

The collector's asylum: The politics of disposability in the work of Julia Rosa Clark

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ABSTRACT

The South African artist Julia Rosa Clark's (2015) collage-based practice is driven by what she terms 'traditions of improvised practice' — haruspex or soothsaying for example — that enable the practitioner to conceptualise new connections between past and present. Tracing these traditions across Clark's *oeuvre* in this article, I compare them with the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's (2006) philosophy of history. Benjamin's commitment to the destruction of tradition unearths a politics within Clark's practice, just as her work opens avenues to consider Benjamin's work as haunted by colonialism. I conclude the discussion by considering the implication of colonialism's haunting for Clark's post-apartheid practice.

Keywords: Julia Rosa Clark, archive, post-apartheid, Walter Benjamin, psychoanalysis, Dada, haunting.

A philosophy that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee-grounds and cannot explicate it cannot be a true philosophy.
Walter Benjamin as told to Gerschom Scholem (1981:59).

In the wake of radio and cinema's emergence as dominant forms of mass culture, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's (2002b) oft-cited essay, "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility" emphasises technology's liberating capacity. Cinema and radio make 'simultaneous collective reception' possible, creating a new social spectatorship that breaks from the tradition, uniqueness, and originality — what Benjamin (2002b:103-106, 116) terms 'aura' — that had previously severed art's relation to politics. Art in an age of reproducibility, Benjamin (2002b:118-119) continues, 'create[s] a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come'; a revolutionary potential

exemplified in Dada's reconfiguration of the refuse of everyday life that jolts the viewer into outrage and political consciousness. Benjamin locates Dada's tactile engagement with modernity in Charles Baudelaire's poetry, yoking the poet to the *chiffonnier* or ragpicker. The poet and impoverished scavenger alike sift through society's refuse, cataloguing and collecting the 'capharnaum of waste' (Benjamin 2003a:48). Baudelaire's urban experience is innervated by the sheer accumulation of excess; further considered through the imaginative capacities of the child at play. Benjamin (2006:156) comments on his own childhood collections:

To renew the old — in such a way that I myself, the newcomer, would make what was old my own — was the task of the collection that filled my drawer. Every stone I discovered, every flower I picked, every butterfly I captured was for me the beginning of a collection, and, in my eyes, all that I owned made for one unique collection. "Tidying up" would have meant demolishing an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that were spiked cudgels, tinfoil that was a hoard of silver, building blocks that were coffins, cactuses that were totem poles, and copper pennies that were shields.

The Dadaist, poet, *chiffonnier*, and child collect, simultaneously protecting and reinventing the narratives of the waste they encounter. The experience of collecting slows modernity's rapid economic turnover, allowing for the object's past and present to exist simultaneously. Collecting reframes history, exemplifying Benjamin's (2003b:396) belief that the object is a constellation whose past serves as a code to understand the present. Benjamin sees the constellation as characteristic of a 'messianic' philosophy of history that resists the triumphalist narratives of progress and newness. Instead of the unbridled belief in society's advance, a 'historical materialism' retains revolutionary potential through the image of past struggles, whose memory, like the practice of soothsaying, holds the possibility for a radical change in the future (Benjamin 2003b:394-396).

This philosophy of history places the object at its core. Benjamin's "messianism" can be understood through his interest in the Kabbalist narrative of the Tikkun — a sacred, but broken vessel whose future restoration creates a new harmony in the world — that Benjamin transposes from the religious to the secular in anticipation of the redemption of the working class (Buck-Morss 1989:235-237). Redemption makes the vessel whole, but its reparation recreates the urn differently from its original form. Dada's reframing of the fragments of modern life provides one example of how the Kabbalist concept moves into Benjamin's historical materialism. Delving into the past, Benjamin further exemplifies his philosophy through a number of ancient traditions whose interpretive strategies are borne from waste. As the epigraph to this essay suggests, the counter-intuitive strategies of soothsaying through coffee grounds, equally at work in Kabbalism, forces one to reconceive one's relationship to the world (Scholem 1981:59). Soothsaying's counter-intuitive interpretations and collecting equally define the South African artist Julia Rosa

Clark's (b. 1975) practice. Clark's obsessive collecting enters her art-making through an amassed horde of junk: cut-outs from magazines, advertisements and product packaging; scraps of tulle fabric and discarded clothing; old board games; stickers; stock film footage; and many other objects populate her collage-based practice. Like Benjamin, turning to the outmoded to analyse the rapidity of change in modernity, Clark's (2015) obsessive reworking of the disposable scraps allows her to understand the self in an age of 'information overload'. The frenzied excess of waste and repurposed treasure bursts from the surface of her print entitled *but there is a storm blowing from paradise* (2016) (Figure 1).

In this work, Clark silkscreens varying shades of turquoise silhouettes including heads, ballerinas, HIV/AIDS ribbons and biomorphic abstractions onto the surface of white sheets of paper. These silhouetted forms become a substrate for Clark to fastidiously fix hand-cut silkscreened images — whose illustrations evoke outmoded school primers — and pieces of tulle. The silkscreened reproductions of illustrations: jewels — a leitmotif in Clark's work and a homonym of her nickname 'Jules' — banded stacks of currency, femur bones, pills and the palms of hands are affixed to the surface of the page with plastic pins used to attach price tags to clothing, which emphasise the work's relationship to commodification.¹

[B]ut there is a storm, as a silkscreen, is infinitely reproducible — diminishing the aura of the work — and yet its tactile quality, hand-cut and laborious, brings the viewer close to the materiality of the objects Clark depicts. This move between Clark's personal collection and the mass-produced nature of the work reinforces the formal explorations of what Clark (2015) calls 'traditions of improvised practice'; a diverse set of techniques guided by off-the-cuff spontaneity including MacGyver's hastily made gizmos, or the interpretive work of scatology, haruspex, reading tealeaves, or scattered bones. Each practice assists people in decision-making; a correct coin-toss confirms the choice and likewise an incorrect one re-affirms the subject by doubting the veracity of the 'tradition' (Clark 2015). These traditions rework the detritus of the past in the present; they function, according to Clark (2015), as 'tools to help us feel the present, not to see the future'.

Clark's 'traditions' — guiding principles for seeing the self within the material conditions of the present — appear throughout Benjamin's fragmented *oeuvre*. Benjamin's interest in haruspex is but one example of an overlap with Clark's traditions. Additionally, Benjamin (1996:206) turns to divination and physiognomy whose interpretation 'striv[es] for analytic complexity', freeing character from the fixity of fate, reading entrails and astrology as primal examples of the mimesis of written word (Benjamin 1999e:722), the clearing away of tradition, the passing down of social situations the oracle inspires in "The destructive character" (Benjamin 1999b:542), as well as photography as a 'descendent of the augurs and haruspices — to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in the pictures'

1. Benjamin (1999a:181) describes the price tag's attachment to the garment as the moment when an object's material history gives way to a "ghostly objectivity" and leads a life of its own'.

(Benjamin 1999d:527). In each instance, Benjamin's reading of law, tradition, and the auratic condition of inheritance are shed, reconstituting the relationship between past and present.

Clark's traditions, marshalled by Benjamin to read 'history against the grain' (2003b:392), lead me back to *but there is a storm* where Clark takes the print's title from Benjamin's (1940) last completed essay "On the concept of history". Characteristic of Benjamin's use of appropriation in *The arcades project* (1999a [1940]), and his belief in montage, Clark references Benjamin's title via a lyric in Laurie Anderson's song *The dream before* (1989), who evokes Benjamin's (2003b:392) famous metaphor of the 'angel of history'. The angel of history is a figure tasked with the burden of making a destroyed past whole again, and while witnessing such wreckage, is unable to repair it; the angel is hurtled forward by the ideologies of progress. The angel's task thus mirrors Clark's desire to 'feel the present' through a reworking of tradition, by unearthing the hidden meanings in the object. Discovering these hidden meanings, Benjamin (2003b:390) sees the angel's work as redemptive; it results in mankind being 'granted the fullness of the past'.

The reparation of wreckage, equally evocative of the *Tikkun*, understands the present in relationship to its past, further binding Clark's work to Benjamin's. These interpretive traditions, including soothsaying, understood in the practices of the collector, unearth a complex narrative of colonial haunting in their work. Drawing from Latin American studies scholar John Kraniauskas's (1994:151) description of Benjamin's work having a colonial 'unconscious' that discloses the simultaneous presence of psychoanalytic theories of the dream and an underdeveloped examination of imperialism, Clark's (1999a:9) traditions expose the colonial implications of consumption Benjamin examines in Europe. Moreover, as Benjamin (2002b:104) describes collecting as 'the asylum of art' — an act of protection against the disposability of the outmoded — his metaphors for collecting lend themselves to the complexities of post-colonial nationalism that Clark explores in her work. Given the importance of psychoanalysis to Benjamin's anthropologies of modernity, and the "asylum" that motivates collecting, I conclude by turning to the psychoanalytic study of the Lithuanian-born, South African, Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet* (1937). Sachs's study of a tribal healer — whose own practice employs many of the same techniques that drive Clark's work — merges the analyst and tribal healer's practice, thus bringing traditional knowledge to bear on the scientific progress of modernity. Significantly for my reading, these interactions often take place within the asylum and engage the complexities of national identity; where Clark's improvisation understood through Benjamin's philosophy of history reframes questions around the determinism of progress, critically motivated by a haunting found in the asylum and phantasmagoria of the Parisian alike. Given the fragmented condition of Benjamin's



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Julia Rosa Clark *Flying and falling*, 2015. Installation, whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town. Courtesy of the artist and whatiftheworld gallery.

writings, which often proceed in short aphorisms, or as in *The arcades project* (1999a), collected fragments whose meaning is elicited via montage, and Clark's use of collecting and dispersal as an underpinning motif throughout her numerous installation-centred exhibitions, my reading necessarily moves through a number of works in both Benjamin's and Clarke's *oeuvres* to develop the themes of collecting and imperialism in particular.

Collecting and destruction

Collecting, Benjamin (2002b) argues, is an act of recreation. Exemplifying this in a reading of the German historian Eduard Fuchs's collections of caricature, erotica and genre painting, Benjamin (2002b:268) contends that Fuchs's collections are guided by a personal interest whose meanings are derived from the desire of the collector and the juxtapositions between objects in the collection. Significantly, Fuchs's work as a collector happens outside the rigid hierarchies of academic disciplines, and as such, breaks with tradition and unearths a new materialist history of art (Benjamin 2002b:261). Like the messy hordes of Benjamin's childhood, the collector continually reinvents the

object's meaning through perpetual contact with the ever-changing collection (Benjamin 1999a:461). The non-hierarchical display of collecting equally guided Clark's work on her installation *Flying and falling* (2015, whatiftheworld, Cape Town) (Figure 2) where she dispersed ephemera, at random and 'without premeditation', until reaching a feeling of satisfaction, exemplifying her 'traditions of improvised practice' (Clark 2015).

In the installation, one finds sewn garlands of ivy whose leaves are formed from outdated atlases, hordes of advertisements for cosmetics and cuts of meat dangling from t-pins on bright pink tulle fabric, and hand painted cut-outs of paper appearing as rock sediment that mottle the gallery space. The experience of the installation moves between the gigantic proportions of the room and the intimate details of each object placed on display. Just as *Flying and falling* shifts between scales of gigantic and intimate, overwhelming and exiting, the installation points to the malleability of meaning evoked in the juxtapositions found in a collection. For example, Clark's strands of ivy are cut from the pages of old atlases, whose information is rendered useless in the age of Google maps and GIS imaging. However, the maps, in their outmoded condition, point to the complexities of mapping and naming space at work in both colonising and decolonising space.² Like Benjamin's reading of Fuchs, Clark's reworking happens through the display of the collection, changing the context of these maps away from the official registers of the archive or library, into natural outgrowths that colonise the gallery walls. Working without the logic of an academic discourse — biology, geology, or geography for example — Clark removes the object's utility for these fields, pointing to the possibility of contemplating how these discourses frame the natural world represented on the maps. To collect means not only to preserve the histories of these systems, again disposable in the age of satellite mapping, but also reframes their relevance to the present.

2. For an excellent history on colonial mapping in India, see Ian Barrow (2003); Margaret Cartwright and Elri Liebenberg (2003) give an introduction on the history of surveying in South Africa.

3. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2012 in response to the killing of an unarmed African American, Trayvon Martin, by a neighborhood watch volunteer named George Zimmerman. The movement addresses systemic racism in the US, including the deaths of many African Americans by the police. Rhodes Must Fall began in 2015 as a student movement, to decolonise education in South African universities, originally directed against the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. More broadly, the movement, which is ongoing, is working for equal access to university and for greater diversity in its faculty and students.

Clark archives a different set of disposable images, namely protest signs documenting decolonial activism in South Africa and the United States (US), in a series of ten watercolour and collage works entitled *Figure & ground exercises (Möbius strip, or how can a continuum have two sides?)* (2015) (Figure 3). Here, using a number of watercolour splotches, many of them similar to the bedrock collages in *Flying and falling*, Clark pastes slogans — whose letters are cut from photographs of black models Clark purposed from old magazines — taken from images of protest signs left behind at Black Lives Matter and Fees/Rhodes Must Fall protests.³

Instead of the image of the protests, Clark working with refuse that remains after the protest's end suggests the ability of police or government to disperse the protestors, consigning their demands to the past. And yet, with many of the protestor's demands



FIGURE **N° 3a**



Julia Rosa Clark, *Figure & ground exercises (Möbius strip, or how can a continuum have two sides?) Placards 1-5*, 2015. Found texts, collage, watercolour and gouache on paper. 59 x 41.5 cm (each). Courtesy of the artist and whatiftheworld gallery.

she quotes on the placards such as: ‘where is the better life promised to us’ — challenging progress — or ‘we shall overcome’ — evoking the 1960’s Civil Rights movements in the US, Clark’s collecting unearths their persistence in the present. The protest posters are haunted with the demands of the past. Likewise, Clark’s use of black skin cut from advertisements, evokes the images of progress rendered through the access to disposable capital that might wash over such strife, such as the dream of middle-class affluence, but equally so, the relationship such demands talk to the inequalities of capitalism. The narrative of disposability wrought by Clark’s work follows the post-colonial scholar Ranjana Khanna’s (2008:184-185) definition of disposability: a simultaneous condition of disposable wealth — disposable plates or nappies — and the disposability of people through governmental and industrial machineries of violence. By showing disposability



FIGURE **Nº 3b**



Julia Rosa Clark, *Figure & ground exercises (Möbius strip, or how can a continuum have two sides?) Placards 6-10*, 2015. Found texts, collage, watercolour and gouache on paper. 59 x 41.5 cm (each). Courtesy of the artist and whatiftheworld gallery.

as a two-fold function of the erasure of the protestor and their historical condition as a disposable labour force in South African history, the bedrock Clark paints in the series becomes a surface to be exploded, much like the narratives of progress that would consign the political demands of the slogans to the past.

The capacity of collecting in Clark's practice is borne from the valueless and disposable — an inventiveness Benjamin also celebrates in Picasso's stereometry, Klee's interiority, Brecht's *v-effekt*, Loos's rejection of ornament, and above all, Mickey Mouse's improvisation. The inventiveness of these modernist tactics, Benjamin (1999c:731-736) argues, rises from the blank slate left by the ruination of the First World War and the mass inflation of the Great Depression. These artists, congruent in the a belief in a

vanguard narrative of modernity and radical rupture, communicate 'in a completely new language ... arbitrary, constructed nature, in contrast to organic language', shaking off the shackles of tradition and seek to speak from the poverty of everyday life (Benjamin 1999c:733-734). Within the radical reworking of the rubble of modern life in Benjamin's essay, the Marxist philosopher Esther Leslie (2013) notes the curious absence of the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. In his collage-based practice, Schwitters continually reworks capitalist excess; his *Merz* practice – associated with the German *Kommerz*, or commerce – comprises obsessive collecting, and, as in Clark's practice, re-arranging such refuse into works of art. Schwitters's *Merz* practice reaches its apotheosis in his construction of *Merzbau* (1937), where the whole of the artist's Hannover home is transformed into an artwork. Schwitters's reworking of the home, affixing junk to the structure's interior, is both the asylum in the sense of preserving his hordes of collected junk and symbolic of Schwitters's experience of exile: the original *Merzbau* was destroyed in 1943, and the artist constructed new versions in Norway and then Britain while fleeing the Nazis (Cooke 2013).⁴ Within this pile of wreckage, Schwitters's work both exemplifies the protective and transformative condition of the collector's asylum; as Leslie (2013:424) describes *Merzbau*, it is 'a ghost to itself ... overwritten with a new context'. Thus it is unsurprising, given Marx's comments on the spectrality of capitalism, that asylum addresses such haunting, by 'divest[ing] things of their commodity character' (Benjamin 1999a:10).⁵

Schwitters's reworking, an asylum, preserves the objects' fore-histories, taking them out of economic circulation, and placing them in new contexts. Clark potentiates a similar experience in *Flying and falling*; dwelling with the objects in her installation becomes a contemplative strategy of reinterpreting agency through 'traditions of improvised practice'.⁶ In this shuttling between the present experience of the object and the histories of its reception – what Benjamin describes as the object's demand on the present – the past haunts the present. Haunting, as in Schwitters's reworked hordes of waste, calls attention to Benjamin's use of phantasmagoria to explain the uncanny, spectral conditions of the commodity found in the arcades, but also in the histories of universal exhibitions, including the 1851 Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace where Europeans were rapidly coming into contact with imported goods from its colonies.⁷ Later, Khanna (2003:261-263) turns to haunting as a form of melancholia, potentiating a post-colonial, nationalist critical agency in her reading of Sachs's *Black Hamlet* (1937), returning to psychoanalysis as method for confronting the residues of imperialism that continue to condition the present.⁸ Despite Benjamin's use of the phantasmagoria to explain the commodity's spectral qualities, his critiques of capitalism do not extend fully to the fantasies generated by imperial goods appearing in Europe's markets, leaving imperialism a complex blind spot within his work.

4. For detailed information on *Merzbau*, see Elizabeth Gamard (2000).

5. Karl Marx (1974:128) describes commodities as having 'a phantom-like objectivity'.

6. Dwelling's relationship to thinking is a central component to Martin Heidegger's essay "Building, dwelling, thinking" (1971). On Dada practice in South Africa, see Roger van Wyk and Kathryn Smith (2016).

7. On imperialism, consumerism and gender see Anne McClintock (1995). Margaret Cohen (1989) examines Benjamin's interest in the phantasmagoria as a form of dialectical critique of European enlightenment narratives of progress. She explains phantasmagoria's conceptual roots in Benjamin's psychoanalytically inflected use of the collective dream; she argues that Benjamin turns to the phantasmagoria to evoke the reifying force of the commodity more clearly.

8. Khanna (2003:ix) mentions a further overlap between the "dark continent" as Freud's metaphor for female sexuality and Henry Morton Stanley's metaphor for Africa. Stanley's use of the metaphor helps extend the metaphor of haunting as a shadow in the European enlightened discourses of progress Benjamin that critiques throughout his work. In this way, one can see imperialism as a further form of haunting in European modernity.

Visualising colonial excess

Montage, which lies at the core of Dadaist collage, and influential in both Clark's and Benjamin's work, re-appears as a rhetorical strategy to explore modern life in both the *Arcades project* and *One-way street* (1928). In both texts, investigations into modernity allude to imperialism, and yet leave its conditions under-developed. Throughout *One-way street* Benjamin writes aphoristically to explore the spatial transformations of modern life: the interior explodes into a gigantic scale, and exterior worlds miniaturise into a toy set. In several entries, Benjamin makes reference to contact with non-European nations coloured by the politics of colonialism. Kraniauskas's (1994) reading of Benjamin's "colonial unconscious" examines one entry entitled "Mexican embassy", where Benjamin (2016:29), inspired by Baudelaire, recounts a dream in which he is on an expedition that encounters an ancient religious sect whose mass culminated in a wooden bust shaking its head in denial at a Mexican fetish. Kraniauskas emphasises the dream-like nature of Benjamin's entry as informed by psychoanalysis and Surrealism, and yet its reference to mythology emerges from the consumer culture of European markets. The entry is coloured by capitalist consumption, and thus has its origins in Europe; it begins with an epigraph from Baudelaire where the fetish is witnessed, presumably in a market, among many other idols exotic to France (Kraniauskas 1994:146, 150). The market place as a zone of contact with imperialism emerges again in the *Arcades project*, where Benjamin emphasises how such goods are reduced to mere style and drained of their histories at world exhibitions. His observations lead Caitlin Vandertop (2016:718) to contend that Benjamin 'responds both to the rise of fascism in Europe, and attendant geopolitical events elsewhere, including the colonial war in Ethiopia'.

By citing the presence of imperialism filtered through commodities, and yet placing the idol's origin in a mythic geography and time, the problems in "Mexican embassy" echo Theodor Adorno's (2007:118) famous critique of the *Arcades project* exposé of 1935, in which he urges his colleague to consider the 'categories of world trade and imperialism ... the arcade as a bazaar ... antique shops as world-trade markets', and insisting that Benjamin's approach would 'unearth' this material from the 'refuse, remnants, [and] debris' of nineteenth century Paris. Adorno's critique, along with his own close reading of "Mexican embassy", leads Kraniauskas (1994:151) to conclude that colonialism remains 'unconscious' within Benjamin's work.

Kraniauskas's reference calls to mind psychoanalysis, whose analytic work to understand the ego is similar to Clark's insistence that 'traditions of improvised practice' elicit an understanding of the self. Benjamin's interest in psychoanalysis and Surrealism that guide his anthropological studies of the rapid transformations of modernity, Kraniauskas (1994:149-



FIGURE N° 4



Julia Rosa Clark, *Exchange/Gift/Theft*, 2012. Found objects, paper, paint. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and whatiftheworld gallery.

150) argues, link to his larger project of historical awakening, and Clark's traditions of improvisation – understood as a critical history – offer a similar potential to unearth the histories of imperial trade.⁹ Clark addresses colonial appropriation and claiming in her 2012 exhibition entitled *Booty* (whatiftheworld, Cape Town). Its central component, an installation entitled *Exchange/Gift/Theft*, features a bounty of trinkets ornamented with her painted jewel-like appliques arranged atop a cheap plaid blanket and strip woven cloth.

In *Booty*, Clark's exploration of exchange and consumption evinces the economic systems of appropriation and circulation in Benjamin's reading of Paris where exotic goods, including woven bowls, looms, jewellery, fruit, and the jewel-like forms are displayed. Clark emphasises their relevance to imperial appropriation in her notebooks for the exhibition, where images of indigenous peoples in North America and European colonisers meeting, roadside salesmen, etchings of London's Crystal Palace, Picasso collages, Orientalist paintings, and hordes of gold coins represent colonialism's place within systems of disposable wealth and modernist creativity.¹⁰ The centrality of Orientalist consumption is further alluded to in *Voyages into the night (the orientalist)* (2012), where Clark layers cut-out images of Persian rugs from an exhibition or shop catalogue – their

9. Andrew Benjamin (2013) compares psychoanalysis with Benjamin's relationship between present and a future to come.

10. For details on Clark's source material used in *Booty* see jrcnotebooks (2012).

excess and multiplicity is more evocative of the eternal hell of a Saturday at Ikea than the Orientalist's fantasy-driven journey into the Levant – flanked by long strands of Clark's painted jewels that evoke beaded curtains. These curtains further underscore the consumption of otherness central to Benjamin's Europe that can be found in the curio stands that populate Clark's hometown of Cape Town. The disposability of the curio – an empty signifier of "Africanness" purchased by the tourist – merge with further images of disposable excess in Clark's studies. For instance, Andreas Gursky's photograph *99 Cent* (ironically itself a luxury object crafted from the largesse of a 99 Cent store), merges with images of wreckage and disaster – wreckage from airplane crashes, floating garbage in the ocean, dwellings altered by hoarding, and ephemera piled at roadside memorials to the dead – that feel at home in the rubble of Benjamin's "Experience and poverty" (1933), or with his angel of history.

And yet, like Benjamin's association with the fecund creativity of modernism that comes out of such devastation, and arms a political response to the ideologies of tradition and authority, Clark's reworking of waste locates another critical tradition that considers the redemptive discourses of post-apartheid nationalism. In several works on *Booty*, Clark considers the history of the Asafo Flag – a hastily and improvised banner of local Fante (Ghana) companies who appropriate images of the coloniser such as the Union Jack – to craft separate images of identity from the order imposed by the coloniser. In *Black flag (Uhuru)*, Clark uses ephemera to expose the signifiers of national identity in post-colonial African states. Uhuru's socialist liberation philosophy referenced in the work's title is redoubled by other images of black power; a soul record peeks out of the green central stripe of the flag recalling its vitality in articulating black identity across the diaspora. Clark's use of a black, green, red and yellow colour scheme found in the flags of many African nations reminds the viewer of nationalism itself as a tradition of improvisation – suggested in the Asafo Flag as a symbol of affiliation – that continually reworks the histories of its pre-colonial and colonial histories to understand itself in the present.

Clark equally uses the Asafo Flag as a tradition to explore the conditions of settler colonialism through a similar collage entitled *White flag (squall)* (2012) (Figure 5). In *White flag (squall)*, Clark uses an old surveying map as a substrate to layer the page's surface with a mass of cut-outs – whose oval shapes give the effect of fossils – that reference exploration. The map is bounded by two painted sheets of paper, a dusty rose band at the bottom and an orange band at the top, calling the apartheid-era South African flag to mind. By using surveying maps and the historical textbook images of exploration, Clark evokes the settler mentality of mapping as a form of claiming and possessing a colony and the racial policing of land ownership further realised in South Africa through legislation such



FIGURE N° 5



Julia Rosa Clark, *Black flag (Uhuru)* (left) and *White flag (squall)* (right), 2012. Glitter, found image, paper, paint and wood (*Black Flag*), found images, paper, paint and wood (*White Flag*). 64 x 94 cm (*Black flag*), 84 x 188 cm (*White flag*). Courtesy of artist and whatiftheworld gallery.

as the 1913 Natives Land Act. By titling the exhibition *Booty*, Clark both refers to treasure – akin to the hordes of silver in Benjamin’s childhood cabinet or Benjamin terming Baudelaire’s poetry ‘rhyme booty’ – and piracy as a form of reclamation and resistance. Akin to the flags, in the detritus of *Flying and falling*, one encounters images of Roman sculpture, suggesting archaeological digs and colonial appropriation, and its reworking in symbols such as the royal crown affixed to the wall. The crown also references British dominion over South Africa and its repurposing as a motif in Basotho blankets as a signifier of Sotho culture, providing yet another example of reworking and refashioning the past.

Clark’s deliberate reference in *Booty* to the improvisations inherent in fashioning Asafo flags reframes the intimate archive of her studio practice to interrogate the conditions of nationalism and history, suggesting an urgency to reconstructing history in the face of a redemptive post-apartheid ideology. By reworking waste in this context, Clark suggests ways of re-interpreting and reframing the collector’s archive as a way of considering the post-colonial condition of nationalism. In this post-colonial condition, the asylum takes a radically different form and improvisation, evoking Benjamin’s philosophy of history to reframe questions of determinism and fate.

In the above discussion, I have framed two separate questions bound between the traditions of improvised practice that drive Clark's work: one that considers how improvisation, thinking with Benjamin, unearths a historical materialist practice, and the second, how turning Clark's practice into Benjamin's materialist philosophy of history, exposes what Kraniauskas may consider the colonial unconscious within Benjamin's work. While both these questions may be explicatory, they equally return to Khanna's definition of disposability – both as comfort and as disposable people – figured through psychoanalysis. Specifically, Khanna (2008) discloses disposability's link with psychoanalysis through Freud's reading of faeces as the primal form of gift, where he compares it with gold. Disposable wealth and the disposability of the person are represented through defecation as a gift to the mother which 'demonstrates an attempt to control the disposability of life itself' (Khanna 2008:184), and return to Clark's interests in scatology and the hordes of gold, piles of money, and precious jewels represented in *but there is a storm*.

Attentive to the political and social overlap between 'capital and its excess' and the disposability of people, the asylum emerges as an architecture whose function is to contain disposable people – labourer or refugee, in particular women – who exist as remnants, the excess, of capitalist comfort and the bystanders of its architecture of war that renders the inmate in a permanent sense of haunting (Khanna 2008:184, 194).¹¹ Khanna's analysis of disposability is certainly topical in present-day South Africa, facing a climate of xenophobia, social stratification, and demands to restructure South Africa's universities; all evoked in Clark's *Figure & ground exercises*. Moreover, the asylum as a site of haunting at play in Clark's, Benjamin's and Schwitters's uses of collecting to re-engage the destruction of modern life, and the excess of capital, also indicates how Benjamin's psychoanalytic inflections may enjoin Clark's own work on nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa.

Faeces as a signifier of loss, obsessively dug through symbolically in psychoanalysis and practically by the scatologist, becomes a symbol of the self that one cannot easily let go of – a process manifest in Clark's and Schwitters's obsessive collecting – which introduces the condition of melancholia. The melancholic – a central concept in Freud's and Khanna's work – whose continual grief-work unceasingly tests the limits of loss leaves the melancholic as an 'unwilling critic of the status quo' (Khanna 2008:196). Developing a notion of 'critical melancholia' through the need for constant testing of the relationships between present and past, Khanna (2003) turns to a close reading of Sachs's *Black Hamlet*, a psychoanalytic study of a Rhodesian tribal healer named John Chavafambria. *Black Hamlet*, like *Booty*, places the question of traditional filiation and national identity at the centre of the text: through Sachs's position as a Lithuanian Jewish émigré to South Africa and Chavafambria as a traditional healer working as a

11. Khanna explains this through a reference to a *New York Times* article about the uninterred cremated remains of 3 489 inmates of the Oregon State Hospital in the United States. One former patient advocated for the remains to remain in the closet they had always been stored in as an 'honest representation of where we were', in a condition that Khanna (2008:184-185) argues would leave the hospital haunted with the reality of the disposability of life for former inmates. On the spectre, also see Jacques Derrida (2006).

labourer in a modernising Johannesburg, *Black Hamlet* renders belonging uncertain, and collapses the distinctions between organic and traditional intellectual, the civilised and primitive (Khanna 2003:236-237, 243-244). What further binds the two, is the interpretive work they do (which at one point takes place in the asylum): Sachs's work as psychoanalyst and Chavafambria's practice as a traditional healer through throwing bones. Their practices are akin to Benjamin's interest in dream-analysis and Clark's work with traditions such as reading entrails or faeces as a form of testing reality.

Finally, Khanna argues that Chavafambria's sense of self remains haunted between tradition and 'Bantu nationalism', a reading realised through the materiality of the discarded bones whose object is both material and messianic by enjoining past and present. This testing of limits, and an inability to be fully incorporated into European discourses of nation-statehood, renders a critical melancholia, by which the post-colonial nation state, and its archive, remains perpetually haunted by its pre-colonial and colonial histories (Khanna 2003:246-247, 261-263). Clark's work, constructed in a very different time of national transition – post-apartheid euphoria – remains equally obsessive in its attempt to reconcile the fragments of the archive, to repurpose the outmoded and to unearth the fossils and images of a history that the post-apartheid archive attempts to lay to rest.¹² The Asafo Flag provides one avenue to rework these symbols of national identity, just as the loose tulle crowded with advertisements finds different images of bones, cosmetics and mapping – all of which are associated with traditions of improvisation, imperial domination and capitalist consumption that overload Clark's sense of self.

Each of these materials – tulle or the flag as fabric – returns to Benjamin one last time. In 'Fate and character', Benjamin ([1919] 1996:204-206) describes fate as an ever-tightening mesh of fabric; locating the potential of its other, the inventiveness of character through a process of divination that undoes the fixity and juridical determinism of fate. By picking up the single thread, or loose object in Clark's scattering, her archive prompts one to work through its materiality, to invent new readings borne from the object's contact between past and present, personal and public that equally inform Benjamin's materialist histories. The methods espoused in *Flying and falling* may not make direct reference to the political. However, their interpretive work turned towards the haunting of the disposable – advertisement and person – in *Figure & ground exercises* creates a collector's asylum by which repurposing the discarded remainders of unrest construct a perpetual haunting, always already present within South Africa's history, make a demand akin to Benjamin's angel turned towards the past to potentiate a future to come.

12. See Derrida (2002) for a discussion of the archive in South Africa.

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