

Chapter 6

Frantz Fanon and Mary Sibande: Sophie Curating the Mess

ABSTRACT

Curatorial practice is deeply connected to how nations and empires are imagined. It involves documenting history, managing archives, and curating exhibitions that represent lived experiences. However, this practice often focuses on Eurocentric ideas of beauty, which exclude Black lived experiences. This chapter examines how contemporary curatorial practices create divisions of inclusion and exclusion, drawing on Frantz Fanon's idea of a divided world. These practices often silence marginalized voices and are influenced by racist attitudes that exclude Black experiences. Decolonial curatorial interventions, inspired by Fanon, challenge the ways curators ignore the dehumanization of Black subjects. The chapter argues for decolonizing curatorial practices to democratize knowledge and reclaim Black identity. It also explores the similarities between curatorial practices and universities as systems that reinforce these divisions.

INTRODUCTION ON THE MESS

This chapter seeks to deploy Frantz Fanon's thought to understand how curating blackness results in the "horrible exhibition" (situates the figure of Sophie in Mary Sibande's visual artworks as the figure of the ontology of the mess. This essay does not follow each exhibition that curated the figure of Sophie as such; rather, it focuses on the epistemic implications of curating as one of the strategies deployed to allow the interpretation and understanding of art. Curating is putting together artworks that can contribute to the same conversation, bringing order into chaos, and organising mess to have coherence. In this chapter, the figure of Sophie is not

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limited to the narrative of Sibande's family or black woman's experience as maids in the anti-black world. Rather the figure of Sophie is an embodiment of the black condition under colonialisation that affects black people at many different levels of life in the world. In this chapter, the figure of Sophie constitutes the figure of the ontology of the mess. That is the figure that has been broken down, a figure that has been condemned as the "wretched of the earth", a figure that has been located with mud, earth, and black colours as symbols of evil. The figure of the ontology of the mess in this sense is the one too dirty for whiteness, it is the one who has been a spectacle for whiteness, and it is the one who embodies the irony of whiteness because she is the one who keeps the house clean but is considered a "dirty nigger" (Fanon, [1952]2008). What Frederick Douglass called a "horrible exhibition" concerning the figure of Sophie are the colonial theoretical framework and conceptual tools deployed when curating exhibitions that show the figure of the ontology of the mess. In this chapter, it is argued that curating the figure of the ontology of the mess constitutes a horrible exhibition when viewed from a Douglassian/Fanonian point of view. Therefore, this chapter will go beyond the general and historical background of its origin and focus more on exhibition as a mode of self-writing subjection.

Four conceptual aspects constitute reading curating from a Fanonian perspective that will be deployed to understand the figure of Sophie under the horrible exhibition that bears relevance to the interpretation of art history. The essay comes from the premise that "art history has a history" (Pollock, 1988, p. xxiv) that is Westernised, colonial and exclusionary. The first aspect is epistemological frontiers on curating that deals mainly with how the figure of Sophie can be interpreted under modernity, post-modernity, and post-colonial as epochal timeframes that shaped it as a horrible exhibition – a sight of spectatorship. The second aspect is the notion of curating as the author of time, and it deals with how the horrible exhibition constructed conceptual timeframes that keep positioning the figure of Sophie under subjection and outside of time. The third aspect is curating from blackness by exploring the difference between aesthetics and aesthesis sensibilities. Lastly, the fourth aspect is curating as witnessing, and it deals with the politics of bearing testimony and the interpretation of how the figure of Sophie stands as evidence of subjection in the world as a crime scene.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter uses literature analysis to critique the colonial underpinnings of curatorial practices, drawing heavily on Frantz Fanon's philosophical thought. Through thematic analysis, the chapter examines how these practices perpetuate exclusionary

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