converge on their way north to the Caribbean.
>
> Every six months it floods.

So starts Michael Taussig's (2018) *Palma Africana* if we skip over the initial photograph of his artist-colleague Simryn Gill "becoming a palm oil tree on the Straits of Malacca" (p. 1) and the two pages of italicized text that stands not in between that initial image and the rest of the book: not in between because it does not so much mediate the image and the rest of the text as it cuts the pretense of either connecting or maintaining a neat separation between what precedes and follows it, as if Taussig's entire ethnography in fact consisted of an extended transmutation of that singular image into an equally singular imagetic text or textual image. Naming that image-text "not in between" also serves as a signpost indicating that we have not really left behind our detour through Moten's text or the detour through James he led us on, even as we precede on new ground. Actually, that ground turns out to be a swamp, or at least surrounded by swampland, whose waters flow into the very island-bound and aqueous-unbound entity Moten first figured via C. L. R. James, as the not-in-between: the Caribbean. Here, that body of water, together with the river whose waters empty into it and the swampland from which that water drains and to which it periodically floods, stand not in between the "reasoning" as described in Jamaica above and the island-like village in and around which much of *Palma Africana* takes place.

Although the "Africana" in *Palma Africana* clearly names the plant and not the place, it still bears noting the absence of reference in a book thus named to the historical reality and radical rupture with the European figuration of history as "progress" nonetheless implicated by the "Africa" in that name. We found this particularly surprising given Taussig's long-standing engagement with the doubly racialized history of violence and violence of history implicated in other plants metamorphosed into commodities in colonial and post-colonial times, wherein the blood of enslaved and forcefully displaced Africans mixed both with the sap extracted from rubber-trees in the Colombian Amazon (as in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wildman*, Taussig: 1987) and with the syrup extracted from sugar cane plantations (as in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Taussig: 1980). Still, there is no skewed "equivalent" to how the reality of indigenous shamanism has repeatedly impressed itself into Tausig's writing, thence pressing against and creatively refiguring the otherwise Eurocentric bend of his surrealist and Marxist influences over the years and animating his repeated attempts to write against terror and its normalization through "agri-writing" (Taussig 2015) and the like.[7] There is certainly no African-diasporically inspired equivalent to Taussig's (1987: 435-446) creative transfiguration of Brechtian montage through its displacement into and by all-night yagé rituals, for instance.

Or is there...? Let us listen in on *Palma Africana*, now a small number of pages later and a large number of kilometers inland from where it began, in that village surrounded by swampland:

> On the steep slopes of the killing fields of the mountainside known as *La Comuna 13* in the city of Medellín, Colombia, for example, you can hear today young rappers singing of Álvaro Uribe's government massacres of the inhabitants in 2002. Operacíon Orión it was called. Ostensibly to wipe out the ELN guerrilla, and employing paramilitaries as well as regular army troops, many civilians were killed. Helicopters buzzed overhead for days, the health clinic became a torture den, and small children watched traumatized in amazement. Now they are in their early twenties, memories aflame and every day new songs are composed by these gangs of roaming minstrels whose habitat is riddled by warring street gangs and paramilitaries alongside tourists coming for the frisson of a mountainside seeped in violence. You listen to the rappers as you fall head over heels down the steep hillsides into their brilliantly colored murals — surrealism *avant la lettre* — on the sides of buildings and on the walls of the cemetery. Despite the active presence of paramilitaries, they plant in parks and along the sidewalk memorials they call *cuerpos gramaticales* — flowers, shrubs, herbs, trees,

> and food crops — explaining that the plants are bodies, human bodies, at that, recalling corpses hidden deep by paramilitaries and the army under the concrete rubble of the city's landfill way high in the mountain slopes that are Comuna 13. You fall head over heels into history as the trucks filled with concrete debris work their whining way up the winding roads to the dump. A sixty-year-old woman confined to a wheelchair on these steep slopes is rapping too. Her legs are stayed but her arms gesticulate back and forth side to side like any young rapper in time to the beat as she pounds out her lines, her story, her song. Unstoppable. Changing all the time. Improvisation is the rule here. A way of life. A way of art. No need for a stage or an audience but the cell phone cameras track every second in makeshift studios the size of telephone booths perched on the steep slopes. It's as if the entire performance is really for invisible entities, anyway, where the spirits of the dead meet the future (Taussig 2018: 12-13).

What is there to say after that ...?

Actually quite a lot following Taussig's text, which returns repeatedly throughout the book to flesh out so many of the references (can we call them that?) compressed together here in this narrative: its mimetic invocation (more than evocation) of that urban hillside scene alongside the rappers' rhythmically cut and voiced narratives and brilliantly painted murals of this and other past and present scenes of violence and resistance, decay and growth — from the forced displacements of peasants justified in the name of "economic growth" and "agricultural productivity" and the calculated by-product of corpses resulting therefrom to the literal and figurative growth of plants plant-like bodies from out of those very corpses.

Let us single out from that avalanche of images the repeated references therein to the art of *rapping,* on the one hand, and to those *cuerpos gramaticales,* on the other. Both constitute, in their own ways, what we might term powerful "mimetic allies"[8] animating Taussig's writing (not unlike the photographic-image-text of artist Simryn Gill, with which *Palma Africana* begins). The references to rapping, we suggest, stand not in between the seeming absence of "Africa" in *Palma Africana* — in this case also motivating our own cutting and augmentation of Taussig's writing through Moten alongside Tshibumba's painted histories of Patrice Lumumba and the realities from which we ourselves write. Although Moten does not directly mention it,[9] rapping as figured in Taussig's writing above could certainly be considered one of those "new things" whose "Blackness" emerges through how phrasing "cuts and augments meaning in the production of content." Rapping also resonates in its own way with our detour through the Rastafari *reasonings* even if the history into which those sessions plunge those participating runs deep and wide, threatening to carry us away like a Biblical flood.

But what of those *cuerpos gramaticales*? To grasp or at least touch upon how that reference cuts and augments Taussig's mimetic writing in *Palma Africana* (the book) and on Palma Africana (the plant), we need to first delve into the mimetic propensities of that palm oil itself — which threatens once again to carry us away:

> Being carried away here has a lot to do with the overwhelming chemistry of palm oil as mimetic salve, by its wondrous capacity to produce cells like the human stem cell capable of becoming most any and everything entering into all manner of life-streams in the supermarket, in your body, in your gas tank, and across what you think of as your being. Similar to a human stem cell, the nuts of this mighty palm now transformed into *OxG* or *Hope of America* elbow their way into world history to be processed in factories to make a cornucopia of slippery, sliding, bubbly commodities including fats, oils, magazines, sauces, emulations, soaps, shampoos, cosmetics, creams, inks, paints, resins, lubricants, glycerin, and green diesel fuel (Taussig 2018: 224).

As Taussig (p. 189) earlier notes in the form of a query, the alchemical properties of palm oil approximate that supreme instance of the "metamorphic sublime" greasing the palms of capitalist production itself: "Is there any commodity other than gold and fossil fuels which gets so close to being like money, the Universal Equivalent?"[10] In the case of palm oil production in the plantations that began (around 2007, Taussig claims) springing up in and taking the place of the very swampland to which peasants had formerly been displaced from drier (and hence more hospitable) lands already largely taken by the landowning elite, money certainly greased the palms of the paramilitaries paid to expel the peasants displaced there from that up-until-then "propertyless" land (known as *baldio* — in fact, the property of the state), so that landowners could also claim that as property. Bodies pile up on swamplands and hillsides alike in the name of progress, and yet, standard approaches to representing violence and/or "explaining" its causes and operations risk contributing to the very sense that for those landowners and paramilitaries it "really" is: just business as usual.

> Which is why the '*cuerpos gramaticales*' of the AgroArte group of rappers, graffiti artists, and performance artists, and performers from the slums of Medellin make such an impact and are so relevant to my concern with African palm, seeing as how AgroArte breaks with predictable forms of remembrance to implicate an agriculture averse to agribusiness, that same agribusiness that sent their parents fleeing to the city from the countryside years before. What they do is plant seeds everywhere in La Comuna 13 of Medellín by the sides of streets, in vacant lots and parks and cemeteries, seeds that grow down into the soil so as connect with the people assassinated by the army and paramilitaries in the infamous Operacíon Orión of 2002 (Taussig 2018: 118).

As Taussig makes it out, only magically real practices such as the *cuerpos gramaticales* are capable of effectively engaging with the equally magical capacity for contemporary capitalism to continuously cover the constituent role of violence in its reproduction. In this case, the metamorphic properties of that system are epitomized not only by the seemingly endless malleability of African palm oil as a commodity or meta-commodity but equally and more sinisterly by the way the violence enacted to secure land for its production becomes so quickly absorbed into an anesthetized and anesthetizing everyday wrapped up in and by the consumption of the varied products infused with that oil as if that violence were just one more component to be added to the list of ingredients on the cardboard box. It is no wonder then that Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* is a further mimetic ally in *Palma Africana*: one intimates through the writing therein that the roots reaching down from the *cuerpos gramaticales* toward the bodies of those assassinated during Operación Orión on the hillside slopes of Medellín also reach back not only to the swampland surrounding the village in which most of *Palma Africana* "takes place" (if that metamorphic ethnography can really be so neatly located) but also back in time to that other "massacre of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of workers on strike in the United Fruit banana plantations on the Caribbean coast in 1928" (Taussig, 2018: 116) as figured in Marquez's novel as having occurred in the nearby town of Ciénegas, with but one uncertain witness. And here, Scott would have to include his own uncertain memory of passing through Ciénegas — a name Taussig takes to mean the "Town of the Swamps" (idem: 12) — more than once while living with his parents (one of them working for an international corporation interested in a different kind of lucrative and violence-infused oil) in Barranquilla, Colombia, when he was 15 years old: passing through that town by car as well as by reading Marquez's novel, perhaps even both at once.

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**Photo 4 –** Mestre Manoel, gathering forces to play with Sonia Maria in Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro, has often remarked on the "mysteries of the ground" in capoeira angola, Brazil, 1995.

That uncertain memory elicited by reading *Palma Africana* — the potency of its writing nourished by the poetically fertile interventions effected by rap musicians and collectives such as Agro-arte — displaces us in equal uncertainty from one form of figuratively charged swamp to another. In this case, that swamp consists of the multiple and murky ways in which language trips up history and thence upsets straightforward accounts of the origins of a certain Black/Afro-Brazilian/African-Diasporic danced fighting form and ritualized game known as *capoeira angola*:

> Let us then venture into this "hermeneutic swamp" (Taussig 1987: 130) of capoeira's origins. Instead of shying away from its treacherously soft earth and boggy waters, unceasing shade, and ever-shifting shadows, let us relish the intertwined roots of word and referent, treating such entangled tales of origin as evidence of the highly fertile nature of the ground beneath – ground hidden away, protected, and enriched by the very brambles and bogs of unresolved meanings that others treat as mere impediments to the pursuit of historical and/or etymological "facts". For rather than treat history as a stable ground beneath the unstable play of language, here the unsure origins of 'capoeira'' [the term and the practice] prepare the ground for a different conception of history as always shifting and never quite predictable… (Y, 2004: 90).

Without wallowing in the bogs and murk of that sensate history as (re)traced in Scott's thesis, let us instead plunge directly into the game (after asking permission from the *Mestre* presiding it), this time eliciting Taussig's help in following the contortions of language and history effected through a gesture enacted therein. As Scott has described the singular instantiation of that gesture in detail elsewhere (Head 2013; 2020), we will just mention here that the gesture — enacted by Mestre Angolinha with whom Scott was playing — involved cutting and sliding a finger across the latter's neck not just once but twice in the same game. This gesture — by itself deftly "citing" the use of razor blades (historically associated with practitioners of the formerly criminalized art form, particularly as found on the streets of colonial Rio de Janeiro) — playfully interrupts conventional accounts of capoeira having "left behind" the time of terror those practitioners were taken to embody in the eyes of the police and government officials, literary types, and foreign travelers once writing about them. Only, in the case (literally) at hand, Angolinha whispered or shouted, *Dançou*! — "You danced," but in popular terms, "You're dead!" — the first time he performed the gesture; and the second time, by using two fingers instead of one and simultaneously saying "*band-eide*" as he enacted it, he transformed the "same" gesture into that of a Band-Aid being placed over the cut opened just before.

> Here, it is not by chance that experienced practitioners of capoeira angola are referred to as *mandingueiros* [or] "masters of sorcerous movement". As M. Taussig (Taussig, 1998: 222) has said with regard to the trickery at the heart of magical healing rituals, the "real skill of the practitioner lies not in skilled concealment,

> but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment". In this case, the gesture of "healing" playfully repeats what was already a repetition of an act of violence in the realm of play, not so much inverting the violence of the gesture as multiplying its ambivalence – doubling over an already (at least) two-sided sign (Y, 2004: 196).

In and through things such as that gesture, the effort is to rewrite elements of the history of capoeira alongside an aesthetic of deception and indirection constitutive of the more traditional and Black/African-Diasporic style of this art form — *capoeira angola* — *even* while pointing to the violence implicated in the enforced separation between the "past" and "present" forms of capoeira. Let us just note how in 1937 (the very same year in which capoeira was "legalized" so long as it were played "indoors") the Frente Negra Brasileira (the first legal form of Black organization in Brazil) was criminalized (Tavares, 2013) — a montage effected by history itself. Over the years, the singular style of interruptive movement of capoeira angola remained what Scott would now term a "mimetic ally" in his efforts to engage with and (re)write the performative entanglements of language, body, and history in and beyond that art form, which certainly resonates with how Felipe listens to and engages with Rastafari reasonings (see, e.g., Araujo 2019). Taussig's writings not only show in both theory and practice how this could possibly be done, but also point to why it is worth doing so: "For it is not history understood as the passage of time that here acquires the character of the sorcerer, but history as an opposition in meaning that the passage of time marks and about which the victors and the vanquished array their cosmos" (Taussig, 1987: 374).

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i am outside of
history. i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there
in its cage

i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than I
thot

(Ishmael Reed, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man")

Turning back to the matter of "unpacking" our library from which we started as revisited through the poem above, we could say that sitting within the libraries and offices from which we write, it becomes difficult not to think of history as something that occurs "outside." This is in fact the case of the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as poetically and parodically invoked by Ishmael Reed: as a member of an avowedly revolutionary political party, he holds onto its promise of being able to "direct" history as if from outside.

That is the case up until the moment he and his Black brethren are betrayed by the (white) leadership of that very party and he finds himself swallowed up by the violent turn of subsequent events as played out on the streets of Harlem. *The Invisible Man* eventually turns the very hole into which he fell while trying to escape into a subterranean abode from which he writes the intra-fictionalized version of Ellison's extra-fictional novel (and need we say, it is in fact a whole lot funkier than that?). A not altogether dissimilar turn of events occurs in the life of Walter Benjamin, starting with his private collection of books getting "stolen from him in Berlin, with the ascension of the Nazis" — as Taussig (2020: 429) writes in the essay cited at the beginning of this essay. We all know how Benjamin's short and tragically inscribed life would end as he fled those same forces — but the "button" or event Taussig opts to recall and ethnographically elaborate in his homage to that life consists of the period of roughly a decade during which Benjamin adopted the Bibliothèque Nacional in Paris as the space in which he wrote so many of the essays for which he is now known.

If history as approached herein has been taken to stand "not in between" writing and reality as approached by and through Taussig, then *Black* history stands at least doubly so. Blackness, Black history, *reasonings*, and *mandinga* all stand *not in between* Scott's and Felipe's differently positioned and dispositioned whiteness and their efforts to write about such matters over the years. These both cut and augment our relation to Taussig's writings in turn and the language-infused reality and body-infused history impressed therein. Following the figuration in Reed's poem, we would be hard-pressed to place Taussig — as a white male tenured professor of Anthropology at Columbia University — as standing anywhere but comfortably outside the cage of history. And yet the reality impressed unto his writing — a reality whose thingliness is as much "in here" as it is "out there," as much a story-like reality as a reality-like story, placing its readers very much within the belly of the beast of capitalist reality, even as it struggles to open a space to breathe within history and for history itself to breathe — might have it otherwise. This is what we think we have learned therefrom, and have thus been trying to impart herein.

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## NOTES

1 As Kathleen Stewart (1996) — who took classes with Taussig and would subsequently become Scott's doctoral thesis advisor (we offer this not as a line of descent but as a potentially mimetic sequence) — writes regarding Agee's writing, in its "impassioned and imperfect effort to imagine something of the density and texture of tenant farm life, it roamed indiscriminately and promiscuously between modes of writing from the romantic to the skeptical, from the confessional to the encyclopedic, from the biographical to the sociological without fixing on any one mode or building an edifice to enclose them all together" (p. 24).

2 While fully agreeing with the collectively authored Introduction to that same book in its pointing to Taussig as offering a provocative response to this question in his own writings over the years — writing they take as suggesting that "reality is always suffused with something more, some other face, some other dimension, something intangible, evanescent, resistant to analytical decomposition" (Paper Boat Collective, 2017: 19) — we would excise the term "intangible" from that list of qualities. Still, the tangibility of reality and writing alike in Taussig's writing certainly come in markedly varied textures.

3 Given the substantial attention others have given to the approach to and practice of mimesis in Taussig's writings, we have opted largely to shy away from that term even if our approach resonates with the issues raised in that regard. If forced to submit to Martin Jay's (1993) clearly rigged option to either "succumb to his spell" or elaborate a "critical response" to Taussig's writings (in that case, on his approach to mimesis) — well, let's just say that if we are to take Jay's own review as an example of the latter, then no, thank you, we prefer the first option. For a critical response to Jay's own work that takes a few jabs at Taussig as well, see Pels (1996).

4 An earlier version of this essay includes a subtitle: "Not In Between: Lyric painting, Visual History and the Postcolonial Future" (Moten, 2003).

5 For a particularly salient exception to this, see Lagrou's (2007, 2018) provocative ethnographic and theoretical engagements with Indigenous artistic practices in Brazil and, moreover, their multiple resonances with Taussig's conception of mimesis.

6 Whereas Marcus (1990: 9) remarks, regarding *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (1987), how the "essentially cinematic imagination at work in Taussig's written ethnography [...] could have been more clearly and economically achieved in film," we would argue that this would be to miss out on how Taussig's displacement and redeployment of this mode of cutting and conjoining images renders reality anew precisely through cutting across some tiresome conventions of ethnographic representation.

7 As Taussig (2018: 184-5) asserts in *Palma Africana,* "what gives magic and shamanism its edge, here and elsewhere throughout the world, is the confusion created by the fact that the copies can be contrived by other shamans and by spirits in life-worlds given over to illusion and illusions of illusions, thanks to the 'doctrine of the similar.' It is this that makes shamans indispensable, both cause and cure of mimetic mysteries. (Writing is not far off.)"

8 "Mimetic ally" is not Taussig's term (to our knowledge); rather, it suggested itself upon our reading of this and other passages in *Palma Africana* and thence elsewhere: we imagine it as a sort of (artistic/cultural) practice or repetitively sustained *thing* that performatively intertwines history, language, and the body in a manner not unlike — and potentially inspirational of — Taussig's writing.

9 Moten (2017: 271), elsewhere in the same book housing the essay drawn from here, has this to say about his relation to hip-hop — which is still not quite to so say rap, but nonetheless: "I've barely written about hip-hop but my work is infused with it. Actually, deeper than that, my work is grounded in it; hip-hop is a foundation of the work I imprecisely call mine. I don't engage with hip-hop so much as I emerge from it..."

10 Note the unfortunate absence of what could have taken the form of an equally magical counter-history of palm oil's "metamorphic sublime": namely, its longstanding use in African-Diasporic magical, religious, and culinary practices as a substance imbued with a life-force — the substance known as *dendê* and the life-force with which it is largely synonymous as *axé* in Brazil (see Lody 1992; Watkins 2021).

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## WRITING (NOT IN BETWEEN) REALITY

**Keywords**
Michael Taussig;
Ethnographic writing;
Language of things;
History;
Not-in-Between.

**Abstract**

A central conceit to Michael Taussig's writing, as approached herein, lies in its removal of the preposition conventionally deployed to describe ethnography, history, and other modes of "non-fictional" writing: writing ~~about~~ reality. What could such writing be like if it is no longer written "about" that which it purports to describe or narrate but rubbing right up against its still-unresolved materiality? Beginning at "Unpacking My Library" — a title Taussig takes from Walter Benjamin — and detouring through Fred Moten's Black Afro-Diasporic figuration of the "not-in-between," we investigate how such approaches to the "language of things" relate to writing ethnography. Exploring how Taussig's writing works, in part by approaching certain artistic/cultural/cosmo-political practices as "mimetic allies," we similarly touch upon the African-Diasporic traditions with which our own writings engage. Throughout, we flesh out how history — and Black history — figure as interruptive forces both in and beyond Taussig's writing.

## ESCREVER (NÃO-ENTRE) REALIDADE

**Palavras-chave**
Michael Taussig;
Escrita etnográfica;
Linguagem das coisas;
História;
Não-entre.

**Resumo**

Uma presunção central na escrita de Michael Taussig, conforme abordada aqui, consiste na remoção da preposição convencionalmente usada para descrever etnografia, história e outros modos de escrita não-ficcional: escrever ~~sobre a~~ realidade. Como seria essa escrita, que não é mais "sobre" aquilo que pretende descrever ou narrar, mas que faz fricção com sua materialidade ainda não determinada? Partindo do ensaio "*Desempacotando minha Biblioteca*" – cujo título Taussig toma de Walter Benjamin –, e desviando pela figuração Negra/Afro-Diaspórica de Fred Moten do "não-entre", investigamos como essas abordagens da "linguagem das coisas" se relacionam com o escrever da etnografia. Explorando como a escrita de Taussig envolve a aproximação de certas práticas artísticas/culturais/cosmo-políticas como "aliados miméticos," também tocamos nas tradições Afro-Diaspóricas com que nossas escritas lidam. E procuramos detalhar como a história — e a história Negra — figuram como forças interruptivas na e além da escrita de Taussig.

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