

*Bodily Matter  
and Complex  
Embodiment in  
the Art of  
Donald Rodney*

*/Virginia Marano,  
Charlotte Matter  
and Laura Valterio/*

Virginia Marano (she/her) is an academic researcher and curatorial assistant at MASI Lugano.  
–virginia.marano@uzh.ch

Charlotte Matter (she/her) is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the Department of Art History at the University of Zurich.  
–charlotte.matter@uzh.ch

Laura Valterio (she/her) is a researcher and lecturer in the Department of Art History at the University of Zurich.  
–laura.valterio@uzh.ch

The three of them are the co-founders of the research project “Rethinking Art History through Disability” at the University of Zurich ([www.disability-artist.net](http://www.disability-artist.net)).

*Cet essai considère la question du handicap et l'utilisation de la matière corporelle dans l'œuvre de l'artiste Donald Rodney (1961–1998). En se concentrant sur deux œuvres, *Visceral Canker* (1990) et *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* (1997), il aborde la manière dont Rodney a utilisé la peau et le sang humains pour réfléchir aux métaphores politiques, sociales et historiques. L'analyse s'appuie sur la théorie de « l'incarnation complexe » de Tobin Siebers, ainsi que sur des considérations plus larges de la théorie de l'affect. Le sang et la peau ont été historiquement détournés pour construire des idéologies racistes et capacitistes, un fait dont Rodney était profondément conscient de par sa propre expérience en tant que personne Noire avec une maladie chronique. Son utilisation de la matière corporelle fait de ces œuvres des déclarations à la fois personnelles et politiques.*

In *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time* (1995), a video portrait of British artist Donald Rodney (1961–1998) produced by Black Audio Film Collective, Rodney discusses his experience of pain and disability due to sickle cell anemia and the slow necrosis of his joints. Early in the film, Rodney observes: “I think within the Black community, and within the art world as well, you do become partially invisible because of having a disability.”<sup>1</sup> While he also noted that there was a place for him within the community of the “avant-garde,” where he could “fit into” and was less of an outsider,<sup>2</sup> many of his works arguably reckoned with the contradiction between the hyper-visibility of the Black male body as sexualized and/or criminalized in white media and culture, and the invisibility of the disabled body in an ableist world.

This essay addresses the question of disability in the work of Donald Rodney, a perspective that remains to be fully explored. It considers complex embodiment and the meaning of bodily matter as an artistic material in his practice. Analyzing two works in particular, *Visceral Canker* (1990) and *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* (1997), in which Rodney used blood (he intended it to be his own but had to resort to artificial fluid) and skin, respectively, as artistic materials, we examine how bodily matter served him to negotiate metaphor and materiality, understanding the personal as political.

Our analysis intertwines Tobin Siebers' theory of complex embodiment with the notion of vulnerability, as theorized by philosopher Judith Butler<sup>3</sup> and disability justice scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson,<sup>4</sup> alongside a broader consideration of affect theory. This approach aims to consider the specific materiality of these bodily substances. Butler redefines normative understandings of vulnerability, arguing that it is not inherently passive but rather a deliberate exposure to power. According to Butler, vulnerability is pivotal in defining the essence of political resistance, framing it as an active, embodied practice. They state: “Once we understand the way that vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone. I consider the undoing of this binary a feminist task.”<sup>5</sup> Expanding on this concept, Garland-Thomson transcends traditional notions of fragility and dependence.<sup>6</sup> She emphasizes the dynamic reciprocity between bodies and their environments, suggesting that vulnerability predominantly stems from this interaction rather than being an inherent attribute of the body.

In a first part, this essay deals with Siebers' idea of complex embodiment and discusses the relation between metaphor and materiality through the lens of disability and race. The second part then focuses on Rodney's *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* to explore how bodies relate to each other, considering notions of home and diaspora. Finally, the third part addresses the notion of temporality in *Visceral Canker*, reflecting on Rodney's engagement with history. Both works can be situated within Rodney's engagement with sickle cell anemia and his appropriation of materials from the medical world—such as his use of x-rays—but they also stand out for their

use of bodily matter as artistic material. Blood and skin have been historically misused to construct racist and ableist ideologies, a fact of which Rodney was deeply aware from his own experience of vulnerability as a Black, chronically ill person. That he chose to use his own blood and skin turns these works into profoundly personal and political statements.

### COMPLEX EMBODIMENT BETWEEN MATERIAL AND METAPHOR

Rodney engaged in numerous works and exhibitions with his experience of chronic illness and disability. In a statement included in the press release of his 1989 solo exhibition *Crisis* at the Chisenhale Gallery in London and the Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield, Rodney explained that he had chosen the exhibition title for its polysemous meanings: “crisis” referred just as much to the local political situation in the UK and the dire effects of New Right policies as to the global environmental crisis due to chemical pollution and waste. Importantly, crisis was also “[t]he name given to a Sickle Cell attack, a blood disorder, that I and many other black people suffer from.”<sup>7</sup> Sickle cell anemia is a genetic condition first identified in the United States during the 1920s. The causative genes are prevalent among diverse populations originating from Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and South Asia, but the disease was initially considered to be specific to Black people. Its association with Blackness has influenced its diagnosis, treatment, and ensuing discussions about structural racism and healthcare disparities.<sup>8</sup> Referring elsewhere to sickle cell anemia as the “BLK BLOOD DISEASE,” Rodney critically engaged with the racially charged history of this illness.<sup>9</sup> As Rodney went on to explain in the *Crisis* press release, “Within the society blacks are perceived widely as the disease within the body politic of Britain. The illness metaphor is the key to decode the visuals.”<sup>10</sup>

Based on this and other statements, the themes of illness and disability in Rodney’s works have often been read in terms of a metaphor. Eddie Chambers in particular, a fellow artist and friend of Rodney, has repeatedly discussed this idea. Referring to Rodney’s extensive use of medical x-rays in his works from the late 1980s on, Chambers argued:

His use of x-rays was not to draw attention to the blood disorder that was slowly corroding his own body. Instead, he used x-rays as a metaphor to represent the “disease” of apartheid, the “disease” of police brutality and the “disease” of racism that lay at the core of society.<sup>11</sup>

In the same publication, which accompanied the most comprehensive survey of Rodney’s work to date, curator Richard Hylton suggested that

1 Black Audio Film Collective, *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 1995, directed by Trevor Mathison and Edward George, color, sound, 25 minutes: 3:45–3:57.

2 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 3:58–4:05.

3 See Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2, Special Issue with the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (2012): 134–151.

4 See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 591–609.

5 Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 25.

6 See also Martha Albertson Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1–23.

7 Press release for the exhibition *Donald Rodney: Crisis* (Graves Art Gallery: Sheffield, 1989), available at [http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display\\_item.php?id=63&table=artefacts](http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=63&table=artefacts).

8 For a critical analysis of the anthropological, medical, genetic, and political discourse on the sickle cell anemia, see, among others: Melbourne Tapper, *In the Blood: Sickle Cell Anemia and the*

*Politics of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); and Keith Walloo, *Dying in the City of the Blues: Sickle Cell Anemia and the Politics of Race and Health* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the British context, see Grace Redhead, “A British Problem Affecting British People: Sickle Cell Anaemia, Medical Activism and Race in the National Health Service, 1975–1993,” *Twentieth Century British History* 32, no. 2 (June 2021): 189–211, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwab007>.

9 On Rodney’s writings about his experience of sickle cell anemia, see Ishion Hutchinson, “In the Archive: Donald Rodney’s ‘Splash Crowns,’” *Tate Papers*, no. 43 (2018), <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-43-summer-2018/archive-donald-rodney-sketchbooks-splash-crowns-ishion-hutchinson>.

10 Press release for the exhibition *Donald Rodney: Crisis*.

11 Eddie Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” in *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton, exh. cat. (London: Autograph, 2003), 33. Chambers already made this argument in an earlier version of the essay, published shortly after Rodney’s death. Eddie Chambers, “His Catechism: The Art of Donald Rodney,” *Third Text* 12, no. 44 (Autumn 1998): 50.

self-portraiture and the body served as “conduits for wider social and political narratives” in Rodney’s practice.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, artist and activist Virginia Nimarkoh proposed to understand Rodney’s engagement with pain “as a metaphor to critique Black masculinity, which in turn impacts on what we term ‘the body.’”<sup>13</sup> But Rodney just as often explicitly referred to his personal experience of pain and disability, for instance in stating: “I’m trying to portray physical pain; the kind of pain that I have experienced.”<sup>14</sup> Beyond metaphors, his works were thus crucially also about his specific, embodied experience of pain.

The problem with illness metaphors, as essayist and critic Susan Sontag has famously discussed in relation to cancer (prompted by her own experience of breast cancer), and later AIDS, is that they are most often used for discriminatory purposes.<sup>15</sup> Based on an analysis of a variety of sources in political rhetoric and the media, Sontag therefore argued that metaphors lead to the stigmatization and disempowerment of sick people. As Rodney’s sketchbooks show, Sontag’s reflections were of great relevance to him.<sup>16</sup> Rodney first noted down the idea of “allegory of disease” in 1986 (he also considered the term “parable,” but crossed that out)<sup>17</sup> and explicitly referenced Sontag in a sketchbook a year later. He wrote down a quote in which she had previously used illness as a metaphor herself, significantly speaking of race: “Susan Sontag wrote ‘The white race is the cancer of human history,’” Rodney noted.<sup>18</sup> The idea of illness as a metaphor recurs sporadically throughout his sketchbooks thereafter, culminating in several pages with excerpts of his meticulous reading of Sontag’s essay in January 1989, during the preparation of the *Crisis* exhibition at Chisenhale.<sup>19</sup> To test the idea, Rodney also began collecting newspaper clippings that used illness as a metaphor, and gathered over 150 different quotes in the mere span of six months.<sup>20</sup>

While Sontag directed her critique of illness metaphors towards discriminatory practices grounded in prejudice and articulated from the outside, others have countered that, for those concerned, the use of metaphors can be a transformative way of conveying meaning to their experience.<sup>21</sup> Conceptualizing of illness as a metaphor may help, for example, to situate one’s personal experience in relation to broader social and political issues—especially when informed by interrelated questions of class, gender, sexuality, or race. This is suggested in the press release for Rodney’s exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery:

Rodney shows disease in the human body as a metaphor to represent the ills in society. He thereby turns Hobbes’ analogy of disease as social disorder upon its head by suggesting that disorder and unrest are symptomatic of a sick society rather than the root cause of it—forcing one to question who/what specifically is sick.<sup>22</sup>

12 Richard Hylton, “Donald Rodney: An Introduction,” in *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton, exh. cat. (London: Autograph, 2003), 8.

13 Virginia Nimarkoh, “Image of Pain: Physicality in the Art of Donald Rodney,” in *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton, exh. cat. (London: Autograph, 2003), 83.

14 Donald Rodney, interview with Ruth Kelly, London, March 11, 1994, quoted in Nimarkoh, “Image of Pain,” 87. Elsewhere, explaining his dismissal of earlier flower paintings, Rodney observed: “I thought this should be about ... I should start doing things about me.” Donald Rodney in conversation with Lubaina Himid, “State of the Art,” Channel 4, 1987, quoted in Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 25. Artist Sonia Boyce likewise highlights the personal and intimate dimension of Rodney’s works in *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 5:35–6:00.

15 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978); and Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989).

16 Donald Rodney’s sketchbooks from 1982 until his death in 1998 are preserved in the Tate archive and fully digitized. They are

available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/tga-200321/forty-eight-notebooks-and-sketchbooks-written-and-created-by-donald-rodney-and-the>.

17 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 9, 1986, 97 and 101, Tate archive.

18 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 18, 1987, 67, Tate archive. The original quote reads in full: “I once wrote, in the heat of despair over America’s war on Vietnam, that ‘the white race is the cancer of human history.’” Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 85.

19 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 26, January 1989, 7–15, Tate archive.

20 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 34, June 1990, 71, Tate archive. As Rodney noted, most quotes related to economics in medical terms.

21 Barbara Clow, “Who’s Afraid of Susan Sontag? or, the Myths and Metaphors of Cancer Reconsidered,” *Social History of Medicine* 14, no. 2 (2001): 293–312, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/14.2.293>.

22 Press release for the exhibition *Donald Rodney: Crisis* (Chisenhale Gallery: London, 1989), available at [https://elephant.art/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/137\\_800x600.jpg](https://elephant.art/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/137_800x600.jpg).

Helpful as they may be to address the “ills in society,” the downside of metaphors, however, is that they may divert attention away from the embodied experience of illness and pain. Scholars of disability studies such as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have, for instance, suggested that disability metaphors tend to be reductive.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Sami Schalk, whose research centers on disability, race, and gender in literature and culture, observes that “refusing to read disability as a metaphor ignores the mutual constitution of (dis)ability, race, and gender as social categories and cultural discourses which have material effects on people’s lives.”<sup>24</sup> She thus argues that metaphors are meaningful to a Black feminist disability studies perspective, yet cannot supplant lived realities. Such an approach seems highly relevant to the analysis of Rodney’s practice. The same observation that Schalk makes in relation to the fungal disease in the dystopian movie *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) could be made about sickle cell disease in Rodney’s work: “It can indeed be read as a metaphor of this racialized history, but such a reading must not evacuate the material role of disability in this history as well.”<sup>25</sup>

With Schalk’s critique in mind, this essay challenges the recurring idea in the discourse on Rodney that his engagement with illness, pain, and disability was acceptable only if it was not about himself and his personal experience, but about “wider constituencies.”<sup>26</sup> The notion that Rodney was “careful to maintain an intelligent and critical distance between himself and his illness”<sup>27</sup> seems to imply that any proximity would have been deemed too messy and personal, not “critical” enough. Hylton’s comment about “Rodney’s ability to use the difficulties of his health to raise broader questions about art that exceeded autobiography” is likewise noteworthy, pressing us to ask why repressing the self would ever constitute a desirable “ability.”<sup>28</sup> Along with Schalk, we are interested in reading illness, disability, and vulnerability in Rodney’s work as both “metaphor and materiality.”<sup>29</sup>

In what follows, we propose a shift in the analysis of Rodney’s works by giving greater consideration to his experience of illness and disability, in order to understand how his artistic engagement with it was intimately connected to his own bodily reality, and not merely a metaphor. Our point is not to dispute the idea and purpose of the metaphor, which Rodney himself formulated as an interpretative lens to his work, but rather to expand it through the lens of “complex embodiment.” Coined by disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers in his groundbreaking work *Disability Theory*, complex embodiment expands the social model of disability, according to which it is ableist norms in society and the built environment that are disabling, to regain awareness of the body, including lived experiences such as pain and aging.<sup>30</sup> Complex embodiment considers histories of oppression stemming from patriarchal social orders, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation from an embodied point of view. It regards disability as a form of human variation and an epistemology.<sup>31</sup>

Along with Siebers and his theory of complex embodiment, we ask how Rodney engaged with bodily matter to produce and communicate embodied forms of knowledge. This idea echoes, in a certain sense, a comment made to Rodney by the artist Lubaina Himid upon seeing his *Crisis* exhibition at Chisenhale. As he recorded in his sketchbook, Himid expressed concern about his depictions of Black people as victims; at the same time, she felt that only he

23 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

24 Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 34.

25 Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 26.

26 Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 30.

27 Ibid.

28 Hylton, “Donald Rodney,” 9.

29 See the chapter “Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives” in Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 33–57.

30 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 25.

31 Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 25–27.

could do such a thing, given his unique understanding of powerlessness from his experience with hospitals and illness.<sup>32</sup> Below these conversation notes, Rodney repeated in underlined writing: “Only I could have done it.”<sup>33</sup> In this sentence, a certain pride in the appreciation of his artistic work is mixed with a reckoning of his unique, embodied approach to vulnerability, related to his chronically ill, Black male body in the conservative late-1980s environment under Thatcherism.

To examine how, in the works of Rodney, the themes of illness and disability are not only an abstract metaphor for a “sick” society contaminated by ableism and racism, but also a way of grappling with complex embodiment, our analysis focuses on the concrete and physical. From the early 1980s until his death in 1998 at the age of thirty-six, Rodney explored a variety of materials and became known for his mixed-media installations. But it is also worth remembering that he started as a painter of flowers and “wanted to be a Black Picasso,” as he once told Himid.<sup>34</sup> He offered various explanations for subsequently abandoning the medium of painting, including what he called “a radicalisation process” in that same conversation with Himid, but also, in the later video portrait by Black Audio Film Collective, physical reasons due to chronic illness, pain, and loss of mobility: “Pain is there constantly, so there’s lots of things which I can’t do, which hinders the way that I work. [...] I used to do quite large paintings. I couldn’t do that now because I couldn’t stand for very long. I couldn’t carry a canvas the way that I used to [...]. I couldn’t stretch because my shoulders are being affected by sickle cell’s slow necrosis of the joints.”<sup>35</sup> Rodney’s turning away from painting towards less conventional media and materials must therefore be situated at the complex intersection of political beliefs, artistic choices, and access needs. In other words, his engagement with bodily matter can be understood in terms of complex embodiment, incorporating both a reflection of disabling structures (the ableism and racism both of art world and society at large) and the physical experience of chronic pain.

Eddie Chambers has related Rodney’s intended use of blood in *Visceral Canker*—and more generally his artistic engagement with sickle cell anemia—to the prevalent debates around AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, both in art and society at large. While AIDS and sickle cell anemia had in common that they were conceived as predominantly affecting already marginalized people, whom society and body politics treated as a disease themselves, Chambers rightly notes the crucial difference between the predominantly white exponents of HIV/AIDS activism and the construction of sickle cell anemia as a Black disease.<sup>36</sup> Rodney’s exploration of illness and bodily matter may be thought of in the context of the contemporaneous HIV/AIDS crisis and related artistic practices; Rodney himself referred to Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), a film that dealt with HIV-related blindness, as what he considered to be a compelling example of an artistic approach to pain.<sup>37</sup> But apart from Jarman, and contrary to the US context, British artists remained otherwise largely silent about HIV/AIDS at the time.<sup>38</sup> Rodney’s works also crucially differ in their more specific engagement with race and racism. Taking seriously Rodney’s positionality as a Black British artist thus means resisting the urge to neatly insert his practice in an overwhelmingly white and North American history of art made in response to HIV/AIDS.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, it is crucial to understand Rodney’s practice through

32 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 26, January 1989, 115, Tate archive.

33 Ibid.

34 Donald Rodney in conversation with Lubaina Himid, “State of the Art,” Channel 4, 1987, quoted in Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 25.

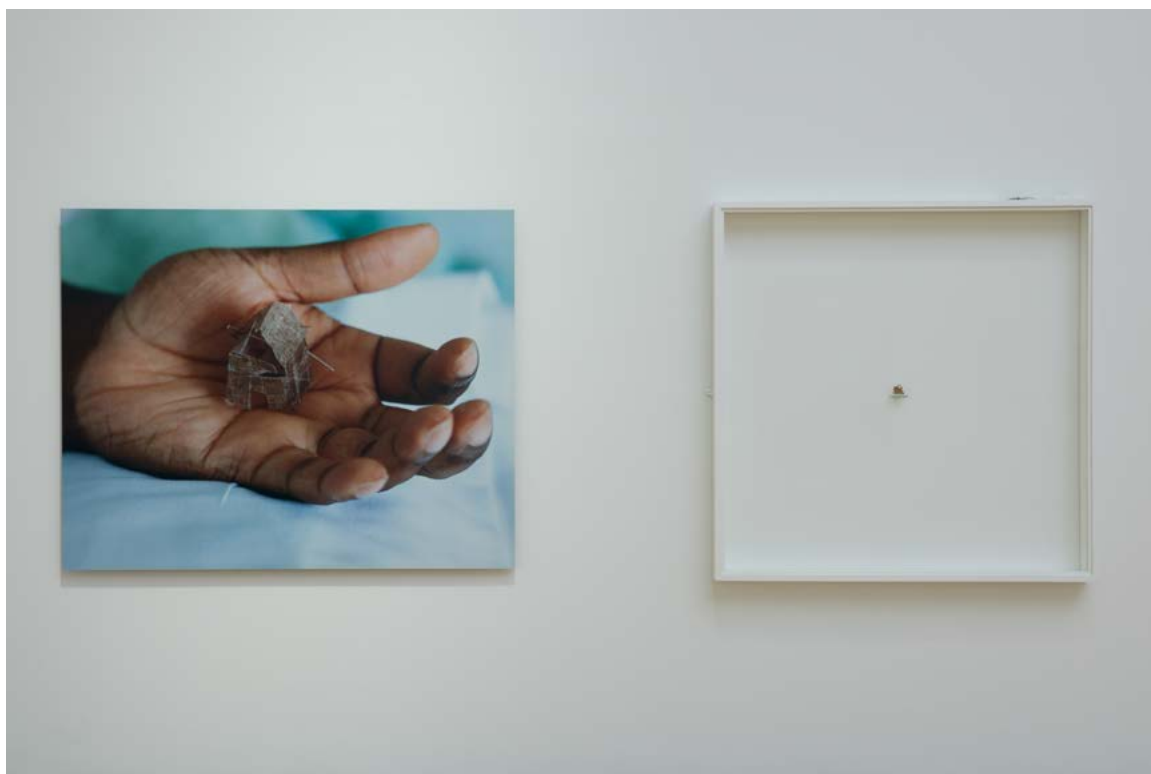
35 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 2:48–3:30.

36 Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 30–31. For a corrective history of HIV/AIDS activism centering more on women and

people of color, see Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021). See also Nishant Shahani, “How to Survive the Whitewashing of AIDS: Global Pasts, Transnational Futures,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.3.1.0001>.

37 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 8:02–8:08.

38 Charles Darwent, “Art and the AIDS Crisis,” *Apollo* 196, no. 714 (December 2022): 62–69.



/fig. 1/ Donald Rodney, *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, 1996–1997. Human skin, pins. Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales © The estate of Donald Rodney / Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales.

an intersectional lens, not unlike the important shift between disability rights and disability justice, as a way of acknowledging the meaning of race, gender, sexuality, and class for the experience of disability and chronic illness.<sup>40</sup>

### INHABITING THE BODY: COMPLEX EMBODIMENT AND DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Resembling a fragile house, the minute sculpture *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* is held together by three dressmaker's pins /fig. 1/. At the time of the work's creation, Rodney was undergoing treatments in a hospital for an abscess on his thigh, likely a consequence of repeated injections.<sup>41</sup> The resolution of this medical intervention left Rodney with excess skin, which he chose not to see as mere biological waste but as a medium for artistic exploration. Rodney's act of preserving his skin and transforming it into a sculpture is a continuation of his long-standing engagement with his body as a subject. His artistic practice, such as integrating his hair in jars of milk, exploring the image of his scar in photographic works, and examining hair under an electron microscope, highlights a recurring theme in his work: the exploration of the body as a site of personal and collective history. In *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, Rodney's use of his skin transcends personal experience, offering a critique of the economic and social structures that shape individual and collective identities. This piece enacts the concept of complex embodiment, where the artist's body is both the medium and the material. As written by Symons, "the skin-house also presents a personal memorial, the result of personal and historical trauma."<sup>42</sup> The title itself, *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, draws attention to the collective entity of a family, suggesting that the individual cannot be separated from their community. This work was exhibited in Rodney's last solo show, *9 Night in Eldorado* at South London Gallery in the fall of 1997, organized as a tribute to his father, an Afro-Caribbean immigrant who arrived in Britain in the late 1950s.<sup>43</sup> One installation view /fig. 2/ provides an impression of how tiny and vulnerable the house made of skin appeared in its oversized frame on the large exhibition wall. To its left, Rodney had installed a work entitled *Camouflage* (1997), bringing to mind army equipment, but also the shape of sickle cells. While this work evoked militarized illness metaphors, its proximity to *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* recalled the very materiality of illness. Rodney employed his own skin to reflect on what it meant to inhabit his body and to channel his personal experience of sickle cell anemia that would claim his life the following year. In describing the work, Eddie Chambers has observed that "the house, a delicate, simple dwelling seemed to symbolize the fragility and the near-futility of Rodney having to live within a structure hopelessly unable to sustain itself or withstand even the smallest turbulence."<sup>44</sup>

Despite the fragility of the material, Rodney conferred it the form of a house, which traditionally stands for steadiness, safety, and protection, highlighting, as the title suggests, the connection between his and other bodies. The use of real skin as sculptural material enhances the disruptive dimension of the art piece. More than a membrane that isolates and protects the body, the epidermis is the organ of the sense of touch, central to relational

39 This is not to say that there were no Black artists and artists of color responding to HIV/AIDS – as exemplified, for instance, by the House of Color Video Collective – but to insist on the fact that the art historical discourse and its institutions have continually omitted their contributions. In 2015, the Tacoma Action Collective called attention to these ongoing erasures by staging a die-in to protest the lack of Black representation in the exhibition *Art AIDS America* at the Tacoma Art Museum. Tacoma Action Collective, "#StopErasingBlackPeople," *OnCurating*, no. 42 (September 2019): 257–259.

40 On the shift in meaning from disability rights to disability justice, see, among others, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

41 Diane Symons, e-mail communication with the authors, November 26, 2023.

42 Diane Symons, "In the House of my Father: Fragments of Body and Time," *Paper*, no. 1 (October 2012).

43 The title of the exhibition references the Jamaican "nine night" tradition that takes place after the death of a loved one, as well as the favourite movie of the artist's father, *El Dorado* (1966). Rodney's father had passed away two years earlier, in 1995. At the time, Rodney was hospitalized. While he was able to attend his father's funeral, he could not participate in the nine night ceremony. Richard Birkett, *Autoicon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), 69–70.

44 Chambers, "His Catechism," 53.





/fig. 2/ Donald Rodney, *Psalms*, 1997. Software, interactive motorised wheelchair, laptop and sensors, 93 x 68 x 87 cm. Tate Collection, London. © The estate of Donald Rodney.

experiences and to the communication of emotions and empathy. Transfixed by pins that evoke the idea of nails, skin is displayed as the site of feelings. Beyond its title, which echoes the Gospel of St John (14:2–6),<sup>45</sup> the work contains additional Christian references. In a 1997 *Time Out Magazine* review, the art critic Sarah Kent described how Rodney, holding an object, evokes imagery similar to St. Catherine’s wheel or St. Agatha’s severed breasts, suggesting the object adorned with pins as a symbol of martyrdom.<sup>46</sup> Kent commented: “The fragile structure becomes an icon of pain as well as belonging.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, as alluded to by Symons, the pins piercing the skin refer to the Christian symbolism of the nails through the hands of Christ, a connection further emphasized by the gesture of the outstretched arm in the photograph.<sup>48</sup> The fact that skin is the substance in which we materially dwell makes it an ideal medium to communicate what it means to live in a body to another body.

In Rodney’s practice, the body becomes a site where the socio-political implications of race, disability, and diaspora are negotiated and articulated. Disability studies scholar Vivian Sobchack provides a further framework to examine the body and home as interconnected concepts in the work of Rodney. Sobchack posits the body “as home, as a house, and as a prison—as, in the first instance, the place that grounds us in a felicitous condition of enablement, that provides our original and initial opening upon and access to the world, and that gives dimension and sense and value to our lives through its motility and senses and gravity.”<sup>49</sup> Rodney’s artistic practice, shaped by his personal experience of sickle cell anemia and deeply rooted in discussions of diaspora, disability, and home, resonate with Sobchack’s perspectives.

If the body is indeed the site providing access to the world and acting as the primary locus of subjectivity, then the subjectivity thus embodied is a function of the interplay between the body and social systems. In Rodney’s art, bodily matter becomes a way to explore the relationship between inside and outside, self and other. Skin makes the presence and absence of the body discernible in its political dimension. This experience of the body is related to the consideration of a diasporic home, which, as sociologist Avtar Brah proposes, can be considered as “the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells.”<sup>50</sup> Being at home is more than just occupying a space outside oneself; it implies a deep connection where individuals and their surroundings intertwine and co-exist. This connection can be likened to wearing a second skin, which does not merely enclose the individual, but also enables them to interact with and feel the world, whether inside or outside the home. This metaphor of the home as a “skin” indicates that the lines between the individual and the home, as well as between the home and the external world, are fluid. Consequently, any movement away from home also resonates within the very essence of what home represents. As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes, this “movement away is always affective: it affects how homely one might feel and fail to feel.”<sup>51</sup> Thinking with and through the skin,<sup>52</sup> Rodney’s work reminds us of that chronic illness and disability are intertwined with other forms of discrimination at the basis of race, gender, and class. In Ahmed’s words, skin is “as a site where bodies take form, suggesting that skin is already written upon, as well as being open to re-inscription.”<sup>53</sup>

45 “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.” John 14:2–6, New King James Version.

46 See Sarah Kent, “Donald Rodney and Keith Piper,” *Time Out* (September 1997).

47 Ibid.

48 Symons, “In the House of my Father: Fragments of Body and Time.”

49 Vivian Sobchack, “‘Is Any Body Home?’: Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (London: Routledge, 1999), 47.

50 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192.

51 Sara Ahmed, “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1999): 341.

52 For contributions to feminist theories addressing embodiment and the trope of skin, see Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, eds., *Thinking through the Skin* (London: Routledge, 2001); Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

53 Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking through the Skin*, 1.

As curator Richard Birkett describes, this work captures a time “of hospitalized waiting, encapsulated in the word ‘patient,’ but also the time of eventful making, not as an insistent force of productive labor but as a point of affective connection.”<sup>54</sup> In his sketchbooks, Rodney reflected on Richard Hamilton’s collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956), which addressed home in relation to consumption, commodity, and popular culture in the postwar era, turning its title into the question: “What makes today[']s black homes so fragile so exposed to state attacks?”<sup>55</sup> In another sketch from 1988, he asked again, “what makes today[']s black homes so vulnerable,”<sup>56</sup> tackling the issue of systemic racism and more specifically the constant threat of state-sanctioned forms of discrimination and violence towards Black communities. Rodney’s rewording sheds light on the unique vulnerabilities faced by Black households. He is not asking a rhetorical question but positing a critical observation upon the status quo. This critique becomes especially potent when considering the historical context of the late 1980s and 1990s, which were marked by racial tensions and public confrontations over issues of police brutality, immigration, and systemic racism in England and beyond.

A companion work to *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* is a photograph by the artist Andra Nelki titled *In the House of My Father* (1997; fig. 3), which shows the house sculpture in the palm of the artist’s hand, itself resting on the white sheets of a hospital bed.<sup>57</sup> The photograph acts as a guardian of the sculpture’s memory, preserving the impermanence of its delicate material. Here, body and home become one; the home embodies the narrative of the bodies that inhabit it. As Ahmed articulates in *Thinking through Skin*, “the skin is not simply in the present (in the here or the now).” It bears “multiple histories and unimaginable futures, it is worked upon, and indeed, it is worked towards.”<sup>58</sup> Gender scholar and anti-racist writer Ulrika Dahl further links vulnerability to the complex interplay of pleasure and danger between empowerment and exposure.<sup>59</sup> Just as the image embodies the idea of owning one’s own body, so does the act of holding onto the house, as a symbol of the family and the community. It represents the generational legacy, hinting at the delicate and intimate relationship between personal history and broader societal narratives. Rodney’s photography, particularly his memorial tribute to his father, speaks volumes about his paternal lineage and the larger socio-historical phenomenon of emigration.

As articulated by art historian Alice Correia in her explorations on diaspora, art, and belonging, Rodney’s house stands as more than just an architectural structure.<sup>60</sup> It becomes a symbolic representation of the struggles faced by diasporic communities, constantly negotiating their spaces between ancestral ties and their present realities. It is a testament to the layered narratives of displacement, memory, and the perennial quest for a sense of “home” in transient terrains. Home, captured as if precariously balanced in the artist’s hand, illustrates the inherent fragility of its transitional structure. This aspect is further underscored by the description of an unstable door, leading Rodney to pen the cautionary words, “Don’t unlock doors you’re [unprepared] to walk into.”<sup>61</sup> The metaphor of the door, in this context, becomes an allegorical warning, epitomizing the dual nature of the diaspora as both a refuge and a realm

54 Birkett, *Autoicon*, 106.

55 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 22, 1988, 121, Tate archive.

56 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 23, 1988, 93, Tate archive.

57 During a discussion with the photographer Andra Nelki, she shared her experience of shooting multiple versions of the house, each with the hand posed in varying levels of openness. Phone conversation between Andra Nelki and Virginia Marano, November 11, 2023. See also Symons, “In the House of my Father: Fragments of Body and Time.”

58 Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking through the Skin*, 2.

59 Ulrika Dahl, “Femmebodiment: Notes on Queer Feminine Shapes of Vulnerability,” *Feminist Theory* 18, no. 1 (December 2016): 35–53.

60 See Alice Correia, “Black Homes, Safe Houses: Contested Belongings and the Problems of Being Black and British in the Work of Donald Rodney,” conference paper presented at the University of Salford Manchester, October 21, 2015; and Correia, “Representing Blackness and Building Reputations,” *Art History* 33, no. 5 (November 2010): 933–37.

61 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 45, 1997–8, 1, Tate Archive.

of potential struggle and estrangement. Understanding home as a vulnerable space offers a poignant commentary on the multifaceted and often contradictory experience of immigrants in British society, where the pursuit of sanctuary can simultaneously entail a profound sense of vulnerability and dislocation. The notion of porosity becomes relevant as it refers to the skin's own material consistence, emphasizing interconnected experiences of disability and diaspora. In Rodney's work, the skin symbolizes a flexible boundary that is both protective and permeable. This challenges the idea of rigid physical boundaries and serves as what Birkett describes as "as a tentative archival gesture, one wilfully riven with affectability rather than the intent to preserve."<sup>62</sup>

Drawing upon intersectional writer and educator bell hooks' meditation on "homeplace,"<sup>63</sup> the house is not just a physical dwelling but a site of community resistance. Facing racist oppression, Black homes, albeit fragile and vulnerable, affirm "a radical political dimension,"<sup>64</sup> that challenges us to rethink conventional binaries of vulnerability and resistance. Rodney's depictions of a fragile home can be seen, along with Butler, as an exploration of the intersection of vulnerability and resistance.<sup>65</sup> As Butler observes, "in thinking vulnerability and resistance together, we hope to develop a different conception of embodiment and sociality within fields of contemporary power, one that engages object worlds, including both built and destroyed environments, as well as social forms of interdependency and individual or collective agency."<sup>66</sup> Therefore, vulnerability can be formulated not as the antithesis of resistance but rather a form of it—particularly when vulnerability is consciously showcased as a challenge to oppressive structures. In Rodney's work, the vulnerable home becomes an embodiment of this concept, weaving a narrative that transcends traditional notions of fragility. In relation to Butler's ideas on the deliberate exposure of one's vulnerability as an act of resistance, Rodney's homes are not just structures susceptible to external threats; they are emblematic of a broader socio-political statement. Through their fragile existence, they actively resist the pressures and prejudices of their environment. This duality, present in Rodney's work, reiterates Butler's idea of the body being in a middle region, both affected and acting. As with nonviolent protesters who deliberately place their bodies in harm's way as a form of resistance, Rodney's homes stand as symbols of fragility that resist by merely existing in their vulnerable state, pushing the observer to rethink the paradigms of vulnerability and resistance.

#### PULSING MATTER: DONALD RODNEY ON HISTORY

In 1990, Donald Rodney exhibited a work entitled *Visceral Canker* / fig. 4 / as part of the *TSWA Four Cities Project* in Plymouth, one of the main historical centres of British Atlantic slave trade. The temporary installation was set up underground in the tunnels of a disused gun battery, part of a system of fortifications built along the British coast during the Napoleonic Wars to defend the country from foreign invaders.<sup>67</sup> The title of the work refers to the painful effects of sickle cell anemia on the body, such as sores, ulcers, and bone necrosis, which severely limited Rodney's mobility. In evoking these wounds, Rodney confronts the beholders with the physical and emotional pain caused by the disease and simultaneously explores how this pain shapes his sense of self and his emplacement in the world. A note in a sketchbook from 1990 reveals Rodney's reflection on the dual meanings of the term *viscera*, referring to the

62 Birkett, *Autoicon*, 106.

63 bell hooks, "Homeplace. A Site of Resistance," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

64 *Ibid.*

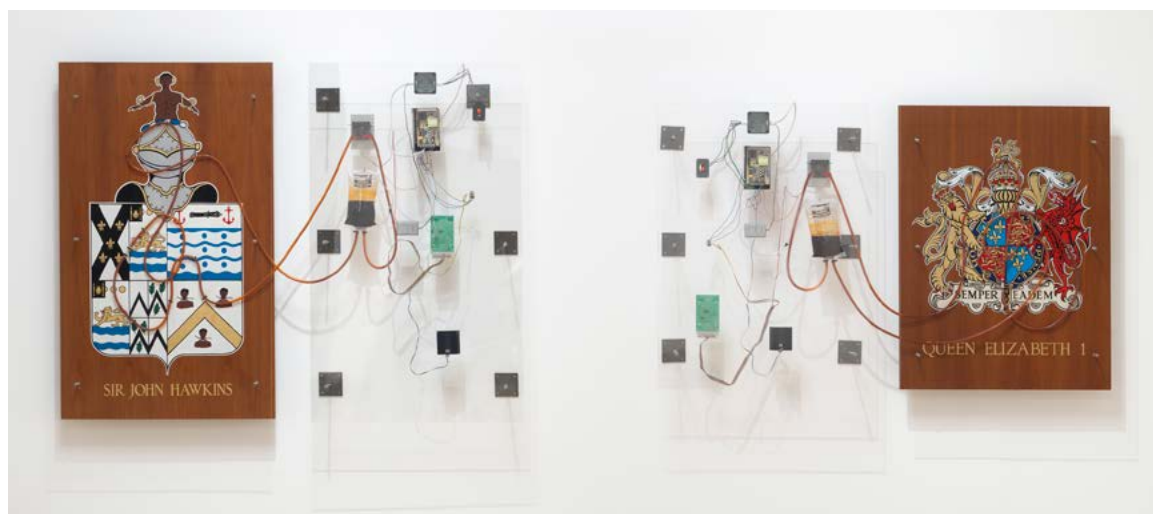
65 See Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, *Vulnerability in Resistance*.

66 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 6.

67 Chambers, "The Art of Donald Rodney," 32. Richard Hylton recalls helping Rodney to install the work in "an obsolete bunker-like defence system built during the Napoleonic Wars. This was a hostile, labyrinthine environment with tomb-like rooms that were dark, cold and subject to flooding." Hylton, "Donald Rodney," 11.



/fig. 3/ Donald Rodney, *In the House of My Father*, 1996/1997. Photograph, c-print on paper, mounted on aluminum, 123 x 153 cm. Tate Collection, London. Courtesy the Estate of Donald Rodney.



/fig. 4/ Donald Rodney, *Visceral Canker*, 1990. Perspex, silicon tubing, gold leaf, plastic bags and elect, 122 x 91 cm. Tate Collection, London. © The estate of Donald Rodney.

“internal organs of the body collectively,” and the use of the adjective *visceral* in the sense of “characterised by instinct rather than intellect.”<sup>68</sup> This reference underscores the embodied and emotional dimension of the artwork, inviting to consider the bodily matter used in the piece as a site of semantization.

*Visceral Canker* is a mixed-media installation composed of two wooden panels painted with heraldic images. The left panel displays the coat of arms of Sir John Hawkins, the first slave trader to set sail from Plymouth. The right panel bears the coat of arms of Queen Elizabeth I, who in 1567 granted Hawkins the use her fleet for enslaving Africans to be sold in the Spanish colonies. On that occasion, the figure of an African with chains on arms and ears was added on top of Hawkins’ coat of arms, which already included three busts wearing slave collars.<sup>69</sup> Rodney noted in his sketchbooks that the queen “made the first legislation limiting Black immigration into Britain.”<sup>70</sup> The juxtaposition of the two emblems underscores a foundational moment in the history of British imperial colonialism. Rather than representing Hawkins and the queen through conventional portraiture, Rodney resorts to heraldry, a visual form that traditionally symbolizes the privileges associated with hereditary social rank. The two emblems are connected by a system of electric pumps, transparent tubes, and sacks for physiological infusions. Through this dispositive a red substance commonly used in medical demonstrations to simulate human blood is circulated. The idea of representing historical and political events through physiological processes may have been inspired by Rodney’s fascination for the way in which the human body has been used in manual and handbooks to illustrate the proper “healthy” functioning of institutions and political systems. The artist even physically incorporated one of these diagrams among the pages of one of his sketchbooks.<sup>71</sup> Rodney originally intended to pump his own blood through the artwork, but the local authorities prohibited this, as the artist himself explained: “Plymouth City Council ruled against the use of my own blood in this work because they claimed it might cause unnecessary offense to public sensibility. Subsequently, it was substituted with artificial blood commonly used in theatrical performances.”<sup>72</sup>

In the film *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, Rodney returned on the significance of including his own blood in *Visceral Canker* and expressed his desire to exhibit the work again, as originally conceived.<sup>73</sup> The sequence of the film dedicated to the theme of time opens on the image of a transparent medical flask where blood trickles slowly, drop by drop.<sup>74</sup> This hourglass-shaped device becomes an object of meditation on mortality and the fragility of human life. But it also functions as instrument to measure another form of “crip time,”<sup>75</sup> marked by the lived experiences of illness and hospitalization. In *Visceral Canker*, exploring the temporality of bodily matter allows Rodney to expand the meaning of complex embodiment from a personal and intimate sphere to a collective one. The lived experience at the heart of the work is not self-contained but invites to a broader consideration of history and its embodied reality. Created at a time when young Black artists were actively re-examining Britain’s colonial past to challenge enduring prejudices within British institutions, bodily knowledge emerged as a powerful form of historical critique, underscoring the imperative to rewrite, reshape and recontextualize both physical and psychological realities.

68 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook number 33, May 1990, London, Tate Archive, TGA 200321/3/33, 51.

69 Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 32.

70 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook number 34, June 1990, London, Tate Archive, TGA 200321/3/34, 53.

71 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook number 29, May 1990, London, Tate Archive, TGA 200321/3/29, 46.

72 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 17:38–18:08.

73 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 16:47–17:05.

74 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 15:51–16:47.

75 See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) for a detailed exploration of how “crip time” challenges normative concepts of time and productivity within disability studies. Cf. with Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) for intersections with queer temporalities.

In his installation, Rodney addressed how dealing with a hereditary blood disease affected his life and identity as a Black man, bringing attention to issues of racial and health disparities. This piece is part of the artist's enduring meditation on the political power of the presence of the absent body in art, which manifests in two contrasting extremes. On the one hand, in artworks like *Psalms* (1997; fig. 2) a wheelchair is transformed from mobility aid into an avatar of the artist's absent body, allowing him to act in institutional spaces to which he had no physical access and to address processes of invisibilization and loneliness.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, in works such as *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* and *Visceral Canker*, a hyperpresence of the body is achieved through the incorporation of fragments of the artist's disabled bodily matter. This vulnerable matter functions as a radical form of self-portraiture, though which Rodney materially confronts the public with his own physicality.<sup>77</sup> The departure from pictorial and photographic representations in favor of the unsettling display of its very matter blurs the boundaries between art and lived experience.

Art historian Monica Wagner noted that the use of human blood gained renewed attention in artistic practice during the 1990s.<sup>78</sup> This aesthetic reappraisal involved notions of authenticity and testimony rooted in Western Christian visual tradition, particularly in relation to martyrdom. Contemporary artists expanded the concept of blood as irrefutable evidence of unimaginable events, applying it to new political contexts and intersectional readings. As early as the 1970s, Ana Mendieta had used blood in her performances to protest against sexual and racial violence.<sup>79</sup> Judy Chicago manipulated menstrual blood to critique its construction as the epitome of impurity and its historical use as a rationale for excluding women from public spaces.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, between the 1980s and the 1990s, blood became associated with fears of contamination and contagion related to the spreading of sexually transmitted infections such as AIDS, giving rise to new forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identities and race. The Plymouth City Council ban on Rodney using his own blood for *Visceral Canker* feeds into the trope of potentially contaminated human fluids as a threat to public health and imagination.

Rodney's original intention was to physically and symbolically connect his own blood, the carrier of the sickle cell anemia affecting his body, to the heraldic emblems representing the historical foundation of an empire rooted in racial exploitation and enslavement. As part of his treatment for sickle cell anemia, Rodney regularly underwent blood exchange transfusions.<sup>81</sup> This procedure may have encouraged him to meditate around the alleged physical boundaries between bodies conceived as individual entities and the urgency to reassess them through concepts such as the "collective body." According to cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, Rodney envisioned the shackled, enslaved figure on John Hawkins' coat of arms to be resuscitated by his own blood circulation.<sup>82</sup> This vision confirms the role of blood in reforging a new relationship between the past and the present. Similar thoughts, echoed in the series of *Splash Crowns* drawings in Rodney's sketchbooks, were expressed by the artist in his account of a dream that occurred during his hospitalization:

I was in hospital again and during the injection of Maximum dose pethidine to kill the pain I drifted off to a landscape Nightmare. I flo[a]ted above everything [on] a sea of glass on which sailed a boat

76 *Three Songs on Pain, Light, and Time*, 21:49–22:04.

77 On this form of material versus represented physicality, see Nimarkoh, "Image of Pain," 59.

78 Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2010), 222–29.

79 See, among others, Kaira M. Cabañas, "Ana Mendieta: 'Pain of Cuba, Body I Am,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1999): 12–17.

80 On the use of menstrual blood in art, see Camilla Mørk Røstvik, "Blood Works: Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art Since 1970," *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 3 (December 2019): 335–53.

81 Diane Symons, e-mail communication with the authors, November 26, 2023.

82 Stuart Hall, "Preface," in *Donald Rodney: Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton, exh. cat. (London: Autograph, 2003), 6.

filled with slaves but somehow we were connected by blood and bone and flesh and storms raged.<sup>83</sup>

Drawing on the traditional artistic role of blood in conveying an unsurpassed sense of reality, in *Visceral Canker* Rodney presents the fluid as a universal life-giving substance capable of making the horrors of historical slavery tangible and real. Its circulation through transparent tubes and physiological infusion bags reminds us of the vital, nourishing function of slavery in sustaining the existence of the British Empire and calls attention on the role of Black labour as the “heart” of the nation.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, this circulatory movement brings to life the forced diasporic journey of Africans throughout the history of the British empire, as opposed to the increasing loss of mobility experienced by the artist as a consequence of the disease.

Like blood, skin also carries a temporal dimension. Through its property of recording the marks of lived experience and by inscribing the past into its tissues as visible and tangible reality, skin can function as a repository of memory. In *Thinking through Skin*, cultural critic Jay Prosser explained this property, stating that: “skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities.”<sup>85</sup> However, the ability to visually record a body’s history can also lead to an ambivalent form of exposure, transforming skin into a canvas susceptible to oppressive projections, as evident in the use of skin colour to racialize bodies.<sup>86</sup> It can become an instrument of “stigmatization,” a term originally referring to a physical mark on the skin.<sup>87</sup> Anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon described the racial stigmatization of bodies through skin colour as “epidermalization” of inferiority. In this process, as Prosser points out, the Black body is reduced to mere surface, “a body re-membered by the racist white subject as only skin.”<sup>88</sup> The poignant use of Rodney’s own skin as artistic material epitomizes the intersection of disability, diasporic memory, and institutional racism. The use of the artist’s blood in *Visceral Canker* would have served a similar purpose. In European history, prior to the emergence of the notion of skin colour as a visual racial marker toward the end of the seventeenth century, blood counted as the primary biological indicator of lineage and ethnicity.<sup>89</sup>

The use of bodily matter as artistic material shows the potential of lived experience as a powerful alternative to a metaphysical interpretation of history. Following scholar of slavery and memory studies Celeste-Marie Bernier, one could say that by presenting the vulnerable matter of his body in his artistic work, Rodney underscored how the historical legacy of the transatlantic slave trade persists not merely as historical memory but as a material source of physical and psychological wounding that continues to inform the Western construction of Black bodies as a source of disease, pollution, and criminal behavior.<sup>90</sup> When transformed into art, skin and blood become repositories of personal experiences that acquire the meaning of historical witnesses. The physiology of the disabled body serves as a forceful model to interpret the

83 Hutchinson, “In the Archive.”

84 Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney,” 32.

85 Jay Prosser, “Skin Memories,” in *Thinking through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), 52.

86 Prosser, “Skin Memories,” 52.

87 Prosser, “Skin Memories,” 55.

88 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 4; Prosser, “Skin Memories,” 55.

89 On the emergence of the concept of skin color in Western European through Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing Out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 143–91. For the historical role of blood

as a racial maker in premodern Western Europe, see Emily Weissbourd, *Bad Blood: Staging Race between Early Modern England and Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023). The reliance on blood in processes of racialization persists to the present day, particularly in practices related to studies associated with the emergence of genetics.

90 Celeste-Marie Bernier, “‘X Is for X Ray, X Slave, X Colony’: A ‘Lexicon of Liberation’ versus ‘My Slave History’ in the Paintings, Installations and Sketchbooks of Donald Rodney,” in *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*, ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016) 218–47, esp. 218–19.



painful dimension of history in its relation to the present. By displaying actual material fragments of his own racialized and disabled body, Rodney re-locates himself in history, reclaiming his place in it. Artworks like *Visceral Canker* and *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* reveal the overlooked potential of embodied knowledge as a form of political and historical critique. They resound as powerful reminders that historical phenomena like slavery and colonial violence are no remote events confined to the past but continue to be viscerally connected to living bodies in the present.

#### CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING VULNERABILITY

As our analysis has shown, Rodney's idea of using bodily matter, such as his own skin or blood, opens up many possibilities of interpretation—including metaphorical readings—but is importantly also grounded in his own embodied experience. For that matter, none are mutually exclusive. Rodney "used his personal narrative—black sick male body—metaphorically to express, or extend, something personal (and private) to the world," as curator and writer Jareh Das thoughtfully observes.<sup>91</sup> The personal, Rodney's works make clear, is always also political. Throughout his sketchbooks, Rodney, who was familiar with feminist thinking, repeatedly wrote down this slogan as well as the notion of "labour of love."<sup>92</sup> Drawing from his experience of illness and frequent hospitalizations, Rodney explored the fragility of the body and skin, crucially doing so from his situated knowledge of being a Black disabled man in a racist and ableist environment. The significance of his own embodied experience is made clear in his self-reflexive choice of titles (as in the recurring use of the possessive pronoun "my"), his engagement with the genre of the self-portrait, and his materials.

Rodney's engagement with illness was also a way of reclaiming vulnerability from its negative connotations grounded in ableist thinking and the notion of an invincible, ever-functioning body under capitalism. As Tobin Siebers asks, "What difference to human rights would it make if we were to treat fragility, vulnerability, and disability as central to the human condition, if we were to see disability as a positive, critical concept useful to define the shared need among all people for the protection of human rights?"<sup>93</sup> Siebers lists a range of benefits that would result from such a paradigm shift, including the capacity of such an understanding to comprise diverse experiences. Centring on the fragility of the human mind and body as a basic principle enables to account for the needs and rights of the many: people with physical and mental disabilities, low-income communities, refugees, children and the elderly, and any person oppressed on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and/or religion. This way of thinking would also open up the prospect of an international community based on solidarity beyond national borders, foregrounding the well-being of the most vulnerable.<sup>94</sup>

Rodney's works, which make vulnerability not only visible, but also tangible through their materiality, have much to do with the term's elasticity described by Siebers, and enable in turn for an intersectional understanding of fragility. Through pieces like *Visceral Canker* and *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, Rodney portrays the interconnectedness between individual bodies and their communities. In the mid-1990s, as his health deteriorated and increasingly required him to stay in hospital, a group of collaborators and friends, including his partner Diane Symons, became an informal care

91 Jareh Das, "Illness as Metaphor: Donald Rodney's X-ray Photographs," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 45 (November 2019): 95.

92 See, for instance, Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 33, May 1990, 37, Tate archive. Under the heading "Nancy Spero," Rodney noted a few principles of the 1970s feminist movement, such

as women's reclaiming of their bodies from the representation of others, drawing comparisons to Black bodies and the need to disentangle them from racist frameworks. Donald Rodney, Sketchbook no. 26, January 1989, 65, Tate archive.

93 Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 180.

94 Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 183.

collective and helped him realize many of his later works.<sup>95</sup> Especially for his last exhibition, *9 Night in Eldorado*, he was able to draw on a wide network of collaborators. Rodney was not able to attend the opening because he was hospitalized at the time. *Psalms*, the empty motorized wheelchair that navigated autonomously through the exhibition space, thus became a surrogate of the artist's body, hauntingly reminding of his absence, yet also materializing the labour of love and caring collective surrounding him. As Birkett observes, while the wheelchair's movement is restricted by technical limitations, visitors standing in its way and the gallery's architecture, these moments of constraint "are also legible as events of meeting and affective destabilisation."<sup>96</sup> In this and other works, Rodney thus posits disability and vulnerability as sites of knowledge production and critical interpretations of the world—in other words, as forms of complex embodiment.

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<sup>95</sup> *Autoicon*, an interactive work that Rodney conceived in the mid-1990s but was not able to complete before his death in 1998, was even executed posthumously by a group of friends who named themselves Donald Rodney plc. For an in-depth analysis of this work, see Birkett, *Autoicon*.

<sup>96</sup> Birkett, *Autoicon*, 110.