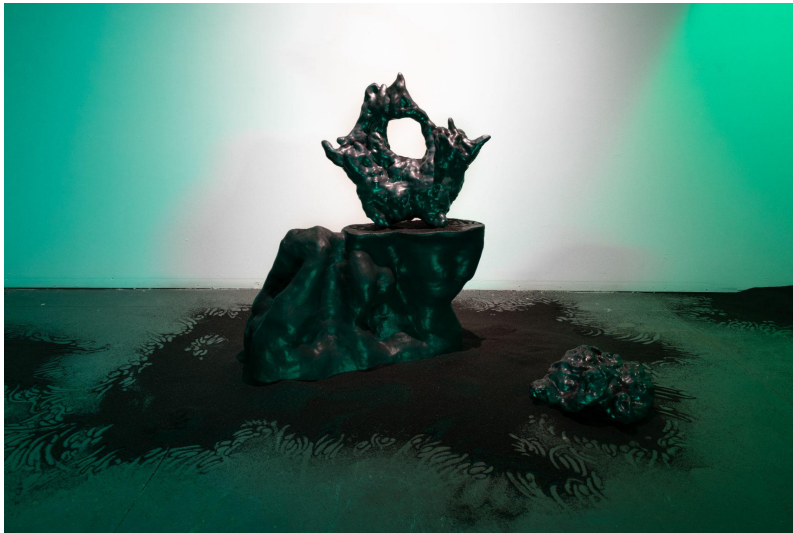


Something Glimpsed Through a Parting in the Clouds

///



Thesis Portfolio

Alim Ringgold

BFA Intermedia Spring 2022

Table of Contents

Bio.....	pg. 2
Thesis Proposal.....	pg. 3-5
Thesis Abstract.....	pg. 6
Artist Statement.....	pg. 7
Thesis Oral.....	pg. 8-14
Bibliography.....	pg. 15-17

Alim Ringgold is an interdisciplinary artist working primarily with ceramic sculpture, sound, and video. They use these mediums as tools for developing a language of personal symbolism and spirituality that is informed by a deep interest in ideas of the spectral and enigmatic. Alim most recently was a resident artist working on the Volumetric Performance Toolbox Project as a part of Eyebeam's Rapid Response for a Better Digital Future fellowship. They have exhibited work in the North Portland International Virtual Film Festival, B10, 511 Gallery, Window Room TV, and Abrons Art Center.

Alim Ringgold (b. 1999) lives and works in Portland, OR

Thesis Proposal

/ / /

There is a desire elicited within me in the presence of natural landscapes, phenomena, and objects; a desire difficult to characterize, but something intense and innate. In gazing up at clouds or pushing through thorny brambles, a sort of fantasizing happens. These landscapes, objects, and phenomena become more than themselves. Elements of this natural environment become intertwined with my own perceptions and enter a state of shapeshifting malleability. There is a sense of communion experienced in my imagining of these originally clear images with a feeling of formal and metaphorical ambiguity. In an exploration of where this sense of communion comes from and how I can formally depict this transformation of mundane matter into something vague and seemingly immaterial, I am asking what it means from a personal and cultural perspective to operate in a state of ambiguity, how the displacement experienced by diasporic populations affects our abilities to connect spiritually, what a conceptualization of spirituality which centers a personal sense of displacement and ambiguity looks like, and what place nature and the natural world holds in that process.

My interest in pursuing these ideas of ambiguity and shapelessness in relation to spirituality stem from my own sense of cultural displacement. Within my experience as a part of the African diaspora, I find myself constantly in search of connection to my environment and for the ability to feel at rest amidst a landscape of existential turmoil. An element of culture which has always been present in my life has been the idea of spirituality. While present, it has not been something I've easily felt a personal connection to nor was it able to acknowledge all of the intersections of my being and lived experience. In this work, I want to create and employ a framework and example for exploring what a sense of spirituality might look like as developed from a place of reflection about diasporic relations to land and culture, as well as the opportunities that the construction of a spiritual realm provides.

In the development of my own conceptualization of spirituality, I am looking towards divinatory practice for both its language and processes in communicating with the divine. Divination is centered around a process of interpreting the world around us or the specific instrument(s) of divination being used as symbols. Various cultural practices of divination often exist in tandem with the natural world, using materials like bones, water, branches, sand, or the wind to glean information and guidance about the mundane. Divinatory practice is the pursuit of clarity, "...jumbled ideas, metaphors and symbols suggest various possible interpretations which slowly give way to an ordered sequencing and to more limited interpretation."¹ I am interested in that space of jumbled ideas and a chaos of images and information before it is shuffled into

¹ Tedlock, Barbara. "Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation." *Folklore* 112, no. 2 (January 2001): 189–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00155870120082236>.

clarity, as well as the material connections to nature that are inherent in so many divinatory practices.

Animism and earth-based spiritualities are the foundation for, and are still very present in, many spiritual and religious practices that are more commonly practiced today. I am interested in the accessibility of images like the sky, dirt, trees, etc. as a common jumping off point for relating to the world and fantasizing about a personal connection between the self and another object. I want to utilize natural phenomena and organisms as a source for the form and imagery of my thesis work, taking these images and obscuring them into elusive and shifting symbols.

Within this project, I will be working with sculpture, video, and sound to create a body of physical objects, related audio artifacts, and video work that simulates this destabilized and shapeshifting environment. In contrast to striving towards an exact set of pieces to be completed by the end of my thesis, I want the creation of my physical work to be heavily intertwined with the work of researching my lines of inquiry, allowing for an iterative process in which the work evolves alongside the exploration of my lines of inquiry.

The sculptural component of my thesis work serves as a physical representation of the ideas of shapeshifting, transformations of matter, and the creation of an image of fluidity and chaos which are concerned with my inquiries. The materials I will be using for the sculptural component of my project are ceramic and mixed media. In these sculptures, form and texture hold importance as avenues for depicting a sense that something that is in the midst of transformation; an image/object which is unstable in its solidity, specificity, and intention. I will be utilizing multiple building techniques for creating these ceramic sculptures including segmented coil building, slab building, and pinch forming. Ceramic is a material which is made of the earth itself and was one of the first materials used to create ritual objects and to formally imagine representations of divinity, the afterlife, different deities, etc. To abstract from the environment in this material lends itself well to exploring transformations of matter and will also formally allow me to create amorphous shapes and textures. Mixed media sculpture holds a place in this work in representing various elements of landscape and nature that I feel ceramic is not fit for. So far, some of these materials include sand and branches coated in pigmented wax.

Created alongside the sculptural forms and evolving with my research, will be an improvised sound piece utilizing voice, field recordings, and instrumentally-generated noise to craft a sonic aura which extends the tone and function of the sculptural work. Sound is a material which resists solidity in many ways; it is constantly interacting with different noises and acoustic environments, existing in a state of flux. Being a mostly invisible medium, sound also interacts with the senses in a different way than visual mediums. Sound can function as an animator, a convincer, and/or something which elicits a bodily response that forms in association with images and ideas it is presented alongside. I see the process of creating sound as part of the sculptural work as a way of elevating their impact physically, and emotionally.

As a third component to this process, I want to create short, mostly improvised video works, which serve to activate and place the sculptures outside of the context of the gallery they will be displayed in. Through video, I want to explore a process of image making which creates a context that can be associated with the work in general, as well as the creation of a space in which I can interact with the sculptural components. Through performance and the introduction of myself as a character in this work, I can more directly draw attention to and comment on the aspect of my project that explores positionality in relation to spiritual understanding and practice.

I am envisioning the final form of this project as a small-scale gallery installation; the ceramic and mixed media sculptures arranged and displayed in the space as the central focus of the installation. The sound clips created will be combined and played in the space to function as a soundscape and enhancer for the environment of the installation. I would like the video work to be displayed in a single projection or screen that will be integrated with a sculptural object. I want this project to focus more on the process of working through these ideas as opposed to creating a perfected final set of work. However, I do want to set a minimum of three large-scale (2ft +) sculptural components as a baseline in order to allow myself to expand and work in smaller bits to be thorough in processing these ideas. I believe that the three-piece minimum and the creation of the soundscape and video piece is a feasible amount of work for me to do in the time I have while still having some time after to reflect on them and add to the final body of work. Ceramic sculptures can be worked on simultaneously and I have had experience creating large scale work within a specific time frame. The mixed media sculpture, sound work, and video piece are all more intuitive and low maintenance in terms of process and will not require extensive editing or preparation.

Within my thesis project, I will be exploring the ideation of an alternative conceptualization of spirituality that is centered around an experience of cultural displacement and lost connection; a practice which reflects an understanding of myself and my experiences in relation to my position as a part of the African diaspora. In order to articulate and create a body of imagery around this subject matter, I will be drawing from the varied structures of divinatory praxis, aspects of animism, natural forms and phenomena, and implementing a kind of reversal of this work, abstracting from images and ideas of clarity and solidity. Through the creation of an environment of sculptures, sound pieces, and video work, I will be engaging in a process of moving ever further into uncertainty and fluctuation and exploring the possibilities of repose and spiritual communion that may exist there.

Thesis Abstract

/ / /

Something Glimpsed Through a Parting in the Clouds is a body of work formed around an initial desire to both explore and further develop a sense of spirituality that is more aligned with my values, sense of self, and way of moving in the world; a spirituality which relies on and works in tandem with my art practice.

Considering diasporic connections to culture and spirituality on both a personal and a general scale led me to center ideas of physical displacement and destabilization through the creation of an in-between realm, de-centering connections to land as a locus of spirituality. As I moved forward from the proposal experience, there became a need to more closely examine and incorporate imagery and making processes that evoke a sense of spiritual communion for me.

With this work I sought to place tactility and material involvement as a more tangible spiritual practice which then culminates in a representation of this ambiguous spiritual realm and a collection of ritual objects.

Artist Statement

/ / /

...and again I saw, through a parting in the clouds, something like a tunnel, opening briefly before being misted over by another passing mass. With each glimpse of this unknowable thing a body begins to soften at the edges, flickering in and out of a worldly sense. And this dissolution of form gives birth to a new realm.”

This body of work is an attempt at engaging with phenomena and the ineffable as rich pathways to experiencing a sense of spiritual connection. Grounded in experiences of cultural displacement, spiritual disconnection, and corporeal dread, this work leans into an ever-present placelessness, conceptualizing a new landscape accessed through an embrace of all that is illusory.

Thesis Oral

/ / /

“...and again I saw, through a parting in the clouds, something like a tunnel, opening briefly before being misted over by another passing mass. With each glimpse of this unknowable thing a body begins to soften at the edges, flickering in and out of a worldly sense. And this dissolution of form gives birth to a new realm.”

In speaking about my thesis work and a lot of the ideas behind it, I have often found myself either at a loss for words, or stringing together long, nonsensical, maze-like descriptions in order to communicate about experiences and images which, for me, feel intensely innate and made fragile in the hands of language. I have not found a way around this, but instead through it in an appreciation and acceptance of a kind of “cryptic transparency and blinding obscurity” described in Daniel Whistler’s *Unutterable Utterances and Mysterious Naming*. This idea of a cryptic transparency is at the center of the work itself and also in my framing of this project. There is a way that words and images are able to sculpt each other in cases of describing ecstatic experiences; a never complete search for clarity through carving away meaning and forming new understandings; an exhaustive process of sifting through both verbal and visual descriptors; a kind of truth which is located within obscurity.

This work embraces ambiguity and entertains the idea of extracting a sense of transcendent significance from my surroundings. At the core of this practice is my desire to conceptualize and find comfort in a feeling of dispossession of culture, land, and body. I seek communion with something vast and beyond description, a thing outside physicality, but able to be glimpsed in blurred images, the passing of clouds, muffled sounds coming from the next world over... A process of locating meaning and mystical value attached to these tactile experiences, colors, and sounds.

In this space these elements become portals, signifiers of a sort of divine realm, a place in between, where these images and sounds coalesce and begin to materialize. This materialization occurs in the slow creation of a displaced and empathetic landscape. A space where an

undefinable raw material vibrates and churns, both forming and dismantling itself in response to an external process of grappling with a sense of placelessness and uncertainty.

As a child I was raised within and exposed to a variety of spiritual and religious practices. Most impactfully, with one of my parents as a devout practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Through this upbringing I was exposed to ideas of the supernatural and other realms of existence as fact, as well as the ways in which these spaces can be accessed through creative ritual practices that incorporate a range of sensory engagement; bodily gestures, the use of voice and musical instruments, the preparation and care of altars and objects of worship, and careful, intuitive making as a devotional practice.

Having these experiences as a child, I think, solidified within me a deep curiosity about imperceptible space and supernatural presence, fostering a kind of pleasure in the discomfort of being uncertain about the bounds of reality. As I grew older so did this curiosity, coming through avenues which felt more accessible to me as I became more distanced from those original connections to religious and spiritual practices.

I became obsessed with ghost hunting shows, the turn of the century Spiritualism Movement with its gauzy ectoplasm and rattling tables, anomalies of light and nature, virtually anything paranormally related; even, despite their hokeyness, being moved to tears by episodes of *The Dead Files* and losing myself in a grainy infra-green glow and the noisy static of spirit boxes. There is a kind of deep swelling feeling in the act of trying to glean something solid from a seeming nothingness, a substrate so ambiguous as to suggest the presence of both nothing and everything.

This idea is more specifically articulated within Mark Pilkington's essay *How to Believe Weird Things*. He says...“In seeking weirdness, we clamor for the familiar, grounding props of more traditional, human scale phenomena – film footage; oblique audio; fuzzy photographs; seance room apports; hair, soil, or metal samples – but true weirdness often emerges on scales too large, too small, or too personal, for all but the most specialized and attuned to identify: a series of almost imperceptible whispers in the ear; anomalous fluctuations in streams of astronomical

data; a familiar face glimpsed in a cloud; out-of-place microbes in a dry lake bed, the infinite strangeness of quantum phenomena.”

Alongside these interests was a constant effort to find some kind of consistent practice to connect myself to, which maintained that all-encompassing, deep, swelling feeling. I want to get back to that idea of dispossession which I mentioned earlier in regards to culture, land, and body. We are currently in a process of just beginning to broadly name and attempt to account for some of the violence and cultural erasure carried out under the projects of Western Colonialism and imperialism. This process requires the construction of boundaries, and these boundaries require clear and distinct categorizations which define and determine the ownership of things so elusive and complex as culture, land, and bodily experience as well as expression. For people existing in states of ambiguous positions in regards to their identity, or a lack of knowledge of their origins, the task of responsibly seeking spiritual connection can become daunting and seemingly impossible.

Within the thesis proposal that I presented last winter, I outlined a project which would create and employ a framework for exploring what a sense of spirituality might look like as developed from a place of reflection about diasporic relations to land and culture, as well as the opportunities that the construction of a spiritual realm provides.

One of the texts which had initially been helping along my inquiries into how diasporic experiences of culture and spirituality function is Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg’s “Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity.” Through a recounting of various cultural histories and practices of displaced groups of people, this collection of essays picks apart and aims to undo “...the notion that there is an immutable link between cultures, peoples, or identities and specific places.” That idea struck a strange feeling of comfort within me, almost like it started to put to rest a notion that I was in deficit for not having any strong sense of connection to a place, or a particular set of cultural values that would fulfill the part of me that was craving a sort of invisible embrace.

This heightened in me an understanding of the value of imagined space and places neither here nor there. In considering alternate realms and places in a state of material flux and mystery, I was urged to think about what images and occupiers of space I was attracted to in a spiritual sense, what things carry with them a sense of something mystical and materially ambiguous. Images like billowing clouds, dying green stars and celestial bodies, fog, mysterious rock formations, caves, branches, and more.

Because these images occurred without the interference of human beings, I united them under the concept of nature, and in the creation of this prospective work, centered nature and natural phenomena as the sole source of the images I would be abstracting from as entry points into and forms within a placeless and destabilized landscape. As I moved into the physical part of the process, there began to emerge an incongruence in the images I felt struck by and their ability to be categorized solely within conceptions of nature or natural phenomena.

In taking the time to remove language from and reexamine what images “were it,” or more eloquently but less suitably, represent a dissolution of solidity; wavering, flickering, drifting images which point to a kind of supernatural mutability. In the absence of descriptors and categorizations, something gave and this network of images began to reveal themselves. Despite the range of sources for all of these images and sensations, they all had in common something which I felt at the time was aptly described by the word nature, but are only loosely united by a sense of something like a divine ambiguity. A pile of clothes strewn haphazardly on a chair which, in the dark, takes the shape of a figure cast in shadow. Something about the way the sun cuts a hole of light into the sky.

A large influence on the way that I went about physically creating this work has been inspired by mediumistic art practices and some of the processes and modes of thought that are associated with it. Mediumistic art is a form of art that is heavily influenced by turn of the century spiritualism and incorporates practices that leave room for supernatural presences or information to be interpreted through the artwork. While I don’t claim to be channeling otherworldly beings in the vein of artists like Paulina Peavy or Georgiana Houghton, I do believe that there is an

endless amount of information to be gleaned from automatic and subtractive making processes which put you in tune with a kind of subconscious decision making.

Each of these ceramic forms emerges out of an intuitive handbuilding process. A first mark is made, often in the form of a closed coil, looping back into itself, or a misshapen slab of clay. Flattened coils are stretched and prodded by my finger tips, the clay absorbing each of my thoughts and intentions, storing it in a soon to be closed-off hollow interior. These sculptures become records of time and thought, both the forms themselves and ceramic as a material, referencing the slow time of geologic processes of erosion, sedimentation and crystallization. Deposition, burial, and lithification solidify spectrality into something that can be felt. These forms emerge and are broken down in a constant recycle, this curious black teleplasm searching for a kind of clarity in the construction of these forms.

The black sand-like presence in this work is the particulate of these vague and materially mysterious forms, matter pushed around by a swirling, and sentient wind, leaving messages in the ground, interpreting loose information. Utilized in a subtractive method of laying down large shapes and again, prodding and mark-making with my fingers, the sand is able to represent an invisible process of sculpting and affecting landscape. This sentient wind is something akin to a spirit, a presence with the ability to touch and interact with its environment unseen. The development of these sand drawings came out of a desire to capture information in a more passive way and render a method of mark making. In my subtractive graphite drawings of clouds and skylscapes.

These drawings make an appearance again in the mask that overlays the video portal in the space. Clouds and the idea of the sky as another realm is an idea which almost perfectly embodies my desire to realize an ever changing and ambiguous space which is responsive to events in ways that allow them to communicate something on a spiritual level. Like seeing the shape of a hand in a cloud. This video portal operates as a window between a mundane space and this new realm, it gazes out through the spaces between clouds, that dark spot which slices up the moon, the flickering flame of a candle.

Despite its subtle presence within this space, sound has been one of the largest influences on this body of work. Sound has an ability to push past pragmatism and affect the body and mind in ways that feel revelatory and akin to a kind of paranormal experience, an unseen force which has the ability to spiritualize the body around a particular set of ideas and/or images. A lot of the research I had been doing in regards to sound was in the form of puzzling about the ways that more abstract forms of music and noise were paired with specific sets of ideas and images and how, through these pairings, those sounds essentially became signifiers for ideas that are not literally represented within the composition.

This way of ascribing meaning and value to formlessness appeals greatly to me because of the way it relies on ambiguity as a tool to develop a deeper and more intense relationship with an image.

Sound is another spirit, another unseen force which wreaks havoc on its environment, thickening the air and clouding it full of information. The soundscape within this space was constructed from multiple tape loops of field recordings and voice in combination with manipulated feedback loops. There is something that commands close listening in noisy, low-fidelity, audio. In this close listening, sound becomes personified, disembodied voices emerge, and yet another fragile and obscure message is revealed.

My role in this work is one that is necessarily multifaceted. I operate at once as character, maker, and witness. Fracturing myself into these three different roles allows me to cope with the aspects of making art, particularly making art within an institution, which are out of harmony with my values and goals as a creative person. There is a need for a certain slowness and irregularity in making work that is spiritually engaged. This process has been a struggle of being able to maintain belief in my own work and being pulled out of my own illusion by a requirement to dissect and verbalize each step along the way. I hope that some of my words today either provided some clarity about this work, or invited you to see something cast in shadow.

Thank you all for being here today and thank you for listening. Before I stop talking I just want to thank all of my friends who have contributed as much as I have to this project in terms of time

and support, anyone who has talked with me about this during this semester, and Michelle for being able to engage with these ideas with a lot of empathy and understanding.

Bibliography

/ / /

Brandon, George. “Lucumi Divination, the Mythic World, and the Management of Misfortune.” *Anthropologica*, vol. 54, no. iss. 2, 2012, pp. 167–88.

Speaks of “symbolic healing” and nature based divination.

Busekist, Astrid von. “The Unutterable.” *Raisons politiques* 2, no. 2: 89–112. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-raisons-politiques-2001-2-page-89.htm>.

Graw, Knut. “Beyond Expertise: Reflections on Specialist Agency and The Autonomy of the Divinatory Ritual Process.” *Africa*, vol. 79, no. 1, Feb. 2009, pp. 92–109. *DOI.org* (*Crossref*), <https://doi.org/10.3366/E0001972008000624>.

Knut Graw discusses agency and autonomy within divinatory practice in relation to

Senegambian forms of divination. Graw questions how it is possible to place significance on the object of divination as the source of enunciation rather than the diviner themselves. To answer this question, Graw speaks of a “sedimentation of experiences,” a socio-cultural process that is both dynamic and historically based which is used as a sort of cloud of information to source the enunciation of a divinatory consultation. This source has led me to think about a process of a sort of reverse divination, a way of accessing this chaotic and dynamic sedimentation of experiences, to blow apart these layers and experience them.

Grosz, Elizabeth, and Gilles Deleuze. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. Columbia University Press, 2008.

A philosophical exploration of the evolution of arts and how they relate to the natural world. Interpretations of Deleuze, Guattari, etc.

Horsfield, Kate, et al. *Ana Mendieta: Fuego de Tierra*. Women Make Movies, 1987.

Ana Mendieta documentary which moves through her upbringing and relationship to land that fueled her *Siluetas* work.

Lavie, Smadar, and Ted Swedenburg, eds. *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Lingan, Edmund B. “The Alchemical Marriage of Art, Performance, and Spirituality.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 31, no. 1 (January 2009): 38–43.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30131087>.

Edmund B. Lingan’s article within the PAJ, entitled *The Alchemical Marriage of Art, Performance, and Spirituality*, briefly creates connections between ideas and attempts to expand the conversation around “a surge of interest in spirituality that currently informs the creation of art across a wide range of disciplines.” Setting out to explore and respond to “why this abundance of spiritually concerned art exists,” and what is unique within this contemporary scope of spiritually informed art, Lingan traces back influences of occultism, eastern philosophies, and previous art movements that share similar influences.

Tedlock, Barbara. “Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation.” *Folklore*, vol. 112, no. 2, Jan. 2001, pp. 189–97. DOI.org

(Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00155870120082236>.

Barbara Tedlock’s article entitled *Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation* briefly introduces divination, its etymology, and the various forms and methods of divining across cultures. These indigenous theories of divination are provided from Zulu, Ifa, Tiv, and K’iche traditions of divination, and explore the language and frameworks these different cultures use in explaining their own practices.

Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. 2010. *Open WorldCat*, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10421869>.

Saterstrom, Selah. *Ideal Suggestions Essays in Divinatory Poetics*. Essay press, 2017.

Spinozzi, Adrienne. *Shapes from Out of Nowhere: Ceramics from the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection*. Atelier Editions.

Sutcliffe, Jamie. *Magic: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2021.

Washington City Paper. “Cosmic Energy Beings Descend on Greater Reston Arts Center in Paulina Peavy’s Outsider Art,” January 12, 2018.

<http://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/325110/paulina-peavy-a-message-to-paulina-at-greater-reston-arts-center/>.

Whistler, D. “‘Unutterable Utterances’ and ‘Mysterious Naming’: Nomination in Badiou and the Theatre of Mysticism.” Accessed May 10, 2022.

https://core.ac.uk/display/80781618?utm_source=pdf&utm_medium=banner&utm_campaign=pdf-decoration-v1.