

Materializing Voice: A Diasporic Lineage of Flour, Spice, and Hair

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“Materializing Voice: A Diasporic Lineage of Flour, Spice, and Hair” attunes to how performative process and material entanglement expand artistic depictions of rape and racism, to decolonize trauma in performative arts practices. In this research, my experiences of the aftermath of rape are considered through the influence of my diasporic identity. The two are entangled as my management of the aftereffects of rape are impacted by my own cultural influences. The project uncovers how the way I have learnt to move through the aftermath of rape and perpetual experiences of racism has been a process of reorienting myself in my body through cycles of pain and perseverance.

From table manners gone awry to displaced matter, the imagery and methods used throughout this project allude to the deeply personal ways in which my trauma is embodied. My body drags itself through flour, curry, and chili powder, and hair emerges and accumulates at the back of my throat. These cyclical and processual rituals piece together a narrative of my body being put back together after having been fragmented through racism and rape. In this practice-based research—the artwork and the writing and thinking through the practice in this essay—I find agency in my body and my voice, inviting others to affectively engage with this agency.

Keywords: trauma, decolonization, Trinidadian folklore, J'ouvert, performance art, video art, book art

“Materializing Voice: A Diasporic Lineage of Flour, Spice, and Hair” explora cómo el proceso performativo y el entrelazamiento material expanden las representaciones artísticas de la violación y el racismo, para decolonizar el trauma en las prácticas de artes performativas. En esta investigación, mis experiencias de las secuelas de un acto de violación se entrelazan con mi identidad diaspórica, ya que mi manejo de las secuelas de la violación se ven afectadas por la influencia de mi cultura. El proyecto descubre cómo la forma en que he aprendido a moverme en las secuelas de la violación y las perpetuas experiencias de racismo ha implicado un proceso de reorientación en mi cuerpo durante ciclos de dolor y perseverancia.

Desde los modales de mesa torcidos hasta la materia desplazada, las imágenes y los métodos utilizados a lo largo de este proyecto aluden a las formas profundamente personales en que se encarna el trauma. Mi cuerpo se arrastra a través de la harina, el curry y el chile en polvo, y el

cabello emerge y se acumula en la parte posterior de mi garganta. Estos rituales cíclicos y procesuales construyen la narrativa de mi cuerpo que se vuelve a componer después de haber sido fragmentado por el racismo y la violación. En esta investigación basada en la práctica — la obra de arte y la escritura y el pensamiento alrededor de la práctica en esta tesis— encuentro agencia en mi cuerpo y en mi voz, invitando a otros a involucrarse afectivamente con esta agencia.

Palabras clave: trauma, descolonización, folclore Trinidad y Tobago, J’ouvert, arte de performance, arte de videos

Preface

I was born in Ottawa, Canada, to an Indo-Trinidadian mother and Euro-Canadian father. The three of us moved to Texas when I was six. Moving to Texas presented me with the first moments where I can remember the color of my skin being used as a cultural signifier. The phrase “where are you from?” usually meant, “what is your ethnicity?” Whenever I responded to “where are you from?” with “Canada,” it was usually followed by, “where are you really from?”

From age six, I grew up spending summer and/or winter holidays in my Trinidadian grandmother’s home listening to stories of my mother’s childhood and local folklore. I spent time at the beach in Maracas eating bake and shark and turning all different shades of brown, bronze, and red. No matter how familiar I became with my mother’s country and culture, no matter how much I acknowledged it as my own, I was still considered foreign. I was teased by my cousins for being so fair and would spend hours in the sun trying to get darker with equal degrees of success and pain. The skin on my shoulders would blister and peel, and the skin on my cheeks would burn bright, hot red. I would go back to Texas after each trip confident in my tan—proof of a link to half of my culture—only to have it fade back to its original moderately brown state.

Brown, but not brown enough.

Each visit to my paternal grandparents in Canada was met with a silent acknowledgment of my otherness. No one teased me for how much darker my skin was in comparison to their own, but the silence made it all the more apparent. I grew up watching musicals (Calamity Jane and Seven Brides for Seven Brothers being a few favorites at the time) and BBC renditions of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte novels. I learnt how to draw, paint, and put on performances for my aunt and grandparents in the basement of their suburban home. My aunt and I would spend hours drawing pictures of women from different eras that we had seen depicted in films, paintings, and read about in books. We colored each one of their arms and face with the same perfect shade of peachy pink. Once I returned to Texas, I would find myself wishing I were fairer, with lighter hair and lighter eyes.

Pale, but not pink enough.

In my pre-teens, my cousin began sexually abusing me. And at nineteen, I was raped at a party in college. The rape resulted in a pregnancy that was followed by severe depression and a failed suicide attempt. In contrast to my history of sexual abuse, which I managed to keep a secret for many years, the rape that occurred thirteen years ago forced me to be much more public about my experiences. While they scraped away the inner lining of my uterus, my mother was on a flight to Trinidad to pay her respects to my very sick grandmother. It was a flight I was supposed to be on. When the

excuses for missing family events, school, and social gatherings with friends began piling up, I became more and more incapable of taking care of myself. Three days after my mother returned to Houston, a doctor told her I would have to be institutionalized or placed under her care and supervision for my safety. She and I chose the latter. This meant trying, painfully, to explain to my mom—why.

I woke up broken
Brown
He woke up smug with his scales
Beige
All I could hear, smell, feel, taste, and see
Crimson
Is this what it means to be a woman?¹

The text above is a compilation of personal journal entries, extracted to recount the experiential catalyst for the content of this article. My experiences of rape and racism have been a motivator and a guide in this text. I experienced rape in specific ways due to racism and, as a performance artist, wanted to understand, work with, and express my experiences. I wanted to let them deepen my own and others' thinking and feeling about rape and racism. I undertook a practice-based project to explore new ways of depicting rape, racism, and trauma, to expand the sorts of depictions I was encountering in performance art. Although they were strong and affective, these artistic depictions seemed to miss something crucial about how rape and trauma are experienced in particular racial contexts, and the larger significance of this gap in a cultural and political context. I also undertook this project with a deep desire to see how performance art could poetically materialize traumatic impact and explore what that might look like through the decolonizing gestures of my matrilineal homeland. I wanted to find how the body can be used to speak despite the hardships of oppression and repression.

Entanglement, in this article, speaks to the complexity of my experiences—the way two or more experiences have intertwined to complicate their original context. Entanglement means it is impossible to consider one experience without the influence of the other. I cannot separate my bodily experiences of rape and the trauma of racism from each other. What I wanted to do with the project was not just work through this for myself—to find ways to work with it in performance—but, as a researcher, to see how this work speaks more broadly in the context of decolonizing politics and the arts. In this sense, both performance art and decolonizing politics have been the context and motivators for this project.

The primary question leading the research of this article is: how can material process and performance manifest autobiographical and entangled experiences of trauma, relating to racialization and rape? As well as: how can this artistic work contribute to decolonizing performance art?² In

¹ Vanessa Godden, *Souconyant*, 2019, audio installation, 4 min., Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 19–22 February 2019.

² By decolonizing performance art, I mean the destabilization of colonial embodiments and pervasiveness of whiteness in the field.

addition to: in what ways does multiculturalism, through the impact of colonialism and Western hegemony, further contribute to racial and cultural alterity?

In this article, I use the term decolonization to describe active attempts to undo colonial influences in the arts. I also reference the political decolonization of Trinidad and Tobago through the country's independence from colonial rule.³ Drawing from my diasporic Indo-Trinidadian identity, I use specific performances and artistic gestures from Trinidadian folklore and Carnival traditions that directly reference colonial resistance leading up to the country's independence. I must note that as a person of Indo-Trinidadian descent, I am considering the ways Indo-Trinidadian customs have become entangled with Afro-Trinidadian customs in folklore and Carnival. This is not to claim Afro-Trinidadian customs as my own through a hollow thread of nationalistic comradeship, but to acknowledge the blending and reconstitution of cultural practices between diasporic peoples resulting from colonialism. By grounding my understandings of decolonization in the histories and traditions of Trinidad and Tobago throughout this research, I prioritize the complex webs of diasporic knowledge from my matrilineal homeland rather than Western canons of knowledge in the arts. I also draw from decolonization theory in the field of art to further frame ideas of decolonization in this research. Australian writer Anna Haebich (2002) defines decolonization as “the unravelling of assumed certainties and the re-imagining and re-negotiating of common futures (70).” In my research, I am working to unravel assumed certainties of traumatic experiences through performative arts practices. I employ this method to not only decentralize whiteness in the arts, but also consider how whiteness continues to pervasively impact my understandings of the field.

Expanding from the ways whiteness impacts my understanding of the arts, I engage with and utilize the term *abjection* through a kind of destabilization of its Eurocentric origins.⁴ Though *abjection* is a European psychoanalytic concept, I am expanding and inflecting it as part of a decolonizing strategy. As a visibly Brown person who has grown up in North America, European psychoanalytic concepts have directly, culturally, and psychically, impacted my body. Now, as a Brown artist, I am seizing the concept affectively and poetically; I am creating new meaning.

This article is an extraction from a larger practice-based research project, titled *Embodying Entanglement* (Godden 2019). It is structured around two live performances and a video from my studio research, *Cartography*, *Purge*, and *Churile*.⁵ The three artworks use organic matter to consider the impacts of trauma on the diasporic body, home, and culture. I utilize an autoethnographic approach to my

³ Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence from Britain in August of 1962. Originally colonized by Spain in the late 1400s, Trinidad and Tobago was governed and settled by several different European powers until the early 1800s, when England took over.

⁴ Please note, ‘abjection’ will be italicized throughout this essay as a way of referring back to this framework of the term.

⁵ Vanessa Godden, *Cartography*, live performance, 15 min., Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 20 February 2019. *Purge*, live performance, 15 min. Exhibited in *Embodying Entanglement*, Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 21 February 2019. *Churile*, 2016, video performance, 3:49. Sound design by Thembi Soddell using sounds sampled from Alice Hui-Sheng and Jim Denley. Exhibited in *Embodying Entanglement*, Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 19 February – 22 February 2019.

writing by interweaving personal experience with academic text. This style of writing is used in order to generatively reflect the artwork discussed in this article.

My matrilineal ancestors' blood and bones built wealth for families in the West. They poured their souls into the land, tilling cane fields for European consumption. Though my maternal family is not indigenous to Trinidad, we haunt and are haunted by it—transforming our own indigenous lands into a distant folktale. I have come to understand citizenship as an exploitative exchange between the laboring Brown body and the West. My studio research draws from these histories to consider the ways transnational ideas of belonging can be interrogated through flour and spice.

Charting a Lineage of the Body through Food

This section looks to the first performance, *Cartography*, to consider how material engagements with the body affectively convey experiential entanglements. Here, I investigate how food-based material engagements with my body performatively materialize processes of managing trauma. I also build connections between *Cartography* and *Purge* in order to examine the ways food's relationship to the body is made complex through concepts of the diaspora. Similar to *Cartography*, *Purge* is a live performance in which I drag myself through flour and spice.⁶ Drawing on Naben Ruthnum's writing (2017) on the colonial contributions to relationships between food and racialization as well as Julietta Singh's text (2018) on the decolonization of mastery, I further illuminate the power of food to act as a decolonizing force in *Cartography*.

Using Food Matter as Metaphor to Highlight the Ineffable

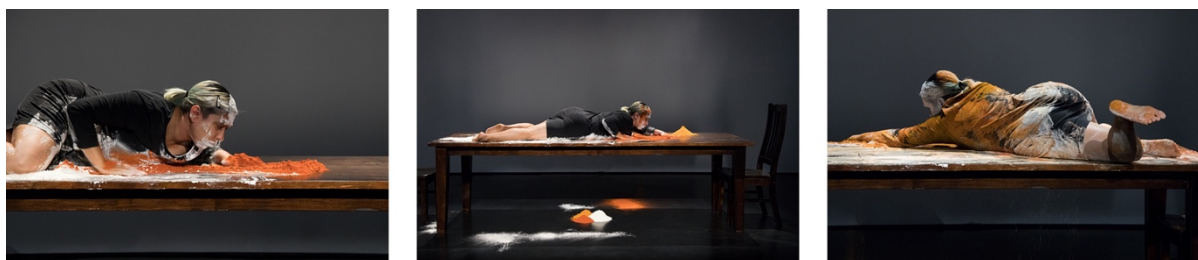


Figure 1: Vanessa Godden, *Cartography*, 2019

Enduring and committed, my body drags itself through flour, chili powder, and curry powder, working to thoroughly marinate itself in *Cartography*. Ignoring the social conventions of dining, I pull, sweep, roll, and shuffle myself across the dining room table in cyclical patterns, all the while, keeping my body tightly pressed against its wooden surface. Instead of using flour and spice as ingredients for my consumption, my body is presented as the consumable object. However, the preparation for my body's consumption occurs atop the place where food is shared, instead of on the conventionally designated workspace of a kitchen bench.

⁶ The connections built between *Cartography* and *Purge* in this section are used to establish that the ways food powders are being conceptualized in *Cartography* are paralleled in *Purge*. *Purge* is analyzed in further detail in the second half of this article.

In my studio research, curry powder, flour, and chili powder serve as material representatives for the three regions that have come to formulate my cultural identity—Canada, Texas, and Trinidad. The food bases are associated with the foods I ate growing up in relation to my Canadian and Trinidadian heritage as well as my Texan upbringing. The colors of the materials correspond to the colors of the land which they represent: flour, the same hue as the whiteness of ground in the dead of winter in Canada; chili, a color similar to the pink clay soil I remember digging into as a child in the backyard in Texas; and curry, a tone matching the golden sand along the shores of some of my favorite beaches in Trinidad. I also reflect on these colors in relation to the ways race is affiliated with exaggerated hues of flesh tones, i.e. my white father, brown mother, and red self.⁷ In the process of dragging myself through flour, chili, and curry, I am not only mapping a path through the complexities of culture, place, and identity but also pointing to the complexities of these ideas through the act of disruption. My body is the tool by which delineated spaces between the three food bases gets interrupted. The act of charting a path through the metaphorical spaces existing in the flour and spice of *Cartography* is messy, disorienting, and othering.

I consider how the multiethnic Brown body is not only othered by Western culture but also the cultures from which it comes. I have grown up recognizing the performances I inhabit in relation to my own culture. For example, when I am around my Trinidadian family, I make it a point to accentuate my knowledge of custom, food, and place while loosening my tongue to match the stride of those around me. Any indication of ignorance on a matter relating to Trinidadian identity is met with an overeagerness to educate the foreign relative. Visits back home to Canada are usually met with, “well, you’re not really Canadian anymore. You’re much more of an American.” In the United States, I am confronted with disconcertion about an inability to categorize me into the country’s sterile classifications of race that are often built on arbitrary categorizations of flesh tones.

Cartography navigates viewers through an unorthodox scene of reductive culinary representations of varied cultures being blended and marinated on my body. The blending of food powders serves as a metaphorical stand-in for haunting recipes of my racialized experiences being brought to the family table. In his article “Tribulations and Western Hallucinations,” artist and art critic Diego Ramirez (2017) comments:

The disquietude of *Cartography* indicates that there is something more disturbing at play than solely a return to cultural origins. While at first glance the work evokes Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* works (1973-77) – a series of actions in which the Cuban artist covered her body with earthly materials such as dirt, the pain connoted by the chili and curry powders suggest an imposition of sorts. Vanessa Godden’s body appears to be subject of a perverse conversation, where meaning making is guided by the thwack of a bigoted kitchen table rant. Indeed, Godden corrupts the return to origin by conjuring an algorithm for casual racism: *brown bodies equal the food they consume*. This gruesome logic, which underpins bitter slurs such as ‘beaner,’ is painfully registered by

⁷ In Trinidadian culture it can be common for people with lighter complexions and mixed-race backgrounds to be referred to as red. My grandfather’s nickname for me as a child was “reds.”

Godden's body. Once clean and wholesome, the artist eerily marks herself with the elements that bring flavor (or a defining character) to the Other in the eyes of the West.

I would say that I am not only performing the act of marking myself “with the elements that bring flavor (or a defining character) to the Other in the eyes of the West,” but also in the eyes of my own varying cultures. I am considering what one culture thinks of the other and how that impacts perceptions of my body, holding trauma, in diasporic space.



Figure 2: Vanessa Godden, *Cartography*, 2019

The food powders used in *Cartography* and *Purge* are generic store-brand flour, curry powder, and chili powder. This particular material selection evokes the contradictions of diasporic existence, how things like curry serve as a connection to a homeland as well as a signifier of either similarity or difference. In his book *Curry: Eating, Reading, and Race*, Ruthnum (2017) calls attention to the flexibility of the concept of curry, how it spans across cultures and continents. He also examines the relationship between culinary cultural authenticity and regionality, explaining that Western perceptions of curry, as a singular culturally-specific meal, is in fact a construct of colonialism and, as such, inauthentic. When speaking of the inauthenticity of the term “curry,” Ruthnum eloquently points out: “the spectacular imprecision of the term speaks to its ability to encompass centuries of food history, cooking, misinterpretation, and reinvention: it’s truly the diasporic meal, even when it stays home” (31). What he means here is that despite curry’s inability to reflect a singular culture and time, these industrialized spice blends labeled as “curry” are tangible reflections of migration—how certain spice blends of one region get reinvented in another. This idea is visualized through Richard Fung’s film *Dal Puri Diaspora* (2012). In this documentary he investigates how food transforms through the diaspora. Fung travels between Canada, India, and the Caribbean to build a deeper understanding of how and why food becomes streamlined and reinvented through migration. The wide spread access to these genericized

spice blends allows for more convenient access to specific kinds of seasonings that may be too difficult to produce individually at home.

When I first moved to Texas in the mid-1990s, the West Indian population was exceedingly small, so access to Trinidadian foods was virtually nonexistent. My mom made do with the spices she found in Indian grocers and had her family ship over specific items like homemade pepper sauce (always stored in a recycled Gatorade container) and pickled plums. Alongside the clichés and tropes that can often be found in curry, the store-brand food powders used in *Cartography* and *Purge* materialize something more. They are evocative of something more pliable and resilient—a blend of the complexities of the diasporic existence that extend beyond longing and belonging.

The use of food matter in *Cartography* and *Purge* also calls to mind the ineffability of traumatic impact and experience. Verbal and written language cannot encapsulate the broad range of human experiences. Notions that humans are able to gain mastery over language are extensions over colonial conceptions that humans are able to gain mastery over land and people. Singh writes about the absurd pursuit of mastering language despite language’s ever-evolving composition. She elaborates by sharing an anecdote about her experiences learning Hindi. Singh writes: “In Hindi, one commonly expresses one’s ability to speak the language as follows: Hindi mujhe aati hain, or ‘Hindi comes to me.’ I do not possess the language. Rather, the language brings itself to me. Somewhere between my summoning, my calling it forth, and its own mobility and malleability, it arrives—almost agentially—and I speak it (2018, 90). The act of calling forth or summoning language acutely translates to the way I am considering my body and the language it creates in collaboration with food matter in my studio research. The language I am summoning is something that lives deep within, it is a part of me, innately written into my heritage.

My mother’s native tongue and by extension my own lineage of language is an amalgamation of speech. In Trinidad, the national language is English, however speech, like many other aspects of Caribbean culture, reflects the country’s extensive colonial histories. Trinidadian Creole encompasses a mixture of English, French, African, Asian, Indigenous, and Spanish languages. From this, I note how, despite colonial attempts to filter out certain languages from the diasporic and Indigenous populations, they sprung forth, building new ways of speaking. This amalgamation of language emphasizes Singh’s notion that language, similar to matter, is not capable of being mastered. Furthermore, it is capable of being worked with. Singh elaborates, “it is as though when we speak to another *through* language, we are also in conversation with language itself (2018, 90).” In relation to entangled trauma, when I “speak to another through language” about my experiences of trauma, conversations between language and trauma also ensue. As evident in Trinidadian Creole, language becomes jumbled following the traumatic impact of colonization. The manner by which language is jumbled in Trinidadian Creole is adaptive, it is ever-evolving while also holding the evidence of attempted erasure or silencing. The connection between materials and my body in my studio research are like the relationship between Singh and her understanding of Hindi—they move one another to speak. Extending from language’s relationship to the body my body and materials also move other bodies, inviting them to respond and connect. Continuing to consider the various ways my studio

research invokes affective modes of speaking, I will next examine the voice more closely and look to the agential power of a vocal lament.

Purging My Voice

I used to have graphic nightmares so vivid I was convinced I was placed back in time and would never escape the horror of being raped. I would be jolted awake by the sounds of screams, surprised to find them coming from my own throat, and even more surprised at my inability to stop them. Sometimes, I still have these nightmares, only they feel less like exact replicas, extractions from the past, and instead are snippets of fear and panic. I have long stopped waking up to the sound of my own wailing voice. What remains is the feeling of fear gripping at my spine. The spasms in my back, emanating from the spine outward, particularly my lower back, feel as though my body is fighting itself. In these moments, it is as if some kind of energy or matter is working with all its might to keep my spine from fleeing, tearing itself free from my body, leaving me to face the imprints of my past without support. Each time, however, no matter how long my body feels like it is being torn away from itself, my spine never leaves. It stays in place, being cradled by a determination to resist the fear. Though the wailing has stopped, it remains with me—a memory of how my voice materialized itself, willed itself into being, in order to drag me out of the past and jolt me into the safety of the present.

Drawing from the memory of being woken up to the sounds of my own wailing voice, I performatively invoke an exorcism of my voice, viscerally pulling it forth to conclude the trilogy of materially-engaged performance series with my physical voice. Moving from performing above the dining room table in *Cartography*, I now invite readers to peer underneath the dining room table through an examination of my live performance, *Purge*. While examining this work, I consider how drawing out my physical voice through an improvised lament further contributes to the way trauma is conveyed through performance art. I then look to the way entanglement materializes in the physical tangles of my hair and body to think beyond Eurocentric conceptions of *abjection*. I explore the ideas of entanglement in tangles through a conversation between my video performance *Churile* and *Purge*. I also examine how centering marginalized ideas and perceptions of *abjection* adjust frameworks and representations of trauma in performative arts practice to include my voice. I conclude by looking to the tactile and narrative capacity of thread to expand depictions of trauma in performative arts practice.

A Hidden Lament: Drawing Out My Physical Voice through Material Engagements with the Body

This section introduces the key grounding ideas that I use to frame *Purge* theoretically and within my field of practice. Here, the disruption of the delicate balance between catharsis and repression, as well as materiality's effect on the physicality of my suppressed voice, are the primary conceptual foci. I am considering the act of discovery in *Purge*—discovery of my tangible voice and discovery of my body, exposed yet oddly concealed, under the table—in relation to the use of discovery in Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scene*. Through this conversation, I examine the ways *Purge* extends from *Rape Scene* to build a more affective engagement with the impacts of rape in performance art. In

particular, I am considering the use of voice between the two works: how the agency of my voice is further accentuated through the material reinforcement of my skin, and the agency of Mendieta's voice is conveyed through the material evidence of staged harm done to her body. In this, I consider how material's relationship to the body can alter how the voice is heard. I examine how materiality of the body is used to establish an animal-like or primordial agency of my voice in *Purge* and connect this to Julietta Singh's writing on the human-animal as a decolonizing force within performance art.

Moving forward, I first address how material engagements with my body impact the way my physical voice is produced and perceived. I also look to the ways specific gestures in *Purge* convey the clash between catharsis and repression, and how that translates to public and private space. Materials help guide my body and voice through the lament. For instance, contact between my body and food matter initiates the production of my voice. Unlike atop the table in *Cartography*, the powders are huddled together in a densely packed mound in *Purge*. Not yet blended, the colors sit pressed up against one another, accentuating their contrasting hues. I situate my naked body around this pile of pungent pigments, lying on my side with the powders to my stomach. As if cradling the flour and spice, my body curves around it, not yet touching its powdery borders.



Figure 3: Vanessa Godden, *Purge*, 2019

After a few moments of stillness, with the rise and fall of my chest being the only movement and the sound of my breath being the only sound from under the table, my hand shifts and begins to move through the pile of flour and spice. While my hand slowly pushes itself through the mountain of powders, I whimper. The soft and childlike whimpers build into heightened groans as I shift from my side to my stomach, dragging my head and then my body through the material. The groans culminate into wails as my body reaches the end of the table and most of my torso is pulled through the food bases. From the way my vocal lament begins, it is evident that material contact with my skin activates the materialization of my voice. The whimpers, wails, and gasps convey that the production of my

voice is not an easy task; it is painful and strenuous, involving bringing forth what has been trained to remain deeply buried for so long.



Figure 4: Vanessa Godden, *Purge*, 2019

Purge is a window into a private form of personal catharsis. The table reveals but also conceals. There is a level of anticipatory precariousness in the way my body functions under the table and an awkwardness that comes with the performative reenactment of ‘airing dirty laundry,’ a vocal release of repressed traumatic impact. *Purge* occurs in a semiprivate space, underneath the dining table, prompting viewers to crouch down or sit on the floor in order to get an unobstructed view of the performance. Eliciting a more sinister association with childhood, the manner in which people have to lower themselves to the floor to find me is reminiscent of the game “hide and seek.” However, what viewers encounter whilst peering under the kitchen table is my strange ritual lament. The act of performing under the table also alludes to unrecorded compensations of labor, often referred to as being “paid under the table.” Both of these allusions speak to a state of liminality that transmits the feeling that something is not quite right. It is apparent that despite my cathartic lamenting vocalizations, concealment is still necessary. Where suppression happens in the previous performance, *Cartography*, by restraining the production of my physical voice, suppression in *Purge* materializes through the placement of my body in space. Through the position of my body, the table serves as a dividing line between public and private experiences of trauma. The top of the table can be viewed in relation to how I experience the impacts of trauma in public, through subdued navigations between a desire to speak and not finding the right words. Conversely, under the table can be viewed as related to the way I experience the impacts of trauma in private, through heightened forms of sadness, anger, and anxiety in the privacy of designated domestic spaces.

Through the act of discovery, Mendieta enacts a form of audience participation that imitates life in her performance *Untitled (Rape Scene)*. The physical presence and proximity between her body and the audience positions viewers as witnesses. Mendieta’s performance, though staged, works to make the violent impacts of rape visible beyond the sensationalism of media coverage. It seems as though Mendieta is considering the dehumanization of the victim’s body through the act of publicizing the violent details of University of Iowa student Sarah Ann Otten’s rape, which occurred in the privacy of her home. Her body and her home are made accessible to the public through a detached consumption of the event, staged by Mendieta, a further violation of her privacy. Here, Mendieta

staged a scenario in which her classmates stumble upon Mendieta's own body, tied up, bloodied, unmoving, exposed, and bruised. Discovery in *Rape Scene* works to reveal the details of Otten's rape case more tangibly, so that effects of the event are affectively conveyed to the wider community.

In *Rape Scene* Otten's voice, by extension of Mendieta's, is manifested in the materially staged violence done to Mendieta's body—animal blood streaking her bottom and thighs—and the material havoc scattered around her body, smashed crockery, and the blood-smeared table. Though sonically the work is quiet, the “voice” of the work speaks loudly and is drawn out through the affective response to discovery. Though performatively staged, visceral responses to this work can be attributed to the state of Mendieta's own body. It is unembellished and unadorned, there are no attempts to make her body or the violence of the scene beautiful or aesthetically palatable. It can be interpreted that Otten's voice is being materialized through this gruesome reenactment by Mendieta to ascribe some agency in Otten's story. However, Mendieta has invoked Otten's voice through evidence of violence. Through the reproduction of violence in this work, the agency of Otten's voice does not extend beyond revealing the fatal potential of rape's effects; which works to invoke fear and shock. While *Rape Scene* is a reactionary performance that functions as a way to incite rage and protest, it still reduces rape to a story rather than an experience, and its effects simply to violence and death.

Many women express a constant fear of rape.⁸ In *Rape Scene*, Mendieta draws upon the ongoing fear many experience at the prospect of being raped. In response to recreating Otten's rape scene, Mendieta in this performance explains that she was “moved and frightened” by the event, so much so that she felt compelled to reperform it (qtd. in Moure 1996, 90). This compulsion seems to be a ritual exorcizing of Mendieta's own fear. By situating her own body in the position of Otten's, she is communing with Otten, reanimating her, but also tangibly processing her own horror of Otten's rape. Elaborating, she states, “I think all my work has been like that – a personal response to a situation. . . . I can't see being theoretical about an issue like that” (qtd. in Moure, 1996, 90).” The fear of rape that Mendieta materializes in *Rape Scene* is, however, an issue that needs to be theorized particularly because it is a work that blurs the ethical boundaries between authorship and voice. *Rape Scene* marked a pivotal shift in how trauma is invoked through performance art, through the unembellished reproduction of rape. It paved the way for aesthetic and affective language in performance art to expand beyond the beautification of trauma. However, it uses a dead woman's very violent experience and death to do so, without her or her family's consent. My research works to theorize my own experiences and works like this one to place the autonomy of voice back in the bodies of those who, like me, have survived rape and racialized violence. I am not suggesting here that artworks addressing rape are not able to produce solidarity with victims who have not survived or those who have; I am, however, suggesting that there are ethical means of broaching this topic. For instance, a year prior to the production of Mendieta's *Rape Scene*, Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani performed *Ablutions* (1972), a collaborative performance piece that metaphorically produces representations of the impacts of rape through abstraction—ritual bathing in clay, blood, and egg yolks, nailing fifty animal

⁸ For a lucid presentation on this, see Griffin (1971).

kidneys to the wall, and being mummified in gauze while seated on a chair.⁹ Alongside these gestures, audio of rape survivors recounting their experiences of sexual assault filters throughout the room. Nonetheless, *Rape Scene* has been an important influence on my research because of its revolutionary use of discovery and embodiment to produce affective responses to traumatic impact.

Though *Purge* does not involve the same kind of surprise discovery that Mendieta's *Rape Scene* invokes by asking viewers to open a door and step into a staged crime scene in a domestic space, it does encompass an intimate kind of discovery—one that is gentle and quiet despite the performance's loud character. Through the act of repositioning themselves in the room, viewers are able to adjust their engagement with my body. Upon simply lowering oneself to the floor or standing further back, the dining room table reveals the gestures that induce the sounds from my vocal lament. My voice is also imminently prominent in *Purge*. Unlike Mendieta's exorcizing of her fear in *Rape Scene*, I exorcize my voice from suppression. Instead of materializing my voice through evidence of violence enacted on the body, I draw out my voice through material reinforcement—using flour and spice as a second skin. These materials draw my voice out. Through material activation, the sounds pulse forth, being dragged out of and spilling from my chest. Maneuvering through the materials, I wail, groan, whimper, gasp, cough, and heave. From time to time, spasmodic cries transmute into maniacal laughter and gasps for air are followed by brief breaks of silence.

The way by which materials draw my voice out alludes to the discomforting and disorienting experience of managing trauma publicly. For instance, occasionally I sit upright and gather the powders that have been spread across and between the four corners of the table back into a pile in front of me. Scooping handfuls of the flour and spice onto my chest, stomach, shoulders, and back, I scrub and wipe the material deep into my skin, as if exfoliating or cleansing in the bath. I dutifully move through the gestures of cleansing, crying out large gasping sobs while doing so. However, instead of washing away the exfoliator, food powders, I add a new layer of material to my flesh. In other moments, I lie flat across the floor, with my stomach or back sinking into the ground. From here, I either motion my arms and hands slowly through the powders or drag myself through them, across the length of the table, leaving tracks of my body wherever it goes. Sometimes I kick and push the materials away from myself, producing guttural shrieks. Other times I press myself firmly against one of the table legs, gulping down air and swallowing sobs, huddling against it for some respite—respite from the process of drawing forth my voice through the ritual material engagements with my skin. There are waves of large gestures and small gestures paired with loud wails and soft whimpers that point to the waves of heightened and lulled states of engagement with trauma. Sometimes it is manageable and other times it unravels—I unravel.

There is an animallike or primordial quality to the way my body engages with matter in *Purge*. My voice is produced through the abandonment of speech and uses grunts, groans, and cries to communicate its state of unease. The way by which I move my body, dragging, sliding, hovering, crawling, is reptilian or feline. The powder, as it coats my skin, takes on scalelike and furlike textures—

⁹ Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani, *Ablutions*, 1972, Performance. <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/ablutions/>

imagining my body as a human-animal hybrid. Singh explains that through anticolonialism and decolonial theories and movements, the need to regain one's humanity by working to distinguish oneself from human-animal relationships was an integral part of resisting and rejecting colonial ideologies (Singh 2018, 29–94). However, through the process of working to achieve equity by proof of humanity, distancing oneself from racist associations with animality meant also subscribing to colonial hierarchies between man and animal—different forms of mastery. Singh suggests that contemporary modes of decolonization must extend beyond the human subject to include animals and matter. This does not simply ask us to consider our relationship to nonhuman subjects, but also acknowledges our nonhuman subjectivities. Singh states: “to mobilize one's animality is to dispossess oneself from the sovereignty of man, to refuse the anticolonial reach of becoming masterful human subjects (2019, 122).” By drawing out my physical voice using performative gestures that allude to my own animality, I am enacting the agential significance of nonhuman invocations and collaborations.



Figure 5: Vanessa Godden, *Purge*, 2019

These invocations and collaborations also draw upon my matrilineal homeland's traditions of decolonizing protest and mappings of colonial trauma through Caribbean folktales. In the first Trinidadian J'ouvert celebrations, rubbing dirt, oil, and pigment onto the body meant using one's own connection to the earth to push against colonial authority. Specific characters materialized from Trinidadian folklore in the adorning of bodies in materials of the earth, particularly various forms of devils, called Jab Jabs. Counter to some anticolonial and decolonial sentiments that attempted to reject all relation to the nonhuman, Afro-Trinidadian slaves used their nonhuman relationships to protest colonialism and materialize the trauma of colonial impact through allusions to evil. Extending from Afro-Trinidadian traditions in carnival, I also look to South Asian traditions such as Phagwa, the religious festival of Spring, as distinct connections to my own Indo-Trinidadian diasporic identity.¹⁰ I draw distinct relationships between pigment as a tangible entanglement of the past and the future in Phagwa and the ways slaves used pigment in J'ouvert. I am compounding these ideas into how I frame

¹⁰ Phagwa is a Hindu holiday in which the beginning of Spring is celebrated. One part of the celebration involves the application of *abeer*, or coloured powders, to the body.

both *Cartography* and *Purge* in order to establish the body's intrinsic connection to the nonhuman as well as its decolonizing capacity.

Churile: Entanglement in the Tangles

In this section, I look to a character from Indo-Caribbean folklore, the Churile, to examine the ways entanglement materializes in my studio research. I examine the metaphorical and physical tangles that unfold in both *Purge* and my short film titled *Churile* (Godden 2016). I build distinctive connections between the two artworks in order to consider how depictions of trauma, materially spilling forth, are conveyed through interior forms of *abjection*. I elaborate on this idea by drawing from Julia Kristeva's writing (1980) on the "interiorization of abjection" prevalent in Western evangelical morality. I use Kristeva's thought to establish how this method of thinking about the *abject* body constructs restrictions based on impurities. In a quite different way, *abjection* is invoked in Trinidadian traditions of Carnival and in folklore as a mode of empowerment and resistance. Expanding from this, I examine how specific performative gestures of the Caribbean diaspora in performance art contribute to the decolonization of the field. I conclude this section by looking back to *Purge* to consider how tangles of matter and my body generatively unravel my voice to invoke entangled trauma.

The Churile is a Jumbie with black matted hair, often shielding her face, who wanders around mournfully wailing for her lost child.¹¹ Prior to becoming a Jumbie, the Churile was once a human who died tragically during childbirth or while pregnant. The Churile haunts only pregnant women and their fetuses, as well as mothers and their infants, in the hopes of being reunited with her own child. The composition of wails in *Purge* is drawn from the Churile's mournful lament. From this I consider how trauma haunts the bodies who have been affected, but also those in close proximity. The Churile's trauma is so great that it follows her into the afterlife, fueling her pain and rage by transferring her fate onto others. Though I am not mourning my own lost child in *Purge*, I am mourning the loss of a part of myself. I have known racism my entire life and having been living with the effects of sexual trauma for half my life. Through racialization, chunks of my subjectivity have been eaten away, bit by bit, coercing me to swallow my heritage—leaving it sitting in the base of my gut, buzzing to be let out. The performances are evocative of my experiences of racialization—having expectations and stereotypes placed on me based on the color of my skin. Through sexual assault, it has been reinforced that my flesh is not only a signifier of my difference but also that it does not belong to me. As part of the effects of sexual trauma, I often sink further inward, separating myself from my body, trying to escape it completely. However, like the Churile being pulled back to earth, I am continually pulled back to my body, and the desire to regain autonomy over my flesh drives me to speak. These two experiences speak to one another, intertwining to find autonomy in my body and my voice. In this discussion, experiential entanglement materializes through the empowerment to resist racialization and rape culture.

I consider tangles in my studio research as evocations of experiential entanglement. In *Purge* my body becomes physically entangled with itself—limbs cross, twist, and intersect with one another

¹¹ In some Caribbean cultures, malevolent ghosts are referred to as Jumbies.

at times, and physically entangle with materials. Flour, chili powder, and curry powder weave themselves into my skin, hair, and nails. Extending from this, my short film titled *Churile* materializes entanglement through the physical tangles in my hair. In the film, my own black, matted hair alludes to the Churile's black, matted hair. But instead of hair obstructing my face, hair obstructs my mouth. A tightly cropped framing of the lower half of my face reveals more hair amassing in clumpy knots on my tongue each time I open my mouth. I consider this as another physical materialization of entanglement and metaphorical invocation of experiential entanglement. Hair, originally meant to be on the head, is displaced onto a region of the body where it should not be—the mouth. The hair in my mouth calls to mind a clogged sink or bathtub drain, with its slimy and mucklike texture, viscerally conveying the discomfort unfurling in the back of my throat. Gestures of revealing (opening my mouth) and concealing (closing my mouth) work to convey a distinctive relationship between the exterior and interior. This relationship is hinged on the tension caused by the internal, represented through my mouth, overwhelmed by the external, represented through my hair, which is dislocated and pressing against the internal. The interior is the primary agent of *abjection* in *Churile*.

Kristeva (1980) writes on the “interiorization of abjection” conceptualized in Christianity. She explains that the restriction of food taboos gives rise to the belief that “abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within” (113). The idea that *abjection* is embedded in certain bodies, like Christian food taboos, understands *abjection* in relation to somatic and psychic impurity. It rests on the belief that humans are inherently *abject* and must engage in spiritual practice in order to cleanse away impurities. The relationship between impurity and *abjection* are not necessarily as closely linked, or linked in this way, in Trinidadian folklore and traditions. This is because *abjection* is more appropriately aligned with the injustice to land, animals, and other humans enacted through colonization. In this, Trinidadian folklore and traditions associate ideologies and practices of imperialism with *abjection* rather than the innate badness of the human psyche. For instance, in order to push against imperialism, Trinidadian slaves used external adornments—mud, clay, oil, pigment on the body—to invoke the *abject*. However, experiences of trauma can be seen to have a close association to *abjection* in Trinidadian folklore, and this *abjection* comes from within. Instead of an innate badness, though, this form of *abjection* is a reaction to breaches of one's autonomy. Through desperate attempts to regain autonomy *abjection* is invoked, and transformations into the supernatural occur. My video performance *Churile* draws from this to convey how my voice becomes a great source of empowerment as I process the entanglement of my trauma. The tangles of saliva-varnished hair bulging out from the back of my throat give my body supernatural qualities, likening the *abject* horror my mouth produces to the Churile's terrifying scream.

The *abject* and eerie visuals of *Churile* are blended with building sounds, composed by sound artist Thembi Soddell, to accentuate the supernatural. Cracks, pops, and sizzles sonically layer to fashion an encompassing realm of anticipatory traction. The anxiety in this video performance is further propelled by Soddell's sounds slowly heightening to match the pace of hair growing in my mouth. Here, my mouth is a conduit for occurrences beyond description. External factors—uncanny sounds—and bizarre internal influences—the production of hair in the mouth—combine to summon an otherworldly lament—one where wails of pain and sorrow are evoked through the *abjection* of my

mouth. *Churile*'s voicetrack functions differently from *Purge* in that the visuals are dissonant from the naturally occurring sounds of the performance. The dronelike layering of sound replaces the absent breaths, slurps, sucks, and squelches to convey the materialization of what Norie Neumark names, "unvoice" (2017, 123). Neumark considers how methods of unvoice are used in media and the arts to contribute a more collaborative encounter between the pairings of audio and visuals. She defines unvoice as an occurrence in which "the usual relationship between soundtrack and image track is disturbed and disturbing" (123). Neumark further elaborates that "playing with and against an image track, unsettling the voicetrack from its anchor to the image track, hinging and unhinging at the very same time, unvoice can be understood as playing between presence and absence" (124). I consider unvoice in relation to *Churile* as a way of thinking about my mouth's evocation of an experiential "playing between presence and absence," an entanglement of sorts. This entanglement speaks to the ways the external and internal are at odds in *Churile*; how the external wants the internal to remain in, and the internal is working to get out.

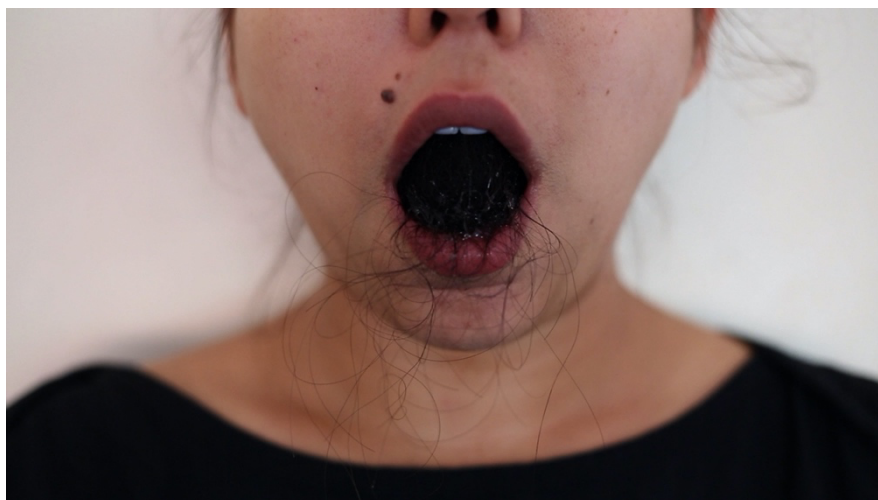


Figure 6: Vanessa Godden, *Churile*, 2016

Similar to the way my saliva spreads across the hair in *Churile*, my body spreads flour and spice across the ground in *Purge*. The flour and spice in *Purge* construct a glowing carpet of soft grainy powders. The way my hands stroke and grope the powders are evocative of the way one moves their hands through the soothing comfort of warm sand. How I pour and scrub the matter onto my skin suggests some kind of cleansing ritual. However, instead of cleaning my body, the orange-brown powders become a second skin. As the flour and spice hug tight to my flesh and hair, they emanate a warm glow from my skin and fuse my body to the grainy matter. Like the Trinidadian folktale character the Soucouyant, I become a fiery orb, floating through the cracks of domestic space.¹² Instead of

¹² The Soucouyant is said to have made a pact with the devil in order to transform her into an eternal being of fire. During the day, she is an unsuspecting cronelike recluse, and by night, she sheds her skin to transform into a glowing orb of light.

seeking out blood, however, I am purging my body of suppressed voice, finding the agency to do so in the fiery light that engulfs me. The threads of blank space that my hands and legs leave in the carpet of blended flour and spice leave haunting imprints of my body, like the skin the Soucouyant leaves behind. Here, it is evident that my voice extends beyond the physicality of my vocal lament. It is also embedded in material entanglements with my body and gestural metaphors. The physicality of my lament, however, is a painful and poetic form of resistance. Like first J’ouvert revelers of my matrilineal homeland, I resist—quietly at first, then building into tumultuous fervor.

Cartography, *Churile*, and *Purge* collectively work together to push against whiteness in art through the literal and figurative use of color in the work. The darkness of my hair (and the Churile’s) and of the night where the Soucouyant ignites into life and J’ouvert revelers assemble are where agency is galvanized—an agency that can push against colonization and pervasive whiteness in the arts. The dark of night is materialized in *Cartography* and *Purge* through the use of lighting. Each performance is spotlit, meaning that everything beyond the table in the gallery falls into darkness. Further, in terms of research, I hope that my work contributes to new knowledge of how the material and physical voice can decolonize trauma in performance art.



Figure 8: Vanessa Godden, *Purge*, 2019

She then roams around finding cracks in the foundations of people’s homes to enter and drain their blood for sustenance and maintain her immortality.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article examined two live performances and a video, *Cartography*, *Purge*, and *Churile*. In the first section I built deeper connections between studio research and the racist and racialized associations between bodies and food. I examined the symbolism of food powders used in *Cartography* and how they draw from my experiences of trauma to push against racialization. In the second part of this article, I framed *Purge* through notions of discovery, material reinforcement, and the agency of human-animal evocations. The final section drew from the Trinidadian folktale character, the Churile, to examine my short film *Churile* in relation to *Purge*. From this I considered how *abject* tropes I have identified in Trinidadian folklore and traditions expand Eurocentric *abjection* to consider the body beyond its relationship to impurity. The material engagements with my body in the studio research worked to draw out my physical voice as my final gesture of resistance against holding my tongue. The ag

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Appendix: Vanessa Godden performances and works

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Push|Pull, 2019, 16 cm L by 11 cm W artist book. Exhibited in *Embodying Entanglement*, Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 19 February – 22 February, 2019. Available at: <https://vanessagodden.com/section/486726-Push-Pull.html>

Soucouyant, 2019, audio installation, 4 min., Melbourne, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 19–22 February 2019. Available at: <https://vanessagodden.com/section/486661-Soucouyant.html>