

Black Sheep: Rasheed Araeen, David Medalla, and Reconfigurations of Visibility in the 1970s

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ABSTRACT *This article analyses ways in which emergent categories of performance and participatory art in the 1970s initiated, intensified, and continue to sustain questions about who and what could be subject of art and its institutional history in the West. I focus on the challenges to established notions of visibility, the archive, and imperialist cultural institutions more broadly made by conceptual and experimental artists Rasheed Araeen and David Medalla. The article details ways in which Araeen and Medalla (like other migrant artists to the UK) have historically been received through interpretive schemata produced by assumptions of 'ethnic tradition', as well as inaccurate and reductive notions of the authentic encounter in performance. By contrast, I make a case here for understanding these practices in terms of a critical and recalcitrant theatricality that might cut across disciplinary and generational borders. As Araeen and Medalla burlesque and counter their own reception as the marginal, outsider, or ethnic 'Other', they foreground the instability of history as a contested and mobile scene which can be wrested for reinscription. Araeen's *Paki Bastard* (1977) and Medalla's *Down with the Slave Trade!* (1968-71) are analysed amongst other works in relation to queer, feminist and postcolonial approaches to historicity. This elucidates a set of formal and political strategies whereby decentred, seemingly quotidian, institutionally 'unauthorised', fabulative, and queer forms of culture and knowledge are engaged in a way that sustains conflicts of visibility and representation in a state of generative contestation.*

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Black, Asian, and minority ethnic artists have figured as at once seemingly absent but also actively resistant to ideological capture by historically white institutions. In terms of performance in contexts of visual art this is now familiar terrain charted by scholars including Kobena Mercer, Coco Fusco, Uri McMillan, Tavia Nyong'o, and Jane Blocker (to name a few of those published in English), as well as research networks such as Asia-Art-Activism (to mention one recent example). In her touchstone study *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, Exile*, Blocker interrogated the legacies of Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta in terms of her absence (cultural *and* political exile) from institutions, but also 'the willful refusal to appear as an act of transgression'.¹ Rather than simply reinforce narratives of exclusion based on gender, race, or ethnicity which foreground readings of 'trauma, dislocation, and subjugation of Latinity' in Mendieta's work and life, Blocker proposed instead to account for the active politics of refusal in the 'discursive position of exile' that Mendieta strategically employed to push at the limits of art as well as identity.² Blocker emphasised, then, cultural visibility as a contested terrain, as well as the pitfalls of attempting to locate and fix itinerant art practices, movements, and people. Indeed, in an influential article published in the same year Kobena Mercer took stock of discourses of diversity and cultural visibility that had been gathering apace in the 1980s and 1990s, and referred to a 'wholly unanticipated predicament of "hypervisibility"'.³ Writing from the UK context, Mercer wrote that the mainstreaming of diversity as a cultural policy had led to the 'gradual de-coupling of political empowerment and

¹ Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, Exile* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 73-4.

³ Kobena Mercer, 'Ethnicity and Internationality', *Third Text* 13, no. 49 (1999): 51-62 (56).

cultural visibility that ushered in a new regime of *multicultural normalisation*.⁴ Within this schema, black radical difference has been sublated by bland ‘corporate internationalism’ in the aftermath of globalisation, and projects of visibility (now seemingly achieved) co-opted to conceal growing material inequalities.⁵ As Mercer and others have repeatedly argued, visibility has thus become the *modus operandi* by which institutions are satiated in their questionable claims to diversity, and (despite newly won individual freedoms) representation itself continues to be a burden for black, Asian and minority ethnic artists: the burden of having to appear, to be fixed, and to speak or stand in for heterogeneous communities of people that can never be wholly represented.

Changing perceptions and tactics of visibility are, of course, perennially bound up with the archive, which is intrinsically part of the promise of the institution – and central to practices of institutional critique. Blocker, Mercer and others have therefore elaborated on the politics of minority visibility and subjectivity intervening into the institutional archive not in terms of assimilation but in terms of antagonism and difference. As Tavia Nyong’o has recently written, ‘This confrontation between the living labor of the performing black body and the demands of the institutions that seek to valorize themselves through that encounter is a major theme in contemporary black art history.’⁶ The tokenistic engagement and institutional co-option of radical practices addressing racial and ethnic alterity raises questions of how to strategically account for, return to, and continue to extend their histories and collective political movements. It is from this vantage point that I want to revisit the 1970s as a period in which

⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁵ Ibid., 54, 56. Mercer refers variously to black, diaspora and more specifically Asian, African and Caribbean artists. In this article my terminology changes according to the context in question, and includes referring to black, Asian and minority ethnic artists (I avoid the acronym BAME on grounds of legibility), black representation (which may concern African diaspora, or the distinct notion of radical or political blackness depending on the subject), and people of colour (where I point to the collective treatment of those seen as ‘non-white’).

⁶ Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 35.

collective art movements concerned with identity gathered on a global scale, and the discourses of the postcolonial Third World (as then termed) and British Black Art movements unfolded in the UK. I focus on Rasheed Araeen and David Medalla as two important artists in the history of performance art (and the pre-history of live art) in the UK, who knew each other and were self-reflexively engaged in the creation of a black art movement – questions of which continue to resonate and unfold today. As artists based in Britain who migrated from Pakistan and the Philippines respectively, Araeen and Medalla’s practices are situated in their own specific ways in relation to different discourses and experiences of migration, which are of course necessarily distinct from those of black African diaspora. While both Araeen and Medalla have been important figures in collective art movements described as *black*, the terms of ‘political blackness’ (a prevalent umbrella term in anti-racist movements since the 1970s which could include anybody who is subject to discrimination due to race or ethnicity) and the more recent term ‘people of colour’ have rightly been critiqued as reductive and flattening distinct communities, identities, and experiences into a single, homogenous group. However, in keeping with the frame of strategic solidarity between artists and activists advocated by Araeen in particular in terms of a radical black praxis, in this article I am engaging with a range of black, Asian diasporic and transversal postcolonial and anti-racist scholarship which has (importantly) had a seismic effect in changing notions of the archive, of cultural institutions, and historicity more broadly. While I offer an account of performance and conceptual art practices in the 1970s in the UK, this research has a much broader frame in considering questions of visibility across generations, and the critique of notions of the authentic encounter in performance.

Here, I am looking to propel a sense of movement in the histories of both performance and conceptual art (the former as both distinct *and* an important part of the latter) that is temporally

transitive between or beyond generations, by making a case for the ongoing relevance of the unresolved questions posed by Araeen and Medalla in 1970s London. While Adrian Piper experienced conceptual art in the 1960s as a “white macho enclave” which was emblematic of a “Eurocentric equation of intellect with masculinity”,⁷ Araeen and Medalla’s examples prompt renewed attention to how the interrelated movements of performance and conceptual art are typically accounted for. In particular, I emphasise a recalcitrant theatricality in both Araeen and Medalla’s performances which propels their ongoing relevance to today’s contexts, and refuse a chrononormative model of history which would cast them as examples of an unsophisticated or supposedly foreclosed identity-based movement of a now distant past.⁸ Rather, these works continue to be radical in their approaches to art, to subjectivity, and to collective movement as they continue to challenge problematic notions of the raced and gendered authentic encounter in performance. In this article I am, therefore, concerned with developing a methodological approach to performance and visual art which seeks to acknowledge and extend the politics of visibility *and* refusal, and which is sensitive to the dangers of intellectual, aesthetic, or ideological containment. What is at stake here is not only to do with how particular histories, practices, or groups are accounted for, but also understanding how decentred, seemingly quotidian, institutionally ‘unauthorised’, fabulative, and queer forms of culture and knowledge can be engaged in ways that sustain generative modalities of contestation – in contrast to the satiated neoliberal ‘*multicultural normalisation*’ as described by Mercer.⁹

⁷ Adrian Piper quoted in Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York and London, New York University Press, 2015), 106.

⁸ Elizabeth Freeman has defined chrononormativity in terms of the inculcation of ‘forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege’ and work to regulate and subjugate difference. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

⁹ Kobena Mercer, ‘Ethnicity and Internationality’, 57.

Both Medalla and Araeen were engaged in emergent categories of performance and conceptual art in the 1970s which initiated, intensified, and continue to sustain debates about *who* and *what* could be subjects of legitimate art and its history. One reductive way of narrativizing this period might be to say that Araeen sought to infiltrate art at institutional levels in order to re-shape it into a more inclusive, as well as more politically and aesthetically interesting site for experimentation. Meanwhile, one might say that Medalla was more actively elusive to integration into the mainstream, not because his work was not relevant (it was known and appreciated in many contexts), but because he developed queer forms which refused institutional conventions of practice, knowledge, and social relation. Indeed, in a 1979 conversation with Araeen, Medalla commented on his comparative indifference to major institutions (which, as he rightly said, were inadequate).¹⁰ However, the story told in this article is certainly not one of an artist seeking institutional visibility, while another artist refuses it. Both artists' works of the period continue to open up valuable spaces for pause, which, as Season Butler has recently said, must include the working through of 'old learnings' as well as discomfort and doubt, towards action.¹¹ The complexity of these artists' works (taken separately and together) enriches discussions of visibility and political and aesthetic practices today, and provide useful models to this end.

In his performance *Paki Bastard* (1977), for instance, Araeen rightly demanded difference, visibility, and longevity for his work which confronted imperialist and racist ideologies of cultural institutions in the UK. The attainment of recognition that was central to feminist, anti-racist, and postcolonial art movements was also, as we have seen, intertwined with active reconfigurations of duration and the archive as part of a broader institutional critique. For

¹⁰ Rasheed Araeen and David Medalla, 'Conversation with David Medalla', *Black Phoenix: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* 3 (Spring 1979): 10-19 (14).

¹¹ Season Butler, 'Heavy Lifting', in *Vanishing Points*, ed. Salome Wagaine (London: Live Art Development Agency and Diverse Actions, 2020), 17-22 (22).

example, in his participatory works such as *Down with the Slave Trade!* (1968-71) and *A Stitch in Time* (1968-72), Medalla developed an aesthetic of critical queer utopia, and proposed to rewrite history with seemingly excessive narratives that have historically been received as wayward or fantastical in unhelpful ways. They continue, however, to hold transformative potential in undermining the privileged, and privileging logics of conventional historiographical models. Medalla confronts collective memory and historicity in a queer modality of fabulation, just as Araeen confronts notions of an essentialist ethnic authenticity with composite and changeable subjectivities. The political transformation of the quotidian in both artists' practices prompts consideration of ways in which more typical, centralised sources of evidence (such as the institutional archive and authoritative first-hand accounts) might be unseated in favour of the *seemingly* extraneous or dubious indices of the misremembered, the excessive, the unbalanced, the automythological, and the spatially or temporally dispersed. Within these parameters, alternative historiographical methods emerge which in turn create new possibilities for understanding practices which are uncertain, difficult, or otherwise elusive to historical documentation, and enable interrogation of the aesthetic and political effects of performances that may or may not have even happened.

The instructive models and forebears to such feminist and postcolonial challenges to conventional hetero- and chrononormative evidentiary logics are too many to fully account for here, but I will begin by foregrounding a now canonical example which emerged from the 1970s itself: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interdisciplinary critiques of the marginal and the subaltern. In her essay 'Explanation and Culture: Marginalia' (1979), Spivak elaborated on an active politics of the marginal that seeks not to win the institutional centre, but to dismantle the binaries of centre and margin altogether. Spivak wrote of a 'constantly thwarted desire to make the text explain' in hegemonic orders of scholarship, which necessarily marginalise all other

possible interpretations, and therefore exclude ‘the possibility of the radically heterogeneous’.¹² In her analysis of the link between ‘official explanations’ of culture and (implicitly damaging) ‘official ideology’ Spivak suggested the usefulness of actively *un*official accounts.¹³ Acutely aware of the role of scholarship in producing ideological shifts, Spivak referred to the ‘rage for order’ (specifically in the humanities) which has been bound up with judgements of “‘valid” readings’ based on conformity to positivist, empirical, and otherwise ideological correctness, which she countered with the following:

The line I am suggesting I have called, in a feminist context, “scrupulous and plausible misreadings”. Since all readings, including the original text, are constituted by, or effects of, the necessary possibility of misreadings, in my argument the question becomes one of interpretation for use, built on the old grounds of coherence, without the cant of theoretical adequacy.¹⁴

For my purposes Spivak’s notion of “scrupulous and plausible misreadings” enables generative analyses of performance practices that may be virtually absent from institutional archives and ‘official’ representation. Spivak’s emphasis on interpretation for strategic use helps to open up pathways for engaging with performances and collective movements which took place before I was born, details of which may be lost or elusive to history, and highlights ways in which active reflection on the possibilities of misreading may be a tool in the production of decentred knowledges (rather than an insurmountable impasse which shuts down the attempt to engage and account for different subjects).¹⁵ It is worth reflecting here on the important critiques that

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Explanation and Culture: Marginalia [1979]’, in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1998]) 139-160 (143).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

¹⁵ I was unsuccessful in attempts to contact the artists in relation to this research, and acquire permissions for documentary images. Mainly, this is an unremarkable and predictable possibility in all research concerned with artists and their work. However, it is also worth pointing out that this amplifies the sense in which my readings are ‘unofficial’, and that this further extends the critical modalities of

have been made of Spivak's influential accounts of the subaltern. For instance, Nivedita Majumdar has argued that key texts of postcolonial scholarship by Spivak and others have misrepresented acts of individual self-preservation or acquiescence to the status quo by skewing them to suit a master narrative of 'agency' and 'resistance' (described by Majumdar as the 'hallmark of postcolonial theory').¹⁶ Majumdar's analysis is particularly valuable in nuancing understandings of visibility, responsibility, and political efficacy in scholarship, and draws attention to the dangers of bending or mischaracterising stories (or indeed people) from the margins so that they suit a desired narrative (which is of course, as Majumdar says, counter to the stated aims of postcolonial scholarship). In this particular context, Spivak's "scrupulous and plausible misreadings" may become damaging, as subjects become co-opted for distant purposes and desires, and their realities become obfuscated. At the same time, part of what I make a case for in this article is finding ways to sustain coalitions and strategic relations between figures, ideas, and practices across different time-frames in order to resist the temptation to wrongly evaluate projects of difference and diversity according to a linear pattern of progression, succession, and displacement. Various elements of models past and present and their strategic value are endlessly entangled in how they address and antagonise the institutional centre - and continue to resonate in complicated ways.

Considering what Spivak and Majumdar (differently) propose about scholarship as critical and political praxis and its relations to evidence, another useful reference point here would be Jane Gallop's later notion of a feminist 'anecdotal theory': as the anecdote cuts through constructed binaries of 'humourous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general' it

misreading explored here. In this context it is, of course, of paramount importance for me to self-reflexively consider the dynamic responsibilities between artists and publics, which is part of what distinguishes active and critical interpretation from careless misapprehension or misuse.

¹⁶ Nivedita Majumdar, 'Silencing the Subaltern', *Catalyst* 1, issue 1 (Spring 2017) <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no1/silencing-the-subaltern> (accessed 16 March, 2020).

can be harnessed as the theoretical underpinning of scholarly approaches to historical evidence which actively undermine patriarchal conceptions of intellectual seriousness and myths of personal detachment.¹⁷ Here I am, of course, placing myself in conversation with an established field in performance studies which has shifted understandings of performance documentation, away from frameworks of immediacy, presence, and disappearance (perhaps most famously interrogated by Peggy Phelan),¹⁸ and towards generative possibilities of the performance document in the knowledge that, as Amelia Jones has argued, performance is always mediated and neither live nor documentary encounters can secure a full understanding, or an absolute point of origin.¹⁹ Again, this offers up opportunities to create coalitions and relations (always bound up with dynamic possibilities of generative or destructive misreadings) across markers of time, space, presence and identity. Works by Araeen and Medalla in the 1970s explored this in different and related ways, and here I will begin to account for the significance of their works from this perspective.

Who ever heard of a “black” avant-gardist?

Who ever heard of a “black” avant-gardist? This question comprised part of the wall text in a pivotal exhibition of black and Asian artists in the UK, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Britain* (1989). Organised by Rasheed Araeen, the show was (along with a previous 1987 exhibition *The Essential Black Art*) an impactful reprisal for many previously rejected funding applications to showcase the British Black Art movement, and represented a particular dimension of questions of visibility; namely, that the discourse of the avant-garde (which might stand for innovation in art more broadly) has necessarily excluded people of colour. This

¹⁷ Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, “Presence” in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation’, *Art Journal* 56, no.4 (Winter 1997): 11-8.

seeming absence from institutional histories of art has been attributed to many causes, including structural and material inequalities and the ongoing failure of schools, curators, scholars, critics, and funders to recognise and nurture black, Asian, and minority ethnic art and artists. Furthermore, to ask the more specific question of who has ever heard of a black *avant-gardist* is to ironically foreground the insidious ideologies of white universalism which have cast those artists in terms of *ethnic tradition*, and not formal or political innovation. This was a point that Araeen would insist and elaborate on repeatedly in his influential body of work which includes not only his art practice but also other curatorial and discursive interventions including *The Other Story*, and as a co-founder of *Black Phoenix* art magazine (1978) and *Third Text* journal (1987-).

Araeen moved from Karachi, Pakistan to London in 1964;²⁰ a moment in which the city was, as Guy Brett and others have suggested, becoming a crucible for contemporary artists arriving from around the globe,²¹ exchanging ideas and collectively propelling nascent arts movements engaged in feminist, Marxist, and anti-racist discourses. Araeen's early work in London was focused on Minimalist sculpture (called 'structures'), which referred to geometry and engineering methods, and represented abstracted concepts of non-hierarchy and

²⁰ Araeen commented on his move to the UK in an undated video interview with Anandi Ramamurthy, which was screened as part of the exhibition *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 19 October 2018 - 27 January 2019). While there was a modernist art scene in Karachi, Araeen felt there was more opportunity elsewhere. His search for a 'dynamic intellectual space' had initially included Paris but Araeen was disappointed that it did not live up to the bohemian community he had imagined (finding instead more focus on US pop art at the time). In a more recent interview with Hettie Judah, Araeen said that his move to London was prompted by feeling that his work was not understood in Karachi. Hettie Judah and Rasheed Araeen, "My life has been a struggle against the establishment": artist Rasheed Araeen', *Guardian*, 16 January, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jan/16/rasheed-araeen-interview-restaurant-shamiyaana-stoke-newington> (accessed 27 April 2020).

²¹ Guy Brett, 'Life Strategies: Overview and selection Buenos Aires / London / Rio de Janeiro / Santiago de Chile 1960-1980', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, exh. cat. ed. Russell Ferguson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 197-226 (200).

egalitarianism.²² By the beginning of the 1970s, with the mainstream optimism of the 1960s at least partially deflated, a Janus-faced atmosphere of crisis (economic and political) *and* movement (collective and experimental) emerged in the UK, and Araeen's art changed with it. In the aftermath of Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech which represented the visible surface of endemic racism, and in the midst of growing racist violence and police harassment,²³ Araeen joined the British Black Panthers in 1972. Collective political action intersected with art movements in powerful ways during this period: London saw the establishment of Artists' Liberation Front in 1971 and Artists for Democracy [AFD] in 1974 by David Medalla, John Dugger, Cecilia Vicuña and others; the opening of the Drum Arts Centre for black arts in 1974; Naseem Khan's report *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*;²⁴ the founding of Minorities Arts Advisory Service (MAAS) in 1976;²⁵ and gathering communities of art, activism, and scholarship which would inform the proliferation of the British Black Art movement in the 1980s. As Courtney Martin has written of this time: 'Britain's turmoil, specifically in London, created a space for experimental art, particularly art that could utilize the detritus (both ideological and actual) of the city. [...] London became an

²² Michael Newman, 'Equality, Resistance, Hospitality: Abstraction and Universality in the Work of Rasheed Araeen', in *Rasheed Araeen*, ed. Nick Aikens (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2018), 65-74 (68).

²³ It is worth noting that racist violence and police harassment was enabled to some extent in the late 1960s and early 1970s by newly instituted legislation of the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 which proved partial and ineffective in addressing and preventing racism; indeed, some forms of racist discrimination effectively remained legal.

²⁴ Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978). I note here that while Khan's report is an important milestone in the ongoing pursuit of diversity and inclusivity, Rasheed Araeen strongly criticised it as he interpreted it as something which confined BAME artists to 'the narrow boundaries of their ethnic traditions', outside of mainstream institutions. This demonstrates ways in which diversity as a discourse was manifested by, and subject to, fierce contestation during the period (as now). Rasheed Araeen, 'Preliminary notes for a BLACK MANIFESTO [1975-76]', in *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984), 73-97 (91).

²⁵ One of the key outcomes of Khan's report is that, following its recommendation for the establishment of 'a linking, publicising and advisory service for ethnic arts', MAAS (Minorities' Arts Advisory Service) came into being in October 1976. It was founded by Khan and Jamaican-born Veronica Lovindeer, and included board members Norman Beaton, Peter Blackman, Ravi Jain, Shantu Maher, and Tadek Jarski. Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, v.

active stage on which new ideas could be freely drafted, explored, and reworked'.²⁶ Within this context Araeen was increasingly compelled to confront the realities of racism in his art, and decided that in order to address oppression and discrimination in society he would also have to address his own subjectivity more directly.²⁷ This shift towards self-portraiture (as Araeen termed it), included experiments in performance which were partially prompted by meeting and engaging in a long-term conversation with David Medalla - who Araeen has referred to as the only non-western artist he knew in London in the mid-to-late 1960s.²⁸ Araeen had first met Medalla at *Signals* the experimental art gallery led by Medalla and Paul Keeler, then again at later performances including an event by the collective performance art group The Exploding Galaxy (also co-founded by Medalla) in 1968, and one of Medalla's *Down with the Slave Trade!* events which Araeen participated in in 1971.²⁹ On the occasion of an exhibition of Araeen's painting and sculpture at AFD, Medalla persuaded Araeen (who was initially reluctant) to perform in the space, and Araeen developed *Paki Bastard* (1977) for this purpose.³⁰ While Araeen has sometimes resisted the terms of performance art (perhaps partly as a result of concerns about the work being taken seriously by institutions that have been

²⁶ Courtney J. Martin, 'Rasheed Araeen, Live Art and Radical Politics in Britain', *Getty Research Journal* 2 (2010): 107-124 (110).

²⁷ Rasheed Araeen interview with Anandi Ramamurthy, undated video exhibited as part of *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art exhibition, 19 October 2018 - 27 January 2019.

²⁸ Rasheed Araeen interviewed by Jens Hoffmann, 'Rasheed Araeen: Countless (Untold) Stories', *Mousse* 58 (April - May 2017): 132-140 (136). While there certainly were other non-western artists in London during this time, Araeen's point is useful for considering issues of institutional invisibility or evasion which made it harder for BAME artists and activists to forge open networks of practice.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Rasheed Araeen recently affirmed Medalla's influence in a panel discussion, 'Rasheed Araeen: A Symposium', BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 12 January 2019.

hostile or ambivalent to performance),³¹ interrogating Araeen's legacy on such terms elucidates and enables the extension of the particular politics of visibility that he developed.³²

Burning Ties

It is clear that Araeen has boldly and persistently countered what he termed the 'conspiracy of silence' in the failure of institutions to even acknowledge black art.³³ In a work which speaks to this condition, *Burning Ties* (1976-79), Araeen is seen holding up a set of variously patterned neckties. The vertical lines of the ties resonate with the geometric order of Araeen's lattice-like sculpture in the background. As the scene unfolds across a sequence of photographs, Araeen raises a naked flame to the bottom of the ties; the flame catches, rises up, and consumes the ties in an explosion of light. The carefully ordered image is disturbed as the ties burn, gradually revealing more of the figure behind them. *Burning Ties* documents an act of destruction and creation, and engages notions of the migrant Other who confronts an impossible condition created by white institutions and their patterns of exclusion and privilege.³⁴ Araeen's act stands for 'the destruction of an archetypal bourgeois symbol, of English propriety, of corporate boardroom formality', as curator Nick Aikens has recently argued.³⁵ For me, more powerfully it also speaks to the troubled and troubling position of an artist who intervenes into the staid ties

³¹ Araeen made a point of emphasising how he sees himself as distanced from the terms of performance art during the aforementioned panel discussion, 'Rasheed Araeen: A Symposium'.

³² Interestingly, Eva Bentcheva's interview and correspondence with the artist shows examples of Araeen developing a performance practice as early as 1962, but these remain mostly hidden from history. Eva Bentcheva, *The Cultural Politics of British South Asian Performance Art, 1960s to the Present* (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2017), 121.

³³ Rasheed Araeen, 'Conspiracy of Silence', in *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984), 67.

³⁴ Here I invoke the racial and ethnic 'Other' (which is outside or at odds with white neutrality) as conceptualised by postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said. For instance, in *Orientalism*, Said identified ways in which Western imperialism renders the Eastern 'Other' in terms of a homogenous mystical essence and inherent deficiency. See, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1978]).

³⁵ Nick Aikens, 'Introduction: Burning Ties', in *Rasheed Araeen*, ed. Nick Aikens (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2018), 10-15 (10).

of the Euro-American modernist canon, and at the same time must resist being pushed into the conflicted position of having to burn their attachments (cultural, emotional, and otherwise), by resisting or strategically dis- or misplacing their own subjectivity in order to be considered legitimate within white criteria of artistic innovation.

As Araeen has been highly strategic in archiving his own practice (often in the absence of institutional representation) we can learn from his experience when, in 1980, Araeen was invited by Ikon gallery director Hugh Stoddart to take part in an exhibition of artists “whose work is linked by a determination to push art beyond the usual boundaries of discretion and acceptability”.³⁶ While Stoddart had asked Araeen to re-enact his earlier performance *Paki Bastard*, Araeen wanted to present a new durational performance, video and installation work, *Black Sheep*, based on a prior performance for camera, which would involve ‘the slaughtering of a sheep, skinning the animal, cooking the meat, and eating the cooked meat collectively’ over two or three days in the gallery.³⁷ Two months after receiving Araeen’s proposal, which drew from ritual elements of an Eid feast, Stoddart retracted his invitation. In his rejection letter to Araeen, Stoddart cited “a very clear reaction” from the other artists and organisers that the work “does not fit” with the rest of the planned exhibition.³⁸ His letter continued: “Essentially, the feeling is that the rest of the show is to do with sources for work deep within the imagination and this source is profoundly different from yours – since the ritual is, as it were, a normal occurrence albeit in a particular milieu.”³⁹ In letters back and forth, Araeen pressed for an explanation, he pointed out that ‘all artistic activity is to do with imagination’,

³⁶ Hugh Stoddart and Rasheed Araeen’s letters are reproduced in facsimile in Rasheed Araeen, ‘Baba Goes to Birmingham’, in *Making Myself Visible*, 136-44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 139. The final exhibition, *Imagination Is the Venom Passing Slyly Through the Vein* included Brian Catling, Stephen Cochrane with Lol Coxhill, Stephen Dilworth, David Duly, Tom Gillespy, Richard Mackness, Jayne Parker, Ian Sinclair, Elaine Shemilt and Sue Wood.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

and exposed the logic of cultural Othering by which his proposal is interpreted by Stoddart and the other artists as unsophisticated or a reproduction of Asian ethnic domesticity. However, Stoddart's final letter only reiterated his embarrassed apology: "I can only say I felt there was a strong feeling coming from other artists participating in the show".⁴⁰

Setting aside the obvious factor of squeamishness or political objections relating to slaughtering animals for meat (in the UK context where consumers of meat are typically distanced from the realities of its production), this example powerfully illustrates the patterns of institutional taste and categorisation by which some cultures and histories have been considered suitable subjects and sources for innovative art, but others can only exist within narrow limits of a 'normal occurrence' (even if belonging to a minority group, as Stoddart underlines). Furthermore; it illustrates ways in which assumptions of essentialism and the unified, coherent subject (in this case, of the Third World subject), have been attached to specific bodies, particularly the bodies of women and of ethnic or racial Others. The gallery director saw in Araeen's proposal an essential figure of Asian domesticity which is implicitly unconnected to the activity of making art. Conversely, Araeen consistently resisted the reduction of his performance works to a singular, essential identity or stable coherence. For example, in his book, *Making Myself Visible*, in which he published the aforementioned letters, Araeen also foregrounded the manner in which other works such as his performance *Paki Bastard* dealt with material realities in society but also mythic, potentially fictionalised spaces which exceeded his own experience.⁴¹ By bridging this gap between the real and the not-quite- or not-yet-real, Araeen critiqued the assumption 'that there exists human essence which is universal, and that art should express this

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Araeen has written that while *Paki Bastard* contains 'autobiographical references, it would be wrong to read it at a personal level', and has referred to the figure that appears in the work in the third person. Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 114-9.

essence by transcending the specificity of a material predicament', as characteristics of a prevalent bourgeois and Eurocentric world-view in the art world.⁴²

Paki Bastard

While I argue that *Paki Bastard* has not yet been adequately represented or engaged with as a key event in the history of performance art in the UK, there are detailed recent accounts of the work, including those by Courtney Martin and Eva Bentcheva.⁴³ *Paki Bastard* had a number of parts including a prior action at London's Bangladeshi-Sylheti Brick Lane, documentation of which was incorporated into a live performance, which together comprised the basis of a later film version of the work made in 2015.⁴⁴ Araeen's 1977 performance recalled aesthetics of expanded cinema as he performed in front of projected slides which showed scenes from the Brick Lane action, photographs of family members, images representing the rising National Front, and the picket line of the Grunwick film processing factory strike which was led by South Asian women, particularly Jayaben Desai, between 1977 and 1978. These were seemingly autobiographical scenes: of an artists' first work, a man sitting in a Brick Lane café, a parent's disappointment that their child became an artist and not a successful engineer, and encounters with a society that was increasingly hostile to black and brown immigrants.⁴⁵ In the performance, Araeen first appeared wearing sunglasses (to evoke an image of 'blindness') and gagged, he collapsed to the floor, swept with a broom which he eventually destroyed, and played one of its pieces as a 'flute'. Martin has emphasised the narrative of *Paki Bastard* as one

⁴² Ibid., 5.

⁴³ Martin, 'Rasheed Araeen, Live Art and Radical Politics in Britain'; Bentcheva, *The Cultural Politics of British South Asian Performance Art, 1960s to the Present*.

⁴⁴ *Paki Bastard* was performed four times in total at different venues in 1977 and 1978. Bentcheva, *The Cultural Politics of British South Asian Performance Art, 1960s to the Present*, 117, 120, 127.

⁴⁵ These scenes are further developed by an accompanying text written by Araeen, published in *Making Myself Visible*, 114-19.

of ‘labor, immigration, and violence’, as well as the politics of the performance as antagonistic to professionalisation and theatrical skill - as the piece was received, at least by some audience members, as awkward.⁴⁶ Writing in *Artscribe* at the time, critic Suzy Adderley rebuked what she perceived as a ‘high degree of alienation’ in the work, which she deemed too off-putting to make an effective contribution to anti-racist discourse.⁴⁷ Where the example of *Black Sheep* suggests that Araeen’s career suffered due to incorrect assumptions that his work can only be of an ‘authentically’ ethnic tradition, Adderley seems to have viewed *Paki Bastard*, at least to some extent, in terms of an all-consuming (implicitly essentialist) immigrant experience and monolithic victimhood which rendered it unpalatable, ineffective, and perhaps incapable of any effects outside of re-telling of a ‘well known’ social problem.⁴⁸ Bentcheva has shed new light on the hostile and awkward reception of Araeen’s work in its different contexts, such as the fact that the first performance was interrupted by an audience member.⁴⁹ Usefully, Bentcheva analyses Araeen’s performance in terms of sustaining a complex notion of identity ‘as both crafted and bestowed by others’ in *Paki Bastard*, and advocating for the potential of art to disrupt hegemonic orders.⁵⁰

Departing from Martin and Bentcheva’s valuable readings, I want to elaborate on how *Paki Bastard* critiques misnomers of authenticity ascribed to the ethnic Other (as seen in both *Burning Ties* and *Black Sheep*). For instance Araeen has, on a number of occasions, drawn attention to ways in which *Paki Bastard* should not be considered as simply autobiographical – although essentialist approaches have often produced this assumption (i.e. that people of

⁴⁶ Martin, ‘Rasheed Araeen, Live Art and Radical Politics in Britain’, 112, 114.

⁴⁷ Part of Suzy Adderley’s *Artscribe* review is reproduced in Araeen, *Making Myself Visible*, 120

⁴⁸ Adderly, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Bentcheva, *The Cultural Politics of British South Asian Performance Art, 1960s to the Present*, 125-8, 123.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

colour and minority ethnic artists can only speak about their own experience which is wholly consumed by their status as such). Looking at the 2015 film – a source that resolutely lacks the appearance of historical verisimilitude of the original documentation – I was struck by the juxtapositions Araeen makes, as well as my own viewing of this necessarily unfaithful and unreliable document, of the potential for an automythological mode which actively interrogates the boundaries of representability, to critique assumptions of essentialism, but also to cross and destabilise distinctions between object and subject, fact and fiction. Recalling the possibilities of the ‘radically heterogeneous’ cultural remainder emphasised by Spivak which I mentioned earlier, *Paki Bastard* creates a complex encounter with snatched impressions of public-private scenes, communities at once real and imagined, and appropriated newspaper clippings referring to racist violence against real people misnamed as the fabled ‘paki bastard’.

Viewing the 2015 film version, I lingered on the image of Araeen awkwardly lying or perhaps crawling across the floor, surrounded by remnants of the smashed broom, the projected slide in the background situating him on the periphery of the Grunwick strike picket line.

Foregrounding a literal movement of struggle, I read Araeen’s figure here as one which is pointing to the always already misremembered, or at least contested encounter on the margins.

The extent of Araeen’s actual participation in the Grunwick strike becomes less relevant as the audience are confronted with the tangled significations of collective experience, memory, and political resistance, as well as the violence of a misremembered, homogenised ethnic ‘Other’.

This gesture of both refusal and desire is produced partly in how Araeen uses archival remainders: a photograph of a South Asian woman labelled ‘My Sister’ is juxtaposed against young white men (who read as sinister in this context) waving union jack flags; Handel’s *Messiah* (1741) is heard one moment, and the soundtrack from the Urdu-language film *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960) the next. Together, these elements produce a striking

heterogeneity of actively mis/appropriated sources, which perhaps work to figure the *active* ontological or political uncertainty of the migrant. Operating in terms of a recalcitrant theatricality, Araeen performs at the cross-roads of his reception as ethnic Other, recording while also warping racial and racist typologies, and the desire to bring material realities and experiences into some kind of visibility. It is a visibility that is necessarily troubled as the former cannot be disentangled from the latter, and recalls what Tavia Nyong'o has elucidated as 'the idea that the false can be both a sign of itself and the correct' in the critical mode of black fabulation.⁵¹

Fabulations of An 'Other Crusader'

Nyong'o's recent account of 'afro-fabulation' has extended black, queer, feminist, and postcolonial discourse on the tangled confluences of fact and fiction, a body of work which also includes Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" and Donna Haraway's "speculative fabulation".⁵² While Nyong'o refers primarily to a more specific lineage of African American representation, his theorisation of the 'persistent reappearance of that which was never meant to appear, but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation' of afro-fabulation also suggests a critical mode with broad applications and implications for that which has *seemingly* occupied the margins of culture and history.⁵³ Nyong'o explores how one might 'begin to make sense of the paradoxical vibrance of a form of life endangered, or even erased, by efforts at documentation and representation', and sets the scene for his theory by pointing to attempts to document black life in queer and drag performance contexts.⁵⁴ Nyong'o refers firstly to Crystal LaBeija (a key figure of Harlem ball culture), who 'manages both to solicit the

⁵¹ Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

cinematic gaze and to dispute its power', appearing in a mode that is simultaneously for *and* against the camera in the documentary *The Queen*.⁵⁵ Here, afro-fabulation is to do with demanding visibility while also enacting the refusal of a certain fixity and frame, occupying seemingly paradoxical positions (for *and* against the spectator), and subverting convention in a way that appears 'excessive, disorderly, or simply unintelligible to an external gaze'.⁵⁶

Particularly, Nyong'o defines afro-fabulation as an act of both preservation and invention in the 'queer hack of the codes of an anti-black world', and which relies on 'a vernacular awareness of, and confrontation with, the manner in which gender and sexual norms operate to reproduce systems of racial hierarchy'.⁵⁷ Foregrounding the subjective, the changeable, and the speculative in black art, Nyong'o charts signs of '*impossibility*', produced by the 'tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false'.⁵⁸ Responding to failures to even acknowledge black subjects or subjectivity, fabulative strategies are deployed as part of broader world-building, crossing between immediate realities and the desired, imagined, or mis/remembered. Nyong'o's theory is a useful reference point, then, for approaching the work of those concerned with racial, ethnic, sexual, or otherwise political alterity more broadly. As David Medalla's performance and participatory art can, and has already been, understood in terms of its queer and fabulative imaginaries (in both generative and unhelpful ways), I now turn my focus to Medalla's work to further elaborate on the questions in play. This involves adapting Nyong'o's theory for a different context, and I also consider interrelationships with earlier theories such as José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer utopian futurity.⁵⁹ Along with the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁹ I would like to elaborate on how queer temporality figures in relation to Medalla's work, but I have focused on other lines of enquiry in the space of this article. This would involve engaging key concepts such as Elizabeth Freeman's notion of a desiring and coalitional 'temporal drag', as well as Jack Halberstam's influential theorisation of queer time. See Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations', *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 727-44; and Judith/Jack

other works considered in this article, these are part of a broader discourse which critiques essentialist and universalist notions of authenticity, and refuses its fixities. Medalla's deployment of automythologies represents another dimension to this field of critical and aesthetic strategies, as well as the 1970s period and its interventions into discourse of cultural visibility.

I will not attempt to give an overview of Medalla's biography, as large parts of his practice have been documented in existing accounts; for instance, Guy Brett's book *Exploding Galaxies*, which was commissioned by Araeen for his press, is extensive.⁶⁰ However, I note here that a chronology of Medalla's life and work includes extraordinary travels around the globe from the 1950s, encounters with famous modernist figures Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Gaston Bachelard, and Walt Disney, and an artistic career launched by early experiments: his entry in the *Contemporary Artists* compendium lists his first 'co-operative sculpture project with farmers and fishermen' in Manila in 1951.⁶¹ This event occurred on a family holiday, and consisted of Medalla, aged nine, mobilising family members to help him construct a sculpture made of clay resting on a coral island in the sea.⁶² A tremendous and fierce commitment to art as a social practice is evident throughout his artistic life, compounded, as he commented in 2008, by the influence of 'all my boyfriends, so many lovers, I'm so promiscuous [*laughter*]'.⁶³ On the subject of Medalla's sexuality, one former collaborator has suggested of their international travels around the 1970s period that Medalla's queerness became a nuisance to their project, and has narrated impressions of uninvited lectures on Buddhism interpolated

Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ Guy Brett, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla* (London: Kala Press, 1996).

⁶¹ Colin Naylor and Genesis P-Orridge, 'David Medalla', in *Contemporary Artists* (London: St. James Press, 1977), 631-2.

⁶² Brett, *Exploding Galaxies*, 31.

⁶³ David Medalla in a roundtable discussion chaired by David A. Bailey, *Documenting Live*, Roundtable 1 ['1990s artists'], DVD, (Live Art Development Agency, 2008).

with scenes of ‘sailors and strange men’ queuing outside Medalla’s hotel room door (the implications of which I will return to).⁶⁴

As Dominic Johnson has noted, ‘The 1970s were significant for performance art in Britain not least for the enthusiasm and hostility with which broadcast media and, by extension, popular audiences, engaged with its novelties and perceived excesses.’⁶⁵ This is clearly borne out in the reception of Medalla’s work during this time: critics have celebrated Medalla as a pioneer and extraordinary force for change in art and society, while elsewhere they have misread his work as reaching for a nostalgic and essentialist ethnic authenticity (like Araeen’s *Black Sheep*), or as merely an extension of naïve and outmoded hippie lifestyle. One critic inaccurately wrote that Medalla represented a ‘deep romanticism for a golden-age simplicity associated with far-off times and places’ and compared him (I think bizarrely) to Mahatma Gandhi;⁶⁶ while another praised Medalla for his contribution to an ‘advance towards a didactic, investigative, but freely imaginative art for the masses’ which ‘escapes the patronising elitism of much contemporary art’.⁶⁷ In his 1973 report to the Arts Council of Great Britain, titled ‘The Situation Regarding Performance Art’, Jeff Nuttall grouped Medalla alongside Carlyle Reedy and others in a somewhat cynically titled category, ‘other crusaders’.⁶⁸ He defined them as ‘the remains of the old late-1960s, blow-your-bone underground’, and ‘let’s-go-back-into-the-garden people’ who ‘present the lifestyle of the collective as a creative achievement in itself, even (hilariously) to the

⁶⁴ I do not to disclose full details of this source here for ethical reasons; email correspondence to the author, 5 September 2015.

⁶⁵ Dominic Johnson, *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 40.

⁶⁶ Nigel Gosling, ‘Stragglings Onwards’, *The Observer*, 3 September, 1972, 30.

⁶⁷ Anthony Everitt, ‘The Avant-Garde in Britain at Gallery House, London’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 August, 1972, 2.

⁶⁸ Jeff Nuttall, ‘The Situation Regarding Performance Art [1973]’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no.1 (2012): 175-7 (176).

Arts Council.⁶⁹ Clearly disparaging in tone (and perhaps quite funny in the context of an official report), Nuttall tried to account for the characteristics of Medalla's work in this context, but at the same time echoed lazy (and enduring) misconceptions that aesthetically constituted and legible works of art were actually merely 'lifestyle' choices.⁷⁰ Medalla himself has worked to counter such charges from early on in his career; for instance, in a 1967 television appearance on *Late Night Line-Up* on BBC 2, the US theatre critic and director Charles Marowitz and the writer Al Alvarez teamed up (to form an 'unlikely liaison', as one reporter said) in their criticisms of the Exploding Galaxy.⁷¹ The Galaxy was a radically experimental group for collective art and living co-founded by Medalla and Paul Keeler, based at 99 Balls Pond Road in Dalston between 1967 and 1968.⁷² The group performed at the Roundhouse and other public locations, and undertook durational exercises which reshaped practices of daily life, which perhaps informed the reception of the group as a 'cult'.⁷³ While Marowitz spoke of his having seen two hours of the 'dance-drama' group (as it was referred to then) in action, Medalla defiantly responded that he had 'no right to pass judgement in under 24'.⁷⁴ This instance indicates the broader impact of Medalla's work, how it radically challenged the limits of categories of art, theatre, and dance, and also how critics struggled to keep up with formally and politically innovative art that reconfigured notions of duration, as well as the frame of art.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Many critics have responded to the art ↔ life narrative in the critical reception of performance art more broadly. A recent example is Lara Shalson who draws attention to elastic frames of life as well as art in the work of Tehching Hsieh among others. See, Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics Since 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially 109-125.

⁷¹ George Melly, 'Pretty Rubbish', *The Observer*, 29 October, 1967, 25.

⁷² Many artists were part of or otherwise impacted by the Exploding Galaxy. For instance, Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE describes their experience of participating in the group in Dominic Johnson, 'Positive Surrender: An Interview with BREYER P-ORRIDGE', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no.1 (2012): 134-45 (141).

⁷³ Hugo Williams, 'A cult of inspired amateurishness that seized the 60s', *The Spectator*, 3 May, 2014, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/05/tripping-through-psychedelia/> (accessed 16 July, 2019).

⁷⁴ Melly, 'Pretty Rubbish', 25.

Brought together, these anecdotes and biographical phenomena have fed characterisations of Medalla as eccentric, or possibly a fantasist. Such interpretations have often been inaccurate or at least unhelpful, particularly when they collide with a casting of the artist as a comic figure in the wings, or as Brandon Taylor noted in his 1977 interview, with a reputation as “the marginal artist par excellence”.⁷⁵ While a possible status of ‘marginal artist’ (or indeed eccentric) can be productive when self-identified as a way of antagonising the mainstream, its designation is at odds with the fact that Medalla is and was a pivotal figure in contemporary art practices in London and internationally. By the time Medalla was 35 he had exhibited around the world, edited *Signals*, the influential news bulletin from the gallery of the same name (1964-66), brought international artists – particularly artists from Latin America, such as Lygia Clark – to the UK for the first time, co-founded the Exploding Galaxy and its offspring, Transmedia Explorations, and chaired the aforementioned Artists for Democracy centre in Fitzrovia. In reference to Medalla’s astonishing biography more broadly, Brett commented in *Exploding Galaxies* that, ‘[s]ome see these as tall stories. More likely they are simply a spin-off of the immense ease with which Medalla gets talking with strangers (he once told me he reckoned he met twelve new people a day)’.⁷⁶ However, I also wish to further engage ways in which Medalla challenges both the ‘evidentiary logic of heterosexuality’, and the restraints of straight time; as José Esteban Muñoz explains, ‘to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer. To participate in such an endeavour is not to imagine an isolated future for the individual but instead to participate in a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique.’⁷⁷ Along these lines, Medalla’s (self-) representations can be understood as part of an active mode of automythology across his

⁷⁵ Pierre Restany quoted in Brandon Taylor, ‘David Medalla: In Conversation with Brandon Taylor’, *Artscribe* 6 (April 1977): 20-23 (20).

⁷⁶ Brett, *Exploding Galaxies*, 18.

⁷⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 26.

broader practice that can be linked to other black, queer and feminist representations which re-write the self in, as, and against history, and which seem to muddle fact and fiction – as in Audre Lorde’s ‘biomythography’, for example.⁷⁸

Interrogating how Medalla’s practice functions as historical intervention draws attention to ways in which he has privileged that which constantly changes or seems to disappear, chance encounters, and queer memories. Particularly, Medalla invokes forms which are too readily placed in the margins by interpretive logics which seek to invalidate that which is not recognised as critical, as material, or as part of history. To draw again from Muñoz:

Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term. The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as a trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumour.⁷⁹

Muñoz’s treatment of evidence can be characterised partly by the way in which elusive epistemologies of the seemingly private or secret (such as the closeted or open secret) are taken up with actively partial and socially contingent imaginaries of queer utopian futurity. Within this frame, events that are not institutionally validated, such as Medalla’s family holiday at the age of nine, can be brought into confrontation with historically legitimated (or to recall Spivak ‘official’) notions of what is relevant to histories of art and performance across different time frames. Read through Muñoz, Medalla’s (self-) representational strategies can be drawn on as models for proving and reading not only queerness, but also the itinerant spaces of in/visibility

⁷⁸ Lorde used the term ‘biomythography’ on the cover of her book, Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing Press, 1982).

⁷⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

self-fashioned and occupied by women and minoritarian subjects in art more broadly (indeed, queer and feminist projects are interminably intertwined).

While Medalla has intervened into a broad cultural landscape at mainstream and subcultural levels, he has evaded neatly intelligible documentary or archival capture of his vast bodies of work. In an interview conversation between Araeen and Medalla published in *Black Phoenix* in 1979, Araeen suggested that Medalla's designation as marginal was surely bound up with legacies of colonial violence, and was a 'reflection of a common Western attitude towards those who are not of a European origin'.⁸⁰ Medalla agreed with Araeen that he was subject to racism, but - strikingly - also insisted that his marginalisation from the 'central tradition of European culture' was resolutely not his problem. Araeen seems reluctant to accept this at this point in the interview, and the two artists suggest their differences in terms of their views on how to place themselves (strategically or otherwise). Discussing the British art establishment, Medalla asked Araeen, 'Do you want to be part of something that's dying?', and referred to the gallery space in this context as being 'like a casket, you know, something dead'.⁸¹ It is a strong indicator of Medalla's Marxist critique and activism against the prevailing 'fucked up capitalist system' which is 'manipulative' and, for Medalla, inherently anti-art. Further still, Medalla provocatively suggested that a retrospective at Tate would be the 'worst thing that could ever happen to anybody' in the context of tokenistic responses to black and Third World art movements, in which artists of colour have been cynically instrumentalised by white institutions.⁸²

Medalla's assertion may be inflammatory, particularly to those within collective movements who have made important efforts to demand recognition, representation, and indeed fair payment from institutions. While this provocation should be critiqued in relation to the

⁸⁰ Rasheed Araeen and David Medalla, 'Conversation with David Medalla', *ibid.*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 16-7.

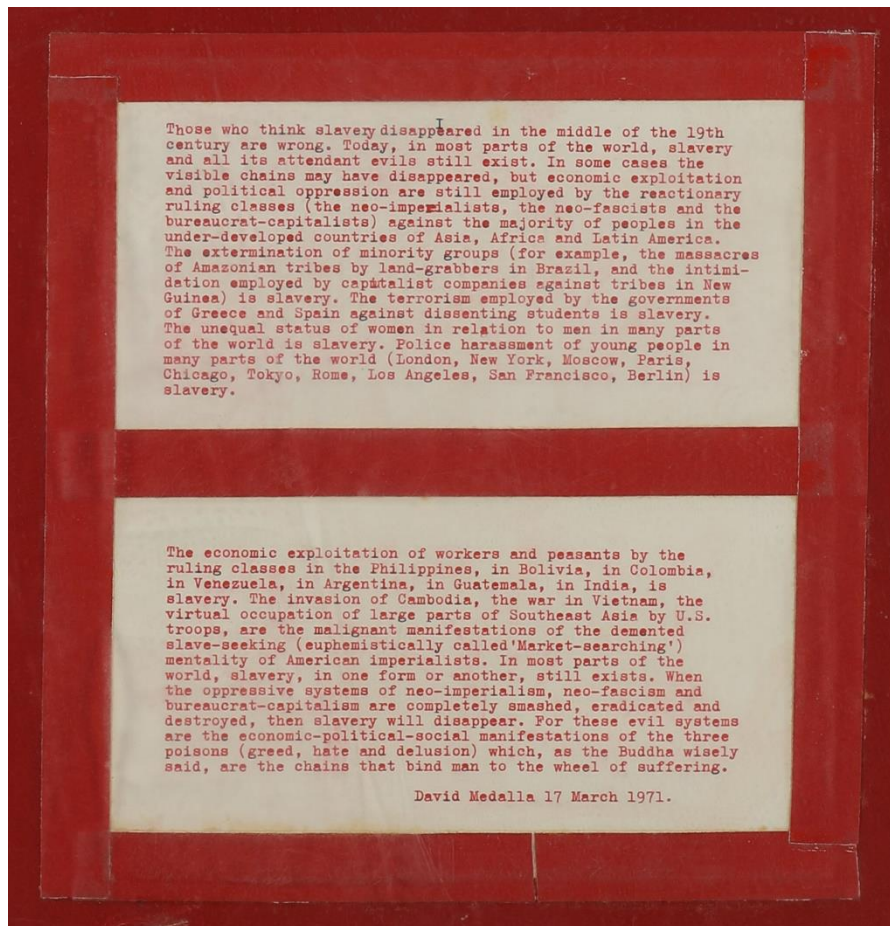


Figure 1. *Down With the Slave Trade!* (ca. 1972) [with text detail] exhibited at documenta 5 (Kassel) and Gallery House (London). Courtesy of the artist / private collection. This image was discovered via David Medalla Archives after completing this article. The author includes it here as an interesting archival object related to Medalla's 'mass participation propulsion' of the same name.

While I have sometimes referred to performance art as a placeholder term here for groups of works which are formally distinct, it is worth noting the specific terms that Medalla also used including 'impromptus' and 'participation-production-propulsion' (the former refers to a focus on improvisation, and the latter to denote participant interaction). While many of these works seem elusive to historicisation, among those that stand out (perhaps because Medalla's authorship is more stable, whereas many works are collective) is *Down with the Slave Trade!* which was performed several times between 1968 and 1971. A 'mass participation propulsion',

the work was like a ‘game’ in which, as Guy Brett has recorded, ‘people were invited to insert themselves into a complex network’ of materials including chains and plastic tubing or sheets, which restricted people’s movement and therefore created a ‘changing pattern of “reciprocal mobility”’ as more people joined in.⁸³ The work referenced, perhaps like Araeen’s early sculptures, the notion of abstraction in the relationship between form (of dynamic, non-hierarchical shapes and structures) and political subject. Brett has written that

The work’s title deliberately used the most graphic and universally graspable term for oppression to draw attention to its continued existence in perhaps more subtle modern forms, and the work itself used the most hackneyed symbol of enslavement to suggest the nature of freedom. “By seizing the traditional symbol of slavery (chains) and discarding its conventional connotations, I found its paradoxical transformation”, Medalla wrote.⁸⁴

While documentation of *Down with the Slave Trade!* is scarce (indeed, Araeen has said that a photograph he took of the event at Camden Arts Centre was the only record of it),⁸⁵ three images of different iterations were published in *Exploding Galaxies*.⁸⁶ Two of the images show audiences of adults and children handling the chains and plastic wrapped around their waists or legs that tied them together, as publics in the background look on. Some participants are smiling, others appear contemplative, and some are focused on how the materials are tangled in their hands. The third image shows Medalla, a young man caught in what seems like a dance as he raises his arms and looks up to the sky. He has long dark hair, is topless and barefoot, with fabric wrapped around his slim hips. White chains hang from his neck and wrists, which pull down as a billowing sheet of translucent plastic creates unexpected shapes of waves, peaks

⁸³ Brett, *Exploding Galaxies*, 94.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

⁸⁵ Araeen interviewed by Hoffmann, 136.

⁸⁶ The images are captioned as being performed at Jans Kirkhof, Utrecht; Bateaux Mayflower II, Quai de Tuileries, Paris; and Camden Arts Centre, London. Brett, *Exploding Galaxies*, 100-1.

and valleys that remind me of the spewing bubble machines of *Cloud Canyons* (1963-), perhaps Medalla's most famous work.

Seeing Medalla's figure in contrast to those of the clothed, and seemingly white audiences of the other two images brings to the fore the possibility of obvious charges that might be made against the work that it obfuscates the material realities of slavery and racist colonial violence. *Down with the Slave Trade!* may appear to allow audiences to feel as though they have occupied the role of a slave, in a game-like scenario which they participate in on a voluntary basis, and which does not seem to include evidence of the very real acts of violence experienced in the broadest scales and harshest severities by black African and African diaspora populations. As collectivity, co-operation, and shared experience are foregrounded in the work, it might be deemed inadequate in its representation of the historical slave, or mistaken as reflecting a white universalist perspective on the human experience which serves to marginalise black histories. While I accept all of the above (to varying degrees) as possible effects of this work, I also want to chart and engage with its criticality, not in order to 'redeem' it in some way for a contemporary viewpoint, but to show how, in its imperfection, it critiques the notion that there can ever be an adequate representation of the histories of slavery upon which the reader can rest. To return to Nyong'o: 'If the paradox of fiction threatens to untether both history and memory from the grounds of veridiction, these powers of the false are not so much to be enthusiastically embraced as they are to be critically interrogated.'⁸⁷ Nyong'o has also identified ways in which to create oppositional distance from difficult or shame-inducing objects of the past is to implicitly work to forget racist (and sexist, homophobic, and so on) histories in

⁸⁷ Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 7.

a process of ‘manufactured innocence’.⁸⁸ Nyong’o refers specifically to art which draws on ‘racist kitsch’ objects of the past towards a transformative and critical ‘racial kitsch’ in the present, which I do not suggest are equivalent to *Down with the Slave Trade!*. However, Nyong’o’s idea, importantly, holds wider relevance in suggesting ways to engage that which holds a number of potentially contradictory effects, subjectivities, and temporalities simultaneously – as well as the important and yet difficult messiness of early responses to diversity and difference in art.

Bearing in mind the instructive histories of black art and performance which have brought into ‘co-presence a sense of the impossible, mingling what was with what might have been’,⁸⁹ or the material realities of past and present with possible futures, I read Medalla’s work in terms of a broader practice of critical and queer utopia. In this he deliberately and ironically engaged with ‘hackneyed’ icons of slavery (as Brett highlights), in order to transform them. *Down with the Slave Trade!* referred to histories of slavery and appropriated colonial imagery, but at the same time it did not attempt to give people an experience resembling that of a slave; rather, the work drew attention to the interconnectedness of labour and social reproduction, and modelled a co-operative relation that was and is critical to its political context. It dealt with systems of power, collectivity and solidarity, not individual lived experiences *as such*. While this may seem a callous (inadequate, or even inappropriate) way of dealing with a violent history, there is great value in the attempt to address systems, structures, and macro patterns because it diminishes the possibility that understandings of oppression will be hindered by the failure to move beyond levels of individual suffering, or victimhood. At the same time, it would be convenient to understand *Down with the Slave Trade!* as representing a relation of desire and

⁸⁸ Nyong’o, ‘Racial Kitsch and Black Performance’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no.2 (Fall 2002): 371-91 (383).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

identification produced in the shared space of (very different but still related) understandings of oppression as a migrant and person of colour in contexts of white supremacy and imperialism. Such a reading would help neatly explain why Medalla as an artist (a migrant from a wealthy Filipino family) approaches slavery (commonly associated with the capture and forced displacement of black Africans) as a subject. However, this would be at least partially inaccurate because *Down with the Slave Trade!* was not about representing slavery *as such*. Rather, through a confrontational sense of absence, Medalla's performance actively works against expected reproductions of slavery as concomitant with an abjected, essentialist black body – such as that seen in white South African artist Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B* (2014). Bailey's performance-installation was a 'reconstruction of a human zoo', the production of which (and subsequent withdrawal from the Barbican following protests led by black activists in London) was oriented towards a 'white spectator who might ultimately feel good about feeling shamed', as Caoimhe Mader McGuinness has shown.⁹⁰ Although Bailey's work (which relied on the labour of precariously employed, seemingly nameless black performers as it toured different venues) was received positively by professional critics, it reproduced facile narratives that have become unhelpful in cementing expected images, as Aleasha Chaunte pointed out, "[a]s if that is all a naked African can represent – a kind of original slavery".⁹¹ In contrast to Bailey's more recent example, I argue that Medalla's *Down with the Slave Trade!* was doing something quite different in attempting to appropriate and transform the scene of exploitation into one of queer co-operative (perhaps also, for Medalla, communist) collectivity. It is an iconoclastic act which refused ideologies of western Enlightenment and positivist history (by which white guilt might be assuaged in the mere recognition of colonial violence), in favour of a process that is

⁹⁰ Caoimhe Mader McGuinness, 'Protesting *Exhibit B* in London: Reconfiguring Antagonism as the Claiming of Theatrical Space', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 26, no.2 (2016): 211-226 (211, 215).

⁹¹ Aleasha Chaunte quoted in Mader McGuinness, 222.

explicitly in flux, interminable, incomplete, and actively inauthentic.⁹² Medalla's work did not seek to create a condition of historical visibility in the manner one might expect. Rather, recalling the simultaneously elicited and refused spectator of afro-fabulation, it both tempted *and* evaded interpretations of a certain archival locatedness, and confronted the dynamic borders of institutional acceptability in the collective creation of political systems which have been and continue to be regarded by establishment politicians as suspicious or dangerous. Furthermore, that elements of *Down with the Slave Trade!* may be inappropriate to contemporary discourses of anti-racism and histories of art recalls the confrontational presence of Trinh T. Minh-ha's 'Inappropriate [or Inappropriate/d] Other', which expresses a notion of difference that simultaneously denies, draws from, subverts, and unsettles the racial and ethnic Other.⁹³ Medalla's mis/treatment of source material in this way is outrageous and impudent, and interestingly this informs how it should be valued and carefully critiqued. It is instructive as a model of queer utopian collectivity which cuts across identity markers, *and* it is politically questionable as an act of appropriation which may obfuscate historical realities of oppression. Ultimately, the heterogeneity of this work produces political, aesthetic and ontological contestation which enriches understandings of difference and representation. Medalla's work therefore demonstrates the politics of appropriation and appropriateness as generative grounds for interrogating discourses of in/equality and difference – and at the same time must rightly be critiqued for its shortcomings.

⁹² Another recent model for challenging the archive can be found in Prarthana Purkayastha's 'historical fiction as a corporeal methodology'. See Prarthana Purkayastha, 'Decolonising human exhibits: dance, re-enactment and historical fiction. *South Asian Diaspora* 11, no.2 (2019): 223-238 (224).

⁹³ Trinh. T. Minh-ha, *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 74; Trinh T. Minh-ha interviewed by Marina Grzinic, 'Inappropriate/d Artificiality', <http://trinhminh-ha.squarespace.com/inappropriated-artificiality/> (accessed 16 July, 2019).

Engaging with the multivalence of *Down with the Slave Trade!* as both innovative and appropriative in politically messy ways is useful in terms of challenging critics of performance and conceptual art that have cast 1970s practices of performance and participatory art *simply* as unsophisticated, based on so-called authentic or pathological encounters, or bland consensus. For instance, among the most well-known examples of this would be Claire Bishop's implied characterisations of 1970s performance art in terms of an 'authenticity of our first-hand encounter with the artist's body' (which implicitly renders it anachronistic in a contemporary context),⁹⁴ and as a pre-cursor of relational art which is naïvely harmonious and unable to critique the 'experience economy' of which it is part.⁹⁵ At odds with Bishop's accounts of such practices, Medalla's participatory and performance art in the 1970s was prescient in its modelling a recalcitrant theatricality that critiqued authenticity; it decentred the artists' body, and created antagonistic forms not typically recognised as such. In developing his aesthetic of critical queer utopia, Medalla focused on political movement and transformation towards communist and countercultural modes which were and are feared and suppressed by the state and the political establishment.⁹⁶ Medalla's participatory works in particular have produced radically heterogeneous effects; for instance, some of the more unexpected outcomes have included audiences destroying work by Medalla and others in angry protest at *Popa at Moma: Pioneers of Part-Art* (Oxford Museum of Modern art, 1971),⁹⁷ and (disputed) accounts of a gallery staff member being punched in the face during a collaboration with John Dugger in *People Weave a House!* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1972).⁹⁸ These examples

⁹⁴ Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79 (54, 66).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁶ One example of police harassment of the Exploding Galaxy, for instance, is detailed in Mary Holland, 'Is It The Police v The Young?', *The Observer*, 5 May, 1968, 9.

⁹⁷ Editorial, 'Visitors wreck modern art show', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15 February, 1971, 25.

⁹⁸ 'ICA, The Mall', clipping from unknown source dated 22 December 1972, described how an ICA staff member 'kicked' at art work by Dugger, before Dugger responded with a punch to the face, TGA 955/7/2/50, ICA Collection, Tate Archive, London. Medalla also reported events in this way in an article in *Art and Artists*, and ICA Secretary Jonathan Benthall wrote to the journal insisting that this

problematise utopian collectivity in terms of the difficult, paradoxical, or impossible (to refer again to Nyong'o's favoured term), but should also be valued in their potential for considering diversity and participation as continually contested (and not blandly consensual) ground.

Stitches in Time

To conclude, I will turn to Medalla's *A Stitch in Time* (1968-72) as a particularly good example to refer to in elaborating on how queer fabulation and memory might push at the institutional archive and reconfigure discourses of visibility, then and now. *A Stitch in Time* was initiated in 1968 when Medalla met two ex-lovers (both stopping off on travels from opposite sides of the globe) at Heathrow airport. Giving them each a handkerchief (one black, one white), on which Medalla had stitched his name and a message, and a needle and thread so they could stitch something themselves on their flights ('to alleviate boredom'), Medalla left them.⁹⁹ Some years later, while in an airport travelling from Amsterdam to London, Medalla caught sight of a young man 'lugging a totem' attached to his backpack, of fabrics stitched together - and found his original gifted handkerchief at the bottom. In the participatory iterations of the work audiences would be invited to stitch whatever they wanted onto fabric stretched across the gallery space, resulting in a kind of anti-tapestry of squiggly initials, messy and delicate line drawings, scraps of other materials attached by participants, and rude cartoons of body parts.¹⁰⁰ *A Stitch in Time* prototypically 'challenges the isolation of the artist' - which, for Medalla, is the *raison d'être* of performance - as the constantly changing object moves between indefinite

had not happened. The journal later issued an apology for any 'embarrassment' caused; letter from Colin Naylor to Jonathan Benthall, TGA 955/7/2/50, ICA Collection, Tate Archive, London; Medalla, 'John Dugger: A collage-article', *ibid.*

⁹⁹ David Medalla interviewed by N. P. James, *David Medalla: Works in the World* (London: Cv Publications, 2012), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Images of *A Stitch in Time* can be found in Brett, *Exploding Galaxies*, 102-5.

numbers of participants who leave their trace.¹⁰¹ It charts lines of exchange between lovers and others as their connections spread and expand to include widening groups of people. This can take on a tragic meaning since the beginning of the AIDS crisis, as sharing might become reinscribed in terms of contagion or toxicity. Another critique that could be made of *A Stitch in Time* is that it may work to romanticise sewing while eliding its histories as a form of gendered labour; for instance, as a site of exploitative working practices, textile industries reinforce inequalities, such as between the economic West and ‘developing’ nations. While recognising the implications of these possible readings, I want to focus on how *A Stitch in Time* is innovative and politically generative in demanding attention for disorderly patchworks of fragmentary encounters (automythologised by Medalla to great effect in the airport anecdote), which test credulity, as a valid form and subject for art. In its reference to traditionally ‘feminine’ craft such as sewing, *A Stitch in Time* also meets with a broader context of feminist demands for recognition that the personal is political, and produces a powerful and critical anti-monumentality. It tells of ways in which the ‘dead structure’ of art institutions (as Medalla characterised London’s major galleries),¹⁰² might be productively countered by forays into a fabulative, queer feminist utopia. In its invitation to audiences to make and share their mark, *A Stitch in Time* can be read and valued as a pedagogic act which invites interrogation of how art – or indeed people – leave traces, and cultures are sustained or extended through their historical representation, which (importantly) includes embodied, collective, and domestic forms of story-telling and exchange.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Taylor, ‘David Medalla: In Conversation with Brandon Taylor’, 20.

¹⁰² Araeen and Medalla, ‘Conversation with David Medalla’, 12.

¹⁰³ Here I want to acknowledge Giulia Palladini’s recent work which has articulated the domestic as uncoupled from historical notions of the merely private and the domesticated, and – rather – as a possible site or instrument of radical transformation in public life. Giulia Palladini, ‘Domestics Against Domestication’ (symposium organised by Giulia Palladini and Valeria Graziano, University of Roehampton, 30 May, 2019).

I have sought to show how Araeen and Medalla's examples continue to be instructive in elucidating methodologies which unsettle notions of the margin and the centre, as Spivak suggested, but also – particularly importantly for scholars of performance – dealing with different modes of variously 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' evidence in ongoing conflicts of visibility. It would be false to argue that Araeen and Medalla pose uncomplicated (or unblemished) acts of resistance, as they may indeed reproduce or reinforce elements of that which they seek to critique. However, it can be said that their performances are influential and effective in their representation of shifting, composite subjectivities, and work to undermine dangerous myths of a unified, cohesive subject constituted through (raced and gendered) constructs of authenticity. I read *A Stitch in Time*, like *Down With The Slave Trade!* and Araeen's *Paki Bastard*, again in terms of their critical theatricality: Araeen and Medalla burlesque and counter their own reception as the marginal, outsider, or the ethnic 'Other', and foreground the instability of history as a contested and mobile scene which can be wrested for reinscription. In turn, this reminds me that there is much more work to be done in interrogating the roles of scholars of art and performance in transforming the privileged, and privileging logics of conventional historiographical models, and in upsetting myths of positivist evidence, authoritative accounts, and claims to detached objectivity or seriousness. Rather than capitulating to cynical deployments of so-called 'alternative facts',¹⁰⁴ in their muddling of the real and the not-quite or not-yet-real, I account for these practices in terms of their potential to interrogate, transform, and scrupulously critique the institutions that would necessarily exclude them – as well as their invitation to engage the archive in subversive ways. I point to the impossibility of the in/appropriate or appropriative Other arising from the 1970s as

¹⁰⁴ 'Alternative facts' was a term infamously deployed by Kellyanne Conway (then senior White House aide) to bolster falsehoods spread by US President Donald Trump. More broadly it represents ways in which neoliberal or authoritarian governments and hate groups propagate false information. See, Jon Swaine, 'Donald Trump's team defends "alternative facts" after widespread protests', *Guardian*, 23 January, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/22/donald-trump-kellyanne-conway-inauguration-alternative-facts> (accessed 16 July 2019).

generative in that it is precisely *through* the condition of contestation, produced in the reception of this work across time, that histories are sustained, retold, and never allowed to settle (and therefore to be forgotten). Performed in a mode of knowing, recalcitrant theatricality, Araeen and Medalla cut figures which emphasise reasons to resist the easy ideological periodisation, compartmentalisation, displacement, and erasure between pasts, the present, and possible futures.