I want to be clear here that when I use the term ghostly I am not speaking metaphorically.

Dennis Childs, Slaves of the State, 2015

Those early Africans came with nothing but the body, which would become the repository of everything they would need to survive. The Body Memory if you will. For four hundred years those black bodies would withstand the onslaught of empire. Those black bodies are, in fact, the only thing standing between empire and a state of total annihilation. The erasure of memory in the face of history. Because to erase the body is to erase the memory.

M. NourbeSe Philip, Interview with an Empire, 2002

This version of FOUND:

Whose Culture? The modern nations’ within whose borders antiquities—the ancient artifacts of peoples long disappeared—happen to have been found? Or the world’s peoples’, heirs to antiquity as the foundation of culture that has never known the political borders but has always been fluid, mongrel, made from contact with new, strange, and wonderful things. [Emphasis mine]


In taking the next step in my work, the exploration of non-intention, I don’t solve the puzzle that the mesostic string presents. Instead I write or find a source text which is then used as an oracle. I ask it what word shall I use for this letter and what one for the next, etc. This frees me from memory, taste, likes and dislikes... with respect to the source material, I am in a global situation. Words come first from here and then from there. The situation is not linear. It is as though I am in a forest hunting for ideas. [Emphasis mine]

John Cage, Composition in Retrospect, 1982

Appropriation and plagiarism are here to stay.

Kenneth Goldsmith, “I Look to Theory Only When I Realize That Somebody Has Dedicated Their Entire Life to a Question I Have Only fleetingly Considered,” 2015

WHOSE FOUND—WHOSE LIVED?

In thinking about found and appropriated art I was reminded of a project that I began a few years ago that I have been unable to finish. It was started by an Art 21 interview of the artist Carrie Mae Weems discussing “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried”—a powerful photographic series that appropriated daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women and other “found” images. Weems discussed how one of the archives that she “appropriated from” contacted and threatened to sue her.

In the interview she discusses how Harvard, the most affluent University in the world, told her that she didn't have the right to use their images, their slave daguerreotypes. So Weems responded, yes sue me. She states, “I think I maybe don't have a legal case, but maybe I have a moral case that could be made that might be really useful to carry out in public.” And after some worry, she responded to the institution that a court case might be “a good thing” and that this was a conversation that “we” should have in court, because such a discussion “would be instructive for any number of reasons…”

Harvard responded and stated that if they could just receive a portion of the sales, that that would suffice. Weems disagreed—she would...
slavery constituted the objects of a "living laboratory"; the objects of his commissioned daguerreotypes were interchangeable and yet essential to his studies. As objects, rather than subjects of a material world, they were evidence, albeit abstracted. Photography was thus used to abstract and interrogate what he could not know, but felt he could capture and theorize.

After the daguerreotypes in South Carolina were captured, Agassiz also wanted to document what he thought were "the dangers of miscegenation." With the help of the philosopher William James, he traveled to Brazil during the U.S. Civil War to document what he believed were the horrors of miscegenation, and to collect more "evidence" for his scientific theory concerning racial classification. When Agassiz and James returned, Darwin's theories were being contested, but felt he could capture and theorize. It became clear that a collection of photographs would not suffice as scientific proof. It would not be enough to sway the shrill community—his early theories for apartheid would be shelved and put to use at another time.

Since the daguerreotypes no longer sufficed as scientific evidence, he made images of Greek statues and Roman figures, sat in a box in the zoology department at Harvard University. Agassiz's son donated his father's research to the university and the archive remained in the zoology department until 1757, when they were "discovered" and quickly moved to the museum and exhibited in 1986. They remain the property of Harvard University: this is the provenance of their ownership.

There is a question asked by postcolonial and Indigenous archivists of utmost importance to those of us who live under hegemonic power: are these your records, where are your memories? If the "portraits" of faces are yours, where are your stories? Where are your ghosts?

When Carrie Mae Weems takes the daguerreotypes of captive men and women, she does this through the language of grief, the politics of haunting, and the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.10 For Agassiz, the bodies of those captive under chattel
memories and ghosts are present. The found that declares MINE when movements are in place tending to the damage. The found declares MINE when movements are in place tending to the damage. The ... The found that declares MINE when movements are in place tending to the damage. The community the phantoms congregate around, for, long:

Eunsong Kim

What might it be to imagine a future, present and a history—where Black artists and poets are not “sharing” or borrowing “forms” from white institutions but are fundamentally prompting and innovating all forms? Altering from the root, always from the root. In addition, what might it be to situate the word “found” not as “accidentally” or “new” or as the ephemerism for the colonial encounter— but as Carrie Mae Weems, Sasha Huber, M. Natasha Philip and others have situated as encounter memories? Rather than “found this,” what if we were “found you,” “finding you,” searching tending caring for you— “I found this,” haunted by, lived through, survived— so that it isn’t “I” go into some place and take you and make you and sell that but are connected haunted torn searching for these memories & will never be the same again once they find us— And not to be mistaken: not all of us are connected in the same ways. Some of us have been granted access by the law but have none of the memories.

In “Ethnicity as Provenance,” archivist Joel Wurl writes of state and archival documents: “History is filled with accounts of protest mobs destroying sites of records that were seen as representing authoritarian rule. Such were not records of the people but of the regimes—information used to control, distort, intimidate, and punish.” However, archival “material is now owned by the repository; the attention given to it is aimed at a large group of potential users, most of whom are not seen as being affiliated with the originators.” Wurl thus posits that provenance (“who owns what”) is in itself a political question, asking what might it be, in this political thought experiment, to configure the root not to the “owner” of the records, but the body? The community the phantoms congregate around, for, long:

Ethnicity as provenance
Memory as root
grasping by the root—Angela Davis notes—is the definition of radicality finding, rooting, pleading for those already part of the continuum Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber and a team of academicians, artists, poets, and activists have been working on an impossible petition to rename a stretch of the Swiss Alps. They have located the sites dedicated to Agassiz’s name: they have begun researching how this name came to be. They have met with politicians and challenged them during their meetings. They have traveled through all the routes provided by the state and have been denied. They write that they have been rejected by all the authorities. Petition to be continued nevertheless!” They have suggested renaming the sites with the slave name provided on the daguerreotypes “Rentyhorn;” this is not a perfect solution, but there is no perfect solution. Just stabs and love and tears and endless labour. Huber has traveled to sites of Agassiz’s name: in Brazil, Boston, all over Europe, creating a series of lists, maps—a cartography of his name. She has haunted the sites, and documented her body, as bodies before have been documented.

The documentation of her performance, titled “Agassiz: The Mixed Traces Series, Somatological Triptych of Sasha Huber, Rio Janeiro, 2010,” displays Huber’s nude body against the backdrop of Agassiz’s site in Brazil. Huber inserts her body, as bodies before have been displayed, Huber’s project is research-driven, and a history—where Black artists and poets are not “sharing” or borrowing “forms” from white institutions but are fundamentally prompting and innovating all forms? Altering from the root, always from the root. In addition, what might it be to situate the word “found” not as “accidentally” or “new” or as the ephemerism for the colonial encounter— but as Carrie Mae Weems, Sasha Huber, M. Natasha Philip and others have situated as encounter memories? Rather than “found this,” what if we were “found you,” “finding you,” searching tending caring for you— “I found this,” haunted by, lived through, survived— so that it isn’t “I” go into some place and take you and make you and sell that but are connected haunted torn searching for these memories & will never be the same again once they find us— And not to be mistaken: not all of us are connected in the same ways. Some of us have been granted access by the law but have none of the memories.

Huber’s says of the performance that she is the “product of what Agassiz would not approve” and that this was a way for her to show “solidarity with the people in the photographs.” Huber’s project is research-driven, confrontational, argumentative—with a target. It is situated in the local, in bringing together residents, academics, and curators to discuss the significance of Agassiz’s legacy. In addition, it is transnational. She links her body to the historical and violent internments of Agassiz’s sites, from Boston to Switzerland to Brazil. Her body unforgettable, entered, authored, at the site of damage, her unforgettable body catalogued, documented, enters to alter the archive forever—in defining provenance and “new records,” Caswell writes: “In the view from the continuum, all of these activations—past, present, and future—form the never-ending provenance of these records, each adding a new layer of meaning to a constantly evolving collection of records that open out into the future.” Huber ruptures and continues: Archive as nuisance, as act of the past, present and future collide, negotiate, find: live.

In Slaves of the State, Dennis Childs writes that “the legal atrocity of prison slavery has been evacuated through the past, present, and future—the political act of the past, present and future collide, negotiate, find: live.

12 We do not reject that form and content are ever separable. No matter how much they test us, no matter how much they fail us and force us and push us to repeat.

13 If we lie to their faces we will go home and whisper no.

14 Equally, we believe that poets have not spoken up enough about the intimate implications of form and power, form as justice. We believe some of the older poets have convinced themselves that poetry is not the realm to discuss power, accountability, and radical justice.

15 The documentation of her performance, titled “Agassiz: The Mixed Traces Series, Somatological Triptych of Sasha Huber, Rio Janeiro, 2010,” displays Huber’s nude body against the backdrop of Agassiz’s site in Brazil. Huber inserts her body, as bodies before have been documented, but are connected haunted torn searching for these memories & will never be the same again once they find us— And not to be mistaken: not all of us are connected in the same ways. Some of us have been granted access by the law but have none of the memories.

Questions of Provenance: In “Ethnicity as Provenance,” archivist Joel Wurl writes of state and archival documents: “History is filled with accounts of protest mobs destroying sites of records that were seen as representing authoritarian rule. Such were not records of the people but of the regimes—information used to control, distort, intimidate, and punish.” However, archival “material is now owned by the repository; the attention given to it is aimed at a large group of potential users, most of whom are not seen as being affiliated with the originators.” Wurl thus posits that provenance (“who owns what”) is in itself a political question, asking what might it be, in this political thought experiment, to configure the root not to the “owner” of the records, but the body? The community the phantoms congregate around, for, long:

...
What figures like Seidel and Goldsmith could never imagine, what their poetry could never produce—as their poetic project is dependent on the racial violence, abjection, and sacrifice NOT OF THEIR OWN—is a poetics that supports the imagination of Bree Newsome. Or poems—if they must continue writing poems—that inspect the language of police, and the metaphors of white modernism/hollywood/the constitution. A poem whose existence fundamentally debilitates whiteness. Rather than poetry dependent on racial abjection as its core spectacle—poetry that makes whiteness abject.

There are some examples of this. Poet and researcher Brett Zeher tells me that over a hundred investment bankers took their lives in the last few months, that he could count. Most of this did not make the news because what would we do with this information. He tells me that highly rewarded technicians of financial capitalism cannot survive within their projected designs. He tells me that he’s working on a poem titled “A Living Dream of Dead Bankers” that lists their deaths. He asks me what I think about radical suicide and I’m horrified. But I realize that the site of this terror is the site that white modernism could never work from: the site of self-betrayal, the site of risk where damage will absolutely follow.

I am going to state very plainly (so that when you call me a philistine I can say: yes, YES), something so didactic and repetitive as to ensure against confusion: there are no better white modernisms. What is made legible through the discourse of modernism is made through the discourse dependent on colonialism and chattel slavery. What is made powerful by modernism, what is made great, is made so because: whiteness as property, whiteness as abstract.

Fred Moten, discussing M. NourbeSe Philip’s work: “Modernity—the consequences of the slave trade, settler colonialism and the democratization of sovereignty through which the world is imagined, graphed, and grasped is a socio-ecological disaster that can neither be calculated nor conceptualized as a series of personal injuries.”

Modernity/avant-garde/conceptualism being challenged, being contested, and decaying does not mean those that have been classified as such will be erased. Rather, we will be tasked with reading all such artifacts radically anew. If something or someone is made illegible because the branding/legacy structure of modernism is dismantled—it is because they should’ve been illegible all along. Black artists and writers of colour do not disappear because critiques of whiteness are entered into modernism/ avant-garde/conceptualism. This is to suggest that black and other non-white artists exist by the grace of whiteness. The critique of white supremacy is a challenge to examine our gaze—and to acknowledge what has always been damaging, illegible to us (because we are without access, because we are with access but cannot be near it).

Additionally, the critique of conceptualism should not and cannot be contained to those who self-identify as such—the roots of this practice run back to a longer, historical discourse in which black body or blackness (as appropriated, antagonized, or as the marker of the retrograde) is necessary to move the idea, the concept forward. But this isn’t the only tradition. And this tradition has always existed with critiques. This is to state once again, very plainly, that black artists sought to critique the premise of modernism, conceptualism, abstraction—by looking into the materiality and the archive of their making.

*There is another instrumentality for POCs and Black women, and that is for white people to take the processes and concepts of our work and turn them into the grounds for their careers, as niches on the job market, as beginning singularity that had no presence or expression in them before they absorbed our light. To make our stuff into ‘a thing’ that they do, theorize, brand and perform. But here is note: you cannot do what I do because you do not love who I love."

Tisa Bryant, 28 September 2015

You cannot do what I do because you do not love who I love.

I am accused of tending to the past as if I made it, as if I sculpted it with my own hands. I did not. This past was waiting for me. Lucille Clifton, "I Am Accused of Tending to the Past"

M. NourbeSe Philip has written that her Zong! is “ritual masquerading as conceptual work” Ritual—as illegible to the western, modernist tradition. Traveling via illegibility. Carrie Mae Weems and archival banditry. Sasha Huber and impossible solidarity: Question provenance. Complicate those without memories—complicate and destroy their ties to ownership, to the archive, to the found, to appropriation. Militant commitment, care for impossible solidarity as Philip writes: Ritual Inserting the body to transform the archive offering objects and poems so that they may live, look through and breathe The risk has always been with here and in them now the risk cannot be transferred Searching through records of violence for glimpses Waiting waiting endless, impossible labor Rejected by all authorities—ritual to continue nonetheless
This essay is an extension of one of my dissertation chapters, currently titled “Violence & Provenance: The Appropriation and Transmission of Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Sanya Huber.” I would like to thank Paula El-Tayeb, Pia de Lichtenberg, Grace Kyeung Hee Hong, Michelle Caswell, Tia BRYANT, Daniel Harris, Tonya Foster, Samiya Bashir, Dallas Childs, Lucas de Lima, Bhano Kapil, Lara Jaffe, and Avery Gordon, Gregory Layton, Don Mee Choi, michiko hoshino, Lesley Bailey, and Alla Griffin for guidance and advice throughout every stage of this essay. I am also deeply gratitude to my colleagues, friends, and Sanya Huber for reading this essay draft and I am forever grateful for her support. I would like to thank the editors at Unprompted, Martin Kedzior, Jeffrey Malicki and Naolin Himeda for their editorial counsel and for publishing this newly formed essay.

1 Samuel Morton was a doctor, professor and a notable collector of human skulls. He authored A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America in which he outlined his theory that cranial capacity could be measured objectively. Morton was a professor of Philadelphia University. I encountered one version of the project in March 2015, on the second floor of Philadelphia’s Institute for Contemporary Art. Abbas and Abou-Rahme had styled two large rooms as the workplace of an anonymous radical cell. A disorderly archive of leftist printed matter piled up across tables, desks, and couches: the writings of Victor Serge, tracts of Marxian analysis, documents on the life of the “Dillinger of the Desert” Abu Jildah, studies in the history of Palestinian communication, and printed-out scenes of protestphotocopied again and again to the brink of abstraction. The walls were likewise paced-over with a collection of realizations of maxims and exhortations of ecocentric origin. One quote, from the young Roberto Bolaño, leapt out as the cluttered space’s animating ethos: “May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth.” Indeed, the rooms suggested their tenants were in the midst of some exhaust effort to recover forgotten origins—perhaps their own.

2 A hectic electronic soundtrack, and one in particular seemed to encapsulate the project: “The EROS 61 SCAPEGOAT 9."

3 This is from Agassiz’s letter to his mother concerning his life in Boston and his feelings towards them. Agassiz to his mother, December 1864 (Houghton Library, Harvard University). I first found this letter reading Brian Wallis’s Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” American R, 2 (1998): 38–61.

4 This argument is indebted to archivalist Michelle Caswell, who in a personal email from June 2017 stated “Just because you can access something, doesn’t mean you should.” Just because we have access to records of state violence does not mean they are ours to use. Access should not and cannot justify modification, appropriation, and ownership.

5 This paragraph comes from my dissertation chapte, currently titled “Violence & Provenance: The Appropriation and Transmission of Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Sanya Huber.”

6 This was the titled “Thayer Exhibitions” and spanned 1865–1866.


8 For a theoretical mediation on these works. I encountered one version of the project in March 2015, on the second floor of Philadelphia’s Institute for Contemporary Art. Abbas and Abou-Rahme had styled two large rooms as the workplace of an anonymous radical cell. A disorderly archive of leftist printed matter piled up across tables, desks, and couches: the writings of Victor Serge, tracts of Marxian analysis, documents on the life of the “Dillinger of the Desert” Abu Jildah, studies in the history of Palestinian communication, and printed-out scenes of protestphotocopied again and again to the brink of abstraction. The walls were likewise paced-over with a collection of realizations of maxims and exhortations of ecocentric origin. One quote, from the young Roberto Bolaño, leapt out as the cluttered space’s animating ethos: “May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth.” Indeed, the rooms suggested their tenants were in the midst of some exhaust effort to recover forgotten origins—perhaps their own.

9 “AN IMPULSE THAT KEEPS RETURNING” CONVERSATION WITH BASIL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHME

Cameron Hu

Base Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme’s The Incidental Insurgents is an ambitious series of installations and videos that probe neglected radical traditions of the twentieth century, in Palestine and elsewhere, and their bearing on a contemporary situation characterized by perpetual crisis and apocalyptic imaginaries. Produced between 2012 and 2015, as the Arab revolutions proceeded from the blits of new beginnings to the difficulties of composing a world faithful to them, and as U.S. imperial domination was succeeded in Iraq by the rise of the Islamic State, The Incidental Insurgents is an affecting exploration of the birth, death, and resurrection of alternative futures.

I encountered one version of the project in March 2015, on the second floor of Philadelphia’s Institute for Contemporary Art. Abbas and Abou-Rahme had styled two large rooms as the workplace of an anonymous radical cell. A disorderly archive of leftist printed matter piled up across tables, desks, and couches: the writings of Victor Serge, tracts of Marxian analysis, documents on the life of the “Dillinger of the Desert” Abu Jildah, studies in the history of Palestinian communication, and printed-out scenes of protestphotocopied again and again to the brink of abstraction. The walls were likewise paced-over with a collection of realizations of maxims and exhortations of ecocentric origin. One quote, from the young Roberto Bolaño, leapt out as the cluttered space’s animating ethos: “May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth.” Indeed, the rooms suggested their tenants were in the midst of some exhaust effort to recover forgotten origins—perhaps their own.

In a third, darkened room, two videos alternated on opposing walls. In each one a camera follows a pair of actors—from behind, such that their faces are never seen—as they walk, then over an empty valley, then at a cave, then over an empty valley, then at a shattered concrete shop, then through the windshield of a car driving down the highway. They are in relentless motion without an obvious destination, and so it seems that a version of the same strenuous search carried among the archives now plays out before the landscape. Yet there is something equally claustrophobic about these works. As the videos loop, the protagonists increasingly situationally and determinably close circuit of frustrated desire. Fragments of text flash across the screen in tempo with a hectic electronic soundtrack, and one in particular seemed to encapsulate the project: “The