EX TENEBRIS:

Black Fugitivity, Archival Whitewashing, and the (Re)imagination of Andromeda

Written by Ayra Alex Thomas
Illustrated by Ielyzaveta (Lisa) Usanova

Dark Matter(s): Introduction

Her body is the whitest and most illuminated thing on the canvas. Her nudity, a distinct form of (un)dress, is offered up for the spectator's pleasure. She tilts her head away from our view, her torso lightly wrung, and her figure contorted with limbs arranged precariously to face us. Chained to a rock and the painting's edge, she remains calm—almost coy—while the sea behind her heaves and a fully armored rescuer gathers to fell the monster that keeps her. Andromeda is, above all, a visual antithesis in the enveloping scene. "Do you see," she seems to say to Perseus, "this is the beauty I have been cursed with from birth. Come, claim your prize."

Fig. 1.1 — *Perseus and Andromeda*, Titian, c. 1554-1556, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

Fig. 1.2 — Details of *Perseus and Andromeda*, Titian, c. 1554-1556, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

The lore behind Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* painting, currently housed in the Wallace Collection in London, finds its original sources in the Greco-Roman myth of the same name. As the myth is most widely told, Andromeda's mother, Queen Cassiopeia, provokes the gods' fury by boasting that her daughter's beauty surpassed that of the Nereids, the sea nymphs who often attend Poseidon, god of the oceans. To punish Cassiopeia's hubris, Poseidon unleashes a great flood and the sea-monster, Cetus, upon the kingdom of Aethiopia (Ethiopia). Seeking to appease the gods and save their land, Andromeda's parents chain the princess to a rock by the shore as sacrificial offering. There, exposed against the waves, Andromeda is transfigured into her most enduring image: bound and bare; awaiting death by monstrous appetite; suspended between the violence of the sea and that of divine vengeance. At this moment, Andromeda's fate is interrupted by none other than Zeus' son: the demigod Perseus—fresh from slaying Medusa and fleeing the Gorgons—catches sight of the captive maiden while riding his winged horse, Pegasus, over Aethiopia. Struck by Andromeda's beauty, he bargains with her father, King Cepheus, promising to kill the monster in exchange for Andromeda's hand in marriage. Ultimately, Perseus succeeds, Andromeda is freed, and the myth ends with their marriage and the many children (seven sons and one daughter) they are said to have raised together.

The painting by Titian, for all intents and purposes, indeed captures the *locus classicus* of the original myth, namely, Andromeda's captivity and rescue.

Except, this is *not* Andromeda, or at least, not the one given to us by our sources from antiquity. Where is the Black princess in Titian's painting? What happened to Andromeda from Ethiopia?

Drawing from Frantz Fanon's post-colonial psychoanalytical theories in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Saidiya Hartman's (2008) treatment of the archive (especially archives regarding the condition and treatment of Blackness) as a haunting ground in dire need of "critical fabulation," this essay interrogates the slow erasure of Andromeda's Ethiopian identity in Western visual and literary traditions, tracing the transformation of a mythological Black princess into an archetype of European whiteness. From mapping the disregarded classical myths of Andromeda "from darkest Ethiopia," as posited by mythographers such as Ovid, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder among others, the paper emphasizes how Andromeda's African heritage was systematically erased and reduced to a "fugitive" element in both mytho-historical and contemporary artistic representations.

By interrogating how Western archives, museums, and galleries perpetuate historical amnesia and racist ideologies by erasing non-white presences, it becomes imperative to challenge the ways in which gendered and racialized bodies may be marginalized or rendered invisible altogether, effectively giving rise to (pre-)modern modes of racial erasure. Equally important, however, are the acts of resistance that emerge in the reception of such art and whitening phenomena. Accompanying my analysis of Andromeda are a sequence of original portraits drawn by Lisa Usanova that reimagines, re-edits, and reclaims Andromeda's Blackness. While the artworks aim to 'do the practical work' of uncovering the 'white mask' and participating in feminist (re-)editing praxes of Black visuality, the pieces also serves as a direct intervention against Andromeda's aesthetic Black erasure by visually claiming a past, present, and future that asserts otherwise.

On the Violences and Silences of the Archive

Many things are lost to us in the archive; in the process of deciding our own historicity. The archive promises preservation and memory by teaching us most acutely how forgetting works. To enter the archive, to read a museum placard or catalogue raisonné, or even to attempt reckoning with the (disfigured, fractured, and often ephemeral) stories that shape our knowledge of the past, is to contend with a breathing tomb.

Like any necropolis, the archive's mortuary labor inheres simultaneously through practice and place. On a cultural level, the archive functions as a site of identity-making: collecting voices and timestamps, safeguarding certain bodies of memory, and casting others into obscurity. On a state level, it functions as a site of authority: governing how and which records are classified, what merits classification, and how all these fragments are arranged into legible systems that confer legitimacy on what becomes the 'official record,' be that law, property, sovereignty, social order, or so on. On a structural level, the very act of archiving—projecting or exporting memory outward to a secondary place or medium—is inseparable from praxes of selection, reproduction, curation, control, classification, displacement, and loss. From this understanding, the archive may be further read as an epistemological experiment:

> *…as a strong metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections […] for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of the primary originary, and untouched entail (Stoler 94).*

Drawing on Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Ann Stoler (2002) recasts the archive as a system that authorizes the lineaments of social order: "the law of what can be said," and the governance of that enunciability. If, however, the archive acts as a disciplinary tool of sociohistorical power, what are the subterranean impulses that drive the possibility of archiving at all? What are the forces which eat away at the conditions of preservation?

For Jacques Derrida (1995), the self-consumptive and constitutively paradoxical capacity of the archive to house the very forces that seek to erode it is, as Sigmund Freud would classify, a "death drive." "There is no archive," Derrida (1995) claims, "without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority" (78). While such exteriorization makes hypomnesic preservation possible, it also exposes memory to decay, misremembrance, exploitation, and

erasure. Reading Freud, Derrida (1995) insists that the conditions which permit archivization become tied to "archiviolithic" impulses that thrust destruction and forgetting "into the heart of the monument," so that preservation is already a rehearsal of loss, so much so that the "archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself" (79). The archiviolithic impulses in the archive may manifest as routine curatorial acts which chip away at non-white presence or convert their disappearance into aesthetic 'fact', such as the 'purification' of certain pigments; privileging of white marble; downplaying polychromy, and bolstering canons which idealize fair-skinned beauty. More menacing, however, is the systemic, methodological acts of silencing and erasure which seep into archive. Considering how historical products are valued in both the context of their production and their consumption, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) provides us with a clear model for locating "where" erasure happens:

> *Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance) (26).*

The economies of violence which saturate the archive are slow yet spectacularized, non-neutral yet normalized. In these vaults, exclusions of Blackness do not occur by accident, and indeed not only *reflect* but *manufacture* ideologies of 'whiteness' as well as the conditions of (in)visibility. Through this process, BIPOC or non-white bodies and stories are consigned to the shadowy margins, assigned a "narratively condemned status" (Wynter 1994, 70), and reduced to decorative, marginal, fugitive symbols.

Although the ephemerality of stories sharpens our hunger for containment, the desire to master memory, lore, or history is itself destabilizing; and indeed, one must always be cautious of any 'mastery narrative' seeking to flatten or totalize historical narratives, especially ones where only fractures exist. As Joan Scott reminds us in *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), "appeals to evidence as if it were transparent… create the illusion that meanings are fixed and knowable" (35); and similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) warns that history written as total mastery is often a "myth of the West," denying the radical openness of events to confine them into prefigured plots, and ultimately effacing "traces of the other to preserve the self as transparent" (202). Such mastery narratives seduce with the promise of coherence and 'fact,' however, that very coherence is symptomatic and (re-)generative of archival violence: the sanding down of ambiguity, the disavowal of rupture, and the excision of the unassimilable, the unwanted, and, what Judith Butler labels, the "ungrievable."

The fundamental motivations of the archive (and by extension, the energies expended by the archivist to meticulously select, contain, standardize, and organize) are by nature, exclusionary and impartial. In "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman (2008) highlights how the "libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent" in the archive, but particularly in archives that define or call into question the state of Blackness and constructions of whiteness:

> *Infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands give birth to the characters we stumble upon in the archive. Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry (Hartman 2008, 6-7).*

Hartman's formulation of the archive builds upon the conjoined dyad of Blackness and fugitivity central to much of Black aesthetic critique, theories on Black poesis, and the studies and practice of Black radical tradition. For Hartman, Black fugitivity embodies a will to (re)fashion life in the interstices of domination so that we may tend to what the archive has been unable to hold (2008; 2019). Reflecting on the fugitive resolve of Blackness, Fred Moten (2009) claims that "fugitive movement" occurs "in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic," and it is within this "zone of unattainability" to which Black figures are relegated, that there persists a "movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen," which—because it "inheres in every closed circle"—can be said to "break every enclosure" that seeks to contain it (179). In other words:

> *Fugitivity (…) becomes a way of 'fleeing' historical and immediate confines, to imagine conditions otherwise of unrelenting oppression (Prempeh 2025, 2)*

Importantly, Nana Prempeh (2025) underscores how African worldmaking—and conceptions of Blackness—predate colonial capture and persist past it. For Prempeh, Blackness and fugitivity are too often framed through and constrained by nineteenth-century (U.S.) plantation and carceral optics alone; so much so that other "comprehensions and experiences of Blackness, especially in the case of Africa" become illegible (2025, 12). Against this reductive narrowing, Prempeh (2025) insists that fugitivity should mark any Black world-making which "eludes absolute capture and disfigurement" so that ongoing articulations of Black being slips the grasp of hegemonic standards, even when there is no exit from colonial modernity's frame; even when archival narratives pronounce the subject dead, missing, cast away, or, as in Andromeda's case, misclassified.

Although Hartman's main concern lies in probing (the violences of/in) records of enslaved Black women—particularly within the transatlantic slave trade—in order to question whether a history of the oppressed can be read, written, and heard from archives produced by the oppressors, Andromeda suffers "the same fate as every other Black Venus" (2008, 2). Despite her mythic, fictional identity, Andromeda is legible as one of the archival "characters" Hartman alludes to insofar as her Blackness predominantly survives through spectacle and subtraction. In the visual art-historical archive, Andromeda is preserved through European Enlightenment logics and post-Renaissance aesthetic traditions which systematically normalized whiteness as the standard, objective, ideal for beauty, while the Ethiopian specificity and Blackness of her figure that the classical-textual archive insist upon is disqualified, bleached away, rendered fugitive.

In "Africana Andromeda" (2020), Kimathi Donkor treats the figure of Andromeda as a masked Black presence whose Ethiopian origin becomes a fugitive instance of Africana. Certainly, Black Andromeda is no stranger to the gallows of archival logic and stands in the wake of Butler's "ungrievable" space: where records of her mythos and image perform, as Derrida (1995) would suggest, paradoxically 'against themselves,' preserving her beauty while eroding her Blackness. Donkor employs the term "fugitive" deliberately, not only to describe the physical "fading of certain painting pigments" that lose their color, texture, or appearance over time, but also to evoke:

> *[…] the relationship between many Western artworks and those enslaved plantation workers whose oppression and resistance were embodied by questions of presence and absence […] the terrorized lives of those forgotten victims remained fugitive in the visual language of the painting, perhaps reflecting the imposition of social invisibility on both the enslaved and those fugitives from the law who fled plantation captivity (180-181).*

While myth does not, and cannot, equate to the lived realities of enslavement or the violences endured by women under the transatlantic slave trade, Andromeda's (mytho)historical afterlife in the art-historical archive may nevertheless be traced through a parallel kind of erasure. Through the lens of Black fugitivity, her repeated "whitening" does not only operate as a distinct form of archival violence but showcases how archival necro-power manufactures legibility by routing the (once) Black woman "at the limit of what can be known" (Hartman 2008, 10-11). It is, however, precisely against this condition that Andromeda's Blackness continues to assert itself, insisting on being (re)membered and (re)seen.

On the Myth of the Negro

The silences in our archives and absences in our museums may be best described as what Frantz Fanon called an "all-white truth" in 1952. Not at least, literally, insofar as the majority of influential figures we encounter—both fictional and historical—as well as the artists and writers featured in prominent galleries and art exhibitions are, in fact, white. Also, however, because these silences and absences are often taken as the truth, self-evident and universal. That museums, libraries, and galleries—particularly in the West—continue to claim neutrality, apoliticality, and objectivity in the face of historical whitewashing and racist amnesia is itself an upshot of the root problem. The weightier, fleshier, and Darker problem. The "all-white truth" that currently plagues our literature and art (as well as our study of that literature and art) is, unquestionably, a bleaching of the truth—a lie. The fact that such white

predominance exists in the Western literary-visual canon reflects a racial-colonial system functioning exactly as it was designed, so that non-white, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Peoples of Color) are left to have no "truth," or at least, not a stable and visible one.

The "white masking" and racialization of Western culture that Fanon critiques in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is quite different to the phenomena of racial erasure and 'whitewashing' in the arts. Though the exact phrase "white masks" does not make a singular appearance in Fanon's text, Kimathi Donkor (2020) accurately reads and crystallizes its meaning: "a hegemonic demand that Black or African diaspora people assimilate into a false 'all-white truth'" (163-164). Arguably, whitewashing in the arts is the visual and literary corollary of this demand, absorbing not (only) the pressure to wear a "white mask," but the recoding of the object itself so that whiteness appears originary and axiomatic. Fanon's logic regarding the racial-colonial condition and the seemingly excessive, scandalous, but always violent 'weight of (my) melanin' directly calls into question our modes of (archival) representation, and the very optics of race and racialization that takes place in both historical production and consumption. Black Skin is pocked with Fanon's many aphorisms that seek to expose and puncture through the violent, seductive coherence behind colonial reason:

> *... When it comes to the case of the Negro... he has no culture, no civilization, no 'long historical past.' (21)*
> *... the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him. (22)*
> *... a kind of lactification... in a word, the race must be whitened... Whiten the race, save the race... (33)*
> *Where am I to be classified? ... Or, if you prefer, tucked away? Where shall I hide? (85)...*
> *...at its extreme, the myth of the Negro, the idea of the Negro, can become the decisive factor of an authentic alienation (158).*
> *For the Black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white. (178)*

When Fanon describes the Black schoolboy in the Antilles who, in speaking of his ancestors, rather "identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth" (114), he is indeed asking us to consider the racial legacies which exist in the death chambers of the archive and in the cannibalistic regimes of 'looking'. For Fanon, the desire to be represented—and represented as one's true-self—is quite simply the desire to be considered. The desire to no longer be "merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness," but rather a demand that one's presence be acknowledged even in one's absence (170).

As a symbol of fugitivity, Black Andromedas are boundless in both proto-colonial and colonial archives. The racialized, exposed, enslaved, female body particularly (un)covers herself in slavery archives (amidst other nooks) of the trans-Atlantic world.[1] We can find her in various different inventories of beauty or brutality: a line in a ship's ledger; a master's diary; an overseer's aside; a shadow in the corner of a family portrait; a traveler's taxonomy; a brief nod to the "Negro" or "*La Brune / La Noir*" in the painting's title; a pornographic vignette; a plantation; a cage; in the hollows of empire. Hers is a slow and silent act of forgetting; and she shares the same fate and "untimely story told by a failed witness" as every Black Andromeda after (and before) her: where it may be "centuries before she would be allowed to 'try her tongue'" (Hartman 2008, 8-9).

And yet, equally, she is also a ghost and a haunt(ing). How do we read, reflect, resist, and reclaim Black Andromeda's (her)story in a manner that shifts away from concluding or 'mastering' her subject and towards more reparative justice pedagogies? How do we acknowledge her presence *even in* her absence?

Dead Girl, Incarnate: Andromeda Unmasked

The notion that Andromeda was a Black woman, explicitly characterized as Ethiopian, originates from now-lost plays composed by Sophocles and Euripides in the fifth century BCE. Despite subtle reworkings of her myth during classical antiquity, subsequent texts from Greco-Roman tragedians and mythographers continued to uphold this tradition and, in all instances, regarded Andromeda as the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia of Ethiopia. In fact, Pliny the Elder (in *Naturalis Historia*, c. 1-100 CE); Strabo (in *Geōgraphiká*, c. 1-100 CE); Hyginus (in both his

[1] By Atlantic World, I refer to the interlocked social circuits, economies, and cultures of Europe, Africa, and the Americas forged by trade, conflict, and slavery during the 15th and 19th centuries.

collection of myths entitled *Fabulae*, c. 1-100 CE, and his book of poems citing myths about the constellations, *Poetica Astronomica*, c. 30-40 CE); pseudo-Apollodorus (in *Bibliotheca*, c. 1-200 CE); and Heliodorus (in *Aethiopica*, c. 225-250 CE) all assert and re-assert Andromeda's Ethiopian identity.

Her ethnicity was so ubiquitously upheld and so widely recognized that when the Roman poet Ovid slightly deviated from his own typical reference and implied an eastern rather than a southern origin to her heritage, A. D. Melville was inclined to leave an editorial gloss in his 1986 translation of *The Love Poems* stating: "Andromeda was in fact Ethiopian, but in Latin poetry, "Indians" and "Ethiopians" are more or less interchangeable" (216). Melville's note here, regarding the "fact" of Andromeda's ethnicity, may demand too much of the reader's imagination. Can there really be a "fact" in something as dynamic as mythology? To this, Kimathi Donkor (2020) responds:

> *[F]rom a twenty-first century historical perspective, Andromeda appears to be a mythical character from the realms of belief, art, and fictional literature rather than a historical person. But, of course, Melville's Andromeda "fact" was not intended to convey information about an everyday, real-life person: he meant "fact" in the specific sense of classical, literary continuity. Andromeda was Ethiopian "in fact" because she was said to be so, not only in Ovid's first-century Metamorphoses but [...] as well as by many other leading mythographers of antiquity. (167)*

So then, how did Andromeda—a figure who made recurring and universally acknowledged appearances in Greco-Roman classical culture as a princess of Ethiopia, and therein, as a woman of African ancestry, as a Black woman—come to be widely portrayed for thousands of years by virtually all Western visual artists, as a pale-skinned, often blonde or auburn-haired white woman? To what extent can we view the narrative and geographic incongruities in Andromeda's mythology—in her very myth-*making*—as a gradual form of whitewashing? Or, as a fugitive instance of Blackness, where the African connections in her story are deliberately overlooked or erased?

Once more with feeling: *What happened to Black Andromeda?*

There were frequent misconceptions about Ethiopia's geolocation, affluence, and power in classical antiquity, it was largely understood to be a site in India or Africa and chiefly populated by dark-skinned peoples (Simons 2022). In fact, the very etymology of the word 'Ethiopian' or (now-archaic) 'Ethiop' [*Αἰθίοψ* in ancient Greek and *Aethiops* in classical Latin] derives from and primarily means "burnt-face" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2014). When mentioned by Homer in the *Odyssey* (c. 700 BCE), 'Ethiopians' referred to people living in remote locations of Asia and the Far East—a space/place incongruent with Africa. It was only until a couple centuries later that the term shed its more general denotations of dark-skinned people or people "born under the sun's path" to more specifically become affiliated to a region in Africa, south of Egypt and west of Arabia (Bekerie 2004).

In this light, by the time Ovid was writing in the late first century BCE and early first century CE, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, who believed that 'Aethiopia' bordered his new Egyptian province in what is now continental Africa (Donkor 2020, 195), Ovid's emphasis on Andromeda's dark complexion alongside her Ethiopian identity served something of a distinct purpose. In Ovid's fifteenth letter of the *Heroides*—a collection of fictional love poems (or 'amatory epistles') addressed by mythological heroines to their lovers—the Roman poet chooses to write by the hand of Sappho, a real historical figure and famous lyric poetess in her own right. In the letter, Sappho mourns the departure of her (imaginary) lover, Phaon, and implores him to return to Greece, emphasizing her artistic talents to compensate for her perceived shortcomings—one of which being her complexion. In a notable passage, Ovid-as-Sappho writes:

If unkind nature has denied me good looks, offset that
lack by taking my talent into account.
I may be small, but I have a reputation that fills every
land on earth; I'm as big as my reputation.
I'm not fair-skinned, but Perseus found Cepheus' Andromeda
attractive, and she was dark (from darkest Ethiopia);
and white doves often have mates of a different color,
and black turtle-doves are loved by green parrots.[2]

[2] That Andromeda is "dark (from darkest Ethiopia)" is alluded to twice more in the Heroides (c. 25-16 BCE) and once in the *Ars Amatoria* (c. 1 BCE). Ovid even labors to recount her myth in Book IV of his most renowned work, the *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE).

Likewise, in *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid thrice references Andromeda's dark skin (with *fusca* directly translating to 'black' or 'brown'), and notes that Perseus finds her among "the black Indians" (i, line 53); that her complexion was no obstacle to Perseus' love given that "white suits dark girls" (iii, 191-92). The implicit color-prejudice and concurrent proto-feminist impulses that Ovid shows us are not easily lost on the contemporary reader; but there is also no simple assumption we can make here about racial controversy in classical antiquity (Brophy 2010).

Ovid's portrayal of Andromeda notably treats her Blackness as an advantage, rather than a detriment, to her beauty or desirability, however, tensions do exist even in antiquity between textual descriptions of the Ethiopian princess and her visual depictions. On a 5th-century BCE red-figure vase currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, for example:

> *Cepheus is depicted as an old man of mixed race. He has the thick lips, upturned nose, and curly hair of an Ethiopian, but the complexion of a European. His African slaves are rendered in an outline technique that emphasizes their dark skin. Andromeda has curly hair but has a complexion like the Greeks represented on other vases in this case. All the figures on this pelike wear costumes that would have indicated to the ancient Greek viewer that they were foreigners. The tight-fitting garments with zigzag designs worn by Andromeda and her father were used commonly in antiquity to differentiate between Greeks and "barbarians" (MFA Boston).*

The modern eye is likely to be tempted into reading the 5th-century BCE painter's choices as, in some capacity, racially motivated or perhaps even racist, however, the conflation of "race" with skin color is a modern phenomenon. Many classicists such as Denise McCoskey (2006) and Sarah F. Derbew (2022) argue against diminishing the broad concept of race to myopic and biologically reductive definitions that hold skin pigment and chromatic appearance as primary signifiers, and rather, claim that "race is a slippery phenomenon in ancient literature and art" (Derbew 2022). As we comprehend from the vase, conceptions of race in antiquity are indeed diachronic and dialogic, (as seen in both painterly conventions or aesthetic hesitations) however, the idea of Black people as decisively marginal or "the coding of dark brown skin as innately threatening" has no immediate roots in the sixth century and further, remains anachronistic to the larger transactions, cultural exchanges, and social interactions of Greco-Roman antiquity (Derbew 2022).

Fig. 1.3 & 1.4 — Pelike, Workshop of the Niobid Painter, Classical Greek Period, ca. 450–440 B.C. Ceramic, red-figure; height 44 cm, diameter 32 cm. Arthur Tracy Cabot Fund. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

What remains clear, however, is that Renaissance readers did indeed register Ovid's—and other classical writers'—explicit identification of Andromeda as Black, and one cannot overstate the influence, reception, and profound transmission of Ovid's legacy, across Europe, during the Renaissance (c. 1500-1600 CE). Still, despite Ovid's widespread readership and the common study of Latin during this time, many poets, writers, sculptors, and artists of the period still chose to portray Andromeda as white. "So extensive was this practice," Donkor (2020) contends, "it might almost seem plausible to construct a potted history of canonical Western art entirely through depictions of Andromeda as white."

During the early modern period (c. 1500-1700), European writers or scholars revisiting classical myths confronted Andromeda's Black identity but often chose to erase or explain it away. For instance, when the fourteenth-century poet, Petrarch, described Andromeda as a "dark virgin beauty" ('*vergine bruna*'), by the mid sixteenth-century, one of Petrarch's commentators declared that Perseus "fell in love with Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, ugly and black as she was" ('*tutta brutta e negra*') (McGrath 1992, 11; 16). In the commentator's eyes, Blackness was disqualified from beauty and—under the consolidating age of empires and amidst a hardening trans-Atlantic imperial logic—from civilizational virtue.

Fig. 1.5 — *Perseus and Andromeda*, François Lemoyne, 1723, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

Fig. 1.6 — *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, Paolo Veronese, c. 1576-1578, oil on canvas, 260 x 211 cm — Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, Rennes, France

Fig. 1.7 — *Perseus and Andromeda,* Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1639-1640, oil on canvas, 265 x 160 cm — Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Fig. 1.8 — *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510-1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

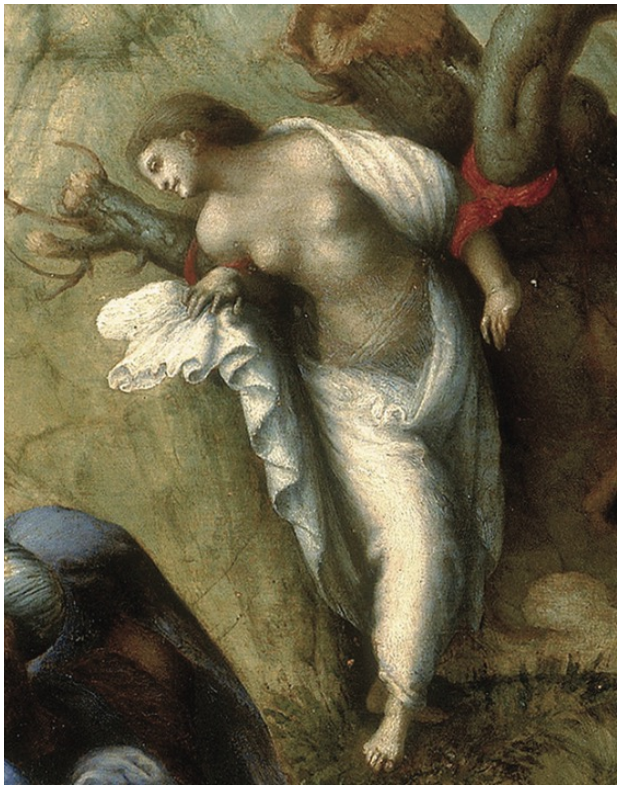

Fig. 1.9 — Details of *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510 —1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Fig. 1.10 — Details of *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510 —1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Art historian Elizabeth McGrath's "The Black Andromeda" (1992) is, to date, one of the most extensive modern analyses into Andromeda's African identity and iconology. McGrath (1992) unravels the various artistic, aesthetic, national, racial, and religio-political complexities which led to the commonplace practice of Andromeda's whitewashing in art and art history. That Andromeda's Black and female identities intersect to manufacture a distinctly "insidious mode of racial invisibility" is clear to McGrath from the very beginning of her exposé. For McGrath (1992), understanding how Andromeda's ethno-racial identity stands in contradiction with her artistic and aesthetic traditions necessarily requires the recognition that, throughout the history and canon of Western art, figures of female beauty "whether virginal or provocative, sacred or secular, are regularly assimilated to an ideal of European whiteness, even where ethnic origin might suggest they should be represented otherwise" (7). In her own archival research, McGrath can ultimately only track two major (Western) seventeenth-century artists, namely Abraham van Diepenbeeck and Joachim von Sandrart, who were the exception to the rule and chose to depict Andromeda in all her Blackness.

Fig. 1.11 — *Andromede*, Abraham van Diepenbeeck, c. 1635-1638, engraving/etching on paper, 276 mm x 178 mm, The British Museum

Fig. 1.12 — *The Rescue of Andromeda from Metamorphosis*, Joachim von Sandrart, 1698

Insofar as 'whiteness' (its treatments, conditions, and constructions) became a cultural and colonial tool by the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, Andromeda's 'beauty' from the fifteenth century onward became routinely equated with pallor. In 1655, for instance, Michel de Marolles wrote an extensive commentary on Andromeda in *Tableaux du Temple des Muses* castigating van Diepenbeeck's depiction of her as Black. While the Parisian commentator rebukes the Flemish artist, he admits that Andromeda was likely "from a Black family" though she "presumably would have been white, albeit African" (de Marolles 1655, 314-22; qtd. in McGrath 1992, 12). By the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—precisely as European overseas empires and Atlantic slaving intensified—the compromise collapses into a standardized norm and white Andromedas populate renowned canvases and statues by Titian (1556), Veronese (1578), Rembrandt (1630), Rubens (1639), and Puget (1684), among others.

Through this understanding, there becomes increasing support to track the long early modern "whitening" or "white masking" of Andromeda's figure as a racial-colonial progression, and her later refashioning (or rather, disfiguring) as an imperial product. The period's visual and textual traditions repeatedly "solve" the problem of Black beauty by relocating beauty to whiteness and by framing Blackness as the baser surroundings (the Ethiopian crowd, the exotic court, the African shore) which only work to heighten the pale heroine's appeal.

The whitewashing of Andromeda and Andromeda's assumed whiteness continues even now in modern twenty-first century popular culture. To name a few portrayals of Andromeda,

completely bleached of her color, there is: Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's 1933 film *King Kong* (see Kilinski 2012); MGM's 1981 *Clash of the Titans* and later Warner Bros' 2010 rendition of *Clash of the Titans*; closely followed by Jonathan Liebesman's 2012 blockbuster *Wrath of the Titans* (see Galer 2019; Donkor 2020; Castell 2024).

Black Visuality: (Re)figuring Andromeda

Andromeda's character and appearance was "whitened" in a *longue durée*. The image of Andromeda—beginning in antiquity with tensions between mythic ethnicity and painterly conventions, then amplified and racialized by the neoclassical resurgence in aesthetic traditions during the early modern period and long eighteenth century, and finally institutionalized under colonial modernity—is indeed a product of racial-colonial appropriation, even if her earliest visual cues predate colonialism proper.

How do we recognize the slower and subtler violences of racial erasure and colonial history while also 'practicing a mode of refusal' which decidedly bears witness to the freedom drives beneath the cracks? How do we, in the phraseology of Maggie Nelson (2021), "allow ourselves to wander away—if only for a spell—from the exclusive task of exposing and condemning domination" so that we may find "sometimes ecstatically, sometimes catastrophically" that there is more to be said "in the knot of freedom and unfreedom than a blueprint for past and present regimes of brutality" (9).

Which is also to ask, in Andromeda's case, how do we listen for her silences, phantoms, haunts, and hauntings without reproducing her death or digging up her various archival graves by committing further acts of injustice in our own narrations? If "to read the archive is to enter a mortuary" as Hartman (2008) claims, then how do we maneuver opening the casket without subjecting the dead "to a second order of violence"? (8). Might there be new counter-historical approaches to "listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives" as a praxis of freedom and the continuous search for justice? (Hartman 2008, 3). How do we exercise our response/abilities toward silence, absence, and nothingness; towards a politics of care that respects what we may never know?

We are not only haunted by the tragedies, erasures, and violences of our past and present, but we bring these 'ghosts' into our negotiations with, hopes for, and anxieties of the future. In distilling from the past and imagining for the future, sites of struggle and acts of resistance seep past temporal boundaries and linearity. In "Responsibility to Nothingness," Aytak Dibavar (2024) urges us to (re)member that which colonial history has cleaved into oppression and oblivion, noting that "the ghosts of our pasts are a memory in need of being remembered" (16). Negotiations with history, therefore, are not only forward-facing into the future but also forward-facing into the past. If our evolving knowledge of the past is constantly in talks with our history of the present and vice versa, then relaying (counter-)histories necessarily involves the ongoing and incomplete project of freedom.

Thus far, my task has been to answer such a call to counter(-)history: to reclaim, at least textually, Andromeda's Blackness in the wake of the archive's "all-white truths" and to "unmask" some of the ways through which her disappearance and (re)appearances as a fugitive symbol of Blackness have been staged in the canon. Nonetheless, to fully capture the spirit of what Saidiya Hartman terms "critical fabulation"—a method not only *necessary* to but *mandated* by feminist (re-)editing praxes of Black visuality[3] which aims to "listen for the unsaid" and refashion fugitive, "disfigured lives" without committing further acts of violence—simply 'unmasking' Andromeda is not sufficient. So then, how do we figuratively bring Andromeda (back) to life amid the archive's mortuary labours? How do we unsettle the archive from within (and without) the confines of its own authority? Most crucially, how do we (re)imagine and (re)figure Andromeda's myth and myth-making in ways that are critically aware yet responsive to her inherited iconography?

In late May 2024, when Lisa Usanova and I first began working on this project together, Andromeda's erasure was one of the case studies we investigated for our publication, *Flesh Fields* (2024), which probed the gendered dynamics of whitewashing and its associations in literature and art history. With *Flesh Fields*, we delved into five instances of literary-historical BIPOC women who

[3] Black visuality, here, names both (a) the power-saturated ways Black people are made visible or invisible and (b) the counter-practices by which Black subjects see, look back, and make themselves and their worlds visible otherwise (Fleetwood 2010; Mirzoeff 2011; Sharpe 2016; Browne 2015).

have been hyper-feminized, hyper-sexualized, and racially 'purified' in the canons of art/media history, in order to uncover dominant ideologies of both 'old' and 'new' racism within (past and present) ocular cultures as well as present our reader with decolonial counter-visualities. In a similar vein, while the crux of this paper has considered the *long durree* of Andromeda's racial and aesthetic erasure, our collaboration developed out of a practice-led methodology which sought to toil against that very current so that new re-imaginations may enter our streams of conversation.

The artistic renditions of Andromeda created by Lisa Usanova for this project stand, first and foremost, as a counter-visual studio practice that complements my counter-historical literary one. The artworks visually translate the aims of decolonial archival studies into the language of portraiture, remembering Andromeda's scenes of capture, abjection, and disfiguration even as they refuse to reenact them in full. Across the series, a different way of 'looking' and ultimately, 'being looked at' is demanded from the viewer by: recentering Andromeda's gaze; muting Perseus and Cetus to the background; hybridizing (analogue) pencil mediums with digital layering; and attending to the quiet, affective registers held within images of Black fugitivity.

At first, Lisa's early sketches of Andromeda too closely echoed those depictions made by post-Renaissance painters such as Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* (c. 1554-1556). "In a way," she reflects, "I was still pushing Andromeda to the margins, and the narrative once again became too encumbered by Perseus' role, despite his removal from the scene [...] The real pivot took place when I altogether abandoned attempts to simply *replace* the white woman with a Black body" (see Appendix A). Following Elizabeth McGrath's own arguments in "The Black Andromeda" (1992), wherein Andromeda's Blackness itself became the pretext for both her mythological punishment and canonical erasure, Lisa began to restructure the compositions entirely. Reflecting on Andromeda's first portrait, "Afterthoughts of Salt," Lisa notes:

> *I have always loved portraiture, and in combination with the conversations Ayra and I had regarding Black feminist critiques of aesthetic representation, it seemed right to change the initial plan. The composition was now a close-up of Andromeda, aspiring to disturb her canonical narrative; deliberately...*
>
> *...assigning the presence of Perseus and the sea monster to the shadows and situating our princess as the central, self-possessed subject of her own myth (Usanova 2025).*

With this (new) Andromeda, the violence remains legible, but only as a residual shadow. Our Andromeda is neither fearless nor idealized, but rather, partially guarded and tender with her hand raised in defense and her eyes remaining alert. The absent eyebrows and deliberate omission of a male rescuer work to disarm the portrait of 'seamless mastery,' withholding any promise of aesthetic polish or heroic completion for the viewer.

Rejecting oil, Lisa turned to colored pencil—a medium historically excluded from 'conventional' fine art traditions—to allow for a gradual process of layering and hatching that built into the works a vital sense of texture and movement. The analog mediums were later interlaced with the digital in order to create both a temporal and material palimpsest that merges the classical past with artistic tools of the present. This, too, was an act of critical fabulation on Lisa's part: to take a familiar image and reorient it towards a radical, oppositional charge, as well as to make the medium itself complicit in the refusal of aesthetic 'purity'.

After completing the primary portrait, Lisa began a series of more surrealist explorations using a limited four-color ballpoint pen palette (Figs X). "This deliberate limitation," she argues, "combined with the unforgiving nature of the medium, required bolder compositional decisions":

> *The second ballpoint portrait (see figure ____) introduces Perseus physically, for the first and last time, his bloodied hand reaching towards Andromeda's face, a gesture full of uncertainty. The unnatural blue hair color is again meant to reference oceanic unrest, while the strategic blending of blue and red inks nod towards the lasting marks of violence in Andromeda's art-historical archive. While our Andromeda appears to lean into the touch, her expression conveys a contradictory impression. Andromeda was punished for her beauty, saved, and subsequently promised to Perseus for slaying the monster. There is no romance in the story, no tenderness, and most importantly, no autonomy given to her. This is the conflict we attempt to showcase within this illustration (Usanova 2025).*

Across the series, Andromeda's body becomes the sole site where the aesthetic, the historical, and the mythic converge. In these artworks, Andromeda is a Black figure that remembers her own erasures, that indeed "tries her tongue" (Hartman 2008), and that demands to be seen otherwise. Lisa's portraits ultimately refuse the canonical injustice in Andromeda's myth that renders her beauty incompatible with Blackness. In re-imagining Andromeda through both counter-visualities and a process of counter-historicization, we take seriously the right to look back as well as the right to remain partly veiled. The counter-archival charge here is, at once, artistic renditions which tend to a figure who cannot fully be recovered while insisting that she be seen, despite this, as Black, alive, and unmastered.

Fig. 1.13 —"Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

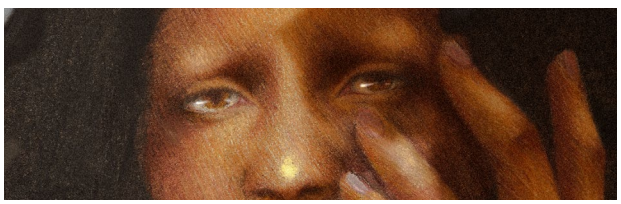

Fig. 1.14 — Details of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.15 — Process of "Unbinding the Tide" // "Vincula Maris" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.16 — "Unbinding the Tide" // "Vincula Maris" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.17 — Process of "A Study in Dissolution" // "Vestigia Nullius" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

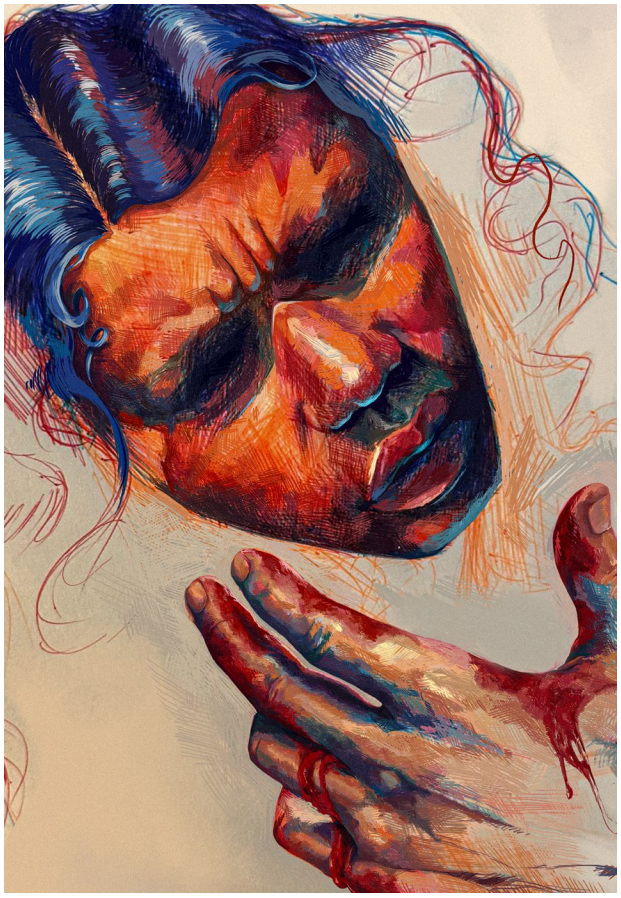

Fig. 1.18 — “A Study in Dissolution” // “Vestigia Nullius” – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

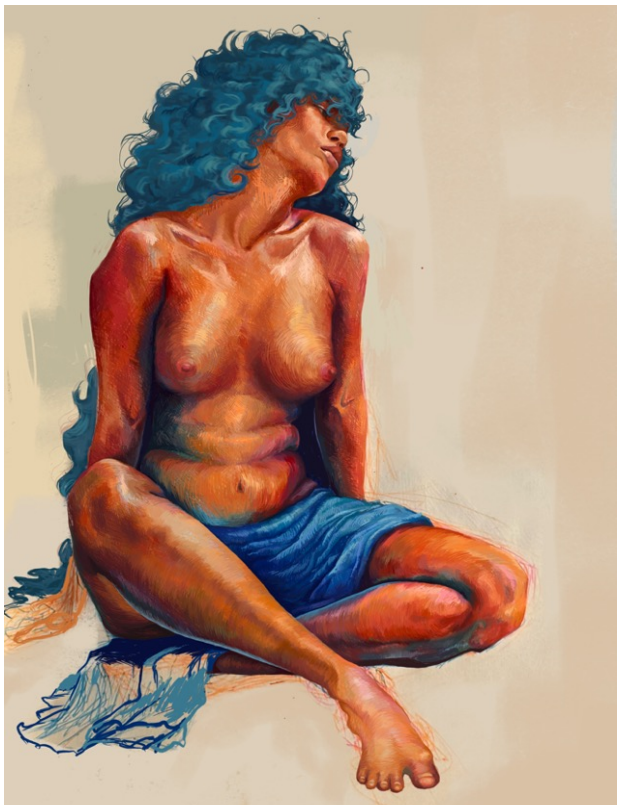

Fig. 1.19 — Process of "Unbinding the Tide” // “Carne Tenbrae” – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, ballpoint pen and digital art

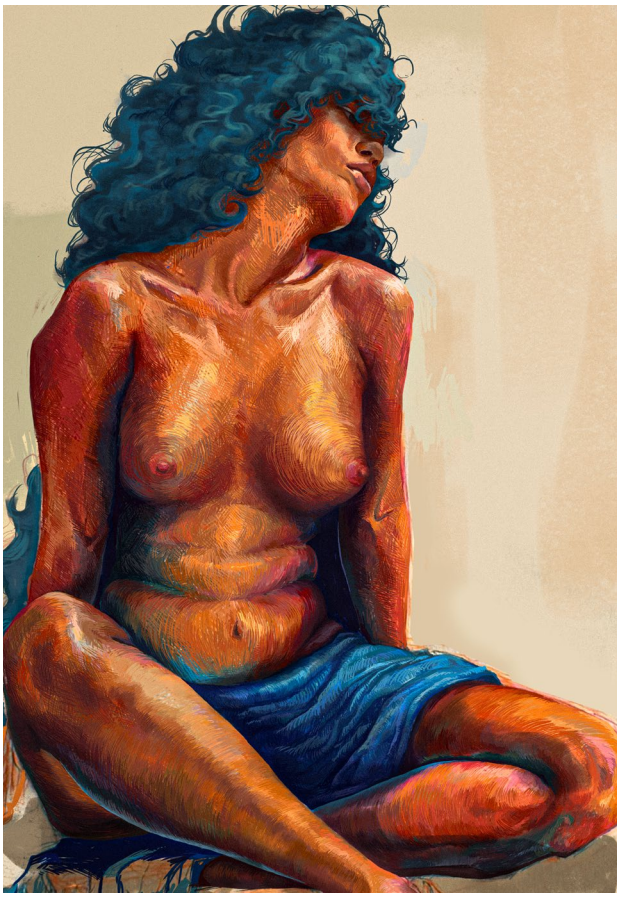

Fig. 1.20 — "Unbinding the Tide” // “Carne Tenbrae” – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, ballpoint pen and digital art

Appendix A: Process Photos

Fig. 1.21 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 2024, digital art

Fig. 1.22 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 2024, digital art

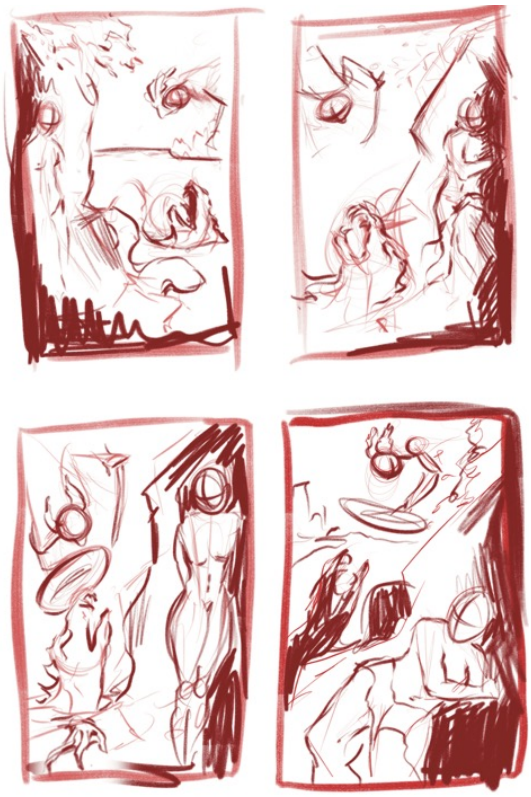

Fig. 1.23 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 2024, digital art

Fig. 1.24 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

Fig. 1.25 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

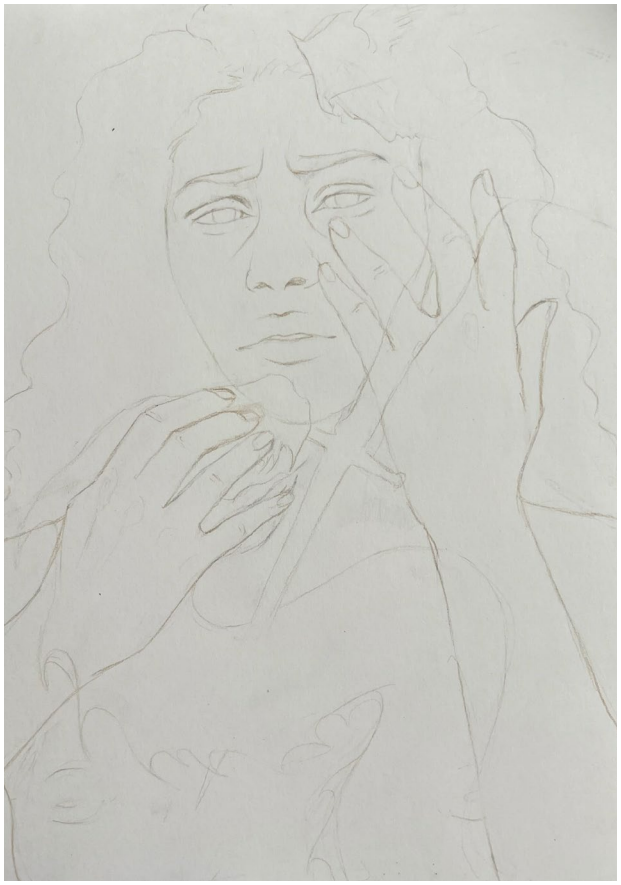

Fig. 1.26 – Process of “Afterthoughts of Salt” // “In Caelum Verso”— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

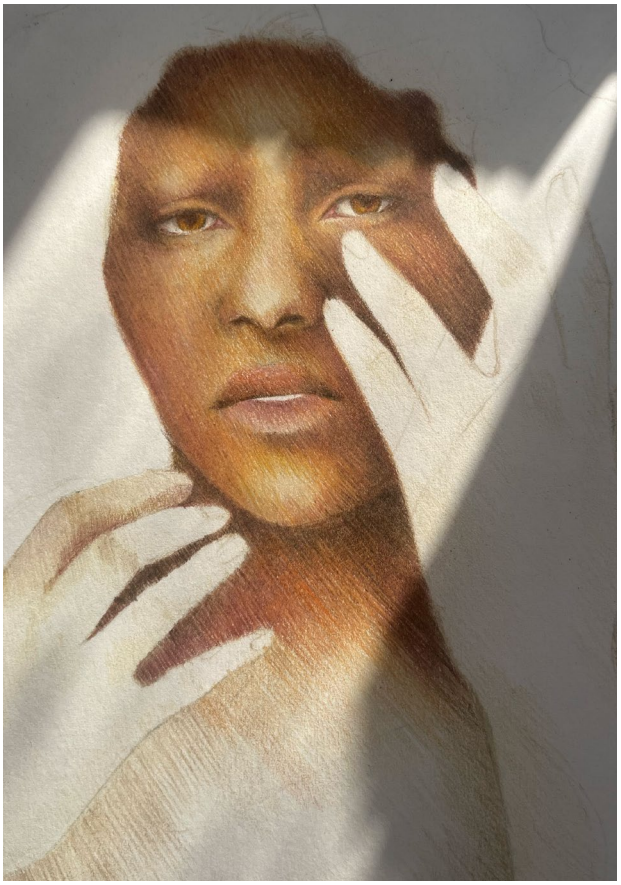

Fig. 1.28 – Process of “Afterthoughts of Salt” // “In Caelum Verso”— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

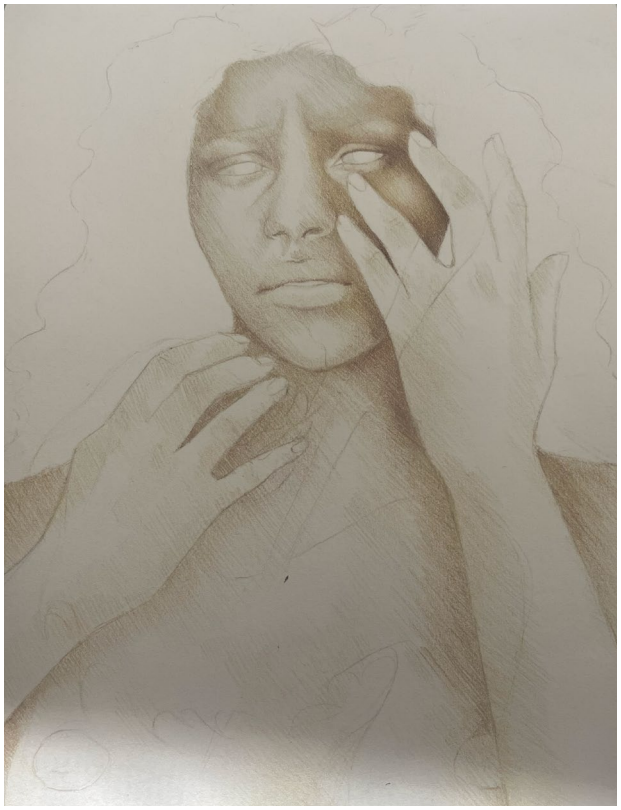

Fig. 1.27 – Process of “Afterthoughts of Salt” // “In Caelum Verso”— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

Fig. 1.29 – Process of “Afterthoughts of Salt” // “In Caelum Verso”— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

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