

Edited by Sampada Aranke and Huey Copeland

# DOSSIER

## AFRO-PESSIMIST AESTHETICS

### AFRO-PESSIMIST AESTHETICS: AN OPEN QUESTION

HUEY COPELAND

In the last few decades, Afro-pessimism has arguably become one of the most vital, trenchant, and often contentious modes of Black radical thought. Extending the work of cultural theorists from Frantz Fanon to Orlando Patterson and emerging from a deep engagement with the work of scholars Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, Afro-pessimism at once reveals and reckons with the modern world's fundamentally anti-Black antagonism, which, in political-ontological terms, structurally positions the Black as the slave, the void, the site of noncapacity that makes possible whiteness, relationality, in a word, "the world" itself.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, a critical understanding of how anti-Blackness shapes and deforms even seemingly innocent registers of experience and expression is vital to any contemporary inquiry worthy of the name. As Jared Sexton has written, Afro-pessimism

is "both an epistemological and an ethical project" that attempts to find a language to speak to the ongoing violence enacted upon Black bodies while it also, in the words of Christina Sharpe, "embraces 'without pathos' that which is constructed and defined as pathology . . . insistently speaks what is being constituted as the unspeakable and enacts an . . . embrace of what is constituted as (affirmatively) unembraceable."<sup>2</sup> In its "tending-toward-Blackness" and its refusal to offer a narrative of progress in the face of ongoing racial violence, Afro-pessimism aims to troubles those notions and structures that are constitutive of the current order and actively looks toward its destruction.<sup>3</sup>

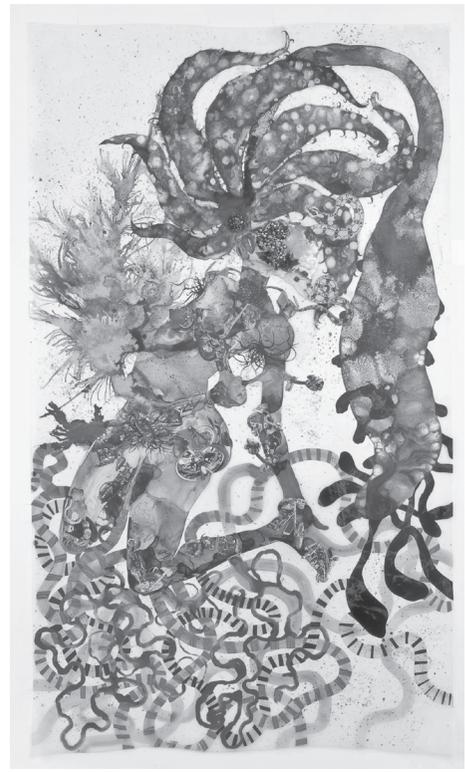
Viewed in this light, the notion of an Afro-pessimist aesthetics may sound like an oxymoron at best, not only because the theory is intent on troubling normative categories but also given how key the critique of modes of performative, visual, and filmic articulation, themselves saturated by anti-Black violence, have been in the development of Afro-pessimism's critical lexicon and its identification of the limits of contemporary cultural practice. To recast a question posed by leading theorist Frank B. Wilderson III,

“can [the aesthetic] tell the story of a sentient being whose story can be neither recognized nor incorporated into Human civil society?”<sup>4</sup> Yet the term “aesthetic,” as derived from the Greek, means, precisely, “sensitive, sentient, pertaining to sense perception,” and it is often, I would argue, Black artistic modes that productively imagine and gesture toward what Wilderson identifies as a kind of revolutionary horizon: “Only when real violence is coupled with representational ‘monstrosity’ can Blacks move from the status of things to the status of . . . of what, we’ll just have to wait and see.”<sup>5</sup>

In considering these provocations, we might look to the work of a practitioner such as Kenyan-born US-based Wangechi Mutu; her art bodies forth both an affirmative response to Wilderson’s question—can the aesthetic tell the story of a sentient being whose story can be neither recognized nor incorporated into human civil society?—as well as to his proleptic desire for those representational monstrosities that emerge on the other side of the horizon. For throughout Mutu’s Black radical feminist practice, we witness a conjoining of the earthly, the machinic, the animal, and the botanical, suggesting “the entire world stuffed inside the African female body” only to be “tortuously turned inside out,” underlining the Black woman’s position as the locus from which all forms of being take their bearing (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Engaging with the particularities of such works, I want to say, opens onto productive questions about not only what an Afro-pessimist imaginary gives us to see and do but also about how we might consider

the aesthetics, rhetorics, and performatives of Afro-pessimist praxis itself, which, assertions to the contrary, are necessarily bound up with aesthetic questions concerning abstraction and representation.

It is precisely such possibilities that Sampada Aranke, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Mlondolozzi Zondi, and Wilderson—hailing from varying generations, disciplines, and national contexts—explore in their contributions to this



**Figure 1.**  
*Wangechi Mutu, A'gave you (2008). Mixed media collage on mylar, 93 × 54 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.*

dossier, which originated as a panel discussion held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on November 10, 2017. My co-convenor Aranke and I asked each participant to home in on a specific aesthetic intervention particular to their field of disciplinary specialization as a way to begin thinking about the possibilities and limitations opened up by the conjunction of Afro-pessimism and the aesthetic. What emerged from these perspectives is neither a program nor a set of prescriptions, but a kaleidoscopic engagement with contemporary culture that takes seriously the political-ontological situation of Blackness without offering any hope of redemption, aesthetic or otherwise. Instead, what becomes clear is each thinker's willingness to hover in the contradictions that necessarily attend Black being's unfurling in those aesthetic, political, and institutional contexts predicated on its negation, despite the difficulties of doing so. This tactical orientation is forcefully underlined by "To Sit with Refusal," an edited version of the conversation among the authors that here follows the three short essays.

Although certain investments are broadly shared, each speaker arrives at her or his own statement through varying rhetorical means that bring to light different aspects of Afro-pessimist theory that lend themselves to both an expansion and interrogation of aesthetic categories. Aranke looks to the performative pissing of African American artist David Hammons in rapidly gentrifying late 1970s and early '80s New York public spaces as a mode of *placemaking* that underlines the

generativity of the Black's belonging nowhere within civil society's spaces and institutions. In his talk, which expanded on an already published article, Wilderson offered a close reading of several scenes from the film *12 Years a Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen, 2013) in order to illuminate the fundamentally incommensurable positions of the bondsman and the master, which, when viewed through an Afro-pessimist lens, unwittingly reveal a fracturing of the cinematic code itself.<sup>7</sup> Zondi likewise explores the implications of such a structural accounting of positionality in examining a recent collaborative dance work, Ligia Lewis's *minor matter*. Mounted by Black and white practitioners from both sides of the Atlantic, the work figures interracial corporeal proximity but makes no promises of actual relationality between those placed within and outside the scope of the human. In Joja's hands, the lessons of Afro-pessimism are, arguably, taken to their logical conclusion: rejecting traditional Western theories of the aesthetic in favor of the African-derived theory of *bolekaja*, he locates the most radical interventions and gestures as stemming from any and all acts aimed at Black revolution.

In her generous response to the dossier, commissioned for this occasion, Adrienne Edwards takes up and extends the authors' thinking in looking carefully at the work of video artist Tony Cokes while also offering a critique of Afro-pessimism's operative presumptions, particular its address to the body, the state, and the image. Perhaps, she contends, an "Afro-pessimist aesthetic" is to be located in works

like Cokes's that refuse the visual and instead maintain the openness of a void in which other possibilities can be imagined that either deform, reframe, or radically undo our understanding of representation itself. Throughout this dossier, what emerges time and again are the pleasures and opportunities afforded by rigorously theorizing the anti-Blackness of the aesthetic and its worlds, which continue to pose an open question for us all. Indeed, posing such questions is vital in moving toward a conception of the aesthetic that is not always already blinkered and biased by the ruses of Western so-called civilization.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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#### / Notes /

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<sup>1</sup> Here I have in mind: Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" and "The Negro and Psychopathology," in *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Press,

1967); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in "Culture and Countermemory: The 'American' Connection," ed. S. P. Mohanty, special issue, *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81; and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Afro-pessimist discourse finds perhaps its most well-known synthesis and rearticulation of these positions in Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). However, many of the discourse's foundational texts are collected in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: racked & dispatched, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes*, no. 29 (2016), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>; Christina Sharpe, "Response to [Jared Sexton's] 'Ante-Anti-Blackness,'" *Lateral* 1 (Winter 2012), <https://csalateral.org/section/theory/ante-anti-blackness-response-sharpe/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Huey Copeland, "Tending-toward-Blackness," *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 141–44.

<sup>4</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 96.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Huey Copeland, "Flow and Arrest," *small axe* 19, no. 3 (November 2015): 223.

<sup>7</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 134–49.

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## VOIDING FROM NOWHERE: ABJECT MATERIALITY IN DAVID HAMMONS'S *PISSED OFF*

SAMPADA ARANKE

I like being from nowhere; it's a beautiful place. That means I can look at anyone who's from somewhere and see how really caught they are.

—David Hammons<sup>1</sup>

In a September 2004 *Artforum* essay, artist Glenn Ligon lingers on this David Hammons quote in which the famed artist offers up a poetic embrace of nowhere as a location of freedom. For Ligon, Hammons's insistence on being from nowhere is a move "toward placeless-ness" and a "deep critique of American society."<sup>2</sup> Ligon's translation of Hammons's "being from nowhere" into "placeless-ness" is one of particular note, in light of this dossier on Afro-pessimist Aesthetics. For it is not placelessness that Hammons describes but instead an insistence

that nowhere is a place—in fact, a beautiful one. Ligon's analysis of this Hammons quote opens up a subtle yet imperative dissonance between placelessness and no-place. Building from Ligon, I offer up a provocation: What might it mean to take seriously the grounds of *nowhere*?

The theoretical contributions gathered under the umbrella of Afro-pessimism have allowed me to think about the rhetorical potential of nowhere, nothing, or nothingness, specifically in relation to questions of aesthetic and embodied practice. Afro-pessimist theory offers up a potentially nonrecuperable understanding of aesthetic possibility, one that strives to push us to the limits of the demand to generate a repair while also opening up a radical rethinking of the conditions for reparation. This is best evidenced in a theory of the Black body that is located within a "position of the unthought," a phrase taken from a 2003 interview between Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson.<sup>3</sup> From this position, there is an attempt to force narrative cohesion, presenting the Black subject as at once "the foundation of the national order" and occupying the position of the unthought.<sup>4</sup> This impossible position forces Black people to endure the ongoing structural violences that form the nation while at once demanding they affirm this very nation.<sup>5</sup> The call for reparations, according to Hartman, is made from an "impossible position, because reparations are not going to solve the systemic ongoing production of racial inequality, in material or any other terms."<sup>6</sup> I believe that this call is a start, however, from an impossible position, a

position from nowhere that makes some kind of generative impossible demand.

The “position of the unthought” opens up a rethinking of Black embodiment that moves us away from the primacy of the readily visible, into a potentially worldly arena of negation. As Wilderson argues, “I’m not saying that in this space of negation, which is blackness, there is no life. We have tremendous life. But this life is not analogous to those touchstones of cohesion that hold civil society together.”<sup>7</sup> Building from a notion of the life within the space of negation which is blackness, I turn to how nowhere is the critical position from which a particular critique is made possible. Being from nowhere, in other words, deforms the very premise of aesthetic practice—it is an act of bodily generation that is not one, a modality of critical practice that misdirects us into the space of the void. In this spirit, I return over and over again to a question that Hartman asks: “So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void?”<sup>8</sup>

This might be why I read Hammons’s nowhere as a place that is unlocatable, nondefined, neither here nor there. It would serve us to excavate the possible roots or routes of this unlocatable nonplace, an origin that begins for Black people in the US in the Middle Passage. Édouard Glissant has described the Middle Passage as an “abyss,” while Hortense Spillers notes how “these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but

they were also *nowhere* at all.”<sup>9</sup> These descriptors shape what I take up in this essay as “the void” as a reference to the genealogical rupture brought about by the Middle Passage and its contemporary legacies. In light of these anoriginary nonplaces of origin, Hammons’s “nowhere” is a deep critique of the conditions of placemaking or even the ability to have a place to make. From this nowhere, the void becomes an activity, an action of deforming and rematerializing aesthetics.

Two years before his famous *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), David Hammons pissed on a Richard Serra sculpture (Fig. 1). Completed



**Figure 1.**  
*Dawoud Bey, David Hammons, Pissed Off (1981)*  
(Detail). Courtesy of the Artist and Stephen Daiter Gallery.

in 1980, Serra's sculpture, *T.W.U.*—named after the Transport Workers Union who went on an eleven-day strike during the sculpture's installation—was located directly in front of the Franklin Street subway stop in New York City. *T.W.U.* is composed of three 2-3/4-inch thick steel plates, measuring 12 feet × 36 feet, and weighing in at 72 tons. Serra, for whom place and its specificity are nonnegotiable material, intended *T.W.U.* to be an instantiation of place in a city where transience is routine.

Just one year after it was installed, Serra's sculpture was claimed by the city's homeless as a place for refuge and shelter, a popular site for graffiti and wheatpasting, and a convenient location to leave behind empty cans and trash. The sculpture quickly moved away from the pristine boldness of its monumentality and toward the wear and tear of everyday city life. It's within this context that Hammons, dressed in sneakers, khaki pants, a dashiki print shirt, and visor, pisses on the cold steel of the sculpture.

Urinating, also referred to as “voiding” in medical terminology, is a necessary stage in the metabolic process as an expulsion of toxins and excessive compounds from the body. In other words, urinating makes something, albeit a toxic and excessive object material. Hammons makes urine his performance material, mixing his warm, organic bodily fluid with the cold, industrial qualities of steel. Hammons *marks* the sculpture, thus initiating a process of oxidation—transforming the gray steel into the deep orange of rust and imbuing

the material with a familiar stench. Ligon has also referred to Hammons's broader practice as a kind of “emptying out of the self as a critical strategy,” and I can't help but of think that manifestation here—as Hammons literally empties himself out and onto the external referent.<sup>10</sup>

Now, there is, of course, a dark humor to Hammons's performance. For one, Hammons can be seen as taking the piss out of (or making fun of) Serra's outlandish investment in monumentality and site-specificity. We can also think of his intervention as an act of alleviation—transforming his rage (“being pissed off” as the title indicates) into a relief. He also, in pure Hammons form, makes literal the pissing contest involved in a particular masculinist and territorial practice of monumentality associated with canonical figures like Serra who have the capacity to define and make place to begin with. This dark humor could best be identified as a *placemaking*, where to be from nowhere allows for a reconceptualization of knowing one's place.

As Hammons makes visible, knowing one's place is doubly violent. To know where one comes from is a genealogical knowledge that is incomplete, if not impossible, for Black people in the US, who can only track such knowledge to the Middle Passage. Additionally, knowing one's place is a managed policing endeavor, in which access to a place is determined by force and restriction, and delimits the condition of possibility for where Black people *can be*, let alone where one *is from or*

is. Therefore, Hammons's assertion that he is of nowhere destabilizes any such certainty and sanctity of place. Hammons's appearance on-site is a physical referent of the "where" in "nowhere" for Black Americans. Nowhere is everywhere as much as it is not. Perhaps, then, Hammons's performance works to activate the impropriety of *placemaking*, to move toward the wretched material of waste, and to see from the position of nowhere.

This might be why, when asked by Huey Copeland in the September 2017 issue of *Artforum*, "So what would it mean to create spaces that are *not* beholden to the work of narrative, explanation, cultural justification, or black respectability?" Frank Wilderson responds, with a laugh, "That would be a very vibrant space for black people, and a very dangerous space for everyone else."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hammons, quoted in Glenn Ligon, "Black Light: David Hammons and the Poetics of Emptiness," *Artforum* 43, no. 1 (September 2004): 249.

<sup>2</sup> Ligon, "Black Light," 249.

<sup>3</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 183–201.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–85.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>9</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), 6; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," "Culture and Counteremory: The 'American' Connection," ed. S. P. Mohanty, special issue, *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ligon, "Black Light," 249.

<sup>11</sup> Huey Copeland and Frank Wilderson, "Red, Black, and Blue: The National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian," *Artforum* 56, no. 1 (September 2017).

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## BOLEKAJA AESTHETICS

**ATHI MONGEZELELI JOJA**

This meditation explores what I call "bolekaja aesthetics," an appellation that does not as yet have a fully developed posture, let alone the critical clout and notoriety that shadows the term *bolekaja*. Bolekaja aesthetics attempts to render sensible, but not necessarily legible,

Black people's insurgent acts and insurrectionary interventions in post-1994 South Africa—covering student uprisings, community protests, and even the retaliatory acts of self-defense. But there's a need to “distinguish and even to distance [this] rage from . . . an entrenched pattern in which black men commit reactionary forms of domestic [and public] violence they understand to be prefatory or preparatory to public acts of insurrection against the state.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, political leader Andile Mngxitama cautions against the externalization of this rage toward foreign African nationals.<sup>2</sup>

By referring to these public events as acts or aesthetics, I seek to underscore their performative, or dramatic, dimensions, albeit without choreographic intent. Therefore, *bolekaja* aesthetics theorizes this theatrical noticeability of Black insurgency, not as a wild invention but as part of “the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering.”<sup>3</sup> The attempt here is to reveal that politics and aesthetics are continuous instead of antinomous.

However, the aesthetic does not appear as a meek, ornamental, and beauteous instrument of the political. Instead, as Monique Roelofs argues,

[r]acialization cannot be understood apart from its aesthetic supports and the aesthetic cannot be understood apart from its racial underpinnings.

A failure to recognize their complex, mutual entanglements runs the risk of aligning the aesthetic too tidily with historically stabilized cultural demarcations, or of reinstating whiteness as a basis of normativity in the fields of art and culture.<sup>4</sup>

To disentangle the aesthetic as “pure” form from its sociopolitical background can only be egregious.<sup>5</sup>

*Bolekaja* means “come down, let's fight!” in Yoruba and refers to West Nigerian mammy-wagon conductors who, when growing tired of their passengers' quibbles about their defective vehicles, invite them to “come down . . . and ‘fight,’ goading them with such epithets as ‘aje butter’ (butter-fed weaklings), who have grown too pampered by Western technology to be able to withstand the little discomforts of home-grown frugality.”<sup>6</sup>

In the literary field, where the term has gained notoriety after the publication of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980), by Nigerian scholars Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *bolekaja* criticism instantiates the anticolonial position. The authors thus define their polemical project as a combative rooting out of “imperialist rot . . . to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality.” They write: “There comes a time, we believe, in the affairs of men and of nations, when it becomes necessary for them to engage in *bolekaja* criticism, for them to drag the stiflers of

their life down to earth for a corrective tussle. A little wrestle on the sands never killed a sturdy youth.”<sup>7</sup> This martial phraseology is a metaphor for their literary criticism directed toward Western adversaries and their sympathizers. The performative power of this acrimony, whether legitimate or not, takes on the structure of racial antagonism to resituate the self-effacing character of European literary criticism from imperialist milieu. On the other hand, although there exist political and theoretical differences, the polemical force of bolekaja critics appears synchronous, in tone and inflection, with aspects of leftist criticisms, particularly those of young Marx, who insisted on a “ruthless criticism,” and of Bertolt Brecht’s notion of *plumpes Denken* [“crude thinking”]. For Marx, a “ruthless criticism of all that exists” meant “ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, in *Understanding Brecht*, writes, “Crude thoughts belong to the household of dialectical thinking precisely because they represent nothing other than the application of theory to practice. . . . But a thought must be crude in order to come into its own in action.”<sup>9</sup>

Considering the bold and unflinching posture of the critical practices outlined above, we must ask: why is bolekaja criticism condemned in the global literary circles while that of its Marxist antecedents is venerated? The answer is straightforward! The detractors of bolekaja criticism have lambasted it for deploying masculinist language and for

reproducing “a veritable ontologization” of nativism.<sup>10</sup> Implicit behind these denunciations, however, is not only that bolekaja critics call into question the unchecked tyranny of Eurocentric cultural criticism but that they also position European civilization writ large as “incorrigibly anti-African.”<sup>11</sup> In Euro-modern philosophical anthropology and aesthetic judgement, Blacks, as Kant wrote, never “rise above the trifling,” but so too are their cultural productions dismissed.<sup>12</sup>

While as a linguistic pairing the terms “bolekaja” and “criticism” might seem relatively contiguous, its aesthetic correlate strikes one as a “semantic monstrosity,” perhaps because protest was once believed to “devalue” literature.<sup>13</sup> But if there is anyone who has persistently troubled this view from the margins of Black political and cultural discourse, it has been C. L. R. James, whose remarks in the study of dialectical reason have insisted, *en passant*, that a revolutionary is an artist: “I have long believed that a very great revolutionary is a great artist, and that he develops his ideas, programmes, etc., as Beethoven develops a movement.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, James based this connection on his learnings of Lenin’s ideas and of the tactical prowess that led to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. What seemed like a transitory statement would be further developed and complicated in James’s seminal essay, “What is Art?,” included in his famous 1963 study on cricket, when he says, “I have made great claims for cricket. . . . I have integrated it in the historical movement of the time. The question remains: What is

it? Is it mere entertainment or is it an art?”<sup>15</sup> He then begins to draw parallels between the aesthetic dimensions of cricket with those of the dramatic arts. For James, cricket “is a game and we have to compare it with other games. It is an art and we have to compare it with other arts. Cricket is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle. It belongs with the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, this was not an unprecedented intervention in itself, but it extended further to move in rhythm with prior and ongoing contestations against prevalent bourgeois conceptions of art. Contrary to “critics of art” though, who were “contemptuous of the word” beauty—and one might add, the avant-garde in the form of Allan Kaprow’s teleological deskilling or transcending of art toward life—James’s prescient views embraced a capacious notion of art that spoke of beauty but was also inclusive of popular culture and organized politics.<sup>17</sup>

James also avoided the binaristic nomenclatures of art and craft prevalent in Western art history that tended to imprison Western vanguardism in what Petrine Archer Straw might characterize as a fetishistic allure of primitivized Blackness.<sup>18</sup> The idea that appropriating African-derived objects into Western high culture (alongside “found objects”) dumbed-down “art,” itself retained, rather than dispelled, the racist perceptions that informed European aesthetic theory. Apropos of James, art historian David Craven argues that

[t]he crucial importance of the dialogical interplay of high art and popular

culture could not be used legitimately to dumb-down or de-skill the very real and quite worthwhile challenges posed by the mastery of artistic media in the arts, along with the visual languages linked to them and the specific form of highly-skilled labour necessary for realising them.<sup>19</sup>

James’s intervention, it seems to me, was not only level-headed, it was also an attempt in stretching (in Fanon’s sense) these narrow boundaries of what art was considered to be.

A few years later, however, Julian Mayfield arrives with an even more radical position regarding art’s relationship to the revolution than James’s that one could only refer to it metaphorically. In certain respects, it builds on James’s approach. In his essay, “Touch My Black Aesthetic and I will Touch Yours,” from Addison Gayle’s 1971 anthology, *The Black Aesthetic*, Mayfield arrives at a controversial theory of Black aesthetics, whose meaning, he postulates, comes from “deep down in my guts.” “The Black Aesthetic,” he writes, “is necessarily the business of making revolution, for we have tried everything else. . . . [it] is Bobby Seale, bound and gagged and straining at his leash in a Chicago courtroom”—a proposition Paul C. Taylor found incongruous with the outlook of “hoping for more, and finding ways to laugh, love, and dance” that undergirds his recent study on Black aesthetics.<sup>20</sup> Although Mayfield does not explain why he recurses to the aesthetic, based on his opening remarks to the haptical invasion of

the Black body by foreign hands, he invokes what Frank Wilderson calls the “quandary of a Black Unconscious.”<sup>21</sup> The aesthetic, after all, linguistically speaking, circles back to sense, sensibility, and the corporeal. Rethinking it, as Sylvia Wynter pushes us to do, is therefore to consider its function for human life in relation to how it cultivates an oppositional stance toward power.<sup>22</sup>

Bolekaja aesthetics instantiates this “partition of the sensible . . . making visible that which was not visible, audible as speaking beings they who were merely heard as noisy animals.”<sup>23</sup> In South Africa, as is the case globally, anti-racist critique has become anathematic, as a form systematically obscuring the prevalence of the racist structure. Here, I want to single out how, for example, the unflinching criticisms of radical formations like Black First Land First (BLF) have rubbed the status quo the wrong way. From its name, to their slogan “land or death,” BLF became too menacing for whites and the white financial oligarchs, and even the Black petit bourgeoisie. In the wake of #RhodesMustFall student protests, a political pastiche led by captains of industry called the #ZumaMustFall campaign set out to divert focus from the popular sentiments against settler-colonial capitalism by redirecting the ire elsewhere.

President Zuma, who happens to continually *court* reactionary controversy, and the Guptas, a tycoon Indian expatriate family, came in as the proverbial scapegoats on which racial inequality and exclusion would be lamentably

pinned, under the banner of “State Capture.” As a consequence, race and colonial denialism led to the mystification of the racial whiteness of settler capitalism into a benign and impersonal system.<sup>24</sup> However, BLF argued that part of its mission was to make visible the hand of “racial capitalism” in State Capture discourse, which meant unearthing the racial material force permeating the social and political structures emergent from capitalism.<sup>25</sup> On these grounds, it therefore rejected the narrative of State Capture *as* simply corruption, arguing instead that South Africa itself (old and new) is a captured state.

“Hands off Zuma: Economic Liberation Now,” insisted one of its earlier placards. Not to be interpreted as a denial of the charges brought against the president, the BLF campaign advocated for Radical Economic Transformation (RET), Land Expropriation Without Compensation, and Free Decolonized Education as a preliminary program of action. These self-declared “constitutional delinquents” insisted that succumbing to the narrative of State Capture as corruption moralizes paradigmatic issues while immunizing the historicity of anti-Black racism; hence their cry, “peace amongst blacks, and war to the enemy.” For BLF’s leader, Andile Mngxitama, “[t]his principle teaches us that our main enemy is white settler colonialism and that we must never fight or seek to destroy other black people. On the other hand, white settler neo-colonialism has its own principle called ‘divide and rule’ which it uses to destroy the black nation.”<sup>26</sup>

What then does it mean to lean toward Blackness? “Tending-toward-Blackness,” Huey Copeland tells us, is “aimed at establishing an ethical posture toward black subjects and those related forms of being that have been positioned at the margins of thought and perception yet are necessarily co-constitutive of them.”<sup>27</sup> Leaning toward Blackness, by necessity, is a philo-aesthetic-praxis of liberation.<sup>28</sup> To say “Black First, Land First,” the implications and the imagined contents of that phrase index a visual and geopolitical disposition that immediately discounts any utopian analysis of aesthetics or the *now*.<sup>29</sup>

BLF, however, is neither an exception nor the sole bearer of the lacerations earned from such deviatory practice. From BLF, to #RhodesMustFall, Marikana miners, Andries Tatane, and even to the Forum of Black Journalists, the lesson is that Black radical formations are constitutionally abominable, while Black fungibility remains the status quo. That is why numerous preemptive strikes always seem underway to curb their potentiality, either by way of caricature, insults, or brutal interdiction. As Cedric Robinson observes of Black radicalism, “the very circumstance of its appearance has required that it be misinterpreted and diminished.”<sup>30</sup>

Responding to the public denunciation of the “fees must fall” movement’s destruction of university and public property, which left a considerable number of students jailed and/or expelled, and some even dead, professor emeritus Mogobe Ramose argued against

the popular professorial demeanor. Ramose referred to these student protests, and, by extension, all oppressed people’s insurrectionary activities, as acts of “democratic violence” whose hallmark “is the ethical demand for equality of condition, that is, substantive as opposed to formal equality.” Implicit in Ramose’s appeal for student uprisings was that their transgressions are as a result of a prior unaccounted-for and indeed systemically necessary disregard of Blacks. He writes:

The problem is that [the university and state establishment] ignore[ ] the violence to the only property that the students have, namely, their body and focuses on “property” that may not take precedence over the students’ right to physical integrity. To disregard the violation of the students’ right to physical integrity is to undermine the ethical order of priority.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the refusal to follow institutional conventions and opting instead for disruption invokes what Nigel Gibson once characterized as “the lived revolt and creativity of the damned of the earth.”<sup>32</sup> The ubiquitous referral to such terms as “bolekaja,” “sister killjoy,” and even “Blackness,” which have been associated with an anachronistic nationalism assumed to have been defeated years back, riles up the tempers. On the other hand, the association of this tendency with such terms as “pessimism,” “social death,” “masculinism,” and “pain,” broadly juxtaposed next to each other as caricature material, as invectives, have become an accepted theater in their own right,

serving goodness knows what. However, the fires stoked against liberal democracy make the plotted failures of Black radical formations only generative because they reacquaint us with the fact that Black liberation is not only outlawed in the unconscious, to paraphrase Wilderson, but also foreclosed in the courts.<sup>33</sup> This foreclosure prematurely terminates the possibilities not only for struggle itself but also for developing truly pluriversal research methodologies. Jared Sexton's recent response to this disavowal apropos Afro-pessimism is apt:

If Afro-Pessimism has captured the imagination of certain black radical formations and suggested a critical idiom, provoking a basic rethinking among more than a few of their non-black counterparts by the way, it has also, and maybe for the same reasons, struck a nerve among others, all along the color line, who fear that open-minded engagement involves forsaking some of the most hard-earned lessons of the last generation.<sup>34</sup>

In conclusion, it's here, in this intersection between generativity and foreclosure, or in a foreclosure that simultaneously cannot avoid being generative, that boleka aesthetics meets and perhaps is itself an Afro-pessimistic impulse. However, what to call this meeting between theory and the impulsive or destructive energy of antiracist Black formations is neither here nor there. All we know is that it takes place, as Wilderson has argued with regard to performance and ontology, "not on a well-lit stage, but in a fog" and therefore

constantly eludes legible descriptions and definitions.<sup>35</sup> Bolekaja aesthetics is an attempt to make sense of Black revolutionary destruction not as an aberration or anomaly but as a necessary particularity birthed by its condition of existence.

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## / Notes /

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Sexton, "Afropessimism: An Unclear Word," *Rhizome: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02>.

<sup>2</sup> See Andile Mngxitama, "Blacks are Kwerekweres, Whites are Tourists," *New Frank Talk: Critical Essays on the Black Condition*, no. 7 (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of a Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Monique Roelofs, "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vice Versa?" in *White on White/Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 109.

<sup>5</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Chike Anyaegbunam, "Bolekaja in the Construction of Africa in Intellectual Discourse," in "Africa: Communication, History and Identity," ed. Chike Anyaegbunam, special issue, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1993): iii.

<sup>7</sup> Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980; Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), 1, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing (Marx to Arnold Ruge)," in

*The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (New York: Verso, 1998), 81.

<sup>10</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory," in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 435.

<sup>11</sup> Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 110.

<sup>13</sup> William R. Jones, "The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy: Some Preliminary Considerations," *Philosophical Forum* 9 nos. 2–3 (Winter/Spring 1977–1978): 149–60. The issue of protest in South African art and literature has been controversial since at least the 1960s in writings from such diverse authors as Lewis Nkosi (1965), Albie Sachs (1990), and Njabulo Ndebele (1991). See also James Baldwin, "Everyone's Protest Novel" (1964).

<sup>14</sup> C. L. R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel-Marx-Lenin* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1981), 153.

<sup>15</sup> C. L. R. James, "What is Art?" in *Beyond a Boundary* (1963; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 196.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> For a serious and unflinching critique of the racist fantasies of Western avant-garde art and cultural practice in the Paris of 1920s, see Petrine Archer Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> David Craven, "C. L. R. James as a Critical Theorist of Modernist Art," in *Art History as Social Praxis: Collected Writings of David Craven*, ed. Brian Winkenweder (Boston: Brill, 2017), 309–10.

<sup>20</sup> Julian Mayfield, "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Anchor, 1972), 24, 31, 29; Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 185.

<sup>21</sup> Expanding on this, Wilderson writes, "rhetorical strategies are less attributable to conscious selection and combination decisions than they are to the quandary of a *Black unconscious* trapped by the disorientation of violent events and disorientation constituted by a paradigm of violence which is too comprehensive for words." Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection of the Political Trials of Black Insurgents," *InTensions Journal*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 22; emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> See Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Exiles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 240.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link" (lecture, University of California at Berkeley, September 2000), <http://16beaver.group.org/mondays/2006/05/06/monday-night-05-08-06-discussion-on-rancieres-politics-of-aesthetics/>.

<sup>24</sup> For an examination of how and why the term "white monopoly capitalism" has all of a sudden turned out to be an anomaly, in the wake of the State Capture discussion, see Oupa Lehulere's contribution on the matter. Oupa Lehulere, "Cronin & Company Harness Marxism to the Service of White Monopoly Capital," *Khanya College Journal*, no. 36 (April/May 2017), <http://khanyajournal.org.za/cronin-company-harness-marxism-to-the-service-of-white-monopoly-capital/>.

<sup>25</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Mandla Mbuyisa, “A Response to Steve Lebelo,” *Black Opinion*, December 8, 2016, <https://blackopinion.co.za/2016/12/08/response-steve-lebelo/>.

<sup>27</sup> Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 143, doi:10.1162/OCTO\_a\_00249.

<sup>28</sup> “Philo-aesthetic-praxis” extends from the concept of philo-praxis; philosopher Ndumiso Dladla builds on the idea that philosophy, despite its capacity to self-examine, isn’t orientated toward itself but instead toward the reality that it interprets. It goes without saying, a philo-aesthetic-praxis speaks to what we are trying to develop as a theory of aesthetics that is coterminously enunciative and emerging out of the reality it reflects. For a thorough development of the concept of philo-praxis, see Ndumiso Dladla, “Towards an African Critical Philosophy of Race: Ubuntu as a Philo-praxis of Liberation,” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 6, no. 1 (January/June 2017): 39–68.

<sup>29</sup> See Hortense J. Spillers, “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Mogobe Ramose, “Feta Kgomo O Tshware Motho,” *Culture Review Magazine*, February 11, 2017, <https://httpculturereview.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/feta-kgomo-o-tshwaremotho/>.

<sup>32</sup> Nigel Gibson, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo* (Pietermaritzburg, ZA: UKZN Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>33</sup> See Wilderson, “Vengeance of Vertigo,” 30.

<sup>34</sup> Sexton, “Afropessimism.”

<sup>35</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, “Grammars and Ghosts: The Performance Limits of African Freedom,” in “African and Afro-Caribbean Performance,” ed. Catherine M. Cole and Leo Cabranes-Grant, special issue, *Theatre Survey* 5, no. 1 (May 2009): 123, doi:10.1017/S004055740900009X.

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## HAUNTING GATHERING: BLACK DANCE AND AFRO-PESSIMISM

**MLONDOLOZI ZONDI**

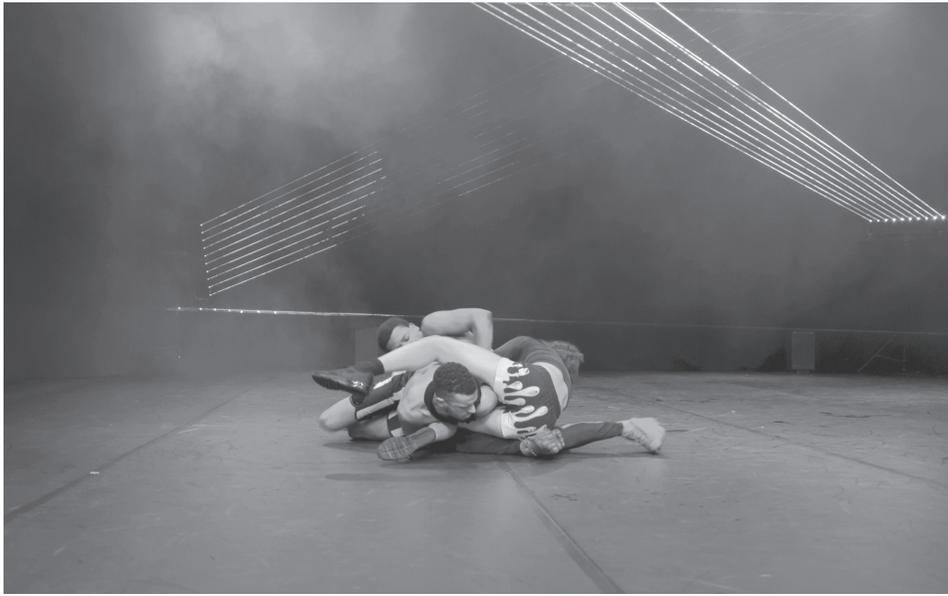
When a group comprised primarily of African-derived “people”—yes, the scare quotes matter—gather at the intersection of performance and subjectivity, the result is often not a renewed commitment to practice or an explicit ensemble of questions, but rather a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are

the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture.

—Frank B. Wilderson III<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between aesthetics and Afro-pessimism is central to my research, which focuses on the work of Black artists in the US and South Africa that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, a period after the “culture wars,” or “culture struggles” as they are known in South Africa. I engage formal performance strategies that Black artists invent and deploy in order to reveal freedom as an “incomplete project” for Blackness around the world.<sup>2</sup> With dancer-choreographer Ligia Lewis’s *minor matter* (2017) in mind, I aim to

demonstrate how this creativity exists in the midst of (and not in spite of) the persistence of Black subjugation, *the dereliction of Black corporeal integrity*, and the normalization of Black death.<sup>3</sup> Afro-pessimism expands the conception of death as not only biological but also psychic, social (lived), and imbricated in desire. Theorists of Afro-pessimism turn to Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies* (2006) as texts that radicalize Black performance studies insofar as they home in on those banal brutalities and grotesqueries of everyday Black life that are “breathed in like air.”<sup>4</sup> Both thinkers demonstrate how for the Black, the neat binary between mundane and



**Figure 1.**

Hector Thami Manekhehla, Jonathan Gonzalez, and Ligia Lewis in *minor matter* (2017). Photographer: Martha Glenn. Image courtesy of Ligia Lewis.

spectacular violence does not cohere and that anti-Blackness is irreducible to discreet hostile interactions with Black people. In particular, they reveal how for survival, Black political and aesthetic articulation have had to suppress the coexistence of these horrors with pleasure and desire.<sup>5</sup>

The body is everywhere in critical theorizing about performance, particularly dance. When it appears, it is whole; it is sensational; it is invaginated; it becomes; it is without organs; it is on the line; it affirms presence; it is a repository of memory and experience; and despite strides made to discuss it away from a reduction to biology, it disappears and/or remains as a given. My research, informed by and contributing to Afro-pessimist theorizing, questions these conclusions about the body. My concern is performance studies' (and by extension dance studies') assumptions about the body's sentience as evidence for subjectivity. The idea of the presence of the body reifies Western conceptions that underplay how the African "body" in particular, as Hortense Spillers argues, "was made to *mean* via the powerful grammars of capture" such as colonialism as well as the Arab and transatlantic slave trades.<sup>6</sup> Instead of theorizing from performance studies' presumption that there *is* a body endowed with (restricted) agency and capacity, what can be gained from taking seriously Spillers's assertion that,

the "body" is neither *given* as an uncomplicated empirical rupture on the

landscape of the human, nor do we ever actually "see" it. . . . it is an analytical construct [that] does not exist in person at all. When we invoke it, then, we are often confusing and conflating our own momentousness as address to the world . . . with an idea on paper, only made vivid because we invest it with living dimensionality, mimicked, in turn, across the play of significations.<sup>7</sup>

Spillers's work demonstrates the body's irreducibility to its anatomical features and functions, describing it instead as a meeting point of discursive-material maneuvers tied to the accumulation of power. For Spillers, "the flesh" is a more apt concept for understanding Black captive personality and creative speculation, which is distinct from the "the body" as that which demarcates liberated subjectivity. This distinction allows a reassessment of presuppositions about the Black's access to the profits of intersubjective empathy and catharsis. In theatrical performance, it reveals the violence of applause/affirmation. As opposed to studies that take for granted the Black body's wholeness and relational capacity, I am interested in how aesthetic motifs associated with formlessness and disassembly assert certain claims about Black captive personality. The performances I study attempt to refrain from amending silences and gaps in archives of Black death. In assessing these works, I share Huey Copeland's curiosity about what he calls "the limits of the sayable" when he asks, "what is

being said by not saying, and why must it be said in this particular way?”<sup>8</sup>

Literary scholar Aliyah Abdur-Rahman tends to the limits of narrative in performance and aesthetics, specifically the limits of realist and figurative gestures that attempt to translate Black suffering for the purpose of transcending it. The concept of “Black grotesquerie” is Abdur-Rahman’s way of attending to Frank Wilderson’s call that “we need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror.”<sup>9</sup> Abdur-Rahman emphasizes the role of Black aesthetic practitioners as critical thinkers whose art confounds representational logics of liberal humanist recognition. Black grotesquerie is an artistic critical posture that acknowledges catastrophe as the context for Black being and considers Black social life as “the practice of living on in outmoded shapes.”<sup>10</sup> This compositional disassembly is also a “recombinant gathering” that does not assume a prior corporeal, narrative, temporal, and topographical integrity for Blackness or Black people whose fragmentation or loss is not mournable in conventional ways. Abdur-Rahman writes:

For those whose terms of existence are tethered to structural loss—to forms of civil and social death and to the persistent likelihood of their own untimely demise—*narrative fails* in its usual procedure. The appeals, interests, and injuries of these subjects cannot be articulated or recuperated within the ordinary sites and schemas

of historical, epistemic, and political rationality.<sup>11</sup>

The failure of narrative to articulate anti-Black horror calls for approaches that refrain from mending this silence/impossibility. It remains to be determined whether Black grotesquerie’s explanatory power can fully account for a certain impasse where even Black artists working in abstraction get entrapped in unavoidable double-binds of reinforcing what they critique. Further, representational monstrosity alone cannot end anti-Black regimes of knowing and sensing. Black grotesquerie, however, does underscore violence as a ubiquitous force that restricts the chances of unfettered Black articulation or performing oneself to personhood.

I am fascinated by narrations of experimental dance that do not address Africa, even as African experimental choreographers continue to shape contemporary movement lexicons in cities around the world (i.e., Paris, New York, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo). This is not a call for the inclusion of African nontraditional performances into metanarratives of contemporary experimental performance. Rather, it is about marking how in these accounts, Africans exist outside of time as well as subsidize contemporary dance’s temporal and material integrity with their accumulated labor that goes unacknowledged. Black dance in the post-1990 era is characterized by increased transnational and multicultural collaborations and residences for Black dancers. This represents the mobility of

those who dance fluidly within and beyond national and disciplinary borders, exploding those borders, but also being racialized in the midst of that mobility. While it is important to celebrate this mobility and the possibilities it promises for the evolution of Black dance, what if critics paused to contemplate how terms such as “transnational collaboration” often obscure the class and racial anti-Black power dynamics at play in these transnational collaborative encounters? The language of “collaboration” obscures the entanglement between these gatherings and presentations of Africans as ethnographic attractions in the early twentieth century and before.<sup>12</sup> The language of transnational collaboration conceals the fact that these collaborations operate under similar (but more sophisticated and suppressed) representational logics of “past” ethnographic attractions. Black performers are invited to rehabilitate European legacies of slavery and colonialism under the guise of “self-reflexive” transnational collaboration. Such collaborations sometimes coax Black artists to collude in practices drafted against their advantage. African (diasporic) intellectual labor in dance is predominantly acknowledged merely as raw affect and energy. These examples illuminate how the global flow of anti-Blackness happens alongside and *through* performance. This means that collaborative transnational performance is also a medium or a maneuver through which anti-Blackness congeals and proliferates globally. When these collaborations are initiated by Black choreographers from the African continent and Black

artists from the Americas and Europe (usually funded by US, German, British, French, and Swiss governments “to promote culture”), there is usually an underlying promise and nostalgic expectation that a suturing of what poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey calls “wounded kinship” between Africa and African America will materialize.<sup>13</sup>

Afro-pessimism allows me to ponder these problems of Black (diasporic) collaboration through a dance performance titled *minor matter*, created in 2016 by Berlin-based Dominican American choreographer Ligia Lewis. I first experienced the piece in 2017 in New York City. Lewis shares the stage with other Black dancers from the US and South Africa, who move between various countries (the Dominican Republic, Germany, Belgium, France). These dancers include Jonathan Gonzalez and Hector Thami Manekehla, and later Tiran Willemse. The performers create a space for vibrant Black (anti-)sociality in dance without resorting to elements of performance that desire a “nostalgic and impossible suturing of wounded kinship.”<sup>14</sup> The piece takes seriously the materiality of the black box theater as a generative site for working out the gendered and racialized affect of rage. Rage is a presumed disposition for Black people, and it is institutionally managed, silenced, and regulated. By asserting Black rage, *minor matter* intentionally forecloses the possibility of presumed relational dialogue, insisting upon a practice of being-with Black rage outside of pathology and moralist judgment.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 2.**

*Tiran Willemse, Jonathan Gonzalez, and Ligia Lewis in minor matter (2017). Photographer: Martha Glenn. Image courtesy of Ligia Lewis.*

The piece also probes the challenges of Black collectivity and political formation. Created against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the piece betrays expectations to aesthetically portray Black death.<sup>16</sup> This refusal is ingrained in the performance description, which states that *minor matter* “resists the tyranny of transparency and representationalism” and limits explanation of the unsayable.<sup>17</sup> Rather than choreographing a stage version of BLM activism that fully succumbs to contemporary art institutions’ penchant for Black “activist art” to fulfill diversity quotas and other related reasons, Lewis approaches Blackness, abstraction, and

matter(ing) through formal problems associated with the materiality of the black box, darkness, line, exhaustion, and what Fred Moten calls “phonic substance.”<sup>18</sup> *Minor matter*’s embrace of the movement for Black lives eschews a parasitic appropriation of Black activists’ labor and incorporating BLM within the performance’s logic. That is to say, the piece is in conversation with BLM politics and additionally poses particular questions about representation and sensation within the black box theater, specifically what can be seen and sensed in total darkness, as well as what a nonvisual orientation toward Blackness might potentialize.<sup>19</sup> Further, if as artist-critic

Hannah Black has observed in her review of the piece, “in Black collective being, apocalyptic hurt and utopian community are folded together,” then it would be overdetermined to label *minor matter* as an Afro-pessimist dance. My interest in the piece, much like in Abdur-Rahman’s “Black grotesquerie,” lies in its palpable exploration of “grammar and ghosts” that haunt Black gesture and gathering, as articulated in the epigraph from Wilderson.

*Minor matter*, as a Black transnational collaboration, is susceptible to expectations to represent transcendental precolonial relationality. Lewis is less interested in that romance as it silences the historical ruptures that established wounded kinship between Africans globally. The vibrant *sociality* enacted on stage is attentive to the *position* of Blackness globally as “living on in outmoded shapes,” recognizing the reality of nation while not celebrating its limitations.<sup>20</sup> *Minor matter* exhausts the theater’s various apparatuses to problematize intercorporeal contact and relationality by foregrounding minor gestures and unprestigious affects.<sup>21</sup> Form in *minor matter* is achieved by the “dissolution [and] annulment of form.”<sup>22</sup> The dancers wrestle to form multiple “huddles” toward the final section of the piece (Fig. 1).<sup>23</sup> The huddle appears as a tight protective embrace, but it is also a slippery and consequence of uncomfortable collisions. The dancers squeeze, grip, and use each other’s limbs to climb and form knotted *tableaux vivants* that repeatedly crash and fall apart. Rather than a resolution, the piece ends with an abrupt blackout cued by Lewis shouting,

“Black!” We are invited to confront a series of questions. Through the huddle, does contact signal a “community of experience” endowed with political plentitude and democratic aspirations?<sup>24</sup> Does the huddle direct attention to a more frictive Afro-diasporic formation that choreographer Ralph Lemon once described (referring to his *Geography Trilogy*) as “a limited, contrived community in a context of empirical performance formalism”?<sup>25</sup> By remaining ambivalent to the “tyranny of positivity” that drives the majority of contemporary Black performance and its theorization, *minor matter* punctures and punctuates a space for questioning the agential and relational gravitas often bestowed upon contact and/as improvisation.<sup>26</sup>

The kind of sociality contained in *minor matter*’s embrace of negative affect and negative philosophy can be thought of as *negative kin-aesthesia*. Negative kin-aesthesia alludes to the deliberate anticathartic performance strategies that prevent idiopathic identification between the audience and the performance/performers.<sup>27</sup> Firstly, while the dance’s virtuosic elements might allow for “kinesthetic empathy” to happen, for the audience to feel moved by the performance, it is precisely this feeling of being moved that risks establishing false identification with the dancers.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the dance acknowledges the global position of Blackness while troubling the romantic presumption of “kin” in the context of African and African-diaspora aesthetic collaboration. Negative kin-aesthesia is less about regathering precolonial wholeness and

more about the praxis and consciousness of using fleshly collisions that tend to Blackness's fractal condition. *Minor matter* is where Black people can gather but the event cannot be a Black gathering. The organized gathering cannot be a refuge or a protected site for Black sociality. Like Black performance in general, the piece is emblematic of Blackness as ongoing resistance subsumed within a framework of institutional coercion, the risk of incorporation into neoliberal identity politics, and civil societal surveillance. These racial-capitalist machinations operate despite Lewis's highly critical, counterhegemonic, and "minoritarian" authorial intentions. This tension reveals where nonrepresentational Black aesthetics arrives at an impasse.

What would emerge if Black studies, and by extension Black performance theory and visual studies, delved more within the "aporetic crisis" presented by *minor matter* alongside concepts that already animate the field such as "fugitivity," "afro-alienation," "Afro-fabulation," "kinaesthetic contagion," and "corporeal orature," etc.<sup>29</sup> This would entail revising a collective investment in endowing Black suffering with narrative closure and reconsidering the hypervaluation of the liberatory properties of survival. Survival is the *afterlife of slavery*, and not its resolution or its transcendence.<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging this detail, as drama theorist Jaye Austin Williams puts it, may steer us away from celebrating the "in spite of"/"anyway" condition of Black survival. This revised consciousness about Black survival would acknowledge "the empirically

supportable fact that when Blacks survive at all, they must do so with a resolve to resist and protest" in perpetuity.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, Afro-pessimism enables me to pose the question: how would fields of study and artistic practices that engage with Blackness be strengthened if they resisted the impulse to resuture the status of Blackness as "crushed object"?<sup>32</sup> My research project, "Unmournable Void," is about learning from aesthetic meditations such as Lewis's that are reckoning with black matter and the status of "crushed objecthood." These projects draw attention to the limits of refurbishing the project of humanism. Engaging Lewis's and other Black dancemakers' work (such as Nelisiwe Xaba, Will Rawls, Faustin Linyekula, mayfield brooks, Keyon Gaskin, and others) demonstrates that Blackness needs not move toward wholeness in order to speculate about what is possible as an effective response to the world. Black objecthood, or the unmournable void, in these aesthetic-theoretical practices is not covered up or overcome. This reminds me of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, where Eva, whose left leg was amputated, did not "wear overlong dresses to disguise the empty place on her left side."<sup>33</sup> Why does Morrison present the "empty place" of Eva's left leg as something not to be overcome, hidden, or something to be apologetic for? She does not romanticize it either.<sup>34</sup> What would it mean for Black studies and aesthetics to address this "empty place" in a manner that does not hide, compensate for, or relegate "the empty place" to metaphor? Moments in *minor matter* move toward this

nonrepresentational revelation, which does not abandon figural articulation completely. This is when aesthetics does not cover up the irreparable chasm launched by anti-Black violence that ruptures relation. For certain Black aesthetic practitioners, the “empty place” has a message for and against the world.<sup>35</sup> Refusal to conceal the “empty place” and the pain that persists despite the absence of visible evidence of the severing is how I aspire to *tend-toward* the void of Black subjectivity.<sup>36</sup>

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/ **Notes** /

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<sup>1</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, “Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom,” in “African and Afro-Caribbean Performance,” ed. Catherine M. Cole and Leo Cabranes-Grant, special issue, *Theatre Survey* 50, no. 1 (May 2009): 119.

<sup>2</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *small axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 4.

<sup>3</sup> See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2

<sup>4</sup> Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14; emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21; emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman quotes Wilderson’s call for “a new language of abstraction with

explanatory powers emphatic enough to embrace the Black.” See Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 2, quoted in Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “Black Grotesquerie.” *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 700.

<sup>10</sup> Abdur-Rahman, “Black Grotesquerie,” 683.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 688; emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> See Bernth Lindfors, *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232, quoted in Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> See Tyrone S. Palmer, “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 31.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis discusses the connection with BLM in “Ligia Lewis in conversation with Erin Manning and Rizvana Bradley,” YouTube video, 46:00, posted by “Studium Generale Rietveld Academic,” June 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGr5wkfjr5I>.

<sup>17</sup> For the performance’s program description, see “minor matter,” *Performance Space New York*, <https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/minor-matter/>.

<sup>18</sup> Moten, *In the Break*.

<sup>19</sup> This nonvisual orientation toward darkness and blackness opens up space to consider the promises and failures of a haptic engagement with blackness. Moten, in discussing Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, states that “invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable.” Moten, *In the Break*, 68. The blackness of the

black box theater, the blacked-out and dimmed lights, and the black dancing *body* are collapsed in *minor matter* as a mode of bringing attention to how black matter is overrepresented as both absence and hypervisibility.

<sup>20</sup> Abdur-Rahman, "Black Grotesquerie," 683.

<sup>21</sup> See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). For a discussion of "minor aesthetics," see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16. Also see Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture: (Thought in the Act)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Art Talk and the Uses of History," *small axe* 19, no. 3 (November 2015): 184; emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> In US postmodern dance, "the huddle" is associated with Simone Forti's dance construction first performed in 1961. I had an opportunity to perform in "the huddle" when Forti visited Northwestern University and directed a performance program titled *Thinking with the Body* in February 2016. Lewis also participated in a workshop where Forti taught "the huddle" in early 2014 at Pieter Space, Los Angeles. Forti's huddle differs from Lewis's in the sense that it privileges notions of working together, harmony, and democracy. It is highly participatory and suggests the way that notions of community were being rethought during the 1960s.

<sup>24</sup> A community of experience where ideas of democracy are practiced in the studio is what Cynthia Novack observes about contact improvisation. See Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). Another dance scholar, Erin Manning, theorizes dance's potential for democracy when she describes a politics of touch in dance as "a fleshy," "flexible and unpredictable" "democracy-to-come." See

Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxi.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art / Race / Exile* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>26</sup> See Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams, "Staging (Within) Violence: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016).

<sup>27</sup> Kaja Silverman describes idiopathic identification as "the annihilatory relation to the other," and Max Scheler characterizes it as "the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own." Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23; and Max Scheler, quoted in *Ibid.* Also see Saidiya Hartman's discussion of "narcissistic identification" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> I am building on Susan Foster's work, which challenges direct psychophysical connection between the dancer's body and the observer's body. "Kinesthetic empathy," the performer-observer connection sensed through movement, is not "natural." It is highly mediated and choreographed to affirm and instill either already-existing or desired social values. See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> "Aporetic crisis" is discussed in Frank B. Wilderson III, "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 135. For "fugitivity," see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013). "Afro-alienation" is discussed in Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2006). “Afro-fabulation” is discussed in Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). For “kinaesthetic contagion,” see Rizvana Bradley, “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 14–30. Finally, for a discussion of “corporeal orature,” see Thomas DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power.” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by Andre Lepecki. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 64–81.

<sup>30</sup> See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

<sup>31</sup> Jaye Austin Williams, “Radical Black Drama-as-Theory: The Black Feminist Dramatic on the Protracted Event–Horizon,” *Theory & Event*, 21, no. 1 (2018): 196.

<sup>32</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

<sup>33</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 31.

<sup>34</sup> My colleague, Dr. Cecilio Cooper (whose research deals more rigorously with the topic), helped me approach *Sula* with closer attentiveness to Eva’s “empty place,” particularly the knowledge it carries for Black study.

<sup>35</sup> This is a riff on W. E. B. Du Bois’s statement that “Negro blood has a message for the world.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Vintage/Library of America, 1990), 9. For a discussion of “the end of the world” in Black feminist aesthetics, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World,” in “States of Black Studies,” ed. Alexander G. Weheliye, special issue, *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

<sup>36</sup> See Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 141–44.

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## TO SIT WITH REFUSAL: A ROUNDTABLE

**HUEY COPELAND, SAMPADA  
ARANKE, ATHI JOJA, MLONDI  
ZONDI, AND FRANK WILDERSON**

In this text—edited from the November 17, 2017 transcript recording the closing conversation of the “Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics” symposium held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—scholars Sampada Aranke, Huey Copeland, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Frank B. Wilderson III, and Mlondolozzi Zondi compare and discuss the ways in which Black radical thought puts pressure on both aesthetic theory and practice, regardless of medium or discipline. Building on and referring back to the other pieces included in this

dossier, the roundtable provides fresh insight into how cultural practitioners navigate life and work in a social field produced through and saturated by the logics of anti-Blackness.

—Sampada Aranke and Huey Copeland

**Huey Copeland/** I thought we might start our conversation by trying to think a little bit between and across the presentations, particularly through the terms that recur and that matter so deeply to all of the pieces: placelessness, social death, the void, and violence, all of which, of course, are crucial to Afro-pessimist theorizations of the Black's positionality. How do we think about how those terms shift or persist based upon the kinds of practices that you're each engaging so we can begin to understand the links and differences between modalities of Black aesthetic practice?

Frank, you're very much thinking with *12 Years a Slave* in order to deepen the Afro-pessimist theory of positionality. Mlonzi, you're looking at *minor matter* in order to think about how that work opens up a discrepant space within the larger landscape of performative practices to find something else, even as the practice itself is symptomatic of the spaces in which it's emplotted. Sam, you are very much trying to use Afro-pessimist theory to think with and deepen how we understand David Hammons's performative interventions. And of course, Athi, you are tracing this other modality of the aesthetic that puts pressure on the ways in which we traditionally conceive it.

So, it seems like we have the aesthetic operating on a number of different levels here and being mobilized in different ways even as those key terms differently recur and inflect each other, a movement across registers that allows us to think both the range of aesthetic production and the work that Afro-pessimist theory can do with and against those registers.

**Sampada Aranke/** The question is really provocative because it's also asking us to think in relation to radically different contexts and historical moments. It's asking, what are the lines of continuity, but also, what ways can we think about different fault lines. For me, one answer to this question is materiality. The thing that makes Hammons's performance particularly generative as a location is that he is taking this [biological] material that is absolutely organic and internal and toxic waste and mobilizing it as [aesthetic] material. And so the rust that appears against Serra's steel becomes tactile. That material for me becomes particularly dynamic.

I think that the first thing I thought of, Mlonzi Zondi, in your presentation is sweat, or Frank Wilderson, you give us this really rich description of the materiality of the scene, the things that we have to fill in.

**Athi Joja/** Back home in South Africa, I have been noticing a return to arguments made in Wilderson's "Grammar and Ghosts," which is one of the texts that made me think about the possibilities and impossibilities of Black aesthetics. Of course, this carries from his *Red*,

*White and Black*. The question, for example, of how many Black cultural practices under apartheid were easily available for incorporation, meaning whatever political response they had toward the system was questionable. “Grammar and Ghosts” brought these questions back to us, about what the aesthetic can do in the event that power is always already welcoming it and opening up spaces for it to displace its capacities.

When Julian Mayfield said, in effect, well, my Black aesthetic is not John Coltrane necessarily, but it is when the young Jackson brother takes the judge or Bobby Seale chained up in a courtroom, he was trying to think of the Black aesthetic not too far from the revolutionary situation that it existentially cultivates. So for me, the Black aesthetic instantiates modes of Black articulations that though can and do get incorporated, it is the acts of refusal that matter.

**HC/** Yes! And I think Sam’s statement about trying to think about the very different kinds of contexts from which these practices emerge is something that may help clarify the variation of these forms of noncooperation or refusal. One point of interest is that y’all are dealing with really diverse types of forms and audiences, which may demand different approaches to how anti-Blackness is specifically being produced or reproduced in those varying contexts.

**Frank Wilderson/** I don’t really know the answer to that, but I can see the problem. In that when one desires to be trained as an

artist and so one goes to MFA school, in my case it’s fiction, or studio art, or dance, the training is hostile to your own experience, and yet there are tools that you want through this training. The hostility is that the training is overdetermined by an ideological imperative. That imperative is founded on the idea that art can redeem as opposed to art would be an accompaniment to a gun, for example, you know, bring your song, but bring your gun also. The aesthetic is always haunted, if not explicitly, expressing a kind of Gramscian tautology of “free your mind your ass will follow.” So one has to learn the tools of art, but not succumb to the orientation and the goal of aesthetics that assumes that art has a redeeming quality to it. That’s a really tough thing to do.

**HC/** So what does it mean to make form or to put form out in the world from an explicitly Afro-pessimist perspective?

**FW/** Personally I never thought of that, though it’s a productive question. The problem for me is how, as Saidiya Hartman would say, does one emplot the slave? And what all of our work here has suggested is that emplotment comes with coordinates that assume there’s a prior plenitude, predicated on the dream of narrative art, which is the dream of a restoration or reorganization. But that arc itself does not apply to Black life. So, I don’t have an answer to your question. What I do is try to write critical theory but then not try to, when I write stories, to force them to articulate with imperatives of my positions as a critic. So, what I’ve learned and said

theoretically resonates with what I'm trying to do poetically but resonates in a way that I'm not aware of as it's happening.

**Mlondi Zondi/** I would echo most of what you said. In terms of my own practice, my approach to form is neither about translating Black suffering nor delivering a didactic message to the world, revolutionary or otherwise. Training in the dance studio is not really about preparing you for a revolutionary way of gesturing onstage, but it is sometimes a way of preparing artists to be better equipped to ask difficult questions in abstract and literal ways, and to problematize things even more.

Another aspect of training, though, which is also very difficult and quite impossible with this work, is the expectation that when you write anything about dance you have to focus solely on formal, thick description. I think about the tension between what I'm saying about formlessness and my own MFA training in Laban movement analysis, which is so tethered to a desire for perfect narrative summation. Black aesthetic practices that "tend-toward" form as already fragmented for the Black pose a challenge for movement analysis's desire to capture. How do you write about a "no dance," which is Ralph Lemon's term for his formless approach to dance and choreography?

**SA/** In considering your question, Huey, the first place that I went to is thinking about opacity, particularly "Open Boat," the opening to Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.

It's the first thing that we encounter before engaging the rest of Glissant's theoretical project. He has this phrase that's repeated over and over again: "womb abyss." There's something around that that is a practice of opacity. It's a speaking to and between that might be unintelligible or at least nontranslatable, emergent, and perhaps fleeting or "fugitive."

For me, form is about that opacity or a kind of striving toward it, or better, just allowing one to be within that tension. I think we're all interested in what it looks like to be within that space, and I think that form could actually be a narrative that is unintelligible. So I'm not quite sure that narrative is necessarily antagonistic or is conflictual with a certain kind of modality or approach. I'm not necessarily interested in representation, but I'm thoroughly interested in abstraction, the ways that abstraction might open up a space of wonder or something within it that's irrecoverable.

**AJ/** I'm trained as a painter. At some point after graduation I stopped painting because painting didn't say what I wanted to say. I started writing because I thought writing was going to offer an alternative. Throughout my writing about art and politics, the attempt has always been raising "the political," which has been largely discouraged in the post-apartheid cultural discourse.

But then I discovered the work of two artists, Ernest Mancoba and Dumile Feni, whom I'm writing about now. Even though these artists

were not necessarily trying to articulate radical projects, their work nonetheless opened up newer ways of seeing the world. In the late 1940s, Ernest Mancoba changed the look of modernity completely, though, of course, after that nobody remembered him. For Dumile, the same exact thing happened with regard to how his work wrestled with representing Black suffering in the 1960s. This is to say, reading form is not predicated on suspending content, but of them dialectically. In other words, to think of the content of the form as well as the form of the content.

**MZ/** When I was an MFA student in dance, I was very excited about writing a thesis that was going to be about all the wonderfully resistive ways of performing my way out of suffering [Laughter].

I don't know if Frank remembers this, but I was taking his class. It was during office hours and I had a lot of questions; one of them was, "Okay, I read the material and I understand it, but there's an impasse here: I'm an artist, that's what I do. I actually have to finish this MFA, so what do I write?" And he didn't offer me a prescription or a program—in my field, I feel that there's a lot of that—but instead posed a question: "Well, what would it mean for you to actually embrace that *cul-de-sac*?" And I think that's what I've tried to stay with, to hover in the *cul-de-sac* as opposed to fleeing, as euphoric as that might feel.

**FW/** Yes, I'm glad you didn't say the wrong thing! [Laughter] But I think that's a really

important point. I think it's emblematic of how these questions relate concretely to the ethics of practice and teaching. There is mutuality between the way MFA programs are run and the way prisons are run. Let's sit with that for a moment. [Laughter]

First of all, I think that in an MFA program Black people tend to be one out of a cohort or one out of a whole group. As you're producing, whether it's your performance thesis or, in my case, short stories or a novel, the question—whether it's asked by the teachers or haunts their discourse—is "How does this make me feel?" as opposed to "How does this make *you* feel?" It's not a conspiracy theory, but they're effectively saying, "This art doesn't speak to me" or "There's no hope here." So I think that what I try to do when I teach creative writing is to say: "Live in the *cul-de-sac*" and explore your own reality, regardless of whether other people think it's too dark or hopeless.

I did a reading at a bookstore and a non-Black person raised their hand and said, "I really like your work, but I find it so depressing." What was interesting is that immediately two Black people raised their hands and said, "We find it refreshing." It is that irreconcilable affect, which they're feeling in my work; it is not hegemonic. In schools or in publishing, you have to fight against an editor or an editorial board for a work of art that A) doesn't have closure or B) argues through symptoms and aesthetics that there are no redemptive qualities to the United States of America. Those authorial voices want you to lower the scale

of abstraction so that you're talking about discrimination or problems at the performative level as opposed to arguing that the whole country or world as one plantation.

My colleague, Jared Sexton, and I taught in a prison when we were in graduate school, which is why I said an MFA is like a prison. One week Jared would do critical theory and then the next week I would teach creative writing. And I found that the men in the class were, understandably, afraid of expressing themselves artistically. And so we began by working through mind-mapping exercises, where you read something or you see an image and you put the impression that comes to you in the middle of a blank piece of paper. You just start building out a spiderweb of associations until you hit what's called a trial web shift when a sentence comes. The whole thing can only take ten minutes so you write for that ten minutes. What you find is that normally you have a vignette that comes full circle, but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. Those little vignettes can then build into a larger piece of narrative fiction.

Well, after about three weeks, all the stories were about, you know, offing the guards or breaking out of prison! [Laughter] The language of prison is honest in a way that the language of the academy is not, you know? The language of the academy wants to say, "I'm policing you to put hope or redemption into your work," whereas in a prison they'll just say, "You can't write that!" [Laughter]. Eventually, they put a guard in the classroom,

so I had to do a creative writing workshop with an armed guard standing in the back. Then they began filming it, then they wouldn't let any of my materials go to the death row prisoners, and then they just shut us down. I think that there's a kind of symbiosis between that hardcore process that took like three weeks and its softer version that can take three years in an MFA program.

**Marissa Baker [audience member]/** Thank you all for your presentations. I just had a quick question. What are the potentials or meanings of "Black interiority" in the context of Black social death?

**SA/** I would return to Glissant and his implied refusal to answer the question since I think it also marks that place of walking away from translatability. For instance, with Hammons I'm interested in the way that he performs an interiority which is an externalizing of an interior material, a material that doesn't necessarily *say* certain kinds of things but that communicates a lot. That kind of generativity is about a certain kind of opacity and refusal. So, I'm interested in the places where your question pushes against some of the exteriorities that we've communicated or offered up today.

**MZ/** I'm also skeptical of that kind of question, not only because it presumes a boundary between interiority and exteriority—but also because it usually means, "These Negroes are doing all of this work about social death and they have not redeemed this one aspect of Black being that might go against what they're theorizing.

Interiority might be a place where they can salvage some kind of Black self-proprietorship.” So I will not answer the question. And I think maybe we should sit with that a little bit.

**Tyrone Palmer [audience member]/** My question resonates with what Huey Copeland asked in terms of form. I was really struck by the use of terms like deform and dissemble, deconstruct and destroy, as well as the idea of formlessness as Mlondi Zondi specifically articulated it, but also as it resonated across the papers. So, I’m wondering if you could say more about how you perceive an Afro-pessimist approach to formal analysis in light of the kinds of formlessness and sorts of deformation that are characteristic of Blackness but also of expression. For instance, in your talk, Frank Wilderson, you provide a careful formal analysis of the film, the shots, and where the camera was placed, demonstrating the failure of form to hold in the face of the inarticulable.

**AJ/** I’ve always found it difficult, personally, to think about formal analysis in terms of Afro-pessimism. On the one side, in Afro-pessimistic writing, there’s a certain approach to form that dis-forms, which is to say that troubles any formality or even threatens to destroy prevailing forms. I’m thinking here about the kinds of paradoxes and flips that inform Jared Sexton’s writing. I am thinking about such phrases “social life of social death” or “fugitivity is not freedom, not now.” The need to think from the singular place of Blackness, which

is nowhere or underground, certainly puts a pause on our generic forms of knowing, of seeing and ultimately of being. Thus, an Afro-pessimistic form becomes, simultaneously, a form of destabilization of all other forms, without the blessing of messianic promissory note of an alter-native or manifesto.

**SA/** I am really interested in deformation as a strategy. I think somebody like Hannah Black does this too, in a way. It’s where the question of deformation, which is also a question of deformity, points us to the notion with which Mlondi led: the assumption that the body itself has some integrity and by extension that the way we see or the way that we experience the object assumes an integrity to the objecthood of that object. Black is trying to point us precisely to the places where we have to pull the rug out from underneath the discourse. This means understanding the limitations of a certain kind of language, a certain kind of grammar, and it also requires grappling with the excess and in-excess that is mobilized around the object. What it can and can’t do. This line of thought is always moving us to those places where we have to consider what the object cannot do for you or for itself. For me, that is a place where thinking about form within a certain kind of grammar of impossibility becomes about having to figure out a language that is not readily here and is not here yet. Maybe it has never been here. I vibe with this tension around the problem of thick description, and yet I’m like, “Well, let’s pour over it.” Can we write a thick description, as

I think Frank does, that moves us to push the wall with our expectations even if we keep hitting that wall over and over and over again? That for me is the possibility of deformation as a kind of critical strategy.

**MZ/** In dance and dance studies, there's been a tension for years between dance and writing. Any kind of formal analysis, no matter how deformed it is, first has to grapple with this very long and storied tension. Dance as an object exists as something that some believe is a disappearance that does not repeat, and others believe is a repetition that simultaneously disappears and records. Dance notation and criticism are attempts to capture and make intelligible what in fact was slippery and was never whole in the first place. It's a challenge to think about what it would mean to write about Black dance in a way that honors that formlessness, at the level of aesthetic form and formlessness as a feature of Black (non)being. Second, thick description, whether traditional or reimagined/disformed, is always anticipated by co-optation and/or annihilation. Afro-pessimism helps me understand that in this world, all Black writing, Afro-pessimist theory included, happens within a context of coercion.

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of Exile and Apartheid (Duke University Press 2015), and *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press 2010). He spent five and a half years in South Africa, where he was one of two Americans to hold elected office in the African National Congress during the apartheid era. He also was a cadre in the underground. His literary awards include The American Book Award, The Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award for Creative Nonfiction, The Maya Angelou Award for Best Fiction Portraying the Black Experience in America, and a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship.

## RESPONSE

# A SPLINTER TO THE HEART: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AFRO-PESSIMIST AESTHETICS

ADRIENNE EDWARDS

Informed by the critical and historical contributions of Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Orlando Patterson, and Hortense Spillers, Black studies scholar Frank Wilderson posits Blackness as an ontology of slavery, measured solely in relation to the State, its apparatuses of power, and ultimately the structure of that power relation. A cursory review of Wilderson's writings exemplify his thoughts on the matter: "the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave," the Slave lacks "Human capacity," "the Slave is a sentient being but not a subject," "a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject,"

“no slave is *in* the world,” “the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity,” “a being outside of relationality,” and so on.<sup>1</sup> The awesomeness of his language resides in its invariably different sameness, supported by a myriad of examples that might buttress its veracity ever more daily by the invariably different sameness of the conditions of contemporary Black “social death,” to use the parlance of Afro-pessimism, where gratuitous violence, the state, and precarity intertwine, which is to say at every instance either is present. For Afro-pessimists, the distinction of being a slave has one neither *in* nor *of* the world. Indeed, Wilderson insists that no analysis concerning a slave can be approached in relation to civil society “unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world.”<sup>2</sup> This reflection makes such an attempt.

This essay departs from what Huey Copeland describes in his introduction as “an oxymoron at best” in reference to approaching the possibility of Afro-pessimist aesthetics. The crux of the matter for Blackness is, if race is a concept, understood as yet one of the State’s assembly of apparatuses, how does the concept express itself?<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Wilderson describes Blackness as a “conceptual possession of civil society.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, if there are “protocols of structural positionality,” what might be the protocols of structural possibility, particularly concerning the concept of Blackness in art?<sup>5</sup>

*Evil.27.Selma* (2011), by conceptual artist Tony Cokes (b. 1956, Richmond, Virginia), is productive in thinking through the stakes of an Afro-pessimist aesthetics (Figs.1 and 2). Precise, at eight minutes in length, the video employs the style and pacing reminiscent of slide-tape performances common in audio-visual works from the 1970s to 1990s as well

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**Figures 1 and 2.**

Tony Cokes, *Evil.27.Selma* (2011). Digital video, color, stereo. 9 mins. Edition 1/5, 2AP (TCo.009.1). Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

as the PowerPoint presentations prevalent in educational and corporate settings today. The majority of Cokes's video and installation projects operate within such an aesthetic. In *Evil.27.Selma*, groupings of white words float on a black, then eventually gray background. The story unfolds over the duration of the piece as what feels like "slides" shift left with an affect more akin to a journalistic account than a narrative. The conceptual through-line of the work is the paradigmatic events of the civil rights movement, including the three Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956), precipitated by Rosa Parks's arrest, which set off an organized protest that formally launched what was the largest action in the United States against Southern apartheid.

The first three slides, a kind of prologue, present the lyrics "And I wonder does anybody feel the same way I do?" "And is Evil just something you are or something you do?" from British alternative rock singer Morrissey's 1988 song "Sister I'm a Poet" on a black background, one of three songs heard in the video. The subsequent images feature text derived from a lecture-performance by the arts collective Our Literal Speed. The other featured music includes "The More You Ignore Me, the Closer I Get," again by Morrissey, and his band The Smiths' "Ask" and "You Just Haven't Earned It Yet, Baby," which conclude just shy of four minutes into the video.

Each conceptual section of text in the video has a song or silence. Accordingly, the viewer focuses on the interval or break between each section, which is extremely subtle, allowing the gaps to register and indicating as well as fostering a shift in perception. Sound, as an orientating mechanism in which we observe the line, resists the feeling of the audio element as a mix, as in mix tape. Rather, perceiving the text simultaneously with the moments in which sound is heard and when it is not (even more affecting) allows for a kind of reading over the line and across the materials Cokes deploys in the work. A kaleidoscopic interpretation technique is required to fully comprehend the installation and the microstructures embedded in it. Such structures instigate a kind of friction, enhanced and made strident by the often jarring, dissonant musical selections; such are the aesthetic choices that make for Cokes's intriguing counterpoint to the text. One thinks, "Why are Morrissey and The Smiths accompanying a text on the civil rights movement?" That's precisely the point for Cokes.

One of the technological transitions with profound social implications addressed in the text is the shift in technology from radio to television. Our Literal Speed describes this move as a "social collectivity heavily dependent on the imagination" precisely because radio had been an imageless format, while television "made instantly visible" such social and political formations. Further, radio, for Our Literal Speed, demanded "a complex mental horizon." For

them, the shift to television demonstrated not only a transition to images but also to evidence as a demonstration of authenticity of the event. In the context of the Selma to Montgomery marches, particularly Bloody Sunday, it is precisely the visibility of those events, broadcast in print and on television, which mobilized (white) American civil society toward “progressive goals.” They note that ten years earlier this was not the case as few had access to television. In fact, the following “slide” sets off in parentheses “especially for Black Alabamans,” who presumably could not have afforded a television.

Perhaps the most important point of this position is the fact that it is precisely because of the unavailability of images that another possibility is unleashed through the vocalization of language and not visual representations. Therefore, the incapacity to represent the event failed on the one hand because of their qualitative nature, meaning the inability to visually convey the intensity of events (a question of felicity), and/or because those events were not captured and therefore are unavailable. For Cokes via *Our Literal Speed*, this rendered the Boycott as “fundamentally a product of fantasy, rather than evidence.” “Citizens had to imagine ” the events without having a visual referent to them or a “pre-existing visual template,” a kind of “on-the-spot conceptualizing.” This is the “principal progressive achievement of the Boycott.” “It concretized possibility in the here and now.” The result is “a process with no logical end point” and not “geared toward a visible goal . . . but rather

toward an invisible chain of fantasy ‘what if’ situations. . . .” Such possibilities are then framed as “what if . . . as equals;” for example, “what if we could live as equals?” This section concludes with an irreverent “And so on . . .,” as if making such enumerations was all too obvious and perhaps not really the point.<sup>6</sup> After all, enumeration in speech enacts a figure of repetition, even when unspoken, and thereby threatens to reify signs by governing and directing meaning as a form of pacification.<sup>7</sup> For the desired possibilities to manifest, to register in the work, their presence must be *gestured* toward, for example not performed as an articulation or explication, but rather necessarily delimited in this instance as a shifting, slide-by-slide suspension that compromises the productivity of images and the incessant drive toward image-making.

Then the video goes silent at the moment the register of the text shifts to reflecting upon Parks’s rebellious act having been “underdocumented,” making them “mythic non-visible material . . . the visible rudiments for a vernacular of possibility.” It is the “imagelessness” of the Boycott that instigates the revolutionary acts of the following fifteen years: transformation occurs paradoxically because there are no images, thus evidence. Visibility allows for association, judgment, proximity, thereby eventually familiarity and comfort, particularly under the force of repetition. Such a violently intimate beholding fixes the unfamiliar in such a way that a false understanding or sense of solidarity takes hold: “I already know about that situation.”

However, the event “that has no image will be the fruit of the imagination.” “Most of those participating in the Boycott had no visual referent for what they were doing.” They were “continually surprised by what they were causing to happen . . . they had no way of getting a panoramic view of the situation.” Images constitute “evidence of wrongs . . . and proof of what is right . . . makes the undertaking more relevant . . . and more available for having some effect in the world.” In fact, “non-visibility will produce the most revolutionary visibilities of all . . . and we will never see it coming.”

For Cokes, “non-visibility” in this particularly exemplary artwork illustrates the ways in which those in power rendered protesters nonvisible and “imageless” in an effort to suppress their message, yet this unleashes and enables something incredibly productive. The cool veneer of the video resists a certain kind of “dream of narrative art, which is the dream of a restoration or reorganization.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Cokes’s videos are heavily determined by structure, a kind of grammar in the Afro-pessimist lexicon. He makes elaborate plans, some—particularly for the earliest works—are handwritten while the latter works evolve from typewritten scripts.<sup>9</sup> He has said sometimes the plan is unsatisfying and part of the process is the acceptance of as many errors as possible as constraints are an important, invisible part of the work.<sup>10</sup> Building the structure involves blocking selections of text from the source material text; the citation of the source material is fragmented with

selections of phrases or words determined for each “slide.” Working in Apple’s Keynote, the video—with rough animations of the stills and soundtrack as samples—is exported and sent to the editor, who makes timing and language adjustments and reanimates stills, which Cokes refines in relation to the rhythm he desires.

Our Literal Speed often writes texts as a group that shifts and changes as need be, and the final texts are often presented or performed by a third party as a mocking ventriloquism. It is the collective’s insisting upon distance and relying upon the circuit of distribution that interests Cokes. As an artist whose work often meditates on the intersection of capitalism, Blackness, and alternative music, Cokes found the Selma text on the group’s website (he is not a collective member, though he has presented at their events). What is interesting is that the relative anonymity of the collective (outside of their public events, though we don’t know if participants in those events are members or presenters) veils the voice but not the language. And what are the implications of Cokes’s having sourced and extracted their language and not just cited it in his own work, but indeed isolated fragments of the text, placed them into a new form (animated), and assured their circulation by his terms (video)?

Cokes’s stealing away with Our Literal Speed’s text is an exercise of errantry and the methods of primitive accumulation.<sup>11</sup> This accumulation is the kind that comes from difference being foundational to Black ontology or in

other words, for Afro-pessimists, the mode of production for the slave. For there is no integrity in the exchange. However, what is Cokes's capacity as and for an expression of power? Here, Wilderson's outlining of the constituent elements of slavery, accumulation, and fungibility as foundational to Blackness can be located in Cokes's aesthetic choices.<sup>12</sup> This gets us toward Huey Copeland's opening question about the very possibility of an Afro-pessimist aesthetic, namely, the fact of replacement or substitution of a figurative image with text, which is to say language in deference to nonvisibility and imagination as expressions of a capacity of power. Here, the dimension of Black fungibility, namely, "[t]he *figurative* capacities of blackness enable white flights of fancy while increasing the likelihood of the captive's disappearance," is invaluable in thinking through the relation of imagination and doing away with the figure as an aesthetic-ethical dilemma of Blackness in and as abstraction.<sup>13</sup> Imagination, the act of forming new ideas and concepts not yet available to the senses, is such an approach. If the aftermath of slavery is a body that has been pressed into flesh, in this afterlife with our imagination a mind meditating on the awesomeness of a possibility that refuses to know what it cannot do is perhaps the most radical act.<sup>14</sup>

As Wilderson suggests, "we need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror . . . [a] quest to forge a language of abstraction with explanatory powers *emphatic enough* to embrace the Black, an accumulated and fungible

object, in a Human world of exploited and alienated subjects."<sup>15</sup> What might an *adequate* emphatic aesthetic look like? In the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, the Black Arts Movements (in the US and UK), and the flourishing of art in post-apartheid South Africa, we already have a century of artistic production emphatic about Blackness. Therefore, what is the qualitative failure that incites Wilderson's call to action? Perhaps in seeking a new language of abstraction, we should look precisely to its aesthetics and question why it has been rendered suspect in responding to the insistence upon Black artists to represent, *authentically*. As Wilderson also notes, "'Black authenticity' is an oxymoron, . . . for it requires the kind of ontological integrity which the Slave cannot claim."<sup>16</sup>

What would the afterlife in Blackness look like as total obscurity? What if it manifests itself in the most oblique, opaque, and dense ways? Would we find a space of the imagination in the sinkhole, in the break, in the hold?<sup>17</sup> One of the ways such an aesthetic of withdrawal would make itself known is precisely "as a structural position of non-communicability," silences, breaks, voids, pressed and presented to you so that you never recognize their prior manipulation. Such tactics do not concern or employ negation. Rather, they are decoys, rerouting and rearranging at the level of surface, as Cokes's veneer of language and incongruent sound in order to explore the very impossibility and necessity of its existence. Cokes's appropriation, repetition of

the voice, points to a refusal of “any discursive coherency”—“opacity somehow meets violence in a way.”<sup>18</sup> One doesn’t need recognition of one’s imagination. Imagination disavows “being for the captor.”<sup>19</sup> What I am arguing for is imagination as a strategy of “formlessness and disassembly,” as Mlonzi Zondi described as a way to assess choreographic strategies in “Haunting Gathering: Black Dance and Afro-Pessimism.” This formulation also follows Sampada Aranke’s productive inquiry: “What might it mean to take seriously the grounds of nowhere,” from her talk “Voiding from Nowhere (Abject Materiality in David Hammons’s *Pissed Off*). Specifically, she locates her argument in the notion of placelessness and that this nowhere is indeed locatable. Aranke suggests a “rethinking of Black embodiment that moves us away from the primacy of the readily visible,” describing such a move as a “notion of the life within the space of negation, which is Blackness.”

Blackness beckons nonvisibility in search of its own event horizon, an absolute void that is not nothing, which is to say not a single thing but perhaps, maybe, likely a multitude constituted in and through chance and chaos.<sup>20</sup> Nonvisibility would be our extreme abstraction to which there are myriad approaches and styles, as a condition of possibility for the imagination, where through its ruminations are what Athi Joja described in “Bolekaja Aesthetics,” as a “pattern of irrationality” and “refusal to be living a life of fatality” gains momentum.<sup>21</sup>

The title of this article is taken in part from Frantz Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

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<sup>1</sup> See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Text taken from Our Literal Speed, “Notes from Selma: On Non-Visibility,” 2009, [https://www.academia.edu/36538855/Our\\_Literal\\_Speed\\_presents\\_Notes\\_From\\_Selma\\_On\\_Non-Visibility\\_2009](https://www.academia.edu/36538855/Our_Literal_Speed_presents_Notes_From_Selma_On_Non-Visibility_2009).

<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1967; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 232–50.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Wilderson, “Afro-pessimist Aesthetics: A Roundtable” (remark, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, November 10, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Tony Cokes, in conversation with the author, August 13, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22; emphasis added. See Adrienne Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction* (New York: Pace Gallery, 2016); Edwards, “Blackness in Abstraction,” *Art in America*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/blackness-in-abstraction-3-63053/>; and Edwards, “Notes on Blackness in Abstraction” (translated to German), in *Visualität und Abstraktion Anthologie [Visuality and Abstraction Anthology]*, ed. Hanne Loreck (Hamburg: HFBK, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in “Culture and Countermemory: The ‘American’ Connection,” ed. S. P. Mohanty, special issue, *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65–82.

<sup>15</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 55; emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> See Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–80.

<sup>18</sup> Athi Joja, “Afro-pessimist Aesthetics: A Roundtable” (remark, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, November 10, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

<sup>20</sup> See Fred Moten, *Black and Blur (consent not to be a single being)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Quotations are taken from an extended version of the conference paper that appears in this issue.

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