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# Shelter and Care: Layo Bright's Crafting of Nigerian Feminine Space with Aunty's Touch

Genevieve Hyacinthe

## ABSTRACT

Olufunmilayo "Layo" Bright's (b. Lagos, 1991) sculpture and performance art is analyzed. Bright's contemporary art practice is framed in relation to Nigerian "aunty" traditions of creativity, history, and memory keeping, as well as the cultivation and protection of their literal and metaphorical progeny. The name "aunty" has spectral significations that extend beyond the notion of family lines, pointing to tensions around class and propriety that Bright explores in her formats. As part of her interrogation, Bright probes the rich terrain of the spaces existing in the gaps of authoritative state and "soft" Althusserian *Ideological State Apparatuses* evoked by the position of the aunty or primary school teacher as an agent passing on modes of conformity to the young for their protection and achievement of social status, so that they may operate within the lines delineated by the state and global bureaucracy. The author draws upon modern and contemporary art theory, such as eccentric abstraction, grid theory, and both traditional and contemporary African global art histories, philosophical, and political discourses, including those with a particular relevance to Nigerian aesthetics. Formal analysis of Bright's work in relation to broader conversations around the complexities of vulnerability and protection, agency and subjugation, is central to the consideration.

**Keywords:** Olufunmilayo "Layo" Bright, Nigeria, Aunty, Africa, Craft, Textiles, Feminism

## FOUR BOYS UNDER AUNTY'S CARE

Tires bagged in semi-transparent plastics dangle against the wall from braided rope lanterns in *These Four Boys,* a 2017 installation by Olufunmilayo "Layo" Bright (b. Lagos, 1991) (Figure 1). A low-lying unfinished brick accumulation rests where the gallery wall meets the ground of aerated earth, perhaps disturbed to form a grave or to bury evidence. We see a shovel at the scene, with mandarin oranges tumbling out of its mouth, casting doubt about whether the implement aided in crop cultivation or some kind of cover-up. The object's code-switches raise associations with David Hammons's print and sculptural works around the spade (a symbol from a deck of cards, a shorthand racial slur, a vernacular reference about clarity). Musing on *These Four Boys*, the beholder's mind might flip through associations that together may create such inner links. We view a spectrum of interpretive possibilities hovering between Bright's graceful dialogue with art history formalism, where form and process is paramount, and the ugly historical and modern reality that the breath is forcibly and regularly compromised and removed from black people as part of the machinations of the state apparatuses that Althusser (1971) eloquently described.

**Figure 1**
Layo Bright (2017). These Four Boys [Tires, plastic bags, rope. 58.42 × 58.42 cm]. Manhattan, MFA Studios, Parsons School of Design

Formalist meditations may evoke visions of Eva Hesse's *Vertiginous Detour* (1966) (Figure 2), *Untitled (Three Nets)* (1966), or *Untitled or Not Yet* (1966)—three works from an area of her eccentric abstraction oeuvre in which she suspended spheres and/or stuffed pouches forms in netting hung from the gallery ceiling or wall. "[B]ound tightly with cord . . . *Untitled or Not Yet* 1966 shows Hesse experimenting with new materials, and with ideas associated with gravitational pull and concealment" (Tate Modern, 2018).

**Figure 2**
Eva Hesse (1966). Vertiginous Detour [Acrylic and polyurethane on papier-mâché, rope, and net. ball: 16 ½ in (41.9cm) diam.; rope: approx. 154 in (391 cm) long]. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1988. Accession Number: 88.24

Lucy Lippard, who notably used the term *eccentric abstraction* in the mid-1960s to reference some sculptural trends, describes these works as situated within the threshold space of the elusive and corporeal. She notes, “Eccentric abstraction offers an improbable combination of this death premise [heroic academic sculpture of the nineteenth century superseded by the serialism sculptural forms of the mid-twentieth] with a wholly sensuous, life-giving element” (Lippard, 1971, p. 100), often with the use of irony or humor (Reed, 2017). Lippard (2017) continues,

> Incongruity... is a prime factor in eccentric abstraction, but the contrasts that it thrives upon are handled impassively...Opposites are used as complementarities rather than contradictions; the result is a formal neutralization, or paralysis, that achieves a unique sort of wholeness. (p. 100)

Aspects of eccentric abstraction seem apropos—albeit updated and reconfigured by a new era and cultural milieu of artists—to Bright’s *These Four Boys.* While we might enjoy the visual pleasure of Bright’s installation and its harmonious interplays and quirkiness in hanging wrapped tires, spade, earth, and peppers, we are simultaneously, or perhaps slightly delayed, made uneasy by the palpable soft trace of violence and trauma in the air. *These Four Boys’* visual pleasure might eventually be compromised by the references it stirs, including the histories of necklacing in Haiti and Nigeria, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century practice of lynching in the American South, and its prescient residues in the removal of breath from Eric Gardner by police in Staten Island, New York, in 2014.

Bright’s installation is reminiscent of a memorial because of the way she enshrouds each tire, as if it is a precious being tended to with softness and protected from our prying eyes. The tires may represent the Aluu Four, four University of Port Harcourt students in Nigeria, who, “after being falsely accused of theft . . . [had] four tires doused in gasoline thrown around them and set on fire” (The Conversation, 2017). The 2012 incident garnered worldwide attention through social media circulation, and “twelve people, including a police officer, were subsequently sentenced to death” (The Conversation, 2017). I imagine *These Four Boys* as perhaps Bright’s memorialization of the four students. Bright’s palpable and intriguing inclusion of the tart or sweet-bursting oranges (partially covered up with or unearthed from dirt) may come to represent, among other possible readings, our permission to release tears, due to the imagined acidic activation of our tastebuds and tear-ducts through imagining the fruit. I say this with the words of sound and visual artist, Adee Roberson in mind, where she noted how certain blues and spirituals could “activate the sympathetic nervous system connected to the tear ducts.” This connection and release served historically “... as a tool for survival for black people” (Adee Robinson in discussion with the author, 2020). In this way, Bright, with *These Four Boys,* is also caring for her beholders. She is training us to displace or bear the brunt the trauma of witnessing those difficult instances that we do not want to see, including the snuffing out of lives we must not forget: this is a memorial that commemorates something “unspeakable.” Bright’s inclusion of these unsuspecting commonplace objects in an “uncanny” arrangement causes us to pause and study the sculpture, the scene. *These Four Boys* sculpture is Yoruban: in some segments of the Yoruban culture that forms part of Bright’s heterogeneous identity, “everyday things—medicines, amulets... gourds, red cloth,” can embody “potential violence,” while establishing a dance of revelation and concealment around all of the sculptural components to distance the viewer from harm or from “metaphorically” becoming a victim of the violence that has befallen the subjects she is portraying by easily or seamlessly accessing a sense of recall (Renne, 1994, p. 101). As Briony Fer (1999) writes in relation to the post-minimalist work of exiled German-born, Jewish-–American artist Eva Hesse for instance, “Detachment in these [sort of sculptural] terms . . . is anything but neutral. Rather, it is the very presence of the object that heightens the sense of losing a portion of oneself” (p. 36).

In Black Atlantic contexts, the familiar is both presented to at once make familiar and at the same time, disorient in the work of U.S.–Jamaican artist Nari Ward, who, like Bright, crafts a language where African diaspora migration and abstractions intermix. Ward’s installation process includes the swaddling familiar and humble objects in twine as in his *Vertical Hold* (1996). More specifically, Ward

evokes the Black Atlantic bottle tree tradition where rural artists create assemblages of bottles wrapped in rope or twine from tree branches. These sculpture have both visual and sonic beauty created in part by the sunlight shining through the glass and wind causing them to clink together not unlike a mobile or chimes. Ward's *Vertical Hold* suspends gracefully from the ceiling of the gallery to just above the ground, seeming apparition-like due to its impressive vertical orientation (107 inches tall × 30 inches wide | 271.8 × 76.2 cm) and the way it hovers. The sculpture's mood is enhanced by the fact that Ward creates an off-white crocheted web of twine that, due to its coloring, almost dissolves into the white walls of the gallery that surrounds it, leaving us with an impression of a flickering network of delicate thread punctuated by clusters where the thread accumulates around the bottles, ensconcing them. Like an apparition, spirit catcher, or bottle tree in the breeze, *Vertical Hold* captivates us as a form of both heimlich and elusiveness simultaneously . . . (Freud, 1953, p. 20).[1] Olukemi Ilesanmi (2001) asserts,

> [Ward finds beauty] in the unexpected places that lay just inside our collective consciousness. What you thought was forgotten or tossed aside declares itself indispensable once again. By shining light on the darker corners of our existence, he asks us to re-arrange hierarchies—aesthetic, geographical, historical, and psychological. . . . His work if deliberate, resonant, yet unafraid of wit or contradiction . . . [and] is inescapably part of us. (p. 76). [2]

Kenyan–US artist Wangechi Mutu's installation works, such as *Suspended Playtime* (2008/2013), also have a place in this conversation. *Suspended Playtime* evokes the unsettling quirkiness that Hesse captures in the playful yet uncanny titles of many of her own works like *Vertiginous Detour or Ring Around the Rosie,* and their quirky, mildly threatening and dematerialized formal qualities, embodying the "eccentricity" Lippard speaks of. At the same time, *Suspended Playtime*, like Bright's *These Four Boys*, or Ward's *Vertical Hold,* conjures up Black gardens and notions of working the land in connection to the spiritual in African and Black Atlantic contexts.

*Suspended Playtime* also has the irresolution or teetering aura of the other works discussed to this point. Mutu (2008/2013) creates a preternatural garden of low-hanging black melons made of garbage bags stuffed with packing blankets and wrapped and suspended from the ceiling with ochre-colored twine and gold string that hover just above ground.[3] Where Bright wrapped her tires with a plastic covered with milky translucence to reveal the black rubber beneath as a shrouding gesture, and Ward used off-white twine to resonate with the gallery environment, Mutu, like Hesse, uses black opacity for her obdurate spheres. She dematerializes Hesse's centralized sphere-in-web presentation and disperses her garden of black growth throughout the space. Hesse, Ward, Mutu, and Bright use repetition of abstract form or familiar forms recontextualized into blurred doubt, what Lippard might refer to as a divestment of "familiar objects of their solidity, permanence, and familiarity" (Lippard, 1971, p. 106) and extended through the time and space of installation. "Sometimes static, sometimes 'breathing,'" the feeling, rather than the literal representation, of the body remains (p. 106).

Through this opening, I sought to introduce some of the facets of eccentric abstraction relevant to Layo Bright's process in crafting spaces of Nigerian femininity with the metaphorical touch of aunty's care, particularly the insertion of the artist's hand into a format that is marked in part by dynamics of repetition for affective—nuanced, sensorially arousing—impact. Generally speaking, "aunty" in Nigerian culture refers to women elders who are keepers of the family and tradition, though this definition becomes more nuanced as we move through the notion of "aunty" in our analysis of Bright's work. The character

1 I am using *heimlich* in the Freudian sense as "home-like."

2 See a reproduction of Nari Ward, *Vertical Hold* (1996) [Yarn and bottles. 271.8 × 76.2 cm]. Manhattan, Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of J. I. Nelson and Sarita Nelson-Nunnelee. Museum of Modern Art Collections Online: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/169718.

3 This work is reproduced here as part of the image captioned, "Wangechi Mutu, Installation shot of A Fantastic Journey, 2013". Courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University: https://vielmetter.com/exhibitions/2013-03-wangechi-mutu-wangechi-mutu-a-fantastic-journey?guid=gallery&mid=2

of Aunty Ifeoma from Chimamanda Ngozi's Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, for example, provides a working definition of an aunty as one who cares for her home and family, protecting her family members by passing on familial and cultural mores, and impressing upon them how to act in their best interests during social situations by recounting family and folklore. The aunty's directives can be relayed with a sense of ease or imperative. Adichie's Aunty Ifeoma, a professor and aunty to her brother's children, in one instance fosters the evolution of her niece, Kambili, by encouraging her to protest when faced with oppressive forces in the domestic or public space, encouraging her to "talk back!" (Adichie, 2003 p. 170). Throughout the novel, Aunty Ifeoma provides a safe space through intimate counseling and by opening her home so that family and community may convene for attempts at conflict resolution (Bhattcharjee, 2017). Where Aunty Ifeoma's approach is straightforward, Bright's transposition of aunty's touch, as seen in *These Four Boys*, and in her other works discussed here, is wrapped in subtlety.

## AUNTY TEACHES HOW TO SHELTER

Bright may have learned this nuanced strategy of caring from her Aunty Oluwatoyin Agbelusi (1948–2017). Aunty Agbelusi provides the directives for action, as the orator in Bright's installation and video *Punishment* (2017–2018) (Figure 3). Here, Aunty Agbelusi's voice has the effect—emotional subtlety of encounter—of an elder storyteller and the calm yet palpable immediacy of a *shelter in place* preparedness advisor (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010); its resonance hovers around warm nurturing and authoritative rule created by Bright's sonic, visual, and movement-based juxtapositions. *Punishment* reflects Nigerian aunty traditions as well as contemporary mass sheltering practices, both of which exist as modes of temporary protection for the purposes of ultimate longevity.

Moreover, the *Punishment* action takes place in a setting blanketed with square and rectangular patchworks of fabric, roughly sutured to line the walls and floor. These swatches (Figure 4) are colored and organized according to the palette and design of West African earthworks, where scraps are combined in a manner that evokes the organizational structures of West African agriculture and architecture, as well as the patterns of textiles produced in the region (Prussin, 1982). Eccentric abstraction's repetition with difference is visible where Bright, at the same time, evokes and disrupts the conformist tensions of modernist grids to place emphasis on what happens in the gaps between each section. According to Bright's measure, the repetition of clean lines and crisp squares are disrupted, recalling Mondrian's search for a nonhierarchical picture plane pushed too far through his experimental gestures of adding tape to the surface of the canvas and, in so doing, disrupting the visual and social order that the grid has been historically effective at upholding (Bois & Reiter-McIntosh, 1988).

Moshekwa Langa, originally of South Africa, similarly interrupts the visual and social hegemonies of the grid in his *Untitled* map collages with garbage bags and masking tape (1996), where maps (grid structures) are challenged by his formal upheaval and narrative questioning of their role in upholding apartheid's homeland systems (Mercer, 2003).[4] He layers the maps with tape, expressionist gestures of paint, and his own free-form automatic glyphs and geometries, imbuing them with the life that their bureaucratic authors intended to confine and constrain. Langa realized that "the whole process of making territories is a random one . . . I started to find maps quite useless and unauthoritative, so I started working with them by re-inscribing the lines" (Mercer, 2003, p. 100).

Resonating with Piet Mondrian's *New York City II* experiment of the early 1940s (Figure 5), and following Langa, Bright injects too much sensual and tactile affect, too many rough edges and unraveling, too much triumph of "natural feeling"—"the ordinary and its extra . . . born in in-between-ness and

4 Reproductions of Moshekwa Langa's mixed media map works, like Untitled (Pretoria) (1996) [collage and mixed media with maps, tape, ink], can be found here: "Moshekwa Langa" @ Artthrob: https://artthrob.co.za/99feb/artbio.htm.

**Figure 3**
Layo Bright (2017–2018). Punishment [Video stills, video duration: 7 minutes and 55 seconds]. Manhattan, MFA Studios, Art, Media and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design @ The New School

**Figure 4**
Yoruba artist (Mid-20th century). Wrapper [Adire, cotton, cassava paste, H × W: 125 × 87.5 cm (49 3/16 × 34 7/16 in.)]. Museum Purchase. 96-1-29. Photograph by Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art. Smithsonian Institution.

resid[ing] as accumulative beside-ness"—complicating the grid's historic role as a form of efficiency (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). Her sewing energy inserts roughness where the viewer might anticipate the even and harmonious hand of the aunties of her family. All told, we might view Bright as both pointing to and, in turn, disrupting the grid as West African and Eurocentric means for individual and social cultivation. She creates a metaphorical physical and cultural sheltering through her use of affective means, which renders her sheltering liminal or structurally fragile and passing and contingent upon the apperceptions of the beholder, how one responds to the accumulation of possibilities in the gaps.

In *Punishment,* we see affectivity as "unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments'—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner" (Meltzer, 2005, p. 24). Bright amplifies this tension, this push-and-pull of shelter and rupture, through the placement of her aunty's voiceover within the Punishment space. The material thickness of the walls and ground creates a sense of claustrophobia that recalls, simultaneously, both home and a padded cell. Suitable for the sharing of family stories and free or coerced confessionals, what is uttered within the space, and what might enter into it, will be muffled. The audio consists of grainy and ambient sounds, from laughter to mumbled voices, a siren, the sound of furniture moving, and the white noise of appliances and technology, which rival and complement those words uttered by Aunty Agbelusi. Despite the muted volume of the sonic environment, Bright appears to hear the commands, clearly responding to them with her actions, comprised mostly of attempting to stay balanced upon a narrow textile-covered beam that rests upon the floor. We witness her triumphant moments of standing upright, squatting, and walking, as well as her moments of failure when she falls off the beam, yet, determined, struggles to right herself again and again. The sense is transmitted that Bright

**Figure 5**

*Piet Mondrian* (1942–1944). *New York City II [Charcoal, oil, and colored paper tapes on canvas, 119 × 115 cm]. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf*

is being directed into the maneuvers she carries out: her aunty's voice, though abstracted, has the greatest command and coherence within the musical score and, thus, appears to conduct Bright's movements, with the ambient choruses functioning as accompaniments.

In the installation and video, Bright is wearing a white one-piece leotard. Such attire conjures notions of nakedness as a state of "being revealed" and, at the same time, as perhaps a blank slate, a state of purity reached through her own agency or as directed. We are uncertain of whether she has been stripped down and/or will at some point be dressed up, as a reconfiguring of her mindset and behavior. The *Punishment* title may skew our reading toward punitive conclusions, yet the voice of her aunty, and the steady, warm light and padding of the environment, create the sense of a nurturing shelter, albeit perhaps one with conditions. Bright (2018) describes the work plainly, leaving ample room for interpretation:

> Her thighs face the camera as the figure seemingly adjusts it. The figure turns and walks away, stepping over a structure on the floor, before turning to face the camera again from a distance. She adjusts her bodysuit in the midsection before proceeding to step onto the structure she passed earlier on. It is about 12 inches high on either side, angle-cut at 45 degrees at the ends, so it forms a triangle. As she steps onto the sculpture in her bodysuit, it gives the impression of a balance beam or training equipment. It is made from material strong enough to support her body weight but she takes great care to keep her balance, applying herself completely to the task. The figure is tall, female, dark skinned, and of African descent. Dark, thick long hair frames her face and falls to her chest (Bright, 2018, unpaginated).

Bright acts programmatically through her performed movements and written description, thereby evoking the sense of dutiful response, the path of least resistance in the face of duress, or the compliance necessary to remain sheltered in place. At the same time, there is a sense that we are voyeurs regarding what Lippard (1971, p. 102) might call a space of "curiously surrounded intimacy" as we are privy to Bright's indoctrination into a particularized Nigerian womanhood passed on by her aunty.

Environments that evoke the notion of sheltering in place, as an act matrixed within a network of nurturing, protection, complicity, and control, have precedents in art history, including Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* (Figure 6). Made for the California Institute of the Arts Program's *Woman house* (1971), Wilding's installation, alternatively known as Womb Room, as the name suggests, evokes a primordial sense of development and nurturing, while also synching with Second Wave Feminist practices that signify the "domestic, ergo, indelibly feminine" (Chave, 2010, p. 29) and perhaps some traces of the eccentric abstraction works that slightly predate them, due to the palpable sense of the artist's gestural touch and craft sensibilities intermingled with repetition of form where overt narratives are displaced by the activation of a beholder's senses—visual, tactile, and 'visceral . . .'" (Lippard, 1971, p. 111). Like the other installations made within *Womanhouse, Crocheted Environment* attempted to provide its visitors with self-reflection and critical engagement around their place in relation to women's subjugation within the United States, if not the global social order, as epitomized by the white patriarchal and heteronormative mores of home and family (Stacey, 2015, p. 5). Wilding strategically injects her format with a sense of instability. *Crocheted Environment* has a delicacy that feels temporary and fleeting due to Wilding's use of humble materials and means of production.

Crocheting, like the sewing Bright employs, lives in both the craft and art worlds, though in Wilding's time craft did not have the acceptance it receives in our contemporary DIY moment, thus her choice of medium and process put her work intrinsically at risk in relation to its very art world legitimacy (Bryan-Wilson et al., 2017, p. 621).[5] Moreover, Wilding uses a soft-pink monochromic yarn and sisal rope to create a graceful web of arabesques that seems vulnerable not only due to its demure "girly" coloring, but

5 Liz Collins stated during a craft discussion held in 2008: "I wonder if the fine-art versus craft split matters anymore. I teach a new generation that doesn't care about old art-craft hierarchies. The DIY movement doesn't think of craft as a dirty word."

also because of its scale and the abundance of negative space that helps to frame our experience, but at the same time raises concerns about whether or not it is going to hold. Similarly, Bright creates in *Punishment* an environment of fragility and safety where its features, including the artist's body, the voice of her aunty, and the patch-worked walls, are wavering and inveigle us to ask questions about the future.

A metaphoric interpretation of the phrase and dynamic, *sheltering in place*, used in emergency situations, gets at some of the nuances of affect and impermanence in Bright's *Punishment* and finds some resonance with the manner in which Glenn Adamson (2007) describes Wilding's *Crocheted Environment:*

**Figure 6**
*Faith Wilding* (1971/ 1995). Crocheted Environment (Womb Room) *[Installation of Woolworth's Sweetheart acrylic yarn and sisal rope]. Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art.*

"Wilding refused to adopt the confidence and authority that [Magdalena] Abakanowicz's [installation] work exuded; she simultaneously delineated the boundaries of the workspace, claiming the 'room of one's own,' and indicated the fragility of those boundaries" (p. 170). Fragility registers in Bright's visual appearance in a white bodysuit resembling an undergarment, her falls and tenuous attempts to once again walk the line, the blurred auralities, and the unevenly sutured patches of fabric covering the walls and ground of the environment, this despite the signifiers of home that include her aunty's voice and aesthetics from the region.

Evoking the discourses of the moment, Bright's work can be read in dialogue with recent exhibition focuses that have provided greater texture to Second Wave Feminist precedents by remaking the ground laid by these pioneers with a wider intersectional impact. The 2017 exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women,* 1965–85 reinvigorated the conversation, and subsequent shows, such as *Radical Women: Latin American Art,* 1960–85 and The National Museum of Women Artists' *Women House,* both in 2018, expanded the debate.[6] *Women House*, for instance, while informed by the *Womanhouse*

6 The exhibition featured "the work by 36 global artists, including Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Mona Hatoum, Zanele Muholi, Leticia Parente, Martha Rosler, Miriam Schapiro, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Rachel Whiteread, and Francesca Woodman." See National Museum of Women in the Arts, Women Artists Deconstruct Domesticity in Women House Exhibition at NMWA (Jan. 17, 2018). Retrieved from https://nmwa.org/press-room/press-releases/women-artists-deconstruct-domesticity-women-house-exhibition-nmwa.

project of 1971, included artists of various racial, cultural, and sexual backgrounds, areas in which its predecessor was notably limited. “Featuring work by thirty-six global artists, Women House challenges conventional ideas about gender and the domestic space . . . emphasiz[ing] the plurality of women’s views on the home” (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2018). In my conversations with Bright, she never expressed an interest in self-identifying as a millennial feminist, although aspects of her work—as observed in *Punishment* and more broadly—engage with Nigerian mores around acceptable social habitus, gender expression, and how girls and young women are groomed to occupy specific echelons of Nigerian society among them.

Bright evokes the liminal nature of being a Nigerian aunty and its contribution to maintaining social order in other areas of her practice: *Aunty* (2017) (Figure 7) is a mobile made of an array of transparent plastics, some tinted yellow and some orange, while others remain clear. Each is cut in the shape of a “speech balloon” overlaid with a word written in sans serif font. Bright arranges the cluster in the corner of a white-walled room and goes on to project light that, in turn, creates a kaleidoscope of stretched and sometimes inverted words through the illumination of each bubble and the deployment of their corresponding projections. The words expressed include: YES, MA, sweep, MADAM, iron, dust, market, and Ada, and they point to the hierarchies implicit to being an aunty in some Nigerian contexts.

Bright (2017) explains:

> I have been drawn to focus on feminine narratives in some of my works, especially in light of the misogyny and patriarchy that prevails in Nigeria. In “Aunty,” I chose to focus on some of the subaltern (female domestic workers) in contrast with the Madam (employer and boss). A controversial topic in Nigeria, issues around lack of adequate compensation and maltreatment of maids/nannies has long been in discussion. I chose to present a visual narrative in this installation, with speech bubbles that slowly turn and give presence to voice: voice of the Madam, voice of the Maid, and voice of Instruction. The choice of the title (“Aunty”) stems from a tradition of respect, which insists on addressing persons older than one’s self with respectful titles preceding the name. e.g., Ma/Madam, Sir, Aunty, Uncle, Cousin. The aspect

**Figure 7**

*Layo Bright* (2017). Aunty *[Plastic, mixed media, light projection]. Manhattan, MFA Studios, Art, Media and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design @ The New School.*

> of respect is crucial in this piece, as it determines how the relationships conveyed in the work are controlled. Aunty, being the term usually used by children in reference to the domestic worker, connotes a familial relationship which is undermined by the realities of class difference that persist. While referring to the employer, the maid/nanny will address her as Ma/Madam, a subsummation born out of class struggle and inequality.

The situation of Aunty in the installation translates Bright's words with visual and critical elegance through the actual physical elevation of the work. Expanding down from the ceiling and laterally, like an illuminating and expansive light, its presentation brings Gayatri Spivak's notion of "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that [colonized] Other in its [the European Subject's] precarious Subjectivity" to mind (Spivak, 1988, 25). The fact that Bright's context includes only Nigerian actors underscores the complexity and nuance of hegemonic techniques where family and community employ dynamics—dynamics of those familiar and of shared background—that maintain their own subjugation through the reflection and contribution to the power and social order of families, communities, and nations.

Some of these techniques are highlighted in Bright's *Punishment* choreographies that are adapted from a series of actions commonly carried out as disciplinary measures in the school context. Students who fall out of line are reprimanded with arduous calisthenics, characterized by high levels of repetition and challenging posture holds with long duration (Figure 8).

Whether these activities are conducted in private or public, they serve as deterrents recalled by word-of-mouth or by witnessing firsthand. Bright (2018) describes the actions, and the teachers who imposed them, as a means of nurturance and control:

Frog Jump—you hold your ears, do the squats and jump from one end to the other till the person giving the punishment is satisfied.

Pick Pin—you have one leg hanging in the air while one finger and the other leg are pinned to the

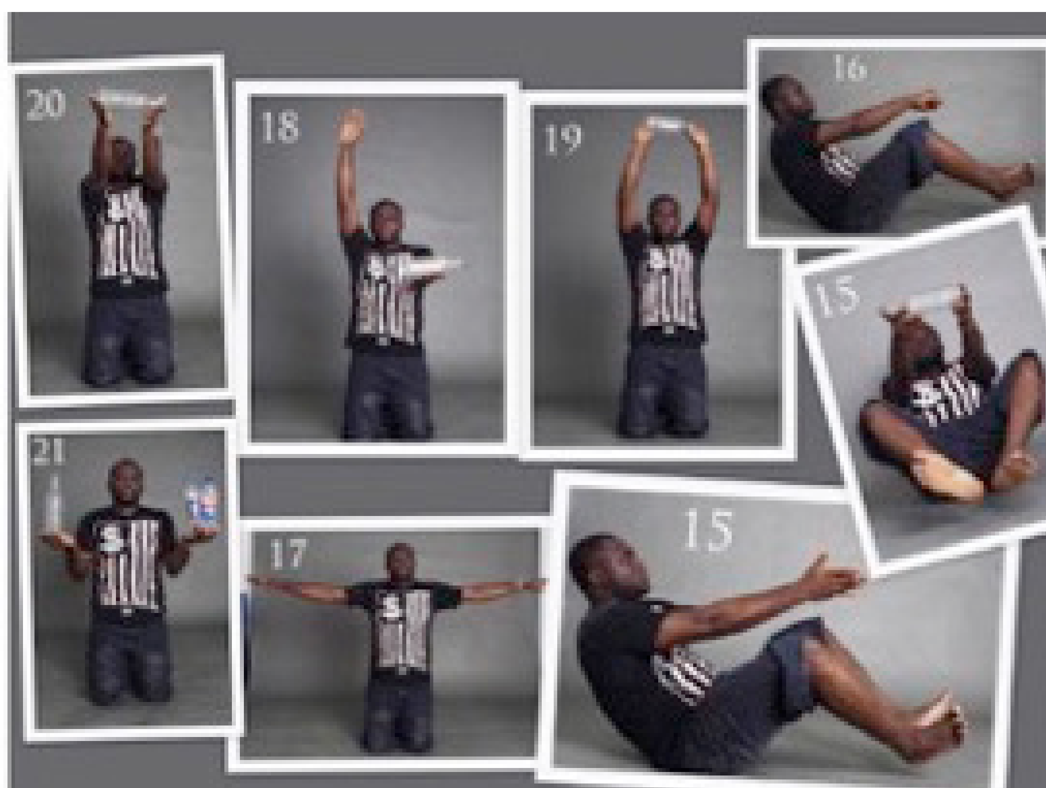


**Figure 8**
*Elo Photos. (2014)* "Punishments" *We Endured Growing Up, featuring Emmanuel Omole. https://elophotos.com/2014/09/05/punishments-we-endured-while-growing-up-in-nigeria*

ground. You remain in that position until your legs gave out or until your parents thought you had trembled enough.

> Motorcycle
> Cut Grass
> Kneel Down
> Sitting on the Air
> Stool Down
> Aeroplane
> Balance—you have one leg on the floor, the other hanging in the air and your hands stretched as though you wanted to fly . . .
> Mr. Kalu was a strict teacher. I can still recall his deep bass tone and South-Eastern accent, as he would lay out instruction tasks for the day. He was the kind of person that perceived teaching, Primary 3 students in this case, as an opportunity to call to order and raise the next generation of "future leaders." Although my primary school permitted teachers to cane the children, Mr. Kalu favoured an array of punishments to instill fear and discipline (Bright, 2018, unpaginated).

These are among Bright's responses to her beloved Aunty Oluwatoyin's call in *Punishment*, actions learned perhaps under duress in school and carried out in response to her aunty's love and concern, bringing us back to the notion that affective situations can work to make visible the conjoining of "unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments'" in a unique way (Meltzer, 2005, p. 24).[7]

Bright's convergence of craft and contemporary art practice, enriched with Nigerian narratives of the feminine and shelter in place among other concerns, is part of her signature process. This is how we may be able to understand the muscle memory sparked by the coexistence of her aunty's storytelling and the memory of her teacher's chastisements; both are forms of love, intermixed to varying degrees with discipline and security. Following Jasbir Puar (2017, p. 21), perhaps we might view Mr. Kalu's version as closer in tenor to the disciplinary, while Layo's aunty's approach is concerned with security. Puar makes the distinction, "Discipline is centripetal, while apparatuses of security are centrifugal" (p. 27). Mr. Kalu operates closer to the [epi]center, while Bright's aunty moves away from it, perhaps tempering and reshaping its hard edges with gentleness. As Mr. Kalu passes along to his students his experience, shaping his will and body by primary school punishments as had been inflicted upon him by his teachers, Bright's Aunty Oluwatoyin is dutiful in her own way, and imposes upon Bright the steps a good young woman must take for her safety and wellbeing, just as they were imposed upon her by her own loving aunties: "Like when my daddy died, they gave me [palm wine] drinks and I . . . drank it like that, like pure water . . . Ife has a tongue. They have *ashé* [ancestral blessings and life-force] on their tongue. Whatever is said, it is so . . ."[8]

## AN AUNTY'S WISH: TRAVEL LIGHTLY

Bright recrafts the *Punishment* space of social rearing anew. In her dim studio, she stirs within us the feeling of familiarity, or *heimlich*, as she remakes the *Punishment* setting into a folded tent, entitled Within the Promise of the Flag (2017) (Figure 9) and projects her *Punishment* performance on the tents' textile surface (Freud, 1955).[9] The tent's uneven grid, its jagged edges, and hanging threads again give the sense

7 T Here, Meltzer quotes Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 3. See Meltzer note 56, 209.

8 Oluwatoyin Agbelusi quote from L. Bright, *Punishment* (2017–2018).

9 Loosely defining the term as positioned by Freud in his writings on the Uncanny, the heimlich is home, natural, and unheimlich is foreign, unnatural. The two "apparent" opposites may eventually coincide with each other, following the reasoning that the foreign can become natural to a beholder through time

that this is a rough-hewn space, perhaps made hurriedly as a quickly assembled shelter. Bright's projected image, large in scale, becomes an imprint and barrier upon and around the form, as it spills off of the tent onto the walls and floor of the studio space, providing the only source of light in the environment and, in so doing, metaphorically positions Bright as a beacon of hope and protection, in the sense that Robert Farris Thompson notes when he describes black Atlantic conical tents as structures of "individuality and self-protection—suggested by the rhythmized, pattern-breaking textile modes . . . [that point to] a history of resistance to the closures of the Western technocratic way" (Thompson, 1984, p. 222).

**Figure 9**
*Layo Bright (2017*). Within the Promise of the Flag *[Fabric, thread, support pole, video projection; dimensions variable]. Manhattan, MFA Studios, Art, Media and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design @ The New School*

The tent's convertible nature brings the intersection of transient and personal shelter to mind in the such canonical art historical precedence as Krysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle* (1988), "A hinged metal unit, which could be extended to provide sleeping, washing and toilet facilities as well as a can-storage compartment [so the homeless could collect and redeem them for money]" (Hebdige, 2012).[10] Wodiczko made the moving home in response to the hegemonies of the "the symbolic, psychopolitical, and economic operations of the city" (Hebdige, 2012) that contribute to pervasive homelessness. Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995 (1995), a readymade tent with an interior Emin grids with appliques carrying the names of all of her intimate partners with whom she has shared a bed or had sex, rendered with embroidery and mixed media, is also evoked (Takac, 2020).[11] We enter her "bedroom," which Emin positions as a transient space of intimacy, stirring for us the challenges of

10 A reproduction of one of Krysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle is in the Hebdige article. Another may beaccessed on the Galerie Lelong & Co. website: Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Homeless Vehicle,* Variant 5 (c. 1988). [Aluminum, fabric, wire cage, and hardware 60 × 36 × 56 inches (152.4 × 91.4 × 142.2 cm)]. Collection Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. https://www.galerielelong.com/artists/krzysztof-wodiczko/slideshow?view=slider#10

11 Please see here the information for viewing a reproduction of Tracey Emin, Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995 (The Tent), 1995; destroyed 2004 [Appliqued tent, mattress, and light], All Rights reserved DACS/Artimage, London and ARS, NY, 2018

privacy and trust during times when access to shelter may be limited: how might being in this position influence the way we muse and engage in “sex, intimacy, love, and care?” (Baydar, 2012, p. 30).

Bright’s *Promise of the Flag* brings up issues connected to homelessness and transience globally, and with African resonances, such as African nomadism. The term *nomadism* originated to connote a state of movement performed by traditional cultures due to a lack of pasture or food instability. *The Promise of the Flag* can be interpreted as referencing this and other modes of migration due to myriad geopolitical factors, as well as the aesthetics and practices made by artists on the move or to highlight these issues. (Literature abounds on the subject. See, for instance, Gilroy [1993]; Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez [2017].) Teshome Gabriel’s “Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and Black Cinema” has poetic semblance with Bright’s strategy of projection (Gabriel, 1990). Just as Bright’s image flickers and warms the space enveloping the tent, protecting it and its imagined owner, so Gabriel remarks:

> The nomad is isolated against forces that are more powerful than he. Dejected and confused, sitting around an open fire in the evening, he gazes at the blazing flames and begins to hallucinate about the legendary spring. Suddenly, through the haze, there appears a woman that the nomad has not seen before. The woman stands, in darkness. Reaching into the fire, she grasps a handful of glowing embers from the ashes and throws them high into the heavens, their trail of light blazing “pathways to the stars.” Ever since, moonbeams and starlight have guided nomads in the night. (p. 397)

*Promise of the Flag* is for the nomads, those with no flag or state. The tent is a “stable” symbol of nomadic existence where, as in the Emin piece, beholders might feel a sense of “surrounded intimacy . . . .” But reading Gabriel’s words with her inclusion of her large-scale glowing projection in mind, Bright points to the fact that a nomadic sensibility of “surrounded intimacy” (Lippard, 1971, p. 102). may take place, perhaps by necessity, without a temporary enclosure—under the stars, in the cold or rain, under surveillance. From this perspective, her presence, like the nomad’s guide, can provide “cover” as protection against and impetus to continue on in the face of a variety of state and environmental threats. Gabriel continues in a manner particularly resonant with Bright’s Promise of the Flag, submitting that nomads “reject the formation of the state because it curtails their freedom of movement; besides, the formation of the state has never been able to fulfill its promises. Nomads have thus developed a way of life, and an aesthetic attitude, which defy and critique both the settlement and art inspired by the state” (Gabriel, 1990, p. 397), and a resistance to state-designed enclosures physical or otherwise.

Bright further diversifies her evocations and provisions of aunty’s care for “nomads” in her *Must Go series* (2018) (Figures 10 and 11). While Gabriel’s description of the nomad and their strategies for living and resistance are critical to framing the spectrum of possibilities associated with nomadic states of being, it is not all, and Bright brings this fact to our awareness in *Must Go.*

The term *nomad* as Gabriel muses it is what he refers to as “Nomads in Quotations” to bring to our attention the fact that he is thinking about the nomadic specifically in relation to an African arts aesthetic, particularly film. A liminal state of being and aesthetic concept, it may require more refinement, more updating, and contextualization, when we apply it to our contemporary global contexts. For instance, we might include within the elastic “nomadic spectrum,” refugees, those fleeing their “homelands” because of state violence in its myriad forms (armed forces, police, religious entities, community, family) (Althusser, 1971, p. 142), “someone who has been forced to flee his or her home because of war, violence or persecution, often without warning” (International Rescue Committee, 2018), and, more narrowly, “a person who has fled his or her country to escape war or persecution, and can prove it” (Sengupta, 2015). The term as submitted by the 1951 Refugee Convention, post-World War II, describes a refugee as one “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, relation, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Sengupta, 2015).

**Figure 10**
*Layo Bright* (2018). Must Go (Safari Tour) *[High-density foam, Ghana Must-Go bag, tassels, rope; 27" × 3" × 80"]. Manhattan, MFA Studios, Art, Media and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design @ The New School.*

**Figure 11**
*Layo Bright (2018).* Must Go (Safari Tour) *[Mixed media]. Installation, Manhattan, MFA Studios, Art, Media and Technology Program, Parsons School of Design @ The New School*

Migrant status might fall within the spectrum of complexities of the nomadic, as well. Differing from a "refugee" existence, Somini Sengupta writes that migrants are not moving from their country of origin in response to wars or political persecution, but instead due to "dire poverty . . . [or one's position as] well-off and merely seeking better opportunities . . . or to join relatives who have gone before them . . . [and possibly because of] the effects of climate change" and its destructive impact on land and resources (Sengupta, 2015).

*Must Go* looks at the nomadic state within a contemporary framework where the above distinctions intermix to varying degrees in Nigerian context. Bright's title comes from the *Ghana Must-Go* bags that

are ubiquitous throughout the country, used to transport goods in everyday life contexts, from market to the home and when travelling not only locally but abroad. At the same time, the bags have become visible as a common way for migrants and refugees sheltering or passing through Nigeria to carry their belongings. The bags and the dynamics they signify have also found a place in other art contexts, a book by Ghanaian author, Taiye Selasi, entitled Ghana Must Go, among them (Selasi, 2013). Further highlighting their presence in our contemporary milieu, one online source dedicated to political and lifestyle African issues discussed the banning of the bags by KLM and Air France as recently as 2017 (SpectaScope, 2017). Efforts to limit, if not ban, the bag's use by global state powers (corporate and otherwise) is not unique to the European airline ban. The Nigerian government notably took steps to limit the usage of the bag, thus limiting the people who own them, in January 1983, when former president Alhaji Shehu Shagari "held a press conference and ordered all immigrants without the right papers to leave the country within a few weeks. There were over two million people; one million were Ghanaians, and the rest were from a mix of other West African countries" (SpectaScope, 2017).

The plastic bags are cut square, with a zipper that runs centrally through all of the side panels, except the ground, that may be unzipped to accommodate a large accumulation of things at once. They are traditionally white, designed with striking grid patterns of various colors, but contemporary innovations include far-reaching designs, ranging anywhere from the inclusion of prints of cosmopolitan cityscapes, to zodiac signs, hearts, or commodities. Owners will carry them by looping two short straps, not unlike those of a shopping bag, over their shoulder. Carried and transported so close to their users in this way, in tandem with their striking colors and fullness, they feel more like presences, more like a companion than a utility. The fact that in "nomadic" or, more specifically, today's refugee or migrant contexts, they may contain all that a person owns, their position as an appendage or intimate of the carrier is magnified.

Bright takes her aunty's touch to the bags, altering and reshaping them through cuts and transfer over foam pads distributed to the displaced in various temporary sheltering contexts throughout Africa, for Bright particularly those in Libya, for the purpose of providing a soft, passing, place to sleep or rest: her process resonates with both what Lippard observed in eccentric abstraction's "opening . . . of new materials, shape, color, and sensuous experience" (Lippard, 1971, p. 99) and also to some degree with the filling and transport of the bags in their original form as precious companions or co-presences. The two dynamics speak to a trace of human affect or trace. Bright (2018) states that the *Must Go* sculptures reflect her commitment to:

> issues of social justice, culture, and identity, with particular attention to the ongoing African migrant crisis and the "modern slave trade." My materials, including the Ghana-Must-Go bags used by Africans journeying outside the continent and wax print fabric, highlight three phases of migration from Africa: country of origin, country of transit, and country of destination. Hand-stitched onto foam forms that recall the foam beds in Tripoli's detention centers, the bags continue to convey narratives of violence and hope. (p. 53)

Bright may cut the modest foam mattresses into new shapes, or leave them in their slight rectangular formats, never diminishing in scale to such an extent that the notion of bodily presence dissipates. In keeping with the aunty processes of caring we observed in her Four Boys and *Within the Promise of the Flag* structures, Bright creates a sense of sheltering, not only from her choice of the foam bed and its cultural context, but also from the way she in turn "shelters" the beds, enveloping each in a blanket comprised from passages of Ghana Must-Go Bags with scraps of Dutch Wax print and African tie-dyed fabrics, and stitches them together lyrically, nonconforming to expectations for even lines.

Bright and other "aunties" of Yoruban–Nigerian descent, such as the women of Owo, Nigeria, engaging in the textile arts, are expected to create cloth of exceptional quality representative of the "ritual[s] . . . special demands and proscriptions placed upon them" (Poyner, 1980, p. 47) by the aunties who teach them their crafts and the community who uses them. "It is assumed that every [Owo] woman

. . . is capable of weaving, and their looms are found in almost every courtyard. . . . It is also indicated that the quality of Owo cloth was exceptional, and that income from the craft must have been correspondingly high. . . . [Not only are the textiles produced of exceptional quality, but] the very act of weaving on the vertical loom [used by these women] often approaches ritual, with special demands and proscriptions placed upon the weaver" (Poyner, 1980, p. 47). Bright's provision of complete, tight covering for each bed in her unique protective fabric also reminds one of the ways that deceased loved ones are sheathed

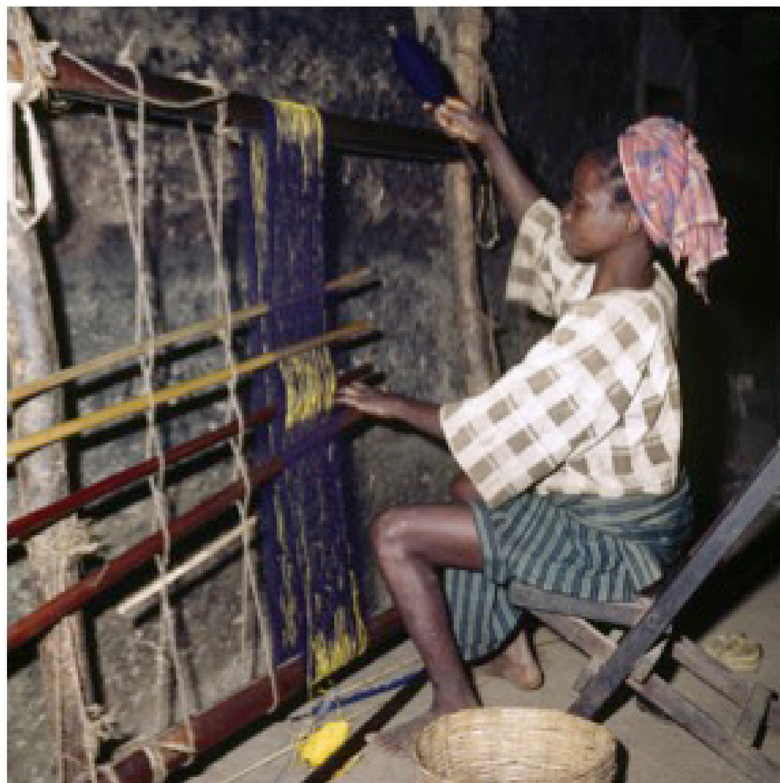

**Figure 12**
*Photograph of Yoruba Woman at Loom in Aran Orin. Kwara State, Nigeria (1977). photo: H. W. van Rinsom. Collectie Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20351170*

in textiles made by Nigerian, Yoruba-speaking, Ebira women, for instance (Figure 12), or how babies are swaddled and carried by maternal or aunty figures throughout West Africa (Picton, 2009, p. 299).

The ability to wield "mastery" over various aspects of textile production and use in community and in-transit contexts may be Bright's by "birthright," inherited through her maternal and/or "aunty lines," as suggested not only by her dexterous formal approaches and the important narratives they highlight, but also by very fact that she is of Ife ancestry.[12] According to Owo lore, among the Ife's impressive array of artistic innovations is a stunning weaving tradition that provided the historical ground for Owo women's practices (Pynor, 1980, p. 47). The Ife culture is an ancient civilization whose artists were responsible for crafting the visual cosmologies of Ife rule and is one of great auspiciousness due to its standing as "the ancestral home to the Yoruba and mythic birthplace of gods and humans" (Blier, 2012, p. 70). Ancient Ife sculptures from as early as the fourteenth century CE depict a range of its citizens, from servants to royal couples adorned in textiles, some with opulent designs or stylized modes of tying, thus indicating the importance of textiles as a social means of communicating status (Blier, 2012, p. 71). It is safe to say that Bright comes from an illustrious line of artists and culture.

We initially sensed this in her Aunty Oluwatoyin Agbelusi's voice. Aunty Agbelusi taught Bright aunty strategies for sheltering and care, intimately, using affective, oral-based performative means replete with informational holes, rhetorical cadences, and vocal inflections, all handed down to Bright with protective grace and immediacy. I suggest that Bright reflects this means of loving protection through the communication of cultural mores and expectations from auntie to niece in *Punishment.* At the same time, Bright juxtaposes this dynamic of cultural indoctrination and social control with one of its harder complements in the form of primary school punishment, which she reenacts through her repetition of discipline exercises commonly enforced as part of the primary school rearing of Nigerian children into proper adults. Aunty Agbeusi's actions are protective and loving, and, though it is a delicate thing to say, simultaneously, softly subjugating: Bright transposes this tension as critique in her crafting of the visual formats of *Punishment, Four Boys, Promise of the Flag, and Must Go,* and at the same time learns the most important things about aunty ways of sheltering and protection. Bright's jagged stitches, holes or passages of plain fabric interplaying with ornamented ones, are those spaces reflect what Katherine McKittrick (2006), following Edouard Glissant describes as:

> [the] geographic expressions and poetics . . . important to uneven geographies . . . that "saying," imagining, and living geography locat[ing] the kinds of creative and material openings [that] traditional geographic arrangements disclose and conceal. . . . The poetics of landscape are particularly important to black women's geographies not only because they function to name and conceptualize the world, but also because they advance complex re-spatializations that can perhaps move beyond descriptive paradoxical geographies. That is, the poetics of landscape, as a projection of black femininity, can provide a moment to imagine new forms of geography, seeing the world from an interhuman (rather than partial) perspective. (p. 144)

Her technique also resonates with what Jacques Ranciere (2009) views as "a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change[s] the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation" (p. 72).

Bright's aunty aesthetics are liminal, that is the way she was taught. She plays with her Aunty Agbelusi's strategies of loving indoctrination into the cultural mores of her good family and its social position in Nigerian society intended to secure Bright's safety, if not flourishing, by exposing them to dynamics of uncertainty. In this way, Bright perhaps distills the essentials of her aunty's lessons, refashioning them according to her own designs. The ancestral *ashé* Oluwatoyin Agbelusi speaks of is mutable and everlasting, and Bright generously extends it to her viewers and those that she shelters. Following Bright's lead, we are also, to some small degree, following in the steps of her aunty. I imagine Oluwatoyin Agbelusi commanding, "If they must go, we must protect them."

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12 In an October 20, 2018, email exchange with Bright, she mentioned that she recently discovered that she has Ile-Ife ancestry

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Dedicated to art of the global Black experience, **Genevieve Hyacinthe** extends phenomenology and self-critical explorations of the body as a cultural and sensorial locus point into her research, writing, and teaching, using as a foundation such Mandé-based West African concepts as balance—in the form of *nyama* (general spirit) and *basigi* (improvisation). Genevieve practices what D. Soyini Madison calls "loving ethnography," viewing research and writing as dedicated, critical, and heart-felt practice. Genevieve's book, *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic* was published by MIT Press in fall 2019. Her next book project explores contemporary Black sculpture practices.