Aimé Mpane’s *Nude*: A Body that Questions

Aimé Mpane is an especially versatile Congolese artist based in Brussels and Kinshasa. This paper examines his *Nude* (2006–2008), a life-sized sculpture of the idealized male form. Thinking carefully about Mpane’s treatment of the body, his selection of material, and his manipulation of the sculpture’s surface, I argue that *Nude* operates on an ethical level. The work engages with social conceptions of Black bodies, the history of nudity in western art, and—most interestingly—Frantz Fanon’s theory of embodiment, as presented in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). *Nude* thus allows us to explore the relationship between a leading artist of the African diaspora and one of the most important critics of the colonial condition. The work also contributes to our increasingly nuanced understanding of art’s place within the wider spheres of post-colonial discourse.

**Keywords:** Aimé Mpane; Frantz Fanon; nude; body; Congo; postcolonial theory

Aimé Mpane (b. 1968)—a versatile Congolese artist and one of the most prominent voices associated with the African diaspora—exhibited his *Nude* (figs. 1, 2) before American audiences in 2009. The sculpture appeared in the *Artists in Dialogue: Antonio Ole and Aimé Mpane* exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (Washington D.C.). As the title suggests, this was a two person show where the featured artists fashioned a multivalent field of exchange: responding to one another and reflecting on their own endeavors, they displayed works that engaged with other creations in the gallery space, with the museum itself, and with the viewing public. I was fortunate enough to visit the exhibition and hear one of Mpane’s talks. Recently, his words have returned to me with a new sense of urgency. So too has *Nude*, that wooden figure of commanding physical presence, its body carved skillfully but roughly with adze.

Mpane spoke of *Nude* in terms of protest. “You don’t have to focus on the object,” he stated, “that’s not what’s important here. Everything here goes to the pedestal. I’m putting up or presenting the act of nudity.... The concept is more important.” He elaborated: “We are in a society today where we refuse nudity.... We are afraid of nudity or to represent ourselves just the way we are.” He referred to clothing as a “moral or psychological cover” that has to be removed, an act that functions as a form of “bringing attention to” or “expressing” oneself publicly and politically in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This, of course, is a country still haunted by the specter of King Leopold II (1835–1909) of Belgium and his violent colonial policies. Karen Milbourne, the curator of the 2009 *Artists in Dialogue* exhibition, explains *Nude*’s stance with ringing clarity: “For Mpane, the nude male figure stands symbolically for human beings in general, Africans in particular—and especially, their beauty and dignity in the face of challenge.... More than a witness to history, [Nude] stands raw and demanding change.”

This paper investigates the nature of that demand. What might it mean for *Nude*, a six-foot-tall (185 cm) sculpture of the unattired male form rendered in rough wood, to appear before a museum going public in the capital of the United States of America? What appeals did this figure make of spectators early in the new millennium? These are my driving questions.
The answers I put forward should not be taken as universal claims, as if Mpane’s work evokes only a single response from a monolithic audience. On the contrary, we must begin by acknowledging the sculpture’s multivalence and the diversity of its viewership. For some, Nude’s exposed body could recall painful images connected to the transatlantic slave trade. In this context, nakedness was a form of violence, a means of “dressing” Africans as “uncivilized Others” in order to prop up oppressive systems of human trafficking.² I can imagine, say, viewers of color—anyone who feels the enduring weight of those oppressive historical systems in today’s world—looking at Nude and experiencing a range of emotions: suspicion, curiosity, anger, or perhaps a sense of being called to action.⁸ At the same time, however, I can also imagine spectators experiencing something pleasurable about Nude. Any number of Mpane’s viewers—individuals of various gender and sexual identities—might have found this sculpted body, with its idealized physique and bared sex, erotically stimulating.⁹ Such avenues of possible exploration must await further consideration. In the pages that follow, I speak not for the whole of Mpane’s audience, but as one of his viewers who can illuminate important dimensions of Nude’s complexity. This means that I necessarily speak from the cultural position that informs my perspective on the world: I am a white American cis-gender heterosexual male. I am also an art historian trained in the western tradition—a tradition filled with sculpted nude bodies and plagued by discourses of Empire.

From a professional standpoint, my inquiries begin with a somewhat unusual move: I break with the artist’s instructions and pay close attention to the sculpted object that is Nude. I consider Mpane’s posing of the figure, his attention to human anatomy, his selection of material, and his treatment of the work’s surface. According to my reading, all of these qualities confront museum-going audiences with the lingering presence of colonialism’s representational strategies. Mpane’s work, thus entering the realm of postcolonial theory and discourse, resonates with the written legacy of Frantz Fanon.¹⁰ My argument is this: Nude intersects most profoundly with a theory of embodiment presented in Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1952). Much like that seminal text, Mpane’s sculpted figure draws viewers into an ethical conversation that lays bare the violence of racial stereotypes. This conversation revolves around social conceptions of Black bodies and the imperialist history of nudity in western art.
1. The Act of Nudity

Few subjects have proven so central to the western artistic cannon as the nude. I am referring here to the idealized nude, the particular form of nudity that Kenneth Clark famously defined in opposition to nakedness:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word “nude,” on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body reformed.11

Many scholars have since taken issue with Clark’s arguments, pointing to their limitations.12 But the fact remains that the “vague image… of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body” remains fixed in the public imagination. Think of Polykleitos’s Doryphoros, Michelangelo’s David, Canova’s Perseus, Rinehart’s Leander—given the focus of my paper, I am referring only to examples of the male nude. Chiseled figures with youthful and unblemished bodies, unattired athletes standing in contrapposto: these are part and parcel of the “classical tradition.” Such bodies are specimens of artistic achievement that, according to received wisdom, speak to generalized conceptions of human perfection that derive from Ancient Greece, the supposed birthplace of western democracy and civilization.13 Washington D.C. might not boast as many classical nudes as other western capitals. But so powerful and ubiquitous is the nude in the historical consciousness of the west that D.C.’s scarcity of bared bodies hardly matters: many (perhaps even most) of Mpane’s American viewers had Clark’s “vague image” of the ideal nude in their minds already when they entered the artist’s 2009 gallery space.

However, as Mpane notes, that “vague image” is neither static nor abstract. Nudity is an act—a conscious decision. In a Smithsonian gallery space, displaying a nude sculpture is an intentional choice to engage with longstanding artistic traditions. In the Congo, displaying the unattired body is something else, namely an act of protest.14 Nude draws these two forms of display together in a way that reveals something important: the idealized, classicizing nude is ultimately an enactment of imperialist ideology. Witness how Clark himself explains the origin of the term: “the word [nude] was forced into our vocabulary by critics of the early eighteenth century to persuade the artless islanders that, in countries where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art.”15

We can push this discussion of imperialist ideology further. The same critics to which Clark alludes, writing when Neoclassicism was ascendant in the west, had a preferred medium when it came to sculpted bodies: marble. Marble’s color was a privileged signifier, especially among American Neoclassicists.16 For them, white stone served as a sign of aesthetic and moral purity. There is a definite racial dimension to this logic.17 Insisting on the edifying value of marble was, with regard to sculpted nudes, a way of making the White body into an aesthetic and moral paradigm, a “universal good” in art.18 This elevation of the White body occurred not simply because white stone stood in for white skin—though marble certainly did blur the line between whiteness as virtue and Whiteness as race—but also because the preference for marble suppressed the possibility of representing Black and other racial identities. As one scholar has explained, “For if Black bodies were cloaked in white marble, then the most obvious and arguably primary signifier of race, skin color/complexion, was obliterated and contained.”19

Mpane effectively removed the cloak of white marble when he created Nude. He used plywood, gluing a number of planks together to form the block that he then shaped from memory, using...
his adze primarily. This choice of medium invites us to reflect on ideas of status, value, and privilege. Plywood, a medium not normally associated with “high” art, is less expensive and less esteemed than fine stone. Likewise, the adze is a tool that has greater purchase in African carving traditions than in the celebrated sculpting schools of Europe and America. And of course, the body Mpane rendered is not white. Nor is it White. Mpane is quite clear on the matter: Nude is a sculpture of a Black man.

Along those same lines, we should note a few other characteristics of Mpane’s figure. Look at the facial features. Many spectators would read them as indicative of African descent. Then there are the figure’s genitals. In my experience as an art history professor, I have had a few brave students ask why classicizing nudes “all have such small penises.” Comparatively speaking, though, the question does not apply to Mpane’s Nude. Here again, we run up against social conceptions of Black bodies. We run up against the legacy of colonial imagery in ethnographic “science,” which posits a connection between the genitalia of Black bodies and a deviant, atavistic, or animalistic sexuality. And we run up against colonialism’s representational strategies, which align cultural—even sculptural—conceptions of Whiteness with higher forms of human evolution and connect Blackness with base categories of sub-human existence (see fig. 3). Once more, the situation is quite clear; signifiers of race, far from being obliterated and contained, are present and palpable in Mpane’s figure. Nude has the type of youthful, athletic physique familiar from the classical tradition. He stands in a pose that recalls canonical precedent, but the signifiers of race raise timely issues: they make explicit the all-too-often hidden assumptions that interweave the celebrated history of nudity in western art with cultural values ascribed to White skin. We begin to see here the insight of Milbourne’s assertion: “More than a witness to history, [Nude] stands raw and demanding change.”

That demand is made to and of the work’s spectators—this is a point that needs to be stressed. Lit from above (as it was in the Artists in Dialogue exhibition), with strong shadows emphasizing the figure’s facial features, Nude has as a corporeal presence that cannot be ignored. The figure stands confidently with a forceful yet relaxed poise. His head turns slightly to the left. His arm is propped prominently on his hip. There is a subtle twist in his torso, and his body.

3 Illustrated racial hierarchy chart that features the Apollo Belvedere at the apex from Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, Types of Mankind; or, Ethnological Researches, based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History, Philadelphia 1854. 458
conveys a sense of reserved energy and depth. *Nude* also returns the viewer’s gaze; this suggests an embodied presence, a mental and emotional life. That impression of a psyche—dare I say a soul—is especially meaningful given the palpable indicators of race and ethnicity in the figure. Mpane’s sculpture asserts that which colonialism and its lingering representational strategies deny when depicting bodies of color: humanity. It is the beauty of human beings, Africans in particular, that Mpane puts on a pedestal here.²⁷

What the work demands is acknowledgement of that humanity. To put it in slightly more philosophical terms, *Nude* resonates with a deeply felt ethical experience: encountering another person, seeing something of the rich internal life of the Other, implores the viewing subject to see another self, another human being that deserves respect, kindness, and care.²⁸

That being said, *Nude* also invites spectators to participate in a different type of looking. Consider the surface of the figure (fig. 4). Writers in the Neoclassical era praised the smooth, uninterrupted exteriors of antique marbles, connecting them to values of beauty and decorum.²⁹ Mpane by contrast left his wood unpolished, abraded, and scarred. This surface activity compels viewers to move closer, invade what we might call *Nude*’s personal space, and participate in a topographical study of the figure’s form. In that moment, the eye moves over and through the external marks. It follows the course of Mpane’s adze and other tools, into the gouges, the gashes, the scratches in the wood, ravaging *Nude*’s body. To borrow slightly from the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the eye is hateful.³⁰ Mpane’s own words are even more revealing.

For the African body [*Nude*], I proceeded by gluing several layers of wood... as if it were the layers of our history that we discover as an archaeologist, and by leaving the surface marked by the lines of wood rasp, it is to put stress on the skin. Because of the pigmentation, the color of our skin, we are immediately labeled. [This] is also a way of talking about our traumatic memory that we carry within us via the collective unconscious.³¹

*Nude* stands—and this is especially true for those spectators who occupy a position of privilege within a society that has long struggled with systemic racism and inequality—in a type of discursive place characterized by tension and oscillation. The power of the figure’s body language is such that beholders react to the sculpture’s emotive character, but the power of the surface is such that the eye wants to peer across the figure’s terrain, bore into it, destabilize the whole, and tear the body into patterns of form, texture, and shape. Under close examination, in other words, *Nude* no longer exists as an embodied subject, as somebody. Perception becomes
superficial—skin-deep. The gaze reads Nude as something. And the experience of looking at the figure begins to recall themes and insights from postcolonial theory. One might invoke the insights of Homi Bhabha at this moment: “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole White body.” Fanon’s poetic descriptions of a violent gaze and racist speech in Black Skin, White Masks are even more poignant: “The Black man has to confront a myth—a deep-rooted myth. The Black man is unaware of it as long as he lives among his own people; but at the first White gaze, he feels the weight of his melanin.”

“Look, a Negro! Maman, a Negro!”

“Ssh! You’ll make him angry. Don’t pay attention to him monsieur, he doesn’t realize that you’re just as civilized as we are.”

2. Fanon’s Final Prayer

There is more to be said about Black Skin, White Masks in relation to Mpane’s Nude. Fanon’s text is a powerful exploration—an evisceration, really—of colonialism, racism, and their impact on the human mind. As one might expect, psychiatry being Fanon’s field of expertise, the book is deeply critical of Eurocentric and essentialist trends in early twentieth-century psychoanalytic practice. For similar reasons, the author also engages with the proponents of Negritude. Fanon opposes discussions that center on universal conceptions of the “Negro spirit” or “African personality.” As he maintains, “what we call the Black soul is a construction by White folks.”

Fanon’s discussion of the “Black soul” strikes a chord with Foucault’s famous pronouncement, “the soul is the prison of the body.” The connection is more than a matter of coincidence. Fanon describes the body as the object of power operations that define racial identities in colonial societies. Notice how he frames the project of his book:

The analysis we are undertaking is psychological. It remains, nevertheless, evident that for us the true disalienation of the Black man implies a brutal awareness of the social and economic realities. The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process:

First economic.

Then, internalization or rather, epidermalization [emphasis added] of this inferiority.

Fanon’s point is preceptive. Colonialism works to establish, reify, and amplify systems of inequality. The colonizer reigns supreme over colonial subjects that have to be, that for the sake of the system itself, must be affirmed and reaffirmed as inferior, less than human. As Fanon explains, one of the many tragedies of this situation is that it makes believers of those who suffer its effects most. This is where colonialism’s representational strategies come into play (see fig. 3 again). Visual images, textual descriptions, pseudo-scientific discourses: together, these different facets of cultural production shape how actual living and breathing individuals interpret their bodies, as well as the bodies of others. “Blackness” as construed in colonial and racist systems—the “myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro”—is written on the body of color. It defines that body. It imprisons that body by perpetuating a type of looking, a gaze that intensifies power hierarchies. “His body is black; his tongue is black; his soul must be black too.” The White man practices this logic daily. The Black man is the symbol of evil and ugliness.”

“A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those White men, fingering their guns, can’t be wrong. I am guilty. I don’t know what of, but I know I’m a wretch.”

As is plainly evident, Fanon is quite explicit when it comes to the violence involved in colo-
nial representations of Black bodies. He speaks of "an arsenal of racial stereotypes" that reside in the collective unconscious (at least in the west) and deny the humanity of Black people. Here again, the body becomes the target of a cruel gaze. Consider some of Fanon’s more evocative prose: “Look! A Negro! … I am an object among other objects.”

This last quotation aligns so precisely with the experience of looking closely at Nude’s surface that it is almost startling. Spectators who notice the scored “skin” of Mpane’s figure study the sculpture by scrutinizing its various physical properties. Exposed joints in the wood blocks. Patterned motifs of slightly different color. A woven texture of marks, traces left by an adze, wood rasp, or other tools. The process is one of dissection and fragmentation. In these moments, Nude does not evoke a powerful sense of embodied subjectivity. It is an “object among other objects.” Only when the spell breaks, when spectators step back to take in the figure as a whole, does the compelling image of a nude Black man come into focus again.

The effect of that oscillation—viewers moving close then back, the sculpture registering differently from the respective vantage points—is poignant. Suddenly, and with blinding realization, the style of visual investigation that draws spectators close—the type of scrutiny that is entrenched within the museum as a cultural institution, as well as the discipline of art history, with its celebrated series of nude marble bodies—becomes an analogue for the dissecting power of the “White gaze.” Similarly, when spectators encounter Nude as an embodied presence, the experience resonates with the ethical dimensions of Black Skin, White Masks. I am referring to the mute appeal that issues from Mpane’s standing figure, with its eloquent body language. From this perspective, Nude registers a degree of humanity that demands acknowledgement, that calls to spectators from a place that colonialism and its representational strategies seek to obscure. Fanon’s language is especially pertinent once again: “Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body, suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost….”

At their core, Black Skin, White Masks and Nude share important ethical convictions. Fanon is a deeply critical and perceptive accuser of the colonial enterprise, but what he ultimately seeks is the freedom of both parties—Black and White—from the violent and oppressive social systems that lock individuals into race-based categories of identity. “The Black man is not. No more than the White man. Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born.” Mpane, too, values this type of communication. Speaking to me over email, the artist explained that he admires Fanon’s book, Black Skin, White Masks, “reminds us… to think of humanity as one…. Because this is how it is possible to forgive and move from caring for oneself to caring for the world.”

By placing Nude in an exhibition that centers on the theme of dialogue, Mpane engaged his spectators as interlocutors. Nude lays bare the violent operations of a racist gaze—a gaze that is so pervasive, so deeply engrained in the fabric of American culture and history that it is able to masquerade as normal. At the same time, Nude confronts beholders with a moral imperative that echoes Fanon’s thinking. The sculpture urges its audience to view with suspicion all the negative associations that have been ascribed to Black bodies, distrust the “inhuman voices” of the past, and “endeavor to assume the universalism inherent in the human condition.” In this respect, the work points to a hard truth: the struggles Fanon and others faced in the anticolonial period continue to pervade this post/neo-colonial era. Speaking of the pain inflicted on colonized bodies, Mpane himself states, “Today
that pain, or rather the echo of that pain, has become screaming. For decades we’ve tried to hide it, but I try to dig into it, question it and present it as questioning. And in that respect, we should view *Nude* as effectively embodying the last lines of Fanon’s book: “My final prayer: / O my body, always make me a man who questions!”

3. Coda

One of the most fascinating elements of the 2009 *Artists in Dialogue* exhibition was the placement of *Nude* (fig. 5). The sculpture commanded a good deal of floor space on its own, but it also looked through an open doorway to the central figure of Mpane’s installation, *Congo, Shadow of a Shadow*. The dialogue between the two works—*Nude* and *Congo, Shadow of a Shadow*—deserves a moment of reflection, in large part because it allows us to continue exploring the parallels between Mpane’s art and Fanon’s writings.

*Congo, Shadow of a Shadow* (fig. 6) is made of spectral bodies, bodies that operate at the limits of representation, in the gray area between form and content. The central figure is a construction of 4,652 matchsticks. Mourning, its head down-cast, it stands before and emerges from a grave marked, “Congo… 1885.” This is an explicit allusion to the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, where King Leopold of Belgium—the monarch of a small and recently-established European territory, envious of the growing empires around him—used his wealth and ruthless diplomatic skill to exploit international rivalries in the scramble for African colonies. When the conference concluded, he was sovereign ruler of the Congo Free State, a newly created political entity.
whose purpose—at least from Leopold’s perspective—was profit, the production of ivory and wild rubber. In spite of the king’s humanitarian posturing, horrendous policies in the pursuit of economic gains became the rule of the day. Forced labor in inhumane conditions, maiming and mutilation, arbitrary executions, and mass killings were common tactics of state-sponsored terror. Eventually, international pressure forced the Belgian parliament to take possession of the Congo in 1908, but Leopold’s tactics have had a lasting influence. The post-1908 colonial period, the upheavals surrounding independence in 1960, and the subsequent rise of Joseph Désiré Mobutu, who held power from 1965 until his death in 1997—these chapters of Congolese history run red.

Material is obviously important in Mpane’s installation, as is the idea of a constructed body that stands in relation to historical trauma. As the artist explained,

In *Congo, Shadow of a Shadow*, I want to give a lesson based on what is going on. I choose the materials because of their function. Matchsticks because they can generate fire…. The first element humankind discovered was fire to heat, to cook, etc. With time, fire served multiple causes, including destructive means: firearms, burning, and killing. Through the medium, I want to pass on an idea of construction. That medium can exploit curves, straight lines, transparency, weightlessness, deconstruction, and light. And especially, to make something from nothing.  

Interestingly, and unlike *Nude*, the power of *Congo, Shadow of a Shadow* stems from the fact that the installation does not engage viewers in terms of solid corporality. The work communicates through “transparency, weightlessness… and light.” We can speak of the central figure as having a haunting materiality and as a type of shadow: fragile, fleeting, elusive—but there all the same. The permeability of Mpane’s matchstick figure thus creates an interesting play between the “here and now” of its form and the historical circumstances marked, “Congo… 1885.” As we can already begin to understand, Mpane uses the idea of shadows as a way of engaging with the issues of memory and temporality. His work invites viewers to “step into” the matchstick figure’s position: to consider the colonial past, confront the reality of neo-colonialism in the present, and reflect on the future possibilities of life in the Congo.

In addition to the matchstick figure, whose projected shadow looms over the dark scene, two wooden silhouettes lay on the floor. One is of a pregnant woman. The other is a child. Each rests on a pair of shoes. These silhouettes—another play on the idea of shadows—mark absent bodies. They are traces of bodies from the past, lost bodies, traces of death and murder. The shoes are a particularly powerful reference to the realities of violence. In the Congo, the threat of rebels and warring gangs, of community raids, murder, rape, and abduction are lived experiences. Often times the shoes of the victims are all that remain after these attacks.

As markers of dead, nameless individuals, what these silhouettes evoke is a lingering sensation of loss and suffering, and in this respect, the ellipsis of “Congo… 1885” begins to take on new meaning. That seemingly simple bit of punctuation quickly becomes an abyss, the open-endedness of the omission it signifies suggesting the multitude of nameless, all-but-forgotten victims that stretch from the beginning of the colonial period to the contemporary era. It is worth noting that by 2005, the year Mpane created this installation, the concentration of war-related fatalities in the Congo was the highest the world had seen since World War II. Many of the victims were not soldiers. Hence the specific forms of Mpane silhouettes: a pregnant woman and a child.

Viewers who step through the door—the “gate”—and enter the installation space immediately enter into a dialogue with brutal chapters of Congolese history. The emotive force conjured by the work’s ethereal figures challenges years
of ingrained colonial discourse and imperialist ideology—what Adam Hochschild refers to as the “politics of forgetting.” Congo, Shadow of a Shadow conveys the exigency of the colonial situation, which continues to impact the present. As a result, the work also recalls Fanon’s ethical understanding of temporality. “Every human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future. And this future is not that of the cosmos, but very much the future of my century, my country, and my existence.”

Note the urgency of Fanon’s words. The need to build a better future in the present is emphatic: “[T]hat is my reason for living. The future must be a construction supported by man in the present. This future edifice is linked to the present insofar as I consider the present something to be overtaken.” Fanon’s insistence and ambition resonate with the figural arrangements of Congo, Shadow of a Shadow. The materiality of wooden slats and the psychology of mourning connect the physical if elusive presence of the matchstick body to the grave that denotes the Congo’s colonial past. The wooden silhouettes extend the theme of death to the present as well, while the looming shadow on the wall—the least tangible, least fixed form in the installation, the one most subject to change—communicates the moral weight of a future that remains open. For many in America, the shadow of a cross that also appears on the wall might recall the idea of perpetual hope, but the grim reminders of violent death in this installation leave no room for doubt: the future of the Congo is under threat by the realities of its present circumstances and the lingering influence of its colonial past.

Light factors into this temporal dynamic as well. The installation’s spotlight simultaneously throws a looming shadow onto the wall and makes the matchstick figure glow. The glow recalls Mpane’s meditations on fire: it emphasizes the beauty of the present construction while also suggesting that at any moment a spark might send the whole structure up in flames. The question then is what to do with the present: enhance the beauty and construct a better future or continue the destructive course that has ravaged the Congo since 1885. As Mpane explains, “I like matchsticks because of their symbolism: they can produce fire, which in turn brings good and bad things to people…. It gives me pleasure to build something beautiful and humane….It hurts me so much to know that in Africa, many people destroy instead of construct.” Fanon conveys a related sentiment, his words delivering a poetic force equal to that of Mpane’s installation: “How can we possibly not hear that voice again tumbling down the steps of History: ‘It’s no longer a question of knowing the world, but of transforming it.’

By positioning Nude so that the figure seemingly looks through the doorway at the matchstick body in Congo, Shadow of a Shadow, Mpane effectively extended Nude’s frame of reference. The artist’s investigations into social conceptions of Black bodies and the history of nudity in western art lead to the issue of colonialism. This fact lends another dimension to Nude’s protest as well as the promise it adumbrates. The figure stands exposed, compels an acknowledgement of colonialism’s continued impact on human life, and calls for change. It prefigures “the ‘ideal’ or the utopian vision of an African man (it is not the case today). It is the expression of what a man wants to be, a man in ‘majesty’.” To put it another way—and to borrow from Fanon once more—Nude demands that we “wake up, put on our thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty.”

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I would like to thank Shannen Hill for her support at the crucial early stages of the project. I would also like to thank Emily Penichet, who read a complete draft of the article manuscript; Steven Mansbach and Joshua Shannon, for their sage advice; and several individuals who were incredibly generous in helping me acquire images for publication: these individuals include Haley Steinhilber, Amy Staples and Karen Milbourne of the National Museum of African Art and Irene Fung of the Haines Gallery, San Francisco. Andrew Eschelbacher deserves special mention in this note of acknowledgment. Andrew has been part of this project from the very beginning, first as a sounding board for ideas, later as a thoughtful interlocutor and reader, and always as a good friend. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and anonymous readers of this journal for their insightful comments and Aimé Mpane, who kindly discussed his work with me.


2 I heard Mpane speak at the University of Maryland, College Park in the spring of 2009. His presentation essentially matched the one he gave to students from Howard University on January 30, 2009 at the National Museum of African Art. The quotations above are taken from an online recording of this January talk, as translated by Xavier Courtouble: URL: http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/dialogue09/students.html (last accessed August 20, 2023).

3 For an excellent discussion of colonialism and urbanism in the capital of the Congo, see Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City, Leuven 2014.


6 Mpane remarks on making work for American audiences, describing them as curious and willing to face colonial histories, “to know them, even though ultimately they might not really care or act on the knowledge.” Cited after Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 331–333, here 331.


10 For informative discussions of Fanon and his written legacy, including his thoughts on violence (which are less germane to Mpane’s work and thus do not factor into my project here), see Robert J. C. Young, Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction, Malden 2001, 274–283; Homi K. Bhabha, Foreword: Framing Fanon, in: Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. by Richard Philcox, New York 2004, vii–xii; Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon’s Oeuvres: A Metaphoric Thought, in: Nka: Contemporary African Art 32, 2013, 8–17.


When I heard Mpane speak at the University of Maryland, he told the story of a man so frustrated with the political realities of life in the Congo that he stripped bare before leaders in order the emphasize his message of dissent. Witnessing this event helped inspire Nude. See Milbourne 2009 (as in note 9), 26. Naminata Diabate offers a searching analysis of women who employ nakedness as an act of biopolitical protest in Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitcs in Africa, Durham 2020, 1–26.


The American art critic James Jackson Jarves is quite explicit about the matter: "I believe for sculpture itself, as confined to the human figure, that the intellectual pleasure diminishes in the degree that pure white is departed from as its material. Does anyone find other pleasure in the artistic freaks of the classical age, and the imitations of the Renaissance in the shape of blackamoors... rendered by the natural colours of their [polychrome] stone-material... than in the ingenuity of these combinations?" James Jackson Jarves, Art-Hints: Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, London 1855, 156. Quoted and discussed in Nelson 2007 (as in note 17), 62.

Ibid., 68.

Mpane’s comments on his inspiration for working with plywood are especially revealing: “[W]hen I got to Congo and roamed around Kinshasa I ended up in a shanty town where there were Pygmies, who had come down from the forests during the Mobutu era but who had been abandoned and badly treated, like animals. This disgusted me, it really affected me badly. This racism between us Black people... There were entire families living in these small plywood shacks, it was horrible. This gave me the idea of doing something with plywood once I returned to my atelier... Some layers [of plywood] were brown like skin, all of them had skin colors really." Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 359.

I am struck by the parallels between the way Nude relates to the classical tradition of nudity and Homi Bhabha’s language when assessing French colonial policy. “French colonial policy acknowledges the naked right of the colonized as individual—divested of cultural difference—to be identified as a citizen of the republic. But there exists, at the same time, a discriminatory denial or disavowal of the colonized citizen’s right to be represented and recognized as a culturally clothed subject who may not conform to the norms and practices of French civil society. Without the rights of representation and participation, in the public sphere, can the subject ever by a citizen in the true sense of the term?” Bhabha 2004 (as in note 10), xxiv.


See Sander Gilman, The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality, in: Kymberly N. Pinder (ed.), Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History, New York 2002, 119–126; Timothy J. McNiven, The Unheroic Penis; Otherness Exposed, in: Source: Notes in the History of Art 15, 1995, 10–16. Fanon’s critique of racist textual images makes for a ready and compelling comparison as well: when “we let ourselves be carried away by the movement of its images, no longer do we see the Black man; we see a penis: the Black man has been occulted. He has been turned into a penis. He is a penis.... The White man is convinced the Black man is an animal; if it is not the length of his penis, it’s his sexual power that impresses the White man. Confronted with this alterity, the White man needs to defend himself, i.e. to characterize ‘the Other,’ who will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires.” Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. by Richard Philcox, New York 2008, 147–148.

Ibid., 68.

Mpane refers to seeing his grandfather craft sculptures with an adze and then learning more about the tools during a trip to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. As Mpane recalls, a staff member of the museum explained that there were several types of adzes, “some used by artists, others that symbolized the power of village chiefs or other leaders. So I thought to myself, this is a powerful object, in many ways.” Ibid.

Mpane kindly corresponded with me via email in February 2021, answering several questions about his work. When quoting Mpane’s remarks—which I do with his permission—I will henceforth refer to our exchange as “Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.” Mpane described Nude as “advocate[ing] our dignity in all that we currently endure as Black (racism, discrimination...).” He also stated, that “the plain wood sculpture [Nude] has to be considered as the ‘ideal’ or the utopian vision of an African man....”


Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 359.
27 Cf. Mpane’s answer when asked about depicting more Congolese subjects in his work: “It is true that I depict more Congolese, particularly in portraits. It might be because Congolese bodies are easier for me to do, I can do them without models, since I have been doing them for so long. And when I talk of man, it does not have to be Black or White, it is a human, it is humanity, the human being…” Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 318.

28 My discussion of seeing the Other draws on Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics as First Philosophy, in Séan Hand (ed.), The Levinas Reader, Oxford 1989, 75–87. Note Levinas’s discussion of seeing the Other’s face in particular: “In its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness… were my business” (ibid., 85).


30 See Levinas 1989 (as in note 28), 80–82.

31 Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

32 Consider how Mpane himself describes working with an adze on other works: “And while using the adze and tapping away at the wood, I realized: ‘this is like a bird, the woodpecker pecking away at a tree, looking for little worms, and these little worms, in turn, are also gnawing away at the tree.’ It is like the powerful that eat away at the weak, who in turn do it to those weaker than them. It is recurrent, we function in a system that feeds on poverty.” Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 329–330.


34 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), 128.

35 Ibid., 93.


37 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), xviii.


39 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), xiv – xv.


41 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), xviii.

42 Ibid., 157.

43 Ibid., 118.

44 Ibid., 58.

45 Ibid., 87. Fanon describes Europe as having a racist structure and speaks of the collective unconscious (ibid., 72).

46 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), 95.

47 Ibid., 87.

48 Ibid., 89.

49 Ibid., 206.

50 Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

51 Van Beurden accurately describes Mpane work as “an effort to populate ‘History’ with those previously invisible to its narratives.” Van Beurden 2016 (as in note 1), 325.

52 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), xiv.

53 Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

54 Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), 206.

55 Mpane’s remarks are quoted in Milbourne 2009 (as in note 5), 26.

56 In its haunting materiality, Mpane’s figure strikes a sympathetic chord with Nandipha Mntambo installations, as analyzed in Giovanni Aloi, Speculative Taxidermy: Inscribing Vulnerability, in: Configurations 27, 2019, 199–205.

57 When I asked Mpane about the different bodies displayed in the Congo, Shadow of a Shadow, he explained that they were invitations to think in terms of time. Everything “depends on how you look at (the way you read) the work. As temporal moments? As past, present, future.” Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

58 The idea of a viewer “stepping into” the matchstick figure’s position derives from Ikem Stanley Okoye’s magisterial reading of Sokari Douglas Camp’s transparent figures: “[T]he transparency of the sculpture demands, to a greater extent than might a solid sculpted figure, that the viewer imagine (or empathize with) what it might be like to occupy the enclosed space—to be within it, looking out.” Ikem Stanley Okoye, Ajü Azu Ndu 11 (or Fishy Questions) on the Body of Contemporary Izhon and Igbo Sculpture: Sokari Douglas Camp and Chris Afuba, in: Nkiru Nzegwu (ed.), Issues in Contemporary African Art, Binghamton 1998, 19–46, here 21.

59 My interpretation of Mpane’s work owes much to Lisa Saltzman’s discussion of shadows, representation, and race in Making Memories Matter: Strate-


Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

Hochschild 1999 (as in note 4), 292–306.

Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), xvi.

Ibid., xvii.

The presence of the matchstick figure recall Bhabha’s words: the figure “makes presence something that is absent—and temporally deferred—it is a representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition.” Bhabha 1994 (as in note 33), 118.

Mpane, quoted in Milbourne 2009 (as in note 5), 25.

Fanon 2008 (as in note 24), 1.

Mpane, 2021 email correspondence with the author.

Fanon 2004 (as in note 10), 62.