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COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION: ON THORNTON DIAL'S AESTHETICS

NOMALANGA SIYOTHULA

A research dissertation in the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

In this study I explore how *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* can be theorised and understood within black studies but based on three selected assemblages in his art practice. The study will engage in three forms of Dial's aesthetics: The aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. It is in this form that Dial's work will be meditated upon. It will do so by centering Composition and Decomposition as the analytical tools. It is a study that will engage in the protocols of black aesthetics, making and unmaking for there to be generativity. So, for this to come into being it is important to understand Dial as a figure in order to arrive at new ways of decolonising black aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Composition and Decomposition, aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability, aesthetics of revitalisation and care, decolonising black aesthetics.

DECLARATION

COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION: ON THORNTON DIAL AESTHETICS

I declare that this dissertation is my work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and properly acknowledged using complete references. I further declare that I submitted the dissertation electronically to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg for another qualification or at any other higher education institution for examination.

Signature: 

Date: 4 October 2024

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DEDICATION

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Fig. 3.1. Thornton Dial, *Shadows of the field,* 2008. An assemblage, string, twine, synthetic cotton batting, wood, burlap, sheet metal, cloth rags, nails, staples and enamel on canvas. Size: 79 x 105 x 5 inches (https://www.metmuseum.org)

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Fig. 4.1. Thornton Dial, *Top of the Line* (Steel), 1992. An assemblage, mixed media: enamel, unbraided canvas roping and metal on plywood. Size: 65 x 81 x 77/8 inches (https://americanart.si.edu)

PREFACE

I have met Dial on many occasions because he came to me in my dreams. Not even Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa can interpret those dreams. Spending time with him made me realise that my ancestors are *undercommons*. Therefore, Dial is an enigma and therefore my ancestor. My improvisatory impulse prompted my topic *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*.

“Black Folks know what they got to do to live, and they will do it, they will work hard as they know how, as hard as the next man, by the sweat of their own brow. They want to have their own strategy for working, to use their own energy and spirit the way it come to them to do it, not to do something because someone else make you do it. That’s freedom. My art is the evidence of my freedom. When I start any piece of art, I can pick up anything I want to pick up. When I get ready for that, I already got my idea for it. I start with whatever fits my idea, things I will find anywhere. I gather up things from around. I see the piece in my mind before I start, but after you start making it, you see more that got to go in it. It’s just like inventing something. It’s like patterns that you cut out to show you how to make something—a boxcar, or clothes. Everything’s got a pattern for it. The pattern for a piece of art is in my mind; it’s the idea for it. That’s the pattern”.

-Thornton Dial

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

According to Fred Moten (2017:152), “The poor…refers to those who have nothing but to the wide multiplicity of all those who are inserted in the mechanisms of social production regardless of social order or property”. Drawing from Moten’s deliberations, I would argue that his definition of the aesthetics of the black social life relates to the notions of historical trauma and slavery. Moten’s exposition is resonant with the historical constructions of colonial discourses with regards to blackness in slavery which falsely framed Thornton Dial (28 September 1928 - 25 January 2016) as an *Outsider artist* in the art world. To demystify these colonial articulations: Dial is a contemporary artist from the rural town of Emelle, who worked in the foundries of Alabama, United States of America. Dial comes from the 20th-century era, a modern historical space and time where blackness is regarded as primitive, a life that holds no value and a life which can easily be dislocated and without warning anything can happen to it. In closing Moten’s argument, my submission elucidates that Dial is an autodidact who is in touch with his ancestral traditions, the indigenous ways of making and unmaking assemblages from unconventional methods, from textures of torn fabrics, rags, wrought steel, chicken wire, old dolls, decomposed branches of trees, scattered bones and many other disposed debris material of resistance that confront colonial power. We can expand further on this point that his work is conceptually produced from different anticolonial subjects, sketches, drawings, paintings, monumental assemblages of found/discarded/available materiality.

The aim of the study attempts to demonstrate that whilst Dial distanced himself from politics he produced art/works from the cold face of racism. Through his fugitive spirit, Dial (2007) would remark, “Life has been rough with me, I don’t know about you, life is rough with everybody”. Even though Dial claims to be apolitical, I would argue that his demands are political. His practice of everyday life is influenced by his black culture. His improvisatory impulse of assembling materiality in vernacular style, in bold and colossal forms can be understood as a classical affirmation of the characteristics of the black visual vernacular tradition which enable us to understand Dial differently from the perspective of the political struggle of blackness in Alabama. We can attest to Dial’s question that he is involved in the practice of demanding black freedom, thus his fugitive spirit confronts anti-black racism. Like the ecological movement, Arte Povera, Dial critiqued the environment and still produced artworks from a process of *Composition and Decomposition* yet his engagement on racism demonstrates that he is political. Blacks from the South live in the cold face of racism. Therefore, for us to understand Dial you have to understand a contemporary artist who is in the belly of terror, the everyday life and

chokehold of racism. Dial's body of work explores the linkages between the lived experience of the black social life, *being-black-in-an-antiblack-world* and the Africana existential phenomenology.

Therefore, in the study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* we can deduct that his body of work argues that he is philosophically embedded in black traditions of folklore, not the classical forms of art history, irreducible to the western/modern fine art traditions of creating art but rather he is engaged in things that are exhausted and recycled - he is engaged in black poiesis. He is involved in the decolonial practice of bringing something into being from *nothingness* as per Moten (2017) which propels him to risk his life in order to retrieve the dignity of black life out of nothing, the dignity of life, the right to existence of the black social life. In that process he reveals the value of something beautiful, which is black and beautiful. Here, importantly, I invoke the concept of *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics,* from the Taylorian[1] (2016) perspective where he sheds light and provides a theoretical insight on black aesthetics. A lot has been written about black aesthetics but I also want to align myself with Lewis R. Gordon (2018) who helped my thought processes through his treatment in his text: *Black Aesthetics, Black Value*. I will unpack my position on Gordon later in this study.

Coming back to Dial, we can say his art reclaims the aesthetics of African/American yard art cultural traditions, illuminating different forms of making art and black life, evidenced by elements of abstract expressionism and the avant-garde but most of all driven by his ancestors, the black spiritual forms of improvisation. Dial refused to over-grammatise. He lets his art/works perform a loud or silent sound and he speaks through his art process.

Art, to him, is a divine gift. He is the one who is given and the one who gives. Why am I studying Dial? Or why am I in dialogue with Dial? Because my study of *Composition and Decomposition*, is a site of investigating how Dial captures the everyday life, how he composes something from the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability, and how the material gives birth to something new to the level of the aesthetics of revitalisation and care, materially and performatively. How this study is located within the aesthetics of the black radical tradition opens him up to the theory and practice of improvisation in relation to *Composition and Decomposition* which is to make and unmake something out of nothing. *Composition and Decomposition* are words that are co-constitutive of each other or interdependent elements with a parasitic connotation. They are in their dynamic interplay. If something is disposed of, Dial creates something, along the way he may destroy it to create/re-create something new.

[1] Paul C.Taylor's (2016) argues: "the practice of art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds". In a Taylorian sense, the black social life denotes the practice of everyday life.

This study applies the concept of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. Dial's three concepts form part of his three themes, namely: the aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Why is Dial studying the three aesthetics? Firstly, in order to interrogate colonial ideas on Dial's aesthetics. Secondly, to decolonise these concepts in an effort to situate/locate Dial within black aesthetics with other scholars, to understand Dial as a thinker in relation to other scholars' positions on blackness such as Moten's (2018) concept of Composition and Decomposition for there to be (generativity of black social life). Lastly, in order to reclaim, to revitalise with care and to decolonise black aesthetics. This is done through his offering of the three selected art/works from his oeuvre. Dial's three art/works are as follows: **Fig**. 2.1, *The Art of Alabama,* 2004, **Fig**. 3.1, *Shadows of the field,* 2008 and **Fig**. 4.1, *Top of the Line (Steel),* 1992. The study will be foregrounded on the protocols of Moten (2017) in his book, "Black and Blur" which encompass Dial's three concepts of *Composition and Decomposition* in order for us to critically engage with his aesthetics.

PRACTICAL COMPONENT

This study is a practice-led dissertation which is composed of two components, volume one and volume two. My artistic practice is in volume one which leads this study through an argument of decolonising black aesthetics between Nomalanga Siyothula and Thornton Dial. Volume one encompasses an exhibition from **Fig**. 0.1 to **Fig**. 3.13 which is composed of fourteen specifically conceived opuses/artworks as reflected in volume one. Volume two is the theory and practice of Dial divided into: Five chapters, three themes and three artworks—an undecet. Here, Dial's selected three bodies of work give context to the inherent challenge of how to decolonise black aesthetics and the works also frame the scholarly debates of the study whilst Dial is reimagining freedom. This is observable as follows in his three artistic assemblages:

Fig. 2.1 is in conversation with Nomalanga Siyothula, **Fig**. 1.1 to **Fig**. 1.5 of the aesthetics of the black social life.

Fig. 3.1 is in conversation with Nomalanga Siyothula, **Fig**. 2.1 to **Fig**. 2.8 of the aesthetics of ruins and disposability.

Fig. 4.1 is in conversation with Nomalanga Siyothula, **Fig**. 3.1 to **Fig**. 3.13 of the aesthetics of revitalisation and care.

1.2 Problem Statement

This study will be read through *Composition and Decomposition* with a specific focus *On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. The main aim of the study is to give a comprehensive

overview on decolonising the three forms of Dial's aesthetics and contribute to the relevant decolonial debates. Firstly, through the extended analysis of the artistic assemblage **Fig**. 2.1, the study will examine the aesthetics of the black social life. Secondly, through the extended analysis of the artistic assemblage **Fig**. 3.1, the study will examine the aesthetics of ruins and disposability. Thirdly, through the extended analysis of the artistic assemblage **Fig**. 4.1, the study will examine the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. The composition of this study consists of five chapters, three themes and three fabricated assemblages which is an undecet. An argument will be made to show how Dial engages with *Composition and Decomposition* which are important in understanding his three aesthetics.

1.3 Research Question

In what ways does Dial's *Composition and Decomposition* articulate the aesthetics of black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care?

1.4 Aim and Rationale

The study aims to understand Dial from a colonial/slavery perspective to a different decolonial perspective with the thought of Moten (2017). The aims are as follows: The black social life, ruins and disposability, revitalisation and care. The above mentioned body of work necessitates the study of this nature in order to understand Dial at the level of an aesthetician as opposed to vernacular artist.

It seeks to build on the existing corpus of knowledge on black aesthetics and the aesthetics of the daily lived experience of blackness valuing the black social life in a broader understanding of blackness. Several studies have been conducted on black aesthetics including the critique of the black social life with other interlocutors and scholars. The study aims to build on the propositions by Moten (2017), Rizvana Bradley (2021), Lewis Gordon (2018) and others on black aesthetics, and black value in relation to "the value of those living it". Furthermore, there are gaps in the literature, while acknowledging that work has been done on the aesthetics of existential phenomenology and black aesthetic production just to name a few. This necessitates a study of this nature in order to understand Dial as a gift, as a life given to us by the universe, the aesthetician as opposed to the vernacular artist.

1.5 Literature Review

Firstly, the argument is directed towards scholarly debates on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* which has three themes, the aesthetic of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care.

Aesthetics is the practice of everyday life, in particular the manner in which black life is generated in the midst of dehumanisation. Aesthetics bring radical change and thus we have *Composition and Decomposition*. The mutual reinforcement of the two. Aesthetics outlives human beings yet the creation is cyclical, it continues its journey. We can argue that aesthetics is not something that is out there. It is the result of black poiesis. The work of bringing something into being. That is why we talk about *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* The improvisation of found material like wrought iron and steel amongst others is the making of the world, that is why the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care, is concerned with poiesis, which means the state of continued creation and elaboration and that is what we see in Dial's work, therefore *Composition and Decomposition* is what informs and elaborates this artistic composition.

Dial's aesthetics will be read through the protocols of the black study with texts from black radical tradition rooted in theorists such as Fred Moten (2017), Rizvana Bradley (2021), Lewis R. Gordon (2018), Frantz Fanon ([1961] 1990), Steve Biko (1978), Tendayi Sithole (2015), Christina Sharpe (2016), Saidiya Hartman (1997), Sarah Cervanak (2014), Paul Farmer (2004), and Stefano Harney (2013). These readings are undertaken through the prism of black aesthetics.

According to Moten:

> […] the continuation of that fundamental social physics of the music that is the animation of our tradition, the way we keep making the music when we play it, when we cut it, when we mix it, when we move it, when we mark it, when we say it, when we see it, when we hear it, when we feel it, in our practical, sensuous, and spiritual consideration of how we ongoingly theorize the very idea of virtuosity, the very idea of goodness, of great goodness of life or, more precisely, of the making of a living that is "the aesthetic sociality of blackness". (Moten 2017:275).

The black social life is a commitment to a particular value called freedom which is the constitutive element of the struggle and a refusal to submit to oppression and death because freedom rebels. Moten's concept of the black social life is informed by a radical imagination, the black radical tradition which brings radical change and that is what black social life is all about. In addition, black people would not be engaged in the invidious works of freedom if there was freedom. They are pushing an alternative script, in there, demanding freedom. They are saying we are making it even in the conditions of its absence. That is to understand the meaning of the black social life as generated by Moten. Therefore, Moten's assertion above of the black social life reveals/exposes the reality of the existential situation of the black subjects in their sociality in relation to black aesthetics.

In amplification, Lewis R. Gordon, in his treatment on *Black Aesthetics, Black Value* argues that:

> Aesthetics, if understood as also the theory of what is involved in the study of *aesthesis,* the realm of sensory and symbolic life through which human beings in effect make themselves at home with reality, should be brought to the fore. It is at the core of how human beings live in the world, not only in terms of lives worth living but also in the value of those living it (Gordon 2018:20).

Gordon's understanding of the concept of the black social life is in relation to black aesthetics which according to Amiri Baraka (1987) is defined as *Black life and Black art*. This illuminates that Baraka and Moten concur with Gordon on aesthetics but Gordon extends his explanation. Gordon articulates his position through a different angle from other interlocutors as he cautions us that black aesthetics should be looked at differently. Black aesthetics must not be understood only as that which black people can produce in relation to their art and life. In what Gordon (2018) calls *black aesthetic production*, Gordon demonstrates that there is more to black aesthetics than focusing only on its production which is not limited to Black art and Black life. Gordon's articulation means black subjects do not make art for art's sake; black aesthetics is about their existence, their survival, their dignity, their self-respect in relation to their practice, their life. The focal point is how the spirit of the black social life, of ruins and disposability and of revitalisation and care is embodied in this figure, Dial. As such, it is what he expresses in his art/works. The spirit is engaged in three dimensions, namely the colonial, political and decolonial spirit.

This means we can extrapolate that Dial breathes life into foul and detritus material, in order to create assemblage forms. I argue that he breathed new life through wrought/steel material and ecological materiality (for example, in volume one, amongst other discardable material I use cow dung and the remnants of destroyed termite mounds as they form part of the other materiality in my artistic practice). That is why in this study we have Dial and I speak/ing, we express our political spirit of the black social life, integrating disintegrated pieces of a dream, pieces of scavenged radical material, then we exhale life, we give birth to something new in what we produce, that is what black people give through their work. Gordon's fundamental question is: What about the value of black life? He points us to something. To question the depth of something, the relationship between, Black art and Black life and the authentic self, their black value. They are the value, they bring value, they value *Composition and Decomposition*, their art and life. This is at the level of how black people are making and unmaking their meaningful life, life which is created from what Moten (2017) calls making life from *nothingness* or what Gordon (2018) calls out of *non value*. Moten and Gordon are also relevant for my research as critical thinkers on black aesthetics in relation to *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. Moten and Gordon are both in concert about *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* In short it means, by way of my formulation, black aesthetics is t*he value of the ones who are invaluable, valuing*

their own life valuably who have been made non-valuable.

Hannah Arendt (1970:20) in *On violence*, and referencing the works of Frantz Fanon, argues with Fanon's claim that "hunger with dignity is preferable to bread eaten in slavery". Arendt's critique of slavery through the Fanonian decolonial concept of violence connotes a space of invisibility in relation to the stolen life of blackness which carries nuances of colonialism. Her position here, her political movement, sends conflicting messages that she selectively supports colonial violence only when the coloniser is using it; colonial violence leveled/exerted against the colonised. Therefore, Arendt does not condemn colonial violence. Arendt (1962) even says to Baldwin: "In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy". Put differently, Arendt justifies colonial violence as self defense but as soon as the same violence is applied, when there is irruption, resistance, when the insurgent spirit of blackness confronts slavery, then violence needs to be negotiated from the colonial terms and conditions of power.

Here, Fanon, Moten, Gordon and Hartman reject slavery as the black social life. Their decolonial practice is driven by a decolonial spirit. It is a spirit which is existential and critiques dehumanisation and the status of what Sithole (2015:3) calls "being-black-in-an anti-black-world". That is why Dial's spirit informs Fanon, Moten, Gordon, Hartman and all of us in this study that it is engaged in the existential struggle for all black subjects. Most importantly, this reminds us that colonialism is the root cause of colonial violence that suppresses the radical pursuit of freedom. Therefore, to bring an understanding of violence assumes that all forms of violence are equivalent and this is what I find problematic.

According to Paul Farmer (2004:307), "Structural violence is violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order". Farmer elucidates that structural violence is how inequality and poverty create a differential risk and for adverse outcomes including death. He says there are three types of structural violence. There is naturalised violence, institutionalised and normalised violence. What is missing in Arendt's argument is: who brought forms of structural violence against blackness from antiquity? To the error of her aesthetic judgment, my question is: what is the role of violence in racial slavery, who stands to benefit from terror, who gains from the passion, pleasure and pain of dehumanisation? Agreeing with Farmer, Saidiya V. Hartman brings her insight through her canonical work, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) which has themes on structural violence. In Hartman's (1997:34) definition, one "observes that what is remarkable is the way violence becomes neutralised and the shocking readily assimilated to the normal, the everyday, the bearable". The characteristics of violence clarifies how she understands the concept of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.*

Most importantly, structural violence undermines the existence of blackness, the value of black people, what they make and unmake as human beings. Supportive of

Fanon's decolonial concept of violence, Moten, Gordon, Hartman and Farmer show us why in their decolonial struggle, their work, they all disagree with Arendt. Arendt's insatiable demands are at odds with negating black subjects; their freedom to exist which is a colonial determination opposed to black humanity. Arendt refuses to understand colonial violence and blackness despite camouflaging the effects of dehumanisation, slavery and anti-black racism. Therefore, in order to achieve freedom and value, blackness must use the same strategy of colonialism and violence to dismantle oppression against colonialism and all forms of slavery, poverty and anti-black racism levelled antagonistically towards blackness.

In her essays *Art on My Mind: visual politics***,** bell hooks (1995) the cultural critic and feminist foregrounds aesthetics as:

> Free of the established domination order, a freedom gained by dislocation and disassociation, by the dynamics of struggle, black artists are empowered to be self-defining, critically reflective, able to challenge, revise, and rework history. Art is revolutionised in the process. (hooks 1995:185).

In relation to *Composition and Decomposition* the hooksian decolonial thought is attesting to the practice of the quotidian experience of blackness. When you are in the dreamworks, in reality, in the struggle for liberation/freedom, you must expect irruptions and disruptions and continued surveillance. When immersed within the study of change, escape does not mean defeat. It is an opportunity for new possibilities and new things to emerge from destruction. A chance to rebuild a better world free from dehumanisation and suffering. hooks's aim is to contribute to the discourse of *Composition and Decomposition*. Therefore, hooks agrees with Moten, Gordon and Fanon on the basis of aesthetics of black radical tradition concept within the scope/project of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.*

The Black Consciousness Movement is a movement which was formed in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa where colonialism was masked as apartheid, the white supremacy rule in South Africa. Coming from a common political experience of apartheid, Mabogo P. More asserts that Stephen Bantu Biko engaged the black social life from a concept of the lived experience of blackness. Through the Black Consciousness philosophy, Biko's insurgent spirit resisted oppression and blatantly rejected apartheid ideologies. In conscientising black people, Biko ([1978] 2004:54) reminded us that "One cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate". Racism, Biko argues, is a prerogative of white people because the "order of things" is such that white people throughout the entire world are in power. Since black people in South Africa had no power whatsoever, they could not be racist." Biko's practice of existentiality, the Africana existential phenomenology, is from an existential question exposing and questioning the black subject's existential conditions, their lived experience, living their lives, life as beings, as human beings, "being-black-in-the-world", in an anti-black world. Here, apartheid is understood as another form of colonialism. It was predicated on oppression, dehumanisation,

exploitation, exclusion and anti-black racism.

As I meditate through arguments of different scholars on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* I arrive at the formulation of black assemblage. Aesthetics is an assemblage. What is an assemblage insofar as Dial is concerned? Assemblages are things that are put together, taking other parts to make something. If an assemblage consists of these objects, then what about these objects, do they come to constitute anything of a life form?

What are they saying about the life forms of those objects, of those things that are tangible and both intangible? My question to Dial is: What does it mean to study Black assemblage in relation to the *Composition and Decomposition* of the black social life which includes the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care? The study is anchored in theories of black aesthetics that will shed more light on understandings of Dial's aesthetics. What is Dial doing? He is engaged in the study of change, the black study. Inside Dial's three art/works are, **Fig**. 2.1, **Fig**. 3.1 and **Fig**. 4.1.

My intention is to show how *Composition and Decomposition* is present in aesthetics. Does the literature take the two in concert together or is there a gap in between or not? In each book or monograph, is the author taking (Composition and Decomposition) them together or in isolation? They are relevant as there is a need to consider *Composition and Decomposition* too in relation to my practice-led dissertation.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

The study will deploy what Fred Moten frames as *Black Op* as a theoretical praxis to present its arguments. What is *Black Op*? Black optimism means black people make things or work that are generative even if conditions do not allow them to be such. The idea of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* will be problematised and thematised as a way of reconfiguring the black social life as the inference of generativity in the face of decadence. The motive of this research is based on the ontological question which is framed in this way: What does it mean to generate life from nothing? The study will draw on the work of many theorists, such as Lewis R. Gordon, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Paul Farmer, Saidiya V. Hartman, bell hooks, Stephen Bantu Biko, Mabogo Percy More, Rizvana Bradley and more in order to interpret and theorise Dial's aesthetics. My study is also influenced by my personal trajectories with my father and my encounter with his avant-garde jazz vinyl music collection. His creative palette for improvisation and jazz experimentalists, contributed to how I listen and process the eclectic form of jazz and other cross-fertilisation of music genres. I consider this as a gift. This gift of sharing music is like sharing ideas on Black art, so, it brings me closer to my childhood memories. It would be impossible for me to do this work without direct reference to

this music. My intention is to listen to avant-garde jazz music while writing my dissertation and during the process of my art practice. Jazz music is interrelated, interwoven with the politics of the black struggle.

This music is intertwined with the black spirit of improvisation and influenced by my ancestral roots, my father. For me music connects both my theoretical and art practice together with the black study. It informs my decisions yet it helps me to explore and understand the thought processes of my selected artists on how they approached the black study of improvisation, studying through avant-garde jazz and their different spiritual praxis. So I will use direct quotes and listen to multi jazz instrumentalists, particularly those who practice black study improvisation from the USA and Africa like Henry Threadgill, on *Subject to Change* (1985) and *Dirt….And More Dirt* (2018), Louis Moholo-Moholo, on *Viva la black-Woza* (1993) and *Sonke* (2006), Sun Ra *Heliocentric worlds of Sun Ra* in *Volume One* (1965) and Zim Ngqawana, *McGregorian Chant* (1999) and Ingoma Ya Kwantu: Resolution (2001), Phillip Tabane and other artists will also foreground the meaning and possibilities of improvisation et cetera.

1.7 Methodology

My research is a practice-led dissertation. The study also uses a qualitative research method as it is concerned with the relevant aesthetics debates. I am critically analysing the existing content, (summarising, interpreting, evaluating) synthesising content which is conceptual, theoretical, philosophical and presented systematically in a narrative form. Qualitative research methods are relevant to this study, hence it deliberately interprets the concept of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* The interpretation of concepts of composition is focused on Dial's psyche but also examines literature from different scholars, draws on artworks from Dial's oeuvre, and references music with regards to how *Composition and Decomposition* are textually and contextually assessed. The study utilizes independent interpretations through a thematic analysis of the three themes based on the topic *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* as a research technique. I am going to work with three themes in order to understand Dial's work. These three themes are formulated as: Aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care.

In terms of this dissertation, we have *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* **Fig**. 2.1, **Fig**. 3.1 and **Fig**. 4.1 are located in volume two. The methodology section is in conversation with volume one, the practice-led component and the theoretical component of Dial. Each theme is structured as a chapter with subheadings that originate from that theme, numerically coded in order to differentiate the contents of its subtheme.

1.8 Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study is foregrounded on Dial's three art/works and three themes. In these three art/works we will be able to illuminate the three forms of aesthetics. It will be impossible to study the entire works of Dial for this single study.

1.9 Chapter Outline

We have *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* The study comprises four chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the study. The second chapter is the examination of the first theme, the aesthetics of the black social life in relation to Dial's art practice*,* **Fig**. 2.1 which is located in volume one.

The third chapter is the examination of the second theme, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability in relation to Dial's art practice, **Fig**. 3.1 in relation to aesthetics of ruins and disposability located in volume one.

The fourth chapter is the examination of the third theme, the aesthetics of revitalisation and care, **Fig**. 4.1 which is located in volume one. Each theme will be structured as a chapter with subheadings that originate from that theme, numerically coded in order to differentiate the contents.

CHAPTER 2. THORNTON DIAL: THE AESTHETICS OF THE BLACK SOCIAL LIFE



Fig. 2.1 Thornton Dial, *The Art of Alabama* (2004). Wood, steel, concrete sculpture, wire, oilcans, bottles, glove, licence plate, found metal, paper collage, enamel, spray paint, and splash zone compound 129 x 40 x 66 inches.

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2, Section 2.1 reflects on the first theme, on the facets of blackness through the black social life. This theme provides the fabric of the black social life (no citizenship) as the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. In a narrative form, it provides a detailed discussion of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* to illuminate what constitutes the three concepts: firstly the aesthetics of the black social life as it relates to Dial's thinking and the lived experience of blackness. Secondly, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as it relates to the discardable, dystopian material of life, black people make life out of nothing. Finally, the aesthetics of revitalisation and care as it relates to making a way out of no way, revitalising and imagining a better world. These themes have a particular selected art/work.

The aesthetics of the black social life as the first theme of the study is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 2.1. Thornton Dial, *The Art of Alabama,* (2004). The second theme is the aesthetics of ruins and disposability which is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 3.1. Thornton Dial, *Shadows of the field,* (2008) and the third theme, the aesthetics of revitalisation and care which is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 4.1. Thornton Dial, *Top of the line (Steel),* (1992). These are engaged in three thematic concerns based on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. Each aesthetic is aligned and grounded. Each theme in the analysis is infused with each other to create a grid-like format, meaning they are interrelated just as much as they stand on their own. This is where concepts are debated and critiqued in order to gain a deeper understanding of black aesthetics.

2.2 The fabric of the black social life

The black social life has to do with the notion of temporality and also the configuration of time and space. This, in essence, is the form and content—say, the fabric of the black social life. It is life that is in the interface of modernity and tradition; a state of flux which is the fugitivity of the spirit escaping from enclosure and all forms of incapacitation. This is where the impossibility is turned into possibility; where people create something out of no value. This flux is against the idea of fixation, against the idea of fluidity that everything is amoebic, but rather, it is the liminal space. According to Tendayi Sithole (2020:131) the black social life is an "ontological scandal". This indeed, is the very idea of improvisation; it is the constant state of becoming in the face of denial of this becoming. Black aesthetics is underpinned by the spirit of the black social life as it is the making of the world. That is why the black social life is poiesis—that is, the state of continued creation, elaboration, reduction, surpluses—that is, the calibration of form and content so as to account for the idea of the fabric of existence. Therefore, black aesthetics is what informs and elaborates this artistic composition as a way of remapping the fabric of existence. So, the ethical imperative of these artistic compositions presented in this study attests to and speaks of the black social life in having to make a liveable world and also refusing to be submissive. As such, the statement and testament of this artistic composition is the radical refusal of the strictures and limits of the colonial construction's purity.

Moten (2017:275) defines the concept of the aesthetics of the black social life within the context of its underlying characteristics which is the making and unmaking of a

universal experience of blackness and its originality in the universe within black studies when he writes:

> "This is our music. Then we give it all away in giving ourselves over to it. We keep dancing so we can keep dancing—that kind of dancing where we be trying to throw our own hands off of whatever it is that people imprecisely call our bodies."

Moten's assertion clarifies the principles of resistance of the black social life that can be understood as when different elements are taken to form the fabric of everyday life, that is a cyclical process of composing/making and decomposing/unmaking of life. It includes making music which accounts for the manner of creation of art that produces a particular grammar as a mode of critique. It is an assemblage, the black assemblage. Black is that which is made everyday, it is the practice of the aesthetics of everyday life. The black radical tradition is a product that emerges as a result of bringing something into being from nothing valuable. This involves its interrelationship between the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Why? Black people are attempting to engage in the poetics of everyday life depending on the necessity at play. It does not mean a total whole but a formation that can be made again, and again and again, and again, depending on the circumstances.

In amplification, Moten's definition, his sense of the black social life can be read as:

> Black study—which is to say blackness: the preoccupied breath of the ones who have been taken, who have been made to leave—is the medi(t)ation of things as, breaking and remaking law, every bond, they shimmer in the absolute disappearance, the absolute nothingness, of the sociality. (Moten 2017:202).

Central to his argument is the paradox of how he defines the colonial system as radically/illegally conquering the land, removing human beings from their sacred ways of making and unmaking something, their life, their assets, from what I call, *something valuable* to nonexistence, their black sociality—to *no thing valuable*. His deliberations are on the history of the black social life through the context of the colonial history of blackness, our history, the human history, re-tracing the memory of the black social life which includes the tangible and intangible heritage**.** Our historical memory of racial slavery is revealed within the parameters of imperialism, colonialism and coloniality. A colonial system of oppression composed from a method/framework of ongoing systematic violence and/or annihilation of black subjects. A radical system of oppression which I have termed *no-time-no-space-for-Black humans*, that treats or disregards blackness in what can be understood as non-existent and/or *no thing valuable* but as objects/waste materiality.

Even though Moten touches on elements of black value, let us draw on Lewis R. Gordon's (2018) insight to examine the black social life in relation to black aesthetics because he has given it a thorough treatment in his register *black aesthetics, black value*. In amplification, Gordon (2018:24) defines the black social life as such: "Aesthetics reality is such. It emerges as how human beings live *as deserving value* in its full range, from meaning to absurdity, pleasure to disgust, joy to sadness, and imagination to ritualized repetition". The metaphor of his definition is about the value of black people in creating their lives, making and unmaking life, which is value

created by human beings who are of no value. In terms of the characteristics of the black social life, Gordon's argument is specific. It is about the value of black life not about what they produce. We can extend that those who are denied value come into consciousness to be in their own value and to value what makes their existence meaningful. Is this not the *reality* (2018) that Gordon is referring to? Aesthetically, let me use the example of cultural appropriation, when the work is adapted by others by way of dispossessing it from the original source. In terms of art it is when the oppressor takes art/works or makes something parallel to what has been done and there is a process of abstraction where there is a universal meaning, whereas black people's meaning as the originator was particular and the coloniser makes it as if it belongs to all of us, or as if the colonisers are its originators. This is where black people's reality of making life is accepted as a raw form in the face of decadence (moral decay).

To build on to this argument, Paul Farmer (2004:311) defines the concept of the black social life which can be understood as: "structural violence continues to play itself out in the daily lives and deaths of the part of the population living in poverty". In terms of the concept of the black social life, he aptly puts it in his definition that the black social life is regarded as an inferior life, life without value. In his definition of the black social life Farmer also borders on the definition of the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, whereby Farmer corroborates that life can be terminated without reason, antagonism, without warning, which begs the question, what threatens colonialism to a point of structural violence, of taking life, of a particular racial group, the black subjects in order to render them poor, without any value? It brings to mind a jazz song by Zim (Zimasile) Ngqawana's (2004) formulation "Kubi" because it resonates with the manner in which black life is easily erased from planet Earth. In terms of black life, black subjects are living within invalid existence and thus easily disposable. This means from an existential position of the black subjects, these two definitions are relevant to the black social life and ruins and disposability in Dial's three aesthetics in this study. Moten, Gordon and Farmer are both in agreement on the definition of the black social life but Moten's critical focus is on his concept of nothingness which exposes the prejudice of how black subjects are disregarded in an anti-black world. Gordon's critical focus draws our attention to the value of those who make black life and not the colonial position of choosing to define and reduce blackness at the level of its production. Farmer critically elaborates on the black social life and posits that structural violence is considered to be violence without an agent which is weaponised against a designated group, fundamentally, what is known as racism.

According to Hannah Arendt,

> Who has ever doubted that the violated dream of violence, that the oppressed "dream at least once a day of setting" themselves up in the oppressor's place, that the poor dream of the possessions of the rich, the persecuted of exchanging "the role of the quarry for that of the hunter". (Arendt 1970:21).

This brings to mind Charles Mingus's (1964) formulation "Myself When I Am Real". The Arendtian theory on black violence is problematic, it carries elements of denial, distortion and manipulation of the history of enslaved black human beings. The denial of killing peoples' indigenous knowledge/s in a system where they thrived in their own ways of valuing/making their own life. Her argument on violence denies the theft of the history of blackness but it is also suggestive of erasing the truth, which colonialism perpetually destroys. Here, I want to align myself with Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o's (2009:20) line of thought on the killing of black peoples' languages, "To starve or kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank". Arendt is in agreement with blackness that the colonial superiority complex undermined the rich black indigenous systems of making life, the value of the aesthetics of the black social life, valuing their own ways of making life. Arendt's uses a defensive application to justify but nullify the components of violent colonial operative structures which violently brought racism. Not only is the justification blurred with claims of colonial frameworks but it is based on biases or exclusionary/discriminatory measures of blackness. Even her understanding of racism is questionable, when Arendt (1970:75) unpacks racism she refers to racism as "Racism, white or black, is fraught with violence by definition". Insofar as the black social life is understood, the Arendtian definition of the poor and on racism is laden with hidden antisociality that is at odds with blackness. However, that is not all there is in this world, we as black people would be complacent or be unable to recuperate our value and dignity if we did not expound racism. Racism is a form of structural violence, weaponised against a particular racial group, black subjects in the anti-black world. Racism originates from colonialism inimical to black subjects. It renders white people more superior than black people. It goes further to erase and criminalise black subjects from what I have termed, *the ontological registers of human beings* which simply means to be out, to be on the sides but outside the planet, outside the politics of life. It renders black human beings non-existent, fundamentally excluded from planet Earth. Therefore, Arendt's definition of the aesthetics of the black social life echoes the sentiments of Abbey Lincoln (1995) when she says "Throw it away". These sentiments remind us of the colonial matrix of power of the oppressor, the domination, the power of a master, the power of an empire upon black subjects that is not limited to the power of art and science of different destructive forms brought by colonialism.

As W.E.B Du Bois (1903:8) defines the black social life further to understand what it means to be black and says, black is that which is made everyday even in destruction: "To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships". Black assemblage is done by those engaged in fugitive planning. Assemblages are produced in the struggle, in the dreamworks imagining a better life/world. Black people would not be involved in the works of freedom if there was freedom. Arendt's argument of the black aesthetics in reducing the struggle of the black social life to criminality simply means that Arendt does not understand the struggle for liberation, the liberatory praxis, the lived reality of the black social life nor that of the Black consciousness. The unanswered question is, does Arendt see blackness as something, or is she seeing non-value, objects, nothing or no-thing? Does she engage her theories critically on the subject of the black social life from an intellectual, philosophical perspective? Therefore, insofar as the black social life is concerned, it is evident that none of the abovementioned scholars agree with Arendt here, needless to say colonialism is characterised by different forms of violence, inequality and nonexistence against humanity. Moten provides a definition and a counter argument for Arendt's theories that:

> "If pessimism allows us to discern that we are nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what derives from that study. We are the ones who engage in and derive from that study: blackness as black study as black radicalism" (Moten 2018:230).

Therefore, justifiably with regards to the question of non-violence, we can conclude that Arendt's blindspot is from a perspective of white privilege, a claim that

strengthens white domination and subjugation. The appearance of non-violence carries the constructions of mental oppression, the strategy of her subconscious mind is aimed at the preservation of mental domination, psychological oppression in order to reproduce anti-black racism within the mind of the oppressed. Arendt's psychological aspects of non-violence is entangled with invisibilising blackness which is strategically aimed at undermining the Africana existential phenomenology, the black social life. This submission takes us to the next concept of the black social life which is fugitivity and generativity. Frantz Fanon can help us to respond to the anti-colonial call, a phenomenon which foregrounds blackness into existence and humanity.

2.3 Fugitivity and generativity

Tina Campt (2017:109) defines fugitivity and generativity as "practicing refusal means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a "fugitive" on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation". The Camptian definition argues that the practice of refusal is within the notions of survival from a life lived unfreely, unfree even from slavery and racial oppression, unfree from an anti-black world, unfree from dehumanisation, without (new) humanity, exclusion and care. It renders fugitivity a solace for blackness, a practice of resistance even in the face of death.

As one of the African existential philosophers, Bantu Stephen Biko ([1978] 2004:29) in his lived experience defines fugitivity and generativity within the aesthetics of the black social life when he says, "In a land rightfully ours we find people coming to tell us where to stay and what powers we shall have without even consulting us". In the context of the Black Consciousness philosophy, Biko's confrontation of fugitivity can be used to gain a deeper understanding of racial slavery, apartheid and settler colonialism, the challenges facing black subjects in relation to land issues, the land appropriation on the basis of emancipation. These are characteristics of the black social life, a state of unfreedom in your land without your own land, your dignity, your own life, so black subjects render it a meaningless freedom, it is freedom without blackness. The solidarity of blackness is very important in reclaiming their land from a violent project of colonialism/coloniality. The settler colonial aspect of the oppressed, the stolen land, is entangled with the structural violence of settler-colonialism. Even history was/is distorted and destroyed, indigenous ways of making and unmaking life were/are destroyed, land was/is exploited for cultural, economic and political gains to name a few, through different forms of extractivism. This means to blackness, the issue of land, in their sacred ways of making and unmaking black life has a negative impact on the/our connection with their/our ancestors. Remember ancestors are not only those from our lineage, they are also those who push for our agenda. Moten and Harney have also given the ancestors' spiritual traditions attention noting the reduction of the value of freedom to just an occasion/event. Colonial extractivism of freedom of Africans was/is premised on the complete erasure of blackness. Thus, Biko and Campt's self determination is advocating for a revolution. A spirit fighting for freedom in order to generate new possibilities, new methods and innovative modes/ways of making life.

In agreement with the principles of fugitivity but extending on decolonisation, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) defines fugitivity and generativity, "The fact is that African struggles were not undertaken for a trinket like getting voting rights under

colonialism. They fought for decolonisation and rehumanisation". Ndlovu-Gatsheni posits that, the decolonial struggle is for human beings— Africans, where all human beings are subjects driven by their kinesthetic force of equality, their indigenous knowledge systems which are governed by their different spirits and in particular that which includes all humanity. To put it in another way, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Biko and Campt remind Africans that we must never compromise the position of fugitivity and generativity, in fighting for our freedom.

Fundamentally, what is decolonisation? Mabogo More correctly clarified to us through the decolonial practice that:

> decolonisation qua liberation occurs at two levels, (1) at the physical level as an act of freeing the land from the colonizer, (2) at the psychological level as an act of freeing the consciousness of the colonized from the fear of the master, inferiority complex and self-hate (More 2011:3).

I am asking this question motivated by More's definition, as he argues that forms of exploitation have an impact on the outcome of the physical and mental aspects of human beings in their struggle against settler colonialism in relation to the black social life in South Africa. He raises complex questions that intersect and define fugitivity and generativity. Fugitivity and generativity as it directly challenges land appropriation by white settlers, structures of power that desire and attempt to unsettle, and undermine the decolonial efforts of the black social life. This highlights the power struggle between blackness and the colonisers. More's argument of the black social life, from an ideological construction of the decolonial practice, reminds blackness of its ethical responsibilities, the insatiable demands for freedom. Africans were violently removed from their land which was expropriated in the belly of terror for (many reasons but most of all) colonial economic exploits and gains. Today, they are still faced with the existential struggle, the reality of the anti-apartheid struggle still denies them the possibility and opportunity of subjectivity as human beings yet the struggle of oppression and the essence of the ontological question continues. This takes us to the question of race and racism as it is also intertwined with the colonial matrix of power as it is multifaceted in its DNA. Racism breeds complex structures of domination. There are psychological disorders emanating from aspects of domination with its dynamics of slavery on the oppressed. Finally, it is safe to conclude that colonialism through race and racism exploit/ed the mind of the oppressed through white domination. Therefore, Campt's definition of fugitivity and generativity is on the basis of refusal. The practice of refusal is the refusal of blackness to submit to colonialism. Biko, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and More are in agreement on fugitivity and generativity and the definition of the Black social life in relation to race and racism but More is conscientising blackness of the legacy project of liberation.

Moten's (2018:37) definition is challenging the notions of the colonial scandal that there is no way out of oppression. His thinking can be applied to the definition of fugitivity and generativity when he says, "I prefer to note such historical movement as general, not restricted to art in any simple sense, where living and what has been called death is, "making a way out of now way". The black social life is in a constant struggle for freedom which is characterised by the spirit that drives its fugitivity, the fugitive spirit of indigenous people, escaping in the face of death, this requires an understanding that even in death, we are making it, the black social life is fugitive, it is amoebic and it changes all the time. It creates and re-creates, revitalises/regenerates life, making a life out of no life. So, aesthetically, Biko, More

and Moten are in agreement on the basis of fugitivity and generativity but touch on the distinctive characteristics of the aesthetics of the black social life which focused on race and racism but they also extend on fugitivity and generativity at a deeper level, the value of black life — Freedom. Freedom about us, for us, is no-freedom without us, it is like a gift.

To retrace my steps a little, I want to bring the reader's attention to the fact that Biko's submission intersects with what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008:55) calls: "at the international level, the South African struggle was reduced to a mere anti-apartheid movement, as though apartheid was not a form of colonialism". From a South African context, the post-liberation era (1994) is still the struggle of blackness in relation to race and racism that continues to rear its ugly head in our so-called democracy in coloniality. This means that in South Africa, the idea of social cohesion avoids racism in a society that does not want to confront anti-black racism. The idea of social cohesion is an oxymoron. Social cohesion continues with the rainbow nation saying, we are together even in poverty and even when you live in shacks, yet black people are still being evicted from those shacks even today. The idea of social cohesion is a myth, therefore irresponsible insofar as anti-black racism and structural violence that affects black people is concerned.

So, Biko, More, Moten and Fanon's call against racism is a critical exposition but it is also meant to conscientise blackness about the catastrophic impact of racism on the mind of the oppressed. That even if racism is a lived experience in their reality, in their conscious state of mind it needs to be eradicated. According to Fanon (1952:69) "it is the racist who creates his inferior". The racist deflects racism to the black social life, to the mind of the enslaved for the oppressed to remain psychologically indebted to the chains of colonial conditions which result in psychological trauma—slavery.

Fanon ([1952] 2008:61) suggests that the black social life relates to *the lived experience of the black* "being Black in an anti-black world". Fanon ([1952] 2008:2) argues on the grounds of the black social life from the perspective of colonial violence and takes the argument to "a zone of nonbeing" in relation to the coloniser and the colonised. Fanon calls it "a zone of nonbeing" where the reality of the lived experience of blackness is defined by racism and dehumanisation. He argues by way of exposing the fact that colonialism has never acknowledged black subjects as human beings. That black subjects are not even at the lower social rung in/of the hierarchy of colonialism. Colonialism is disguised as coloniality where life is denied, a zone where colonialism itself is on the top of the hierarchy and that is what Fanon calls the "zone of being" where a particular designated group is acknowledged. This zone is where they qualify to be human beings, where they have rights and the fundamental right to exist/existence, the right to a dignified life. One wonders who determines who lives and who dies there?

Fanon, here, invokes Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2007:1) claim to the "abyssal line" in relation to discrimination and racism. He defines the black social life and says, "the invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of "this side of the line" and the realm of "the other side of the line". A line of segregation/division, a distinction/exclusion between human beings and non-human, but fundamentally it is about the nonexistence of blackness on planet Earth.

In strengthening Fanon's argument, Paulo Freire (2005:182) joins in and posits that,

“The oppressor is interested in knowing this totality only as an aid to his action of invasion in order to dominate or preserve domination”. Freire critiques the system of oppression and the vicious cycle of domination. How the right to be human as the black social life has been transformed to the level of objectifying the oppressed in order to totally control the mind of the oppressed, this results in the oppressed being insecure and completely dependent on the oppressor. The Freirean anti-colonial positionality extends on the characteristics of the black social life made by the other scholars but from an educational perspective, yet it is aligned with the black radical thought and radical spirit. A fugitive spirit that defies the inescapable brutality of oppression, the rhythm of oppression; rhythm in the sense that the tempo always changes without any warning, the African indigenous spirit which is culturally, politically, economically and spiritually driven by ancestors. That is what the Freirean scholarship articulates through education. Therefore, Freire’s theory is also aligned with Fanon’s ideological standpoint of revolution, the eradication of oppression through education. It defies the colonial project, this is a struggle against colonial oppression, a spirit engaged in the decolonial struggle, the liberatory praxis for freedom. In essence, Fanon, de Sousa Santos and Freire all agree on the definition and characteristics of the aesthetics of the black social life in their different ways of making and unmaking the aesthetics of the black social life. So, Fanon, de Sousa Santos and Freire’s abovementioned vantage point justifies that colonialism is a radical phenomenon driven by all forms of structural violence towards the black subjects. This is where the concept of the black social life drives the fundamental question: Do the challenges of the black social life require an anti-colonial and combative spirit or is it driven by an insurgent spirit of our ancestors that radically confronts colonisation? Are there any different sets of decolonial/radical approaches, a counter-violence/counter-revolutionary approach justified/required to confront colonialism/coloniality, and would this approach be useful to unearth colonialism/coloniality from its hidden structures? What are the other forms of decolonial practice, another way of life, that would be used by the black social life to confront/challenge the hierarchical structures of violence of colonialism?

Let us take another submission from Moten who elaborates and answers these questions but move in preparation of extending the argument. He writes:

> […] what remains here to be activated, is not merely an internalization of the outside as lost object but the always already given possibility of the exteriority of the inside, the becoming-object of the speaking, singing, commodified object. This becoming-object of the object, this resistance of the object that is (black) performance, that is the ongoing reproduction of the black radical tradition, that is the black proletarianization of bourgeois form, the sound of the sentimental avant-garde’s interpolative noncorrespondence to time and tune (Moten 2017:33).

Moten continues to explicate the aesthetics of the black social life from a perspective of fugitivity, generativity and resistance. We can argue that what is a matter of concern is the black social life which is engaged through the modalities or modulations of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial’s Aesthetics* for this modulation to come into being. In Dial’s thought the fundamental premise is that objects do resist and can exist. Dial is an artist who is imagining and enacting freedom. Dial and art are canonical thinkers of the black social life. Wherein life is about constant composition, creation, innovation, decomposition and improvisation, even in the midst of the conditions OF this refusal which is dehumanisation. What is refused is blackness. The idea of black life as reflected in **Fig**. 2.1, (**Fig**. 2.1) is given

its own treatment later in this chapter. In reading Moten and other texts the idea is to situate Dial's thinking in relation to the aesthetics of the black social life.

2.4 Alternative conditions of possibility

According to Paulo Freire (1985:47), "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly". Freire's definition of the black social life is important for an understanding of alternative conditions of possibility in relation to the black social life on how the black subjects must engage in liberatory praxis for emancipation.

Christina Sharpe (2016:18) defines the black social life through the "Wake work", the critical practice that imagines new conscious ways to live in the afterlife of slavery and in new futures. Like Fanon who also addressed the conscious way of the daily lived experience of blackness and also writes about imagining a better world. Sharpe maintains the characteristics of the black social life, that the wake is the site of artistic production, resistance, consciousness and possibility meaning that improvisation is a form of possibility when imagining another world. This resonates with how Dial handled the wake of reality in the belly of terror in Alabama. It also talks about Dial's decision to create monumental art/works as a site of resistance in his artistic practice. What Sharpe (2016:14) is challenging and defining *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* is that "rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*". Coming from South Africa the "Wake" resonates with me in relation to settler-colonial-apartheid and oppression which was another form of apartheid violence, what was known politically as colonialism of a special kind in South Africa. Aesthetically, Sharpe's argument is consistent and in keeping with the ideologies of the Black social life. Da Silva**,** Biko, Fanon, Moten and other relevant scholars are in agreement in relation to the process of *Composition and Decomposition* and the lived experience of blackness in an anti-black world. Sharpe is also investigating particularly what escapes under oppression in colonialism/coloniality, which is the fugitive spirit of resistance opposing the death of blackness. This takes us back to what this study of *Composition and Decomposition* is all about, which is the study of change and observing what escapes. In essence, she is also advocating for a state of mind of consciousness. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is relevant to all three aesthetics, the aesthetic of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care but for the purpose of clarity I will explain it in relation to the black social life for now.

Marco Scotini's (2017:14) definition of the black social life attests to *Composition and Decomposition* that "It is in the repetition, in fact, that memory transforms the real into the possible and the possible into the real, returning possibilities to the past. Only repetition, therefore, can open up to the multiple times of what will become". The work of this flux is against the idea of fixation, the idea of fluidity as something ungrounded and amoebic but it is the liminal space. This, indeed, is the very idea of improvisation because black social life is the constant state of becoming in the face of denial of this becoming. Thus we have *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* the dynamic interplay between the two, the cyclical process in which they are generating something from nothing, from nowhere to somewhere, from nobody to somebody, from no-life to a meaningful life, from denial

of existence to acceptance of black life as beautiful, from beauty to abundance. For us to understand *Composition and Decomposition*, vis-à-vis, the thinking of Dial, we need to understand his three forms of aesthetics and why they are important including the black social life.

The aesthetics of the black social life is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 2.1. If we are talking about *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* the question to be asked is: what is it that Dial does in his art practice? For us to understand his aesthetics requires us to break down his psyche in a manner in which he approaches the art objects that he is working on and producing (whether in their tonal values of abstract expressionism or as avant-garde forms). Thus, Dial in his realm of ontology makes something without pleasing anyone, something out of the discarded as the excluded from the art world. Out of nothing/ex nihilo, he works and makes assemblages. His assemblages are not limited to visual arts but they are at the level of the existential tradition of black aesthetics. His work encompasses art/works which are rusted, wrought, worn out but worthy to us, worthy in his life, art/works that are of value to blackness. Even though the artworld denied him this value, through colonial oppression and locked him in the genre of a biographical moment/sphere, an *Outsider* artist. This is what I call an artist who is on the *outer sides* of the line, the "Out" and on the "Sides" of the horizontal line of colonial oppression. That poses a double tragedy/problem for colonialism in dealing with the disposable, the segregated from the history of humanity and history of art, the trash, the ruined object, the black object, the beauty and the terrible. Dial possibly proves what it means to be black, a human being, a contemporary artist, a thinker, a fugitive, the one who brings the value of fugitivity to the clinical art world/spaces/ to the standards/the regulated spaces. What if his escape even in death is still under surveillance? A human being who rejected the entrapment of the colonial powers and exclusion in Alabama. In retrospect this answers the question or arguably the framework of an Outsider artist. Outsider could be a code for fugitivity, what I termed a *mercury human being*, a human being that dissolves in your hands. Here is a human being that survived the ruins and disposability of the art world which further poses a problem for the masters of colonialism, an artist that survived segregation, racial oppression and colonialism. Remember, nobody knew about Dial in terms of the art world. Dial's art is a catharsis for the black social life. His art/works are revealed by ancestors to the art world. Again, according to Moten and Harney (2013) in the *Undercommons* — Ancestors are not only those who are of our lineage, they are also those who push for our agenda.

Critically and analytically Dial proposes something, he examines art, monitors, consciously, deeply looks at, detects, gives something, he exhales and breathes life into something, then he steps back, registers something, observes the changes, his observations are a process of his study, studying change. Is it fundamental? No. Studying change is that which interrupts, destabilises. It is always on the move. What kind of change? That which is fugitive, combative, resistant and insurgent, the raw (ness) of the spirits, the peculiar sacred veins of the object, the rare beauty, the black beauty of blackness in his state of consciousness. Change is ongoing; it has the opportunity that something can be created out of it. Sometimes Dial becomes ethical/radical, he reveals the truth, the political spirit and ugliness of the object, the persistence, the resilience, that is the transfiguration and the magicalisation of the object, that is what characterises the aesthetics of the black social life, the making of life, the impossible to be possible life, his social life, the black social life – in his reality and breathes black value into it. You can not say he is not a theoretician, an intellectual of his art practice, an actional human being, a magical virtuoso. This does

not warrant a reduction to an *outsider artist* nor encasing his identity within a particular sociological or anthropological framework. Dial defied these simple reductions.

Dial's work is a testament to the value of black life, how black life is made everyday even though reality does not allow its existence and its worth. The concept of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* can be understood from his locus of enunciation, the South, in Alabama, USA. His artistic form ethically represents different forms of mediums created from either drawing or painting, which destabilises the order of things. Then he reveals something, the gift, the soul of blackness in three dimensional objects on a two dimensional surface. It can be understood as a process of formulation of concepts which can be political, philosophical, ontological, phenomenological, theoretical and/or practical. In his conscious state of mind, Dial offers himself to us and gives us a window to his soul. In his practice he carries intuitive African traditional forms of making and unmaking black life out of nothing, out of no way. This emanates from his own explorations/experience with how he meticulously handles materiality. Dial, here, is an intellectual collaborator of the project/study, a canonical thinker and a contemporary artist. Dial has an affinity for three-dimensional abstract art sculptures, painting, drawing, assemblages, and monumental artworks. Dial's artistic practice foregrounds the cyclical process of *Composition and Decomposition*, it is not about arriving at a complete art/work nor presenting a complete picture of his body of work, his concepts/thought processes, but instead, it is about change, observing change, observing what can easily be missed. These changes help artists like Dial in order to arrive at new ways/concepts or to learn/unlearn, or to think/unthink, feel/unsense to unsense in unconstructed and uncontrolled ways, ways of seeing/sonic, reasoning/unreason and do/undo/redo. Why? Black study is something in his real life situation. We can say necessity is the imperative for things to change fundamentally.

His corpus of work speaks in amplified terms to a point where they can not be noticed for necessity/value. His body of work is a medium through which the different indigenous spirits: decolonial, liberatory, insurgent, resistant, aesthetic spirits are disseminated. Thus he is always on the move and is carried by different spirits depending on the necessity at play. Through *The Art of Alabama* (2004) we can see the insurgent spirit with nuances/connotations of fluidity, possibilities of spontaneity flowing into new ideas. This does not negate the fact that a meticulous execution and an artistic precision was involved in the planning. This is a window to the thought process stage of this colossal art/work. Through his preferred choice of avant-garde methods, Dial is driven by something, a force, his improvisatory spirit, a spirit of bringing various elements/methods together. He weaves, he makes and unmakes what he calls the value of black life, and values what he lives, it is like a thought process of a patchwork blanket, you may easily call it the end product, an art/work. These art/works are in different forms of abstract expressionism which are evocative/provocative and challenge you. They say, I dare you, with a rebellious/revolutionary emotive subsystem. Here, art is created with organic/raw material. It is on the move, in the cyclical process of Composition and Decomposition. So, those art/works become otherwise. Their intention is to disrupt the colonial epistemologies working against indigenous knowledge systems, and even institutions from colonial modes of reasoning. That is how those who make value like Dial have value, aesthetically challenging their reality and making value out of zero value in defining the black social life.

Fig. 2.1 creates the possibility to locate the body of work within the realm of black

aesthetics. It carries different allegorical connotations which can either be political, colonial and decolonial amongst others. That is, what does it mean to be Dial in the presence of colonialism? The theologian Martin Luther King (1991:563) would say that "*The South was a stronghold of racism"*. In light of its political and colonial undertone, it implies that Dial foregrounds his work from his human experience, lived in the belly of discrimination, prejudice, segregation and most of all, colonialism.

Fig. 2.1 was created from a struggle, disaster, in relation to colonialism in *Alabama*. It is a form of confrontation, pushing for change/transformation through resistance imagining a better, and another world. It is driven by Dial's material force, insurgent spirits, ancestral people from indigenous knowledge systems that push for new revolutionary ideas/methods. Where groundbreaking experiments, unconventional methods, eccentric yet original traditional ways of thinking create and re-create towards new forms of epistemologies. **Fig**. 2.1 is from the global north in terms of its geographic site. The spirit involved in this creation is not from the western forms or traditions, it is not from the perspective of settlers' position of power. Instead Dial is radically imagining possibilities through his themes, concepts, methods and cyclical processes of *Composition and Decomposition*. There, deep in the mound, underground, deep in his ontological being, in a sacred space where indigenous knowledge systems apply in order to process the energy of his creative spirit, this spirit drives the art/works as a form of expression, expression for revolution, meaning it is in the struggle of survival.

Fig. 2.1 is a monumental/colossal art/work which radically challenges the black social life. It is entrenched in the traditional forms/processes/methods of making art which resonates with the South African anti-apartheid, radical, traditional, indigenous, resistance artists such as Gladys Nomfanekiso Mgudlandlu (b.1917-d.1979), Jackson Hlungwane (b.1923-2010), Esther Mahlangu (b.1935), Noria Muelwa Mabasa (b.1938), Helen Makgabo Sebidi (b.1943), David Koloane (b.1938-2019), Charles Sokhaya Nkosi (b.1949), Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (1921-2020) and many others. Like Dial, these artists used different elements of abstract expressionism in their iconographical treatment of mediums in order to punctuate emotions that would not have been realised if their art forms did not politically confront apartheid and (post) apartheid. Even though most of these artists were influenced by their ancestors, their traditional forms of making art and their reality in dehumanisation are foremost. This is also what we see in Dial's aesthetics.

Aesthetically, **Fig**. 2.1 is an assemblage, a monolithic sculpture created from ruined and discarded material/objects. It carries allegorical nuances that may mean a lot of things. In terms of traditional music it brings to mind the sounds of music/blackness, the ancient African melodies and rhythms governed by radical spirits that can be involved in indigenous African healing practices. The metaphor of **Fig**. 2.1 is its radical pursuit for freedom. Dial engaged the black social life from a colonial condition which means he gave a critical disposition of the black social life from his location, the rural town Emelle, America, USA. Here, I consider this as his geopolitical position, from what Tendayi Sithole (2015:3) would say "being black in an anti-black world". Essentially, he gave meaning to the study because he is at the receiving end of colonisation. So, his critical engagement of his three themes: the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care is from a decolonial perspective.

The visual language and connotations of **Fig**. 2.1 resonate with the concept of the black social life which is making life out of nothingness, using material that is

rejected, denied and found to make something. From another perspective the art/works might be objects but to us as contemporary artists they cease to be objects - they are articulating the aesthetics of the black social life, challenging reality. Which begs the question: What forms of future do these artists/spirits want? Dial's work speaks in amplified terms to a point where the work cannot be noticed for necessity. His different abstract art forms have nuances of a particular genre in relation to music, it is known as avant-garde in Jazz. The improvisational practice is experimental, unorthodox, disruptive, radical, combative, confrontational yet the discerning will know, those involved with radical aesthetics will know, that this is Dial's visual expression.

Thus in my Xhosa culture, music is also a site of the black social life used to evoke/reclaim the spirits of ancestors. Here**,** I am equating Dial's gifts with those of Jazz icons (like Thelonious Monk (b.1917-1982) American pianist, Charlie Parker (b.1920-1955) American jazz saxophonist, Miles Davis (b.1926-1991) American jazz trumpeter and composer, Abdullah Ibrahim (b.1934) South African jazz pianist, Philip Tabane (b.1934-2018) South African jazz guitarist and composer, Jonas Gwangwa (b.1937-2021) South African jazz trombonist, Bhekumuzi Hyacinth Mseleku (b.1955-2008) South African jazz pianist and composer and Wynton Marsalis (b.1961) American jazz trumpeter and composer) who also studied change through improvisation, improving improvisation, *Composition and Decomposition*, making and unmaking music and compositions in the belly of terror during apartheid in South Africa. This reminds me of the improvisatory practice of the South African drummer Louis Moholo Moholo (2006) "Sonke" and John Coltrane (1963) — Alabama, the South African and American saxophonist in what they would call avant-garde in Jazz music. That is the practice of making and unmaking of art/works in this study: art assembling and disassembling materiality but also forming part of *Composition and Decomposition* in relation to avant-garde music. During the process new things can emerge, escape and resist but these artists are making life out of nothing.

We can say necessity is the imperative which drives things to change fundamentally. What is pursued is what must be done. Principled people do what needs to be done which is the disruption of coloniality fighting for freedom but in particular in **Fig**. 2.1, that is what is represented by Dial's fugitive spirit. The inherent spiritual quality of the work signifies African cultural traditional forms of indigenous ways of generating art/works from rich, degenerate found material. Artists like Dial compose art/works not for arts sake but in order to study change. It is a monumental art/work, a sculpture of mixed media, an assemblage creatively created from found objects. Dial's body of work evokes the culture of black radical traditions and forms of making and unmaking of art, with emotive punctuations of abstract expressionism. These nuances of indigenous spirits are fighting for liberation. As a marginalised artist, on the periphery even though he is considered by some to be inside. His spirit is restless, always creating and fugitive, thus his works always caution, question, provoke, move and hold us. For black people like Dial they are committed to a particular value called freedom which is the constitutive element of his spirit. That is why their existential struggle is a radical pursuit of freedom. You cannot fight for freedom if you do not have a conscience of freedom. Freedom is what they make and fight for, their art/works are what they make and fight for through their art/works fashioning a better life. The vicious irony of the black social life is death. Black social life is affirmed and not challenged. It is affirmed by way of being insisted upon. It is black aesthetics with its cyclical relationship between Composition and Decomposition. The black social life is in its rhythm of *Composition and Decomposition* in the midst of dehumanisation, the creation of life whereby Dial is

engaged in the protocols of black study and improvisation, and accounts for the idea of black beauty. What is refused to blackness is the idea of black life. Those who are denied value. What kind of life is created by black people?

That is why Dial speaks through his colossal art/works because the study of change is an ongoing process. *In there, in the deep, between life and death* something can be created out of no-thing/nothing/ness out of no-where/nowhere, again and again. What kind of change is it? It can either be a fugitive, combative or insurgent spirit which interrupts and destabilises the order of things and that is why it is always on the move. This will give us an understanding of Dial within the protocols of black study as an aesthetician in relation to the black social life. So, Dial becomes the actional human being, he acts by way of creating the body of his work through his lived experience of being black in an anti-black world. He is engaged in the practices and protocols of the black study. He is challenging us by creating monumental art/works that are provocative and seemingly says: I dare dream of other possibilities, I dare imagine and create another world. A life that is lived in the midst of its denial. Dial is also involved in a liberatory praxis which is described by Paulo Freire (2005:12) as the "unity between theory and practice" in order to make something possible. Dial should be understood as an organic intellectual engaged in praxis, a struggle capturing the essence of the black social life. As a contemporary modern artist who is placed in the realm of vernacular art, nothing far from his existence; that's the *sine qua non* of black aesthetics.

However, artists like Dial are saying, we are making life even in the conditions of its absence; as a matter of fact, we are making it. What forms of future do they want? It is a prophetic concern. This is informed by different forms of political spirits: colonial, decolonial, liberatory, resurgent and insurgent, resistant, aesthetics et cetera. His insurgent spirit is driven by what Cedric Robinson (2000) calls *Black radical tradition*. How? It is the spirit that confronts limits and impossibilities that radically insist on different sets of possibilities. Things have to fundamentally change and things cannot be what they have been. A spirit that continues to fight even in the midst of betrayal or fabrication. The collective utterance is the voice of those who say nothing will stop us. We will continue the fight until the bitter end. A spirit that refuses to submit to the forces that kill it. That is Dial's radical imagination, the radical pursuit for freedom that is seen in his art/works, radically demanding freedom. Aesthetics is the practice of Dial, his everyday life, in particular the manner in which black life is generated, how it creates beauty in the midst of suffering and dehumanisation, in the condition of violence, in the belly of ugliness. Dial is the artist of black life and black art, he is a canonical thinker of black social life wherein life is about constant creation even in the midst of the conditions of this refusal. What is refused to blackness is the idea of black life.

So, how is the black lived experience accounted for **i**nsofar as Dial is concerned? As Joanne Cubbs (2011) puts it in her lecture on Hard Truths: A Forum on Art and the Politics of Difference at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Hard Truths is about the politics of life and the Art of Dial which is black aesthetics. It is not about romanticising the defiance of the western forms against the traditional indigenous African forms of making art. What is expressed by Dial in **Fig**. 2.1 is that the yellow figure represents the resistance of oppression, the breaking down of conventions of western forms of art which exclude the black social life. This distinguishes black art assemblages from white art constellations with nuances of prejudice. The temporal paradox of **Fig**. 2.1 is that, fundamentally, it is the failure of the politics of the artworld that still determines who leads, who gets privileges and who is accepted

and that includes those who are denied value even today. On the other hand it is still resisting *forms of black creativity* (2011). This art/work is the living embodiment of the black social life because in fact it proves the lived experience of Dial in Alabama.

Dial and Art are canonical thinkers of black social life. Wherein life is about constant creation, composition even in the midst of the conditions by this refusal which is decomposition and dehumanisation. What is refused is blackness, the idea of black life as reflected in **Fig**. 2.1. To claim that life Moten (2017) is eloquently introducing *Black and Blur* and *nothingness*.

Dial is an artist who is imagining and enacting freedom. As Cubbs would have it, *Vernacular art* in relation to Dial is the worst reduction of human life used to describe a virtuoso; it erases the complexity and sophistication of Dial's work. Dial is a contemporary artist with paradoxical and allegorical art/works, addressing issues of black aesthetics.

2.6 Conclusion

Theoretically, the notion of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* was examined through Dial's first thematic form, the aesthetics of the black social life. *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* was also conceptually illuminated through the first selected artwork, **Fig**. 2.1. This art/work (**Fig**. 2.1) carried frameworks not limited to theorising and performing the aesthetics of the black social life, with a strategic function that constituted it as the site of practicing improvisation.

Secondly, it was revealed how colonialism/coloniality comes with different sets of conditions and destructive prescriptions. These are prescriptions which are inclusive of a multiplicity of anti-black racial structures against blackness, held by a thin veil of tyranny in the unpredictable life and afterlife. It also implies that the coloniser/oppressor is involved in an oscillatory study of destruction. A study of non-existence and if there is any life allowed to survive then it is life which will be reduced to a level of guilty consciousness of why it survived. It will feel the wrath of oppression until its existence is meaningless.

The first point was on the topic, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* in relation to the first theme, the aesthetics of the black social life; it was defined and contextualised through different authors. Different authors adapted similar positionalities on the topic while other authors differed on it. In their discussions we saw how artists like Dial come to value those who are making and unmaking black aesthetics.

The aim was to show which authors agree and disagree on a position of the aesthetics of the black social life, on colonial conditions, the black condition and the decolonial condition. These conditions open opportunities and possibilities to have a dialogue/convergence on the basis of the three aesthetics. The aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care, which authors are extending from where others left off. What are its characteristics? In these characteristics, the issue of making and unmaking was clear in the arguments of some authors in relation to Dial's three aesthetics. What do these aesthetics do? These aesthetics are concerned with the black social

life, they talk to the everyday experience of the black social life as the main operative concept. It was shown that black aesthetics is the constitutive element of the black social life and how it falls within the ambit of Dial. Dial does the same thing, his art is not done in vain, it talks to the essence of the black people. This explains why decolonisation is relevant in this study as the colonised must find a way out of what I termed, the *now or never, of structural* violence. Violence is part of blackness/their efforts of building another world for human beings on planet Earth.

Aesthetically, this project is engaged in a study of change. A practice of observing change, what arrived, what escaped, what remained, what resisted, what survived, what was composed/decomposed/recomposed cyclically et cetera. Therefore, aesthetics is a product that comes as a result of bringing something into being, thus, *Composition and Decomposition*. I have looked at the dynamic interplay between *Composition and Decomposition* and the mutual reinforcement of the two. The cyclical process in which they are generating something for us to understand *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* vis-à-vis the thinking of Dial. We need to understand the three thematic forms of aesthetics and why they are important. The process of making and unmaking was illuminated philosophically. This theme accounted for the first aesthetic, the aesthetics of the black social life to show the lived experience of blackness, the Africana existential phenomenology, the dehumanisation of blackness both in Alabama, USA and the similarities in South Africa in terms of geographical location.

Lastly, the study concluded this theme by showing the relevance of Dial's aesthetics through his practice of refusal, the vernacular art, his thoughts, his decolonial practice and decolonisation. The study uncovered the importance of improvisation which is cyclical. At the same time it defies formality, structures, and the linear conception of things. It is preparation and yet the preparation is not formalised. There is uncertainty of what can happen which is a liberating tool to explore how the aesthetics of the black social life is located within existential phenomenology and black aesthetics.

CHAPTER 3. THORNTON DIAL: AESTHETICS OF RUINS AND DISPOSABILITY



Fig. 3.1 Thornton Dial, *Shadows of the field, 2008.* String, twine, synthetic cotton batting, wood, burlap, sheet metal, cloth rags, nails, staples, paint and canvas

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the black social life to address *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* The black social life provides a theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. In a narrative form it will provide a detailed discussion of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* in order to illuminate the second concept: the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as it relates to the discardable, dystopian material of life, where black people make life out of nothing. This theme has a particular artwork, **Fig**. 3.1 Thornton Dial's, *Shadows of the field,* 2008. The aesthetics of ruins and disposability is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 3.1. Thornton Dial, *Shadows of the field,* 2008. They will be engaged in three thematic concerns based on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* The analysis aims to produce a comparative account. Each aesthetic will be aligned and grounded. The analysis will be infused with each other and create a grid-like format meaning they will stand on their own. This is where concepts will be debated and critiqued in order to gain a deeper understanding of black aesthetics.

3.2 Destruction of life forms

Sharpe (2016:14) defines the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as the "insistence of black exclusion" orchestrating the destruction of life forms that happens at different structural levels everyday instituted against the poor and the oppressed. That includes galleries and museums that are regarded as institutional structures, which form part of the structures of black exclusion. Sharpe's definition of ruins and disposability shows us the characteristics of junk, ruins and disposability as it intersects with the anti-black racial slavery. Sharpe is interrogating what it means to be a discarded material human being, in garbage, waste, in an anti-black world. What is this something that survived rupturing, destruction, demolition and rises above exclusion? A further question is: What does it mean to create the value of black life, for human beings, in the wake of ruins and disposability, in dehumanisation, de-spirited without the bare necessities and the negation of life. Stanley Turrentine's (1966) formulation agrees that the destruction of black life is "*Rough 'N' Tumble"*. Therefore, Sharpe is conscientising us to see what is unveiled by exclusion. What is wretched, ruined, disposed of, denied? And whether that which escapes (if it does), remains under surveillance. This is a wake up call where Dial is relevant in relation to this study. He observes change, this is a study of observation, observing any minute change. In disaster, what re-emerges? What submerges? What is the target of the colonial/ity exclusion of blackness, does it intend to eradicate certain black people, whilst others may survive the destruction, others might die, others will escape. What is the value or devaluation of the destruction of blackness and some people, other than completely destroying certain human beings? Sharpe is saying we must not lose sight of the agenda of the wake work in the destruction of life forms.

To extend on the argument, Moten (2017:128) calls making and unmaking life from ruins and disposability "freedom under continued unfreedom". This definition is the essence of Moten's argument in ruins and disposability. What does it mean to create life from escaping death inside the struggle of denial of blackness, the battleground/battlefield of "being-black-in-an-antiblack-world"? The black fugitive

spirit thrives in ruins and disposability fighting for existence, where the black is reduced to the discardable. The fugitive spirit of the black social life survives the onslaught of slavery, but the oxymoron is that the unfreedom of black freedom is not guaranteed, even in ruins and disposability, where Sylvia Wynter's (1994) formulation says *No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues*. That is what I call "a zone of unfreedom fighting for freedom of blackness". Black people keep pushing even in death; to them death is not defeat it is a decolonial process of freedom, a site of the insurgent spirit fighting existence. To me, that is why even in death the spirit continues with its journey fighting for black life. *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* is living on borrowed times; we soldier on, fighting for freedom again and again and again. Are we saying that if something survived the disaster, does that mean that there were no ruins and no disposability, because you can argue that blackness emerged and things were not too bad? They survived, it was just a human error or it was just an accident or an event that was bound to happen.

Biko (2005:70) defines the concept of destruction of life forms as aesthetics of ruins and disposability through the integral principles of waste and disposability, the destruction of life forms: "Wherever colonization is a fact, the indigenous culture begins to rot and among the ruins something begins to be born which is condemned to exist on the margin allowed by European culture". Biko's argument on colonialism is characterised by an obsolescence of human beings. It is a violent machine that invades everything, living and nonliving, the heritage life, the ways of life, the ways of making and unmaking life of Africans. Using different strategies, it targets the modes of living by means of contaminating anything that it comes into contact with, needless to say, it is fungible on people's lives. It violently disposes of those who are making value, the black subjects and their indigenous knowledge systems. The colonial, violent, oppression is a volcanic apparatus. Just to name a few; it radically erodes and erases peoples knowledges, their culture, their language, their indigenous knowledge systems, their ways of thinking—their mindset and resets it to a colonial mind(set) as if it uses a chip system to monitor its subjects. Whilst others are conditioned to be more equal than human beings, in ruins and disposability the target of oppression is no longer about the collective like in the aesthetics of the black social life. This violent form of oppression targets individuals. Who are those who survive? They are those who remain under constant surveillance throughout their lives even in death. The oppressive system changes its modus operandi and dominates through a controlled remote type of a system. The survivor is free but the oppressor is semi-psychologically-oppressed, he constantly monitors the survivors, it is a space of turning human beings into hu-robotics. *Hu-robots* is my concept that I am consistently investigating and monitoring. It is a system of oppression where you lose all humanity to non-human-life, the ruins of black beauty to colonialism and the birth of hu-robotics. What used to be a human being, that which does not value the black life and black art, feel or see other human beings but is only controlled remotely by the invisible Master—the one that controls the machine. So, here, ruins and disposability is about the complete death of humanity. When black people survive they can never be the same again, but in terms of the black social life, survival is a new form of life, black/things are not the same, you are not the same, and in violence you transform into a violent machine but then you become what I call an *improvised lifelong omnipresent machine*.

Sharpe, Moten and Biko define the aesthetics of ruins and disposability differently. Sharpe's focus is on anti-black racial slavery, on the basis of discrimination. Moten and Biko's angle is on the critique of complete destruction of black life forms by

colonialism. Though it is through different angles, Sharpe and Biko's argument encompasses the characteristics of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics;* the aesthetics of the black social life and aesthetics of ruins and disposability in this study. Colonialism attacks the value of Africans. Gordon (2018) has already cautioned us and a point has been made on the aesthetics of the black social life. Gordon disagrees with colonialism as it attacks the ways of seeing, ways of do-ing, ways of sensing, ways of listening/hearing, and ways of dreaming. Furthermore, it attacks the ancestors, their dignity, their humanity and questions if it has been colonised to a point where calling it black aesthetics may be another form of oppression.

It is clear that life in the aesthetics of ruins and disposability is a life of precarity and redundancy that radically treats black life as a form of waste. Thus we have ruins and disposability as a form of production from colonialism, human beings who have no value who are being regarded as in excess to the world. That is why this is a struggle between life and death. When in there, black subjects die, and it looks like it is their fault. Farmer's (2004:308) apt definition posits that the aesthetic of ruins and disposability is that the "Erasure or distortion of history is part of the process of desocialization necessary for the emergence of hegemonic accounts of what happened and how and why". Farmer's explanation is on the basis of the destruction of human existence. He cautions that structural violence is catastrophic/wretchedness which can lead to premature death and dehumanisation. Its target is those victims who died, the poor who live life on the edge of a precipice and if they die their survival is under constant monitoring/surveillance. Farmer argues that the violence is hidden in structures, meaning it can be institutionalised, naturalised and also normalised. Those who are violated, it looks like it is their fault. Farmer agrees with Biko's position on the basis of the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, that the colonial agenda is to dispose of lives secretly but if it is overt then it is not obvious who committed the atrocities. Therefore, Sharpe, Biko, Gordon and Farmer agree on ruins and disposability but their emphasis is on the characteristics of this brutal apparatus, that it is entangled with most colonial structures of dominance. It is invisible yet if anything happens, the ongoing violence against human beings, black subjects, then the mystery looks innocent. That is how they elaborate on aesthetics of ruins and disposability.

Amiri Baraka (1987:104), defines the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as "No breath No life". Baraka's qualification of aesthetics of ruins and disposability intersects with the aesthetics of the black social life. It demands us to understand the human condition and its characteristics which is the practice of everyday life, in particular the manner in which black life is generated in the midst of dehumanisation. Baraka (1987:23) puts it crudely that the paradox of black aesthetics is "Black art, in the sense that we first used it, meant not only an art that was an expression of black life, but revolutionary art". As pointed out in his submission, Baraka continues to elaborate on his definition and pays attention to the radical spirit that confronts immoral reality and fights violent oppression. His definition also shows the characteristics of the concept of the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and intersects with the black social life. Put differently, the ruins and disposability with the black social life is life practiced in precarious times, in the furnace, through the fire, in the face of this denial of being, being a human being, predicated on nonexistent terms. This is where human life is disposed of in ruins. So, Sharpe, Biko, Farmer and Baraka, though expressed differently, agree on the factors of aesthetics of ruins and disposability and also touch on the aesthetics of the black social life at the same time. That is why the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the black social life are

a dangerous study, a study between life and death.

In amplification Moten (2018:41) foregrounds the discussion when he says “the black radical tradition improvises terror, through the philosophy of terror, in ways that don’t limit terror’s discursive or cultural trace to an exclusively descriptive approach”. Moten’s definition of ruins and disposability correlate with the definition of the aesthetics of the black sociality. Moten’s framework is not limited to the improvisation of art which can either be music appreciation/genre, theatrical performance and/or film et cetera which is what black people can make. Aesthetically, his argument is that in ruins and disposability black life has no value, it is not guaranteed. Black life is denied but the insurgent spirit that drives the liberatory praxis is decolonial and is saying we are making it even in the face of its denial, and even in death it does not mean defeat. This also shows us the characteristics of the aesthetics of the black social life and aesthetics of ruins and disposability which is the authentic making and unmaking of the value of the black human life and black art. It is not limited to the subject of slavery and the blues people, not limited to the life forms of tangible and intangible heritage. So, I read the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of the black social life here from its characteristics of a position of confrontation and resistance. How black subjects defy the colonial project of ruins and disposability. As different authors, Sharpe, Biko, Farmer, Baraka and Moten’s sense/perspective shows us how they define these aesthetics. Their similarities show us how they are in agreement on the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and how those similarities tie up with the characteristics of the black social life. This shows how their interpretation of ruins and disposability resonates with Thornton Dial’s aesthetics, ruins and disposability even if they also reflect on the black social life but they are still within the parameters of black aesthetics.

In the same vein, this qualifies how the aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, are intertwined. They are inseparable, interdependent but they are strategically and radically positioned to confront colonialism in the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care through decolonial thought. These different authors, Sharpe, Biko, Gordon, Farmer, Baraka and Moten, based on their arguments, show that they are in congruence on ruins and disposability, that life is uncertain but black death is not a guarantee of human eradication in that field. The playing field is not leveled. It is also clear that the aesthetics of the black social life and the aesthetics of ruins and disposability are operating in different environments though they may have similarities and they attest to the fact that it is fugitive and engaged in a decolonial practice which is the authentic way of generating something, something new out of no-thing, (making and unmaking of the black life), Composing and Decomposing life on Dial’s aesthetics. From dead matter, decay and destruction whilst fashioning/imagining a better world from a different set of conditions, from precarity.

3.3 Beauty and the terrible

In defining the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, Sharpe (2007:6) observed and wrote the following on Saidiya Hartman: “the precarities of the afterlives of slavery skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”. Sharpe moves on a different track with the argument that exposes the fact that the strength of oppression is its own weakness.

A killer machine where there is only violence/destruction of black life, with its inability to reconstruct, repair, revitalise its own destruction. What kind of life are the black subjects, the human beings creating/imagining from ruins and disposability? Are they involved in the work of what is regarded as the terrible, gathering waste/beauty into being, weaving/joining different aesthetically ruined and discarded pieces together which is related and unrelated, the work of black beauty, from ruins and disposability which is what I call, a space where you can not breathe and there are no black human beings, *a no-life-zone—Armageddon*.

We can ask crucial questions in relation to *no-life-zone* and blackness. Does a *no-life-zone* deny blackness its existential beauty/ugliness of nothing/ness? What is at the tipping point/danger zone/risk of nothing? What is at stake to the point of catastrophe for racial-colonialism for them to engineer ruins and disposability aesthetically to the level of intangibility or erasure of black human life? What survives, what lives, what refuses to be nothing/die? Is nothing a form of eclipse/denial of the value of life? Finally, what escapes?

Nathan Hare would say:

> The legitimacy of the concept of black ecology accrues from the fact that: (1) the black and white environments not only differ in degree but in nature as well; (2) the causes and solutions to ecological problems are fundamentally different in the suburbs and ghetto (both of which human ecologists regard as "natural [ecological] areas"; and (3) the solutions set forth for the "ecological crisis" are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands (Hare 1970:2).

Black ecology is equally concerned with the notions of the black social life, socio-ecological structural violence, anti-black racism and oppression. This is relevant to the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as the confluence of thought between the black and white race in terms of social and political inequality from an environmental perspective of the radical black ecology. Therefore, Black ecology is another form of apparatus in decolonial practice that advocates for radical change which is relevant for the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. The beauty and the terror of the colonial machinery is that it relies on cloning, on violently transforming human beings into what I call *robotics*. Rather than producing new life, *robotics* here means it reproduces itself on to the existing life rather than giving new birth, which is an ongoing colonial project. Biobirth is a decolonial project that is concerned with giving birth to new life biologically, epistemically, linguistically, indigenously, etc, whilst *robobirth* is a coloniality of *robotics.* This is a project that is concerned with continuing even on the ruins and disposability of human beings but monitoring what, who and why they survived. That process of survival includes surviving death, it is the magicalisation of the object but from another angle it is a visible opportunity for surveillance; even the colonial system is about who survived not only about death. If anything survives, the study of oppression gives birth to continue with eradication and so this becomes a vicious cycle but the issue rests with the survivor. The survivor is operating its own decolonial script of decoloniality. Even in death the spirit is fugitive, it is that which escapes, and what escapes. This begs the question: does the killing apparatus of the black, to the level of ruins and disposability of the black and poor subjects, equate to attempting to invisibilise black existence? This point takes us to the last theme in this study, the aesthetics of revitalisation and care.

The aesthetics of ruins and disposability, its components are similar to the aesthetics

of the black social life yet they are both concerned with the crisis of black humanity and the lived experience of blackness. That is why, Dial, as a virtuoso, creates new possibilities, new meanings, colossal art/works from where he is, from an insurgent spirit that confronts his reality. He is creating a new way out of the ruined and disposed life. Aesthetically, this is a mode of resistance challenging Western forms of traditions of making and unmaking life in relation to the black social life. This is his reality, his struggle in relation to his lived experience as an artist. The reality of human destruction, the value of his life, the denial of his existence, his real life situation including his art/works seen and erased in the face of the Earth as art/works. Instead of saying: Dial is making life and valuing his life, he speaks through his art/works. That is his life. Dial resisted the framework of reducing the work of human beings, their life, their art, their value (art/works) as artists to the level of what I have termed no-life, to mere objects—art/works. Why? That is how he confronted terror, colonialism in the South, Alabama, throughout his life. Objects resist being objects. Artists like Dial improvise with them, and they give us new knowledge, they push us to find new indigenous ways of thinking in the process of making life, new ways of *Composition and Decomposition: On Dial's Aesthetics.*

In their writings, Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle, *Politics of Disposability,* Henry Giroux and Brad Evans (2015:45) define the concept of ruins and disposability by way of Zygmunt Bauman that "we live in "liquid" times characterized by a "civilization of excess, redundancy, waste, and waste disposal". These are times where anything, anytime can happen to human beings, life can be ruined and disposed of without any cause or effect because life is regarded as redundant by the oppressor. This is where George Orwell (1945) in his writings, such as the Animal Farm, would be relevant where he argues that some animals are more equal than others. Giroux and Evans are extending on points made by Freire on structural violence. The aesthetics of ruins and disposability intersects with Freire's three cultures of structural violence. It means Giroux and Evans explain ruins and disposability differently from Sharpe, Biko, Farmer, Baraka and Moten. This does not mean they disagree. They are articulating ruins and disposability from a perspective of time. In time there are no guarantees, anything can happen, good or bad. In this case it is bad for human beings.

In her register *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* Sharpe defines the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as:

> "I use the wake in all its meanings as a means to understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance" (Sharpe 2016:14).

My point is that in precarity/disaster, in tragedy what emerges? What remains? What are those forms of life? The ruined and disposed of. Are we saying that because something survives there was no racial enslavement, that there was no black consciousness/black ecology of disaster? There was no premature death and poverty? The essence of my argument in ruins and disposability is that making things from ruins does not mean that there was no ruin, there was no disposability because you can say black people emerged and things were not bad. They survived. This is "the human error" or you can say it was an accident or an event that was bound to happen. What does it mean to create from ruins and disposability will be unpacked in the next theme of revitalisation and care.

Moten writes,

> Blackness is, in this crucible of refusal, a null set offering neither resistance nor explanation. Here, it is the existence of the impossibility of existing but for the eternal, brutal imposition of the deadly gift of that impossibility. That the one who conveys that gift bears that gift, as that gift, is something we keep having to remember to forget. Being and nothingness converge (Moten 2018:21).

Here, dehumanisation is the denial of existence whilst disposable life is death. But the black denial of death by the fugitive spirit expresses that even in death we are making it, making the value of black life and black art. It is what Fanon calls the *Wretched of the Earth* ([1961]1990) on the brutality or violence of human life, which is the dehumanising effects of colonialism. When black life is riven by oppression against/over disposability.

Coming from settler-colonial-apartheid it means making life in the state of emergency under ruined and disposed life conditions. That is making the value of life under duress, Fela Kuti (1975) in his formulation would call it making and unmaking life with terrible beauty, *expensive shit.* The metaphor of expensive shit is not how he used waste material to escape in jail. In this study I want to focus my attention on the waste material, the relationship between waste and blackness. Why did Kuti engage in the praxis of excremental poetics to escape captivity to invoke another practice? Kuti's commitment to freedom in the face of fire is driven by the fugitive spirit, so he confronts colonial oppression through the practice of refusal which renders blackness non-existent. So, ubulongwe and expensive shit as mediums weave the now, the past and our future histories as a critical care(ful) intervention in the wake that defies the status quo, the precarity of the black social life. This is an exploration of other possibilities to engage black radical thought for the future in its process of revitalisation and care.

What reemerges as our inherent spasms, is driven by our impulsive black magic of creation, undercreation, recreation, and the fugitivity of our insurgent spirit to continue no matter what, in the face of the struggle. Moten (2017:39) eloquently weaves this concept as *The Magic of Objects* with "improvisation". Improvisation is like a spiritual journey in evolution or transformation, living in the now and understanding survival, how you survive by making and unmaking something out of nothing.The dynamic interplay of Composition and Decomposition and the aesthetics of life. That is the evolution revolution, a space where a strategy needs to be constantly re-evaluated. It is a struggle of our history as black people!

Macarena Gómez-Barris (2017:5) writes: "the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity". This takes us back to colonial forms of extractivism. Cotton fields are a metaphor for killing fields, plantations, whether it is an economic killing field or nature's killing, or life or all of the above but it is a death space. The tatters of this old cloth are torn and ragged in its *Composition and Decomposition*. Dial's works speak of a state of surrealism in relation to oppression in the South of Alabama. If you come out alive then you deserve surveillance and further destruction, thus Dial becomes a study of colonialism. The question for colonialism is: how did he survive, how did he make

monumental artworks? Yet he is nothing, from nothing without anything!

3.4. The value of the discardable

According to Moten:

> "Sometimes it seems like we are trapped in the correspondence of this assumed legitimacy of exclusion and precarity (in which enclosure is exercised as a kind of right and disposability is understood to be an essential quality of every earthly inhabitant)" (Moten 2017:155).

Moten's thinking helps us to critique **Fig**. 3.1, in that it foregrounds the aesthetics of ruins and disposability as a site of black rupture. The works are provocative. The graphic image, in terms of visual culture, literally represents a fabric of the black social life which is threadbare, worn out material, yet the ragged material echoes the inequality of colonialism. Metaphorically, it also represents human beings who are reduced to waste material, from human materiality as an ontological being in their existence to rubbish ecology, from rubbish to racial slavery that is within the concept of aesthetics of ruins and disposability of the black social life. Allegorically, the art/work shows the grotesque underlying lesions of **Fig**. 3.1 as the narrative of cotton fields. They were a site where the value of life, of blackness, was disposed of.

Ecologically, the title is in keeping with the characteristics of the relations between the environment represented by a form of materiality (cotton and human beings). Yet due to the blurring of the shadow, Dial urges the viewer not to lose sight of the fact that the different radiant rays of light and the illuminated shades are a revelation represented by the *Shadows of the field* (2008).

Dial's responsibility is to focus on and investigate what is hidden and unexposed by the cotton fields. What is revealed by the field? Does it require us to unearth it environmentally whilst we observe a/any change/s on the precarious site/battlefield/ colonial site of ecological extractivism? A site where knowledges are extracted from the colonised? The fundamental question is, what is transmitted by these muted art/works? What lies in between the environment, nature and human beings and what is it that is obscured by **Fig**. 3.1 *Shadows of the field*? What is differentiated by the shadow and what radically escapes/ed in the entrapment/enclosure of the *Shadows of the field*? What is confirmed by Dial through **Fig**. 3.1 *Shadows of the field* (2008) is that the *Shadows of the field* were actually cotton killing fields of the oppressed.

This deepens the complication of this argument but requires a deeper engagement with the works because it does not solve how the colonial order rendered the invisibility of the black social life. On the aesthetic level we can argue about the beauty of abstraction of **Fig**. 3.1 and that Dial is magical in his thought processes. Dial used to be in the cotton line. He is asking us what lies between the indigenous ground, the sacred ground and the Earth, from a South African perspective, that is the land that was forcefully taken away from us, and here it is in relation to his art practice (**Fig**. 3.1) and the colonisers and who is entitled to black life. He is inviting us to bear witness to the brutality and violence of colonialism in the cotton fields or cotton plantations during the *cotton* fields project of slavery in the South, Alabama, USA. In terms of agriculture, green fields are culturally regarded as our way of life for

black subjects, connected to the Earth, so they are sacred spaces. It is where nature gives birth naturally to material, birth to human beings and anything for humanity takes place there, the birth of cotton, the birth of new possibilities, new alternative ways of making and unmaking takes place, a space for/of revitalisation and caring for the human beings and planet Earth, the birth of spiritual rejuvenation. A space where blackness is engaged in the practices and protocols of the black study. Amongst other mechanisms of colonial oppression, cotton fields are the art and science of colonial extractivism, but the magic of the cotton fields is its sacred ground, our fertile land. The aim of cotton fields/plantations was to wage not only war against humanity, against ancestors, but also an environmental warfare against the Earth. The destruction of life forms intend to unsettle the African spirits or the Gods. Colonial oppression shields itself from ancestors knowing the wrath of ancestors. This oppression tries to be invisible against black spirits, at times using a black subject in order to dissect the African structure. Cotton fields are aesthetically pleasing from another angle but it is a dangerous space, a field with contraventions, contradictions and erasure, whilst its plantations are a battleground for freedom.

In this art/work the cotton is life, and covers the possibility of liberation. It is a camouflage which depends on its host or on its geographical location. The life changes that this cloth went through from its raw process to a final product shows us the quotidian lived experience of blackness in South Alabama. Somehow it reminds me of a jazz standard album, titled, *Changes* by way of Keith Jarrett Trio (1983). It is an album that was recorded without rehearsals, without preparations/planning and without a playlist. That is the beauty of jazz improvisation at its best. For me that ties up with my study, the study of change. It is a study of how blackness makes life and values people like Dial, valuing their black life. Black life can be destroyed prematurely without notification and ruined at the same time with the aim of disposability by colonialism for no reason.

Colonialism changes its form all the time, needless to say if it was an animal it would be correlated to a chameleon in relation to its characteristics, the forms of its changes. Dial chose different mediums in this art/work but there is a particular medium, which is *cotton/*cloth materiality, in its subtlety he is exposing colonialism. Note how the *cotton* cloth material goes through changes imposed by colonialism. Also note its resilience even though it is a loving, soft textured, human materiality it has an ability to survive and care for humanity. It has the ability to hide its fugitive ulterior motives, namely confronting the ongoing/never ending forms/modes of racial slavery on blackness that we experience even today.

In terms of performance, the art/work reverberates sounds of blackness. The sound can send beautiful or painful frequencies. The souls of men, women and children screaming of the horrors of racial slavery. Their voices are like a sparrow, they waft/fly and what we hear is the vibrations of the sonic permeating through the steel rods. The steel carries metaphorical meanings, it is a symbol of the weight of slavery on black subjects yet a possible weapon for liberation and decolonisation. It is somewhat jagged to intensify the emotive subsystem of oppression on the mind of the oppressed. In her register, Campt (2017) talks to the frequencies of an image. If you gently and patiently tune into **Fig**. 3.1 and pay attention just as we listen to the termites outside the termite mound, then one can hear sonics, sounds of flowing water, salty tears, tears of the wretched, the ruined and the ruined black human beings. The tearing of materiality, the tiny fibers and the empty sounds, disjointed sounds, you can also appreciate further performative elements of the lyrics behind the tearing of the cloth. The exteriority of this motif symbolises elements of tyranny,

terror and cruelty. As the cloth goes through hierarchical stages of separation or tearing of materiality, it also reveals something, something that we would not have known of, if Dial did not offer himself to us. This is where the study becomes magical and interesting, you can observe change in this study. This radical irruption of the shredded pieces of fabric speaks to the black spirit of resistance. At the same time (the ontological being of black subjects), it intersects with the aesthetics of the black social life. Yet the same fine threads will be relevant in weaving a new way forward in the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Dial is showing us how the spirit of resistance, the decolonial spirit, is in its cyclical process of *Composition and Decomposition* confronting terror and making freedom at the same time. Time is important and timing is key. This particular steel frame talks to the inescapable chains of oppression. Even in chains, the cloth defies those notions of oppression. It does not mean defeat. The fugitive spirit finds a way out of no way, that is why there are empty spaces in the art/works, where the spirit finds time to *breathe again.* Yet it also exhales through these art/works. This is a spirit on the move. This rupture that we are seeing is in relation to the pain referred to by Stevie Wonder (1976) in his album *Songs in the Key of Life*, written from a perspective of *Love's in Need of Love Today:* "could change your joy and laughter to tears and pain". This attests to the fact that when the insurgent spirit exhales, there is uncertainty, an infinite chaos which is in keeping with fugitivity. Fugitivity penetrating the realm of resistance, the refusal of death. The art/work reveals the dynamics of the study in relation to the topic, the cyclical process of *Composition and Decomposition*. It shows why it was relevant to this study with its characteristics of the aesthetics of ruins and disposability.

The use of cotton fabric as a medium was not just for aesthetic purposes. Aesthetics here does not mean beauty, it means the practice of everyday life. Its purpose was rather for a reflection on an in-depth, textural syntax, visual language of the fabric of the black social life. Dial comes from a space of using different forms of mediums. In this case, he also worked in the cotton plantations which influenced this particular artwork. Cotton is a texturally rich material which elicits various strong elements of resilience and it comes as no surprise as to why it was carefully selected during slavery. Here, cotton echoes the brutality of humanity in the cotton field plantations of the South. The title is in relation to his lived experience in Alabama but it goes beyond Alabama, it exposes life without value in relation to black brutality denying their existence. When cotton material was the order of the day, geographically, tents housed human beings, human beings who generated cotton income for the state. People make/made black life out of what you can aesthetically call cotton fabric material, but actually that is one of the fabrics of black life. The cotton fabric is a sacred material, material chosen by our ancestors which was available as materiality for life, a materiality for planet Earth, a blanket from mother nature. Dial's choice of cotton fabric material is a political decision. White cotton signified immortality for black life. Yet cotton field plantations were a fertile ground for the commercialisation of the sacred materiality cotton for colonial gain. This was a double trauma, the infiltration of indigenous forms/mediums of making and unmaking life and the racial, colonial oppression of blackness using black/own ancestral methods to also attack the mind of the colonised.

Fig. 3.1 represents what Katherine McKittrick (2011:948) describes as "The plantation evidences an uneven colonial-racial economy that, while differently articulated across time and place, legalized black servitude while simultaneously sanctioning black placelessness and constraint". Dial's complex emotions around slavery and resistance, even facing and defying death, brings to mind a formulation

by Don Pullen (1995) in *Sacred Common Ground*. A sacred ground, the land that belongs to Africans, an earthly ground/land of their ancestors. A ground of black denial, where *Composition and Decomposition* defies the oppression of the black. The cotton fabric in **Fig**. 3.1 is a double edged sword. On the other side it is the fabric of the black social life that is radically treated with brutality by oppression, and metaphorically it is unmasked by Dial, not to insinuate pity resulting from poverty of black subjects but rather it is torn to radically demonise colonialism, the terrifying future of coloniality and neoliberalism, which is an oxymoron for human beings who are disposed of and are the voice of the voiceless. The paradox is that these art/works are a political form of resistance but they are in a struggle between life and death. They are also used to define a catastrophic world of colonial order, and urge black life to continue with the decolonial practice, in line with Fanon (1952/2008), when he argues that blackness allows us to imagine a better world. And also that without notice it can end at any time.

Looking at the art/works you can see that there is destruction of life, a precarious life, with forms/subjects of catastrophe which exposes destroyed life. There is a humanitarian crisis. It seems the title was selected carefully by Dial to abstractly express that those who are violated must look like it is their fault. The violence is blurred in the ruined cloth rags. It does not mean ruins. Rather he has used an allegory of shadows to emphasise the forms of structures of racial slavery which lead to premature death and dehumanisation. There is the emptiness and homelessness of those affected by oppression, in a ruthless space where cotton fabric could be their solace. The cotton fabric is radically torn apart, in the practice of structural violence. The raw beauty of this artwork is that in defeat lies possibilities, the fugitive spirit of resistance and confrontation escaping oppression even in death. Through Dial's psyche, artists are reminded of how to continue with the painful struggle of assemblage, joining pieces together even in disruption or destruction, imagining a different world free from all forms of slavery.

3.5. Conclusion

My entry point into the debates around the construction of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's (three) Aesthetics* was through the following question: if Composition and Decomposition is the making and unmaking of the world, then what is at risk in the process? As an intellectual figure, Dial showed us in his processes, through **Fig**. 3.1 that the cotton fields have many metaphors. On the one hand they were used for colonial advantage as an instrument of erasure of blackness by colonialists/sm. On the other hand they were a form of economic currency and extractivism. Another question arises from Dial: What is the value of death, what escapes? What resists colonialism/ity against Dial's aesthetics of ruins and disposability? Dial agrees with the arguments of his interlocutors that "being-black-in-an-antiblack-world" is the main challenge for the oppressor and the oppressed, the black. That it needs to be confronted within the unbearable ruined and disposable life. From the vantage point of black aesthetics, the black social life and ruins and disposability interconnectedness suggest that there is a need for further interrogation, but through another layer of the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Through different concepts interlocutors proved that black people are attempting to engage in the poetics of everyday life from a site of decomposition/resistance. Even if this is about fashioning a better life together.

In accordance with Dial's thinking, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability is also in the cyclical process of making and unmaking life for something new to come into being which is improvisation. What does it do? It defies the linear conception of things, it defies formality, defies structures and it is in the process of preparation which is not formalised. So when in there, in reality, in its decomposition, organic form, raw form, there is uncertainty of what can happen before, during and afterwards.

The concept of *Shadows of the field* (2008) is Dial's artistic expression of the political rupture of his daily life, and imagination with his insurgent spirit. Through his practice, his art/works become larger than life and he is imagining a better world even in the face of adversity. How does Dial compose, build, from ruins and disposability, with inanimate, degenerate found material? He makes beautiful wrought art/works, using torn, rich textured material, constructing something from nothing. From a battle-ground, a place where only decomposed, torn/ragged material is re-connected, re-composed, where nobody wants to go but only the masters of *Composition and Decomposition* reside. Where material scavengers of nature, the environment and black ecology allows you to thrive but enclosure insists on radical exclusion of blackness. The external disturbance from colonialism can result in destruction of creative and intellectual concepts/ideas for *Composition and Decomposition* on Dial's aesthetics but his insurgent spirit or improvisatory impulse push him to study change which Moten (2017:155) recalls as, "Mr. Dial extends a sociopoetic tradition of studying the eloquence of things". As a figure, why is Dial studying change? It is because he wants to know if something survives. Dial's notion of disposability comes from his lived experience in slavery. So he is using art as a mode of confrontation, investigation, resistance and making and unmaking the value of blackness.

Therefore, for us to interrogate *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* particularly the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, we must tap into the realm of the lived reality of black subjects by way of Dial's aesthetics, the black aesthetics. However, in the colonial context the aesthetics of ruins and disposability is a death trap. Living in unprecedented times, the reality is that anything can happen to humanity at any time for those living that life. This is happening in the state of their consciousness. The roots of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* are examined in relation to the black subjects, black human beings as it is applicable to the colonised black subjects but not the uncolonised family. The point is the reality of the black quotidian experience. What does it mean to be black in an anti-black world, in accordance with the afterlife of slavery, in the aesthetics of ruins and disposability? So it means here, on Earth, life is easily ruined and disposed of.

CHAPTER 4. THORNTON DIAL: AESTHETICS OF REVITALIZATION AND CARE



Fig. 4.1 Thornton Dial. *Top of the line (Steel) 1992. Mixed media: Enamel, unbraided canvas roping and metal plywood*

4.1. Introduction

Chapter 4 reflects on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* This chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for the study. In a narrative form it will provide a detailed discussion of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* to illuminate the third concept: the aesthetics of revitalisation and care as it relates to the new: new Earth, rebirth and care. Furthermore, to new aesthetics, beginnings, awakening, love, joy, peace, anchoring, autonomy, unique connections with human beings and their gifts of life, and how this contributes to the whole, and the connection of existence as co-creators. Here the focus is on renewal not terror. New earthlings.

The aesthetics of revitalisation and care is applied to the analysis of **Fig**. 4.1. Thornton Dial. *Top of the line (Steel)* (1992). It will be engaged in one thematic concern based on *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. The thematic analysis will contribute to the system of comparison. Aesthetics of revitalisation and care will be aligned and grounded. The thematic analysis will be infused with the other two aesthetics to create a grid-like format while allowing it to stand on its own.

Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021) define the aesthetics of revitalisation and care as "a composition which is always already a recomposition and a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions". Bradley and da Silva touch on *Composition and Decomposition* and are paying attention to the three aesthetics of Dial. They both allude to the fact that *Composition and Decomposition* is the continuous practice of decoloniality, the continuous practice of infinite care, interconnected, interdependent, of intersections, of interweaving with care using bare hands as a bare necessity. It is driven by different forms of political spirits, and the delicate liberation of spirits of care. It brings to mind Louis Moholo Moholo (2002) who would say it is the *Spirit of the Wind into Gazilam (My blood)*, a spirit within the realm of human beings', a prophetic spirit that is concerned with what they want, that which is different forms of the future driven by the impulse of the praxis of revitalisation and care. That is a study of improvisation, the work of recomposing, rethinking, redoing, rebirth of new futures/world. It is a study of joining completely different beautiful pieces of the tangible and intangible, visible and invisibilised pieces of materiality together with care. It is about joining *Pieces of Dreams* as per Stanley Turrentine's (a jazz saxophonist) formulation (1974). Most importantly it is about the value of care, the worthiness and the magic of black life. It takes us back to where we started from, the study of Dial, joining the aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care. It is a cyclical process of bringing something into being that is related and unrelated, in what I call, *out-of-zero-value and +zero-black-life* in this context. Let us break it down and understand it to mean that out of *out-of-blackness* emanates from a decolonial position in defiance of the colonial matrix of power whereby there are no black human beings in their existence. Black human beings do not exist in their cosmology or their life and on their earth. Though on this Earth, life is brand new, life is revitalised naturally and cared for by its people. So the concept of *out-of-blackness* functions within the parameters of a lifeline, the black social life. The concept of *out-of-zero-value* means out of blackness/life without the worth of (black) but with some of the meaningless of life. But it is taken from composition of the non-human, and in this decolonial study of Dial: *Composition and Decomposition*, the colonial project is unable to thrive. There is life there with a

possibility of re-emergence. Unlike ruins and disposability with the discarded life, it is a life cycle of the black life. The +zero-black-life means even those who survive the struggle of/for existence which is this life. Their life is without meaning, it is lifeless, it is papering over the cracks of life, but life continues in revitalisation and care, it is life without oppression, and Dial's study defies those notions of eradication, dehumanisation and +zero-black-life.

We can ask crucial questions about *out-of-zero-value* an *out-of-zero-black life* in relation to the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. What is the beauty/ugliness of *out-of-zero-value* and -zero black/ness the life of the ruined and disposed of, what is at the tipping edge point/danger zone/risk of dehumanisation of this out-of-zero-value and out-of-zero-black life, what is catastrophic about the non-existence of human beings? *Out-of-zero-value and out-of-zero-black-life*, non-revitalisation and carelessness: what survives? What lives? What refuses to be nothing/die? Is nothing a form of eclipse/denial of the value, harmony of "being black-in-an-anti-black world"? In what ways does Dial revitalise and care for black aesthetics? Even in a state of repair, vulnerability remains a threat to healing ourselves, our planet. We must find a way of finding another way of *Composition and Decomposition* of black life out of a ruined and disposable life.

4.2 The excremental poetics

Susan Signe Morrison (2013:467) defines excremental poetics as "anyone who touches dirt or waste is contaminated socially as waste him or herself and becomes "thrown out" socially, geographically, economically, and morally". I want to suggest that the aesthetics of revitalisation and care is when the insurgent spirit, the spirit that confronts limits and impossibilities, radically insists on different sets of possibilities, demands that things have to fundamentally change and things can not be what they have been. A spirit that continues to fight even in the midst of betrayal of fabrication. The collective utterance of Dial's three aesthetics is the voice of those who say nothing will stop us. We will continue to fight until the bitter end. That is a spirit that refuses to submit to the forces that kill it. This insurgent spirit is an indication that Dial is involved in excremental poetics. The logic of this argument leads to the logic of excremental poetics based on the premise of dealing with oppression which involves the risk of being contaminated by waste; debris as the black social life. How do you articulate an excremental condition as a human being while using the poetics of dung, rotten, decomposed, composing, recomposing the materiality of ubulongwe or any other waste be it human or material? Engaging in revitalisation and care recomposes the human spirit preparing for the survival of human existence. "Expensive Shit" is the title song of Fela Kuti's composition.

Excremental poetics stands for and articulates the waste, the rejected, the wretchedness, the oppressed, dehumanisation, discrimination, racism and disposable/discardable ways that black people are made to be on planet Earth. Why poetics? Poetics means the way of knitting, weaving and creating life. We need to analyse and understand excremental poetics further in relation to the subject of the black social lives, ruins and disposability with its insurgent spirit through the lens of Dial's decolonial perspective and practice as they connect with aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Excremental poetics is a branch of the concept of black aesthetics, it is interrelated to all three aesthetics of Dial, aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and

care. How? It exposes the death of the old order, the death of colo-nial-ism/ity and neo-liber-ali-sm/ity, the death of any form of oppression. It is improvisation, the birth of new possibilities, the new Earth, a celebration of human life, the new universe. This is about looking from a multi-dimensional point of view which is another way of looking, of doing, of seeing (et cetera) for you to understand that the aesthetics of revitalisation and care carries the cyclical process of Composition and Decomposition.

Dial (2001) posits that “My art is the evidence of my freedom”. The allegory of Dial’s argument is the radical art question that disrupts the fundamentals of excremental poetics within the artistic discourse. In **Fig**. 4.1, it begs the question: is Dial making art or are these artworks objects of waste or is there something more to his praxis than nothing? To me these works are beyond art/works/assemblages or objects. His practice is above and beyond the level of making art in his artistic praxis, he is in the avant-garde process using excremental contaminated materiality, wasted, discarded, ruined, found material not sterile material. Dial is studying waste and observing changes in the waste through his materiality. He is philosophically involved with excremental poetics, using garbage and ruined materials to confront excremental racial oppression. You can argue that ecologically he is addressing issues of climate change through the cyclical process of *Composition and Decomposition*. You can also argue that he is making art/works but Dial meditates on the principles of the aesthetics of waste decoloniality and the fundamentals of the black social life. This brings to mind Fela Kuti-Anikupalo’s (1974) song “Expensive Shit” which is intrinsically related to excremental poetics. His mediums are confronting violence, which was carefully selected for this study because he is revitalising our land, the environment and planet Earth. Dial’s materiality, in its texture, also handles well during the process, patiently repairing the fabric of the black social life, repairing and healing the ruined and disposable life. Using discardable elements allows the process of decomposition to be in its own processes, its plasticity and healing properties to organically bind the three aesthetics together in the process in order to compose a better liveable life. His earthly composition is what drives the excremental poetics and the chemistry within the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. His work is not only philosophical but it is ecological. It releases its healing energy to us as human beings in the environment. When earth material is combined with another waste, discarded, ruined and disposed material like ubulongwe in my art practice, the material proves to be resilient, it fights back. It fights even in the face of death and combats failure whereby it continues with its process of careful reparative changes, the resuscitation of the worthiness of black life including its black beauty, its former glory, that is the metamorphosis of the object in *Composition and Decomposition*. It takes any mediums through a life cycle, a cyclical process of Composition and Decomposition, it is a process that challenges and transforms mediums into a warm, organic, and earthly blanket, a gift, for us in order to assist the black social life with resistance, to heal the ruined human beings taking extra care from ruins and disposability to another process of revitalisation and care and the environment. This is where more precautionary measures are taken, because revitalisation and care is a delicate study on its own, whilst it is inextricably intertwined with black aesthetics it is a sensitive zone of (re)healing and rebirth. A place where our planet Earth is re-working non stop with all of us in its process of spiritual evolution. Therefore, to me the value of Dial’s materiality is the same as ubulongwe in my art praxis. It is about an excremental poetics - it takes us to a new life, on planet Earth. Ubulongwe is considered as one of the indigenous sacred materials from the universe. This aesthetics of revitalisation and care is about weaving with care the value of life threads, cotton threads, ruined and disposed

threads of black aesthetics, the fabric of the black social life, the fabric of ruins and disposability and the fabric of revitalisation and care.

4.3. The ethics of life forms

Moten defines the aesthetic of revitalisation and care through the ethics of life forms in his body of work and says,

> Mr. Dial works and speaks a whole other ecology of the thing, of the abundance of things in the refusal of whatever notion of the disposable. This is another essential theme in his work. One might speak of the biodiversity of that work—of a kind of uncut imaginative generativity that studies generativity; a generativity of the thing, *de re,* that is independent from its degeneration and regeneration. (Moten 2017:155).

Moten's definition of the aesthetics of revitalisation and care intersects with the concept of aesthetics of ruins and disposability as it emanates from Dial's principles of ecology, his ethical consideration of our planet, his respect for the planet and working towards the preservation of nature and sharing our planet with all of us. His choice of medium qualifies the fact that he is engaging with the environment differently, not only from making and unmaking art, but from the black social life, from ruins and disposability to revitalisation and care. In there, he is imagining a better world, and in the process, he is concurrently making that world.

Moten is showing us the value of resistance in black aesthetics, the lived experience of blackness. Black life is interdependent with the environment which also forms part of black ecology, and in that process of improvisation it is intertwined with *Composition and Decomposition* with all three of Dial's aesthetics and Dial's three art/works, even if oppression is continuously in the face of its denial, denying black existence. In addition, Moten shows us the ability of Dial's practice to evolve regardless of colonial interference. Here, colonial interference encompasses its modes of destruction targeting the black social life, ecology, ruins and disposability, using ways to eradicate blackness from planet Earth. Dial's spirit defies the status quo with a solid revitalisation and care study/practice that transforms it into a new form, a new life, carefully giving us a loving energy, giving birth to *Changes* if I may borrow Keith Jarrett's (1983) formulation. Moten agrees with Dial in that blackness can not be reduced to what I termed *no-life* and/or ruins and disposability. Like Dial, Moten is also defying the colonial notions that black life must not exist, he is confronting the myopic views and colonial processes of elimination of blackness, that the black human life is not a waste of *non-human beings* that deserve to be framed/fixed to colonial levels of reducing black life to non-value in relation to ruins and disposability. Ruins and disposability mean that the black social life can be erased anytime, anywhere without any reason in order to blur the lines of history and blur black bodies existence. Moten is having a difficult conversation with Dial. Difficult in the sense that he is engaging Dial on the principles of existence, what it means to be black in an anti-black world. Moten and Dial are both confronting the same struggle of existence. They challenge each other yet prepare to join other scholars and artists to rebuild the value of black aesthetics, those who are making and unmaking the ethics of life forms in relation to revitalisation and care. That is why Moten is relevant in the study of Dial like Bradley as they illuminate Dial's thoughts philosophically in relation to the aesthetics of the black social life,

aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care. We can conclude on this point that Moten attests to black ecology which is concerned with the black social life, racism, black existentialism and environmental justice.

Dial's art/works are a form of preservation of the earth. He re-uses discarded material and restores them back to their black value, beyond their original value. So, Dial's work is a site of resistance. The works are a form of new vibration that vibrates at a higher frequency and at the level of spiritual, divine frequencies. Thus I say that he is meditating on his art/works through revitalisation and care because revitalisation and care is the antidote of freedom.

Sharpe (2016:5) defines the aesthetics of revitalisation and care and says "I want to think of "care" as a problem for thought. I want to think of care in the wake as a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world". Here, what we must take into consideration, is that the aesthetics of revitalisation and care is the protocol and, this work of healing with care must not be taken for granted. We must understand that care is the practice of decolonising the emotional wounds, this is where the study is fragile because anything can happen. It is work in the dreamworks, the revitalisation and care in its core processes or ways of making freedom, ways of decolonising black aesthetics, that we are challenging. Gordon (2018:19) cautions us that "A problem with constructing black aesthetics is whether *aesthetics* has been so colonised that its production would be a form of colonising instead of decolonial practice". The study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* fundamentally is Dial's decolonial practice to decolonise black aesthetics with revitalisation and care.

Tina Campt (2021:23) defines the aesthetics of revitalisation and care as "... Black life is constituted through vulnerability to the overwhelming force of anti-blackness and white supremacy, and yet not capitulating to [that]only known by those forces". The Camptian definition of the aesthetics of revitalisation and care is bordering on the argument of Dial in relation to **Fig**. 4.1. The timing of creating and producing these art/works attest to how Dial carried out his strategies carefully, how in his daily lived experience he was already revitalising blackness inside the struggle of oppression.

In terms of vulnerability during the execution of his concepts in relation to his work, as a thinker and contemporary artist, Dial's art/works expands beyond his artistic imagination, beyond contemporary arts. His work is produced from a different realm, in another world, a process of work produced in new beginnings. It is work that troubles you, that questions you, it questions the daily lived experience of blackness. Sometimes it gives you different frequencies, a feeling of abstract expressionism with visual images that look incomplete or improvised. Paradoxically, Dial carefully creates an opportunity for us to converge and generate new knowledges, new ways of *Composition and Decomposition*. Artists and scholars can collaborate or engage with Dial at a deeper decolonial level in order to build on the different knowledgeshe has left us.

It goes without saying that he is a virtuoso, a master planner who create/s monumental art/works as a response not limited to, but including, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 where four white policemen were acquitted of the killing of Rodney King. He creates in order to re-create a new space and time where blacks are allowed to exist without fear or favor or prejudice or disposability, but as resistance to oppression.

4.4 The magicalisation of the object

Inspired by meditations of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics,* I crave for the "Fruit of Islam", a song offered by Terence Blanchard (1992) from an album Malcolm X. Moten (2017:168) defines the aesthetics of revitalisation and care as "What if we could detach repair not only from restoration but also from the very idea of the original — not so that repair comes but that it comes before. Then, making and repair are inseparable". Moten's definition reveals that the **Fig**. 4.1 assemblage is work where its black vernacular artistic production enunciates a materiality which has values of love and care from vernacular cultural forms of black tradition of vernacular history. Aesthetically, Dial has an affinity for improvisation, integrating disintegrated found-objects and assemblages which proves his resistant position against oppression. Philosophically, the essence of his choice is to resuscitate the black traditions from colonial erasure. Therefore, Dial's definition of the concept of revitalisation and care concurs with Moten's proposition. Through Dial's practice of resistance, one can argue that his art/works represent his life. Instead, I argue that he is making art from objects and he is deeply involved with the magicalisation of nothing into something, the magicalisation of non value to value, the object.

According to da Silva:

> "Decolonization requires the setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands" (da Silva 2014:85).

Da Silva's definition talks to the body, the object of blackness. Through his work, Dial talks about the essence of black people. So, **Fig**. 4.1 denotes the daily testament, the struggle of blackness as a response to the political turmoil in the history of Alabama. The metaphorical meaning of the brown rope reflects on Dial's efforts to save black lives, the ability of the insurgent spirit to escape out of the quagmire of the riots in the quest for freedom. Its composition also carries connotations of the chokehold of colonialism on the lives of black people, an effort to hold the fort when things fall apart. It is an aggressive/radical approach to stabilise the ruptured life and bring the balance of human life in the face of its denial, in the belly of terror. The brush strokes are dripping with red paint which intersects with oppression, agony, and the rawness of emotional wounds. Elements portray strong emotions related to tears and resilience of the spirit to heal itself in what I call *healing inwards and outwards* which simply means to heal through *Composition and the Decomposition* for humanity, the black human being. The sky blue paint reveals vigilance, justice and perseverance, the window to his thought processes, how he imagines possibilities even in the face of death. That is how the insurgent spirit tries to find a way to confront death within the riots of Alabama. The use of black paint reflects on the beauty of Dial, the black beauty, in conversation with how black people are making life against the odds, oppression or in the face of decadence. Occasionally the art/works show elements of the reign of terror, trauma, distraction and dehumanisation. There is evidence of ruined/torn canvas with a sharp object, this is in relation to the untimely rupture of the soul but Dial is using a steel frame to release

the air trapped inside his body. In music, Lenora Zenzalai Helm Hammonds, a jazz contemporary artist, breathes in high octaves. In visual arts, Dial breathes through his signature, his rough, wrought and decomposed material. This is a form of spirit that is resilient to fire, to any internal or external threat, in the sacred zone of foregrounding his spiritual alignment with his ancestors in his efforts to revitalise and recalibrate his own work and handle it with care. On the left hand side of the art/works there are signs of a musical instrument bar. Here it is possible that Dial is referencing the sonic of a piano or bass clarinet or a flute or the sounds of colonialism and effects of oppression or either the sonic sounds of the struggle songs of freedom. It is impossible to do this kind of work without any influence of music in this journey. I want to give music some treatment and unpack how these works reverberate when I look at them through performance. There is a connection between Dial's colonial struggle in Alabama, USA and apartheid struggle in South Africa. **Fig**. 4.1 evokes memories of the anti-apartheid struggle songs in South Africa which is represented by a history of arts and culture being the traditional engine of the black social life in these works. I want to borrow from Zim Ngqawana's formulation when he says "ingoma/song" is the life and death of the struggle. It brings to mind a liberation stalwart, an unsung hero, Vuyisile Mini who defied death with his insurgent spirit during apartheid. When he was faced with the gallows in Pretoria1964, he sang his own composition titled "Ndod' emnyama (Beware Verwoerd)". In 1964 the song was later improvised by Miriam Makeba.

4.5 Conclusion

Cornel West (1990:25) would say "We look to the past for strength, not solace, we look at the present and see people perishing, not profits mounting; we look toward the future and vow to make it different and better". In light of West's submission, I argue that Dial's raison d'être is making and unmaking of black life even handling it with care. You may argue that these are art/works but to Dial and I they cease to be artworks, to us this is the value of black life, valuing what they make and not necessarily art/works. To simplify, these art/works, **Fig**. 4.1. show nuances of slavery. The allegorical meaning of ropes on the art/works evoke histories and memories of slavery and in fact ropes were used by the colonisers to brutalise life and hang black people in order to take away their valuable soul/life.

Sbusiso N. Ndebele writes (2016:10): "But in the same way apartheid guns did not stop young people, they did not stop the emergent flowering of creative activity in literature, theater and music from South Africa's townships". What is worth noting in this study is the role of women in relation to Dial's study of black aesthetics. Throughout his study of change Dial was in collaboration and in conversation with women in the South of Alabama and the greater South. Philosophically, women have not been acknowledged or referenced well. Women also formed an integral part of the struggle against colonialism in Alabama and another form of colonialism which is anti-apartheid in South Africa. This means that even though we come from different geographic locations with Dial, there are similarities in our lived experiences in relation to the black social life. We still endured the same wrath of colonialism and the chokehold of anti-black racism.

In our lived experience in South Africa, women also formed an integral part of the apartheid struggle and in terms of contemporary art, Noria Mabasa has made monumental artworks using found and carved materials. Helen Sebidi was also part

of the anti-apartheid struggle, confronting issues of racism through her figurative painting. Esther Mahlangu used found chicken feathers for abstract and geometric painting. These women also confronted the aesthetics of ruins and disposability and oppression through different forms. Miriam Makeba challenged apartheid through song and when people confronted the police during the anti-apartheid struggle they would start singing struggle songs as part of the revolution.

I have shown what is at stake in **Fig**. 4.1, is the meaning of a family, how African family structures were destroyed in slavery. Dial used red, white and blue which have a symbolic connection to the American flag. Metaphorically, white implies the oppressors and the innocence/purity of the oppressor. As a thinker, Dial was in the avant-garde state of mind which allows him to escape reality and tap into his inner soul, tapping into his creative juices with his ancestors to make life not artworks, we are not making art/works, we are making life out of nothing/filth.

In conclusion, **Fig**. 4.1 represents Dial's form of storytelling through fabric. Fabric here means different textures of materiality alluding to the black social life through incessant layering. Dial is living and dreaming at the same time. In his conscious state of mind he is able to tap into his unconscious state, tapping into his dreams, talking to the essence of black people and the revitalisation and care. Of note is that Dial's art/works are defined from an insurgent spirit, articulating and transforming the entire cosmological space for a liveable planet. The beauty of his intention in these art/works is that he is confronting brutality, oppression, dehumanisation and death. Out of non value, the discardable life, life forms from things that are seen as not worthy of life.

My point is that Dial composed **Fig**. 4.1 from found material, disposed material, which is seen to be of no value. By giving them value, by revitalising them by means of aesthetic expression, he practices decomposition as composition and revitalises with care.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* was closely examined through Dial's body of work. This study postulated that Dial's first philosophical concept is the aesthetics of the black social life in relation to Dial's first artistic assemblage, **Fig**. 2.1 which was explicated in chapter 2. The second philosophical concept is the aesthetics of ruins and disposability in relation to the second artistic assemblage, **Fig**. 3.1 which was addressed in chapter 3. The third philosophical concept is the aesthetics of revitalisation and care in relation to the third artistic assemblage, **Fig**. 4.1 which is clarified in chapter 4. I have demonstrated that Dial's three aesthetics of inquiry lie ingrained in his genre of avant-garde and abstract expressionism. His metaphorical works are intentionally abstract in nature. Dial's visual language carries subtle and loud frequencies in his works, carrying different political, cultural, philosophical, linguistic, epistemic, indigenous and decolonial connotations that confront the lived experience of blackness. His anti-colonial expressions are either visible or invisible, muted or unmuted but what is embedded in the monumental artworks is the interrelations of Dial's three aesthetics throughout the study with other interlocutors. This begs the question: What are the possibilities of Dial's aesthetics in relation to decolonising black aesthetics? The engine of this study is his art/works. His art/works drive this study and so the answer lies in his art/works. It is important to understand the reason why Dial is making monumental art/works and why he is involved in the practice of refusal. Dial is refusing to submit to colonial oppression. This refusal operates on different terms, it demands different sets of conditions.

By way of Carey (2007), Dial says "Art ain't about paint. It ain't about canvas. It's about ideas". Dial's inquiry interrogates many interwoven practical and theoretical premises grounded from Dial's aesthetics through different interlocutors on constructions and formulations of the black study. I have demonstrated how the ideas/arguments were grounded on deeper philosophical questions, tackling issues of colonial power, colonial violence, (racial) slavery, discrimination, anti-black racism and dehumanisation of blackness which breeds black resistance.

Dial's discernment of black aesthetics is that it is concerned with the value of the black social life, making value and valuing what they make valuably**.** It is a testament that his African constructions on the theory and practice of improvisation is centered on the close examination of his body of works, valuing what he makes which is **Fig**. 2.1, **Fig**. 3.1. and **Fig**. 4.1 as the umbilical cord of the study and a site of the decolonial project.

Fig. 2.1 was conceptualised from the aesthetics of the black social life, from the struggle, in the disaster, terror, in colonialism in the heart of Alabama as a form of confrontation and advocating for change/transformation through resistance, imagining a better and another world. It is driven by Dial's insurgent spirits, ancestral people from indigenous knowledge systems that push for new revolutionary ideas/methods. Where groundbreaking experiments, unconventional methods, eccentric yet original traditional ways of thinking create and re-create for new forms of epistemologies. Dial is not only thinking of *The Art of Alabama* (2004) (**Fig**. 2.1) from the global north in terms of its geographic site. The spirit involved in his creation is not from the western forms of traditions. It is not from the perspective of settlers' position of power. Instead Dial is radically imagining possibilities through his themes, concepts, methods and cyclical processes of *Composition and Decomposition*.

There, deep in the mound, underground, deep in his ontological being, in a sacred space where indigenous knowledge systems apply in order to process the energy of his creative spirit, this spirit drives the art/works as a form of expression. This is an expression for revolution, meaning it is in the struggle of survival.

Henry Threadgill (2021) writes: “But improvisation-based music is different in that you are trying to find a new way to do things, period”. Building on Moten's argument, we can argue that Dial unearthed the oppressive conditions, the hidden agenda of colonial practice that sustains the power of black aesthetics. Therefore, the study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial’s Aesthetics* explored the ideas and meaning of the three decolonial concepts employed by Dial in decolonising black aesthetics.

Bradley (2021:176), writes: “Dial is a conceptually minded, visually oriented intellectual”. Based on Bradley’s framing, Dial offered himself to us. His concepts are a gift to us today to argue for blackness. They help us to understand the reason behind the intervention of the study of *Composition and Decomposition* on his three aesthetics from a different perspective, from the aesthetics of the black social life, the aesthetics of ruins and disposability, and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Therefore, in the South of Alabama, in the colonial struggle and in the belly of terror, Dial’s concepts are inseparable from his colonial lived experience of blackness, from the legacy of precarity and brutality in the South of Alabama and we can come to the first conclusion that violent oppression of black subjects, Dial’s exclusion in art history gave impetus to the liberatory praxis. Liberatory praxis is what makes his insurgent spirit enable other possibilities to be realized. Black people fight for liberation fashioning other possibilities through their spirit which comes through their work, their assemblages and oeuvre from creating a better and a lovable world. Therefore, we can arrive at the second conclusion that his work breathes a new lease of life and that the three concepts are his daily lived aesthetics and an ethical commitment to the existential phenomenon of blackness. We can understand that liberatory aestheticians, intellectuals like Dial and Bradley are in a convergent and divergent process with their ideas through improvisatory rhythms. To use Gordon’s term, this is where the “black aesthetics *qua* aesthetics” outcome of improvisation speaks its own language in lieu of the colonial language but rather a decolonial language that is “beyond category” as per Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (2014).

Through Moten (2017:152), Dial testified that “nothing will come from nothing”. In light of Moten’s assertions, Dial intricately and relentlessly weaves the force of his ancestral spirits, the explosion of feelings that are pouring out from him, his vernacular tradition and his culture, experimenting with new ideas, and along the way he is improvising within the practice of resistance of blackness in the decolonial project. He deliberately uses a multitude of experiments, different formulas, modes of methods in his execution style. For example, his chosen materiality is the performance of the object, a performance in the sense that the selected material can yield anything but in the process it can reveal the invisible secret or turn the improvised intention of an avant-garde process into an achievement. It can resist the fundamental cyclical relationship between composition, decomposition and recomposition on Dial’s aesthetics. Therefore, the materiality exposes the deep seated spirits of resistance, the decolonial spirits of the black social life in relation to the preferred methods of improvisation, the spirits being the driving force behind the theoretical and practical framework of his/this study. However, this demonstrated to us how he is involved in the dreamworks, the meditative state of Composition and Decomposition, the thought processes of freedom, and the decolonial project.

Therefore, his three aesthetics are interdependent on each other which allows him to meticulously engage with them in another way, valuing the black, the wrought, the disposable, the decay/ed through a cyclical process of *Composition and Decomposition*. He is not trying to arrive at a conclusion but he is observing and studying change. Therefore, we can arrive at another conclusion that the study foregrounds Dial's visual language as a virtuoso of aesthetics, and a canonical thinker who meditates on something, the theory and practice of *aesthetics* whilst improvising on decolonising black aesthetics.

By reason of Zenon Ndayisenga (2021:144), Fanon says "violence in its natural state, [and] it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" ([1961]1990:48). Based on this analysis, Fanon remains one of the catalysts of decolonialism in relation to the existential phenomenon of blackness. He attests to the fact of being black, that the colonial use of anti-black racism as another force of colonial violence denies the black human beings on planet Earth their core value which is existence. Therefore, Fanon and Dial meditate on the performativity of anti-black racism which is the quotidian lived experience of blackness, and remains a challenging force against this violence. At the same time, it warrants blackness to implore the same violence to destroy the same violent machinery.

However, Arendt's (2006) thought provoking counterargument is that "In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy." Therefore, Arendt's position disagrees with Fanon and Moten that counter-violence must be used to circumvent colonial violence even if violence comes from the colonialists. Moten (2018:215) attests that, "Her misrecognition of this experience is at the root of her profound misunderstanding of black insurgency". Anti-black violence still remains a hindrance on the progress of the decolonial project in relation to decolonial violence, Africana existential phenomenology and even decolonising black aesthetics. Here, this puts Arendt at loggerheads and in a biased position with the views of other thinkers. Therefore, Fanon and Moten's counter-argument shows that the colonists are not willing to compromise on colonial violence but expect the black subjects to give up the decolonial struggle without a fight for freedom. We can conclude that Arendt's views reveal that colonial keepers refuse to destroy and dispose of colonialism but prefer to hypocritically compose violence against the black subjects.

The study also clarified the aesthetic value of Dial and how his political/black ecological intervention (even though he says he is not political) necessitates the rebuilding of the value of blackness on the basis of "being-black-in-an-anti-black world". It further affirmed how his concepts are related to the daily lived experience of the black social life and its everyday existence. Dial's arguments point us to the third final conclusion on why Dial remains relevant in decolonising black aesthetics today. Dial's study revealed several streaks of misanthropy within colonialism that is also eclipsed with invisibilising blackness premised from the fears of the oppressor/master in its construction of colonialism/ty. Since its inception of slavery, it lends a perspective of maintaining different forms of structural violence and eradication of the black. The corollary means that the target of the oppressor/master is aimed at devaluing those that make their aesthetic value, those who come to value what their spirits make, making freedom no matter what.

The reality of today is the violent oppression against black humanity, therefore, Fanon ([1961] 1990:48) says "violence in its natural state, [and] it will only yield when confronted with greater violence". Needless to say, it is the responsibility of

decolonial practice/decolonisation to continue to aim at destroying colonialism swiftly and violently regardless of the fact that violence is the DNA of colonial oppression.

Therefore, in preparation for a second conclusion, we can deduce that the study exposed the aim of the colonial goal/gain, that it remains an oxymoron because like Dial, black people continue with their study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. Black people are saying, we are making black life even in the face of its denial. In addition to this point, Gordon (2017:17) also agrees with Dial and qualifies the decolonial argument on black aesthetics that black aesthetics is not reducible to what black people can produce but "It involves being able to live in a world of human production of value". In conclusion, therefore, Dial's aesthetics are the instruments of black value for *Composition and Decomposition* to decolonise black aesthetics.

Dial and I conclude that the ongoing failure of the colonial project is due to its target for human life, aiming to achieve black destruction to the level of black death and eradication. This anti-black colonial position breeds an advantageous position of defiance for blackness in their everyday existence, even if blackness remains under constant surveillance from colonialism/ty as it continues with its colonial and neoliberal agenda.

Dial decoded colonialism but we are making it even in the face of its denial, the denial of the value of those who are making value, black life. This provides the theoretical framework, focusing on Moten and his theories to provide a foundation for the anarchic principle of creativity. Thus Moten and Dial are in a sense of generativity in understanding black study.

In conclusion, we can argue that Dial is a creative thinker and all thinkers accounted for radical aesthetics which was extended into three concepts in order to give us an understanding of Dial within the protocols of black study. This interplay was between *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* with other thinkers. Through his colossal works which are complex and provocative, Dial studied change silently. Therefore, change is fundamental as it stabilises the order of things. What kind of change is this? It is change that interrupts, destroys and it is always on the move. This study is a dangerous act to undertake. People who are being denied their value and to study change, they are radically studying in their own modes because to study change is to live, and furthermore, it is to deeply interrogate what is and what comes, so it is often beyond these/any possibilities.

Studying change through contemporary artists and theorists meant minimising the possibilities of this study. The study is larger than the traditional ways of a dissertation with word count limitations, so honing discussions and arguments for the purpose of this study was another challenge of the study. For me this was just an introduction; the study will carry on to find a deeper meaning of decolonising black aesthetics, so long as black life has no value then further investigations of handling black life and black art within the black radical tradition are required, but handled meticulously with care. Every artwork/poetic in this study carried the elements of the fabric of the black social life, assemblage and every word carries a particular energy that vibrates at different frequencies, different levels. We can contextualise these emotions into words but we need to tune in beyond that experience. We need to tune in between those energies and listen to the sound, the sonic that decolonises black aesthetics differently for us to establish what lies beyond the sounds.

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COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION: ON THORNTON DIAL'S AESTHETICS

VOLUME 1

By

NOMALANGA SIYOTHULA

A research dissertation in the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the subject

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INTRODUCTION

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

I, Nomalanga Siyothula (1 February 1971) hail from the beautiful South African skies of Eastern Cape, (Transkei) kuQumbu. As a multidisciplinary artist I am passionate about multimedia art practice which encompasses contemporary installations, assemblages, concepts which encapsulate decolonial themes of the black social life in forms of abstract expressionism. My oeuvre is an invisible philosophical connotation of inherent spasms boiling within, waiting to be communicated. It is influenced by my genealogies of personal trajectories with my grandparents which is seen in **Fig**. 0.1. My art/work (**Fig**. 0.1.) makes visible the indigenous practices and the fact that I have always accompanied my grandmothers to collect discarded wood and cow dung material in the rural areas. Here, you can appreciate our conversations with the eco-collaborators, termites, grubs, bees (et cetera) who have entrusted me with complete artistic freedom for this project of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. This installation forms part of my body of work in the study of observing change, my study of improvisation. The intention is not to arrive at a conclusion but to carefully examine art, observe and handle with care all the findings with Dial.



Fig. 0.1. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Impande VI,* 2021. Garb, bark, stone, size: 3m

ARTIST STATEMENT: NOMALANGA SIYOTHULA

Introducing the study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* is my art practice/exhibition in volume 1 with respect to Dial's three themes: The aesthetics of the black social life which relates to **Fig**. 0.1 to **Fig**. 1.5. The aesthetics of ruins and disposability that relates to **Fig**. 2.1 to **Fig**. 2.8 and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care which relates to **Fig**. 3.1 to **Fig**. 3.13. Therefore, like Dial in volume 2, my body of work is divided into three art assemblages. The intention is to demonstrate how my art/works are in a creative and intellectual conversation with Dial's art/works through an analysis of Dial's body of selected art assemblages. It shows how I relate/connect with Dial as a contemporary artist through unique material, but diverse, art practices. Volume 2, is Dial's theoretical practice which comprises his three art/works **Fig**. 2.1, **Fig**. 3.1 and **Fig**. 4.1, three themes and five chapters.

My body of work is influenced by an improvisatory impulse, this drive for things to change fundamentally is the manifestation of freedom. A free spirit of radical hope because those who are denied value come into consciousness to be in their own value and to value what makes their existence meaningful, hence the use of my clan names, poetry, avant-garde jazz music, performance and salvaged or discarded materials. At home, in the backyard I find myself collaborating or converging with heterogeneous ancestors: termite mounds and termites (isiduli nomuhlwa), cow dung (ubulongwe), dung beetles, snails (iminenke), flies (impukane), steel (insimbi), boughs and twigs, foliage, flowers and sound/frequencies/vibrations of everything within this planet. In using the assemblage, patchwork blanket technique of my grandmothers, I am joining related and unrelated pieces of found material, filth material, sonic studies (black), patchwork blankets, old beads, fabric, torn photographs, printmaking techniques, diasec prints, steel, copper wire, nuts, bolts, rusted-wrought iron material, paper, cardboard, canvas, beans, bark, bone, gastropod shells, charcoal from burnt wood, different types of ochre pigments to make a paint substance, amavovo (sorghum) from umqombothi (sacred traditional drink and not alcohol in my culture), raw sorghum, oil pastel and discarded/found trees. For me this process means taking fragments to form the fabric of the everyday life. Black is that (magic) which is made everyday even in deformation, destruction, dislocation and in dehumanisation. That means being engaged in the poetics of everyday life, showing how black people are fashioning a better human life.

Aesthetically, **Fig**. 1.1 is a monumental artwork. As a gift, this dress/medium enabled me in this study to observe the processes of change. Metaphorically, the dress has a feminine energy which symbolises what Hortense J. Spillers (1987:65) calls "black woman", Mother Earth, a mother's love, spirits of love and a loving form of protection. The power of cow dung and its form of resistance as a medium is reflected naturally in its raw form on the materiality of the renewed dress. I observed that the dress handled well under pressure of cow dung. **Fig**. 1.2 is the 3-channel projected HD video art installation with sound. We can see that the process of *Composition and Decomposition* (the cow dung dress) is in its cyclical process, not in its final stage. The aim of these art/works is not to reach a conclusion but we can also understand the effect of sound in the engineering of these art/works.

Fig. 3.10 reminds me of my grandmother's patchwork blankets, beads, **Fig**. 3.10 and **Fig**. 3.4 Umbhaco with beads, black and orange Xhosa garb and the black and white Xhosa garb **Fig**. 3.11. Umbhaco with beads symbolises happiness and celebration. Umbhaco without beads carries a different meaning, unhappiness and mourning in Xhosa culture. These materials, cow dung, grab, clay, ocher, driftwood, barks, wrought steel, termite mounds, snails and earth are on their own very potent visually, in smells and symbolically. They are in the dynamic interplay between *Composition and Decomposition*. The mutual reinforcement of the two, the cyclical process in which they are generating something in order to produce something from discarded, found material or material of non value. I am not building something final or permanent but depending on the necessity at play. Likewise, I use quill feathers for painting; bare hands instead of brushes; a wooden step ladder to interrogate the powers of the kraal (isibaya) through a decolonial practice in relation to women, which is another study on its own that deals with eco-aesthetics and ecofeminism, earth and resultant art/works. To me these art/works are the making and unmaking of the black life which we value, from found, rusted steel, bones and metal in an effort to punctuate emotions that would not have been realised if I did not create these motifs through forms of abstract expressionism. This expresses the value of the aesthetics of the black social life, ruins and disposability and revitalisation and care.

I use thick layers of ubulongwe/cow dung as reflected in **Fig**. 1.1, **Fig**. 1.2, **Fig**. 3.7, **Fig**. 3.8, **Fig**. 3.10 and **Fig**. 3.11 and the termite mound **Fig**. 3.6 which are dominant mediums in my study to explore its veins and thick materiality. I engage with ubulongwe because of its sublime earth tones and combine it with canvas in order to make my own traditional blanket influenced by my grandmother’s patchwork blanket, ochre for a matte and satin finish; acrylic and oil in my ceaseless experimentation to explore colors; charcoal for drawing in memory of burning wood for fires to cook at night using the Welcome Dover stove at home with my grandmothers; and textiles to refer to the pieces of torn cloth material that I use during my art processes. The ability of ubulongwe that allows you to work through it in the process is beautiful, whereas in the beginning ubulongwe is very strong and saturated in texture, thick in application and lighter as you reduce it on canvas. I challenge the integrity of paper to continue experimenting and observing the changes between cow dung and rhino dung in making my own paper to investigate the differences between cow dung and rhino dung fibers because cow dung fibers are too short to bind together properly, so, the question is, how far can cow dung hold in the process of making and unmaking the desired paper? I could add rumen and experiment with it in the process. Yet I would never know the outcome. Coming to umuhlwa (termites). I think umuhlwa **Fig**. 0.1 were the original indigenous carvers, so I carve and place the wooden sculpture deep underground for the grub worms and umuhlwa to continue carving. After some few months, I also continued where umuhlwa left off, carving in order to allow the sculpture to come to fruition from decomposition. It is a labor of love, the art and science of carving by grub worms and umuhlwa as a colony is out of this world. Somehow umuhlwa has the ability to handle the division of labor strategically for the benefit of all in the caste/colony system without overlapping with each other and for the benefit of biodiversity and human beings. This execution is also seen through the veil of carving the bark of trees, in the building of homesteads, in their construction of termite mounds. Why am I using found material? Because of the subject matter *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial’s Aesthetics*. The death of organic material is the resurrection of organic material to me. I mean

when material is decomposed, people throw it away but I use it and transform it and give it a new lease of life. The study is involved in the practice of observation, experimenting, investigating the power of different mediums, observing their ability to transform, ability to reconfigure, to breathe new air and ululation into the subject which gives them a new lease of life. The process is poetic and performative but the spirit of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* is studied by analysing three thematic concerns practically, namely: the colonial spirit, the political spirit and the decolonial spirit.

In these configurations we are not trying to get to a conclusion. The material must also develop its own language and its own life. It can go in different directions but like grub worms, umuhlwa, ubulongwe and bark their existence can reinforce a new life. I have tried to create a visual narrative by creating scenes through color, texture, composition, scale (ascending or descending), juxtaposition, tonality, placement and the sonic (sound). During the process of making my work I marvel at the patience of mediums drying up, it is like 'waiting for the owl of Minerva' to apply oil pastel and acrylic painting. It is this resilience to express itself in a visual language which dictates the final outcome of the art/works. These multimedia art/works and installations aim to contribute to my personal trajectories with my ancestors and how they have influenced my art without knowing. In order to create paint, my grandmothers used to experiment with different types of ochre (Earth) colors and paint their home/huts inside and outside. The quill feathers were used by my grandmother's as a technique to create beautiful African motifs. This technique was also popularised by Esther Mahlangu, a South African contemporary artist.



Fig. 1.1. Nomalanga Siyothula, *UMaRadebe I,* 2022-2023. 3-channel video and sound installation view, cow dung, dress, stepladder, canvas and sail material, discarded material, cow dung video installation, size 3.8 x 4m.



Fig. 1.2. Nomalanga Siyothula, *UMaRadebe II,* 2022-2023. 3-channel projected HD video art installation with sound

THE AESTHETICS OF THE BLACK SOCIAL LIFE

By way of Walter Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres would say:

> 'Science' (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; languages are not just 'cultural' phenomena in which people find their 'identity'; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed. And, since languages are not something human beings have but rather something of what human beings are, coloniality of power and of knowledge engendered the coloniality of being [*colonialidad del ser*] (Mignolo 2007:242).

The visual language depicted in **Fig**. 0.1 to **Fig**. 1.5 art/works are imbued with my ancestral sensibilities, the aesthetics of the black social life. This is also observed in the analysis of Dial's art/work, **Fig**. 2.1. The art/works are integrated with the efforts of my eco-collaborators, my ancestors and my decolonial spirits in this study of observing change. Through the poetics of my African language, my clan names, my co-collaborators and my cultural improvisation I practically examine the depiction of Dial's themes: The aesthetics of the black social life within my art/work and his art/work **Fig**. 2.1 to try and show you the commonalities between Dial and my aesthetics, driven by our decolonial spirits and performed by the ensemble of my eco-collaborators in the practice of refusal.

Through the analysis of **Fig**. 1.1 and **Fig**. 1.2, my opus is in conversation with Dial's **Fig**. 1.1. The *Art of Alabama (2004)*. The question is, what is it that Dial and I are communicating and in what aesthetic domain? Our spirit is the embodiment of being in both of us**.** As such it is what we express in our art/works (black life). We do so as we are breaking down the structures and conventions of colonialism in order to create something new. We both pay careful attention to our chosen, found materiality. There are similarities in our art practice. Amongst other material, Dial uses found wrought steel for his monumental art/works, to understand the role of improvisation in decolonial studies. I use found cow dung material which is rich in African histories, as it intersects with anthropomorphic and creative indigenous practices. In retrospect, here, cow dung materiality is a technique used as an art form, a method by which we investigate the relationship between Dial and myself in our art practice without preparation and innovation through multimedia aesthetics. Cow dung is used to pay respect to my ancestors. My ancestors also used it to pay respect to their ancestors, and this makes it an indigenous sacred material in my family. What cow dung does in the study might be better understood as performative and theatrical, a practice of resistance, and a practice that evokes ubuntu/aesthetics.

Beyond knowledge and skills transfer from my elders but based on my observations in the study I would then conclude that cow dung pays respect to the sacred architecture of a homestead. It is dramatic, wide and wildly diverse in its materiality yet it is in unison with its people. However, its texture reveals it has the ability to maintain its identity even through epic scale installations. This art practice forms part of breaking down conventions in relation to indigenous ways of making and unmaking art. What motivates both of us in relation to *Composition and Decomposition: On Dial Aesthetics* is us taking the African spirits seriously. Spirits inform our cosmology and this becomes the source of our aesthetic motif and, as

such, the function of the spirits is making and unmaking of the world. In my art/works, **Fig**. 1.1 and **Fig**. 1.2, I am defining, articulating and transforming the entire space and this is attuned to the decolonial spirit of Hortense J. Spillers (1987), bell hooks (1995), Fred Moten (2017), Christina Sharpe (2016), Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008), Steve Biko ([1978] 2004), Tina Campt (2017), Lewis Gordon (2018) and other interlocutors, a spirit that confronts oppression, indignity, violence and death.

Fig. 1.1 and **Fig**. 1.2 are on an epic scale, represented by exhausted material, the canvas cloth material which is reversible on the other side with polyester material; (car sail) polyester from a scrap yard, stepladder and the cow dung dress. bell hooks (1995:97) talks about "The practicing of freedom in daily life, and that includes artistic freedom, is always a liberatory act that begins with the will to imagine". I took the material to a space where they have four different kraals. The kraal is an important space in the Xhosa culture. I also noticed that there were also three different textures of animal dung, **(**cow, goat and sheep) in those kraals. I gave them the material as we were told women are not allowed in their kraal. I note the submission with great respect for African traditional culture especially coming from space/cultural traditions where we also have customs and traditions (amasiko nezithethe) at home but intend to further engage and interrogate matters of the African Xhosa kraal in another study. Later, I learned that the particular kraal is owned by an African spiritual church. **Fig**. 1.2. The sail/canvas/polyester material was thrown into the kraal and dunked in cow dung. Then, the mystery began to happen. In the process, one could hear the sonic of the sail being mixed with cow dung. The two dresses were mixed with dung, at some point the shoes came off and I was excited because I know cow dung's ability to maintain its position in relation to improvisation. It is like a particular musical rhythm or tempo to hear the sound of this process, quickly the canvas material was showing signs of lack of resilience against the cow dung. Cow dung was showing signs of resistance, a refusal to be dominated. Moten (2017:35) would add that "(Black) performances are resistances of the object and the object is in that it resists, is in that it is always the practice of resistance". That's why we took a video to share the resistive driving force behind the action, the practical experience with you as a reader, in order to appreciate the nuances of the chronicles of cow dung and canvas material, the beauty of improvisation, improving improvisation of the object and the secrets of cow dung but most of all to join the study of change in the subject matter in motion, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* Another point of interest was to establish how far the sail/canvas/polyester can hold against the cow dung material right inside the heart of the kraal because cow dung is born out of a brutal landscape. Cow dung is a piece of sculpture in its own right. Depending on your opinion, if you are keen to use it, you will be rewarded with humility and tranquility**.**

In addition Moten (2017:38) writes: "Surplus is the very magic of objects, their fetish character, their mysterious secret". Ubulongwe also responds differently, in its richness/nobleness, engraving, engulfing and manipulating other mediums without backing down on its position and potential to dominate with its green or black earth tones challenging these mediums to see what they can reveal, accept or refuse or what the material can do in conversation with other materials. That is why the installation is a testament to indigenous forms of black creativity, the black social life**.**

Like Dial, it is also fashioned from found objects like cow dung, a dress, a stepladder, and canvas sail material. This installation may resemble the kraal on the other hand it looks like a sacred space-Umsamo but it is not the kraal. It is a form of straw used to make an African mat. A sacred space of/for connecting with ancestors, connecting with nature, to improvise with the universe, either in song, performance and creative way. Moten would say a place to lower your vibrations and try to establish a connection and listen and hear others. Art/works are a medium through which the spirit is disseminated. The black social life is the existential force, where Dial and I grapple with the question of existence. So, these art/works provoke us, they question us. The material is confrontational, this is where we are confronting reality through the combative spirit which is larger than life, which is complex, dark and tardy.

The canvas material also forms part of the notions of the patchwork blanket that joins pieces together for *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* It is influenced by uMaMtolo, my grandmother, who used to apply cow dung religiously on the floor at home. Moten says (2017:275) "It's a social practice that is always also a spiritual practice". What I will always treasure is the warmth of the huts in the homestead, cool in summer and warm in winter. Cow dung is/was also used for biofuel purposes (cooking). The cow dung dress belonged to my mother which is like a piece of an umbilical cord between a mother and a child, it is a gift. In order to join the study of change, we gave it a new lease of life, revitalised it and gave it an aesthetic status. Why? The cow dung dress is titled *UMaRadebe* after her clan name. It looks like a message from the Gods, the spiritual resuscitation of our beginning of the landscape whence we come from, the time of antiquity up until now. It is like reviving the spiritual presence of our ancestors because the whole presentation represents the magic of improvisation. The subject of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* should also be understood in the dreamwork that is being created by Dial and I. In engaging in the decolonial dreamworks it does not mean we will become free. The location of the spirit can be found in a manner in which subjectivity is being mobilised in my art/works. So, the stepladder is a compositional strategy used not for novelty but a compositional technique for provocation, interrogating change juxtaposed with improvisation, that is the spirit of the decolonial spirit because it is resistant. It is the spirit that refuses to be complicit that necessitates liberation, therefore it is the spirit that is insurgent. It necessitates a different set of conditions. What are those conditions? These conditions are the ones that are of liberatory praxis in the face of impossibility, but this does not take away the fact that the nightmare is still there or the problem that Fanon is confronting is solved in the contradictions of confronting the problem.

With regards to the scientific question that was raised during the exhibition in relation to my art practice. The question was: why are we bringing plastic inside the kraal or combining polyester with cow dung? This is a pivotal question making reference to pollution in an organic space. Cow dung is one of the organic materials that sheds light on the complexities of black aesthetics and how to recompose as masters of *Composition and Decomposition*. The magic that it brings in depicting abstraction and improvisation in the study is worth further investigations for the study of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. What we have observed is that the power of this study rests on the shoulders of its collaborators that includes offering solutions to the environment, global warming and decolonising black aesthetics. The rumen fluid found in the stomach of the cow has bacteria which

is enough to cyclically decompose the polyester material which is relevant for assisting us in the ecosystem, for example: bacteria and fungi in the project are also elements involved in Composition and Decomposition. In the last five years, observations were not theoretically based but grounded in practice. When cow dung is combined with all these above mentioned materials then we can see the value of cow dung in Composition and Decomposition in its cyclical processes of breaking down the polyester and improvising it into a cow dung-cloth like substance. We have also seen how it transformed and preserved the dress. After the exhibition, the cow dung blanket, (transformed canvas with cow dung) material was put back to the soil to continue its journey of improvisation with other collaborators. A few weeks later we saw an insect seeking refuge in the cow dung blanket/the blanket of the Earth. We noticed the value of observation, not disturbing the process, we saw the process of decomposition taking place. This needs time and zero disturbance for us to contribute to this discussion with tangible outcomes. Moving material for any reason affects the outcome. So, there is no conclusive answer but to say: in our effort of *Healing planet Earth* or assisting the planet, whether with litter or recycling which is another eco-sustainable way of healing the planet. Cow dung is offering a solution, saying we can assist with the plastic degradation or recycling process let alone the bio-engineering elements of a home. Quartinello et al (2021) have also done some work which resonates with this study, titled, Together is Better: The Rumen Microbial Community as Biological Toolbox for Degradation of Synthetic Polyesters.

How are these works in conversation with Dial? Both Dial and I are using found/discarded/degraded material. We make monumental art/works to defy time but this is our life. We are making life from decomposition but not for aesthetic purposes. This has nothing to do with sentimentality but has everything to do with what is fundamentally at stake which is the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and the aesthetics of revitalisation and care.



Fig. 1.3. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Sophisticated Lady I,* 2021. Digital photograph, mixed media: Chicken and chicklets, found material, grass, scrap metal, rubber mat, tyres, steel, metal, soil, sizes unknown.

The *Sophisticated Lady* name **Fig**. 1.3 and **Fig**. 1.4 is derived from an LP record/album of Duke Ellington and his orchestra in 1933, a jazz contemporary artist, pianist, bass player and composer. The Duke Ellington song reminds me of my mother. Metaphorically, the *Sophisticated Lady* (mother hen) is sophisticated not because of situating her through her biological origins or her ecofeminism position (ecofeminism in this context is in relation to her position/ability of fertilising the soil and self-actualisation) but because of how she explores African expressive ways in the wake of making and unmaking art. We can argue that it is because of her innovative artistic creative ways of preserving the environment with care, and her independence as one of the co-collaborators. The *Sophisticated Lady* creates forms of abstract art with what she has, with her own happy feet/wings based on her natural gifts, materiality, her canvas which is the ground of planet Earth. Sometimes you can see the use of her wings, her precision with her brush strokes, sometimes it is through her nails, that you can witness her touching the ground, it is as if she is swinging through the Ellington tunes, drawing/painting on the ground, with a dense form of red and black ochre type of clay type on the rich soil, depending on where she is with her visual language, in her dreamworks. In this density she is confronted by a force of gravity, her spirit resists and pushes back and she continues to carve her marks on the ground in an avant-garde process. Her art/works reflect on her personal trajectories with her chicklets, her black lived experiences. This decolonial practice evokes her insurgent spirits**.** The effect of her movement with her family produces complex marks of abstract expressionism on the ground. It is breathtaking to observe *Sophisticated Lady* busy philosophising in the study of change, busy inventing something into existence in concert with her family which is beyond freedom. This attests to her visual language and this is a learning curve for me. You have to observe in order to learn how others improvise the improvisation technique of self actualisation with her chicklets. She carefully creates a space for other co-creators to be able to join in and decolonise black aesthetics, she is mindful of other key players in this cyclical process of Composition and Decomposition. Her chicklet's movement also creates a sound, a twitching sound, yet they keep up with the tempo of their movement in a sophisticated tune, meaning they keep each other's company even if they slightly move out of their circle, they always move back to her like an improvised jazz avant-garde composition. It is like seeing Lulu Gontsana's (2011) brush strokes on drums, *We Three (and More)*. The movement is soft but it is there. It is like Brian Blade's (2008) *Omni* on drums—a mean jazz drummer, silent but loud. Her movement with her family is accompanied by gentle movements, original, natural and traditionally engaged in gestures of ecstasy or with metaphorical implications in the sense that as a mother she supplies warmth to her family. This is done as a form of movement in performance practice in keeping with a consistent conversation with Dial. Thus, the *Sophisticated Lady*, Dial and my spirits are the existential force. We grapple with the question of existence about our lives in our own place. Our art/works are in relation to the black social life. They provoke you, they question you, they question you as observers, whilst we are also observing change.



Fig. 1.4. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Sophisticated Lady II,* 2021. Digital photograph, mixed media: Chicken and chicklets, grass, found scrap metal, rubber mat, tyres, steel, metal, soil, sizes unknown.



Fig. 1.5. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Tlaleng,* 2021. Digital photograph, rusted scrap metal and exhaust pipes, twigs, installation, sizes unknown.



Fig. 2.1. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Zizi I,* 2021. Sheep, chicken, spray paint, enamel, hay, found scrap metal, tyres, broken windscreens, steel, paint, wrought iron, sizes unknown

The second theme is the aesthetics of ruins and disposability. I have constructed a photographic image, a monumental art/work represented through the depicted photographic images and the installation of **Fig**. 2.1 to **Fig**. 2.8 and **Fig**. 3.1 to **Fig**. 3.3. Here, I explore Fanon's concept of *The everyday life* which is situated within the context of being-black-in-the world, the Africana existential phenomenology and the lived experience of black subjects. Sharpe (2016:15) writes that "Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence". My work and my collaborators' work is larger than life. Our spirit is testifying to the times that we are bearing witness to, it also projects on the future that we are prophesying. This is because the past and the present we find themselves in, is what has to be radically changed. That is why our existential struggle is a radical pursuit of freedom.

The spirit is engaged in the existential struggle caused by structural violence. Their spirit is a radical refusal to submit to colonialism. It fights in the face of defeat, betrayal, pessimism, hopelessness. A spirit of radical hope. This becomes our driving force. So, we confront the daily lived experience of black subjects through the decolonial spirits. Fanon ([1961] (1990:27) agrees that "decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon". We can strengthen Fanon's argument through the artistic expression of the image of the struggle between the coloniser and the colonised, whereby there is a denial of humanity. Under the shed, the ram, rooster and hen are saying we are composing life in the face of precarity, we are making it in the face of its denial, under duress. There is a violent invasion of people's value systems by colonialism, their life, their privacy evidenced as structural violence. A struggle between the coloniser and the colonised. How inequality and poverty create a differential risk for infection and for adverse outcomes, including death.

To amplify, Farmer agrees with Fanon and talks about the three forms of structural violence, naturalised, institutionalised and normalised. Whether it is man made or natural. The situation is catastrophic. It is excremental poetics, meaning it articulates dehumanisation, and disposable ways that black people are made to be. How black subjects are rejected in the world. Poetics means the way of creating to being. The ram, rooster, hen and I question us to look at the other side of darkness. There are also emotions suggestive of a colonising gaze. What was glaring is how we are creating something out of non-value. Creating life forms from things that are seen as not worthy of life engaging in excremental poetics of the disposable. These found materials are disposed materials which are seen to be of no value. The ram, rooster, hen and I are giving them value by revitalising them by means of an aesthetic expression where what is decomposed is composed.

The ram, rooster, hen and I are in the cold face of the struggle in a world that denies us. These artistic expressions are affirming our humanity. Our spirit is from a creative force. Its production or art/works outlives the artist. The spirit outlives the artist, the spirit outlives a human being, the spirit continues its journey.



Fig. 2.2 Nomalanga Siyothula. *Ntsizi*, 2021. Tractor, Moon, Earth, Soil. Size: width: 5.8 feet *(69.7 inches),* Length: 10.65 feet *(127.8 inches),* Height: 7.98 feet *(95.7 inches),* sizes unknown.

My practice is an invisible spasm boiling within, waiting to be communicated. It is influenced by genealogies of personal trajectories with my maternal and paternal grandparents. According to Potts (2003:22) “A work of art operates like a sign”. There is a Truck (**Fig**. 2.2) that my father inherited from my paternal grandfather and it still operates, and I have come to view it through the lens of a vintage work of fine art, an installation and to a lesser extent, a sculpture. It is amazing how the universe takes you back to the road that your ancestors once traveled through contemporary art practice. There is a spiritual alignment between the Truck/art/works, the moon and the sun at the same time with the sunset.

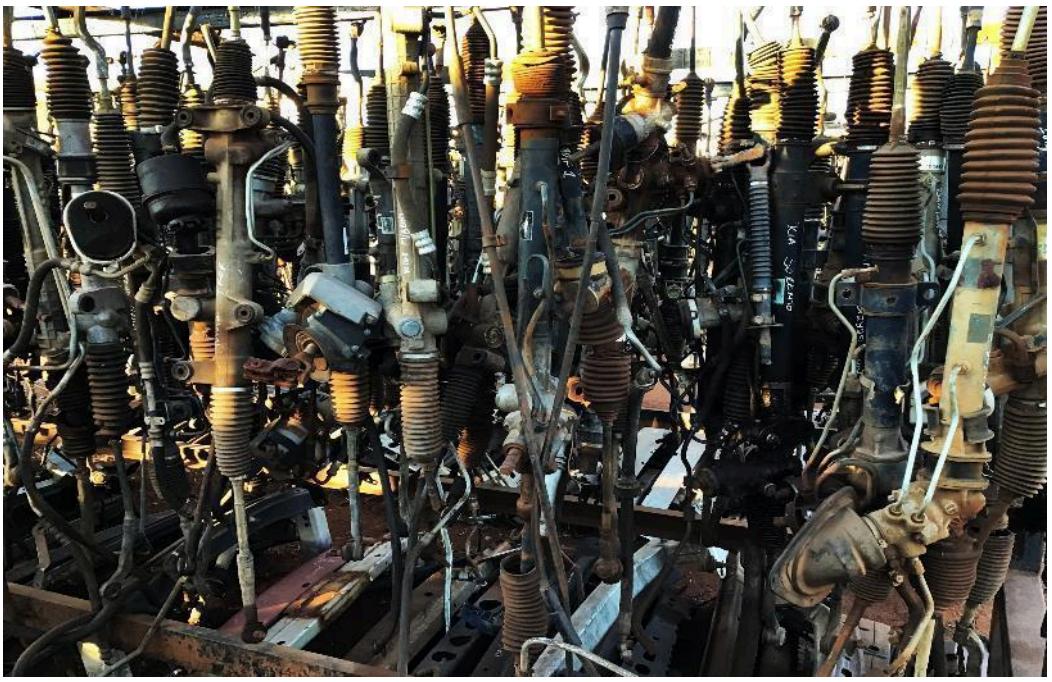


Fig. 2.3. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Tsatsi, Ndlovu, Gatsheni*, *Mtungwa,* 2022-2023. Installation view. Wrought steel, Installation, sizes 25m

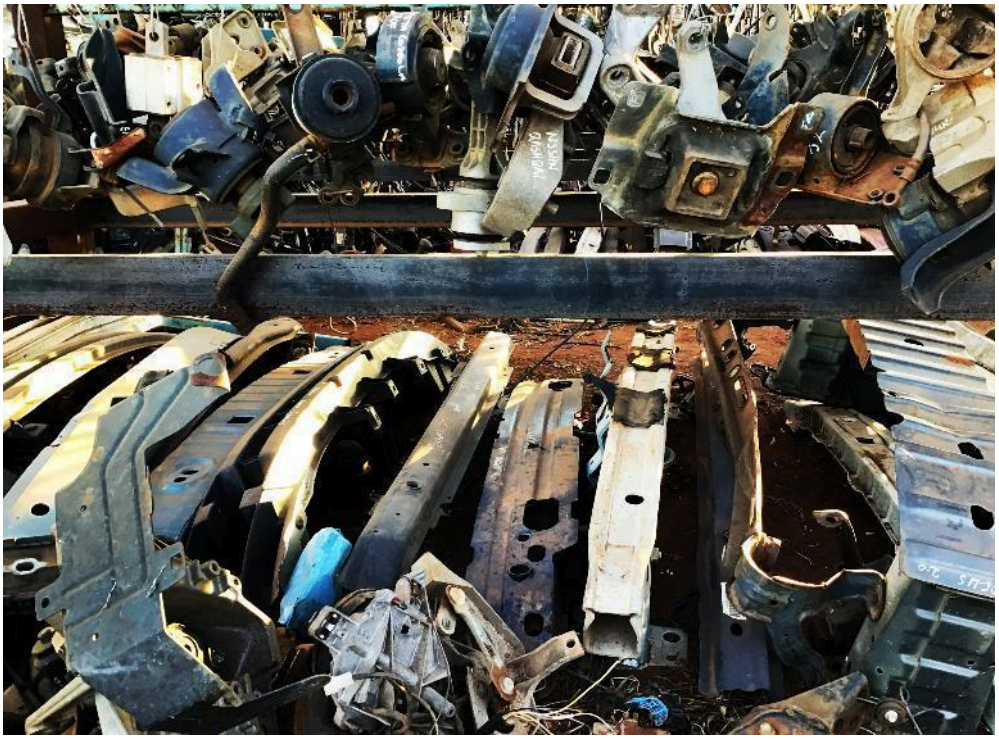


Fig. 2.4. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Mafatseng*, 2022-2023. Installation view. scrap metal, soil, Installation: Size: 25m



Fig. 2.5. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Hlathi*, 2022-2023. Installation view.scrap metal, Installation: Size: 25m



Fig. 2.6. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Tonko, Nuku*, 2022-2023. Moon, wrought steel, plastic, Installation: Size: 25m



Fig. 2.7. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Zwelibanzi,* 2022-2023. Installation view. Wrought steel, wooden box, Installation: Size: 25m



Fig. 2.8. Nomalanga Siyothula, *MaMtolo,* 2022-2023. Art Installation view. Wrought steel, wooden Installation: Size: 25m

AESTHETICS OF REVITALISATION AND CARE



Fig. 3.1. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds I,* 2022. Isiduli, umuhlwa, utshani, inhlabathi, Size: 3m

An Ode to the Termites and Termite mounds

Preoccupied with what comes
What comes with improving
What comes
From twilight at dusk
To twilight at dawn
From the depths of the Earth
Un-Earth-ing dangerous materiality
Wisdom
What comes
Sacred spaces/Termite mounds
Where the brave dare not go
What comes with excavation
Beyond archeological sites of excavation
What comes with construction
Constructing chambers
But are these chambers
Are these Termites as we call them
Or are these sacred spaces
Spaces of wisdom and understanding
Construction is their termite language
Their termite love letter
A process of improvisation
Observing the birth/re-birth of the Earth
Underneath the Earth
Observing change
Composing with Termites
Observing change
Deep inside and outside the mound
Underground the Earth
What comes
Lenticular soil mounds

Fig. 3.1, *Heliocentric Worlds 1,* 2022, **Fig**. 3.2. **Fig**. 3.3, **Fig**. 3.4. **Fig**. 3.5 and **Fig**. 3.6 specimens collected from Waterfall Estate, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. The title comes from Heliocentric Worlds by Sun Ra, Volume 1, (1965). It is an avant-garde jazz album which reverberates with the African cosmologies. Coming to the project, we are using the term Heliocentric worlds as it carries heavily annotated metaphors, it carries the lantern of clarity in relation to the Sun, African cosmology. Through the eyes of the beholder, this can mean something else but to us, the concept of the Sun God being the omnipotent, the spiritual backup is the spiritual rooting of our very being from the days of antiquity many moons ago, years ago where improvisatory principles of interweaving Composition and Decomposition with the termites and their mounds reside.

bell hooks (1995:184) writes: “a legacy of participation in avant-garde art practices where black presence is most often denied and erased”. These images **Fig**. 3.1, **Fig**. 3.2, **Fig**. 3.3, **Fig**. 3.4 and **Fig**. 3.5 and **Fig**. 3.6 show termites from an active nest. The ruins and disposability of these unique termite mound species were sampled outside the Waterfall Estate (Johannesburg/Gauteng) accessed from the tar road; it represents what Farmer (2004) calls structural violence. It is considered to be violence without an agent, the violence is hidden in structures, and reproduces itself. In this particular wetland site (Waterfall Estate) there has been an infrastructure development, most of the animals that used to be found there have disappeared except the man made representatives (animals), those that were brought to replace the disappeared ones. According to Gordon (2018:20), “Valuing black life is no small matter”. Every year I watch (Waterfall Estate) how the destruction of this wetland continues at the level of destroying “the fungus-growing termites” as per Johanna Darlington’s (1985:116) camouflaging as landscaping. Furthermore, Gordon (2018:20) agrees that, “It is at the core of how human beings live in the world, not only in terms of lives worth living but also in the value of those living it”. The tenacity and patience of making termite mounds shows that freedom rebels. The collective utterance is the voice of those who say, nothing will stop us. We will continue the fight until the bitter end. That is a spirit that refuses to submit to the forces that kill it. Whilst new forms of termite mounds are formed and revitalised by the termites everyday.

Thus I submit that this is a normalised structural violence, meaning it is weaponised against a designated racial group, fundamentally racism which is targeted against a particular group. Those who are violated look like it is their fault. In a world of African traditional art histories. To them, termite mounds might be objects but to the termites they cease to be objects—they are art/works, they are life. Art/works heal them, they do what they like about their lives in their own place. The work is challenging. It confronts what we know yet it shows how much we do not know, how much is coded and decoded by the termites and the termite mounds.

Termites are responsible for the bioengineering of the termite mound, producing what I call *termite*knowledge. Moten (2017:154) would say, “the ones who work from can’t see in the morning until can see in the morning”. I would like to add that it is also the ones who create monumental art/works, the ones who build everyday, making and unmaking skyscrapers from darkness at night until darkness in the

morning, a space of blackness, the termite mounds, a terribly beautiful space, from a sacred *termite*space. Paul Taylor would say black is beautiful (2016), Steve Biko ([1978] 2004) would agree. Thus Dial and I form synergies with the termites as contemporary artists because we make monumental art/works from nothing.

Making from a spirit with an African creative force entails expanding their own value from borrowed times. Borrowed times because their life is not guaranteed by the Empire. Here, the Empire refers to the land expropriators, land developers and those who gaze at the destruction of termite mounds. Without any warning their life can be destroyed due to structural violence. Termite mounds are ancestors who are responsible for the purification of the air that we breathe. Through a thin veil that connects us with nature and the universe, they are also responsible for the fertilisation of the soil, and *healing the land* naturally without chemicals. According to Moten (2017:275) “they say, because we are uncountable, because we are the miracle that cannot be accounted for in any science of ownership’s brutal double entry”. Termites make valuable life out of nothing. Then we also have the masters of Composition and Decomposition, cow dung, the ones who break down structures/conventions, who offer us the gift of dung in order to study Composition and Decomposition, the opportunity to improvise, observe and study change. I call them my family, my ancestors, those who are not of my lineage but those who advocate for change, those who push our agenda, needless to say - my ecological family. To contribute to the universe in healing planet Earth through Composition and Decomposition. The power of my art praxis, this project rests within autoethnographic principles because only when in there, listening deeply to the termites in their mound, underground, un-earth-ing, ex-cavating from their site, the termite mound, that we can Compose and Decompose, break down conventions and improvise with them.



Fig. 3.2. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds II,* 2021. Isiduli, umuhlwa, utshani, inhlabathi, Size: 30m

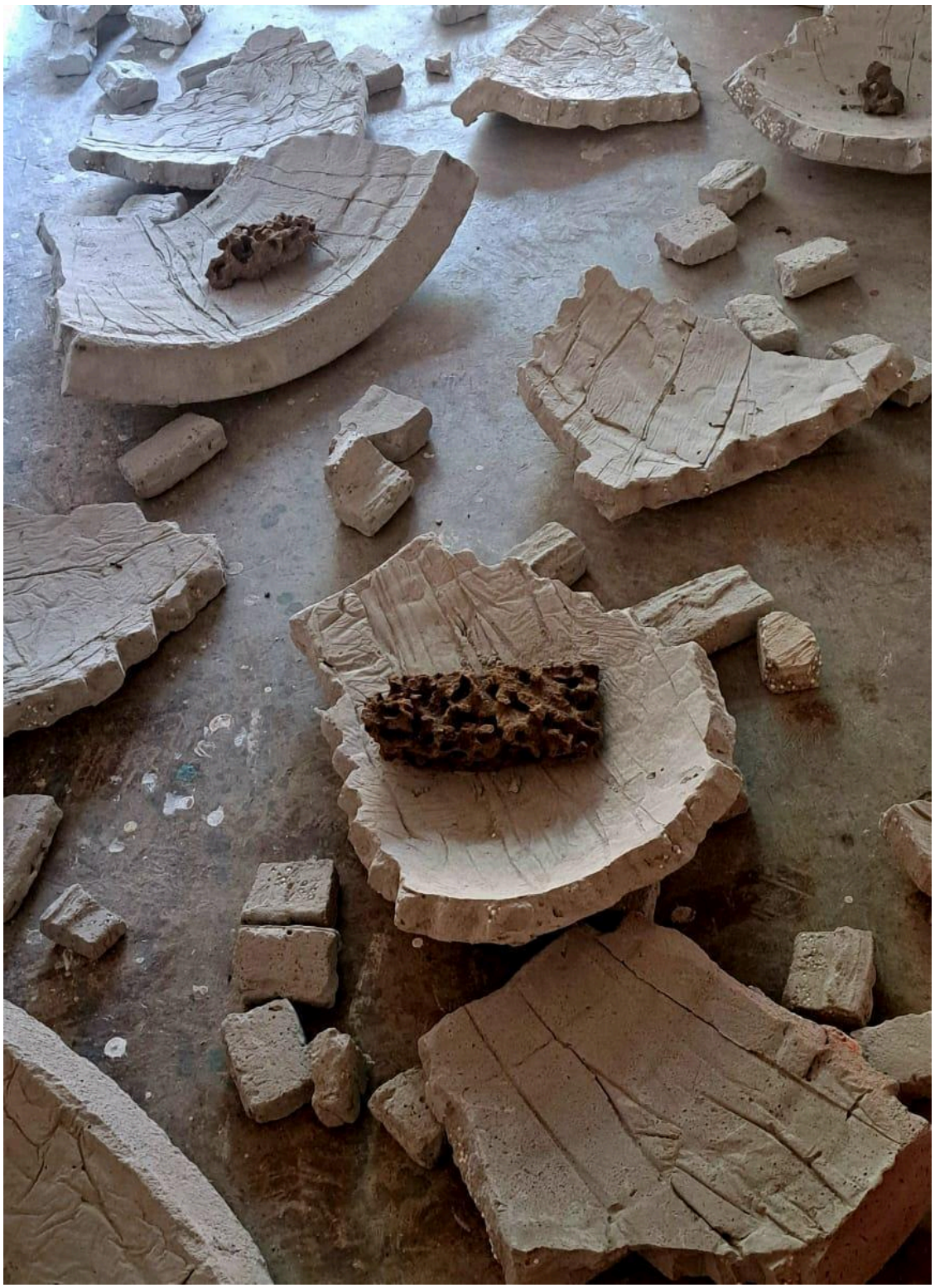


Fig. 3.3. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds III,* 2023. Isiduli, earth and a bit of cement, Size: 30m



Fig. 3.4. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds IV,* (2023). Isiduli, ilokhwe yombhaco/Xhosa garb, isihlahla, inhlabathi, cow dung, ruptured umbilical cord, Size: 30m, ecological and musical soundscape video art installation.

Fig. 3.5. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds V,* (2023), ecological and musical soundscape, large-scale video art installation, 3-channel projected HD video art installation with sound, (time) 48 minutes 30 seconds.

The aesthetics of revitalisation and care, is represented through **Fig**. 3.4, the Xhosa dress installation and **Fig**. 3.5, the video installation which is based on re-tracing the memory of my genealogies, particularly my grandmothers. The three themes of black social life, ruins and disposability, and revitalisation and care, are the living embodiment remembering the dead and the living. The living who are composing life whilst the dead are decomposing in their cyclical process in the spiritual plane. The dead gave the living a memory**.** A *termite*space, a formulation that I made meaning the art of listening, even listening to the sonics of ancestors, not a space to respond but a *termite*space of establishing a deeper connection with the secrets of termites on planet Earth.

Campt argues that:

> "Listening to these images gives us access to something much more mediated and perhaps far more powerful: the hum of utopian dreams and diasporic aspiration. It is a hum that resonates the unsayable truths of black folks at the lower frequencies of quiet photography" (Campt 2017:45)

That is a gift, a gift to tune in, to listen through vibrations not ears, a time and space of/for in depth composition, reconnection, rejuvenation, recollection and decomposition. A *termite*space where the universe is unmasking your knowledges, new knowledges are produced, it means giving up your knowledges but offering yourself to new ways of learning and unlearning, it is not a controlled space, it is a free spirited space, a space where all the unnecessary information is decluttered, delinked, deactivated, deregistered, decomposed, on Dial's aesthetics study, making and unmaking black social life, a *termite*space for revitalisation and care. When in conversation with the termite mound, as an organic matter it is a form of meditation. My practice is about the life cycle of the termite mound. In this artistic material or aesthetic motif located within the African traditions in South Africa in post-apartheid. I am showing you that the compositional and decompositional technique attests to life and life in its form. This is the ecological restatement, returning to ecological matter, thinking through it, materialising it.

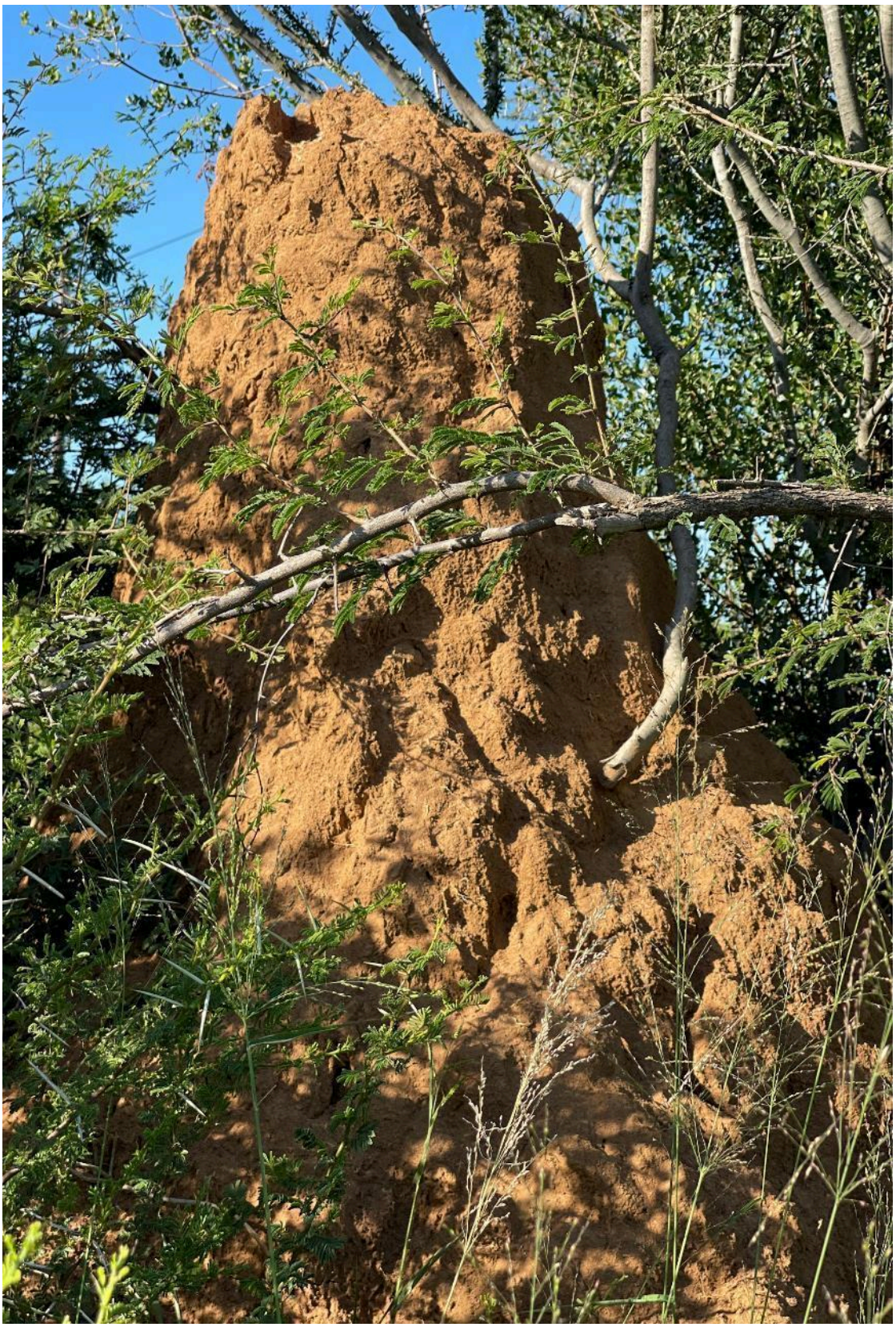


Fig. 3.6. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Heliocentric Worlds VI,* 2023. Isiduli, umuhlwa, isihlahla somga, utshani, inhlabathi, isibhakabhaka, size 30m (Photograph by the artist)

Isiduli (termite mound) **Fig**. 3.6 which is a photographic image. An architectural design of Isiduli/termite mound made of umuhlwa (termites). Moten (2017:275) would agree and say, *we a*re “uncountable, because we are the miracle that cannot be accounted for in any science”.

Umuhlwa is used for a number of reasons through indigenous knowledge systems. Isiduli forms a constitutive part in building a homestead together with cow dung in African culture. Depending on the strength you are trying to achieve when building. In the building process, isiduli is crushed with imbokodo (stone), mixed with cow dung and water as the foundation. The cohesiveness of cow dung, the insurgent spirit (in this context, the refusal to obey or be dominated by other mediums), tenacity and plasticity of cow dung make this final process a waterproofing agent. The resilience of cow dung to express itself in a visual language which dictates the outcome of the art/works in the process is that it allows you to work through it then binds these mediums like concrete which explains the art and science behind the eco-friendly huts and behind my installations. That is the architectural practice of designing and constructing my art through found material.



Fig. 3.7. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Mthimkhulu I,* 2022-2023. Art Installation view. Old tree, ubulongwe, barks, dry leaves, size 30m, diasec print, *Healing planet Earth II*



Fig. 3.8 Nomalanga Siyothula, *Mthimkhulu II,* 2022-2023. Art Installation view. Old tree, dried wood, dried cow dung, dried aloe, barks, dry leaves, size 30m, diasec print, *Healing planet Earth II*

The beauty/aesthetics of my home/homestead **Fig**. 3.7 and **Fig**. 3.8 is its vibrant energy of multiple gifts, the gifts of African spirituality, musical performance, the contemporary artists and scientists, music collectors, pottery makers, poetry, folklore storytelling, just to name a few. John Akomfrah (2017:34) says “Thus, memory is a kind of crossroad, a junction, an intersection where the old and the new meet”. The power of this exhibition rests on storytelling inside the hut (rondavel). The seating arrangement of sitting around the fire at night and sitting under the warm South African skies during the day. This prepared us as children for the ensemble, the performance. For me, this is storytelling through a song/ingoma, the gift of eternal love in collaboration with other women in the village. UMaMtolo, my grandmother, through her dreams, her ancestors gave her a gift of *uHadi* (Xhosa bow), *Isitolotolo* (jaw harp) *Umrhubhe* (a stringed mouth-bow). UMaMtolo, wove a rich tapestry of the black social life in the face of the unlivable apartheid precarity. If we understand living in the belly of terror of anti-black racism, the violence of dislocation of families as we were sent back to the rural areas to my grandmother and the exclusion of blackness as the materiality under the rubric of apartheid in South Africa, then we can understand the genealogy of her art practice as the art and science of radical traditions of making life and resistance, through song. Her artistic experiments with *uHadi*, *Umrhubhe* which are traditional South African isiXhosa and isiZulu instruments, her poetry, voice, the movement/performance of her body, chants, evoked performative ancestral spirits. It is interesting how she approached her artistic practice. One would appreciate my grandmother’s musical collaborative performances with her octet (friends), a mass choir under a constellation of stars at night. She was speaking through its complex tonalities, the richness of African strings, *Umrhubhe* and her ability with *uHadi* to transcendentally take you to another universe, if there is any out there. Through their persistent movement of ukuxhentsa (dancing), an incantation to praise the ancestors through epic poems and songs. Ukuxhentsa movement involves the thoracic, the shoulder movements and upper bodily movement with a strong stomping with bare feet. Here, the polyrhythms/cross rhythms, the harmony also emanates from a sound transmitted by the experiment of this materiality, from a pliable tree known as *uHlolo*, and through the lens of my mothers clan name, I call it UMthimkhulu.

This string/fibre from *uHlolo* is tuned and this experience brings to mind the sounds of Sun Ra’s (1965) album, *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volume One*, playing with the Solar orchestra. In the process of making/composing and unmaking the string bow, it is twisted, rigorously pulled and improvised with a gourd. It is resilient under pressure. What if there is a possibility of refusal on site in the process of Composition and Decomposition between *uHlolo* and the composer, here, my grandmother? In her study of compositions there is a possibility that a sound may radically break from the rupture of the material, from *UHadi or Umrhubhe*, then there is a possibility of resistance from the material and the birth of new ways of production and innovation. Then we have the aesthetics (beauty) of the terrible, the ruptured. In this magical process, in my curious observation, observing change, the subtle revelation of the truth, the mirror image, the beauty of the unexpected, the untold, the fugitive spirit of the material. As Moten’s (2017:34) formulation says, “the magic of the objects”, the value of the discarded, the value of a cyclical process, the value of their life.



Fig. 3.9. Nomalanga Siyothula, *Impande II* 2021. Charcoal drawing, found barks, paper, size: 30m



Fig. 3.10. Nomalanga Siyothula, '*Strange Fruit'* in Honor of Nina Simone and Billie Holiday, 2021. Ubulongwe, bark, charcoal and (mushroom) fungus art installation, size: 2.5m



Fig. 3.11.Nomalanga Siyothula, *Impande V,* 2021. Grab, bark, calabash, umbhaco/Xhosa garb, cow dung, soil, twigs, paper, art Installation. Old tree, dry leaves, Size:30m

Inkondlo Yokhamba (**Fig**. 3.11)

Kukhona lapho ungafanisa khona
Ufanise khona ucezu lweyindengezi
ucezu lweyinkamba
Yinkamba zotshwala (*uphiso*)
lapho ungaze uthi kunempepho
impepho eshiswayo, yokubizwa abadala
abangasekho phakathi kokhamba
kuphinde kubekhona ukhamba (*imbiza*)
lokuphuza amanzi amtoti
Ukhamba lwamasi
kuyaye kubongwe abaphansi
ngotshwala besintu, thina sithi
Icamagu livumile



Fig. 3.12. Nomalanga Siyothula, *when i awakened,* 2021. Grub, bark, grass, Size: 3m



Fig. 3.13. Nomalanga Siyothula, *uNombulelo (Abantwana I),* 2023, diasec print, size 3-4m.

CONCLUSION

There are two different diasec prints in the exhibition, **Fig**. 3.7 titled *Healing planet Earth* and **Fig**. 3.13. *uNombulelo (Abantwana I).* **Fig**. 3.13. in particular showed elements of a practice without a script, observed during the process of drawing with oil pastel and acrylic paint as one of my other chosen mediums. This diasec print was exhibited as a singular work in the exhibition space to emphasise its monumental qualities. Moten talks about monumental art/works and says:

> "Monuments are meant to put us in mind of something. To be put in mind is a strange construction. To be reminded, to have something brought to one's mind, to have something put in one's mind, is articulated as one having been put in (the) mind of the thing of which one is reminded." (Moten 2017:170)

Fig. 3.13 was curated through cultural and scientific strategies with an underlying value of scientific elements of my eco-collaborators within an art space. Their presence was carefully selected to gain a deeper understanding of the study as they bring their own new knowledge systems, new meanings, new ways of making and unmaking. They create a space of the practice of everyday life: aesthetics and not beauty, pushing boundaries for innovation, along the way challenging the paradigms of art history. We have (Re-tracing) memory of my genealogies which encompasses the whole exhibition space but it is in action(al) operating as a conceptual framework. If it is in action does it purport to be an art practice, an installation, creating a visual narrative (art history) yet thinking in black aesthetics? It expanded the whole/holistic approach of an art/work into a different set of conditions and set of possibilities: from culture to film/movement/performance of the exhibition, to the movement of the viewer/artist/curator, space/time, the performance of installation, the performance of the video art installation, the comprehension of images of the exhibition, reasoning/thinking through/thought process, invocations and affect theories and the invisible, the emergence of new knowledge, the gift, beauty, disrupted, and the dislocation and the value of the discarded.

The syntax of this exhibition project could be read as re-tracing memory, a collection of moments through meditations of the theme, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. There are three themes; the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care. Re-tracing memory gives rise to the practice component of my work in order to show/explain how the curatorial scope of the practice component is in conversation with *Composition and decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics*. Composition and decomposition are words that are co-constitutive of each other. They are in dynamic interplay, they produce something. If something is disposed of, just like Dial (who is unpacked in vol II which is where the theoretical intersects with the practical aspect of the study), I create something new and along the way it can be destroyed. If *Composition and Decomposition: On Dial's Aesthetics* is the making and unmaking then what is at risk in the process, what is disrupted, what escapes, what survives and what resists? Composition and Decomposition has to do with the notion of temporality and also the reconfiguration of time and space. This, in essence, is the form and content—say, the fabric of the black social life, ruins and disposability and

revitalisation and care. It is the life that is in the interface of modernity and tradition which are in the state of flux. This, in turn, is the fugitivity of the spirit escaping from enclosure and all forms of incapacitation. This is where impossibility is turned into possibility. People create something out of nothing and this flux resists the idea of fixation. It is everything amoebic, a liminal space. Aesthetics here is not about beauty, it is the practice of everyday life and in particular the manner in which black life is generated in the midst of dislocation and dehumanisation.

Further to this, indeed, is the very idea of *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics.* Gordon (2018:19) would say "everyday existence is an extraordinary achievement". The idea of making and unmaking a valuable life, the practice of invention without planning which is in the constant state of becoming in the face of the denial of this becoming. Thus, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* is underpinned by the spirit of the aesthetics of the black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care as constituting the making and healing of the world. It is poiesis—that is, the state of continued creation, elaboration, reduction, surplus. This is a calibration of form and content so as to account for the idea of the fabric of existence. That is why we have three opuses that stand like chapters because of their independence. Aesthetics of the black social life is represented by **Fig**. 1.1 to **Fig**. 1.6 and the cow dung video installation. **Fig**. 1.1, with the above-mentioned art/works being in conversation with Dial's *The Art of Alabama (2008).*

The aesthetics of ruins and disposability is represented by **Fig**. 2.1 to **Fig**. 2.7. The aesthetics of revitalisation and care is represented by **Fig**. 3.1 to **Fig**. 3.13 and the **Fig**. 3.5 Soundscape/ecology video installation. Therefore, *Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics* is what informs and elaborates this body of work as a way of remapping the fabric of existence. *Composition and Decomposition: On Dial's Aesthetics* is the past, present and future sedimented in the time and space of the contemporary. It is the protocol of re/membering those who have been dismembered. So, the ethical imperative of these artistic compositions presented here in the exhibition attest to and speak of the aesthetics of black social life, aesthetics of ruins and disposability and aesthetics of revitalisation and care as making a livable world and also refusing to forget. As such, the statement and testament of this artistic composition is the radical refusal of the strictures and limits of the colonial construction's purity.

Composition and Decomposition: On Thornton Dial's Aesthetics is a sextet composed of three themes and three art/works from my body of work. Every art/work under each theme is considered as an assemblage, in so far as they bring different elements (installation) together. It does not mean a total whole but a formulation that can be made depending on circumstances. The proper perspective of *Composition and Decomposition: on Dial's aesthetics* is similar to Dial's, that is creating art, forming a scientific, political and ecological dialogue between different registers or mediums with my ecological collaborators, **Fig**. 1.1 to **Fig**. 3.13. Cow dung, *Sophisticated Lady*, snails, grub and termite mounds, et cetera. We are not building something final or permanent, we are critically observing change, the new possibilities in the space and in the study but depending on the contingencies at play. That is the black assemblage, fragments, **Fig**. 2.7. are taken to form the fabric of everyday life. Black —is that which is made everyday even in destruction.

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