CHAPTER

don't get it twisted: queer performativity and the emptying out of gesture

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> *The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text ... and recircuits its workings to account for, include and empower minority identities and identifications.*
>
> José Esteban Muñoz,
> *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

At an intersection in the Johannesburg inner city, a runner dressed in spandex bends down and enacts a series of provocative, erotic dance movements, as if on a nightclub stage. Inside a Pentecostal church near my studio, where I write this text, I have witnessed the exorcism of female congregants, their bodies convulsing while they speak in tongues, violently pulled and pushed by male priests, sometimes held by their hair. On Jeppe Street, transgender shop singers beckon to passersby to enter retail stores, hailing them in a register between song and speech on bass- distorted sound systems.

Where does a performance end and the self begin? How do these everyday gestures embody our visible selves,

inscribing our identities within the symbolic structures that determine and set limits to how we are named, the way we move and the way we look? These modes of everyday performativity are both ciphers of our social belonging and our placement in a scene of visibility: the conditions of being seen. We are placed by the gazes of those who see us, but also by those who fail to see us, who misread, misplace, or make us invisible. And I too am responsible

for how I see, both as a white body out of place here in inner-city Johannesburg but also as the holder of the power of inscription within this text. Each of the descriptions above refers to a moment of witnessed performativity – a word, an action, a gesture – that, in its enactment, potentially produces meaning. These are gestures made to be seen/scene.

This chapter focuses on queer practitioners working in transmedial forms across platforms, from social media to the gallery to public space: FAKA (Fela Gucci and Desire Marea), Athi-Patra Ruga and Dean Hutton (in collaboration with Alberta Whittle). I propose a close reading of gesture within the works of these artists and in the relationship each work stages between the body and an environment. I relate this reading of gesture to concepts drawn from the work of Diana Taylor: 'repertoire,' 'transfer' and 'scenario.'[1]

Two ideas from postcolonial thinkers frame what I refer to as the emptying out of gesture in this work: 'opacity' and 'intimacy.' I draw here on Edouard Glissant's notion of the right to opacity as a condition for postcolonial relational identity as against the essentialism of the desire for the other's transparency.[2] Achille Mbembe addresses the positioning of the African subject in western knowledge as defined by intimacy, itself a symbolically violent act of possession inherent in the act of looking.[3] I am interested in the way that these artists stage their own bodies as sites of potential intimacy at the same time as full transparency is refused. I look closely at how this sense of intimacy is produced through a relationship between gesture and scenario, specifically by situating the queer body in a landscape, installation or immersive environment, and the relational placement of the viewers towards or within these scenarios. The emptying out of gesture here is twofold: both an inviting in of the audience, and a refusal of entry, where gesture is both a revealing and recognition of a code, and an ultimate withholding of meaning. This chapter argues that a continual play between intimacy and opacity in the works of FAKA, Ruga and Hutton produces less a politics of queer identity than a queering of the politics of identity. Their works stage the limits of identity politics and, in this questioning, queer the very politics of identity.

In her essay 'The Work Between Us,' Jean Fisher cautions that 'art has been absorbed into discussions of cultural context that treat it and the artist as a subcategory of social anthropology.'[4] I extend this caution to think through, and against, the presentation of performative queer practices as simply staging queer

identities, where bodies become bodies that matter through their decodability as 'other.'[5] I work through the politics (and indeed the limits) of visibility through the writing of Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Jack Halberstam and José Muñoz, as well as the important work of bell hooks.

FAKA, Ruga and Hutton walk a fine line between staging the body as an image that both invites and negates possible consumption. Crucially, I position this argument against the discourse of the queer body as a site of social trauma, or lack.[6] Instead, I propose the right to opacity that is embodied in the gesture without a code. Opacity opens up a possibility for thinking queer subjectivity outside of lack, and here I draw on an example from film: Marlon Riggs's astonishingly relevant 1989 film, *Tongues Untied*.

All too often, the performing body, queer and especially black, is reduced to a signifier of non-being and a site of symbolic violence. Halberstam's reading of Muñoz's work on queer identity and race points towards the potential for queer 'wildness' to reinhabit and reappropriate the cultural signifiers of difference through a process of disidentification and repetition. Halberstam quotes Muñoz: '"disidentification scrambles and reconstructs ... the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations."'[7] However, Halberstam cautions that in this act of re-encoding signifiers of queer and black bodies, 'the risk is that the replaying of racialized tropes of wildness and primitivism, of disorderliness and belatedness, will simply flow right back into the discursive machinery that produces bodies of color as perpetually out of line, out of time, out of whack, and out of work.'[8]

Common across all the works I explore is the use of masquerade and concealment, which simultaneously undoes and reproduces binaries of race and gender. Common also is the placement of bodies in natural landscapes, and the shifts of the same bodies into the interior spaces of galleries and constructed environments. In several instances, queer bodies are almost trapped in a series of gestures that repeat and mimic within environments that contain or limit their movements. I see this work as, at times, staging a literal immobility – an inability to move except within the discursive limits that inscribe the queer body as a site of lack. I argue that these acts of repetition stage not lack or trauma, but the very conditions and limits of becoming visible. As such, they stage the limits of the promise of recognition within identity politics.

Deploying Taylor's concepts of 'transfer' and 'scenario' and the idea of 'queer wildness' drawn from Halberstam and Muñoz, I suggest that a new relationship between land as political category and a queer politics of identity emerges across the works discussed. I demonstrate what I call a queering of the political promise, which, in situating the queer body as a figure of wildness within landscape settings, fundamentally troubles the category of the natural, inscribed as it is within the double hegemonies of whiteness and colonial patriarchy.

By isolating and focusing on certain gestures in the work of these artists as they are staged in different viewing contexts, I probe moments of transparency, and often violent exposure, in which the queer body is inscribed with a kind of intimacy. What I would like to find are those moments of opacity that promise, rather than perform, queerness as a project and a politics of becoming. Here, gesture is not merely a matter to be inscribed with social meaning but an act of transfer with the potential to inhabit its own opacity.[9]

OPACITY AND INTIMACY: THE EMPTYING OUT OF GESTURE

For the 2016 Stevenson gallery group exhibition titled *SEX*, FAKA build a dark room. Lying on separate beds that are more like plinths, or at times together, they embody the movements of sex clubs, erotic dancers and intimate sexual acts, masturbatory or with an invisible other, whether an onlooker or a body. The gallery viewer is invited to enter the space, but most people hover hesitantly at its edges looking in, often uncomfortable, and then leave to see the rest of the exhibition.

At a 2010 interdisciplinary colloquium entitled *pre-post-per-form*, Ruga runs on a treadmill to a hard techno song while carrying another performer. Smoke machines emit steam intermittently until the room in Cape Town's Evol nightclub takes on the haze of a Friday night. The image produced by the relation between bodies makes reference to the famous press photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying the body of Hector Pieterson, who was fatally shot by police in the June 1976 Soweto student protests. Not everyone in the audience recognises the historical reference to this press photograph, which played a significant role in the campaign against apartheid. One significant detail is altered here: the performer Ruga carries is white. As the performance continues, Ruga's exhaustion becomes increasingly visible, even as the room fills up with steam. The audience is inextricably part of

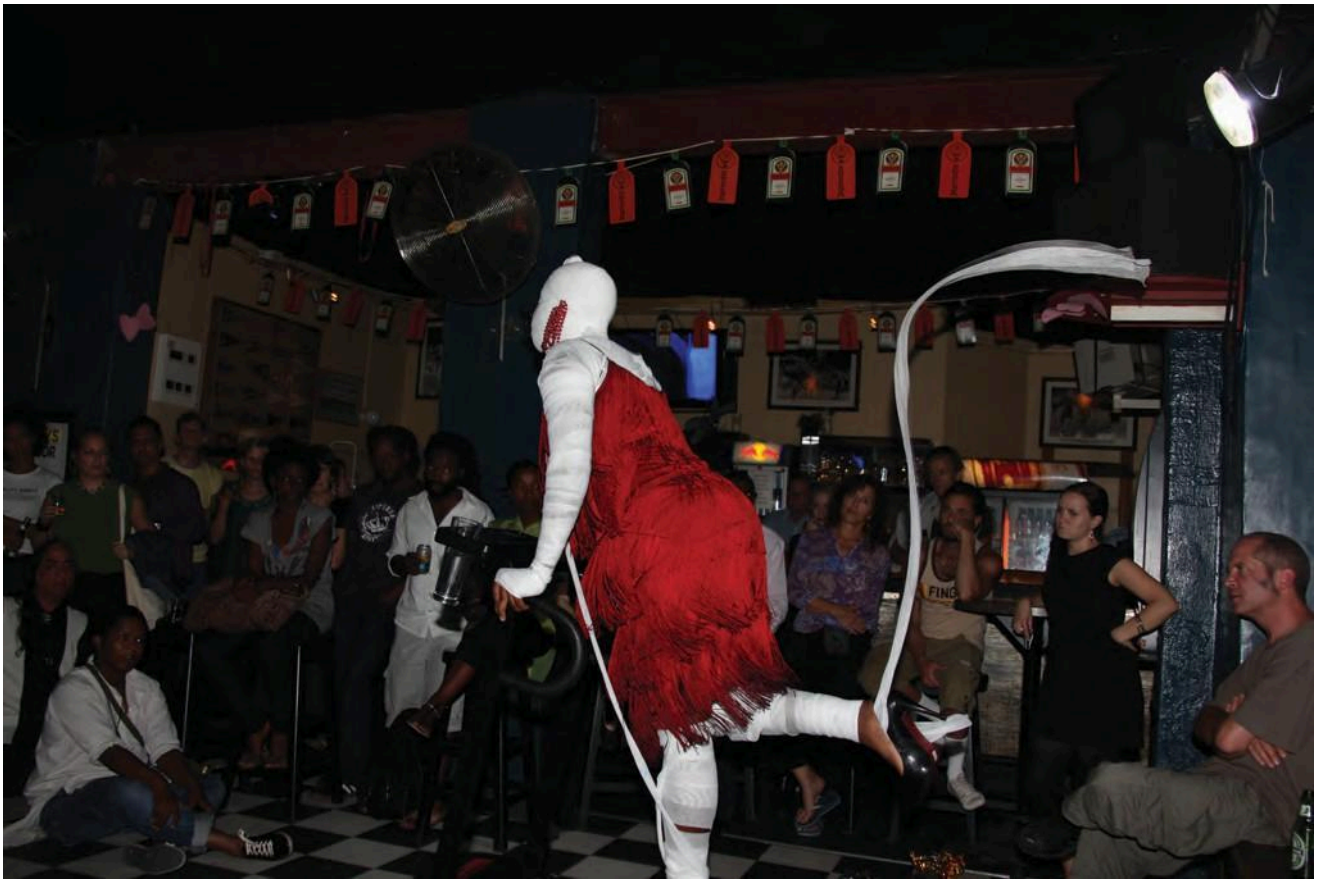


Figure 9.1. Athi-Patra Ruga, *Prelude to Ilulwane*, 2010. Courtesy Institute for Creative Arts.
Photograph by Moeneeb Dalwai.

the club atmosphere, feeling the sweat of the performers, the weight of one in the other's arms, and the endurance of the repetition of a single gesture.

At what moment do we, as viewers of these works, inscribe the bodies of the performers as queer bodies, as raced and classed bodies? At what point do we read or mark them as ciphers of social recognition within the unspoken boundedness of identity – as white, black or brown bodies, male or female, religious or secular, privileged or classed, contemporary or historical? In each of the scenarios described here, the gestures of the performers are full of the potential both to signify (or perform) identity and, at any moment, to be emptied out of meaning. It is this play

between opacity and intimacy that presents the body as that which cannot simply be inscribed with a singular meaning.

In the 1989 documentary *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs's seminal essay film about queer black life, there is a section titled 'snap Diverology' in which the narrator offers viewers a 'basic lesson in "Snap!"' A series of descriptions of different snaps follows, seeming to be an exercise in the vocabulary and syntax of the snap as gesture in queer black life: 'Grand Diva Snap,' 'Domestic Snap' and so on.[10] What is striking, however, is that the meaning of each snap is never explained. The narrator cautions the viewer, 'don't get it twisted ... precision, poise, placement
... you must perfect each for a grand snap statement.'[11] The visual demonstration that follows is a choreographed series of snaps, very similar in form to the timing of dance and physical theatre. The gesture is demonstrated, filmed and named, but the 'statement' made by each snap is never translated, its signified effect is never revealed. Rather, what emerges is a rhythmic relationship between snaps, which operates sonically, not linguistically. This refusal of the translation of the snap into a legible or singular meaning is the exemplary act of an emptying out of gesture, producing a particular experience of opacity.

The gestural languages and references in the works of Hutton, FAKA and Ruga, I argue, invite inscription with social meaning; however, what we see is not necessarily what we 'get,' to play once again on the title of this chapter, 'don't get it twisted.' As Riggs's narrator explains, we should focus less on meaning than 'precision, poise, placement,' suggesting that gestures like the snap ascribe meaning as not simply containable within the symbolic order. However, there is a logic here that is rhythmic and temporal in the same way that a musical composition contains a logic beyond the merely symbolic or semiotic.

What I mean to imply by a gesture that is both full and emptied of meaning is that we need to begin to understand the language of gesture as a notation that is in excess of signification, and thus in excess of consumable meanings. Here, one is reminded of bell hooks's critique of the film *Paris is Burning*, which she sees as participating in 'the way consumer capitalism undermines the subversive power of the drag balls, subordinating ritual to spectacle.'[12] She counterposes this to Riggs's *Tongues Untied* where drag performance is placed within a network of social rituals in which performativity is seen as a necessary and everyday strategy for self- actualisation within a structure that does not recognise black queer subjects. Thus,

gesture as coded social ritual suggests a much more powerful politics that moves beyond consumable images of queerness or race. In her critique of the film's white, albeit queer, filmmaker Jennie Livingston, hooks is unforgiving, saying that she reproduces the balls as a consumable spectacle for an outside audience.[13]

To return to FAKA: while inviting viewers into the darkroom they have constructed within the gallery, the duo in fact refuses us the pleasure of looking, precisely because we too are seen, caught in the act of looking by viewers on the other side of the open booth. The very architecture of this structure, painted entirely black within the white cube gallery, disturbs any easy pleasure in consuming the artists' bodies as an image of queerness and blackness. At the same time, a viewer who happens upon the scene may walk away feeling as if they have recognised the meaning of the gestures and filed these as consumable images of queerness associated with sexual excess – what Muñoz and Halberstam refer to as 'queer wildness.'[14] Thus the work may appear at first site/sight to evoke an easy reading of queerness and, it might also be noted, of a consumable black body, exposed and inviting viewers into a contract that appears to stage intimacy. However, their refusal to reach the endpoint of climax, the inexhaustibility of their pleasure and its audible sounds spilling into the rest of the space, makes the experience one without closure.

To understand the effect of this lack of closure and the importance of the way in which the constructed scenario of each work under discussion places both the body of the artist and the viewer in a particular contract of intimacy and opacity, I turn to the work of Diana Taylor.

ACTS OF TRANSFER: REPERTOIRE AND SCENARIO

In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor argues for the treatment of performance as 'a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis.'[15] She asks whether performance is 'that which disappears, or that which persists, transmitted through a nonarchival system of transfer,' which she calls 'repertoire.'[16] Taylor's project focuses on ritual and performance and everyday gesture in Latin America, but it holds much potential for thinking about live art practices and everyday queer performativity. The repertoire is that which 'enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those

acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.'[17] The literal meaning of the repertoire as inventory holds potential for discovery and storage that is embodied, requiring 'presence': 'people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of the transmission.'[18] It is important to understand that the repertoire is not a fixed set of actions or objects, but rather the 'repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning' over time.[19]

Taylor introduces another key term for her method of analysis: 'scenario.' This is traditionally the term referring to '"a sketch or outline of the plot of a play, giving particulars of the scenes, situations etc."'[20] For Taylor, this is never original, it is rather 'a portable framework' bearing the 'weight of accumulative repeats ... the scenario makes visible ... what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes.'[21] It is what structures our understanding of gestures and bodies; 'positioning our perspective, it promotes certain views while helping to disappear others.'[22] It is the scaffolding for a range of possibilities, narratives and actions.[23]

I have drawn on two major strands of Taylor's schematisation of the scenario. Firstly, Taylor explains the necessity that 'the scenario forces us to situate ourselves in relationship to it; as participants, spectators, or witnesses, we need to "be there," part of the act of transfer. Thus, the scenario precludes a certain kind of distancing.'[24] It is for this reason that I focus in part on live art works that I myself have witnessed. However, I also look at works that include some kind of transfer of scenario and work into other spaces and media. Taylor's last point is that 'a scenario is not necessarily mimetic ... it usually works through reactivation rather than duplication. Scenarios conjure up past situations, at times so profoundly internalized by a society that no one remembers the precedence ... Rather than a copy, the scenario constitutes a once-againness.'[25] She hence poses the question of how we are called upon to participate in such scenes: as 'witnesses, spectators, or voyeurs.'[26] Most importantly, it 'physically places the spectator within the frame and can force the ethical question: *the signifier*, we recall, "*cannot be detached from the individual or collective body*." What is our role "there?"'[27] This last point of Taylor's returns us to questions of intimacy and the inscription of meaning.

The translation, or following Taylor, transmission of live art into photographic and video documentation means that performing bodies can too easily be

inscribed within restrictive and often exotic desires for authentic otherness by a hegemonic gaze hungry to consume bodies that are tradable as bodies seen to matter within varied circuits of economic and symbolic value, from galleries to social media. In this sense, the kind of intimacy and even empathy staged in photographic and filmic registers can function as a violent reinscription of the visible body within codes of exotic queerness, wildness and blackness, whether as camp, parody, drag or clowning, thus recuperating the radical, transgressive potential that defines the works of FAKA, Ruga and Hutton into a consumable queer image. The question of how the viewer is placed within the framing of the scenario is at the heart of my reading of their work.

My particular interest here is in four works that place the body of the performer in a scenario that draws on tropes and mythologies of landscape, both as natural and constructed spaces of nature, but also peripheral areas of the urban. In the next section, I work through three performance works to reveal what I refer to as a queering of the political promise through a recurring repertoire of gestures and scenarios that stage queer bodies as tropes of 'wildness' that disturb categories of the natural. I suggest that the act of transfer embodied in this work stages queer identity at the limit point of the political, and in this act queers the politics of promise. Hence, I argue that a relationship between land as political category and a queer politics of identity emerges across the works discussed.

QUEERING THE LANDSCAPE

PART I: AT LAND

Dean Hutton is a photographer and visual and performance artist who has become best known for their controversial project *Fuck White People*, which is an iteration of their public performance project *Goldendean*. Kwanele Sosibo makes the incisive observation that conservative white audiences are alienated not only by Hutton's offense against whiteness, but by the fact that Hutton's body does not conform to binary gender and feminine beauty stereotypes: 'By virtue of Hutton's physical transformation and embracing of their body image along with the myriad ways it challenges the constructed aesthetics of white beauty, Hutton is striking a severe blow at the heart of whiteness.'[28]

Figure 9.2. Dean Hutton and Alberta Whittle, *The Cradle*, 2015. Courtesy the artists.

My focus is an earlier collaborative project by Hutton and artist Alberta Whittle, with Anna Christina Lorenzen, and Comet and Luka (the latter being Hutton's two dogs, who feature in the video works). Entitled *The Cradle *savagenobility romancingthepatriarchy one avatar at a time youcantsitwithus*, the work was produced in 2015 at the GoetheOnMain project space in Johannesburg. The piece had several components, including videos of *in situ* interventions shot at the Cradle of Humankind, a nature reserve an hour outside of Johannesburg. The final work consisted of an immersive environment set up at the Goethe project space with a live performance element. In the exhibition text, the artists begin: 'What does it mean to be natural? Are queer bodies unnatural? Are black bodies supernatural? And who can access all of this nature?'[29]

This is followed by a quote from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: '"Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well."'[30] This opening statement and the quote clearly situate the work within a political reading of landscape as 'land' – a highly contentious and politicised category within the contemporary South African imagination, where continued white land ownership and the failure of redistribution persists as a key failure of the postdemocratic period and an indicator of a more general failure of material redress.

The second aspect of the politics of land here is as a category of the natural versus the constructed or cultural. As such, performing the queer body within the landscape becomes a way to undo assumptions at the heart of gender binaries. Judith Butler argues against the category of sex as natural: 'If gender is something that one becomes – but can never be – then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort.'[31] The notions of repetition and mimicry are at the basis of gender performativity, which, in this chapter, relates to ideas drawn from Taylor, where queer performance replays a repertoire of gestures within a transferable scenario. Hutton and Whittle explain how they create avatars that they become, but can never be. Each avatar repeats a set of actions and gestures throughout different scenarios that not only work against gender norms but also assumptions around race. Can we make a translation from the performance of heteronormativity to the performance of whiteness as a coded repertoire? Ahmed cautions against oversimplifying race as a performative or constructed social category. In a text exploring the politics of 'passing,' she argues: 'The difference between a black subject who passes as white and the white subject who passes as white is not then an *essential* difference ... rather it is a *structural* difference that demonstrates that passing involves the re-opening or re-staging of a fractured history of identifications that constitutes limits to a given subject's mobility.'[32]

Ahmed's caution here proves instructive for a reading of Hutton's work, where Hutton's position of white privilege within their *Fuck White People* project has itself been a point of contention in readings of the work. Hutton's Goldendean avatar is a figure that confronts a double hegemony, simultaneously citing and disrupting tropes of white patriarchy and white capital with the use of gold paint: 'Birthed

on the minedumps of eGoli the avatar of Goldendean gleams and glamours us, inciting a frenzy of gold lust, gold fever and golden showers. Much like gold itself, the spectacle of Goldendean challenges the arbitrary values we place in the normative body. Our gaze cannot help but devour Goldendean.'[33]

We need to think carefully through the terms by which Goldendean makes visible both racial and gendered difference in different contexts, how they re-open and restage 'a fractured history of identifications' where whiteness remains a site and sight of privilege and value. Goldendean is a character that Hutton has placed in several public interventions and situations, including Ghana's Chale Wote festival. Here, the queer white body is paraded in a public space during a contemporary performance and art festival in the area of Jamestown, Accra. The area is dense and its community depends on precarious income from fishing, under threat due to the presence of foreign fishing industries.

Hutton's gold body paint plays with the idea of value, where the precious metal's colour appears to make the white body even more precious. At the same time as it brings attention to the way that whiteness remains the unsignified marker of value against which all visuality is measured, and while Hutton is exposed and certainly vulnerable in the piece, their ability to move through a space such as Jamestown brings into sharp relief the way the queer, gender-non-conforming white body, while precarious, remains protected and granted a mobility not possible for black queer bodies in the same space. Thus, the lived experience of black bodies here can be read as backdrop to the spectacle of white queerness. In a sense, the work is caught up in the very risk of replaying the very signifiers it attempts to disrupt. As Halberstam and Muñoz both caution, disidentification always risks reinscription and reidentification. Hutton appears to be aware of this risk.

PART II: AT SCENE

In the collaborative work with Whittle, *The Cradle*, manifested both as a series of *in situ* video pieces and an installation, Goldendean as avatar plays similarly with gender binaries. Hutton wears an ancient cattle bell around their waist, which acts as both phallic signifier and encumbering attachment, suggestive of the weight of the 'natural' category of sex carried by the artist and imposed by the gaze. The bell was in fact purchased at a market in Accra and serves as a potent symbol in Ghanaian traditions, where masquerade and procession can be witnessed in several

festivals throughout the year.[34] Hutton continually repeats the action of ringing the bell while sweeping the soil that is spread throughout the upper floor of the gallery space. These repeat gestures of ringing and sweeping seem to both enslave and empower the artist within a series of reproductive, domestic labours that are, at the same time, sonic and visual markers of authorship. Intermittently, the artist rubs their hair (also covered in gold paint), which flakes off onto the floor. The audience's experience of the space is strongly centred on Hutton's figure and their actions, which both engage and ignore us. Our placement in the scenario, barefoot and literally touching the soil of the landscape (apparently brought from the Cradle itself), is as witness and participant in the work's act of transfer.

Whittle's avatar also radically troubles categories of race and gender: 'the mythological figure of Mammmmmyyyyywaaaata, rooted in belief systems from West Africa, carried over the Middle Passage in the memories of the enslaved, she arrived in the Caribbean ready to transform again.'[35] Painted blue, Whittle sits next to a plastic basin of water on the lower level of the gallery, giving viewers hand- written fortunes and whispering secrets to audience members who are beckoned closer, folding R10 notes into the shapes of paper aeroplanes or boats, and giving these away or withholding them. Nearby, a fountain flows with water that is slightly inky and off-colour. The projected video works form a totally immersive environment and feature Whittle, Hutton and Hutton's dogs at the Cradle of Humankind nature reserve. The footage shows Hutton and Whittle performing a series of gestures that mimic exercise routines but also fashion shoots and music videos. Whittle does yoga positions with a children's blow-up ball, while Hutton appears to 'dry hump' a log. Here, too, Hutton wears the bell, which is ceaselessly rung by the movement of their hips. In one shot, one of the dogs eats raw meat on a perfectly green, mowed lawn.[36]

Within the immersive exhibition environment, viewers are caught within the field of these gestures, the sound of the bell and Hutton's continual sighing, and the projected images. We were asked to remove our shoes and to walk on the soil in blue medical shoe covers. In some moments, Hutton rubbed their hair, spraying flecks of gold into the sparsely stage-lit space, where pools of spotlighting illuminated some areas and left others dark. It was a quiet and affecting durational performance, which created a kind of intimacy. The placement of Goldendean and Whittle's *Mammmmmyyyyywaaaata* within the aptly titled nature reserve, the

Figure 9.3. Dean Hutton and Alberta Whittle, *The Cradle*, 2015. Courtesy the artists.

Cradle, appears to set up the scenario that associates the feminine with nature as an object to be pacified, owned, controlled and inscribed within the gaze of white patriarchy. With the history of displacement of indigenous black populations from ancestral land under both colonial and apartheid rule, the relationship of the South African imagination to land makes this reference to 'nature' and the idea of a point of origin a complex political question.

In their exhibition statement, Hutton and Whittle take a directly political position:

> The Cradle of Humankind, Maropeng and the Lion and Rhino Park are potent sites in which intersectional oppressions are organised, segregating access through its enforced preservation and commodification. The gatekeepers of these institutions insist that expensive admission fees, and access to land prohibit access to the predominantly black local populace, who are considered trespassers on this stolen land. Instead these bastions of knowledge and heritage become the reserve of whiteness, embodied by the avatar of the Great White Hunter.[37]

Scenes of leisure within natural settings encoded with violent settler imaginings of empty territories are invoked, as are the works of novelist JM Coetzee in which the images of dogs serve as a metaphor for a haunted and haunting settler imagination, along with the taming of wildness suggested by the suburban mowed lawn. Hutton and Whittle are acutely aware of the multiple scenarios invoked here, and how their playful and provocative repertoire of gestures both irreverently quotes and undoes these scenarios. This work stages a queering and hence troubling of the white settler scenario of the right to land, an imaginary and material object of ownership and enjoyment to be feminised, tamed and possessed. Halberstam draws on Muñoz to think about wildness as a necessary strategy for queer transgression, embodying the '"spirit of the unknown and the disorderly"' against the orders of the natural and the knowable.[38] Halberstam argues for an association between 'wildness' and 'queer failure.'[39] Wildness suggests the failure of signification and inscription, as that which 'exceeds meaning,' the disruption of colonial and masculine orders of knowledge and control 'through temporal and spatial and bodily excess and eccentricity.'[40]

Hutton's continual ringing of the bell is impossible to read without thinking of the role of the slave bell in regimenting the daily lives of labouring black subjects, but it also resonates with cattle bells – a means of locatability and a reminder of the control of the non-human body. Hutton's wearing of the bell functions as a mask of their natural sex, and as a grotesque phallic signifier, a suggestion of camp and queer anachronism, a body out of time and place. The ringing of the bell is a double irony which entraps the artist's body within a frame of legibility as other, as marked by their own difference, while simultaneously rendering their body opaque and illegible, almost without gender or discernible code. This is a radical disturbance of the orders of visuality as they are structured by the fictions of the gender binary and of the natural versus the wild. And yet, despite this troubling of the binary, the avatar, in the repetition of the repertoire, seems caught within the very framing they attempt to disturb, both as a gendered and racialised subject, unable to escape their inscription within a social framework as a queer, white and privileged body.

PART III: MASKING, MASQUERADE AND MIMICRY

What emerges in the work of Ruga and FAKA is how their use of masking, masquerade and mimicry in their gestural repertoire points to the intersectional nature of identity as composed of both the fictions and truths of race, class and gender.[41] In referring to 'truths,' I imply the resilience of the structural conditions and constraints by which queer (especially black and brown) bodies are identified as 'other,' but also the structural realities that position white queer bodies as privileged and protected.

I turn now to two works that traverse both natural and urban environments – Ruga's *The Future White Woman of Azania* (2015) and FAKA's *From a Distance* (2015). While these works are not solely instances of live art, they speak to various live art projects by the same artists in which similar scenarios and repertoires resurface. The common scenario across these works and the Hutton-Whittle collaboration is a placement of the body in masquerade within an exterior landscape.

My reading of *The Future White Woman of Azania* (abbreviated in the catalogue as *FWWA*) focuses on a series of photographic stills that feature the artist in a full body costume made of multicoloured balloons, which cover their entire torso, leaving only their legs, in pink tights and heels, visible. This figure reappears across a series of

works and live performances – as studied in Andrew Hennlich's contribution to this collection. I limit my discussion to the series of photographs shot for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award during the Grahamstown National Arts Festival, where Ruga won in the performance art category. It should be noted that this iteration of *FWWA* is not a live performance; it was produced for direct translation into a photographic series. In this particular act of transfer the viewer is still positioned in relation to a scenario and the artist's gestures within the space of the frame.

This series sees the artist move through the peripheral townships and settlements around Grahamstown during the major arts festival period. The artist moves from the peripheral areas into the town centre, and is observed and documented via a turn-of-the-century camera obscura located in the Observatory Museum in the town centre. In the photographs the *FWWA* is seen looking out onto the landscape through a pair of binoculars, making visible the apparatus as condition of the gaze. The work features the *FWWA*'s movement through the urban and semi-urban landscape passing fascinated or bewildered residents, who are in turn captured in the images. This is not an empty natural landscape but a peopled, partially urbanised one. Tropes of apartheid's violent divisions between rural and urban, township and town, citizen and subject are legible in this journey. Signs of underdevelopment and poverty in the peripheral townships are visible against the clean white streets of the town centre. As Ruga moves through the spaces, their legs and the balloons also become visibly marked, deflated, worn and dusty from the journey. A strange sense of waiting pervades the scenes as residents stare blankly at the colourful stranger who silently passes through, struggling a little to maintain balance on uneven dirt roads.[42]

In this variation of the landscape scenario, Ruga's is a minimal gesture, the act of simply walking, made vulnerable by their exposure and poor visibility – literally seeing through the disguise of the balloons, which also restrict their breathing, suggesting claustrophobic endurance. The balloons are contradictory signifiers here – on the one hand celebratory, on the other ostentatious and almost too bright against the faded greens, the grey-brown gravel and washed-out house paint. It is in this contradiction that the power of the work's disruption inheres. In contrast to political campaigns that promise economic freedom, radical economic transformation and land redistribution, the *Future White Woman* seems to function as an aspirational image of privilege and entitlement associated with white

heteronormative femininity. Yet, the location of the promise of status deferred to the future makes this image elusive and transitory.

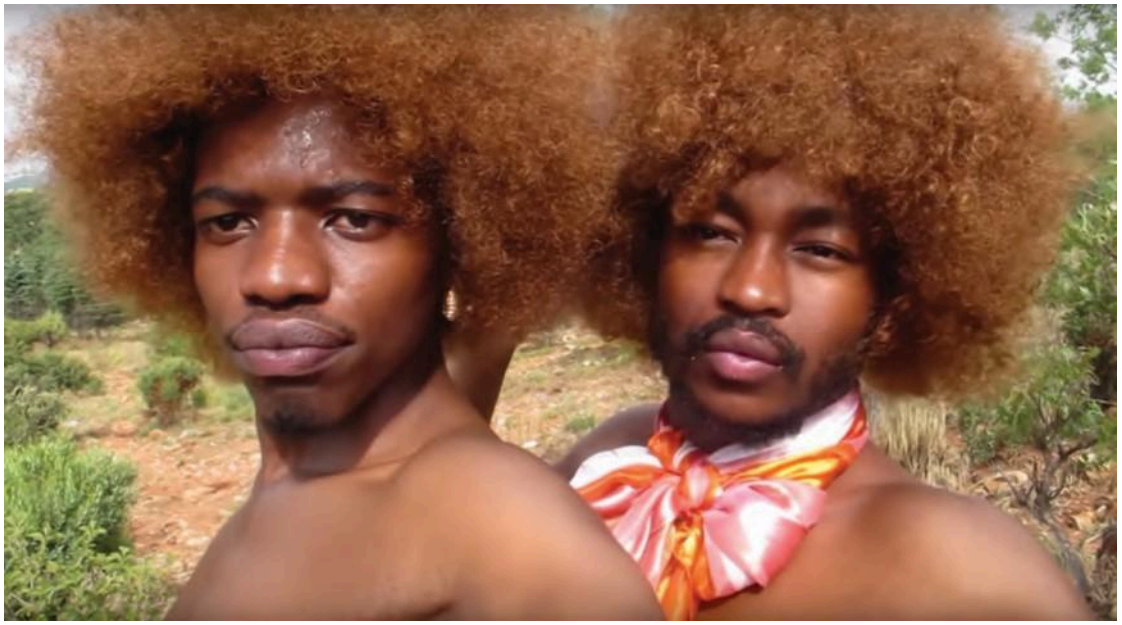
The work plays with naming and masking to point to the fictions and structural truths of whiteness's association with wealth and class privilege, but also to the fictions of the political promise of economic freedom and transformation. Here, Lauren Berlant's notions of 'promise' and 'attachment' are instructive. Berlant asks why we remain attached to objects that are bad for us and ideas that we know are ultimately fictional promises of future happiness and fulfilment. Berlant argues that thinking about subjects as defined by traditional psychoanalytic categories of desire and lack are less productive ways to understand contemporary subjectivity than the twin notions of promise and attachment.[43] The question of land and wealth redistribution is a current and urgent political question in postapartheid South Africa, indexed by continuous student and service delivery protests and the emergence of calls for radical economic reform. The failed political promise of the rainbow nation has effectively been replaced by the promise of economic freedom. Ruga's *FWWA* queers the political promise of the fading mythology of the rainbow nation, deferring this scenario to a future that is trapped in an image of the past, an aspiration attached to the fiction of whiteness and the promise of Azania, the decolonial future utopic state and counter-mythology to South Africa. Ruga's body is masked by the costume but also highly vulnerable as a black queer subject moving through marginalised peripheral urban areas with high incidences of hate crimes against queer black bodies. Here, the hold of whiteness over the political imagination of space, body and self is both made visible and disrupted by the queering of the fiction of the ever-deferred political promise.

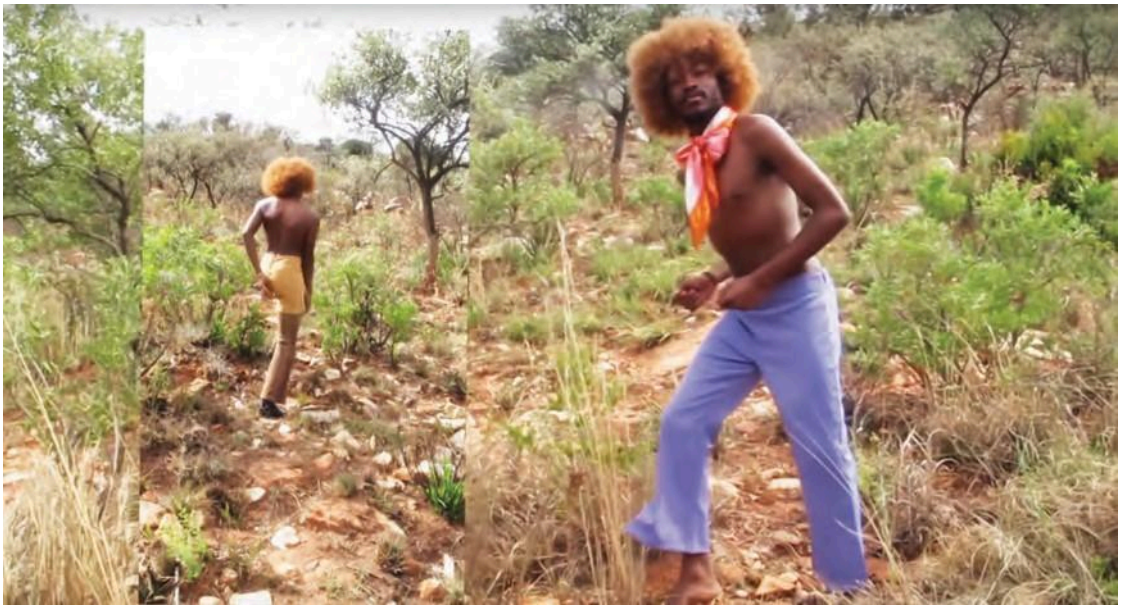
In an entirely different medium – one that circulates not through an exhibition format but through the online platform of YouTube and other social media – the duo FAKA produce the music video *From a Distance* for their dance track of the same title. Articulate across a variety of artistic platforms, from fashion to dance music, they are equally well known as deejays/music producers and visual artists. Highly sensitive to popular cultural codes, they give the following ironic subtitle for the music video: 'A Gqom-Gospel Lamentation for Dick,'[44] hence queering two strongly heteronormative local music styles: *gqom,* being a fast-tempo kwaito house style emerging from KwaZulu-Natal, and gospel, a hugely popular and diverse national genre.

From a Distance once again stages the scenario of the queer body within the natural landscape, this time unnamed but recognisable as the grasslands described locally as bush or veld. The piece plays with the citation of popular local music videos, especially gospel, but also with stereotypes of feminine fashion models and drag. The video editing works intentionally with basic editing effects like split-screen and other framing insert devices that proliferate in self-produced music videos on self-publishing sites like YouTube. The artists wear identical Afro wigs, died a burnt orange colour and are shirtless. Desire Marea wears a mustard miniskirt over tights, while Fela Gucci wears femme purple trousers and a scarf bow tie. The two adopt poses that mimic portrait photography, fashion modelling and low-budget music videos. Their poses do not extend into movements, thus the repertoire is not really one of dance, but of the still image, perhaps less fashion magazine spread than Instagram post – another channel they employ for their work. What is interesting here is the deploying of recognisable popular codes that are replayed and disidentified by the simplicity of queer signifiers: their wigs, their clothing and their femme and trans gestural repertoire. The radicalness of FAKA's queering of popular music codes is in the double hybridisation of their bodies as both masculine and feminine and of two disparate music genres: *gqom* and gospel. The radical queer gesture here is in the act of transfer that situates this work within the popular imagination via social media and YouTube, highly accessible spaces of consumption.

In their gallery interventions, these deejay and performer personas convert the gallery environment into the club space, and here it is often the duration of the work that disallows easy consumption. These long interruptions are

Figures 9.4, 9.5 and 9.6 FAKA, *From a Distance*, 2015.
Courtesy the artists.





uncontainable irruptions of popular codes within the confines of the white cube dedicated to the avant-garde, that which is art for art's sake. This queering of popular codes visible in *From a Distance* is interesting precisely because it may be seen by an audience outside of FAKA's following. It is the label 'Gqom- Gospel Lamentation' that produces the confusion of codes and a potential for double reading and disruption.[45] Once again, we encounter a scenario where two popular musical repertoires are re-encoded, hybridised and replayed in excess of their original meanings.

The choice of location in a non-specific natural setting outside of the city of Johannesburg (where both artists live and work) once again invokes the scenario of the queer body within the landscape. The video begins with a zoom-in from an intentionally cheesy animation of a satellite image of the earth from space, headed by the phrase in simple yellow font: 'lord is watching us.' The animation imitates a Google Earth zoom onto the continent, then South Africa and the title appears: 'From a Distance,' followed by a fade into the opening shot of Fela Gucci in character mimicking a catwalk pose in the landscape.

The mimicry of gestures from music and fashion both disrupts and reproduces popular codes, and in doing so, troubles a moral ordering of bodies and landscapes. The religious reference to the gaze of the lord implies an at-once disciplinary and paternal gaze that imposes onto bodies a moral order and, as such, determines categories of natural and unnatural behaviour. For queer bodies that fall outside of this frame – as unnatural, immoral, ambiguous and unclean – the gaze of the lord is not protective but a potential threat of exposure where becoming visible or coming out engenders potential discipline, even violence. Hate crimes against queer black bodies are prevalent in South Africa, and queer bodies often move through public spaces at great risk.

FAKA's lyrics for the 'lament' unapologetically use explicit language, which makes direct homosexual and trans references, to trouble both religious expectations of gospel, and the heteronormative, often explicitly sexual, generic conventions of *gqom*. The song is also musically and tonally very daring and arresting. The repertoire of gestures in this scenario is a play with queer wildness and queer failure to disrupt the very idea of the natural and the moral order. The framing of the video by this religious imperative is at odds with the title phrase, 'from a distance,' which references a kitsch American gospel pop song,

made famous by actor Bette Midler in a 1990s rendition. Again, a popular code is appropriated and replayed. 'From a distance,' is a phrase that in fact frames our viewing of the work, inviting us to gaze onto these 'unnatural' bodies in a 'natural' landscape without distance, to come up close. Yet, as in their installation and performance at the Stevenson gallery, FAKA invite us in only to refuse us entry; the work is simultaneously intimate and opaque. Gestures that appear to make queerness visible are merely mimetic repetitions of cultural codes drawn from a wide range of sources.

The mimicry of the feminine gesture in FAKA's repertoire echoes the exercise routine performed by Whittle and Hutton at the Cradle site. The two collaborations reproduce a repertoire of heteronormative bodily discipline, but now as mimicry, as imitation and blank parody. Here, the queer body liberates the landscape from the hegemonic gaze by queering the gesture, but it is also at the cost of their own transparency, their own exposure. They are made vulnerable in the instant they become visible, and yet this visibility depends on a series of repetitions that empty their own gestures of meaning. They become opaque ciphers of the very gestures that entrap them in the binary fictions of race and gender: the gold and blue body paint, the bell, the pinks and yellows of the balloons worn by Ruga, FAKA's clothing and wigs. Ruga's balloon costume masks as it reveals the ethnicity and gender of their body as they move through the territory between urban and rural, feminine and masculine. As I have stated, this continual play between intimacy and opacity is not legible as a simple rendering of a politics of queer identity, but rather presents a queering of the politics of identity. What I mean here is that each work's staging of queer visibility is, to return to Ahmed, the 're-staging of a fractured history of identifications.' The becoming visible of the queer subject is always on condition of its recognition as a body defined by sexual difference that is also raced and classed, thus exposing the structural limits by which marginal bodies are seen as bodies that matter.[46]

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A QUEERING OF THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

I have traced out an emerging queering of the politics of land, social space and the body in South African performance practices. Hutton, Whittle, Ruga and FAKA, I argue, work through a sophisticated system of repetition, citation and

mimicry to effect a queering of the political promise of land and identity. My final provocation is this: where and how is it possible to extend this repertoire from one based on citation to produce a language that has its own grammar, that is not caught within a repeating and repeatable scenario that re-enacts or mimics tropes of heteronormative binaries, white privilege and patriarchy? These acts of repetition stage the very conditions and limits of becoming visible for the queer body, and the vulnerability of queer black and brown bodies. However, at many points the work's act of transfer to the audience, whether live, contemplative or digital, holds the potential for a queer politics of identity that is not limited to an emptying out of gesture, but instead promises a new form.

I would like to end with a return to the 'snap!' sequence from *Tongues Untied*, from which the title of this chapter is drawn. Here, a grammar of gesture emerges that is able to articulate its own rhythm, performing an act of transfer while inhabiting its own opacity. This sequence of gestures is a living performative practice that cannot be translated, owned, reproduced or consumed. The one who gets it 'twisted' is the one who fails to recognise that this is the *promise*, not the fiction, of queer becoming.

1. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
2. Edouard Glissant, 'Transparency and Opacity,' in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 111–121.
3. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
4. Jean Fisher, 'The Work Between Us,' in *Trade Routes: History and Geography*: *Second Johannesburg Biennale Catalogue*, eds. Okwui Enwezor and Colin Richards (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), 20–23.
5. The phrase 'bodies that matter' draws on the title of Judith Butler's book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
6. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*: *The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
7. José Esteban Muñoz quoted in Jack Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (2014): 143, accessed 5 May 2017, doi: 10.1215/01642472-2820520.
8. Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' 143.

9. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.
10. *Tongues Untied,* directed by Marlon Riggs (USA; San Francisco: Frameline and California Newsreel, 1989), DVD.
11. Riggs, *Tongues Untied*.
12. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 289.
13. hooks, *Reel to Real*. See also: Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 27–56.
14. Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' 145.
15. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, xvi.
16. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, xvii.
17. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
18. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
19. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
20. *The Oxford English Dictionary* quoted in Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.
21. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.
22. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.
23. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.
24. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 32.
25. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 32.
26. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 32.
27. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 32.
28. Kwanele Sosibo, 'Is "Fuck White People" fucking itself?' *Mail & Guardian*, 3 February 2017, accessed 12 May 2017, https://mg.co.za/article/2017-02-03-00-is-fuck-white-people-fucking-itself.
29. Dean Hutton and Alberta Whittle, 'The Cradle,' 2point8, accessed 12 May 2017, http://www.2point8.co.za/interventions/the-cradle-savagenobility-romancingthepatriarchy-one-avatar-at-a-time-youcantsitwithus.
30. Frantz Fanon quoted in Hutton and Whittle, 'The Cradle.'
31. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 112.
32. Sara Ahmed, '"She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a Nigger": Passing through Hybridity,' in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: SAGE, 1999), 93.
33. Hutton and Whittle, 'The Cradle.'
34. I witnessed this first hand during the procession of the twins during the Homowo Festival of the Ga people of Jamestown, Accra in 2017. This is also the location of the Chale Wote festival.

35. Hutton and Whittle, 'The Cradle.'
36. Video documentation supplied courtesy of Dean Hutton and Alberta Whittle.
37. Hutton and Whittle, 'The Cradle.'
38. Michael Taussig quoted in Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' 137.
39. Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' 146.
40. Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' 140.
41. Influential texts on my reading of mimicry in this section include, Vikki Bell, 'Mimesis as Cultural Survival: Judith Butler and Anti-Semitism,' in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: SAGE, 1999), 133–162.
42. Athi-Patra Ruga, *The Future White Woman of Azania Saga Catalogue* (Cape Town: WHATIFTHEWORLD, 2015).
43. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 23–25.
44. FAKA (Desire Marea and Fela Gucci), 'From a Distance,' YouTube video, 3:50, 8 November 2015, accessed 15 May 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2doHNuXe534.
45. FAKA, 'From a Distance.'
46. Here, I return, once again, to Butler's title *Bodies that Matter* in order to make a provocation against how value and meaning are ascribed to the queer body as desirable wildness in artistic practice and popular culture.