



Bleeding to life

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Abstract

An essay-performance, this media-archaeological examination celebrates the revolutionary potential of recognizing and engaging with our collective, gaping wounds. Taking Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* as a point of departure, I construct a narrative that links the production of subjectivities in "post"-colonial contexts, with the *technosexual* networks of resistance and coded information exchange that grew out of the government-manufactured crack epidemic in oppressed neighborhoods throughout the late 70s/early 80s and today. Indebted to the writing of Donna Haraway, Jussi Parikka, Hortense Spillers, & Kanye West. Created specifically for the *Dark Diction* event on January 16, 2015 at JACK in NYC, organized by Social Health Performance Club.

Tattoo work was done by Josh Kil, photos by Laura Blüer, and video by David Ian Griess, and are featured here with those collaborators' permission.

See video here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqKvzfadJ_Y



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio The Incredulity of Saint Thomas

[1] Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* famously depicts the Biblical account of a man who would not believe Jesus had resurrected until he had seen and felt this miraculously returned body for himself. Theologians differ as to whether or not we should assume Thomas actually did rely on that second dimension of touch to believe, or if the image of Jesus alone sufficed. There has been much debate about what the implications are for such an event – second base or not – in regards to the expectations for individual salvation.



Fernando Bayona La duda de Tomás

[2] I suppose I was first drawn to the image of “Doubting” Thomas – as it is more commonly known – and the wound, for its unabashed homoeroticism, which I do not think can be wholly attributed to Caravaggio’s unique and irreverent representation. Such overtones seem to be strewn throughout the Biblical stories, as I had the opportunity to witness recently.



Robert Sherer Doubting Tommy

[3] Catching a glimpse of the televised evangelical sermons my mother regularly watches, I delighted in noticing a very young pastor try to work himself out of a confusing explanation of the biblical term *knowing*, which he reminded us was intimate in nature, though not explicitly sexual. Still, he managed to make a hilariously expressive gesture with his hands while expanding on the phrase: '*Jesus was in the Father, the Father was in Jesus, Jesus was in us, and we were in the Father*'... ad nauseam.



Patricia Hicks Untitled #1

[4] From a biological perspective, Saint Thomas' episode of incredulity can indeed be seen as a sexual exchange of sorts in that there occurred a transfer of information that yielded a recombination, a reprogramming. Thomas, according to modern biblical accounts, at least, will emerge from this experience changed – revived in his faith – although possibly a little guilty over his skepticism.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio The Incredulity of Saint Thomas (detail)

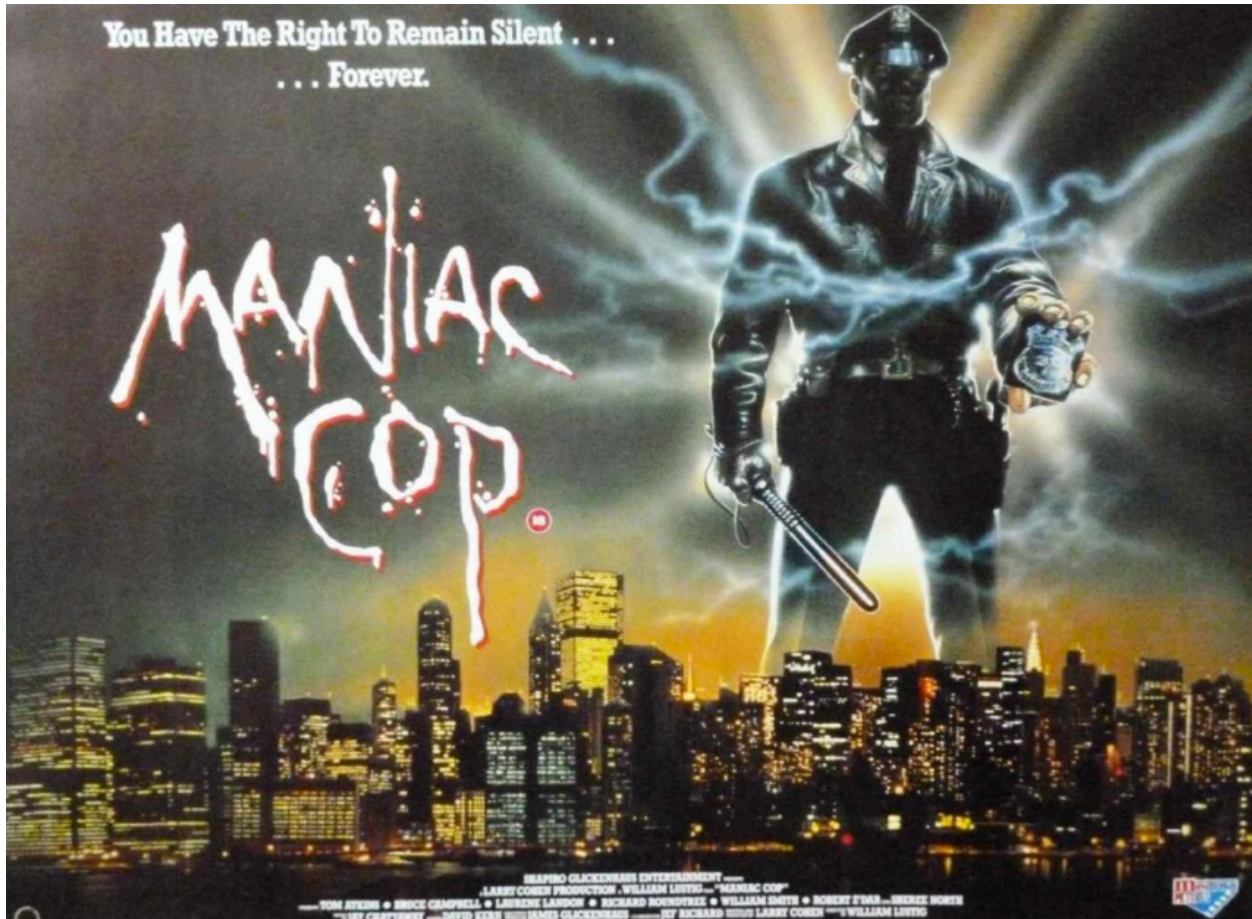
[5] Jesus' guiding hand on Thomas' wrist, his cautious – though quite deep – entering of the wound (and the two eager onlookers who seem to be waiting for a grand reveal themselves), reinforce, for me, the importance of the term *incredulity* from Caravaggio's original title.

[6] It is unfortunate, or perhaps careless – even malicious – that this image has come to be associated most often with *doubt*, which implies a

sense of disbelief that can be rectified with a modest amount of physical proofs. It is much too optimistic a description.

[7] Incredulity implies something very different. Thomas – flanked by the onlookers – is knuckle-deep into the viscera, yet he does not appear as one who has laid eyes on a long, thought-to-be-lost friend. In fact, I can picture this Thomas recoiling, rubbing the tips of his fingers together and smacking: *'cheap parlor tricks'*. This Thomas might never believe. It is a choice.

[8] I have noticed a tendency amongst later interpretations of the Christian incredulity scene to include increasingly deeper phalangeal penetration – as if to comment on the difficulty of cultivating blind faith in our time; a “techno-erotic touch that goes ever deeper” (Haraway, 205).



William Lustig Maniac Cop

[9] And yet blindness prevails.

[10] Incredulity denotes the inability and the *unwillingness* to truly believe. An unwillingness usually motivated by prejudice, resentment and fear.

[11] In our present situation, when irrefutable videographic evidence of Eric Garner being maliciously choked to death is widely available, yet fails to produce a criminal indictment, it seems we are dealing with an obscene level of unwillingness – to comprehend, to condemn, to commiserate.



Ron Mueck Man in a Boat



Ron Mueck Youth



Ron Mueck Youth (detail)

InTensions Journal
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Issue 8 (Fall/Winter 2016) ISSN# 1913-5874



Ron Mueck Man in a Boat (detail)

[12] In an interview from Cuba, Assata Shakur briefly and painfully recalls an ordeal many years ago, in which police assigned to watch over her in the hospital would routinely mock and torture Shakur by putting their fingers directly into her many bullet wounds, asking repeatedly: "*where does it hurt?*" (Walt, emphasis added by author). The pain was perhaps too all-encompassing to define.

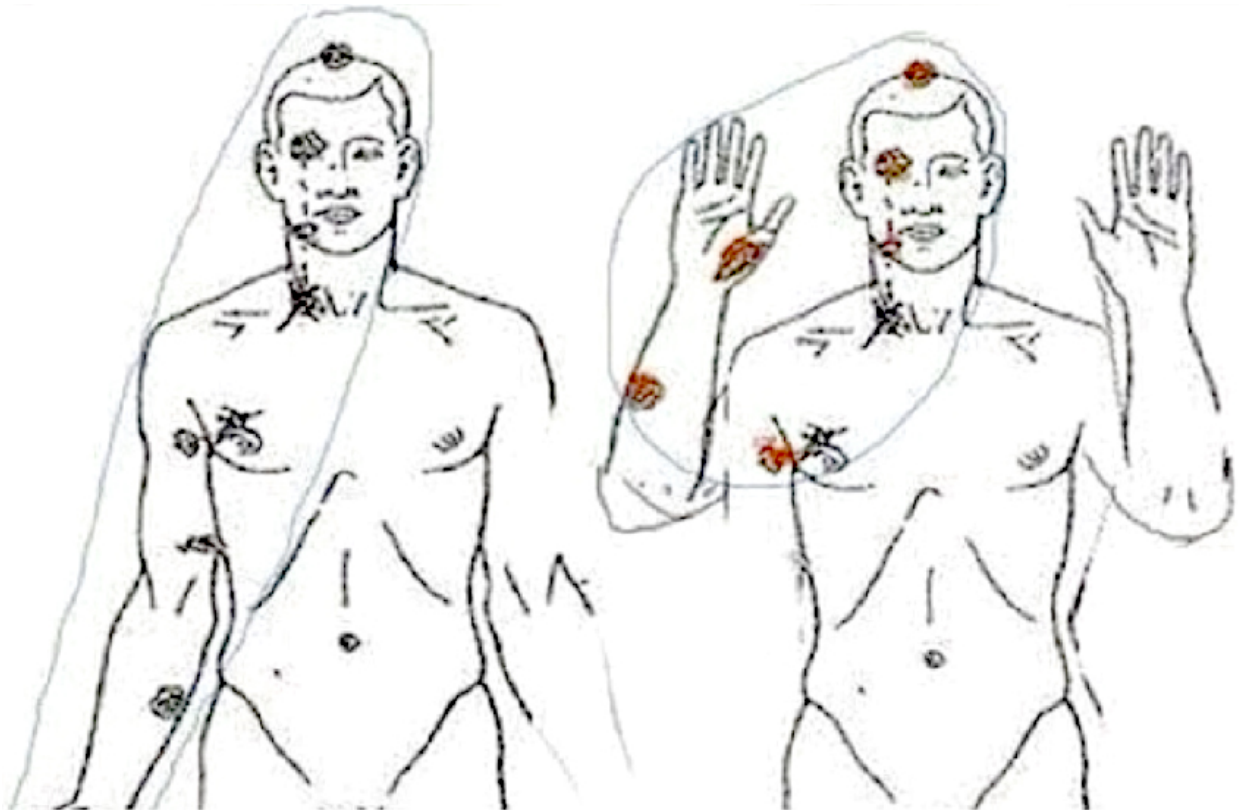


Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office JoAnne Chesimard a.k.a. Assata Shakur

[13] Our problem in this country [the U.S.] has never been one of seeing or believing. It is, rather, a problem of recognition.

[14] To witness a black body brutalized at the hands of the state or an individual is surely to *believe*, perceptually, in the visual experience, but this physical acknowledgement is all-too-often lacking an appropriate empathic response. For, in order to be empathic, there must exist a state of recognition flowing from the witness to the crucified, which receives and reciprocates the understanding of their shared ontological place on this planet.

[15] Governed by hate and indifference, however, too many of our population will grant no such recognition to the black body. Perceiving them as less-than-human, the person in question becomes an object denied subjectivity, deprived of empathy; they are the unmourned casualty of a technocratic age, which turned the post-war idealism of *'never forget'* into the thrice-disowning, militarized deniability of our age: *'turn that camera off, 'there's nothing to see here'... 'no pictures.'*



Anthony Gray, Brown family attorney Michael Brown autopsy report

[16] A reversal would take nothing less than to look into the wounds of another, one you perceive as completely *other*, and see there, as if through a pane of glass, two faces...two humans.

[17] In response to the organization of black liberationists throughout the second half of the 20th century, the U.S. government devised methods of flooding the black and other low-income neighborhoods with hard drugs like crack cocaine, creating debilitating addictions for the popular base of those forward-thinking movements (Hanson).

[18] That calculated violence created an imposed network of information transfer (drug dealing), which was akin to a sexual enslavement on a massive scale.

[19] But the marginalized communities also responded, and out of this dreary atmosphere emerged a revolutionary tool for social expression and collective organization: *hip-hop*.



Martha Cooper Little Crazy Legs during shooting of *Wild Style*

[20] Hip-hop established a unique relationship of exchange between disenfranchised communities and technology, creating what Kanye West would later describe as an infectious “dark diction” that ran counter to the prevailing “American grammar” elucidated by Hortense Spillers as a genocidal language of anti-blackness.



Martha Cooper Cops in the Train

[21] Matt Ridley, a writer investigating the evolutionary psychology of sexual selection, proposes the theory that reproductive sex “evolved in nature as a solution to the problem of parasites” (Ludlow, 45), suggesting that this process of coded information exchange and genetic recombination,

or remixing, was a way to “keep the parasites locked out” (Ibid). It was survival.

[22] Peter Ludlow, paraphrasing his own work in *The Myth of Human Language*, goes on to apply a similar metaphorical understanding to language, remarking that when people get together they actually build a common microlanguage on the fly, rewiring their “shared language so as to avoid group-think, and ... those who attempt to co-opt [their] language ... [locking out] eavesdroppers and outsiders” (Ludlow, 47).



Beyoncé Formation

“Grammar is politics by other means” (Haraway, 3).

[23] Within this framework of remixing, information exchange, encryption, and language construction, we may come to understand how the origins of

hip-hop exemplified a revolutionary techno-sexual network of resistance born out of our gaping collective wounds.



Steven Klein Kanye West for Details Magazine

[24] In order to survive, this network of resistance must retain its aggressive nature of cybersocialist copulation, sampling, sharing, and creating outside of disenfranchising modes of production and dissemination.

[25] Since that 1970s-80s golden era, corporate sponsored intellectual property legislation, mainstreaming, and the proliferation of *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, rap-Capitalist lifestyles have threatened the effectiveness of this

coded communication web to reach beyond mass entertainment and individual success into grassroots, collective mobilization (50 Cent).



Joshua Mellin Kanye West on his Yeezus tour

[26] Kanye West, whose Christian roots inspire him to pronounce himself as a god under Jesus and take the very name *Yeezus*, has made the correlation that hip-hop/rap and their “dark diction”, have become “America’s addiction”, and can thus be considered a kind of Crack Music.

[27] West enjoys describing his music in liberatory terms, the meteoric rise to fame built on a crack cocaine to crack music trajectory, presented as poetic justice. But the kind of economic emancipation espoused by West and

others is untenable to most. By design, these positions are rarefied and largely inimitable. "Music is the new cotton" (Mogul).



Kanye West Yeezus tour



Theodoor Rombouts Prometheus

[28] Like that ever-reopening wound of Prometheus, the laceration of slavery and the deep, growing gash of Jim Crow remain upon us, closing wearily after each new cut, each renewed Draconian punishment. But the marks of liberationists are not to be completely healed, subsumed as they are by a *New Black* skin (Parham).

[29] Our signs of trauma are powerful in their opacity. As with Philoctete's stubborn, unhealing wound from Derek Walcott's *Omeros*: "he believed the swelling came from the chained ankles of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?" (*Omeros*, 19).

[30] We must, as long as “the knife” is there, acknowledge its presence and not be content with its protracted retreat (X). The wound, dressed, but un-sutured, can serve as a docking port for societal reprogramming and remixing, a conduit for cultural and political metamorphosis and emergence...a productive infestation. It is this recognition, reflection, and identification with our gaping regional wounds and our ability to transform and mutate with them, which will contribute to our ultimate, mass liberation.



Laura Blüer performance by Ian Deleón

[31] This wound [the tattoo in progress], which will heal, revealing the symbolic one it engendered, will be a permanent reminder for me, of a commitment to become more than a witness or an ally, to become

accomplice. This flesh-mirror, catching the light from other, even deeper wounds, becomes a conduit for conversation and active listening. The wound itself is a channel for the discussion of realizable futures and an empathic blueprint toward the comprehension that: their wounds are my wounds...and there can be no amelioration while one portal remains open; a lesion without succor.



Laura Blüer performance by Ian Deleón



Laura Blüer performance by Ian Deleón

"It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other" (2Pac).

Original essay-performance delivered on January 16, 2015 at JACK in Brooklyn, NY, for **Dark Diction**, a two-evening program that asked artists to respond to the lyrics of Kanye West's "Crack Music", organized by Social Health Performance Club. Live tattoo by Josh Kil. Title derived from the poem: *We Need a God Who Bleeds Now* by Ntozake Shange.

Bio

Ian Deleón (b. 1987, Miami, 2nd generation Cuban/Brazilian) is an artist, writer, and independent curator currently based in Brooklyn, NY. His writing

InTensions Journal

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Issue 8 (Fall/Winter 2016) ISSN# 1913-5874

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