

# Portraying slavery: Visual art and cultural trauma\*

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**Abstract.** This article, aimed at presenting the effectiveness of the arts in the transformation of cultural trauma, presents how Ellen Gallagher's visual art intervenes in the transformation of the cultural trauma of slavery. Hence, first of all, we investigate the implications of cultural trauma, and how these can be enhanced by memory studies, to recognise the substantial value given by the analysis of the shape-shifting nature of the events. Secondly, we propose how the theory of cultural trauma can benefit from the feminist debate on bodies and cultural boundaries, which insists on the interruption of hegemonic and dominant narrations. To achieve this goal, we stress the role of visibility and present an artist who mobilizes the public meanings of slavery and intervenes on the still open wounds of a controversial past.

**Keywords:** Public memory, Cultural trauma theories, Visual arts.

## Introduction

This article addresses the potential of the arts in the reconfiguration of cultural trauma, a process mediated through several forms of representation, which can lead to the reworking of collective identity and controversial pasts. In particular, we address this theoretical issue through the exploration of Ellen Gallagher's visual art. Internationally known for her mixed-media artworks and her intervention in the debate on the foundation of an Afro-centred identity, Gallagher offers a critical reflection on the way art practices can generate alternative ways of recalling and reimagining the past. Indeed, she reworks the cultural trauma of slavery and colonialism by experimenting something new and by using art as a tool to build a new vision for the future. In this article we combine two different theoretical perspectives for the analysis of the potential of the arts: the sociological approach and the postcolonial one.

As we know from several theoretical traditions that have highlighted from different perspectives the efficacy of the aesthetic paradigm in the controversies of the public discourse, aesthetic codes are particularly effective when they are used as a powerful dispositif for alternative forms of reconciliation and healing. In particular, aesthetic codes can allow a different access to the knowledge of the past, or a modality that is not possible otherwise and gives voice to the minorities who are silenced in dominant national narratives (Goldfarb, 2017). Therefore, we claim that art is crucial both for the social condition and for understanding it. It is precisely in art that contemporary societies address the challenges of memory and have the possibility to transform cultural trauma, by using alternative methods of inquiry (Dekel & Tota, 2017).

The fragments of a traumatic past can be put together in the negotiated arena of the aesthetic domain, where rights, social identities and definitions are questioned and claimed. Furthermore, the practices of artistic production and consumption concretely become places in which to imagine social change and spaces in which to experiment new forms of reparation. It is precisely for these reasons that at the core of this article there are artworks that are significantly effective in their use of art as repair. In particular, from a methodological point of view, our contribution is based on an

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autoethnographic work, with reference to a research method that, departing from the analysis of the researcher's biographical experiences, contributes to the situated comprehension of cultural and social phenomena (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). Specifically, one of the two authors of this article spent five days at Gallagher's exhibition "AXME" (held at Tate Modern, London, from 1 May to 1 September 2013), by becoming a participant observer in the gallery space and taking field notes on the artworks and the conception of the exhibiting space.

The visit at the exhibition represented both a critical wandering and a moment of absolute astonishment, to quote Elspeth Van Veen's suggestion (2019). This article, aimed at presenting the effectiveness of the arts in the transformation of cultural trauma, presents how visual art can intervene in the transformation of the cultural trauma of slavery. Hence, first of all, we investigate the implications of cultural trauma, and how this perspective can be enhanced by memory studies, to recognise the substantial value given by the analysis of the shape-shifting nature of the events. Secondly, we propose how the theory of cultural trauma can benefit from the feminist debate on bodies and cultural boundaries, which insists on the interruption of hegemonic and dominant narrations. To achieve this goal, we stress the role of visibility and present an artist who works on the female body and mobilises the public meanings of slavery and colonialism to intervene on the still open wounds of a controversial past.

### **I. The Theoretical Framework: Cultural Trauma and the "Restlessness" of Events**

In this article we propose that the arts have the capacity to transform cultural trauma and intervene in the reworking of controversial memories. According to the theory of cultural trauma, formulated by Eyerman (2001) and Alexander *et al.* (2004) and applied in many studies since its first formulations, trauma is not the result of a group that experiences sorrow, but the consequence of a pain that breaks into the core of the collective identity. Thus, cultural trauma is an empirical and a scientific concept, as well as an attribution that is socially given either before the occurrence of an event or after its conclusion, taking the form of a social reconstruction or reworking. Imagination plays a crucial role in the process of representation and informs the social work on the construction of cultural trauma, because through the imaginative process actors experience the trauma.

The process of cultural trauma necessarily brings to the fore unconventional strategies and alternative voices if the community's identity has been dramatically affected. In this sense, cultural trauma can be understood as a meaning struggle, where actors define a particular situation by proposing interpretations. As Eyerman suggests (2001), an event can be traumatic on reflection and recollection, thus having the potential to establish an identity-formation process and a reconfiguration of collective memory, differently from a psychological or physical trauma, which causes a physical wound in the individual. Therefore, in our contribution we refer to slavery as a socially constructed cultural trauma, linked to a dramatic hole in the social fabric, by proposing alternative possibilities of healing and repair that take place in the aesthetic domain.<sup>1</sup> Through the recognition of cultural trauma, the artist we present in this article acknowledges a shared sorrow and takes responsibility for a social reconstruction, in which the mediated and delayed reflection of art plays a key role.

The social work of reconstruction – of assembling the pieces together – can be very painful, because the trauma is also given by the others' indifference towards the marginalised groups' suffering; in this case, the process of recollection can be very problematic (Eyerman, 2019). Certainly, as Maurice Halbwachs, following Durkheim, states (1968), the past is not a static object, but a dynamic and shared construction, whose public narration is formed by several individuals, social groups, communities, institutions, and factors. The different individual, collective, and public forms of memory are analysed as a constant work in progress or as a transformative force, which functions to create social bonds in the present. How a past is recollected is a never-ending process.

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<sup>1</sup> In our contribution we use the term "aesthetics" to encompass the languages of art forms, such as visual arts, photography, filmmaking, music, painting, among the others, and to emphasize the expressive domains of art. Though we refer to art practices in general, in this work we will focus on visual arts, in which the artist expresses an alternative regime of knowledge production.

Most memory studies scholars direct their attention to the process of meaning formation, in particular to the meanings emerging from the representation of difficult and controversial pasts (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991; Olick & Levy, 1997; Zolberg, 1998; Tota, 2002; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; Tota & Hagen, 2016). Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, in particular, investigate how the structure of commemoration, which plays an important role in repairing the holes caused by cultural trauma, is often characterized by dissent (1991). In this sense, within the investigation of the cultural implications of trauma, enhanced by the studies of public memory, it is particularly relevant for us, here, to recognise the substantial value given by Wagner-Pacifici's analysis of the restless nature of events (2010). In order to investigate the shared practices of reparation and transformation that emerge from the aesthetic field, it is very important to register the meanings and the on-going consequences of the events because they can never be considered as concluded once and for all. The consideration of the fluid and shape-shifting nature of the events enables a very productive way of assessing the interaction between cultural trauma and socio-cultural mediations. In this way, events are investigated in their capacity of living through different forms and reconfigurations.

Since the meaning is always provisional, public memory assumes a political role and represents a multidisciplinary tool that, instead of being locked to the idea of simply narrating the past, contributes to new definitions. In this regard, by inscribing the process of cultural trauma in the public discourse, art practices contribute to the visibility of representations and perceptions, to the transformations of events, places, and people, and to a broader recognition of social justice. Their efficacy can have a significant impact on issues such as migration, gender and ethnic inequalities. Artistic forms have a crucial role in countering social injustices and a significant potential in intervening on both a local and a global scale on questions of democracy and memory. They can materially contribute to an alternative point of view on the compelling complexity of the contemporary world, thus making the social conditions for a more comprehensive sense of justice possible.

## **II. Visuality and Cultural Trauma: The Challenge of the Gender Perspective**

Another important issue raised in this article concerns visibility as a central sensory channel of knowledge (Evans & Hall 1999; Zelizer 2004; Harper 2012; Shevchenko 2014; Tota 2014). Methodologically speaking, this issue has important implications for our research. In this regard, a visual approach to social theory can enrich the research and investigate the crucial role played by images in the public discourse. We do not intend to speak about the images, indeed we propose a work *with* and *on* culturally produced images, which are investigated as an additional medium of the intersubjective transmission of memory and as an effective strategy of making sense of the cultural trauma of slavery. Ellen Gallagher, born in the US in 1965, to a black father from Cape Verde and a white Irish mother, produces highly politicised visual imaginaries, established on the idea of an Afro-centred black identity and the deconstruction of the white male gaze. In her work the legacy of slavery – in particular the memory of the so-called Middle Passage – is reconfigured and given new representations.<sup>2</sup> To quote Eyerman, slavery is a cultural trauma: it is obviously traumatic for those who experienced it directly, but it is also painful across generations and geographical spaces “in retrospect” (2001). Through an emergent collective memory, slavery formed the roots and the routes of a collective identity, a sense of belonging that established and distinguished a whole people and community, in particular in the US in the later decades of the nineteenth century. At that time a new generation of black intellectuals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, contributed to the formation of African American identity and to the debate on ethnicity, as well as to the support of organizations for black Americans (1903).

Arts, such as music, literature, painting, filmmaking, among the others, play a crucial role not only to recollect, but also to re-imagine and rework the past, connecting individual biographies into a more unified collective narration. While generations of artists such as those belonging to the so-called

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<sup>2</sup> The Middle Passage refers to the trans-Atlantic shipment of slaves from the African continent to the Americas, experienced by the estimated 11 million Africans who went through enslavement, transportation, waiting for shipment on the African coasts, arrival in American port cities, and then being sent to plantations (Heuman & Burnard 2011).

Harlem Renaissance from the 1920s to the 1940s insisted on the demand for dignity and equality for African American people, by questioning the cultural and political white hegemony, contemporary African American artists generally seem more interested in redefining the very notion of blackness inherited by previous generations (Shur, 2007). In 2001 the artist Glenn Ligon and Thelma Golden, director and curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (the renowned cultural institution devoted to the visual art of African descent) coined the term “post-black”, to describe younger generations of artists who were no more interested in the positive or negative representation of black people, but in questioning the very foundation of African American identity and in exhibiting the black body with new strategies and paradigms.

Gallagher shares with other artists a consistent interest in the black body, in particular in the female body, thus proposing a counterpoint to the stereotypes of the feminine. Her work contributes to the feminist critical debate and politics, for which the interest in corporeality is very common, in particular when we refer to the struggle over the meanings of the female body, considered as a crucial site of negotiations and agency. In her effort to build a common language for women and to propose an alternative politics for gender and feminism, Donna Haraway highlights the image of the cyborg as a hybrid organism (produced by fiction as well as by concrete experiences) that engenders unexpected possibilities and transgresses boundaries (1991). Or, as Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément suggest (1986), we could highlight a liminal feminist positioning, an in-between condition that interrupts dominant and hegemonic narrations, thus producing something new.

If for Cixous “women’s writing” (*écriture féminine*) is particularly characterized by the desire of eluding cultural boundaries, with an emphasis on thresholds and crossings, in accordance with her influential thinking, we claim that Gallagher’s art practices engender liminal strategies between cultures, languages, and countries. As Ella Shohat argues (2001), the socio-cultural conditions of women do not have to be investigated in isolated and geographically defined domains, but in a relational understanding of feminism, responsive to the actual conditions of living the present. Gallagher proposes in her art making new strategies of exhibiting female bodies and subverting racial and gender stereotypes within the regime of representation. Her production is characterised by montages of images and juxtapositions of different elements, cut-outs and collages, in which the black body — often distorted and provocative — is a recurrent theme. In particular, in foregrounding a female black body that is often transgressive and unpleasant, Gallagher’s artworks react to the patriarchal voyeuristic gaze and rewrite the traditional stereotyped representation of black women, inherited from slavery and adopted by colonial discourse and knowledge.

During European imperial and civilizing missions the representation of the black woman as the sexual other was legitimised by scientific knowledge on female bodies. For example, the depiction of colonised women as exotic and lustful black Venuses was often presented as an ethnographical work aimed at classifying human beings (Ponzanesi, 2005). An example of this racist and colonial oppression is Sarah Bartmann, known as the Hottentot Venus, a South African woman who was displayed in 1810 in Europe and studied as an abnormal sexualised freak. The white viewers paid to see her protuberant buttocks, thus her body was reduced to her sexual parts and exhibited to function as the main representation of black women in the nineteenth century (Gilman, 1985). Very different from a multicultural and white-centred rhetoric of integration, Gallagher expresses the necessity to reconfigure the legacy coming from a past of oppression by exhibiting monstrous and transgressive bodies.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, she also demonstrates that the feminist strategies of cutting and assembling – typical traits of the artistic collage – can stimulate an on-going process of signification and boost an active production of public memory.

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<sup>3</sup> Abnormal representations of female bodies represent common tools in women’s fiction and art. Among the others, the hybrid bird-woman who is the protagonist of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) is particularly significant. She is a freak, both angelical and diabolical, between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the male and the female. Fevvers, part woman, part swan, delights the European spectators at the end of the nineteenth century with her acrobatic spectacles, provided by her hybrid gigantic body with heavy arms and superb wings. Jack Walser, an American journalist, wants to discover the truth behind her mysterious identity: hypnotized by her love for her, he decides to join the circus on its magical tour through London, St Petersburg and Siberia.

### III. Ellen Gallagher's Subversive Bodies

Ellen Gallagher's exhibition "AxME", held at Tate Modern in 2013, is her first important solo show in the UK (Tate, 2013). Half Irish and half African American, Gallagher shows a deep concern about questions of racism and gender. Cape Verde, the home country of her father's family, is an island in West Africa with a traumatic past of slave trade. Under Portuguese rule from 1460 to 1975, this island was a particularly important centre during the expansion of slave trading and worked as a crucial transit point for human beings who were enslaved and brought to North and South America (Carter & Aulette, 2009). Institutionalised by colonialism and persisted as a crucial element in the foundation and the economy of modern Western nation-states, slavery is deeply linked to the consolidation of racism and "race" prejudices in their modern articulations.

Born in USA, Gallagher reconfigures the latent legacy of colonialism and slavery in her society. Since her early works in the Nineties she has been confounding easy classifications through the combination of different techniques, such as oil on canvas, pencil, plasticine, cut paper on paper, watercolour, and more recently video. In *Oh! Susanna* (1993), for example, she reproduces uninterrupted lines on canvas that appear as an abstract outline at a distance. However, on a closer look the viewer realizes that these lines are made of thick lips and wide eyes. These isolated parts of the black body are obsessively and meticulously repeated to function as a synecdoche. Indeed, they stand for the whole body and play with the stereotypical meanings associated to the black body, especially those experienced by African American women. As Paul Gilroy would suggest, at a distance "blackness" may appear as a homogeneous and neat condition, but at a closer look or "in the frog's perspective", it is possible to perceive the "fractal geometry of black life's rifts and crevices" (1993, p. 112). Therefore, Gallagher's *Oh! Susanna* plays with the stereotypical representation of black women's bodies and the obsession with isolated parts of these bodies. At the same time, this artwork demonstrates that the condition of blackness is far from being neat and abstract: it is constantly marked by a multiplicity of differences that coexist in the complex context of cultural hybridity and migration.

Given this concern, we might argue that from her early works Gallagher does not allow a linear reading of the content. Indeed, her work is a recollection of fragments, pieces of a past of slavery and European colonialism that still resonates in the present. We could define her work "transcultural" and we use this term with reference to the Vietnamese and USA-based feminist filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (2013). Rather than talking of multiculturalism, as in the mainstream meaning, which seems to normalize cultural difference and deny the latent racism and sexism, we wish to emphasize the importance of the prefix "trans", which stresses, not merely the movement across boundaries, but traveling as the site of dwelling. Instead of juxtaposing different cultures, the transcultural perspective expressed by Gallagher's work challenges fixed notions of border and belonging, as it questions the obvious meanings inscribed in the public discourse on ethnicity.

While visiting Gallagher's exhibition "AxME", held in the post-industrial Tate gallery space, located in London, on the bank of the River Thames, we cannot help but thinking of the crucial role that this town had in the administration of the historical British Empire and the consequences of the colonial experience in the formation of British contemporary society. First of all, we are struck by the title: "AxME", as we read in the exhibition guide, plays with the word "ask" in the Afro-American dialect (Tate, 2013). Actually, while visiting the exhibition and wandering through the rooms, we acknowledge that the textual strategy inscribed by the curators on the walls of the gallery space envisages a visitor who is aware of the tensions that work below the obvious meanings. The viewer is invited to contribute to the process of signification, wandering through the rooms of the London gallery. Nevertheless, in her autoethnographic work within the exhibition, the scholar registers that the choice of the title "AxME" also seems to invite the viewer to ask Gallagher for *her* intervention and discover *her* point of view. Indeed, within the aesthetic domain, the artist contributes to a social work of collective reconfiguration and reparation of still bleeding wounds in the social fabric.

It is for a reason that in the first room of the gallery space the viewer encounters *Odalisque* (2005), a black and white print with gold leaf, which registers the clear intention of foregrounding Gallagher's point of view in the complex intersection of gender and "race". In fact, this work is the artist's ironical self-portrait: Gallagher is reclined on a couch and wears harem-style clothes. She is close to Sigmund Freud, who sits with a sketchbook in his hands, and looks ironically at him. In the exhibition guide we read that this print is based on a 1928 photograph by the American visual artist and photographer Man Ray, who took a picture of Henri Matisse while drawing a model in a harem-like setting (Tate, 2013). In the original print the white model wears the stereotypical harem garments and jewels, lying on a bed surrounded by luxurious oriental-style fabrics and curtains in Matisse's French studio. In the print exhibited at Tate, Freud replaces the French painter, while Gallagher substitutes Matisse's model face with her own face and returns the gaze back on Freud, the father of psychoanalysis.

This artwork reconfigures the question of the gaze and the central role of visual power in the process of identity formation. As Frantz Fanon demonstrates, the racial Other is materially defined when confronted with the racist Western gaze (1952). As a Martinican psychiatrist who moved to Paris in the 1940s, Fanon describes the inescapable and traumatic process of the experience of racism: he feels fixed by the white gaze and discovers for the first time his black body whose lacerated presence constantly obsesses him. Furthermore, as a result of this process, the black subject feels the racial construction of blackness on his/her own skin and register that his/her story is connected to the history of ancestors, who were enslaved and subjugated during European colonial experiences.

To further complicate the intricate relation between the viewing subject and the viewed object, feminist film theory introduces the importance of pleasure and sexuality implicated in the process of looking: the silent image of the woman can become the object of a fantasising and active male gaze who fixes the female subject in a passive position (Mulvey, 1975; Rose, 1986; Silverman, 1988). In the interrelation of representation and power, the sexual and/or racialised difference is crystallized in a condition of otherness: together with the above-mentioned example of the Hottentot Venus, visual representations of sexualised female subjects are very common in European painting. If we think of the famous paintings *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres or *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834) by Eugène Delacroix, both exhibited at the Louvre, the connection between the seductive female body and a lascivious and feminised Orient is palpable. The imprecise and definite label of "Orient" reflects a colonial discourse, consolidated by stereotypical and crystallized representations that do not correspond to the variety of populations included under this term. In the reports of the first British anthropologists at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the civilizing mission is supported by a scientific knowledge that sustains and legitimizes the inferiority of the human beings under the British rule (Said, 1978). Furthermore, it is through a return to Fanon (1952) that postcolonial critics find a new impulse to demonstrate the centrality of the gaze in the subjectivising processes engendered by stereotypical representations (Bhabha, 1983). In Delacroix's painting, women are depicted as lazy, voluptuous and passive subjects in a static setting that evokes otherness and subjugation (Ponzanesi, 2005).

Both the naked odalisque depicted by Ingres and Delacroix's clothed women are portrayed in a "harem", which represents an important trope in the discourse on gender. Writers such as Assia Djebar (1980) and Fatema Mernissi (1994) demonstrate the empowering and trespassing practices engendered by women who lived in domestic harems, which differed from the institutions of the imperial dynasties. The European fascination with the harem is linked to the ideological formation of psychoanalysis and the criticized description of female sexuality as the "dark continent". Freud depicts women's adult sexual life as a "dark continent" for psychology by turning the specificity of the female body into a "fetishized metaphor of the unknown" (Khanna, 2003, p. 49). In this way psychoanalysis conceptualises Otherness. We are not suggesting that for Freud the Other is necessarily racialised, however colonial missions and explorations implemented a scientific knowledge according to which otherness was constructed as inferior, lacking and feminised. By sitting on the couch looking intensely at Freud, Gallagher ironically re-signifies the "dark continent"

and simultaneously performs a female character who has the freedom to look, not only to be looked at (Chan, 2017). As bell hooks recalls in her *Black Looks* (1992), during slavery blacks were severely punished for looking, so following generations had to learn to recuperate the rebellious desire of an “oppositional” gaze. Here, we suggest that not only does Gallagher courageously stare at Freud, but also through her gaze she reconfigures the metaphor of the dark continent - the repressed unconscious of colonialism - and re-signifies, in the present, the cultural trauma of slavery.

As Robin D. G. Kelley suggests, Gallagher’s project is a “deep examination, meditation, dissembling, disassembling, and remixing of modernity” (2013, p. 8). Indeed, Gallagher confuses the viewers who consider her as one of the several black artists who investigate racial stereotypes. She shows that the violence of colonialism and slavery is at the very foundation of modernity. Moreover, the invention of a sexual and racialised inferior Other is an essential requisite for the justification of a coherent, superior and white Western subject. Following the questions presented by the exhibition, another piece that strikes the viewer’s attention is a work on paper, which is strangely entitled *Negroes ask for German Colonies* (2002). Through the use of cut paper, oil and plasticine Gallagher creates a matrix of twenty female heads, with different skin colours and white wigs carved in relief on a white background. Their faces are frightening and uncanny: Gallagher put pink plasticine on the models’ eyes, so the viewer is asked to interpret their ghosting presence in the exhibition. Moreover, the viewer is tempted to touch the surface of the artwork and the different models’ hairstyles, which are meticulously forged on paper. At a closer look the viewer realises that each of the heads has a name: “Afro-Swirly”, “Flippant”, “All-over Roll Up”, “E-Bangs”, “Innocence”, “Fifi”, “Pixette”, etc. The viewer acknowledges that for this artwork Gallagher is inspired by an article written in 1919 by Hubert Harrison (1883-1927), a brilliant political activist and critic (Tate, 2013). Harrison’s life is marked by his struggle against racial oppression and his contribution to promote social justice for Black people. At the Paris Peace Conference held in 1919 he questioned the idea of giving self-rule to the African territories belonging to defeated Germany: since they were not a power, he warned black people not to believe in impossible expectations (Perry, 2001; Kelley, 2013). In mixing up Harrison’s era with a grid of urban style wigs, Gallagher finds new modes of dealing with a controversial past. Moreover, in foregrounding hairstyling as a cultural practice, Gallagher invests it with meaning and value. Where “race” is a constitutive part of social division, hair functions like skin and it is burdened with a symbolic dimension. During the slave trade – whose plantation economy was crucial for the formation of New World societies – scientific racism developed around skin colours and skull variations, as well as hair texture differences, according to which different categories of human beings were organised and classified (Mercer, 1994). Contrary to the skin colour or facial features that cannot be modified, “hair functions as a key *ethnic signifier*” because, due to its malleability, it can easily be changed, as in the practice of straightening (*ivi*, p. 103). This theoretical perspective informs Gallagher’s artwork *Negroes ask for German Colonies*: the wigs of her models rework the latent legacy of slavery and racial division and show hair as a powerful field of expression. Thus, hair is presented as a controversial site on which Gallagher shapes, forges and negotiates meanings.

Another work that strikes the viewer’s attention and asks her to interpret what she sees is the *Watery Ecstatic* series, started in 2001 and including beautiful drawings realised with watercolour, ink, oil, and plasticine on cut paper. In this series Gallagher allows the viewer to contemplate a variety of marine creatures: fish, jellyfish and free-swimming and translucent sea creatures with tentacles populate the gallery space and overwhelm the viewer. In the exhibition guide we read that in this work Gallagher develops her longstanding interest in marine life, because as a student she spent a semester on an oceanographic research vessel investigating the life of microscopic creatures (Tate, 2013). The colours of these drawings are extremely delicate and transmit a lyrical sensation of wellbeing and peacefulness to the viewer. However, at a closer look, we perceive tiny wigs, eyes and lips: what at a distance seems an intrinsic part of the swimming sea creatures reveals, at a careful observation, several faces of black people drowning in the water. The viewer feels again

overwhelmed: this time it is not the beauty of the drawings that affects her, but the grimace of pain distinguished on the minuscule faces. Suddenly a thought comes up in the viewer's mind: Gallagher re-actualises the history of the ancestors of African American people, human beings who drowned in the Atlantic Ocean during the Middle Passage slave trade. This is a history of violence, death and oppression, or an afterlife of slavery, re-signified by Gallagher in one of the most prestigious gallery spaces in the West. The "heart of darkness" of Europe is thus materially palpable. Furthermore, this representation of death inevitably resonates with other lives that are tragically interrupted in a sea crossing: those of the human beings who die while crossing the Mediterranean, the sea that touches the shores of Italy, the viewer's home country. At this point a "critical mourning" (Chambers, 2008) is necessary, to register the resonance between the past and the present, or the Black Atlantic and the contemporary Black Mediterranean.

In *Watery Ecstatic* Gallagher makes the descendants of the African slaves re-emerge from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. She is inspired by a legend created by James Stinson, the founder of a techno band based in Detroit, according to which the children of African women who were thrown from ships during the slave trade established "Drexciya", a mythic black Atlantis at the bottom of the ocean (Kelly, 2013; Chan, 2017). Rather than revengeful characters, the people who inhabit Gallagher's drawings are floating tiny faces or resuscitated women with Afro wigs made of coral, surrounded by marine vegetation. Moreover, these imagined characters confound and confuse the binary logic of black and white – which the viewers would be used to – because they are characterised by pastel paints. Gallagher uses the blankness of the white paper "as a layered, double-sided material ground", on which different meanings can be inscribed (Armstrong, 2013, p. 28). When she cuts more or less deeply she shows the viewer the multiple layers that are revealed through the sculpting of the paper surface, as if the uppermost layer could be really felt and touched. Surprisingly, the viewer really feels for one second the urgent desire to caress the drawings, in particular the scales protecting the skin fish or the floating wigs covering the drowned women's heads. In this way, paper functions as a porous membrane of trauma, in a process that involves both the artist's perspective and the viewer's reception.

Another work that expresses an archaeological practice of unveiling the past in the present is the outstanding and large-scale piece entitled *DeLuxe* (2004–5), exhibited in the last room of the exhibition. Here, Gallagher presents a series of sixty printed images composed of advertisements creatively cut out from magazines and re-assembled to transform their meanings. For example, upon closer examination, the viewer discerns ads for black women and men, such as pomades, tips for a "lighter skin" and hair attachments, straighteners, and different choices of female wigs. The amount of materials used by Gallagher to articulate the surface of each plate is really stunning and demonstrates a massive work of collage. What is more, each image is distorted – in some cases decoding is really difficult – because Gallagher makes an extensive use of creative artifices to alter the original prints that refer to beauty routines. For example, she adds yellow plasticine on black hair, she erases the models' eyes to confer them a ghostly, unfamiliar and frightening appearance, or still she pastes wide eyes and thick lips on the ads to hide their messages. The viewer is astonished by the impressive use of materials and reads that Gallagher's intention is to present a map of a "lost world" she discovered in "the black magazines of the 1950s and 1960s" (Tate, 2013). Mid-century publications such as *Our World*, *Black Digest*, and *Ebony* offered tips for skincare and beauty, thus demonstrating their readers' anxiety to conform to a white supremacist norm and to overcome the humiliation of their own features (Heartney *et al.*, 2007). Through an incessant manipulation of plasticine, hair and wigs, lips and eyes, Gallagher plays with the transformation of blackness and turns her characters, in particular black women, into monstrous and unrecognizable creatures. In the last room of the exhibition, the subversive bodies presented in *DeLuxe* haunt the gallery space and demand a considerable effort to understand their reconfigurations in the present time.



## Conclusions

In this article we have presented an art exhibition that asks the viewer to be a participant who actively produces and shares meanings. Indeed, by adopting an autoethnographic strategy and becoming an active viewer, the researcher contributes to the comprehension of the role of the arts in a social work of healing and repair. Starting from the idea that aesthetic codes can be an efficient method of inquiry, which can give voice to silenced narratives, we have claimed that it is precisely in art that contemporary societies have the chance to reconfigure cultural trauma, as well as to deal with controversial pasts. To achieve this goal, we have chosen an artist who directly engages with the painful past of slavery and proposes new modalities for reflecting on a cultural trauma that has caused a deep hole in the social fabric. Thus, by proposing Ellen Gallagher in particular, we argue that the theoretical perspective on cultural trauma and memory can also be enhanced by the contribution of the feminist debate. By foregrounding a shape-shifting and transgressive female black body, Gallagher interrupts the patriarchal dominant narrations of women: the unpleasant and unfamiliar bodies of her artworks show the viewers a different strategy of expressing the feminine.

Furthermore, we suggest that Gallagher reworks the traditional representation of black women, inherited from slavery and then adopted by colonial discourse. Actually, she offers new opportunities to create and to share meanings on the trauma of slavery, by proposing aesthetic codes that mobilise alternative forms of public memory. In her exhibition, the Atlantic Ocean – where the Middle Passage slave trade is tremendously inscribed – engenders a process of counter-memory, in which the viewer is asked to further interpret the violent deportation of millions of Africans and their tragic ocean crossings. As we have seen, the artist's intention to disrupt the expectations has been fulfilled: Gallagher's strategies totally confound previous assumptions and contribute to a thought-provoking art practice of transformation and regeneration.

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