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An Elephant's Exquisite Corpse: Spectral Matters in Lynn Nottage's *Mlima's Tale*

Natalia Duong, Rishika Mehrishi, Joshua Williams

In her 2018 play Mlima's Tale, Lynn Nottage narrates the story of Mlima, a Kenyan elephant, as his spectral body and material remains transform and traverse transnational and oceanic networks. This article explores the manifold circuits of more-than-human exchange that Mlima activates through discourses of race and species, medium and materiality, violence and language, space and time, form and value, life and death. Using the Surrealist technique of the "exquisite corpse" both as a writing method and an analytical device, the authors collaboratively explore animal memory, materiality, being, and becoming in all their spectacular and spectral transmutations.

Keywords: *interspecies, Lynn Nottage, exquisite corpse, transformation, oceanic networks*

In Lynn Nottage's *Mlima's Tale* (2018), an elephant is killed for his tusks. The play, following in part the recursive pattern of plot development most often associated with Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* (1897), spins out from there. It follows the tusks—and the ghostly presence of the elephant, Mlima, that they retain—as they pass from hand to hand from East Africa to Southeast Asia to China. By giving dramatic shape to the illicit ivory trade, *Mlima's Tale* activates manifold circuits of more-than-human exchange in the Indian Ocean world, spectacularizing questions of race and species, medium and materiality, violence and language, space and time, form and value, and the multiplicity of death.

This collaboratively written essay follows *Mlima's Tale* where it leads. Our shared disciplinary investment in the intersections of theatre and performance studies, animal studies, and variously inflected forms of new materialism led us to consider matching our individual readings of the play to its own haphazard progress from character to character, scene to scene, continent to continent. Almost immediately, we settled on the exquisite corpse as a way of working. The technique is simple and is widely used in poetry and visual art. Each collaborator in the chain creates something—in our case, a few paragraphs of academic prose—with only the fragment generated by the person who preceded them to direct their efforts. Simone Kahn, a member of the Surrealist circle that invented the technique, called

Natalia Duong, Rishika Mehrishi, and Joshua Williams all work at the intersections of performance studies, animal studies, and materiality. Collectively, they are interested in theorizations of the more-than-human, spectacular forms of material transfer, and postcolonial critiques of liberal humanism. Separately, their work interrogates kinship relations formed through toxic mobility in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, animal materialities and metaphors in South Asia, and the political figure of the animal in East African theater and performance. This essay constitutes the first part of their collaboration on interspecies performance.

it “a system, a method of research” that was able to produce “unimaginable” images and ideas out of “the involuntary, unconscious, and unpredictable combination of three or four heterogeneous minds.”¹ Passing our essay back and forth in this way, without full knowledge of its emerging shape, allowed for these unforeseen combinations as well as an analytical openness and mutuality that replaced the view-from-nowhere of much academic writing with something much more partial, situated, fragmentary, and polyphonic.

The necessity of establishing socially distanced modes of artistic and scholarly collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified interest in the exquisite corpse.² Its practicality aside, we were drawn to it because of its evocation of the densely interwoven networks in which human and more-than-human bodies have always commingled. Rachel Lee, for one, addresses anxiety over what it means to be biological in the wake of posthumanist reconfigurations of the body by asking, in *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, “whether literary criticism and performance studies can still remain humanist if they think in terms of distributed parts rather than organic structures, or, more exactly, turn fragment and substance into patterns—circulations of energy, affects, atoms, and liquidity in its accounting of the soma.”³ Lee utilizes the aleatory, unpredictable, and contingent aesthetic of the exquisite corpse to rethink race by straddling both anthropocentric and posthumanist conceptions of the body.

Lee’s account of corporeality itself as distributed, pluriform, and far from closure sits well with *Mlima’s Tale*, which after all follows a body and its remains as they move and are transformed. Indeed, the consonance between the exquisite corpse methodology and Nottage’s play proved even more fruitful than we had hoped it would. In writing this essay—to return once more to Simone Kahn—we “were at once recipients of and contributors to the joy of witnessing the sudden appearance of creatures none of us had foreseen, but which we ourselves had nonetheless created.”⁴

Spectral Matters

Theatre traffics in bodies. Shakespeare’s “two hours’ traffic of our stage”⁵ is composed, principally if not exclusively, of the labor of actors’ bodies as they move and breathe and speak and sing. Theatre spectacularizes and commoditizes this labor,⁶ abstracting the aesthetic thrill of liveness from the aliveness of the performer—even, or perhaps especially, when that obviously, self-evidently living performer is playing dead. As Basil Jones, the South African puppet theatre maker, has noted, an actor’s “*livingness* is obvious and certainly doesn’t need to be ‘performed,’” while puppets and other performing objects must continually “strive towards life.”⁷ It follows that a performer playing a corpse must struggle to die because the inescapable fact of their being alive militates against the theatrical illusion that they are not.

Difficulty or perhaps even impossibility aside, many plays that traffic in dead bodies mobilize performers' aliveness to conjure up the embodied disembodiment of the ghost. Michael Chemers has built on the rich tradition of ghosts-in-the-theatre scholarship to suggest that the appearance of a ghost onstage is an intensification or concretization of the "phantasmal" energies present in all theatrical performance, which always "straddles the present and the past, fantasy and reality, emerging as a fairly uncanny collaboration between these opposites."⁸ The uncanny simultaneity of the ghost—at once present and past, phantom and fact—aligns neatly with most accounts of the ephemerality of performance in general. At the same time, however, the embodied performance of a ghostly role highlights the stubborn refusal of the dead to remain so. Trafficking in ghosts means giving them shape, breath, body, voice. Like the theatre itself, ghosts are both evanescent and material. They call for what Andrew Sofer has called "spectral readings."⁹

The materiality of death—and of playing dead—acquires an ethical dimension in *Mlima's Tale*. Nottage theatricalizes the illicit international traffic in ivory by making ivory human. In both productions of the play to date, a Black man—Sahr Ngaujah at The Public Theater in 2018 and Jermaine Rowe at Westport Country Playhouse in 2019—portrayed, first, Mlima the elephant, and then, after Mlima is shot by poachers, the ghostly remainder of his being as it circulates in the global market in the form of the ivory taken from his body. The charge of anthropomorphism here is obvious and uninteresting, largely because it elides the complex ways in which Nottage's translation of elephant and ivory onto the human body enlivens Mlima's death.¹⁰ By affiliating an elephant's remains with a Black human being, *Mlima's Tale* pulls discourses of Africanness together across species lines, risking the bestialization of the Black body in order to explore the thingification to which both Black and elephant lives have been subject. The fact that the Black human bodies in question are located differently in the African diaspora—for one, neither Ngaujah nor Rowe are Kenyan—only compounds the play's engagement with what Avery Gordon calls the "ghostly matters" of Blackness in the wake of slavery and colonial genocide.¹¹ Ngaujah and Rowe's performances of and as Mlima lend the ivory in which his being is re- and unmade an aliveness that compounds the ethical charge of the play by stymying any easy reduction of animal remains to dead matter. As Ben Brantley put it in his review, "Killing him entirely, it turns out, isn't possible."¹²

Flesh, Bone, Sinew, Plastic

The charge of anthropomorphism belies the slippery boundary between animal and Man.¹³ A man playing a corpse. A Black man playing a now-dead animal whose life becomes valuable only at the threshold at which it dies and is made (in)to matter through expiration. The animation of this body traffics in the specters of Man, and the limits of humanity traced by a genealogy of Black studies through flesh and

bone, sinew and plasticity.¹⁴ Though the oceanic spaces between spectacular sites of figuration have often been disregarded as merely spaces of transit, the connective tissue that subtends illicit transfers of goods across national borders also offers geographies for thinking expansively about what constitutes matter.

What matters. To think transpacific and transatlantic circulations together is also to recognize oceans as sites of meaning production where the trafficking of bodies, and goods, and bodies *as* goods, come to accumulate value. *Mlima's Tale* journeys through and across the Indian Ocean: as Mlima's spectral body moves, it remembers the entanglement of oceanic geographies that colonial powers have aimed to disarticulate. What comes to matter when oceans are not divided but rather centered as sites of figuration?

Recent scholarship explores how oceans are a critical agent in the formation of subjects, objects, and the empires upheld by their circulation.¹⁵ Often overlooked as the space between nation-states, the tides are also actants in what Michelle N. Huang calls "ecologies of entanglement" that congeal a giant oceanic gyre of plastic detritus into its own formative entity. For Huang, plastic embodies the interconnected molecularity of being as it slowly disintegrates and accumulates in living bodies.¹⁶ Plastic, at once imagined as infinite pliability and as a protective barrier, also represents a durability and recalcitrant presence that, much like Mlima, refuses to disappear even as it is broken down into its microscopic forms and is ushered away by currents. As the actor playing Mlima circulates through the play, a trace of culpability is left in his wake. He leaves a chalky residue that maps the movement of ivory such that the causes of Mlima's death both intensify and become diffuse amongst all the other characters. Like the spread of plastic waste across oceans, accountability for violence in the play is constantly deferred to zones of supposed disposability. With this transference, a simultaneous erasure and accumulation of slow violence remains.¹⁷ In this *oceanic undercommons*, a generative locale Aimee Bahng defines as the opposite of an *oceanus nullius*, the sidelined actors indeed play no small part.¹⁸

Building on the ontological lure of plastic, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson figures Blackness through plasticity to denote the ways that recognition or inclusion into categories of "the human" does not necessarily protect what she calls "black(ened)" bodies against ontological violence.¹⁹ Rather, Jackson argues that the plasticization of Blackness is a process whereby "the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology."²⁰ Read in the context of Nottage's play, Mlima's plasticity across species divides does not afford him protection against ontological violence; rather, it is his plasticization that obscures the cumulative harms at the precipices of humanity.

The chameleonic journey that the actor playing Mlima undergoes does not then follow a teleology that results in Man, but rather constitutes a process through

which Blackness is transmogrified into its constituent parts. Though he dons a chalky dust and paints his body ivory to become the coveted matter symbolized by tusk, his material exterior decays as he transits through the play and the geographies represented in it. In scene 10, cautiously titled “Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped,” Mlima finds himself in a cargo hold, surrounded by the faint voices of what Nottage calls “elephant memories.”²¹ The stage directions instruct that “Mlima listens to the voices with his entire body” while they list off a roll call of names as a series of kin relations.²² A father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a son. Finally, Mlima is incorporated into this litany of names as he morphs from “Mlima of the Great Plains” to “Mlima, Father of Gitu.”²³ It is through this transformation that Mlima’s value is substantiated by memory, lineage, and a body that hears.

Becoming Tusk: A Haptic Perversity

Nottage makes such transformation the conceptual and structural framework for *Mlima’s Tale*. Her commitment to exploring metamorphic possibilities is evident from the very first stage directions, which prescribe the stage to be “a space that invites transformation, sparse and open,” lending a “breathless quality to the flow of the action.”²⁴ Nottage’s *theatre of species* is charged with an aesthetic, narratological, and temporal allegiance to transformation that operates with a hypnotic urgency throughout the play.²⁵ It is in these moments of transit that Nottage invites an embodied immersion into animal memory, materiality, being, and becoming.

Mlima’s Tale establishes a transmutative ecology hinging on matter(s) of life and death. This ecology is operated by an uninterrupted choreography of affective, haptic, and material practices. In scene 1, titled “Thunder is not yet rain,” Mlima arrives onstage invoking his ancestral wisdom of listening with the entire body. As he navigates his past and present through his body’s capacity for sensing and movement, Mlima is engulfed in recollections of love and friendship, fear and risk. But soon his listening, sensing, moving body is seen collapsing in pain. Mlima has succumbed to a poachers’ attack. The following scene opens with two Somali poachers, Geedi and Rahman, sitting and looking at the massive elephant “battling death.”²⁶ Our looking at the dying animal, along with theirs, is predicated on the poachers’ knowledge of hunting elephants. Having struck the animal with a poisoned arrow, Geedi shares how his father taught him how to kill the animal respectfully. The Somali way of using a bow and arrow and spear (unlike the “white infidel[’s]” use of guns)²⁷ allows the poacher to look the animal in the eye, proffering elephants the honor of knowing who killed them.

This intimacy of seeing-knowing invokes what Laura Marks terms *haptic visuality*. For Marks, haptic visuality activates an intersubjective way of seeing and perceiving that engages with the surface—the skin, texture, trace—of an image. She proposes an embodied spectatorship that emerges when the tactile, olfactory, and the optic together activate a material relationship with media.²⁸ Following Marks’s theorization, Rizvana Bradley takes the notion of the haptic

beyond the surface into an in-depth somatic and visceral engagement with the medium.²⁹ She writes: “The haptic can be understood as the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work, or the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility of performance.”³⁰ Mlima’s poisoned, dying body, ripe with conditions of transmutative possibility, grips us with its viscera(l) surplus. Writhing between life and death, Mlima refuses a quick and easy departure. The poachers’ growing impatience pushes Geedi to hack the groaning animal’s face with a machete. Mlima’s blood flows; his groaning stops; and Geedi gets to work. He begins to chop out Mlima’s “majestic tusks. His trophies.”³¹ The first act of dismembering Mlima’s corpse unveils a perverse encounter with the animal in all its virile, vulnerable, and violated fleshiness. An intimacy between Mlima and the two Somali poachers grows in the crevices of violence.

Nottage uses this haptic perversity—a violent sensuality of desire and possession centered on Mlima’s tusks—to bring our attention to the ethico-political stakes of encountering and representing more-than-human life and death.³² The transmutative and ethical potential that Nottage invokes here is akin to Karen Barad’s claim that “touching is a matter of response.” She writes, “In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other.”³³ What transpires from here on is a co-constitutive drama of touching and being touched by Mlima.

The concluding stage directions of scene 2 instruct: “As Mlima journeys through the play, he leaves a white streak of paint or dust on every person he encounters. Residue. A stain. A mark of complicity. It should be visible to the audience, and punctuate the storytelling.”³⁴ The first time the audience sees this enacted is on Mlima himself. He responds to the poacher’s touch by gradually becoming his tusks. He touches himself, rubbing his fingers with “ivory paint or dust,” a residue that sums up his parts.³⁵ The white paint or dust used in the play is, of course, not actual ivory. Working as a theatrical illusion, however, the white material operates multiple realms of transformation. As he streaks his face and body, Mlima’s whole listening body evokes a self-making while also succumbing to an objectification. A haptic interlude screeches across each scene, movement, and transference actuating Mlima’s becoming self, becoming spectral, becoming dust. With every staining, Mlima launches an enquiry into assemblages of self-proliferation and obliteration that haunt the genealogies of animal movement. His simultaneous persistence both as a subject and object compels us to consider the ways in which white paint moves beyond its signification of ivory. In what ways does the materiality of the ivory paint operate as a mark of both Mlima’s selfhood and its annihilation? What labor does the white paint perform on the bodies of the actors?

Nottage’s *ecodramaturgy* undoubtedly anticipates that members of her audiences will differently interpret the myriad significations of the ivory markings

on the bodies of the actors.³⁶ It is, however, safe to speculate that streaks of paint work as a surplus mark, lending their own excessiveness to the bodies onstage. Through a haptic encounter between Mlima and other characters, the white paint in particular asserts an active presence that confounds and complicates the racialized dynamics of *Mlima's Tale*. Bound in a material relatedness with each other, the actors negotiate their embodied Blackness with the effect of whiteness the ivory dust imparts to their skin. The dust in particular provides Mlima's spectral body an animatedness that is essential to his spectacularized selfhood and abjection.³⁷ This animatedness is contingent upon and congruent with Mlima's disintegration. At times the dust invites us to excavate deep for the circulations of commodification and consumption; at other moments it commands us to stay with the exigencies that emerge on the surface of Mlima's concerted erasure.

Allotropic Consumption

Conflicting forces drive the unfolding of *Mlima's Tale*. At one end, an aleatory opening emerges from Mlima's transmutative journey: a porosity buttressed by the haptic potentiality of becoming through touch. At the other end, an urgent progression that is driven by the subsistence of bare life and the seeming inevitability of capital-driven consumption. These two forces operate as parallel yet simultaneous functions that challenge the ethical response-ability of each and every body that touches Mlima, and that Mlima touches.

Although the stage is made "sparse and open," the consecutive and consequential train of happenings that undergird the transformation of flesh to tusk appears inescapable. In the "breathless" transfer of commodity through the chain of demand, personified by the series of actors who mutate and replace one another onstage, there are seldom points of rest where desires are not always already fed by the supply of another need further up the line of intake. Throughout the play, the same actors at times play the consumer only to transform into the consumed. Meanwhile, Mlima observes how the incessant pulse of conspicuous consumption propels itself forward. Here lies Nottage's commentary on the allotropic consumption implicit in illicit ivory trades where hunger drives both cause and effect.

Hunger itself takes many forms. At times, the hunger is literal and acts of consumption are the only natural sources of reprieve. In scene 2, the Somali poacher Geedi first justifies killing Mlima by citing a generational lesson from his father, who taught him that "hunger be the only reason to kill," while warning his partner Rahman, "You'll starve off sentiments."³⁸ In this exchange, the immediacy of survival takes precedence while moral or ethical rumination is deferred. Later, in scene 8, the Tanzanian businessman Hassan Abdulla brokers a deal with exporter Aziz Muhammed over a meal, almost as if the act of consumption itself feeds further desire. Greed threatens to overturn their covert plan as Muhammed warns Abdulla to "stop licking your lips" while the men finalize the details of Mlima's oceanic transfer.³⁹ In scene 12, "The mouth that eats does not talk," consumption

again appears to undergird the clandestine trade, where the Vietnamese broker Thuy Fan devours a meal of beef as he barter over the cost of the tusks in his carving shop. In fact, food appears to come at the cost of ethics in the apparently endless cycles of conspicuous consumption. Scene 11, titled “Where there is blood, there is plenty of food,” centrally features this exchange as a bribery at a port in Hai Phong, northern Vietnam.

At other times in the play, hunger transforms into a more metaphysical and planetary force. Scene 3, “No matter how full the river, it still wants to grow,” is named after devouring currents of water. Similarly, in the penultimate scene, “A man’s greed is like a snake that wants to swallow an elephant,” hunger cheekily returns as the Chinese elite Hong Feng provides a waffling evaluation of the ivory sculpture made of Mlima’s tusks, hinting at his ethical quandary of being a vegan who “gave up meat a couple of years ago,” but who nonetheless trades away other ethical belongings to accumulate wealth and cohort with the *nouveau riche*.⁴⁰ In this chain of globalized consumption that circumnavigates the Indian Ocean, it is interesting to note that the ivory ultimately lands in the possession of a Chinese consumer, as Nottage figures China as the emblem of conspicuous consumption and unscrupulous greed. In their many iterative forms, hunger and appetites appear boundless and inevitable.

These immediate lures of consumption depicted throughout the unfolding of scenes in the play affectively contrast the cited generational practices that uphold the continuation of the ivory trade. In addition to Mlima’s lineage that haunts the intermediary scenes, and that bookends the play, multiple characters cite how their kin founded and sustained the historic trade, most succinctly summed up by Hassan Abdulla’s reminder that many people “shame us today for the few sacrificed, forgetting that it’s part of an ancient tradition, and a long history of trade between Asia and Africa.”⁴¹ How, then, to divert the cycle of recursive extraction? How might a transmutative ecology open onto an exquisite corpse? For Rachel Lee, an exquisite corpse offers a vibrational potentiality, a sideways open-endedness that does not foreclose teleological determinism, but rather offers a “dispositional, affective charge” linked to feminist and queer engagements.⁴² Lee hence describes the exquisite corpse as creating an alternate opening, one that offers generous entry into a politics of temporal uncertainty. An exquisite corpse asks, What occurs at the haptic border of a body unfolding onto itself? Mlima’s body becomes this disarticulated corpse. Through its dissection and circulation within this genealogy of extraction, it begets an “alternate opening” through which cycles of violence might be refigured, their ends as yet unknown.

The ethics of consumption in Nottage’s work thus appear as a fragmented body wherein several moves toward innocence lie. When asked if the suspected poachers were in fact responsible for Mlima’s death, the Director of Wildlife, a white Kenyan named Andrew, replies, “That is a complicated question. Did they kill Mlima, yes, are they solely responsible...no.”⁴³ Nobody escapes complicity.

Even as the characters negotiate their immediate desires, the drive of consumption appears to be inherited and passed through the repertoires of ancestral memory. In the echoing chamber of the ship's cargo hold, when Mlima hears his kin reciting a roster of those who lived and died because of the same force of desire, he recognizes that he is neither the first nor the last who will succumb to the hunger of others.

In Ocean Vuong's poetic autobiography, the predictability of generational harm is embodied by a herd of buffalo who follow one another off a cliff. The inevitability of their expiration is repeated as bodies lurch after one another to their serial and communal end. For the buffalo, futurity is already somewhat foreclosed; death is inexorable. And yet, Vuong's text concludes with a metamorphosis that interrupts the cycle of violence by way of transfiguration: the buffalo become moose, then dogs, then macaque monkeys, then finally, at the precipice of "the forever nothing below, they ignite into ochre-red sparks of monarchs" and fly away.⁴⁴ By becoming butterfly, the buffalo find a line of flight to evade their prescribed limit. After all, as Vuong reminds us, "Monkeys, moose, cows, dogs, butterflies, buffaloes. What we would give to have the ruined lives of animals tell a human story—when our lives are in themselves the story of animals."⁴⁵ What to make then, of this story of an elephant, and the many human stories told in its wake?

Stick-Slip

Mlima transforms as he is consumed. He does not metamorphose into other animals—although of course it bears repeating that he is played throughout by another animal, a human, and is consequently always multiple—but instead disaggregates, or is disaggregated, into the component parts of his body. Chief among these are his tusks, which all the other characters in the play hunger for, in one way or another. As elephant becomes tusks becomes ivory, the labor of poacher, smuggler, broker, and sculptor remakes Mlima's body as a commodity. The transformations of his exquisite corpse as it travels along the supply chain make viscerally manifest Marx's emphasis on "the whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor on the basis of commodity production."⁴⁶ Mlima goes from being a living being so massive that his name suggests the immobility of the geologic—*mlima* means "mountain" in Swahili—to a work of art on a much more human scale, magically accruing value in the process. At the same time, he retains a phantasmal coherency that militates against any straightforwardly Marxist reading of his transformation. The inexorable logic of the market aside, his remains cannot be reduced to their value as commodities. He is the ghost in the machinery of his own exchange.

The magic—theatrical and economic—of Mlima's transformation into ivory leaves his flesh as surplus. After they kill Mlima, the poachers Geedi and Rahman butcher his body. "You family'll be fed," Geedi says.⁴⁷ And later: "Hunger be the only reason to kill."⁴⁸ It is unclear whether they take any of Mlima's flesh to eat or to sell as meat, but even if they do not, one cannot help but imagine that the bulk of

Mlima's body will be consumed—if not by humans, then by scavengers like hyenas, lions, and vultures, to say nothing of the insects, worms, bacteria, fungi, molds, and yeasts that will strip him to his bones. Accounts of the materiality of elephant remains tend, like *Mlima's Tale*, to elide the viscosity of this process, centering instead the products into which ivory is made. Sculptures and inlays, combs and buttons: these are the commodity forms that elephant death takes. Similarly, the historical record dwells on sites—like the carver Master Yee's workshop in *Mlima's Tale* or the massive factories in Victorian Connecticut where ivory was lathed, bleached, and cut into veneers for piano keys, forty-five keyboards' worth per tusk⁴⁹—in which the labor of dedicated experts furthered the necromantic work of converting dead matter into living value. This neglects the caloric value of elephant flesh and the rhizomatic networks of exchange, beyond the economic, through which Mlima outlives his death. In "Shooting an Elephant," his influential 1936 essay on the roots of imperialism in white fears of humiliation, George Orwell illuminates, if inadvertently, this dimension of animal life-in-death when he fumes that the people who witnessed him killing the titular elephant in a town in colonial Burma "wanted the meat":⁵⁰ "Burmans were arriving with dahs and baskets even before I left, and I was told that they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon."⁵¹ The animal's death here is merely an opening onto a more thorough-going process of transmutation.

Orwell, "stuck between [his] hatred of the empire [he] served and [his] rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make his job impossible,"⁵² casts the Burmese townsfolk as the scavengers *Mlima's Tale* keeps offstage. The carrion they pick at is not only the elephant's body but the spectacle of his death. Their appetite is both metabolic and affective. Nottage comes up against affect, if not metabolism, as well insofar as her play spectacularizes Mlima's demise—with, perhaps, different intentions and to a different end than Orwell's essay. In light of this, it seems notable that the play also traffics in images—yet another commodity form that Mlima's body takes. In the 2019 Westport Country Playhouse production, images of mutilated elephant bodies, their tusks wrenched from their skulls, were projected onto the rear of the set when the game warden Wamwara showed his uncle, the police officer Githinji, photographs of Mlima's butchered corpse. While the action of the play theatricalizes the contemporary links between Africa and Asia, and the intimacy between them that the traffic in ivory affords,⁵³ moments like this one recenter the connections between Africa and the Americas that the casting of a Black US-based actor as Mlima establishes. One of the commodity forms of lynching in the US South was the photograph; photographic evidence of lynchings circulated widely in white supremacist circles as well as amongst anti-lynching advocates who rightly identified them as proof of unspeakable crimes.⁵⁴ Scholars like Amy Louise Wood have shown how the public killing of supposedly dangerous circus elephants in the United States was morphologically linked to the lynching of Black people.⁵⁵ When an elephant, Mary, who had killed

her inexperienced keeper, was hanged in Erwin, Tennessee, in 1916, the NAACP wrote to at least one newspaper to request images of her death for their files.⁵⁶ And when Sonny White improvised his piano introduction to Billie Holiday's famous 1939 recording of the anti-lynching standard "Strange Fruit," his fingers felt their way across the "'stick-slip'" surface of ivory.⁵⁷

Genealogies of Necromantic Spectacle

Intimacies of transcontinental connections are not only the guiding force of the play's narrative but also played a role in Nottage's creative process. She found inspiration in the 2004 dance drama *Fagaala* by Germaine Acogny's Senegal-based Compagnie JANT-BI. A collaboration between Acogny and the Japanese choreographer Kota Yamazaki, *Fagaala* (meaning "to eliminate" in Wolof) illustrates the violence of the Rwandan genocide through butoh and African dance. In an interview, Nottage said, "When thinking of ways to bring Mlima's ghost to life, I remember seeing a very arresting image of these African dancers who were exploring the Rwandan genocide through Butoh technique."⁵⁸ Another spectacle of Black annihilation fed into Nottage's portrayal of animal life-in-death.⁵⁹ Acogny's own inspiration for *Fagaala* came from reading Boris Boubacar Diop's 2000 novel *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, the first work of fiction based on the Rwandan genocide.⁶⁰ From the novel as well as her interviews with genocide survivors emerges, as Acogny states in a program note, "A body language inspired by the inner distress...suffering, the horror, the screaming of pain...[that] is translated by the dancers' bodies, so as to call out to the world, and shock and disturb the bodies and spirits."⁶¹ One witnesses a similar body language in *Mlima's Tale* that attempts to present inner distress with a screeching serenity. Nottage's figuration of Mlima's ghost seems particularly inspired by the solo performance of a butoh-inspired white-dusted performer whose frantic dance leaves traces of the white powder in the air, as if "to release all the anguish of the world his character seems to have ingested."⁶² As a form deeply invested in exploring the depths of annihilation, butoh seamlessly weaves into Acogny's (and thus Nottage's) contemplation of violence. On the use of white makeup as a "neutralizer," butoh performers Ohno Kazuo and Ohno Yoshito claim that "in applying makeup, we aren't, as often presumed, painting something onto the body. Rather, we're erasing something...The process of self-obliteration, in effect, makes it possible for us to become someone or something else."⁶³ Doused in white dust, Acogny's dancer gesticulates a historic obliteration through the daunting task of becoming bone. Arrested by Acogny's images of this necromantic spectacle, Nottage created her own narrative of elimination. Mlima's haunting movements of becoming bone/corpse/dust gesture at a repertoire of body images that offer a seething meditation on violence. Bringing together ritual body painting⁶⁴ (a stereotypical image of "an African" that Nottage toys with throughout the play) and butoh's emblematic use of white powder, *Mlima's Tale* creates a genealogy of gestural-material-aesthetic

practices that are deeply invested in exploring the transmutative contours of life and death, life-in-death, life after death.

Mlima's hypnotic grip operates a "stick-slip" hapticity that is only accorded to him at the moment of his annihilation. Haunting the crossroads of life and death, Mlima operates with a certain virality, leaving a white stain on every person he encounters. With this spectral touch, he gains a freedom to journey across the play, tracking the ebbs and flows of interspecies transaction. Mlima, upon being hunted, returns to scout and track a repertoire of spectacularized violence. His becoming spectral restructures the dynamics of surveillance that predicate every act of animal killing. With every white mark, Mlima slickly traverses hierarchies of power, and at the same time punctuates every narrative transition. At every material interruption, he invites us to co-witness the biopolitical choreographies of interspecies networks. As these networks proliferate, a dizzying array of numbers, calculations, and negotiations appear. Each bargain intensifies Mlima's morphological annihilation, and further expands his ethical efficacy. With every haptic encounter, Mlima unveils a web of complicity. And with every tag of complicity, Mlima becomes "whiter," becomes ivory, becomes an exquisite corpse.

At the Scene of Writing

Elephant, meat, bones, ivory, cargo, material, commodity, artwork. The transmogrification of Mlima's exquisite corpse extends the line of his being outwards from his death. Drawing on butoh in its theatricalization of this rhizomatic traffic across the heavily policed boundaries of nations, economies, bodies, and epistemes, *Mlima's Tale* activates not only *ankoko* butoh pioneers Ohno Kazuo and Hijikata Tatsumi's emphasis on stripping performance of its humanity but also the political situatedness of their art form in the devastated landscape of postwar Japan.⁶⁵ Early *ankoko* butoh emerged from the irradiated wreckage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Compagnie JANT-BI's *Fagaala*, marshalling this legacy of locating unimaginable disaster in and on the body, combined butoh and African dance in order to revisit the killing fields of Rwanda. *Mlima's Tale*, third in this chain of transpositions, grounds itself in the unrelenting epidemic of elephant poaching—which, given its long-standing embeddedness in the political economy of eastern and central Africa, cannot help but recall the slave trade.⁶⁶ The passage of Mlima's exquisite corpse is not circular, as the formal model of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* suggests it should be, nor is it entirely captured in the generally eastward flow of the play as it moves from Africa to Asia. Mlima is, instead, borne explosively outward by the force of the disaster that both killed him and brought him into theatrical being.⁶⁷

Of course, Mlima leaves a trace behind him as he moves. The play itself is one such trace: the "tale" that he is telling or that is being told about him. But Mlima also leaves a mark, in performance, on all those whose decisions inflect the trajectory of his remains. A smear of makeup, a cloud of dust: Mlima's stick-slip touch is a kind of writing. By visibly and graphically marking those who are complicit in his

death, dismemberment, and metamorphosis, he conscripts them into his narrative, transforming them into the surface on which the disaster is written and rewritten as text. Whether this has any cognizable effect on poacher or customs agent or art collector is immaterial; as Maurice Blanchot puts it, “To read, to write, the way one lives under the surveillance of the disaster: exposed to the passivity that is outside passion. The heightening of forgetfulness. It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.”⁶⁸ Throughout the play, the disaster of Mlima’s death speaks through him, to little effect. “If you can hear me,” he shouts—and no one, save perhaps the audience, can.⁶⁹ But the marks he makes prove more difficult to ignore, despite other characters’ feigned or willed forgetfulness when faced with his remains. Mlima becomes text as the disaster writes itself on and through his creaturely materiality. This recalls the spectral presence of the animal at the scene of writing and in the chemical trace of the mark: ostrich quill, horsehair brush, bone char, hide glue, egg wash, vellum. In order to transcribe the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* as the poet Vyasa recited it, the elephant god Ganesha broke off his own tusk, dipped it in ink, and wrote.

Forty-Eight Rains and Five Summers

“I count forty-eight rains from memory, five summers of dried grass.”⁷⁰ What does it mean to not only witness the erasure of one’s kin but also be made materially of their disappearance? To embody the trace of text, the mark of chemical transfer, the reorganization of molecules such that one’s corpse becomes a map of violence past? To give one’s creaturely materiality to disaster: “forty-eight rains from memory, five summers of dried grass,” Mlima remembers.

Mlima speaks to the violence of his past by surfacing the ghosts of displayed bodies that haunt his genealogy. Disability studies and animal rights scholar Sunaura Taylor locates a lineage of elephants in circus performances that exploited animal labor for human entertainment. She recounts stories of elephants fighting back against their trainers as a sort of speech act wherein the elephants are not silently passive, but rather active advocates in voicing their desire for liberation.⁷¹ In tracing this past, however, it would be myopic to ignore how racialized, disabled, and nonnormative human bodies of multiple types were also inscribed into this economy of public display, and how their bodies were animalized through performances of what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls “freakery.” The spectacular display of Black bodies harkened back to the violent evaluation of captured bodies for capital, while East Asian bodies assuaged white spectators by re-creating Orientalist fantasies. Thomson charts freak discourse’s genealogy as “a movement from a narrative of the marvelous to a narrative of the deviant.”⁷² In doing so, Thomson also suggests how deviant bodies can become sites of resistance. Bodily dysmorphia signals a departure from genealogy wherein evolutionary deviance could signal profit or peril.

The bodies of elephants bespeak the violence that humans wage against one another as well. Recently, increasing numbers of female African elephants have evolved to be tuskless in regions where poachers survived civil wars by participating in illicit ivory trading. Researchers similarly speculate that the majority of Asian elephants are tuskless because of the longer history of ivory demand in that region. They suggest that elephant herds evolved at such a fast pace to adapt to the anthropogenic results of intrahuman conflict: a temporal scale that signals the urgency of their survival and the entangled nature of violence. In Gorongosa National Park, 51 percent of the female elephants who survived the civil war in Mozambique were found tuskless, while 32 percent of female elephants are now *born* tuskless.⁷³ Tuskless elephants similarly survived the human wars by evolving to use their trunks in ways usually reserved for their tusks; they adapted to peeling bark from trees, for example. However, other changes to their lifestyle have proved more dire for interdependent species that rely upon elephants' tusk-driven behavior, such as smaller species who often share watering holes dug by tusks or lizards who create habitats in trees uprooted by passing elephants. As a result of the elephant herds' adaptation to anthropogenic violence, their migrations have also mutated, leaving many other species vulnerable in their wake. It is important, then, to situate the violences that unfold in the inevitable sequencing of *Mlima's Tale* not only as a genealogical progression toward the inevitable and insatiable desire for ivory as depicted in the penultimate scene but also as a sort of ecological web of interdependent causes and effects. To think with *Mlima's Tale* as an exquisite corpse is not to unfold a teleology of harm, but rather to construct a composite sculpture of the many intersecting forces that both narrate past violence and script future catastrophe.

And yet, amidst the disaster, there also lies care. Taylor recounts the tale of an elephant named Babyl from the Samburu Reserve in northern Kenya who couldn't traverse landscapes as fast as the rest of the herd due to a mobility disability. Despite being labeled "crippled" by ethologist Marc Bekoff, Babyl piqued the interest of other pachyderm specialists because of the empathetic response that she elicited from the rest of the herd. They slowed to accommodate Babyl's syncopated tempo, procured feed to nourish her, and adjusted their migration patterns to be more accessible to her. While the herd's behavior baffled the specialists who couldn't logically reconcile why a herd of elephants who had no genetic ties to Babyl would care for her in these ways, Taylor offers that perhaps "from a critical disability perspective it is also important to keep open the possibility that Babyl did offer something useful to the troop—something that may be hard for us to recognize if we understand disability as a drawback or limitation."⁷⁴ Thinking with elephant herds affords an expansion of possible kin relations, perhaps even across species lines. Mlima, at the precipice of his own death, calls out to his kin, and extends himself beyond his earthly embodiment towards an ecology of webbed relations.

In doing so, Mlima warns others of the cyclical return of violence by recounting his own end. From the Ming Dynasty to as recently as 2006, ivory powder has been believed to have medicinal properties amongst many Chinese civilizations. Emperors believed that ivory chopsticks would change colors upon coming into contact with poisonous materials; ivory is also said to improve one's skin, epilepsy, infertility, osteoporosis, and tuberculosis.⁷⁵ If the presence or absence of ivory acts as a sort of canary, signaling the toxic harm to come, what can be made of Mlima's tale and the horizons of disaster that await? Not to mention those that have already arrived.

The Tusks Will Keep Track of Time

Wailing of violent pasts and ominous futures, Mlima embodies many horizons of disaster. Through each encounter, he labors as a metronome, keeping track of more-than-human temporalities: rain time; grass time; savannah time; ocean time; chase, hide, escape, run time; mourn time; bleed time; catastrophic time. Every rhythmic ticking of movement in the play constitutes a measuring unit for catastrophic time, notating postcolonial networks of multispecies movements that are drenched in local, traditional, colonial, and transnational histories of trade and knowledges of transaction. Though her precise curation of the animal's movement makes catastrophe omnipresent and inevitable (if not always predictable), Nottage zooms in on every single encounter and charges it with unpredictable tensions.

Tusks keep track of time. Neither animal nor ivory, they linger in a state of tentativeness, at times rummaging through their past of elephant familial lineage; at others hinting at their future in neoliberal art circuits. Catastrophic time itself becomes material through Mlima's performance of grandeur and decay. At the midway point in the narrative, a Tanzanian businessman, upon finding a potential Chinese investor, reminisces about the long history of ivory trade between Africa and Asia. He approaches local shipping agent Aziz Muhammed to arrange for the tusks to be illegally transported to Vietnam. Tempted but scared to participate in the transaction, Muhammed nervously exclaims, "The tusks are attracting too many flies."⁷⁶ As a Kenyan national figure, Mlima's rotting body had invited tightening surveillance from local officials. At the same time, the sweet, sticky allure of the highly-priced tusks entices many suitors. The tusks traverse the domains of local poachers, police chief, forest warden, Kenyan Director of Wildlife, Chinese embassy officials, Tanzanian businessman, American cargo captain, Vietnamese customs officers, traders, ivory carvers, and nouveau riche collectors. Chasing the investigative urgency and salacious appetite of all these "players," we witness Mlima's tusks precariously navigate manifestations of fear and lure, surveillance and greed.

Catastrophic time works in tandem with affective manifestations of violence to actuate the tusks' proprioceptive transformation. Decay does not promise "an escape

from the totalizing grasp of consumption,” but instead expedites an assimilation of Mlima’s body (and of the actor playing him) into “an economy of racialized consumption.”⁷⁷ This consumptive catastrophe is monumentalized in the carver’s “sensual, intimate” stroking of Mlima in his final moments of disintegration from tusk to ivory, from teeth to tissue.⁷⁸

Nottage grounds *Mlima’s Tale* within a practice of disintegrated yet monumental corporeality that warns against any possibility of ethical and epistemological foreclosure. Scene 9’s title, “The best way to eat an elephant in your path is to cut him into little pieces,” further deepens Nottage’s commitment to a formulation of the nonhuman that ricochets between spectacles of accumulative monumentality and indispensable deterioration. The material inconsistencies that Mlima embodies—appearing as a ghost, tusks, shadow, dust, ivory, memory—truncate any settled verdicts on the hierarchies of consumption. Instead, they push us to consider what and who is being consumed. Consuming Mlima as he plastically transforms becomes an inherent feature of experiencing such circulations in flesh and blood. Working around the legal restrictions on bringing ivory onto the stage, Nottage compels us instead to acknowledge the devouring of bodies of color laden with lacerations of ivory’s circulation. Every multispecies encounter then must be scrutinized as a recipe for a cannibalistic complicity in the circulation of racialized bodies.

Mlima’s dismemberment compels us toward animated materialities reminiscent but independent of the corporeal whole. By simultaneously challenging and stoking an ethical desire to see a living, whole animal, Nottage troubles the taxonomical, epistemological, and pedagogical impulses that make more-than-human entities graspable. *Mlima’s Tale* steers us away from a moralizing imperative for a reparative justice that cathartically resolves animal death, loss, and violence. Nor does a contemplation of Mlima’s fragmented body invoke a romantic hope for a restorative future of animal life in postcapitalistic ruins. Instead of projecting a legible whole onto the animal’s body, Nottage invites us to devour each of its material and spectral mutilations. Demanding our embodied attention to animal sinew, *Mlima’s Tale* urges a deeper edification pointed toward the more-than-human by laboring through the complex chains of diverse multi-species contingencies. And in case we get lost in the dizzying alleys of these contingencies, the tusks will keep track of time.

Notes

1. Simone Kahn, “The Exquisite Corpses,” in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont, trans. Franklin Rosemont (London: Athlone Press, 1998), 19.

2. Rachel Lee’s theoretical reinvigoration of the exquisite corpse predates the COVID-19 pandemic, as does the choreographer Mitchell Rose’s 2016 piece *Exquisite Corpses*. RAWdance’s Katerina Wong made an exquisite corpse piece with long-distance collaborators immediately before pandemic lockdowns forced most of the world online. Long-term social distancing and other public health measures in 2020 and 2021 have occasioned still more experimentation with the form. Polecats Manila’s YouTube piece “Exquisite Corpse Dance Version | Distance Dancing” is a representative example. A recent feature in *WIRED* further suggests that collaborative approaches to online music-

and meme-making, during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, are latter-day iterations of the exquisite corpse. Angela Watercutter, "TikTok Duets Are Reviving the Exquisite Corpse," *WIRED*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/is-tiktok-art/>.

3. Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 7.

4. Kahn, "The Exquisite Corpses," 19.

5. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Yale Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Hosley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), prologue, 12.

6. For more on the relationship between theatre, work, and the commodity form, see, among others, Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); and Michael Shane Boyle, "Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy," *Theatre Survey* 58, no. 1 (January 2017): 3–23.

7. Basil Jones, "Puppetry and Authorship," in *Handspring Puppet Company*, ed. Jane Taylor (Parkwood, South Africa: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 254.

8. Michael Chemers, *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 122. For some important recent scholarship on ghosts, specters, and the sepulchral in the theatre, see Jessica Nakamura, "Against the Flows of Theory: Expanding the Ghost with Japanese Noh," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 151–69; and Patrick Scorese, "'The Act of Sepulcher': Effigies and Other Affects toward a Theory of Historiographic Performance," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 193–206.

9. See Andrew Sofer, "Spectral Readings," *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 3 (October 2012): 323–36; and Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

10. Drawing attention to anthropomorphism wherever it appears has become reflexive for animal studies scholars, in large part because it serves as a signpost for anthropocentrism more broadly. However, scholars like Radhika Govindrajana, building on the work of Frans de Waal, have suggested that far from being "an unpardonable sin," anthropomorphism might actually point to vital ways of thinking and being with animals as our understanding of their many forms of intelligence continues to deepen and broaden. Radhika Govindrajana, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 24. For a useful overview of animal studies approaches to anthropocentrism, see Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, "Anthropocentrism," in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 47–63.

11. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

12. Ben Brantley, "Review: An Elephant's Ghost Stalks the World in 'Mlima's Tale,'" *New York Times*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/15/theater/mlimas-tale-review-lynn-nottage.html>.

13. Sylvia Wynter uses the term "Man" to describe conceptions of humanity that are premised upon liberal subjectivity and that consequently culminate in the racial and political telos of whiteness. The discourse of "Man," she argues, posits Black bodies as the limit case and nadir of humanness. We use "Man" here to indicate the stakes of Mlima's anthropomorphism within a genealogy of Black studies that critiques the supposed universality of the human as an ontological entity, and draws attention to the violence engendered by contingent, precarious, or partial belonging to that category.

14. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 317; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

15. Scholars in performance studies, critical ethnic studies, and feminist science studies have theorized how oceanic analyses provide new epistemic frames for intertwining disparate geographies. See, for example, Sean Metzger, *The Chinese Atlantic: Seascapes and the Theatricality of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 17; Craig Santos Perez, "'The Ocean in Us': Navigating the Blue Humanities and Diasporic Chamoru Poetry," *Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2020): 66; and Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 104.

16. Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2017): 102.

17. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

18. Aimee Bahng builds upon Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of the undercommons as a site of resistant political life to define an *oceanic undercommons* as a place where "principles of deep reciprocity and antihierarchical, place-based relationships" facilitate the possibility of "resurgent Pacific futures." In contrast to dominant frameworks that depict oceans as empty spaces for the disposal or deferral of waste, Bahng conceives of oceanic spaces as a site from which to build coalitions across forms of ecological life. Aimee Bahng, "The Pacific Proving Grounds and the Proliferation of Settler Environmentalism," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 49.

19. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1. While we generally capitalize the words "Black" and "Blackness" in this essay, we acknowledge that Jackson uses "blackness," in lower case, to indicate the malleability of the forms of racial becoming that she discusses. Jackson further employs the term *black(ened)* to refer to the historical and social processes of differentiation specific to the racialization of Black bodies and the animalization of Blackness.

20. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 3.

21. Lynn Nottage, *Mlima's Tale* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2019), 35.

22. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 35.

23. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 35–36.

24. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 5. Nottage's use of the term *breathless* resonates with Rachel Poliquin's interest in the breathlessness of taxidermy, particularly the wonder in and desire for the "liveness" of dead materiality. See Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012).

25. Una Chaudhuri ascribes the term *theater of species* to performance practices that stage "all life as *species life*, highlighting and foregrounding the ecological dimensions of human life" (50). *Mlima's Tale* shares with Chaudhuri's theater of species a common aesthetics and politics of urgency, violence, contingency and responsibility. See Una Chaudhuri, "The Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theater of Species," in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, ed. Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 45–57.

26. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 9.

27. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 11.

28. Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

29. Marks and Bradley's attention to the haptic extends beyond the ontological parameters of Donna Haraway's question "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog" into the epistemological and performative potentials of interspecies encounters. See Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3.

30. Rizvana Bradley, "Introduction: Other Sensualities," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 2–3 (2014): 130.

31. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 12.

32. For more on the ethics of representing the more-than-human world, see Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow, "Animalizing Performance, Becoming-Theatre: Inside Zooesis with the Animal Project at NYU," *Theatre Topics* 16, no. 1 (2006): 1–17; Stacy Alaimo, "Thinking as the Stuff of the World," *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies* 1 (2014): 13–21; and Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

33. Karen Barad, "On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am," *Differences* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 215.

34. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 12.

35. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 12.

36. Theresa J. May coined the term *ecodramaturgy* to identify "theater and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the center of its theatrical and thematic intent." See Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May, "Introduction," in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, ed. Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

37. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

38. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 11–2.

39. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 30.

40. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 48.

41. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 28.

42. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, 27.

43. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 24.

44. Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 241.

45. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 242.

46. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 169.
47. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 10.
48. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 11.
49. Christopher Joyce, "Elephant Slaughter, African Slavery and America's Pianos," *NPR Morning Edition*, August 18, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/18/338989248/elephant-slaughter-african-slavery-and-americas-pianos>.
50. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," in *Essays*, ed. Peter Davison (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002), 45.
51. Orwell, 49.
52. Orwell, 43.
53. This reading of the intimacy of exchange is indebted to Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
54. See James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
55. Amy Louise Wood, "'Killing the Elephant': Murderous Beasts and the Thrill of Retribution, 1885-1930," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 11, no. 3 (July 2012): 438-44.
56. Wood, "'Killing the Elephant,'" 443.
57. The suggestions that ivory piano keys have a "stick-slip" feel comes from Salvatore J. Calabrese, an engineer working on synthetic ivory substitutes. Quoted in Malcolm W. Browne, "With Ivory in Short Supply, Pianists Tickle the Polymers," *New York Times*, May 25, 1993.
58. "Lynn Nottage Explores Ongoing Slaughter in Westport's *Mlima's Tale*," *New Haven Register*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.ctinsider.com/entertainment/nhregister/article/Lynn-Nottage-explores-ongoing-slaughter-in-14480732.php>.
59. Nottage's 2017 play *Ruined* is based on the genocide in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For more on the play, see Ryan Poll, "Lynn Nottage's Theatre of Genocide: *Ruined*, Rape, and Afropessimism," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 81-105.
60. Jennifer Dunning, "Play and Ritual in the Village, an Unseen Terror at the Gates," *New York Times*, March 13, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/arts/dance/13jant.html>.
61. Quoted in Jeff Stewart, "Visiting the Rwandan Genocide Memorial Site at Murambi, Gikongoro," *Performance Paradigm* 3 (2007): 78.
62. Lucia Mauro, "Japanese Choreographer, Senegalese Troupe Explore Rwanda Genocide," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 2004, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2004-04-24-0404240102-story.html>.
63. Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno, *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without and Within*, trans. John Barrett (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 65.
64. Brantley, "Review."
65. See Adam Broinowski, "The Atomic Gaze and Ankoku Butoh in Post-War Japan," in *Reimagining Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Nuclear Humanities in the Post-Cold War*, ed. N. A. J Taylor and Robert Jacobs (London: Routledge, 2017), 91-107.
66. For more on the relationship between slavery and the ivory trade, see in particular Robert Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500-1891* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), and Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987).
67. The exquisite corpse technique has its own connections to disaster; the roots of Surrealism in the horrors of the First World War are well-known.
68. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 4.
69. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 49.
70. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 49.
71. Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: New Press, 2017), 66.
72. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 92.

73. Dina Fine Maron, "Under Poaching Pressure, Elephants Are Evolving to Lose Their Tusks," *National Geographic*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/11/wildlife-watch-news-tuskless-elephants-behavior-change/>.

74. Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 28.

75. Clarissa Wei, "The Myths of Medicinal Ivory," *KCET*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.kcet.org/food-discovery/food/the-myths-of-medicinal-ivory>.

76. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 31.

77. See Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 43. Musser analyses artist Kara Walker's 2014 sugar installation, *A Subtlety*, and its accompanying "blackamoors" that melted away over the course of the exhibition.

78. Nottage, *Mlima's Tale*, 43.