

ARTICLE

The Hands That Built Nations: Graphite Drawings of African Braiders

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the worn-out hands of the African hair braider, drawn in heavy graphite, create a decolonial move. It re-positions these hands as instruments of labour into a text on which it argues that their labour is inherently connected to the larger, and mostly hidden, processes of postcolonial reconstruction and identification making. The article is presented from a material-based approach. This method is based on the notion that the physical characteristics of the artistic medium are not accidental but primary in the creation of meaning. In particular, it explores the functionality of the deliberate application of solid, tactile graphite, in its ability to produce deep shadows, extreme contrast, and a sculptural quality on paper as a critical signifier. The process enables the materialization of the weight, endurance, and heaviness of care work that can be expressed through the artwork to articulate what has been oppressed by traditional colonial archives. It is in this materialist perspective that the article shows how the image of hands of the braider has a critical intertextual dialogue with the national rebuilding narratives. It brings to view the invisible feminized labour which keeps communities and cultural memory alive and physically reinstates social identity following colonialism. This artistic intervention questions the erasures of the colonial archive and suggests a different mode of historical responsibility, which records the hair braider as a nation-builder and her hands as some of the major actors in the current project of cultural and social repossession.

Keywords: Hands; Built Nation; Graphite; Drawing; Labour; Decolonial; African Braider

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1. Introduction

The historical and artistic canon, especially as influenced by Western colonial ventures, has traditionally served as a process of selective remembering. It is a library which carefully recorded the labour, accomplishments and aesthetics of the colonizer and has been systematic in excluding, devaluing or exoticizing the efforts of the colonized^[1]. This exclusion is not passive but an active process of what post-colonial theorist Ann Laura Stoler calls a “politics of omission”, which is the core of colonial rule^[2].

In this curated silence, some types of labour have become doubly inaccessible, the skilled labour that is neither industrialized nor industrializing, the labour of the feminized and hence of the domestic sphere, and, inherently, of African cultural practice and thus, neglected as a simple primitive craft instead of being seen as an art or as a necessary social labour^[3].

The time-honoured, complex art of African hair braiding is a multi-layered language of identity, community, and spirituality, and is an example of this triple-erased work^[4]. Its adherents, who are mostly women, are the unrecognized archivists of cultural memory, and their hands are the ones that inscribe genealogy, social status, and resistance upon the very bodies of their people^[5]. Nevertheless, their labour does not enter the annals of “great” art and history, but must content itself with the anthropological interest or with service^[6]. This critical lack is the starting point of this paper, inquiring how artistic practice can interfere with the archive record to remedy its inaccuracy.

This paper is a primary case study and a methodological intervention that examines a hypothetical or indeed an actual set of large-scale, hyper-detailed drawings, which solely investigate the weathered hands of an African hair braider engaged in work. These artworks are done in heavy graphite drawing, which has been done purposefully because of its material and symbolic characteristics. The presence of the size makes the viewer face the subject on its own terms and not as an ornamental component of the portrait, but as the unique, heroic subject matter. It is the style of representation, but with material intensity; the graphite is scratched and rubbed around to intense shadows and wings of dramatic light and shadow, to the topography of the skin, the calluses, the power in the fingers, the slight tension of the exact motion. This

is not just a representational practice of art, but an act of reclaiming. The artist creates the effect of making the hands of the braider visible to themselves and then magnified to focus the gaze out of the aesthetic product (the complete braid) to the neglected process and the expert body that is capable of carrying out the process. The visual thesis presented here is the central text to undergo analysis, an intervention that argues out of the re-reading of value, labour, and history.

The paper states that the artistic use of heavy graphite drawing to represent the eroded hands of the African hair braider is a strong decolonial intertextual practice. This operates on multiple levels, beginning with the materiality of graphite itself. To fully grasp the significance of this medium, one must trace its history from a humble marking tool used in sketching and industrial drafting, the preliminary, unseen work that underpins grander creations, to a core component of pencils, the fundamental instrument of literacy and documentation^[7, 8]. This history imbues graphite with an inherent association with foundational, often-overlooked labour^[9].

It acts at the dual levels, the first one being the physicality of the graphite, its weight, density and touch, which are used to render and memorialize the physical and emotional burden of the invisible care of the braider, which renders its importance palpable. Second, on the conceptual level, the practice pursues intertextuality through reading the hands of the braider as a primary cultural textual ground and putting it into the conversation with the repressed discourses of postcolonial reconstruction. The drawing does not merely represent hands, but sets this particular, feminized labour as necessarily related to and constitutive of the larger project of postcolonial reconstruction and identity-building. The work of the braider in the post-colonial period is transformed into a successive, imperative practice of reweaving social fabric, retaining the memory of a culture and literally reweaving a sense of self and identity, in the wake of the colonial rupture that strove to silence the indigenous cultures^[10]. The drawing, therefore, is a form of archival insurgency, offering a different story, in which the braider is re-constructed as a nation-builder.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The section provides the theoretical basis of the analysis by presenting the argument that intertextuality is not

simply a literary device but an effective approach to methodological approach to decolonial critique. We can bring about the authority of the colonial archive to its knees by extending the understanding of text to now include visual and bodily systems of signification, and re-read the hands of the braider as a place of repressed historical knowledge.

2.1. Beyond the Literal Text

Intertextuality, which is a synthesis of Bakhtin, as suggested by Julia Kristeva, is a theory that assumes that any text is a “mosaic of quotes”, and that its meaning is created through its connection with other texts^[11]. Roland Barthes went ahead to pronounce “the death of the author” by stating that the unity of a text is no longer in its source but in the destination of the reader who applies a huge cultural lexicon in order to create a meaning^[12]. To undertake this study, we went beyond this text to use this theory in the visual culture. A text turns any system of signification, for example, a painting, a photograph, a film, but also a cultural practice, and a gesture of the body, or a hairstyle.

The colonial gaze of the analysis is criticized in the light of the colonial archive, which includes (or excludes) the subjects and describes them through the prism of power, categorization, and control.

Thus, the complexities of African hair braiding are text; they provide social status, ethnicity, spirituality and resistance^[13]. Colonial archive is in itself a text, written by the power to give a certain account of history, and most importantly to this argument, the shattered hands of the weaver are a writing, a multifarious paper, written with the concrete record of labour, work and years. Drawing these hands is an artistic practice of intertextuality that puts the text of the hands purposefully against the text of the colonial archive, producing a new, rebel meaning that is created at the intersection between these two pieces of textuality^[14].

The paper deploys an intertextual and semiotic approach. It considers practices of culture (braiding), physical appearance (hands), and archival documents as texts, the meanings of which are produced by the relations between them. This lens is informed by theorists such as Kristeva and Barthes to examine how such signs of the visual and cultural create new, subversive meanings.

2.2. The Colonial Archive as a Hegemonic Text

The colonial project was a military, economic, and epistemological conquest. One of the major instruments of this domination was the establishment of the colonial archive. In her argument, Ann Laura Stoler states that archives are not inert depositories of facts but rather laboratories of the colonial state, the active sites of creation of knowledge, its classification, and weaponization to organize people and justify their rule (p. 50). This was done through a calculated calibration of worthiness in terms of what was considered worthy of recording.

The archive carefully registered labour which was immediately relevant to the colonial economy, like industrial production, agricultural exports (e.g., records of cotton, rubber, or mineral mining) and administration of enslaved or indentured labourers. The enormous sphere of social reproduction and cultural maintenance, the feminised, household and women-sustaining labour carried out mainly by women of colour, was made invisible in contrast. This labour that consisted of cooking, healing, child rearing, and cultural activities such as braiding, was deemed inborn, natural, trivial, and hence not worthy of being documented^[15].

The inability of this work to be erased not only removed a great part of the human experience but also broke the fundamental connection between cultural practice and identity formation, offering colonized cultures as timeless and simple, a gesture that is archetypal of what Edward Said has described as orientalism^[16].

2.3. Reclaiming Erased Labour

The postcolonial theory and decoloniality are the critical terms through which this archival violence can be discredited and the process of reclaiming the lost histories should be conceptualized. The works of Silvia Federici are central to this. In her argument on primitive accumulation, she illustrates that the capitalist economy was constructed on systemic and devaluation of unpaid reproductive labour, which was reinforced and racialized under colonialism^[17]. This “worker body calibration” meant beating some of the workers to do some kind of work and this labour value pyramid is still there in the modern world; it still clouds the contributions of some, such as the cultural braider.

The decision to braid hair may be seen as a kind of exterior conformity to the system of production, indeed in a world of dominance dominated by a long history of capitalist economic systemic undervaluation and undercompensation of feminized and racialized labour. This devaluation is not by chance, but rather highly congruent with a colonialist and capitalist tradition of extracting value from such labour and denying it full social and economic acknowledgement, which, as Silvia Federici critically points out, is the exploitation of reproductive and care labour.

To consider braiding purely in terms of this like oppression, however, is to overlook its deep and coeval ability to find subversion. Each of the braids is an act of cultural preservation and reclamation, which is strategic and everyday. It is a practice where the body itself is made to be a location of protest and memory, a canvas where cultural memory is written and defended against the assimilatory forces of a dominant culture, which at one time tried to destroy it^[18]. When the braider operates as a part of the economic system, she can act as an agent of subtly undermining its logic; by continuing to hold on to the very cultures and communities that the structure is trying to marginalize, she is sewing up the social fabric that colonialism was trying to destroy. This corresponds with the notion of the oppositional gaze introduced by bell hooks, which is an act by the marginalized people to look back with a critical gaze at the hegemony, generating the space to live autonomously and define themselves^[19]. The labour of the braider is in a condition of very strong paradox: it is both a service traded in a capitalist market, and a rebellion that proclaims a sovereignty of culture and shows the ability to act and create even under conditions of extreme constraint^[20].

Also, the postcolonial condition is not an enclosed situation attained after independence but a repeated process, what Achille Mbembe calls “the struggle to agency” and self-definition in the legacy of the colonial discontinuity^[21]. It stands as a state of continuous reconstruction, political, economic and above all cultural. It is in this context that the work of the braider needs to be understood. Every act of braid is not some cutesy cultural artifact but rather a living, breathing process of repairing the social fabric, knitting together strands of memory, identity and resistance which colonialism was attempting to undo. It is an essential way of what Michel de Certeau could term a “making do”, an

everyday life tactic that claims agency and maintains culture both within and through an overwhelming system^[22].

2.4. The Hand as a Text

By combining these theories, we reach the main thesis of this framework since we proposed that the hands of the braider are not a subject to be drawn, but a document to be read. The hand is projected in the form of a text that has several layers of meaning.

We throw up the hand as historical text in the condition of the wrinkles, the calluses and the power of the hands, which tell us a biography of labour, a history of repetitive, skilled movement which has held community and culture through generations.

It is also lived within the discourse of Social Text as social interaction, mother-child, friend-friend, artisan-client. They are an indication of a series of knowledge transfer that happens beyond the formal, institutional learning.

Besides, in politics, it is perceived as a political text by the very practice of this culturally particular labour being a silent yet ongoing demand for identity in a world that frequently requires assimilation. The hands are agents of what Homi K. Bhabha may consider as a kind of “mimicry” that disrupts the colonial power; they utilize their expertise to produce the object that asserts difference in a powerful manner^[23].

This material is intensely focused on the practice of drawing these hands; thus, it is a critical reading. It is a commentary on this traumatic text, which reveals its hidden voices and demands their core role in the overall perception of history, labour, and the postcolonial world.

3. Materials and Methods

The basic strategy adopted in this paper is a Material-Based Analysis, a methodological paradigm according to which the choice and treatment of materials that the artist makes is not subservient to a work of art, but it is, in fact, the main means of conveying the idea of the work. This strategy is based on the discourse of artistic practice and materiality, which dictates the creation of meaning in the physical interaction with matter. The technical and material processes utilized by the artist consequently need to undergo a close and forensic examination as an important method-

ological measure. The most important thing in the case in consideration is that the artist has used high-grade (6B–9B) graphite sticks or powder, which is deliberate. It is this particular substance that has been used in dense, thick and opaque masses and has been physically insistent to the extent that the drawing produced has a physical weight, almost gravitational, on the paper that may be considered a contravention of the traditional understanding of drawing as a lightweight and preparatory practice. This is a deliberate play into the exploitation of the natural qualities of graphite as a medium to develop its argument: first, its ability to produce extreme and velvety blacks as well as an enormous tonal spectrum, which enables a greater exploitation of value and depth. Secondly, the quality of its surfaces that are uniquely smooth when smeared, and which may be polished by the artist to a reflective, metallic finish, or remain in their alarmed, discomposure, rough condition, directly appeals to the haptic sense of the viewer. Most notably, the physicality of graphite is highlighted by its application: the graphite is not merely applied to the surface, but is accumulated, made thick, solid, almost sculptural, and physically burdens itself on the paper on which it is pinned, fading out the line between the two-dimensionality of drawing and the relief of the three-dimensional. In order to enhance this materiality, the artist makes use of a drastic play of light and shadow, reminiscent of the chiaroscuro and tenebrism methods. The paper is essentially cut or hacked through with deep, abyssal shadows created out of the graphite masses, then dramatically contrasted with serious highlights, which are commonly viewed subtractively using an eraser. This method not only represents light but also applies the contrast to bring out the topographical, material reality of the graphite itself, and the drawing is an object of event as much as it is an image^[24]. Thus, the main subject matter of the artwork is the argument about weight, presence, and the alchemical change of material is expressed not with the help of the graphite, but with the help of the graphite itself and even the processes of its implementation^[25].

4. Results

At this point, the paper carries out a close reading of the graphite drawings by arguing that the meticulousness of the technique used by the artist not only renders pictures of

hands but also actually builds a story or narrative. It examines how the materiality of the image inscribes the biography of labour, accounts braiding as an intertextual gesture of postcolonial reconstruction and monumentalizes feminized work, thus re-establishing the braider as a key participant in the nation-building enterprise.

4.1. The “Weathered” Hand as a Site of History

The heavy application of graphite by the artist is, first of all, a historical registration. In **Figure 1**, the braider’s hands become a forensic document, with every scratch on the paper a scratch on the body, and the hand becomes a palimpsest of the experience of life. This biography of labour is inscribed in the methods of labour that are discussed in the analysis.

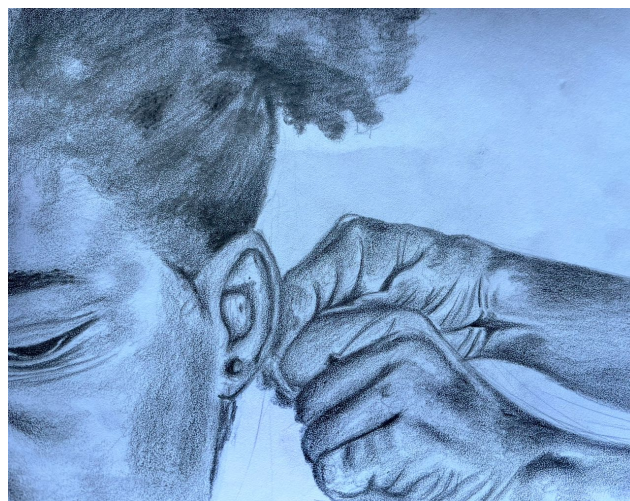


Figure 1. The braider’s hand becomes a manuscript of experience of life.

Source: Monica Arhin (2025). Project work.

Line was used as a narrative since the network of lines etched onto the skin, the wrinkles, creases, and folds are not depicted in a generic, but in a selective, slow stroke. Every bruise can be interpreted as an account of repeating movement, as the ever-present straining of hair, and the accurate placement of the fingers, the years of practice. These lines/marks trace a chart of movement, similar to growth rings of a tree, indicating length of existence and resilience.

Shadow as accretion in the deep, stratified shadows accreted with sub-fine graphite are beyond anatomical depth. They embody time and the accumulation of labour. **Figure 2** portrays the blackness of the hollow of the palm or the

gap between muscles, which is thick with the web of remembered braids made, each of which is a payment of time and skill. This pictorial mass is a direct rebuttal to the idea of this labour as something light or intangible.

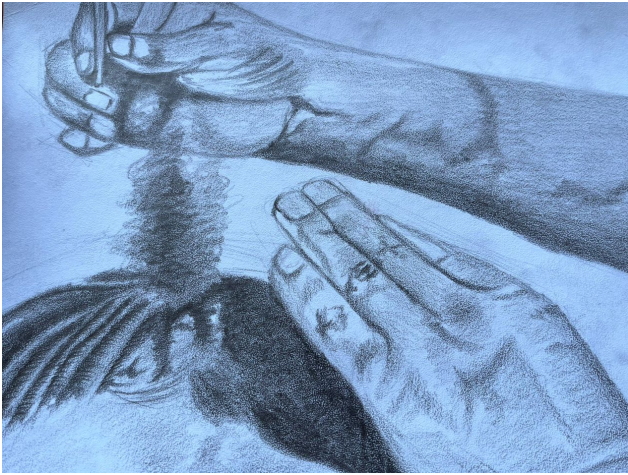


Figure 2. The blackness of the hollow of the palm or the gap between muscles is made thick with the web-like of remembered braids made, of which each shows the payment of time and skill.

Source: Monica Arhin (2025). Project work.

It is especially important in the case of “Texture as Testimony” of rendering calluses, or hardened spots of the skin. The strokes and the smudging of the artist are a mixture of abrasive qualities and a rough texture. These calluses are being brought forth not as defects but as trademarks, the personal record of labour of the body. They are the physical document of the ability that needs rubbing, holding, and pressing and are the irrefutable record of a mastery that is acquired, but not granted.

This way, the drawing techniques go beyond the realms of representation to testimony. The hand is no longer considered as a sign of labour, but as its material remnant. It turns into what anthropologist Allen Feldman refers to as an “archival body”, a place where history is literally written in, and can be read in a meticulous materialist approach^[26].

4.2. Intertextuality in Practice

Figure 3 reveals the strength of the drawing is its intertextual jump because it relates the micro-process of the braid to the bigger macro-process of nation-building in the postcolonial world.

In **Figure 4**, on the micro level, the drawing takes braiding as a classic gesture of caring and socializing. The haptic, intimate nature of the practice is highlighted by the

focus on the hands. This is the labour that touches, who knows, and needs time to be with. It is a rite of talk, narration and passing of knowledge between one generation to another, either in a personal or a shared domain^[27]. Scholars like Paula England have long insisted that this kind of care work that women do disproportionately is systematically undervalued in economic systems that mostly place value on market production^[28]. The sketch stops this rejection by giving this social act a still position and insisting that it be observed.

The discussion claims that this close deed is a micro world of the macro fight for postcolonial identity. The hands of the braider are busy in an endless reconstruction.

Weaving identity as the braider does with the individual strands of hair, the postcolonial nation does with the various cultural, ethnic and historical strands to shape a new national identity. The hand is a synthesizing agent.

The designs woven into hair, whether Fulani cornrows, a symbol of social rank, or Bantu knots, something spiritual, are a mobile archive in the maintenance of memory. The braider is, therefore, a preserver of cultural recollection and s/he is actively working to fight against cultural amnesia that is brought about by colonialism^[29].

To rebuild the social fabric, colonialism worked with a divide-and-rule strategy, dividing communities and social structure. Braiding is an everyday practice of re-weaving fabric bonds to form networks of solidarity and cultural affirmation and is an intimate, community-sustaining form of work.

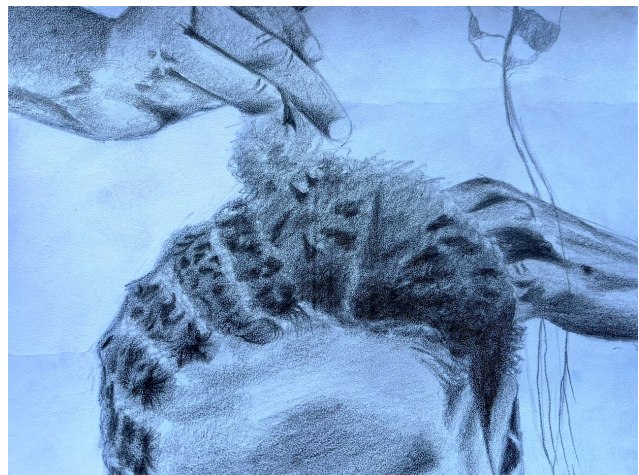


Figure 3. The braider’s micro-process of the braid moves to the bigger macro-process of nation-building in the postcolonial world.

Source: Monica Arhin (2025). Project work.



Figure 4. On the micro level, the drawing takes braiding as a classic gesture of the braider’s caring and socializing.

Source: Monica Arhin (2025). Project work.

The intertextual conversation is evident here, in the careful, patient practice of the braider, which is not distinct from the practice of the politician, of the educator, of the activist; but it is the underlying layer of culture, on which all other reconstruction will be based. It is the decoloniality of being that scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes about, and is evident in the day-to-day action^[30].

4.3. Feminized Labour Made Monumental

The gendered aspect of erasure is discussed in this paper. Feminization of labour involves the historical and overwhelming feminization of labour, used by women, confined to the domestic sphere, and defined as either domestic or decorative labour, and is not included in official histories of value and production^[31].

Figure 5 connects the artistic practice as a direct challenge to this gendered invisibility with the act of deliberate monumentalization. The artist makes a radical revaluation by breaking these hands out of scale and putting them dramatically with the chiaroscuro of heroism and tragedy usually reserved for generals, saints, and statesmen.

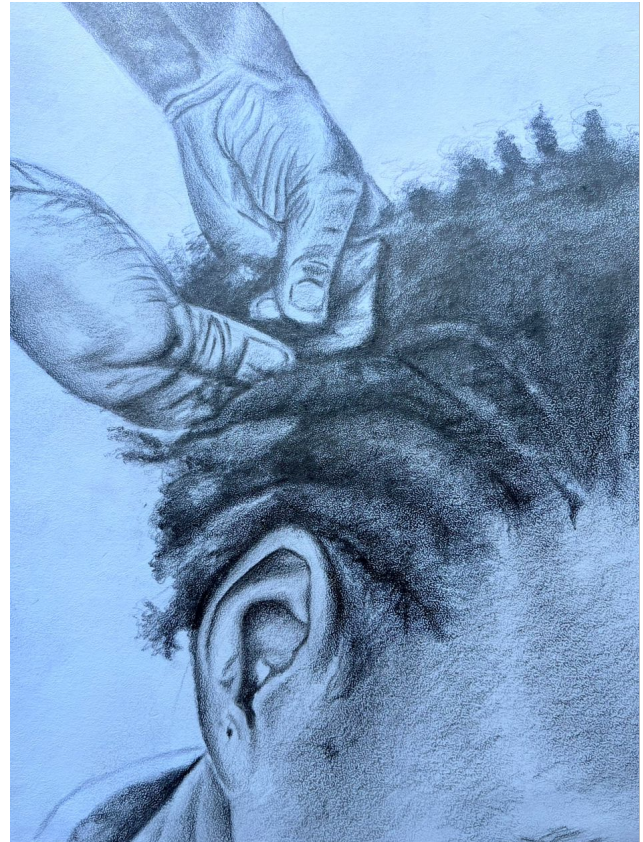


Figure 5. The act of deliberate monumentalization.

Source: Monica Arhin (2025). Project work.

The massiveness of the subject makes the viewer face the subject. These are not miniature, graceful drawings; they are large, broad and irresistible, occupying a place in the gallery, and hence in history, as the argument occupies a place in the cultural discourse.

Dramatic lighting in the heroic gaze does not render the features soft and, on the contrary, strengthens and reinforces them. The viewer cannot but look up these hands to admire how powerful and skillful they are. This subversive and feminist look at the body of a working-class Black woman as a heroic aesthetic is an inverted gaze. It rebels against the colonial and patriarchal gaze where this body would be exoticized or rejected and instead gives a gaze of respect and reverence.

This is in line with the postcolonial feminist critics, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who call for bringing to light the “Third World” agency and the role of women^[32]. The labour is not merely made visible by the drawing; it is placed in an epic, cornerstone, and memorable context. The braider is no longer a service employee; she is re-positioned as a nation-builder^[33], her hands the implements which phys-

ically and symbolically keep the culture organized.

5. Discussion

This part of the paper is to draw the discussion of the preceding analyses in order to formulate the whole political and ethical drive of the artistic practice. It states that the graphite drawings represent a key decolonial act in that they aggressively contest the colonial gaze and essentially historical actor and develop a new, insurgent archive that redresses the gaps of the colonial account.

5.1. Challenging the Colonial Gaze

According to the theorization of postcolonial scholars, the colonial look is a subjective gaze that objectifies others and dominates. It operates by projecting the colonizer's fantasies and hierarchies onto the colonized subject, reducing them to a simplified stereotype to be classified, controlled, and consumed.

It is a gaze that considers the colonized subject as an exotic object, a passive object of culture or a source of raw labour to be handled and controlled. This gaze has been embodied both in the past, when African hair braiding was treated as a primitively curious object to be studied within anthropology, and as a banal service that has historically refused to acknowledge the complexity, art and even cultural depth of such actions.

The artistic practice that is being analyzed poses a direct and multilayered challenge to such a gaze by means of "Refusal of Context". The artist denies the ethnographic urge by isolating the hands, as well as eliminating any exoticism of background or narrative context (a village scene, a market)^[34]. This isolation transforms the hands from a symbolic ideal into an immediate, unmediated presence; we are confronted not with a representation of labour, but with the lived experience of it—its weight, its history, and its enduring strength etched into skin and sinew.

The viewer is deprived of the reassuring aloofness of cultural tourism. They are plunged into an unavoidable close approach to the very labour, to which the stereotypical signifiers have been removed.

The subjectivity is also inverted because the gaze entrenched in the drawing is not the objectifying gaze of the colonizer. In its place, it is a look of profound interior devo-

tion and concentration. The level of detail so carefully paid by the artist resembles the attention that the braider paid to her work. This is what the viewer is requested not to observe the braider as an object, but as she does, to look with her and share her viewpoint, as well as admire her prowess, on the inside out. This has been in line with the understanding of the "oppositional gaze" by bell hooks as a means of gazing that is concerned with critical interrogation and reclaiming the right to form one's own reality^[35].

Finally, there was the need to see something new in the hyper-rendered presentation forces of the artist, which is materially dense and requires the viewer to see differently. These cannot be glanced at; they must be read, studied, touched and felt. This haptic visuality, as described by Laura U. Marks, is the opposite of the fast, categorizing gaze of the colonial gaze^[36]. It requires a new ethic of perception based on respect, forbearance, and a sense of complication.

5.2. Re-Imagining the Historical Agent

The most radical intervention of this work concerns the historical representative. Historical time has been adventured with traditional histories of nation-building filled with the individuals of historical significance as determined by the colonial archive, case in point, generals who won independence, politicians who wrote constitutions, and engineers who constructed infrastructure. The role of women, especially in the cultural maintenance and reproduction of society, is conspicuously missing.

The braider's craft is itself a form of historical evidence—a living archive of techniques, symbols, and community knowledge passed through generations. Each plait and pattern is an act of cultural preservation, weaving together identity and resilience in the face of assimilation, making her a foundational builder of the nation's social fabric.

This is done with the material force of graphite; the braider is inserted into this history, no longer as a footnote, but as one of its main characters. It suggests that cultural continuity as a task on its own is a kind of nation-building. The conscious, everyday practice of maintaining and enacting cultural identity, in the wake of the cultural devastation of colonialism, is a radical political one. Through her work, the braider makes sure that people do not forget who they are.

The braider's practice brings out the architect of identity, the political leader constructs institutions, and the braider constructs the cultural subject that will occupy it. She literally forms the body that passes through the postcolonial world.

Furthermore, her work also acted as a preserver of memory because in the absence of documentation that could have been destroyed or ignored by the colonialists, the braider is a walking library with her hands memorizing and performing the designs that bring centuries-old significance.

It justifies itself as an agent of social cohesion as the communal aspect of braiding, as it is frequently a social gathering of telling stories and fostering relationships, making her a weaver of the social thread, which is the fundamental basis of any political project.

This claim echoes the well-known provocation to have the subaltern speak that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made^[37]. Although Spivak is not optimistic about the rediscovery of pure subaltern voice, this art practice has provided such a strong reaction to the subaltern that she/he might not speak in the archives, but her/his hands have never been silent. Her testimony is written in her labour, and the task of the artist, concerned with ethics, is to create the techniques of deciphering it and revealing it to the world.

5.3. The New Archive

Overall, this literature serves as an additional archive. The colonial archive is not exhaustive, based on Jacques Derrida's concept in "Archival Fever", the concept is determined by exclusions^[38]. The nature of the exclusion enacted by the colonial archive is fundamental to understanding the decolonial intervention of this artistic practice. These exclusions were not mere accidental omissions or oversights; they were systematic, deliberate, and deeply ideological. The urge to develop new archives, to archive what the official record has not documented, is a decolonial desire.

These drawings, because they are visual records that document a truth not found in written records, are a "Visual Repository" archive. They store the feel of the skin, the hand strength and the trace of the skill that the ledgers and reports might never portray.

They play as "Archive of Affect" that is distinct from the cold and bureaucratic colonial archive, but an archive of

feeling, of care, endurance and love. It puts more importance on the qualitative, rather than the quantitative.

These drawings are an active and insurgent archive, which is not a passive repository but an active argument. To use such archives, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay explains in "Potential History", we have to unlearn the imperial habits that left the gaps there in the first place^[39]. These drawings do not merely occupy an empty space; they make us say why the space was and why there is a need to make a reckoning.

The artist not only portrays a braider by producing this new archive, but she is also engaging in historical healing^[40]. They believe that without looking back to the past and the present, one cannot fully account for them without mentioning the hands that have actively woven and sustained the cultural fabric. A visual parallel to this philosophical project of decolonizing the archive, they offer a way to envision a future that is not marked by the optimistic reenactment of the present but by complete transformation. To write a new and more accurate record into our visual memory by the materiality of graphite is a crucial step towards that goal.

6. Conclusions

The artistic act of making the worn-out hands of the African hair braider seem like heavy graphite hands, as we have asserted in this paper, is a deep-seated decolonial action. It is not a passive form of representation but rather an active process of reclamation, which confronts historical exclusions, remodels agency, and creates a new archive. This new archive has ceased to be an aseptic depository of documents, but a living, tactile trace of embodied labour and struggle; the physical weight of the graphite makes the role of the braider in history material. This conclusion summarizes the main argument, expounds its wider ramifications in the global resistance to epistemic injustice, and claims the ethical necessity of this art practice.

This paper has revealed that the selected artistic approach effectively produces a decolonial confrontation using an effective synthesis of form and idea. This argument follows three cohesive movements, which include theoretical foundation, material argument and decolonial intervention.

We have defined under the theoretical foundation that intertextuality gives a critical framework. This structure is rendered visible in the drawing by consciously using the

qualities of physical juxtaposition of textures: the rough, work-reading texture of the hands being drawn is cast in a visual dialogue with the insinuated, smooth power of the archives. Defining the hands of the braider as a text to be read in conversation with the colonial archive, the practice transforms beyond the realm of mere depiction into the sphere of critical analysis. The systematic absence of feminized, cultural labour in the colonial archive, revealed by this intertextual reading that is informed by postcolonial and feminist theory, preconditions the correction of this omission.

In the case of the material argument, we presented that graphite as a vehicle for this argument is material. The weight, tactile, and chiaroscuro dramatic of the medium are not stylistic elements but conceptual elements. The physical and emotional burden of the labour of a braider, monumentalizing her physique, and compelling a haptic, empathetic state of perception that disrupts the objectifying colonial gaze, is materialized.

Finally, we used a decolonial intervention by using close analysis, and we demonstrated how this practice develops a counter-narrative. It compels the viewer to rethink the undervalued labour and re-invents the braider as a nation-builder who is necessary in the postcolonial reconstruction and nation-building and creates an extra-visual archive to pay tribute to the contributions that the official record has erased.

In composition, the composition passes through the work of reckoning, the process of bringing into sight what is invisible, making banal spectacular, and personal political. It relies on the personalized scale of the hand to narrate a nationally and historically important story, which confirms that the instruments of artistic endeavour are no less essential than the historical text in the ongoing process of decolonization.

Author Contributions

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I confirm that AI tools were used during the manuscript preparation process solely for editing, coherence, and referencing, as the Vancouver reference was new to me.

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