



**Project
Space**



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Tradition

Danièle Dennis

July 30 – August 22, 2015

i am a black wave
in
a white sea.
Always seen
and
unseen
-the difference
Nyyirah Waheed, *Salt*

Inspired by Nyyirah Waheed's poem *the difference*, *Tradition* (2015) by artist Danièle Dennis presents a network of interdependent narratives. The metaphor of the black wave in a white sea speaks to the dynamics operating in North America and Europe in which acknowledgement and visibility depend on imperialist agendas. Thus, this video performance urges us to question whose voices are heard, who is writing today's histories, whose bodies matter, and most importantly, what are we celebrating when speaking about black communities' emancipation?

The paradoxical status of being seen and unseen is highlighted by the slow burying of the artist's body, one handful of rice at a time. This imagery hints at the complex relationship between colonialism, labour, race, and gender. Rice's materiality becomes a "site" where the role of the grain as both part of commensality and celebratory religious ceremonials, also figures as integral in the formulation of cultural identities. The anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney states in her book *Rice as Self: Japanese identities Through Time* (1994) that "what distinguishes rice from other candidates for symbols is its link to space and time, or more

concretely, land and history.”¹ Rice cultivation and slave agriculture in the Americas and the Caribbean are tightly intertwined in the creation of some of the most profitable economies in the world. In her book *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2001), professor Judith A. Carney taps into the socio-political and economic factors shaping past and present systems valuing black women’s labour, bodies and histories since their arrival in the New World.

Although the history of rice cultivation in the Americas is not overtly discussed in Dennis’ work, it holds an important place in terms of deciphering material and ideological connections that mediate the production of history, and the effect on the ways in which the black female body is perceived today. According to Dr. Carney’s research, slave traders in the Americas, and more specifically in South Carolina, had a great interest in people from West Africa coastal villages since their rice cultivation techniques could be easily duplicated in the environment of the Southern state. Carney’s scholarship dismantles the myths surrounding the beginnings of rice cultivation in the colonies as a solely European intervention and questions the common belief that African slaves were unskilled labourers. Moreover, within the African division of labour, women were at the center of a successful agricultural practice as they were responsible for sowing, seeding, transplanting, weeding, and processing the grains whereas men were in charge of field preparation and maintenance. “Female slaves bound for South Carolina received a higher purchase price than in other plantations’ economies (...) key aspects of rice culture embodied specialized knowledge of the domain of African women.”² Consequently, during the formation of rice plantations in the Americas, black women were indispensable to slave owners in order to set up the first crops.

Carney’s account of the establishment of rice culture demonstrates that the practice of cultivation has long been an ethnic and gendered activity; rice and slaves were not separate entities, they were one. Conversely, in Dennis’ video the dichotomy between the color of her skin and the color of the rice underscores a continuous battle to break away from the grip of institutional racism. Through this endurance piece, the artist re-enacts feelings of being overwhelmed, anxiety, trauma, and resilience characterizing ancestral narratives of violence,

¹ Emiko, Ohnuki-Tierney. *Rice as Self: Japanese identities Through Time*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 129.

² Judith, A. Carney. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 107.

forced migration, and current racial tensions. For thirty-seven minutes, she lies on the floor and quietly endures the painful pinch caused by repetitive handfuls of rice thrown at her bare body. Her eyes blink and her feet twitch at each throw. While she attempts to avoid breathing the grains that may have entered her nostrils or her mouth, her body seems to slightly contract in an effort to gasp for air. This performance strangely echoes the last moments of Eric Garner just before his death in the hands of a police officer, struggling to catch his breath. Garner's last words: I CAN'T BREATHE resonates collectively. Powerful, this sentence reveals where blackness stood and stands currently, but does not define its future. WE CAN'T BREATHE informs today's mental and physical state for many black people. When watching Dennis' performance, one is reminded that despite being free, equal-opportunities and equality have not yet been achieved. Furthermore, one could also ask; what were the last words of one of the black women murdered this year? Always seen and unseen, black women's narratives are easily dismissed- buried. As a powerful means of non-verbal communication, Dennis uses her body to assert her positionality as a black woman unapologetically exhibiting grief, sorrow, resistance, and the affects of internalized anti-black violence.

One may read the display of the rice that served for the performance within the gallery space, in its physicality and its quantitative gravity, as a suggestive socio-political counter-point. What if the pile of rice works as an evidence of possible new subjectivities? Perhaps, this initiative embraces the prospect of overcoming the sentiment of being buried alive or alienated. What if the act of stepping out of the rice was the beginning of a slow process of spiritual and physical decolonization? Or, alternately, maybe the rice residue points out the hovering of both past and present systems of oppression and its power to maintain its status, insidiously in the dark corners of our minds.

- Geneviève Wallen