



*liquid blackness*

Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspension



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“Black Up” (Directed by Kahlil Joseph, 2011)

liquid blackness

Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspension

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*BLACK UP* (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2011), FRAME GRAB.





# Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspensions<sup>1</sup>

**ALESSANDRA  
RAENGO**

The idea for the seventh issue of the *liquid blackness* journal, which welcomes the contribution of a newly assembled editorial board that includes Derek Conrad Murray (UC Santa Cruz), James Tobias (UC Riverside) and Charles “Chip” Linscott (Ohio University), alongside Lauren M. Cramer (Pace University), who is one of the founding members of the group, came together in occasion of the October 6–7, 2016 screening and symposium titled “Holding Blackness in Suspension: The Films of Kahlil Joseph,” which explored the intensely arresting aesthetics of the Los Angeles-based music video director and installation artist. Joseph was also one of Arthur Jafa’s closest collaborators on *Dreams are colder than Death* (2013), which was the subject of our previous research project on “Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness,” and is a film that crystalized for us the idea of a growing aesthetic mode pivoting

around forms of suspension in artistic practices that move fluidly between a number of exhibition venues and visual forms, including filmmaking, music video, and installation art.<sup>2</sup> The experimental cinematography, the frequent movement across scale—from the mundane to the celestial, from the individual to the cosmological—synched to a carefully calibrated “durational drag,” and the way it holds in balance the thinking of life and the thinking of death, place suspension at the heart of Jafa’s film.<sup>3</sup> Whether we approach the idea of suspension as a way to bring into focus formal concerns or thematic/philosophical ones, since our research on *Dreams* and the symposium on Kahlil Joseph’s work, we have found a somewhat similar sensibility in a growing list of works and practitioners, which include Bradford Young’s cinematography for *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011), *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013), *Middle of*

## IT MAY BE PRECISELY WHERE THE PROPER TERMS OF THE LINEAGE SEEM THE LEAST TRANSPARENT THAT THE WORK OF THE ARCHIVE BECOMES MOST NECESSARY

*Nowhere* (Ava DuVernay, 2012), *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), and *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), as well as his directorial debut *Black America Again* (in collaboration with Common, 2017); Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood* (2014), Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (2016)—on which Joseph collaborated—Berry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), Donald Glover and Hiro Murai’s *Atlanta* (2016)—especially given the way Murai recognizes a debt to Joseph’s work—Joseph’s video for Sampha’s debut album, *Process*

(2017), and Jafa’s most recent work as a cinematographer for Solange’s videos for *A Seat at the Table* (2016), as co-director of the title video for Jay-Z’s *4:44* (2017), and as sole author of *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016).

In the article, “The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,” for *The New Yorker* (October 24, 2016), Cassie Da Costa highlights the challenge of tracing the development of distinctive black aesthetic modes across diverse instantiations spanning

different artistic practices, modes and venues. Yet, as *liquid blackness* member Jenny Gunn has argued, it may be precisely where the proper terms of the lineage seem the least transparent that the work of the archive becomes most necessary.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the unruly genealogy of a black aesthetic demands eclectic (or “liquid” as we have called them) forms of collection and analysis. It requires a willingness to follow hints, hunches, and family resemblances, with the idea that they might

## SIMILAR TO BLACK “LIQUIDITY,” SEEING SUSPENSION IS COMPLICATED AND THUS IT TOO REQUIRES A HERMENEUTIC DECISION

succeed in providing, supplementing or at least complicating, existing tools of formal analysis.

It is in this spirit that we have slightly revised the structure of the present publication in two important ways: first, past issues of the *liquid blackness* journal have pivoted around existing research projects usually built around a limited set of objects (such as Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* for the research on “The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble,” or Jafa’s *Dreams are colder than Death* for the last issue on “Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness”), as a way to engage this complicated archive and continue to emphasize the cultural and political work of form. Here, however, we are experimenting with a more inclusive gesture to test whether “suspension” might be a productive concept to describe a less ambiguous connection between

liquidity as a mode of formal analysis and a foundational commitment of the group: to keep blackness philosophically safe. In other words, we are testing whether “suspension” can offer, as Daren Fowler puts it in his essay for this issue, “a praxis for the ethics of black liquidity.”<sup>5</sup>

The need to clarify both ethics and praxis prompted me to evoke the concept of suspension since the very first public statement I ever made about *liquid blackness* as a way to characterize the “critical act one might perform in attempting to understand its contours....What if we held blackness in balance,” I asked, “not necessarily to sever it from its lived experience, but in order to confront and come to terms with the many *other* ways in which it exists?”<sup>6</sup> While these questions posed blackness as a concept and a thing in and of itself—as a way to take seriously, as a legitimate object

of scholarly investigation, processes of cultural and aesthetic liquefaction we had seen already underway in our contemporary visual and sonic culture—they also responded to a concern for the difficult ethics of that same critical operation. “Liquidity,” I have repeatedly claimed, functions as a pressure point: it is diagnostic and critical, descriptive and generative, equally evocative of processes of objectification, commodification, and fungibility, as well as expansiveness and inexhaustible formlessness and potentiality. Similarly, suspension seeks to identify sites, moments, and modes where the tension between these two poles is placed at a distance or held in some form of temporary, if precarious, balance.

Similar to black “liquidity,” *seeing* suspension is complicated and thus it too requires a hermeneutic decision. Even at a basic level, as Lauren M. Cramer puts it, when understood

as the lifting of forces of gravity, it implies a quasi-contradiction between its “visual effect [...] (hovering and lightness) and the process that creates suspension (force and pressure).”<sup>7</sup> This willingness to *read for it*, we feel, is also at its core an ethical choice—that is, a willingness to have it orient one’s scholarly and pedagogical practices.

For this reason—and this is the second revision to our usual publishing structure—we have decided to *hold* this very journal issue *in suspension* and offer ways to continue to “think along,” collectively, around this productive topic.<sup>8</sup> To this end, we will release a working bibliography surrounding this idea and some of the objects that have crystalized it for us, as well as an interactive version of the month-long conversation around the concept and methodologies of

*liquid blackness* I curated in April 2016 for the listserv *empyre*.<sup>9</sup>

Although not directly visible in it, questions of hermeneutics, ethics and praxis animated the list of terms I wrote to announce the launching of the *liquid blackness* group, terms that were supposed to function evocatively, particularly for artists who might have been exploring forms of black liquidity in their work or modes of unmooring blackness from the body and the subject so that they (i.e., blackness, the body, and the subject) could be momentarily addressed in their own terms. The list appeared on the *liquid blackness* website for the first time in fall 2013 and in summer 2015 and was reprinted in the exhibition catalog for Mark Bradford’s show *Scorched Earth*, curated by Connie Butler at the Hammer museum in L.A. (Figure 1) Bradford is an artist whose use of abstraction



can productively be regarded as a practice of suspension, insofar as it is often the outcome of several processes of layering, machine-sanding, and therefore distancing and repurposing concrete, everyday public objects such as street posters, as he has shown again with his work for the 2017 Venice Biennial, *Tomorrow is Another Day*.<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 1. LIQUIDITY LIST

- **Sensuousness** – liquid blackness is sensorially rich and erotically charged
- **Affectivity** – liquid blackness exists and moves in between bodies
- **Formlessness** – liquid blackness fills all available space and fluidly transforms with the shape of its container.
- **Penetration** – in its shape-shifting qualities, liquid blackness is capable of infiltrating anywhere.
- **Fluctuation** – liquid blackness moves through ripples and waves, like electronic signals
- **Modulation** – liquid blackness oscillates and vibrates within a spectrum of possibilities
- **Absorption and assimilation** – liquid blackness manifests fantasies of racial amalgamation
- **Intensity** – liquid blackness channels “intensive affective flows”<sup>1</sup>
- **Viscosity** – liquid blackness produces fantasies of tactility and experiences of stickiness
- **Density** – liquid blackness is tangibly material and thick
- **Slipperiness** – liquid blackness can be seemingly touched, but not held, or held in place
- **Elasticity** – liquid blackness can stretch, bleed, and slightly give in
- **Allure** – liquid blackness beckons and yet withdraws
- **Vibration** – liquid blackness is animated by the vitality of black matter
- **Unboundedness** – liquid blackness is unstoppable and pervasive
- **Virality** – liquid blackness proliferates and procreates, gaining incremental vitality with each reproduction.
- **Channeling** – liquid blackness is a channel, a vehicle, a medium – it carries, funnels, and puts in contact
- **Plasticity**—liquid blackness mutates within constantly mutating conditions
- **Organicity** – liquid blackness wades fluidly through processes of appropriation, sampling, grafting, injecting, rejecting, implanting, and transplanting.
- **Glide** – liquid blackness slides transversally across and between surfaces

The call for papers for the current issue contained another list (Figure 2).

Read alongside one another, their relationship is undeniably confrontational: only the second list makes explicit the group’s ethical commitment. Yet, this greater clarity updates our mission statement towards a more direct engagement with what in our last issue we addressed as “the love of blackness,” as a way, in Daren Fowler’s words, “to give weight and necessity to blackness as an ontological question for love.”<sup>11</sup> With suspension—just like with “the love of blackness”—we seek to deliberately leverage a productive undecidability of location: *of*, in fact, acts as a relay between “for,” “from,” and “toward.” Similarly, suspension moves freely between reading practices, aesthetic strategies, rhetorical structures, and media affordances and specificities.

FIGURE 2. SUSPENSION LIST

- **Holding up**, holding safe, and holding in balance
- **Unmooring** from predictable scripts, performances, and aesthetic conceits
- **Floating**, flowing, and moving unattached
- **Lifting up** from misery, death, danger
- **Withholding** judgement, predetermination, finality and demanding different modes of engagement
- **Rearranging** formal properties, expectations, functionalities
- **Interrupting** given scripts, expected performances, and predictable aesthetic conceits
- **Defying** temporal linearity and contiguity
- **Deferring, Delaying and Partaking** in forms of circularity, stasis, repetition, and recurrence
- **Halting** forms and modes of surrounding, closing in, and shutting down
- **Preserving** and keeping intact
- **Making space**, making place, making time.

In this introduction, therefore, I will move through examples from previous and current *liquid blackness* research projects that show this productive undecidability at work across a number of locations, beginning with *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), the text that first brought to my attention the idea that suspension begins with an act of will.

**Holding up, Unmooring, Floating, Lifting up...**

At the end of *Fruitvale Station* Oscar Grant's mother, played by Octavia Spencer, asks her dying son's friends to "lift him up." Arranged in a circle, on their knees in a hospital's waiting room, she then leads them in prayer. She asks God to place his "healing hands around [Oscar] so that we can hold him and see his smile again." In this case, "suspension" indexes a radical reorientation—at least the application of a mental or spiritual

force that is equal and opposite to the obscenely unthinking gesture that made Officer Johannes Mehserle shoot Oscar in the back as he was lying on the platform floor of the BART Fruitvale Station—as an act of care. Oscar is undergoing surgery and she has not yet been able to see him, but, following her prayer, the viewer gets to see him again: a short flashback shows Oscar carrying his daughter Tatiana on his back as they leave the daycare center as warm sunlight bathes them from behind.

The flashback is drained of sound and in slow motion, momentarily performing the "lifting" his friends have been asked to pray for. The film has accompanied Oscar's moves throughout the day, following him through rather prosaic moments and Oscar's own struggles and shortcomings, with an understated realism, inspired by the sensibility of Charles Burnett's cinema.<sup>12</sup>

Yet this mode, whose ethical grounding relies precisely on an alignment with a quasi-Zavattinian sensibility towards regarding all "small" events as having an "equally concrete density," is suspended here to give in to a clearly marked poetic gesture—what in a more classical Hollywood film would have appeared as a melodramatic one—that seems to fulfill, although only momentarily, the mother's request.<sup>13</sup>

The flashback is abruptly cut by a close-up of a bag of blood being thrown in a trashcan. Because the death is ruled a homicide, Oscar's mother will be unable to hold her son and can only look at him from a large window outside the operating room. The film ends brusquely suspended, in yet another sense, before Oscar's girlfriend Sophina facing their daughter Tatiana, whom she has picked up from a sleepover with her cousins

and placed in the shower in front of her—water running down both of their bodies—is able to answer her question: "Where is daddy?"

In her writing on Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), Paula Massood characterized the film's formal choices as adopting an "aesthetic appropriate to conditions."<sup>14</sup> *Fruitvale Station*, for me, re-proposes the same issue with an emphasis on aesthetic modes appropriate to *ethical* conditions. The current focus of the *liquid blackness* group stems from a similar concern and is interested in family resemblances among works that pursue strategies of halting, unmooring, untethering, deferring, and the like, understood as "operations" and "clearing gestures"—as Derek Conrad Murray might describe them—that can produce acts of refusal and defiance and, at times, make space, place or time for alternative



FIGURE 3. *FRUITVALE STATION* (DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, FOREST WHITAKER'S SIGNIFICANT PRODUCTIONS/OG PROJECT, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



FRUITVALE  
STATION, FOR  
ME, RE-PROPOSES  
THE SAME  
ISSUE WITH  
AN EMPHASIS  
ON AESTHETIC  
MODES  
APPROPRIATE  
TO ETHICAL  
CONDITIONS

moves.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, the goal of suspension is to produce some form of disentanglement: formally, theoretically, and pedagogically.

Daren Fowler’s and Arzu Karaduman’s essays in this issue reflect this investment. Cinematography and sound design in Berry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), Fowler explains, produces a “pedagogy for caring, holding, and loving (queer) blackness without containing, suffocating, and freezing its vital movements.”<sup>16</sup> In this manner, it creates some kind of buffer zone, so to speak, around its vulnerable main character. At least until he builds himself “hard,” Fowler shows, seeking to achieve the sheen of self-contained reassured masculinity he admires in Juan, the drug dealer and substitute father-figure who finds him hiding from his persecutors at the beginning of the film. In Fowler’s perceptive reading, what Chiron is missing and

attempts to retrieve throughout the film is Juan’s glistening sheen of sweat, as indicative of a porous movement between solidity and liquidity and therefore of an opening between the self and the world. In this “gap” or zone of discrepancy, he argues, lies the possibility for an ethics and erotics of relation.

Arzu Karaduman’s careful attention to the suspended sound-image synchronization in *Moonlight* identifies in the mother’s scream, which is repeated twice—the first time drained of sound, so that only the mother’s lips are seen moving and the second time replayed backwards—a wedge in the film’s temporality as it concerns Chiron’s coming-out. While a cut to Chiron knocking on Juan’s door to ask what “faggot” means suggests that that is indeed what the mother just called him, the specific suspenseful sound-image configuration deployed in this

repeated moment does not allow the film itself to reenact the violence performed by the epithet, but instead opens up a strategic discrepant gap within which Chiron can be shielded from the world’s violent shaming and slowly pursue his “sideways” growth.<sup>17</sup> Similar to the end of *Fruitvale Station*, this asynchronicity keeps the audience from “consuming” black pain as entertainment and from “touching” Chiron’s body, possessing him, or giving in to the charged sensuality that pervades the film.

**Withholding, Rearranging, Interrupting, Defying, Deferring, Delaying, and Partaking in forms of Circularity, Stasis, Repetition, and Recurrence.**

Retrospectively, suspension also seems an appropriate way to characterize the determination to explore the expansive capacity of blackness that animates so many of the films of the L.A. Rebellion,

where it features always as a lived experience *and* a philosophical position. These films include first and foremost, Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* (1977), but also a number of experimental films such as Ben Caldwell’s *Medea* (1973) and *I & I: An African Allegory* (1979), and Barbara McCullough’s *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979), among others. Caldwell’s *Medea*, structured around a pregnant woman and her delivery, establishes a connection between cosmological and generational cycles and black history across the African diaspora. Opening shots of moving clouds juxtaposed to a soundtrack that mimics breathing sounds and then a heartbeat usher in a woman’s voice that recites Amiri Baraka’s poem, “Part of the Doctrine.”<sup>18</sup> Her quasi-hypnotic chant, punctuated by a recurring refrain—“to raise the race . . . to raise the race”—propels a montage of still images of various

genres (from the ethnographic and documentary to the protest and art image) of African and Black American figures, rapidly flashing on screen, and claims them as part of a collective memory that recapitulates the breadth of the diaspora in the ontogenesis of every soon-to-be-born Black child in America.<sup>19</sup> As it unfolds, the montage increasingly conforms to the pace of the mother’s heartbeat, her breathing, and her chanting all at once, and then concludes with a close up of a pregnant belly. It thus suspends the anti-black logic that governs the organization of these archives and substitutes for it the vitality of a life to come, figured in the poignant image that concludes the film: announced by the cry of a newborn, a small child enters the frame carrying a white balloon.

Evoking circularity as well as perfection, this image gestures

## EVOKING CIRCULARITY AS WELL AS PERFECTION, THIS IMAGE GESTURES TOWARD THE IDEA OF A SELF-CONTAINED BLACK HISTORY — SUSPENDED ABOVE ITS HOSTILE SURROUNDINGS — THAT FINDS WITHIN ITSELF THE RESOURCES FOR ITS FULFILLMENT

toward the idea of a self-contained Black history—suspended above its hostile surroundings—that finds within itself the resources for its fulfillment.

Nettrice Gaskins's images for this issue point at a similar sense of self-reliant circularity. They are inspired by the theme of flight common to Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Kendrick Lamar's video *Alright* (2015), and they dialog with a long deep-rooted imaginary of “flying Africans” who traveled

the Middle Passage backwards, seeking to go back home. Using DeepDream software as a way to connect to the algorithmic genius blackness has maintained across the Middle Passage, the goal of Gaskins's work is ultimately to render black consciousness as constantly moving, untethered, and unmoored.

Similarly, grounding his reading of *La Haine* (Matthew Kassovitz, 1995) in the film's hip-hop sensibility, Steve Spence identifies the genre's striving toward suspension, including

the weightlessness and defiance of gravity in b-boys performances, in opposition to the joke that frames the film: it's about a guy falling from a skyscraper and, as he is falling, repeats to himself, “so far so good, so far so good.” The joke locates the film's narrative in a moment of suspension before the deadly crash so that it acts as a mechanism that delays the “inescapable doom.” The same “delay” is reproduced also by the Steadicam shots following the three friends—Vinz, Hubert and

Said—throughout the film and is most effectively dramatized in the high angle shot onto the projects courtyard as DJ Cut Killer's sound exits his window and floats through the air overcoming the architectural boundaries put in place by a history of State policing of the *banlieues*. While the framing joke “sketches a kind of dangerous limbo, a freedom that might feel like flight but that must end in catastrophe,” in this scene the unmoored camera transforms surveillance footage into contemplation.<sup>20</sup>

### Halting Forms and Modes of Surrounding, Closing In, and Shutting Down

The critical valence of suspension can further be brought down to scale to bear upon the very understanding of the photographic image itself, as a way to place a wedge between the image and its profilic subject, which, in the case of black bodies,



FIGURE 4. *MEDEA* (DIRECTED BY BEN CALDWELL, 1973), FRAME GRAB.



# THE CRITICAL VALENCE OF SUSPENSION CAN FURTHER BE BROUGHT DOWN TO SCALE TO BEAR UPON THE VERY UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE ITSELF, AS A WAY TO PLACE A WEDGE BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND ITS PROFILMIC SUBJECT

has been historically made to coincide, as if flattened onto the same truthful surface. Yet, as long as it involves a lens, photography also always comprises a space (with a specific architecture), a duration (however small), and the possibility of movement and of its repression. Thus, it is possible to regard suspension as the byproduct of a belabored immobility, as does Tina Campt, who deploys for visual analysis Darieck Scott’s emphasis on what he has described as “Fanon’s

muscles,” the state of muscular tension Frantz Fanon diagnoses in the colonized who are captive of a cycle of spatial and temporal denials that offer no true mobility and no release.<sup>21</sup> Campt reads suspension in the facial expressions of a series of women featured in a colonial photographic archive compiled by a Trappist mission in the Eastern Cape of Africa in 1894 as the result of tensions produced by holding competing forces in balance

and managing their potentially eruptive and disruptive force.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to the “aesthetic deception” practiced by Sojourner Truth, as discussed by Sarah Smith in her essay in this issue on selected works from Gallery Momo’s exhibition, *Selling the Shadow* (Cape Town, South Africa), this rhetorical indirection can be productively deployed to suspend foreclosed conclusions, associations, and reading protocols. In Smith’s reading of Truth’s deliberate use of early photographic technologies

and her oratory to support the abolitionist cause, suspension produces a space for a crafting or “curating” of the self that, however, is kept out of sight, or, more precisely, in what Smith describes as “plain/ plane sight,” that is, not immediately visible because that self is *folded* in the architectural structures of anti-blackness.<sup>23</sup> This is what happens in Torkwase Dyson’s *Anthony Burns (In Plane Site: Fugitive)* (2016), which Smith discusses in her essay as enacting bi-dimensional renderings of architectural space as a way to suspend technologies of domination and captivity. These renderings presuppose architectures of enclosure but refuse to reproduce them. Instead, they place them at a remove, through abstractions that figure the alternative vectors and trajectories that unmoor the body and allow it to “steal itself away” into freedom, as happened in the case of Anthony Burns, who hid in

the hull of a ship in order to do so. Mary Sibande’s sculptures, created from casts of the artist’s body, also featured in *Selling the Shadow*, make suspension even harder to see, but this is because they upend the domestic-madam relation via processes of incorporation and implosion, rather than prying open or keeping apart, so much so that only one sculptural body is left to signify the outcome of this “monstrous intimacy.”<sup>24</sup>

Again, these conflicting and unresolved tensions remind me of an L.A. Rebellion film, in this case Julie Dash’s *The Diary of an African Nun* (1977), adapted from a short story by Alice Walker, where this tension unfolds dramatically as a question of the protagonist’s relationship to the sound of her immediate environment: the young and beautiful nun, played by Barbara O, is torn apart by competing alliances to the

rigidity demanded by her religious habit and the riveting beat of the African drums she hears outside her bedroom window. Her habit was her coveted prize and greatest childhood desire—a form of “regal” and dignified “liveness” she envied in the nuns and priests who taught at the mission school she frequented. She dreamed of wearing it, being “shrouded in whiteness like the mountains I see from my window,” her voice-over explains, and earn the “right to never be without it.”

Shot in black and white, the film emphasizes the contrast between the immaculate whiteness of her dress and the richness of her complexion. But at the end of the day, when she retires to her room the habit has to come off. As she disrobes to the drumbeat she remarks, “...I sing my whole chant in response to theirs.” The drums she hears carry other impulses and desires: the food, wine,



FIGURE 5. *DIARY OF AN AFRICAN NUN* (DIRECTED BY JULIE DASH, 1977), FRAME GRAB.

and conviviality she no longer has access to, or the equally unattainable spark of a young romance. They awaken an unbearable conflict between the deep mortification required by her vows and the promise of incessant movement folded in the energy of each drumbeat. Forced to maintain a composure both threatened and undermined by the sounds surrounding her, her body becomes a battlefield. Yet, while she struggles to suspend the competing impulses that tear her apart, the editing gives in to her inner agitation, transitioning to rapid cuts and repeated canted shots of her hands coming together in prayer as she falls to her knees. Even the window's shutters move rapidly and rhythmically to convey the emotional charge of the scene.<sup>25</sup> The film ultimately stages a form of embattled stillness underneath the cloak of whiteness she embraced as a vehicle toward some kind of transcendence

(including of the overembodiment of racialization), which ultimately will not do, because the more profound mechanics of the colonial relation still agitate underneath it.

*Dreams are colder than Death* also gestures toward a place underneath racialization but from a different perspective. In the film, Kara Walker's comments describe the space of her creativity *as a type of suspension*: under the skin, a skin slightly detached, just enough to allow her some measure of freedom. Perhaps, but it's not fully clear, this type of retinal detachment also gives her the ability to "look at the underside of race a little bit."<sup>26</sup> However fleeting and precarious, this space becomes available once blackness is untethered from the body and held in balance, as if hovering above it. Conversely, Christina Sharpe reads this retinal image evoked by Walker as the "optic of the door

of no return on our retina."<sup>27</sup> As such, she regards it as descriptive of the epistemological, ethical but, ultimately, ontological position held by the cell phone photograph Oscar Grant was able to take of the BART officer who shot him moments later. In this sense—from this view from the hold—black consciousness emerges still as the place where whatever is suspended (for a moment, for a breath, for a thought) is also ultimately and unavoidably the place where it also still lands.

Suspension can also open a productive space between the moving image and the (black) subject's movement, which the cinematic apparatus has historically harvested to gain an effect of surplus liveness.<sup>28</sup> Here suspension is meant as disruption, refusal, and endurance as it is involved, for instance, in the "still act" Steve McQueen performs in his installation *Deadpan* (1997), might

be a way to unglue, unmoor and untether the black body from the way it has historically borne the burden of *integrating* the moving image and lubricating its mechanisms.<sup>29</sup>

In *Deadpan*, as I have discussed elsewhere, McQueen remakes with a spectacular stillness a famous Buster Keaton stunt from *Steamboat Will Jr.* (1928): the façade of a house collapses on top of Keaton who barely stands up and quickly runs away. McQueen, instead, stands perfectly immobile *through* the falling façade and the same stunt is shown repeatedly from a variety of different angles so that his upright stillness functions as a gesture of suspension. Building on McQueen's work on the limits of the film frame and his stated desire to "pass through" the image "like in a road movie," I ultimately read this installation as staging a form of trespassing and perhaps also an escape through the porous



## VISUAL AESTHETICS OF SUSPENSION CAN PRODUCE LOOPHOLES AND ESCAPE ROUTES, OR OTHERWISE UPHOLD AND HALT FORMS AND MODES OF SURROUNDING, CLOSING IN, AND SHUTTING DOWN

black screen that early cinema made exchangeable with the black body.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this does not mean that the body is necessarily set free, but rather that visual aesthetics of suspension can produce loopholes and escape routes, or otherwise uphold and halt forms and modes of surrounding, closing in, and shutting down sanctioned or legitimate moves.

But here is a productive complication: in his talk at the 2014 Cinematic Migration Symposium at MIT

organized by Renée Green on John Akomfrah's work, Fred Moten critiqued the overdetermined manner in which black subjectivity in the cinema unfolds between the dream of exaltation into sovereignty and the shame that comes from the realization of the impossibility to fulfill that dream—an oscillation that the cinematic apparatus, in turn has institutionalized in the tension between movement and stasis.<sup>31</sup> For Moten, McQueen's work is perpetually (and delusionally)

preoccupied with this wavering between euphoria and shame. Arthur Jafa's attempt to create a Black Visual Intonation (BVI), instead, can perhaps be seen as an effort in the opposite direction, as the search for a mechanism to withhold and halt this closing in of the apparatus around the black body and its movements. This is nowhere more evident than in Jafa's more recent work *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016), as well as the video he co-directed for Jay-Z's *4:44*.<sup>32</sup> While the

ekphrastic efforts to describe the former—a seven-minute montage of original footage (including shots from *Dreams* and stills that have appeared in previous works), YouTube clips, archival footage, Civil Rights imagery, and film clips to the pace of Kanye West's gospel-inspired song *Ultralight Beam*—accumulate as the installation travels from New York to L.A. and beyond, the emphasis continues to fall on the seemingly incomprehensible and yet sublime logic that strings this montage together in a constantly reversible continuum between exhilaration and pain. Jafa has described it as an attempt to build empathy, which, as Hortense Spillers articulates in *Dreams*, is the experience of the *flesh*, and to show, exercise, and ultimately develop “empathy muscles,” which black people already have because they have to identify with people other than themselves.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, he claims, “I’m trying to make my



FIGURE 6. *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR JAJA, TNEG, 2016), FRAME GRAB.

shit as black as possible and still have you deal with my humanity.”<sup>34</sup>

Greg Tate describes the video as “an alternatively mirthful-cum-melancholic-cum-cardiac-arresting meditation on race-agency wrapped in a visually sermonic recitation of race tragedy wrapped in a nuanced and feverish exultation of diverse Black American lives at various states of collapse and regeneration.”<sup>35</sup> Sharpe describes it as an oscillation between exertion and composure, noting how, although at times flowing quickly, its images require “a biophysical response of a held breath, an elongated sigh.” They demand lingering: “We are left...to linger in the reverb, to experience duration, to live in the body split and reconfigured by sound..., in the afterimage of the suffering that forged Blackness and the joy and song that yet, and still, emerge.”<sup>36</sup> Helena Molesworth, Chief Curator



FIGURE 7. *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, TNEG, 2016), FRAME GRAB.

for The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, where the installation showed earlier this year, further points out how “all the movement and gestures [Jafa] has chosen are expressions of bodily compression and release.”<sup>37</sup>

The pursuit of a Black Visual Intonation can be seen as an attempt to pry wide open this gap between exertion and composure, exhilaration and pain, compression and release—a gap that, in another conversation with Jafa, about the difference between painting and photography, Kerry James Marshall characterized as a place of “discrepancy”—and suspend black bodies within it, making it a suitable dwelling place where they might at *their own chosen* direction and pace, and where all *e-motions* from the human spectrum can equally take place.<sup>38</sup>

In Jafa’s sustained focus on rhythm and vectoriality, and black people’s facility with “spatial arrays,”

trajectories, or, “flow through figures,” architectural meanings of “suspension” begin to come into focus.<sup>39</sup> This is in Torkwase Dyson’s *Anthony Burns (In Plane Site: Fugitive)* (2016) that Smith discusses in her essay, and even more so in Lauren M. Cramer’s reading of Kahlil Joseph’s “Until the Quiet Comes” (2012), which was central to the *liquid blackness* group’s decision to address suspension as a thematic, methodological, and formal concern.

### Architectures of suspension

In architecture, suspension describes the technique of dispersing a structure’s mass across multiple grounding positions so that even the most complex and weighty structures can appear “light” because of how their material elements are held in tension.<sup>40</sup> While immediately descriptive of Joseph’s camera movements, sometimes traveling upside down or vertically

situated in relation to their subjects, suspension for Cramer describes the way a much deeper logic of anti-blackness *diagrams* spaces, including cinematic spaces, their architectures and their “joints,” and the way Joseph brings that logic to the brink of catastrophe and then unfolds it toward a different outcome. Indeed, she argues, “‘Until the Quiet Comes’ practices suspension by fully inhabiting its tension: it “renders a seemingly weightless image of blackness ... by becoming denser,” by diagramming its predictable outcome, its already predetermined doom, and then unfolding that very diagram according to vectors that are possible within it, but have not been imagined, conceived or desired, by the structures of anti-blackness. Blackness is excluded from the “world” we live in, Cramer argues by building on Katherine McKittrick’s argument in *Demonic Grounds*, and yet it provides the ground on which





FIGURE 8. *BELHAVEN MERIDIAN*, (DIRECTED BY KAHILIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2009), FRAME GRAB.

it is built. What happens then, when black bodies leave this ground?

**“Where Are We Going?”**

*Belhaven Meridian* (2009) is the first video Joseph directed for Shabazz Palaces. Shot in Watts, in 35mm black and white film, it is an homage to Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977). It begins with the roar of a car engine over a black screen, then a side shot of a car. A young man is at the wheel and a young woman is sitting on the roof of the car. There is no diegetic dialog but a caption, instead, appears:

HIM: IT’S TIME.

She slides off the roof and swiftly turns around the car while he stretches towards the passenger’s seat and opens the door for her.

Then another caption:

HER: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

## BLACKNESS IS EXCLUDED FROM THE “WORLD” WE LIVE IN ... AND YET IT PROVIDES THE GROUND ON WHICH IT IS BUILT. WHAT HAPPENS THEN, WHEN BLACK BODIES LEAVE THIS GROUND?

She gets into the car—the car that *Killer of Sheep*’s protagonist Stan could never get to work—and they quickly ride away. The camera follows them until they disappear behind a row of houses, then it tilts to the left to frame an empty street, as an attractive woman enters the frame from the right strolling confidently in the middle of the street. Quickly, and predictably, a young man approaches her and tries to make small talk. They are young and brash and at home. As they walk away from the camera

his step quickly conforms to her stride and their combined movement lulls at the beat of the soundtrack.

As if by chance, tilting to the right, the camera picks up the (re-enacted) shooting of a scene from *Killer of Sheep* itself, which took place on the front steps of Stan’s house as two of his “buddies” attempt to lure him into a more facile life of crime as a way out of his predicament: the perverse cycle that entraps him as both the killer and the sheep he routinely slaughters in his day

job. This precious glance into the “making” of *Killer of Sheep*—a labor of love and respect, and patience and community—is enough to cause the camera to rotate on its axis and turn upside down. In this new world, where the top and bottom have exchanged places, the silhouette of a young man appears running down the same street.

Juxtaposed to the silhouette there appears also an African mask floating on the surface of the image, but not for long: the young man inexplicably grabs it and rushes through a group



of boys who are trying to tackle him, like a running back going for a touchdown. The camera remains upside down and the long take continues as we see him eventually passing the mask to a bike rider from a group of motorcyclists who suddenly ride through the same street. The music settles on a quieter register and the camera follows them gliding through streets progressively filling up with traffic, moving freely and almost floating effortlessly away.

The answer to her question finally comes here:

HIM: WHEREVER WE WANT.

This is one of Joseph's earliest films but suspension is already central to it. The camera upside down in the middle of a long take upholds the world as we know it, but it does not compromise the integrity of the space. It simply makes it feel a bit more miraculous

by disrupting the experience of the ground and the forces that anchor bodies to it. Suspension features as weightlessness, but not as an un-grounding—not a severance from home, experience, intimacy or community. Propelled by the movement of various bodies in the frame—the couple in the car, the couple in the street, the lone silhouette and so on—the camera progressively leaves behind tractions and attritions and ushers in an experience of lightness that, however, is never divorced from gravitas. Extraordinarily, the camera's nimbleness in Joseph's work always adds to the solemnity of the image.

Thus, while the camera hovers over a number of bodies dressed in white and draped over architectural ruins reclaimed by lush vegetation in a scene shot on location in Puerto Rico from his later video for Shabazz Palaces titled *Black Up*—described

as a “fever dream” inspired by the duo's music— (the image we chose for the cover of this issue) and vertically looks down on them, they too possess a sense of levity and composure that defies the idea that they might be dead. Now that the ground has become the ceiling, the “weight” of their stillness has shifted from possible death to rest, from stiffness to softness.

This quality of Joseph's camera—just like the logic of Jafa's montage—are very hard to describe. Yet, in James Tobias's account, when asked about the reasons for some of his camera movements, Joseph related that sometimes he is thinking about the way an uncle speaks—in my understanding—and I'm paraphrasing and interpreting here using a critical idiom that Joseph doesn't necessarily value—the words themselves may not matter, but there is a larger question of speech beyond the semio-

grammatical unit, a question, that is, of style, and stylistics not necessarily dependent on word (or image) and rather communicative of something like the “Black Talk” which Ben Sidran famously introduced back in 1971 by describing “listening to a Coltrane solo and hearing my mother's voice.”<sup>41</sup>

Toward the end of *Black Up*, we hear Gil Scott Heron's raspy voice: “There were some African poets that would only speak syllables,” he intones, with a slight stutter, “it's like reading the yellow pages backwards.” This communicative opacity that highlights the musicality of words over their signification inspires the suspension Joseph's seemingly always-moving camera performs around his characters who become part of what feels like a much more sensitive environment. By removing the black body “from the architectural function that requires its subjection,”



FIGURE 9. *BELHAVEN MERIDIAN* (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2009), FRAME GRAB.

Cramer claims, Joseph articulates cinematic spaces that are no longer “brutalizing to black bodies.”<sup>42</sup>

*Black Up*’s closing image offers yet another illustration of architectural suspension, as we see Ishmael Butler (one of the two artists who make up Shabazz Palaces) standing in line in front of a restaurant window at night in the Bronx, while a/his girl huddles in a gray hoodie leans against him and, her weight now slightly suspended, closes her eyes.

Like liquidity, suspension works best when it is pursued in all its rich polysemy and undecidability. Unlike liquidity, suspension demands to be *held* and to be, in turn, *suspended* so that the critical work it performs can be amplified and built upon. Yet, suspension does not indulge in fixation and it defies the stillness of fetishization. Suspension acknowledges that pressure requires release, elevation will eventually end,

and there is only so much tension that can be reconciled or absorbed before implosion or explosion: as Cramer’s analysis of “Until the Quiet Comes” reminds us, “any violence visualized in the process of building *this* world always lands on the black body,” which remains this world’s very ground.<sup>43</sup> ■

Endnotes

- <sup>1.</sup> More than usual, this introduction has benefitted from the careful comments of Lauren M. Cramer, Charles “Chip” Linscott, Jenny Gunn, John Roberts, Shady Patterson, Daren Fowler, and Charleen Wilcox.
- <sup>2.</sup> The research project included public screenings and artist’s talks, and culminated in the publication of the sixth issue of the *liquid blackness* journal.
- <sup>3.</sup> Jafa’s use of the term “durational drag” is reported in Angela Brown, “Video Art at the Tempo of Emergency: Arthur Jafa on His Recent Work,” ArtNews, February 15, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/15/video-art-at-the-tempo-of-emergency-arthur-jafa-on-his-recent-work>. For a more detailed discussion of *Dreams are colder than Death* in the context of questions of black ontology and the love of blackness, themselves a form of holding blackness in suspension, see my introduction to the no. 6 issue of *liquid blackness* as well as my essay “Dreams are colder than Death and the Gathering of Black Sociality,” *Black Camera*, 8, no. 2 (2016): 120-140.
- <sup>4.</sup> Jenny Gunn, “Re: ‘The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,’ by Cassie da Costa, October 24, 2016,” letter to the editor of the *New Yorker*, November 18, 2016.
- <sup>5.</sup> Daren Fowler, “To Erotically Know: The Ethics and Pedagogy of *Moonlight*” in this issue, 45.
- <sup>6.</sup> Alessandra Raengo, “*liquid blackness*: A Research Project on Blackness and Aesthetics,” in *Mark Bradford: Scorched Earth*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, exhibition catalogue ed. by Connie Butler and published by DelMonico-Prestel, 2015, 170.
- <sup>7.</sup> Lauren M. Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe: Diagramming Blackness in *Until the Quiet Comes*,” in this issue, 145.
- <sup>8.</sup> Within the *liquid blackness* group, we describe as a “think along” what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might describe as “black study,” which is a practice of *thinking with others* that, since our research project on Larry Clark’s *Passing Through*, we have attached to the dynamics of the jazz ensemble, see Lauren M. Cramer and Alessandra Raengo,

- “Freeing Black Codes: *liquid blackness* Plays the Jazz Ensemble,” in “Black Code Studies,” ed. Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal, special issue, *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 8-21.
- <sup>9</sup>. As a project that seeks to continue our experimentation with digital forms of “black study” the hyperlinked text of this lively discussion invited by Derek and Soraya Murray will also be open to feedback and other forms of contribution and augmentation.
- <sup>10</sup>. Bradford, *Scorched Earth*. Bradford’s contribution to the Venice Biennial, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, occupies the U.S. Pavilion very much in the mode of a suspended obstruction. Visitors can only enter from the side door and are immediately confronted by densely labored masses suspended from the ceiling (*Spoiled Foot*, 2016), sprouting from the ground (*Medusa*, 2016), or colonizing the vault of the rotunda like overgrown vine (*Saturn Returns*, 2013). The video that concludes the exhibition, *Niagara* (2005), shows Bradford’s LA neighbor walking away from the camera with recognizable swagger. Slow motion comings and goings of cars in the street index the passage of real time but, in terms of spatiality, progress is not being made. He seemingly does not gain any ground and remains suspended instead, almost hovering over the sidewalk, as if walking in place.
- <sup>11</sup>. Fowler, “To Erotically Know,” 44.
- <sup>12</sup>. *Killer of Sheep*, obviously, which Coogler has indicated as influential in his aesthetic choices, but I am thinking also about his Project One film, *Several Friends* (1969).
- <sup>13</sup>. Andre Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” 37, in *What is Cinema?* Vol. II, transl. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). In “Eyes at the Back of His Head: Precarious Masculinity and the Modern Tracking Shot.” Speaker series sponsored by the Corporeality Working Group and the Franklin Humanities Group. Duke University, 14 April 2014, Jennifer Barker calls attention to the film’s commitment also to exposing the limits of the representational logic of realism, to the extent that it never affords a point of view shot from Oscar’s camera although it opens with cell-phone camera footage of his death. More importantly, she focuses on the camera position throughout, in what she describes as “follow shots” which enact a form of “witnessing at a

- distance,” that is precariously similar to the constant surveillance Oscar undergoes as he moves in public spaces. Her observations make the tone of the flashback even more strikingly discontinuous to the rest of the film. See also Jennifer M. Barker and Adam Cottrel, “Eyes at the Back of the Head: Precarious Masculinity and the Modern Tracking Shot,” *Paragraph* 38, no. 1 (March 2015): 86-100.
- <sup>14</sup>. Paula Massood, “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse,” *Wide Angle* 21, no. 4 (2004): 20-41.
- <sup>15</sup>. See Derek Conrad Murray’s contribution to empyre, April 2016, and specifically his characterization of the similarities between the concept of “post-blackness” and “liquid-blackness.” <http://liquidblackness.com/twine/empyre.html>.
- <sup>16</sup>. Fowler, “To Erotically Know,” in this issue, p. 45.
- <sup>17</sup>. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
- <sup>18</sup>. Amiri Baraka, *Part of the Doctrine: Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art: Collected Poetry, 1961-1967* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).
- <sup>19</sup>. For a longer discussion of these films see Alessandra Raengo, “Encountering the Rebellion: *liquid blackness* reflects on the expansive possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion films,” in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Stewart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 291-318, and Allyson Nadia Field, “Rebellious Unlearnings: UCLA Project One Films (1967-1978),” *Ibid.*, 83-118.
- <sup>20</sup>. Steve Spence, “Hip Hop Aesthetics and *La Haine*,” in this issue, 100.
- <sup>21</sup>. Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).



- <sup>22.</sup> A tension that strains the muscles and might be visible in the face if one is willing to “listen” to the photographic image. Without reference to the rich theoretical backing by Fred Moten in his discussion of “Black Mo’nin’ in the Sound of the Photograph” (a chapter from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Campt describes as “listening” her attentive, sympathetic reading for the counter-archival moves that might be articulated even by the most seemingly disciplined photographic archives. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>23.</sup> Charleen Wilcox suggested that Truth’s aesthetic deception can also be regarded as a type of self-curation. For a rigorous approach to the architectures of anti-blackness see Lauren M. Cramer’s essay in this issue.
- <sup>24.</sup> I take liberally this expression from Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies. Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- <sup>25.</sup> In a way that is reminiscent of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).
- <sup>26.</sup> *Dreams are colder than Death* (Arthur Jafa, 2013).
- <sup>27.</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.
- <sup>28.</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- <sup>29.</sup> Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness and the Image of Motility: A Suspenseful Critique,” *Black Camera*, 8, no. 1 (2016): 191-206. For Andre Lepecki, the still “acts because it interrogates economies of time, because it reveals the possibility of one’s agency within controlling regimes of capital, subjectivity, labor and mobility.” André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.
- <sup>30.</sup> See *What Happened in the Tunnel* (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1903) when the association of the black screen with the maid’s

- epidermal blackness becomes one of the pretexts for the narrative and racial switcheroo. See also Trond Lundemo, “The Colors of Haptic Space,” in *Color: The Film Reader*, edited by Brian and Angela Dalle Vacche Price, 88-101 (New York: Routledge, 2006); Stephen Best, *The Fugitives’ Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 203-267; Susan Courtney, *Hollywood’s Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>31.</sup> As Alice Maurice takes steps to show in *The Cinema and Its Shadow*.
- <sup>32.</sup> Jafa showed the video that became *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* in Atlanta in the context of the special event that *liquid blackness* hosted for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (April 2016), still untitled.
- <sup>33.</sup> Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt, “Love is the Message, The Plan is Death,” *e-flux journal* #81, April 2017.
- <sup>34.</sup> Arthur Jafa qtd. in Antwaun Sargent, “Arthur Jafa and the Future of Black Cinema,” *Interview* (January 11, 2017): <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/arthur-jafa>. Because grounded in the “flesh,” empathy deepens and suspends at the same time: *Dreams* presents it both, and equally, as a profoundly personal, intimate and singular experience, especially when Spillers talks about her loss of family members, while it is also one black people share, as black people.
- <sup>35.</sup> Greg Tate, “The Changeling Mise-en-Scène—Arthur Jafa’s Meta Love and the New Black Reportage,” in Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (New York: Gavin Brown Enterprise, 2016), n.p.
- <sup>36.</sup> Christina Sharpe, “Love is the Message, The Message is Death,” in Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message*, n.p.
- <sup>37.</sup> Helen Molesworth, “Arthur Jafa: *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*,” brochure for exhibition at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, April 2-June 12, 2017.
- <sup>38.</sup> Writing for *Art News*, Angela Brown reports a conversation between Jafa and Kerry James Marshall where the latter characterized the difference between painting and photography as one about “discrepancy,” a gap between the rendering of something and what is being rendered, “a very complicated thing for black folks, because we live in [it] all

the time.” <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/15/video-art-at-the-tempo-of-emergency-arthur-jafa-on-his-recent-work>.

<sup>39</sup>. Jafa and Campt, “Love is the Message,” 6. Jafa has also repeatedly indicated that, at Howard University he had initially studied architecture and had brought to that discipline similar questions about how an architectural structure might correspond to a black sound.

<sup>40</sup>. Lauren M. Cramer, “Building the Black (Universal) Archive and the Architecture of Black Cinema,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (2016): 131-145.

<sup>41</sup>. James Tobias, “Untitled,” *In Media Res* (October 13, 2016), <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2016/10/13/untitled>.

<sup>42</sup>. Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe,” in this issue, 149.

<sup>43</sup>. Ibid., 155.

*MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.





# To Erotically Know: The Ethics and Pedagogy of *Moonlight*

DAREN FOWLER

Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016) has something to teach us through its efforts to show how to engage vibrant images of a gay black kid coming of age and coming to terms. *Moonlight*'s images and narrative have rightly been praised for providing nuanced and complicated representation to the underrepresented. The film gives space and care to its main character, Chiron, as he navigates his community's poverty, his mother's addiction, and his own queerness. The concern for suspension that propels this issue is, in part, a concern for bringing care and love to the study of blackness and its aesthetic forms. Alessandra Raengo, the founder of *liquid blackness*, frames suspension as an ethical move—to suspend is to lift up, to hold, to unburden, but also to contain, to freeze, and to scientifically, chemically collect. Suspension lingers in the liminal

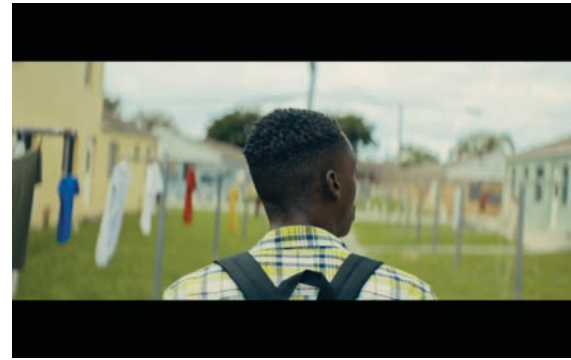
space between love and domination; an aesthetics of suspension points to the ways images, bodies, spaces, and times linger with, for, and as each other—an ethics of relation. The aesthetics at the forefront of this journal issue pose the questions of what is being suspended and how that suspension occurs. Suspension functions as a culmination of sorts for *liquid blackness*, especially considering the previous two issues and their concerns with the “study” and “love” of blackness. In issue five, *Passing Through Film: The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble*, Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977) necessitated a different mode of study. Clark and his film deny the freeze frame style of film scholarship where an image is captured, frozen, and contained so that it can be analyzed and picked apart. As Lauren M. Cramer argues in her essay for that issue, Clark's film “is about movement, connectivity, and scale—

## TO CONSIDER THE LOVE OF BLACKNESS AS AN ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION IS TO GIVE WEIGHT AND NECESSITY TO BLACKNESS AS AN ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION FOR LOVE.

there must be room to pass through, and this passing through should not be interrupted.”<sup>1</sup> Cramer argues for a mode of close analysis oriented toward movement that embraces the fluidity of filmic images and the lives they are representing and imagining. She deploys not singular frames, but a horizontal filmstrip-like collection of images that attempt to preserve the movement and change that film as a medium makes possible and in which Clark's film thrives. Cramer's proposition, and the guiding premise

for issue five, was to theorize Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's “Black Study” for film, to ask what it means to study black film and how such study might be undertaken. What was being offered was a mode of being with, as Moten and Harney argue, a process of thinking alongside blackness in its open, lived, fluid, and filmic possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Moten also oriented the concerns for the sixth issue of *liquid blackness: Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness*. In Arthur Jafa's *Dreams are colder*

*than Death* (2013), Moten asks “Can black people be loved? Not desired, not wanted, not acquired, not lusted after...Can blackness be loved?”<sup>3</sup> As Raengo writes in that issue's introduction, of central concern are “the repercussions of approaching the ontology of blackness from the point of view of death rather than the point of view of life. Said otherwise, what is the ontology of black lives, when they are so thoroughly wrapped in an atmospheric anti-blackness?”<sup>4</sup> I do not want to recount



TRIPTYCH 1. *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRABS.

the ontological questions parsed in that issue, however; instead, what strikes me as crucial, and why I have opened with this seeming detour through *liquid blackness's* past, is that to consider the love of blackness as an ontological question is to give weight and necessity to blackness as an ontological question *for* love. Which is to say, I view the work of *liquid blackness* over at least the previous two issues as a thorough, experimental dive into theorizing how we as theorists and people in

the world come to know, care, and fight for and with blackness. The research group has posed study and love as terms for reconsidering how and where blackness is confronted by academics, artists, and activists—that is, an ethical declaration for the centrality and necessity of blackness and its aesthetic liquidity in the world.

The purpose for this brief reflection on *liquid blackness* is to offer a frame for how I understand the terms for the current issue on the aesthetics

of suspension. As I wrote in the opening of this essay, suspension exists in a liminal space between care and domination, and to turn toward such a term and the aesthetics it can produce is to turn toward ethics once more. I propose suspension as a continuation and culmination of that ethical project. Suspension offers not a new mode of seeing, but a new practice of being with and caring for. It is a mode of black aesthetic possibilities that does in motion what *liquid blackness*

has been theorizing—a praxis for the ethics of black liquidity. And I see *Moonlight* as offering one of the most cogent and affectively impactful demonstrations of what an aesthetic of suspension can visualize and open for film while also presenting a pedagogy for caring, holding, and loving (queer) blackness without containing, suffocating, and freezing its vital movements.

Within this frame of an aesthetic of suspension, I finally turn in earnest to *Moonlight*. Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* follows the coming-of-age story of Chiron (alternately called Little in part one and Black in part three). *Moonlight* thus exists as a triptych: three sections work to imagine three Chirons. And like a triptych, the dividing lines between the three stories and worlds are blurred with characters, settings, and moods lingering in the harsh black screens that separate each

movement. Chiron is a young black kid from Miami whom we first see around eight years old as a blur of color (his black skin standing out against his white polo) being chased by three other kids. In part two, we see him again as a thin and lanky teenager barely in the frame, as his bully, Terrell, berates Chiron over whether it is his “time of the month.” In part three, a twenty-something Chiron has transformed, his body Adonis-like; he stands in a kitchen lit in blue light as the camera stares at his muscled back with his face hidden and stretched into the freezer. Each Chiron stands as an outgrowth of what came before—what the viewer has been shown and what the viewer has been denied. Each part of the film (i. Little; ii. Chiron; iii. Black) seeps into the next, though rarely with images; more often, this intermingling of parts is enacted by the affective and narrative remains of what came before and

the haunting of what is to come.

This sense of haunting is one of the critical poles in Arzu Karaduman's essay, also included in this issue. Karaduman and I are drawn to the ways the film holds and protects Chiron from the world he lives in and the world in which the film is made visible (i.e., recognized and deemed valuable). In her essay, “‘Hush-hush, I Will Know When I Know’: Post-black Sound Aesthetics in *Moonlight*,” *Moonlight's* “suspension of synchronization” between sound and image is key. For example, a scream from Chiron's mother begins the end of part one and marks the beginning of part three; this suspension produces a rift between the violent shaming of the mother's (and the world's) disdain and the film's need to protect and care for Chiron and his queer blackness. As Karaduman argues, the aesthetic work of rupturing aurality contains

and holds Chiron's queerness away from queer shame until he finds a path otherwise and, crucially for the pedagogical ethics of suspension, keeps the film from enacting a repetition of that shaming violence.

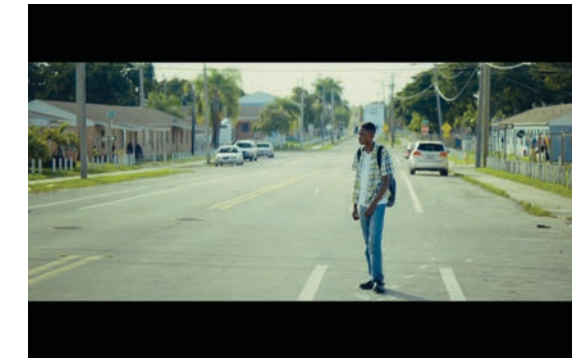
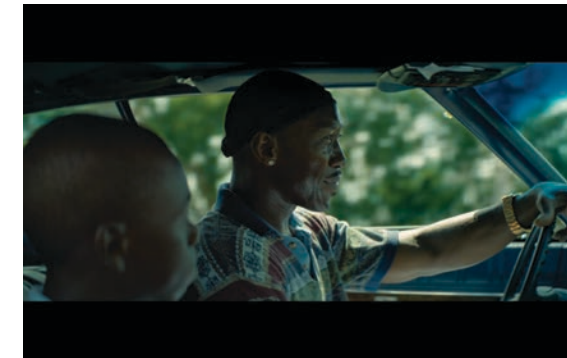
What is at stake for Karaduman and I, and why this issue turns multiply to *Moonlight*, is precisely this pedagogical potential in the film. The film aesthetically makes available and aesthetically teaches the viewer the love and care for queer blackness. And—like Cramer's development of an alternative mode of textual analysis that preserves the multiplicity and fluidity of the filmic jazz ensemble—to watch, know, and speak of *Moonlight* is not to consider a singular moment or a singular instance of Chiron, but to consider the fluid, non-linear movement of the film's entirety. Just as Chiron is not simply Little, Chiron, or Black, but an amalgam of each and much more, the

film demands through its aesthetic fluidity an open participation with and alongside Chiron—a study of and love for. This essay, therefore, will attempt to embrace the fluid triptych structure that the film deploys. I offer three sections of my own—hardness, water, and erotics—that theorize three modes of Chiron's image and the implications they have on him for himself, for the film itself, and for those bearing witness to both. These three terms are not addressed discretely in the film, but exist simultaneously within and without each other. Therefore, this is not a progression or hierarchy of terms, but the atomic materials holding Chiron and *Moonlight* in a conflicting and stressed movement between care and containment.

#### i. Hardness

To begin thinking about the film, I will turn to where it ends. Chiron stands hunched in the corner of the kitchen,

his back almost touching the wall. He stands just far enough back to avoid its touch. A body-length away stands Kevin, the man Chiron has driven nine hours from Atlanta to Miami to see after a decade. Chiron's eyes stare down, his mouth slightly open, ready to speak should the energy come. Kevin stares straight ahead, trying to find Chiron behind the averted gaze and tight grip of his muscled body. The camera stays in a medium shot from Chiron, close enough to see his body and apprehension but too far to really gaze into him. The camera cuts to Kevin, his eyes still attempting to penetrate Chiron to find the kid he grew up with, the kid he desired, the kid he broke. Kevin finally speaks, "Who is you, man?" Chiron looks up, confused and frustrated, "Who's me?" Once more, Kevin asks, "Who is you, Chiron?" A pause stretches out, filling the room with affective desire—desire to answer, desire to scream, desire to touch, desire to know (each other and



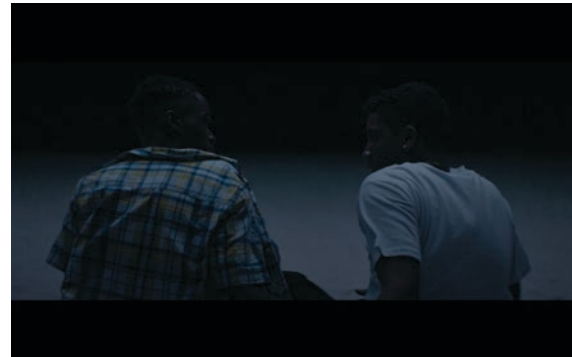
TRIPTYCH 2. *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRABS.

Chiron). "So, you hard now?" Kevin, after hours, finally utters the question that sums up what he sees as the gap between this older Chiron, this Chiron who now goes by "Black," and the lanky Chiron whom Kevin touched, caressed, and kissed on a beach a decade before. Another pause stretches out, and the camera stays on Chiron hunched in the corner. His body grows tighter; his lips close, hiding his fronts. Kevin's question, "So you hard now?" frames much of the tension of the film: what does it mean

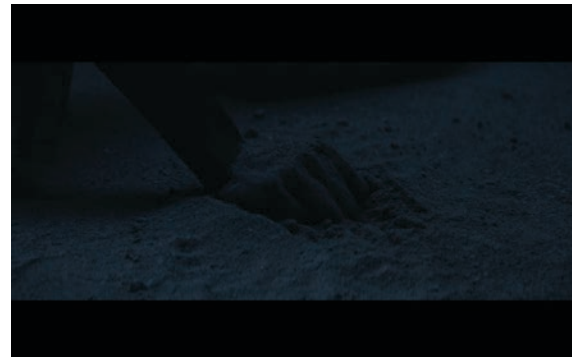
to be hard, how does one achieve it, and what are the ramifications for doing so? In part one, we see Chiron and Kevin playfully wrestling after Chiron has left a larger group of boys. Kevin asks if Chiron is soft, and Chiron unequivocally declares that he isn't soft. Kevin says he knows, but that Chiron has to act harder so that everyone else will know too. Hardness is a performative act of masculinity. It can be visually signaled through the hard body—a muscled, masculinist image of solidity and fortitude. To

be hard is to not be soft, to not be weak, to not be gay. Juan, a drug dealer who finds Chiron after he has escaped from his bullies, performs hardness most clearly and powerfully in the film. Juan is a beautiful, dark-skinned Cuban man. His body is muscled, and his skin is flawless but always contains a slight glisten of sweat. Juan becomes Chiron's father figure. He takes Chiron swimming for the first time, gives Chiron a second family, and pushes Chiron's mother to get her life together and stop taking





TRIPTYCH 3. *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRABS.



the drugs that he sells her. Juan is the first person Chiron confronts about his own sexuality, asking, “What is a faggot?” Juan answers honestly—“a hateful word for gay people”—and tells Chiron that he will figure it (his implied sexuality) out eventually, but not to worry about it now. Juan becomes the symbol of a proper-life: his body his hard, his wife is beautiful, he is open and caring, and he sells drugs. There is a normality to Juan, despite his illegal trade, that becomes a clear idol and future model for Chiron (Triptych 2).

In that kitchen—with his body, identity, and self so thoroughly questioned, just as it was when he first heard “faggot” as a child and Terrell pushed Kevin to punching Chiron—he finally speaks the closest thing he has to an epistemology of himself. It has been a decade since Kevin and Chiron sat on that beach together, smoking a blunt, and this

the first opening of himself we have heard since. Back then, Chiron spoke about those breezes that blow out from the ocean and through the hood, breezes that feel so good “all you can hear is your own heartbeat,” breezes so good, they “make you start to cry [...and] turn into drops and just crawl out into the water.” One such breeze rushed out from the ocean to hit them, to pull Kevin’s hand up to Chiron’s neck, to guide his mouth to Chiron’s mouth, to caress his fingers against Chiron’s pants, to touch Chiron (Triptych 3). But this new opening spoken in Kevin’s kitchen comes faster than on the beach; it comes harder and stronger and more desperate. Chiron speaks of his life after Kevin made him bleed to cover over his own fears. He speaks of his life after he broke a chair over the back of his tormentor, Terrell. Chiron speaks: “When we got to Atlanta, I built myself from the ground up. I built myself so hard.”

After Kevin’s confrontation with Chiron’s hardness, Chiron is finally able to respond and speak of his own choices, his own agency—something Kevin consistently denies him from childhood to the present adulthood. Chiron speaks of the work and labor he did to make himself hard. After shattering that chair, Chiron is sent to juvenile detention and eventually moved to Atlanta. He builds himself up anew; he builds himself up as his ideal male figure of consistent love—Juan. The film, unlike Kevin, does not reject this hard Chiron, nor does it argue that his identity as Black is a simple performance covering over his “real” desires. However, the film does share Kevin’s apprehension. When we, and Kevin, return to this older Chiron we see Juan, a hard-bodied drug dealer, but Chiron is missing something, and it is not the heteronormative family. Chiron is missing the slight glisten of sweat, the porous movement between solidity

and liquidity. That sweat marked a porousness between Juan’s inside and outside, between his hardness (the performative act of masculinity) and the caring caress of family and love he showed Teresa and Chiron. These are not oppositions, but facets of Juan that made him the lingering, haunting figure in Chiron’s life. What is at stake, aesthetically, for Chiron in that kitchen, and in his life, is finding access to the exuding of liquidity, a fluid openness of self and world.

## ii. Water

The film does show Chiron as wet, his skin covered in water, but it is just that—covered. We see Little make himself a bath after his mother’s latest bender. We see Chiron dunk his beaten face into a sink of ice. And we see Black submerge himself in a sink of ice as a ritual for his hardened body, a step alongside pushups and the rest of his workout. Chiron must always place water *upon* his skin; he

TRIPTYCH 4. *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRABS.



## HE CANNOT REACH INSIDE HIMSELF TO KNOW HIS LIQUIDITY...THE FLOWING QUEER CONTINGENCY OF A DEBT UNPAID, A DEBT REJECTED AS NEVER BEING OWED.

cannot *exude* the liquidity of Juan. Chiron's ritual submersions in water demonstrate a need, a yearning for that thing that he does not have, that he cannot perform (Triptych 4).

Unlike Juan, Chiron has a different weight, a different alterity: the closet. Chiron's orientation—sexuality and directionality—forms his body and its potentials differently. How one is oriented, whether one follows or veers off the proper line, produces different effects and affects upon the body. Writing on queer feelings

in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed argues that "What needs closer examination is how heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of 'birthing', a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognisable as forms of civilisation."<sup>5</sup> Ahmed is speaking directly to the norms of sexuality that oppress and suppress queer bodies and feelings that "accumulate as impressions on

the skin."<sup>6</sup> She sees this as a form of labor that works over and on bodies to shape their surfaces into proper form, to orient bodies toward proper affects, and to produce all the limitations that orientation entails.

Chiron is oriented toward the object he has made of Juan; he is following the path he feels Juan explored before him. And yet, that path has been its own form of restriction. The home he has built does not breathe the way it did for Juan; Chiron's skin does not open up to allow his

liquidity to flow as it did for Juan. The inability to extend himself into this space is not a failure of Chiron's agency—his hard body and trapping. Rather, it comes from his inability to orient himself as someone beyond the closeted world in which he lives. As is made clear in the next section, no one has touched Chiron since his encounter with Kevin on the beach. But his lack of touch is not simply physical. The empowering knowledge of the erotic eludes him; he remains closed off from the fountain of possibility and liquidity found in the dark and hidden places of the past and of the future. He must cover himself in water because he cannot reach inside himself to know his liquidity—the flowing queer contingency of a debt unpaid, a debt rejected as never being owed.

What is left, for Chiron and this essay, is to find a means to this erotics through a different

aesthetic formation—one of water, of hardness, and of suspension.

### iii. Erotics

I turn toward Audre Lorde's erotics for its consideration of those bodies and feelings long denied and othered, those that have been regulated and constrained by oppressive heteropatriarchal orderings. Other sensuous terms are readymade for *Moonlight*; the scenes of crucial importance to this essay are filled with bodies touching, seeing, smelling, and hearing. However, these terms fail to account for the multiplicity of feelings and sensations occurring in any of those moments and the ways those sensations linger in and change the bodies they encounter. The sensuousness of touch is apparent when Kevin and Chiron sit on that beach, but that touch is momentary and emphasizes the physicality of what Chiron is experiencing and

we are witnessing. That rapture on the beach or Juan holding Chiron up in the water are spaces of care, of coming into contact with the other through and for the self.

For Lorde, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings."<sup>7</sup> To reach for the erotic inside ourselves is to reach for the empowering flow of energy between our self and our desires. In Lorde, for a woman to know herself is to know her desires—not to necessarily achieve them, but to recognize what she needs, wants, and has been given or earned. It is a reflective but never easy act of self-care that is fundamental, for Lorde, to black womanhood, long denied the time and agency for thought and feeling. The erotic knowing of oneself comes at the expense of a system of oppression that exists around women and those left to the side.<sup>8</sup>

The system Lorde speaks of values work only in terms of its usefulness to capital, and that usefulness stretches beyond the product made and the labor deployed; it stretches into the skin, bones, muscles, and even the sinews of the self. The body is sapped of feeling and force, especially those bodies never conceived of as compatible with humanity. The erotic, then, is not just some abstract feeling of the Other with no substance or thrust. The erotic, in the face of suffocating and vile racist heteropatriarchy, stands as a radical act of self-care that nurtures, soothes, and grows the self beyond the limits of expectations while going on to form new and hard-fought possibilities.<sup>9</sup> The erotic, I wish to argue, offers a category of revolutionary aesthetic self-care that momentarily ruptures space and time so that bodies, selves, and souls can hold each other in collective embrace. That is, the

erotic suspends queer blackness in between the violence of the world and expansive, ancestral love.

Returning once more to Kevin's kitchen: Chiron, for possibly the first time in the film, stares fiercely at another person. The camera has cut in close to Chiron so that he can be seen in ways entirely new to both Kevin and the audience. Chiron's hesitation is no longer timid or nervous. It is bubbling with something else. "You're the only man that's ever touched me," he says. "You're the only one. I haven't really touched anyone since." The camera cuts away to Kevin in a medium shot, his body seen holding his green tea in his small kitchen. His eyes are soft, his gaze longing. He smiles a smile that gestures to relief—relief that Chiron has finally spoken.

I contend that there are three times Chiron opens himself up to the contingencies of a queer life—a

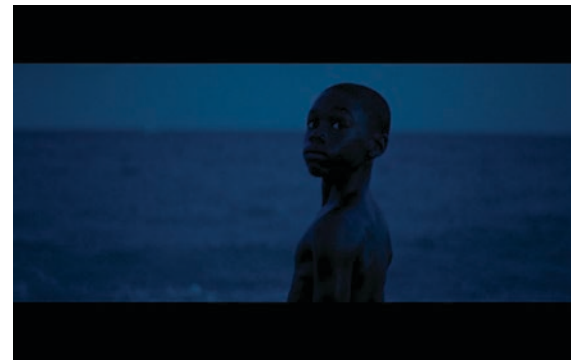
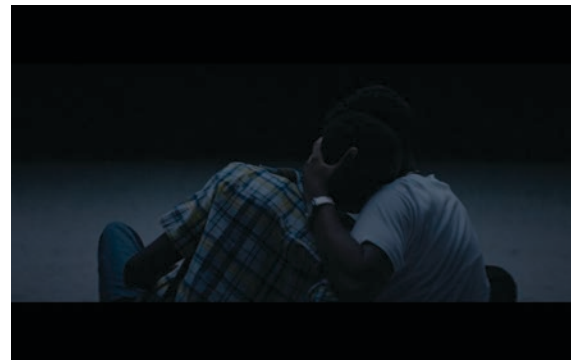
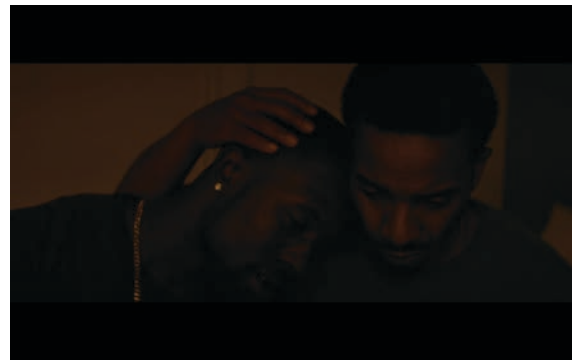
life lived otherwise. First, when he arrives at Juan's home and asks, "What's a faggot?" Chiron, as Audre Lorde calls for, recognizes himself, his own way of knowing other than the way before. His question is not an attempt to return to the proper; it is not an attack on the possibility of being a faggot nor utter terror at its possibility. His question is one of reaching out and hoping for an answer so that he may learn who he is and why he has so little space to extend. He gestures out to the queer paths around him. The second opening occurs when Chiron and Kevin are at the beach and Chiron speaks of crying so much that he opens up completely, returning to water and crawling back into the ocean. He speaks once more of a desire to know who he is, of the liquidity he knows he has but is too afraid to reach inward to claim. He gives himself up to the contingency of queer futures, of becoming liquid,

and in that openness, Kevin touches him. Third, Chiron stands in Kevin's kitchen being challenged on the validity of his hardness, his agency, and thus he speaks of his abstinence. The lack of physical touch Chiron has experienced since Kevin does not read as Chiron simply desiring Kevin once more, but instead of not knowing how to return to that moment of reaching in toward the fountain of possibility. When he tells Kevin he "really hasn't touched anyone since then," he is letting go of that which weighs him down, the thing keeping him stuck, the thing that doesn't allow him to flow the way his skin so desires. He opens himself up and lets out the solidity of expectations for the "good life" so that he may know his body, know himself, know his erotics.

Importantly, these three moments of opening are not propelled by physical contact, though two of

them end that way. The means through which Chiron knows himself is through speaking, through letting his voice radiate toward the other's ear, but also toward his own. The erotic cannot exist simply inside the individual. To know the erotic is to encounter an ancestral past so that one can see what one must *share* with others. And this sharing is the key; for "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."<sup>10</sup> The erotic, and its poetic origin, produces a profound act of knowing the self so that one may know another. The growth of the self helps grow one's relationship with the rest. These three moments are erotic because Chiron, in his own voice, reaches into himself so that he may encounter those dark and hidden places long denied him

**THE FILM CARES  
FOR CHIRON  
BY LEAVING  
ITSELF OPEN,  
BY PRODUCING  
GAPS AND  
HOLES THAT  
KEEP CHIRON  
APART FROM  
THE VIEWER**



TRIPTYCH 5. *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRABS.

and speak them to and *for* others. His hardness and his liquidity come into an open, suspended embrace by hearing Chiron speak of himself to others. These are moments of self-knowledge and agential declaration that make Chiron open to others and open to his own erotic love.

I have focused more on the erotic rather than the other two modes of the triptych not to present it as primary, but to lift up what the erotic does uniquely and crucially in this film. I have worked to show some of

what the erotic can teach us as an aesthetic engagement with queer blackness. The erotic, as a mode of ethical self-care proposed by Lorde and made aesthetic in hardness and water by *Moonlight*, does the work that I propose suspension asks for and that *Moonlight* offers and teaches—an aesthetic taking care of Chiron and a practice for aesthetically caring. The film cares for Chiron by leaving itself open, by producing gaps and holes that keep Chiron apart from the viewer, so

we cannot consume him whole and assume a knowledge of completeness and clarity that Chiron does not have and that we are not owed. The film circles and moves through the world as it flows around Juan in its opening, or as it delicately follows Chiron through rippling, colorful concrete, and as it meanders behind Black's car as he stretches out toward Kevin once more. This fluidity could give a sense of mastery, but that fluidity instead keeps us at bay, leaving us desperately behind. The

harsh breaks in time; the stark black screens cutting each section; the fracturing, silent screams of Paula, Chiron's mother; and the absent and dead characters left in that off-screen and past-black space—each of these challenges the assumption of knowledge that the viewer may desire from a film. In particular, these suspensions preclude the sort of mastery and wholeness that viewers often expect from a film that gives access to the underrepresented—the multiply exoticized other.

In this disruptive care, *Moonlight* also begins to teach us how to aesthetically, erotically care—a practice of aesthetic suspension. This is how I understand the final montage of the film. The camera cuts into Kevin's bedroom. The two sit on the edge of the bed, Chiron's head cradled in Kevin's neck and Kevin's hand gently resting on Chiron's head. The room is lit in red

and purple light. The film finally cuts backward, returning us to Chiron's hand clutching sand as Kevin touches him. The film cuts back one final time to an image we have never seen: Chiron as a child faces away from the camera, looking out at the ocean in blue moonlight. Chiron turns and looks back at us, back at his future, back at Chiron's present (Triptych 5).

Chiron's final moment of erotic opening ruptures the film's form and temporality. The film has been moving persistently forward, the previous sections only felt in the affective radiation they left behind on the frame. But here—after this moment of Chiron owning his body, owning his choices, owning his erotics—the film begins reaching back toward the past moments of self-care. The film spirals so far back into its memory that we are given a wholly unseen recollection: the image of Chiron, a child once more, standing

underneath that blue moonlight, his skin absorbing its luminescence and glowing all its own. The film is no longer representing some coming-of-age story, a genre whose form is well-known and reliably cliché. The film has flowed and stretched, like Chiron, into an expression of the erotics, an aesthetic reaching in toward the self to find a fountain of contingency, a coursing liquid suspending one's self up through the energy of queer black life and potentiality. The glowing young Chiron looks back at the camera and peers forward through time to the adult Chiron sitting on that bed, his head nestled in Kevin's shoulder. Little, Chiron, and Black look at, know, and hold each other. They speak in a collective voice of love to, of, and for each other. In that embrace, an opened and emptied Chiron knows himself, knows a radiating vitality of queer possibility, a caressing of a radical epistemology of queer blackness. ■



Endnotes

- <sup>1.</sup> Lauren M. Cramer, “Passing Through: A Methodology for Close Analysis,” *liquid blackness* 2, no. 5 (2015), 41.
- <sup>2.</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- <sup>3.</sup> *Dreams are Colder than Death*, dir. Arthur Jafa (2013).
- <sup>4.</sup> Alessandra Raengo, “Introduction,” *liquid blackness* 3, no. 6 (2016), 18.
- <sup>5.</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Duke University Press, 2004), 144-145.
- <sup>6.</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 9.
- <sup>7.</sup> Audre Lorde, “Use of The Erotic: The Erotic s Power” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches Audre Lorde* (Berkley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 54.
- <sup>8.</sup> Ibid., 55.
- <sup>9.</sup> Ibid., 57.
- <sup>10.</sup> Ibid.

*MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.



# “Hush-hush, I Will Know When I Know”: Post- Black Sound Aesthetics in *Moonlight*

ARZU KARADUMAN

*Within Derrida's thought, suspension is both spatial and temporal, pervasive and elusive. It operates under a number of different signs, and in a number of different languages that either resist or yield to translation in ways that are not easily gathered together: epochē, arrêt, syncope, bracketing, iteration, deferral, Aufhebung, and différance.*

—Anne McCarthy<sup>1</sup>

Based on Tarell McCraney's 2003 play “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue,” *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) is the coming-of-age story of Little becoming Chiron becoming Black on his journey of self-discovery as a black gay man growing up in Liberty City, a poor neighborhood in Miami<sup>2</sup>. Presented in three chapters, respectively titled “Little,” “Chiron,” and “Black,” the film exposes the difficulties in the protagonist's search for a sexual identity. Even before we see the protagonist on the screen,

we hear a group of kids calling him “faggot” and chasing him into a dope hole. The first chapter ends with Little's search for the meaning of this derogatory word frequently hurled at him by other kids and possibly uttered by his mother in her scream the film presents in slow motion and without sound. In this first scene of the distorted scream, Chiron's mother Paula lashes out at him following her confrontation with Juan on the street. In this slow-motion scene, the mother takes out the anger she has built during her confrontation with Juan on Little. The verbal assaults continue in Chiron's adolescence in the second chapter only to escalate into physical violence. The only person Chiron can talk to is his childhood friend, Kevin, before their friendship is broken by the bullies at school who force Kevin to knockout Chiron in front of their schoolmates. The night before the day of violence at school, Kevin and Chiron pleasure each other on the

## WE MIGHT THINK OF SUSPENSION AS THAT WHICH HOLDS (HOLDS TOGETHER, HOLDS BACK), BUT DOES SO LOOSELY, ALLOWING FOR MOVEMENT AND THE COMING OF THE UNEXPECTED

beach under the moonlight. The night with Kevin remains an unforgettable memory for Chiron as we see in the third chapter, which opens with the mother's scream distorted differently, played in reverse motion until the cut to the scream played at regular speed in its loud and clear audibility, in Black's nightmare.

Sound plays a key role in *Moonlight's* aesthetic responses to society's marginalization of black queer men; the film queers a heterologocentric understanding of time and sound

image relations through an aesthetics of suspension. In this essay, I will analyze the two scenes of the mother's distorted scream that close the first chapter and open the third one, in which time is stretched through slow motion and synchronization is put on hold in the film's post-black cinema aesthetics. Following an elaboration on the aesthetics of suspension in the two scenes of the mother's distorted scream, I will address how the film holds Chiron's blackness

and queerness bracketed and in suspension in (between) those two scenes by engaging with Kara Keeling's notion of “the interval,” that is waiting as a state of existence in suspension.<sup>3</sup> While Keeling's waiting in “the interval,” originally developed by David Marriott following Fanon, refers to a predestined state of being in an inescapable, vicious circle, I approach the thinking of suspension in the following Derridean gesture: “To think suspension as suspension means thinking it beyond privation,

## MOONLIGHT OPERATES IN QUEER TERMS BY ... SKEWING SOUND-IMAGE RELATIONS AS WELL AS INCORPORATING THE CHOPPED AND SCREWED STYLE OF HIP-HOP TO STRETCH AND DISTORT ALL KINDS OF MUSIC

as constitutive of what it suspends. We might think of suspension as that which holds (holds together, holds back), but does so loosely, allowing for movement and the coming of the unexpected.”<sup>4</sup>

Suspensions of time and of synchronization, which is “the audiovisual lock” and “the lynchpin of sound cinema,” in the two scenes of the mother’s distorted screams “create a kind of mirrored ellipsis in the film, with all of the space in-between holding the weight of

Chiron’s sexuality” in an interval.<sup>5</sup> The aesthetics of suspension is one specific way in which the film relates to post-blackness by constituting, triggering, and enabling queerness in abeyance, suspended, in the middle.<sup>6</sup> Before analyzing the distorted screams that join post-black aesthetics in cinema in their suspensions, resonances, echoes, and ripples in *Moonlight*, I offer to turn to post-blackness and its embrace of black/queer—or “blacqueer”—bodies after drawing a short map

of the earlier, mutually exclusive, and hence criticized scholarships of blackness and queerness.

Black Nationalism’s misogyny, homophobia, and hetero-patriarchal stance led to hostility towards queer sexualities and added to its discrimination in terms of social status, class difference, and educational background.<sup>7</sup> The Black Power movement’s goal of redeeming blackness, as in “black (man) is beautiful,” through macho hetero-patriarchy resulted from a

conflation of the success of racial identity with an ideal manhood.<sup>8</sup> The redemption of an emasculated black male identity in the form of “a worship of the phallus” limited the black artists’ capacities in expressing themselves and their experiences.<sup>9</sup> Racial uplift, positive images, and cultural authenticity left no room for satire, critique, or queerness. With few notable exceptions, Black queer artists existed like ghosts during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and in the Protest Era of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>10</sup> They finally came out starting in the late 1970s and more in the 1980s when black gay activism was also happening.<sup>11</sup> However, advocates of post-blackness believe the struggle is not yet over and that the discriminatory demons of the hetero-patriarchal black power movement still demand an exorcism today. “Post-black” is a term first used by curator Thelma Golden in reference to a group of black artists

who dismissed the label “black artists” as they were careful to avoid the potential limitations brought by the codes of cultural authenticity of black nationalism.<sup>12</sup> The term is also defined by Derek Conrad Murray as “an effort to redefine the parameters of blackness in the twenty-first century, and to push it beyond the stifling dictates of nostalgia for past political movements.”<sup>13</sup>

Due to racial patriotism, fundamentalism, and policing, black people were threatened with exclusion from their communities and labeled “turncoats” or “sellouts” once they crossed the borders of “black authenticity.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, queer studies was accused of pushing queer people of color to the margins and bringing the experiences of white middle-class and mostly male subjectivities to the fore.<sup>15</sup> It is the “queer of color critique” that “challenges ideologies of discreteness” and “attempts to

disturb the idea that racial and national formations are obviously disconnected.”<sup>16</sup> Increasingly in the twenty-first century, queer scholars have rendered the voices of intersectional groups audible as “[s]exuality is always racially marked, as every racial marking is always imbued with a specific sexuality (gender, class, and other classificatory inscriptions are equally determined and determining).”<sup>17</sup> As Johnson and Henderson claim in *Black Queer Studies*, intersectionality and a non-single-variable politics are the tools to fight oppression and respond to the “complexity of contemporary subjectivities” in the post-modern era.<sup>18</sup>

Thematically interested in queer sexuality in the coming-of-age story of a black boy from a poor neighborhood in Miami, *Moonlight* joins the contemporary debates on intersectional politics and



## ELONGATION SUSPENDS THE LINEAR FORWARD PROGRESSION OF NARRATION, PUTTING IT ON HOLD AND SUSTAINING AMBIGUITY

post-blackness through its queer aesthetics of suspension as well. *Moonlight* operates in queer terms by specifically skewing sound-image relations as well as incorporating the chopped and screwed style of hip-hop to stretch and distort all kinds of music including classical scores with piano or violins.<sup>19</sup> In its post-black aesthetics of playing with sound and image relations, *Moonlight* queers—better yet, quares—such relations through its aesthetics of suspension, specifically of synchronization and hence of audibility/inaudibility, presence/absence, and linear/out-of-joint time in the two scenes of the mother’s distorted screams.<sup>20</sup> I argue the technique that exemplifies post-black aesthetics in *Moonlight*, namely suspension of synchrony in the two scenes of Paula’s distorted screams, is critical in terms of the film’s defiance of shaming queerness as well as opening an interval for the possibility of queerness.

The first scene of the mother’s distorted scream occurs in slow-motion, a technique that stretches time and in that elongation suspends the linear forward progression of narration, putting it on hold and sustaining ambiguity like a fog that covers a road blocking one’s vision in traffic. The scene not only defies a capitalist understanding of homogeneous and measurable time of forward progress and teleology of reproduction—or “reproductive futurism”—through slow motion, but also deflects hetero-patriarchal shaming of queer sexuality by rendering the mother’s words inaudible.<sup>21</sup> The mother yells at Chiron, possibly uttering the word “faggot”—possibly, but not certainly. Her words are muted, and we hear only the music. Britell’s gripping music continues over from the previous scene starting as Paula and Juan go their own way after their tense confrontation

on the street. The soaring strings are already highly strung from the tension between Paula and Juan. The violin in Paula’s blast in the hallway at home is “screwed down to a key ... that a normal violin can’t play,” and the chopped and screwed violin creates a deep bass rumble sonically arresting bodies and touching the flesh in its strong penetrating vibrations.<sup>22</sup> Donnelly’s point that “[w]hen a sequence goes into slow motion, it is almost never accompanied by diegetic sounds that match the speed of the action” is not the reason, though, why Paula’s scream is muted.<sup>23</sup> The scream is muted to mimic the futility of a potential utterance of a word that is totally pointless to Little, who does not know its meaning. The sound design of this scene also recalls silent film aesthetics, in which musical accompaniment is offered in lieu of unheard characters’ voices with musical accompaniment to

films in which characters’ voices are unheard.<sup>24</sup> The specific aesthetic choices of muting the mother’s scream allows the composed piece to rise to a breaking point, after which it keeps resonating to suspend time by stretching it in slow motion and to bring out the tension of the mother’s anger.<sup>25</sup> With its suspenseful aesthetics, the scene mimics a feeling of being choked, invoking chest compression and movements being slowed down when confronted with difficulty of breathing. As Chion explains in *Audio-vision*, “Often just one audio element of the soundscape is ‘suspended,’ with the result of heightening one moment of the scene, giving it a striking, disquieting or magical impact.”<sup>26</sup> However, unlike the “often-goes-unnoticed” nature of the type of suspension Chion talks about, the suspension through the mother’s muted scream in *Moonlight* boldly, conspicuously, and even terrifyingly

marks a turning point in the narrative. For the same reason, the muted scream cannot be categorized as “emanation speech,” another type of rare and difficult-to-notice technique offered by Chion “found infrequently in films, wherein the words are not completely heard or understood. Speech becomes a sort of emanation of the characters, not essential for understanding significant action or meaning.”<sup>27</sup> Alternately, the possibility of categorizing the muted scream as “voice-out” coined by Justin Horton is also infeasible, since the replay of the scene opening the third chapter excribes the first muted scream in a loud and clear synchronization that gives the body back its scream, surprisingly lacking the ugly term.<sup>28</sup>

In its deliberate silencing of the mother whose muscle tension slows down the temporal flow, the film is thinking on the elusiveness of the meaning of what Little might



FIGURE 1. TERESA TELLING LITTLE HE WILL KNOW IF HE IS GAY WHEN THE TIME COMES IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.

have heard in his vulnerability.<sup>29</sup> Approaching vulnerability as the condition of responsiveness, Butler offers: “[S]omething affects us, or we find ourselves affected; we are moved to speak, to accept the terms by which we are addressed, or to refuse them, or, indeed, to skew them or queer them.”<sup>30</sup> While the film stylistically responds with its queer aesthetics of suspension, Little responds by diverging from the mother’s path: “She and Little are drifting apart and whatever is back there in that room is something that he will never understand or see.”<sup>31</sup> Separating his path from the mother’s, Little deviates, and “deviation brings with it anxiety, fear, and a sense of thrill” but at the same time “when it is undertaken in concert with others, it is also the beginning of new forms of solidarity.”<sup>32</sup> After they separate paths, Little finds solidarity and communion at Juan and Teresa’s house where he learns

what the derogatory term means. Little understands debasement, degradation, and shaming as well as his deviation and separation from his mother and bonds sideways with the two adults who do not necessarily expect him to “grow up” to contribute to “reproductive futurism.”<sup>33</sup> In their embrace and understanding, substitute parents Juan and Teresa confirm Little does not have to know if he is gay or not “now,” as his now will come later when his childhood is over:

Queer culture, with its emphasis on repetition (Butler), horizontality (Munoz, Stockton), immaturity and a refusal of adulthood (me), where adulthood rhymes with heterosexual parenting, resists a developmental model of substitution and instead invests in what Stockton calls “sideway relations”, relations that grow along parallel lines rather than upward and onward. This queer

form of antidevelopment requires healthy doses of forgetting and disavowal and proceeds by way of a series of substitutions.<sup>34</sup>

The transition from a door closed on Little by his own mother to a door opened by Juan to welcome Little inside adds extra space in-between the doubled opening brackets, namely the failed inaudible scream and the end of the first chapter signaled in a quasi-theatrical fashion by four flickering elliptical blue lights on the black screen, mimicking an epileptic seizure that suspends a body through twitches and convulsions.<sup>35</sup> It is as if time is elongated for the sake of a proper synchronization to be given to the substitute parents who clarify “the linguistic register of autonomy” for Little “against those who really fail to address him.”<sup>36</sup> The mother’s scream is marked as lost time while time is stretched to connect the two

**THE FILM  
DEMANDS  
THAT WE  
UNDERSTAND  
THE TRAUMA  
OF THE MUTED  
SCREAM  
FOLLOWED BY  
THE PARENTAL  
LOVE**



FIGURE 2. HALLWAY AFTER THE MOTHER INAUDIBLY YELLS AT LITTLE AND GOES INTO HER BEDROOM FRAME RIGHT. THE MOTHER CLOSES THE BEDROOM DOOR ON LITTLE IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.

homes, through the opening and closing —literal and metaphoric—of doors, as a single space occupied by Little. Visually, the transition from the closed door to another one opening for Little is like a reversed mirror image. The mother walks frame right and enters her bedroom and closes the door; next is a cut to a very similar short hallway with a door frame left inside Juan and Teresa’s house. The film demands that we understand the trauma of the muted scream followed by the parental love in the form of proper communication as a single scene in its smooth transition through a graphic match. In Allen’s terms, Little becoming Chiron becoming Black will be able to “conjure blacqueer love” through “time compression magic” by learning from the lessons in the past and by forming a community.<sup>37</sup>

The third chapter starts with the double distortion of the mother’s

scream; the same shot of the mother entering her bedroom after yelling at Little is played backwards in slow motion. The reverse motion continues until the sleight of hand of a cut to the loud and clear scream that is synchronized and hence played at the regular speed. The mother yells “Don’t look at me!” and Black jumps forward in bed waking up from his nightmare. To our surprise, this time in its precise synchronization, the scream “retroaudibly” lacks the ugly term that we expected to hear after Little’s search for its meaning at the end of the first chapter. With its power to destroy the elasticity of time, synchronization ends the suspension achieved through the muted scream in slow motion that was able to deflect the hetero-reproductive logic of forward progress.<sup>38</sup> However, the audible repetition of an otherwise distorted, or doubly distorted and hence synchronized, scream surprises us

FIGURE 3. HALLWAY IN JUAN AND TERESA’S HOUSE. LITTLE IS KNOCKING ON THE DOOR FRAME LEFT IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.







FIGURE 4. JUAN ANSWERING LITTLE'S QUESTION ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE TERM IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.

only to prove the term of humiliation that we expected to hear has gone missing in the audible inaudibilities of both of the distorted screams. Indeed, Black is haunted by his past, and as Derrida explains in *Ghost Dance*: “To be haunted by a ghost is to remember something you’ve never lived through. For memory is the past that has never taken the form of the present.”<sup>39</sup>

The repetition of the mother’s scream, no matter how traumatic, is also productive. It reminds us that the aesthetics of suspension works to disrupt the act of shaming queerness and hence paradoxically constitutes an interval for Chiron’s sexuality to blossom in the second chapter. The two scenes of the mother’s distorted scream operate like parentheses; they precede and follow Chiron’s coming to terms with his sexuality, with the inaudible and incomprehensible term swallowed first in the silent

scream and not present in the repeated loud scream of the mother. In its impossible (in)audibilities, the discarded term of shaming is not endowed with synchronization in a heterologocentric understanding of presence and forward teleological movement in time. The possibly traumatic moment is skewed, quared, and distorted from its hetero-patriarchal efforts of excluding queerness that it tries to render abject.<sup>40</sup> I hear *Moonlight* echo post-black aesthetic convictions that black unity, as holding one position—namely ideal manhood, “flattening out differences,” and “sweeping certain things under the rug” in the pretensions of likeness with no room for queerness—is inaudible, out-of-sync, and distorted in today’s “liquid blackness.”<sup>41</sup>

In its doubling of the scream, given a latent audibility only later as if in the form of an echo, there is not

## THE INAUDIBLE TERM OF SHAMING ... BECOMES A TABOO WORD FOR THE MOTHER ... SILENCED LIKE A CRYPT FORMED INSIDE THE FILM

only deferral and repetition but also difference and a play with presence and absence in the suspensions of synchrony.<sup>42</sup> In the first distortion of the scream, the act of shaming is muted, turned into “the scream of Medusa by definition ‘stuck in the throat,’” and marking “the suspension of life,” rendered inaudible and hence unintelligible.<sup>43</sup> The silent scream operates at best like an ellipsis or opening parenthesis—that is, a symbol in a text rather than a word with a meaning silently doing its

work of opening a space of interval; the muted scream, “call it, perhaps, a plenitude without presence, marked by an ellipsis (*points de suspension*) which signifies omission and pause, but also an opening and waiting for response.”<sup>44</sup> In the way I read Chiron’s queerness, I take the potential Keeling sees in the interval rather than the viciousness of the circle that renders blackness impossible: “The challenge the experience of the interval provides entails opening thought to ‘the

## QUEER SEXUALITY...IS ALREADY INSIDE, PART OF, AND A POSSIBILITY IN BLACKNESS

unforeseeable, the unanticipatable, the non-masterable, non-identifiable.’ Perhaps a whole other reality—one that we do not yet have a memory of as such—opens up.”<sup>45</sup>

The inaudible term of shaming in the distorted screams becomes a taboo word for the mother, unutterable, censored, and silenced like a crypt formed inside the film, repeatedly making distorted and inaudible calls through a rippling in suspended time. The suspended act of abjecting and shaming queerness by the mother’s

parenthetical screams in the film aporetically opens up a space, an interval for the possibility of black queer sexuality. Queer sexuality that the mother intends to leave out, discard, and expel is already inside, part of, and a possibility in blackness. The impossibly possible queer sexuality works as a trace or *différance* in the distorted screams; their “operations of suspension resemble that of *différance*, opening intervals and breathing spaces into the structure of signification.”<sup>46</sup>

The two outer parentheses hold blaqueer sexuality suspended and stretched in an interval centered inside, in the middle: “Suspension is not, for Derrida, the exclusion of anything, ... but a way of bracketing, keeping contingency present, including it.”<sup>47</sup> It is an interval opened in post-black aesthetics that conjures blaqueer magic in its inaudible audibilities and impossible resonances echoing “rhizomatic agencement,” “temporal dispersal,” and “litany for survival.”<sup>48</sup>

The bracketing of Chiron’s blossoming sexuality produced through the parenthetical distorted screams of the mother is accentuated and doubled through the flickering blue and red lights on the black screen that punctuate the sequential breakdown of the three chapters in a quasi-theatrical fashion. The two scenes of the mother’s distorted screams as the outer brackets halt the linear narrative flow twice by elasticating, stretching, and distorting a possibly traumatic moment perversely while they operate through *différance* by not only differing from each other and what could logocentrically be thought of as an origin but also deferring eternally in the suspensions and repetitions of the event rendered highly dense and thick in affective terms and as uncertain and elusive in its semiotic vulnerability.<sup>49</sup> The flickering elliptical dots of blue and red lights on the black screen, (*Points*

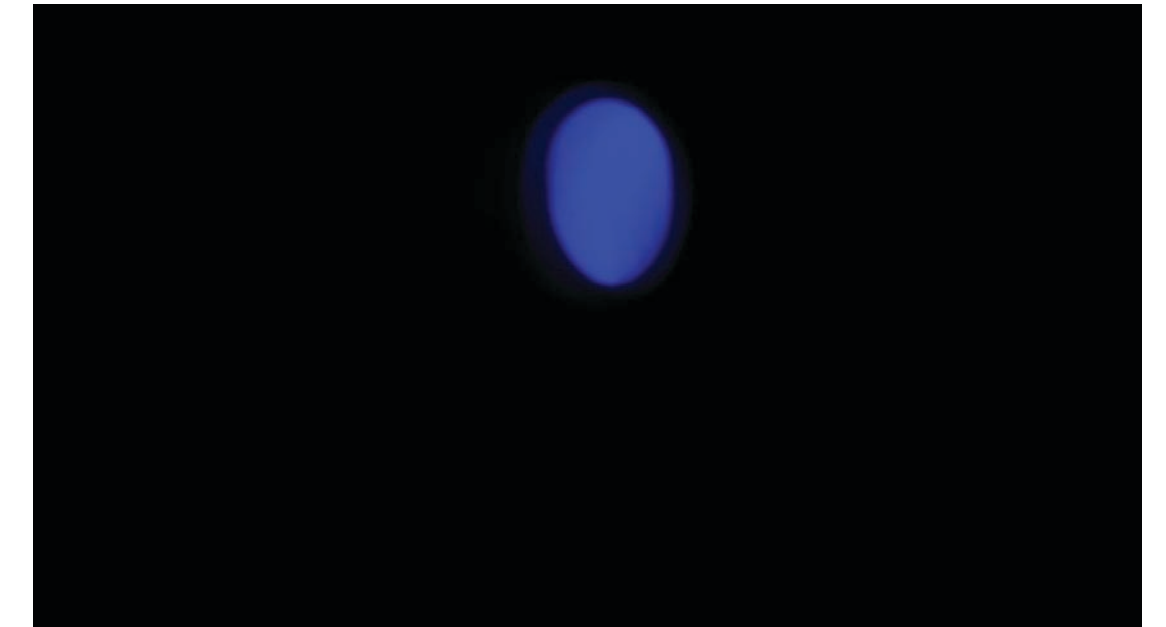


FIGURE 5. THE FLICKERING BLUE ON A BLACK SCREEN SEPARATING THE FIRST AND THE SECOND CHAPTERS IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.



FIGURE 6. THE LAST SCENE SHOWING KEVIN AND BLACK REUNITED: BONDING, LOVE, AND AFFECTION IN *MOONLIGHT* (DIRECTED BY BARRY JENKINS, 2016, A24, PASTEL, AND PLAN B ENTERTAINMENT), FRAME GRAB.

*de suspension* or *Points:...*), double the bracketing of the blooming of queerness in the film, accentuating the paradox of the (in)significance of the adolescent years as highly critical and in constant resonance with childhood and adulthood.<sup>50</sup> This spatial and temporal interval of queerness opened by the parentheses is an interval similar to and different from the one Kara Keeling proposes in “In The Interval.” Keeling understands the interval as an infernal cycle, as a predetermined duration starting with an opening and ending with an explosion that immediately restarts the entire cycle of the wait echoing Hartman’s notion of the “afterlife of slavery.”<sup>51</sup> Unlike the wait in the interval Keeling reveals, the suspension in *Moonlight* takes queerness in an interval as “... a text with uncertain quotation marks, with floating parentheses (never to close the parenthesis is very specifically: *to drift*).”<sup>52</sup> Similar

to the interval Keeling explains in relation to the muscle tension and the threat of explosion Fanon diagnoses in the colonized, there is a specific temporal configuration of the distorted screams in *Moonlight*.<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, the first muted scream, inaudible and indecipherable, is, like the muscle tension or the “necrotized flesh”, too early.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, after the night Chiron spends with Kevin on the beach, the second loudly synchronized scream following a reversed slow motion return of the mother, just like the explosion, is too late. Differently in *Moonlight*, Chiron’s queerness is in the interval, suspended inside and in waiting, but impossibly possible like his blackness that turns blue in moonlight at night, the one night he will have spent with Kevin on the beach.

It is an interval initiated by time suspended and stretched through its ripples from inside out; queerness

centered inside centrifugally ripples through the aesthetics of suspension of the ellipses, visual, sonic, or textual. It is an interval for a bonding, communion, and union to last forever in a suspension without end: “(...the state of suspension in which it’s over—and over again, and you’ll never have done with that suspension itself).”<sup>55</sup> ■

**CHIRON'S  
QUEERNESS IS IN  
THE INTERVAL,  
SUSPENDED  
INSIDE AND IN  
WAITING, BUT  
IMPOSSIBLY  
POSSIBLE LIKE  
HIS BLACKNESS  
THAT TURNS BLUE  
IN MOONLIGHT**



Endnotes

- <sup>1.</sup> Anne McCarthy, “Suspension,” in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook, (London: Routledge, 2015), 24.
- <sup>2.</sup> Barry Jenkins explains in his commentary in the special features of the DVD.
- <sup>3.</sup> Kara Keeling develops this understanding of suspension following David Marriott, “‘In the Interval’: Frantz Fanon and The ‘Problems’ of Visual Representation,” *Qui Parle*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 91-117.
- <sup>4.</sup> McCarthy, “Suspension,” 24.
- <sup>5.</sup> Kevin J. Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics: Synchronization in Sound Film* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12; I would like to thank Charleen Wilcox, who described the suspensions in the two instances of the distorted scream as “mirrored ellipsis” in a conversation.
- <sup>6.</sup> Impossible and atemporal synchronization in the diner scene in the third chapter and the technique of, what Jenkins calls, “portrait vignettes” with Paula and Kevin separately are the other scenes which deliberately queer synchronization, a technique I find teleological and heterologocentric.
- <sup>7.</sup> Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 7-8. See also Rinaldo Walcott, “Beyond the ‘Nation Thing’: Black Studies, Cultural Studies, and Diaspora Discourse (Or the Post-Black Studies Moment) in Decolonizing the Academy: African Diaspora Studies, ed. Carole Boyce Davies et. al., (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003). Institutionally, the reflections of such cultural nationalism and black authenticity were usually found in African American studies, a field born as an academic discipline resulting from social activism.
- <sup>8.</sup> As phrased by Angela Davis in *Black Is Black Ain’t* (Marlon Riggs, 1994); Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 98.
- <sup>9.</sup> As phrased by bell hooks, Essex Hemphill, and Cornel West in *Black Is Black Ain’t*; Derek Murray, *Queering Post-Black*

- Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016), 5-7.
- <sup>10.</sup> With its accompanying cultural arm known as BAM (Black Arts Movement).
  - <sup>11.</sup> Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 90s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 21-23.
  - <sup>12.</sup> Victoria L. Valentine, “A ‘Freestyle’ Take on Post-Black Art,” *Culture Type*, Oct 31, 2013, <http://www.culturetype.com/2013/10/31/a-freestyle-take-on-post-black-art/>.
  - <sup>13.</sup> Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 9. The term became popularized, although also partially conflated with ideas of post-raciality, with the publication of Touré’s book, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now*, where all kinds of expressions of blackness are legitimized within post-blackness including queer sexualities.
  - <sup>14.</sup> Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 2.
  - <sup>15.</sup> Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 3-4.
  - <sup>16.</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.
  - <sup>17.</sup> Barnard, *Queer Race*, 2.
  - <sup>18.</sup> E. Patrick Johnson and Mae. Henderson, ed., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 5-7.
  - <sup>19.</sup> In DVD commentary, Jenkins explains that the chopped and screwed style is a genre of Southern hip-hop popular in Houston and Tampa where the music is slowed down and the pitch goes down.
  - <sup>20.</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother,”

*Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no.1 (2001): 1–25.

<sup>21.</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>22.</sup> “Moonlight | Live Orchestra | Official Featurette HD | A24,” YouTube video, posted by “A24,” February 17, 2017, <https://youtu.be/4isV4dZLJn4>. In the video, Britell explains the difference between scoring the film in the studio vs. the performance of the live score in the theater at a special screening at Million Dollar Theatre in LA.

<sup>23.</sup> Donnelly, *Occult Aesthetics*, 192.

<sup>24.</sup> The film indeed enjoyed a special screening with a live orchestra accompaniment in a common silent film exhibition manner, joining the trend of other contemporary films being screened with musicians performing the score live in a theater.

<sup>25.</sup> “Moonlight | Live Orchestra | Official Featurette HD | A24,” YouTube video, posted by “A24,” February 17, 2017, <https://youtu.be/4isV4dZLJn4>. In the video, Tim Fain plays part of the piece in the distorted scream scene and explains how they had to replace his violin with an electronic one during the live performance. Fain says: “I was playing those passages on an electric violin. We would pitch it down, get this sort of like otherworldly quality to it. I think we arrived at something that got us the very emotional quality for the film. I could feel moments when people were holding their breath.”

<sup>26.</sup> Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman, and Walter Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 133.

<sup>27.</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 222.

<sup>28.</sup> Justin Horton, “The Unheard Voice in the Sound Film,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 4 (2013): 3-24. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>. The unheard scream of the mother would be a perfect example of “voice out” if it was not endowed synchronization later in the film.

<sup>29.</sup> Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 109.

<sup>30.</sup> Judith Butler in “Interview with Judith Butler” by Sara Ahmed, *Sexualities* 19, no. 4 (2016): 485.

<sup>31.</sup> Jenkins explains in his commentary in the special features of the DVD.

<sup>32.</sup> Butler, “Interview with Judith Butler,” 484.

<sup>33.</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 73.

<sup>34.</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>35.</sup> I would like to thank Charleen Wilcox, who made me think of “epileptic seizures” in relation to the flickering elliptical dots on the black screen that recall strobe light effects triggering epileptic seizures. A seizure is a suspension for the body that moves uncontrollably.

<sup>36.</sup> Butler, “Interview with Judith Butler,” 485–486. Butler interprets the political power and appeal of Sara Ahmed’s work in this way.

<sup>37.</sup> Jafari S. Allen, “Allure: Conjuring Blaqueeer Magic,” a keynote discussion with Tarell McCraney and Jafari S. Allen hosted by Morehouse College Safe Space, March 31, 2017.

<sup>38.</sup> On time and synchronization, Chion offers: “The sound of the spoken voice, at least when it is diegetic and synched with the image, has the power to inscribe the image in a real and linearized time that no longer has elasticity”, and hence the negativity of such a destructive power (1994, 18).

<sup>39.</sup> Jacques Derrida in *Ghost Dance* directed by Ken McMullen in 1983 (DVD release by Cornerstone Media, 2006).

<sup>40.</sup> Scott emphasizes the potential powers of accepting degradation and humiliation in his understanding of abjection.

Although my reading of abjection is different from his, I am certainly interested in his discussions of trauma and nonlinear time as well as lost time providing escape from subversiveness and subjugation in the rest of this paper.

<sup>41.</sup> hooks explaining the problem of “ideal manhood” in *Black is Black Ain’t*; Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity,” *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (2014): 4–18.

<sup>42.</sup> Jacque Derrida, “Différance” in *Margins of Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>43.</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 671.

<sup>44.</sup> McCarthy, “Suspension,” 26.

<sup>45.</sup> Keeling, “‘In the Interval’,” 110.

<sup>46.</sup> McCarthy, “Suspension,” 24.

<sup>47.</sup> McCarthy, “Suspension,” 29.

<sup>48.</sup> Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer Rhizomatics Train Up a Child in the Way Ze Should Grow...,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 28. Jafari Allen prefers the use of the term “agencement” to “assemblage”; Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 111. Borrowing the term “temporal dispersal” from Merleau-Ponty, Scott offers that it is one of the powers of blackness; Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1995).

<sup>49.</sup> Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art*, 23.

<sup>50.</sup> *Points de suspension: Entretiens* is the title of a 1992 book, a collection of interviews with Jacques Derrida; the book is titled *Points....:Interviews, 1974–1994* in its English translation.

<sup>51.</sup> Keeling, “‘In the Interval’,” 103–105.

<sup>52.</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang; 2010), 106.

<sup>53.</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 1; Keeling also elaborates on the specific temporal configuration on page 103 in “‘In the Interval’.”

<sup>54.</sup> Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 103.

<sup>55.</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et. al. (New York: Continuum, 1979), 77.



NETTRICE R. GASKINS, *SOLOMON'S LEAP*, 2017. DEEPDREAM GENERATOR AND PHOTOSHOP.





# Algorithmic Analytics: Race, Blackness and Data in *Song of Solomon* and “Alright”

**NETTRICE GASKINS**

## Artist’s Statement

My work explores the concept of “deep dreaming” as a way to create algorithmic art in real time and understand the process by which human and spirit beings surrender and take to the air. Algorithmic art can be found throughout history, from prehistoric basket weaving to generative art in the twenty-first century. In the latter half of the last century, with the growth in computer science and digital media the use of algorithmic procedures spread far beyond the dreams of the earliest practitioners. For this project, I used DeepDream, computer vision software that evolved from the study of pattern recognition in artificial intelligence or AI. DeepDream uses algorithms that can learn from and make predictions on data. Examples of this technology include self-driving cars and image and facial recognition. The use of AI algorithms,

in this instance, move beyond prior conceptions of blackness, explores new questions, and develops new theoretical concepts that follow the development of visual culture in the twenty-first century.

This visual essay juxtaposes algorithmic art with images evoked by Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* and in Kendrick Lamar’s music video for “Alright.” In “Alright,” Lamar hangs from a crane as he travels down the streets of Oakland, California. Lamar takes his leap but his ascension is cut short by a policeman’s invisible bullet. In *Song of Solomon*, we do not know whether or not the protagonist Milkman Dead actually achieves flight or succumbs to death, joining his ancestors. It could be argued that Milkman has finally found what he was seeking for most of his life: the realization or fulfillment of his potential. The underlying theme of Morrison’s novel and Lamar’s video

— flight — considers the notion of consciousness in constant movement, while I used algorithmic art to explore movement and flight. The resulting images show how themes in literature, media, and AI systems provide information to explore territory previously uncharted, by surrendering preconceived notions of race, blackness (culture), and technology. ■

## Endnotes

1. Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.
2. Roman Verostko, “The Algorists.” Web. <http://www.verostko.com/algorist.html>.
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4. Kendrick Lamar. “Alright.” YouTube. 30 June 2015.



FIGURE 1. NETTRICE R. GASKINS, *NOT DOCTOR STREET*, 2017. DEEPCREAM GENERATOR AND PHOTOSHOP.



FIGURE 2. KENDRICK LAMAR, "ALRIGHT" (DIRECTED BY COLIN TILLEY AND THE LITTLE HOMIES, 2015, TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE), FRAME GRAB.





FIGURE 3. NETTRICE R. GASKINS, *DREAMING*, 2017. DEEPDREAM GENERATOR AND PHOTOSHOP.

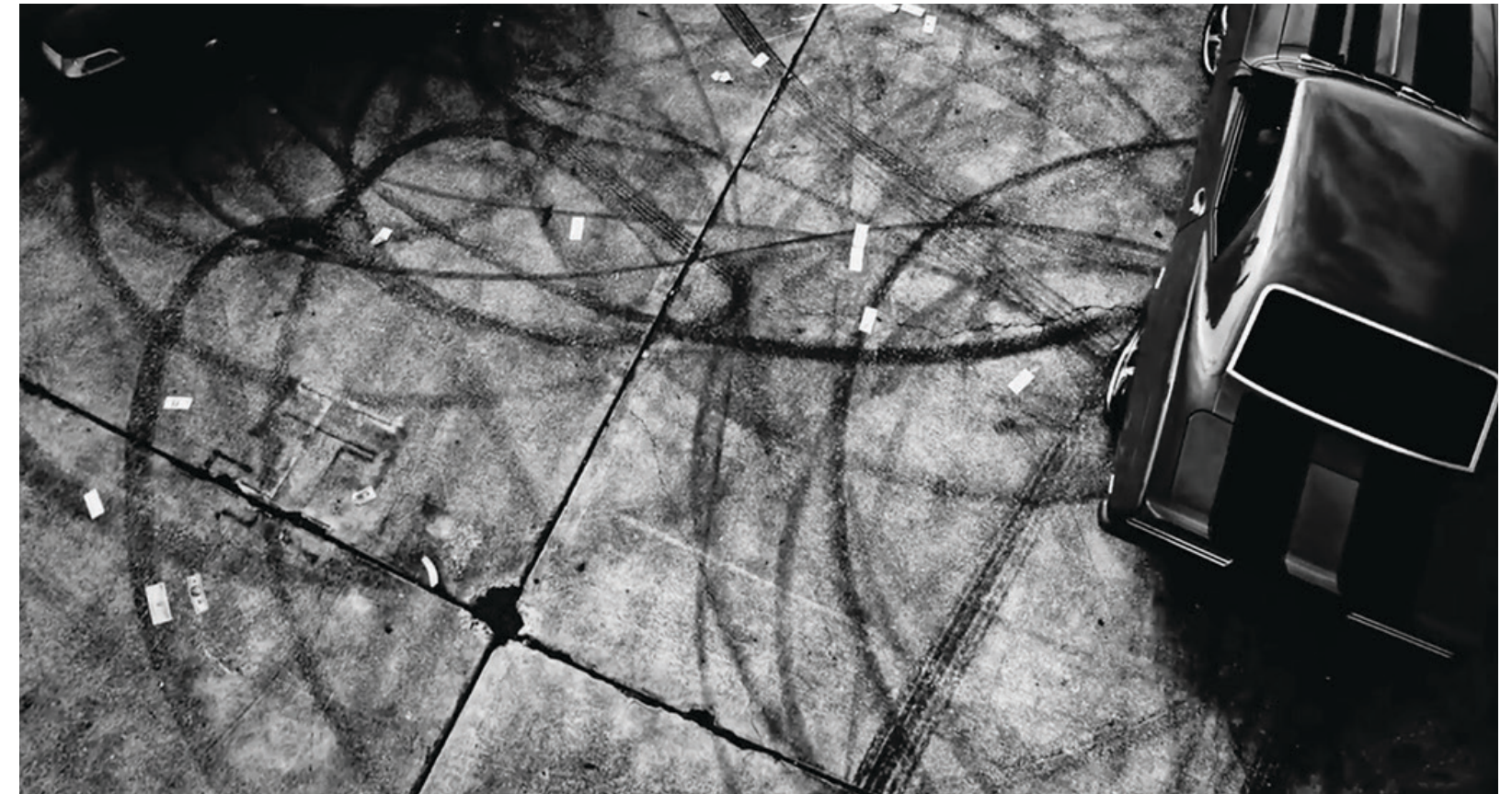


FIGURE 4. KENDRICK LAMAR, "ALRIGHT" (DIRECTED BY COLIN TILLEY AND THE LITTLE HOMIES, 2015, TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE), FRAME GRAB.





FIGURE 5. KENDRICK LAMAR, "ALRIGHT" (DIRECTED BY COLIN TILLEY AND THE LITTLE HOMIES, 2015, TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE), FRAME GRAB.

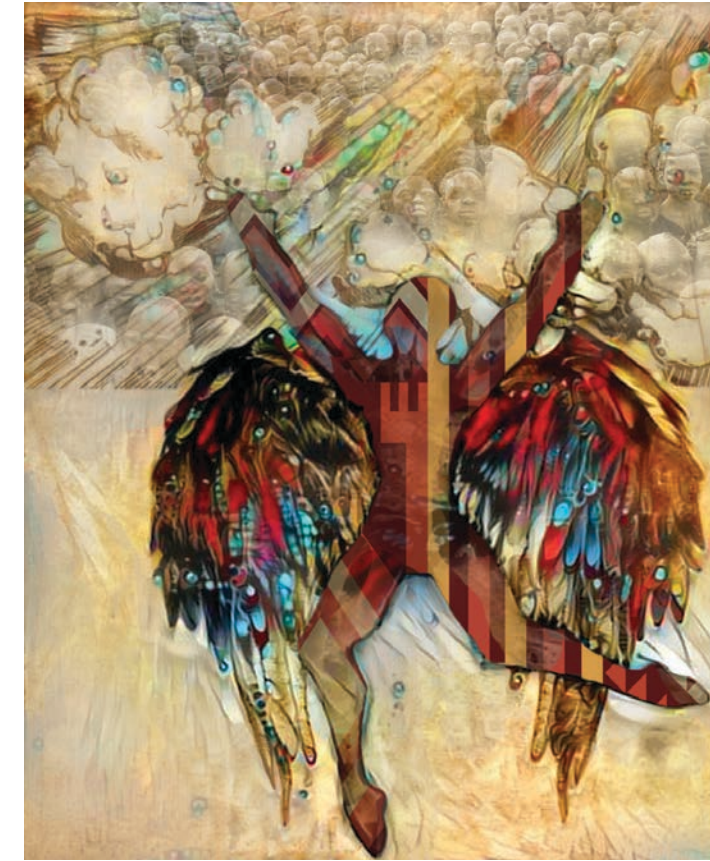


FIGURE 6. NETTRICE R. GASKINS, *BREAKING FREE*, 2017. DEEPA DREAM GENERATOR AND PHOTOSHOP.





FIGURE 7. KENDRICK LAMAR, "ALRIGHT" (DIRECTED BY COLIN TILLEY AND THE LITTLE HOMIES, 2015, TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE), FRAME GRAB.



FIGURE 8 – NETTRICE R. GASKINS, *SURRENDER*, 2017. DEEPDREAM GENERATOR AND PHOTOSHOP.



*LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.



# Hip-Hop Aesthetics and La Haine

STEVE SPENCE

Studying *le hip hop* in a hardscrabble French neighborhood at the turn of the century, dancer and professor Felicia McCarren discovered an almost dialectical tension:

Even in class, there is a kind of rage in the form: some of the moves are outrageous. We are taught to move frenetically, not just to the beat. We learn to crawl on the floor and skim over it backwards. We all try to spin on our heads. But these moves are all at the service of a performance that is disciplined, skill that is acquired, and dancing that is not only for oneself but also for others. It is not jazzercise and it is not gym; it is a dance class with a recognizable format.<sup>1</sup>

As McCarren and many others have noted, *le hip hop*'s artists and interpretive communities are thriving, multi-generational, and

increasingly autonomous.<sup>2</sup> French artistic practices are often quite distinct from those of their American cousins. However, *le hip hop* also honors its roots in New York City in the late 1970s, within the aesthetic system created and nurtured by African-diaspora youth in America. In dance, for example, these debts are expressed not just through the (seeming) contradiction of "outrageous" moves pursued with discipline and extraordinary skill, but also through a preference for the aerial. McCarren notes that this Africanism manifests itself in the emphasis on upward movements during the initial, "top-rock" stages of a hip-hop performance, so that feet seem barely to touch the ground.<sup>3</sup> And it is most clear in the form's "air moves" and "power moves," including its distinctive head spins and windmills. By defying gravity in this way, hip-hop dancers are making gestural statements about the

radical possibilities of life within the worlds in which they find themselves. France's hip-hopeurs have developed a movement vocabulary that is rooted in U.S. models, and in rage, but that is bound by neither. Though still very much an art form of the dispossessed, McCarren writes, "...this dance has come to speak about other things: to figure its dancers as something or someone else...."<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I examine another artistic statement with a similar project: the brutal, elegant, and widely celebrated film *La Haine*, directed by Matthieu Kassovitz and released in 1995. As I demonstrate, the parallel sensibilities that link *La Haine* to *le hip hop* are no coincidence. In ways that have not been fully appreciated, *La Haine* is a hip-hop film.

At the level of mise-en-scène, of course, few could miss *La Haine*'s passion for hip-hop. Shot on location

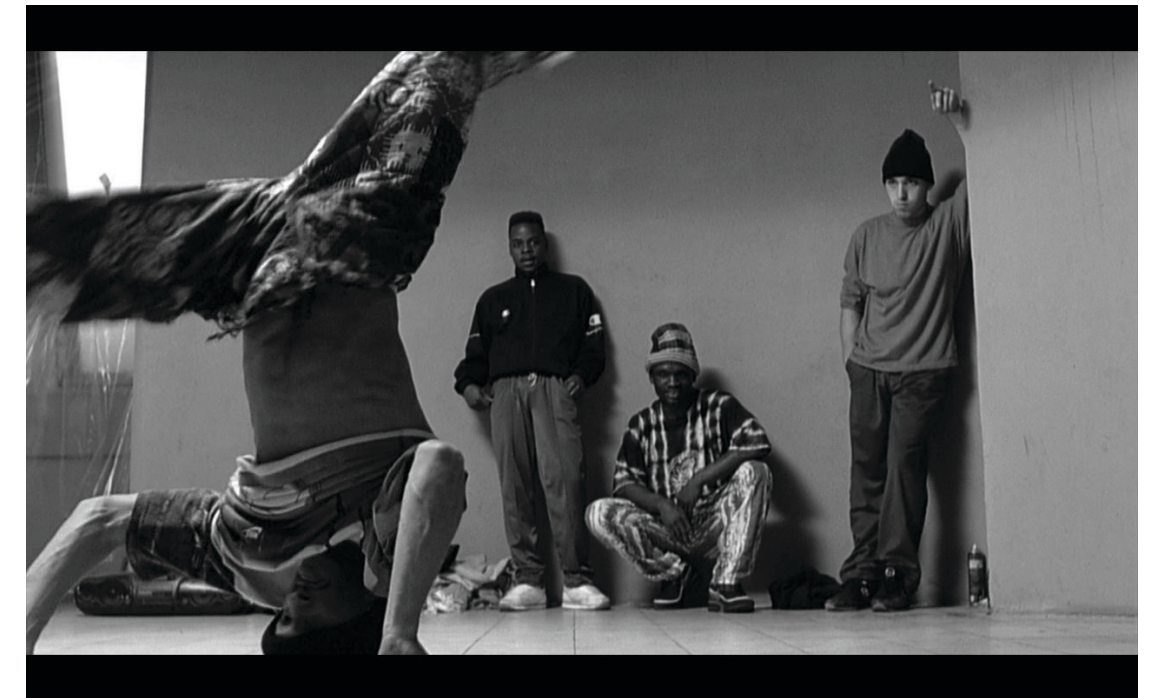


FIGURE 1. B-BOYS DANCING IN A WRECKED TRAIN STATION IN *LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.

## “TO SHOCK AND TO PLEASE” OFFERS A USEFUL SUMMARY OF THE AIMS OF HIP-HOP AESTHETICS

in a working-class suburb of Paris, the film showcases the artistry of the neighborhood’s graffiti writers and b-boys, and it also includes a cameo performance by DJ Cut Killer (Anouar Hajoui), a renowned Parisian DJ. For a great many critics, however, hip-hop’s appearances serve at best as evidence of the film’s ethnographic impulse or, worse, of Kassovitz’s efforts to tart up the story with imposed signifiers of an Americanized, commodity culture.<sup>5</sup>

In both cases, *La Haine*’s ostentatious style poses a problem. Although the film flouts the codes of journalistic realism, *La Haine* clearly shares a mission with the wave of TV exposés and “sociological” films that preceded and followed its 1995 release. Its makers framed *La Haine* as a “message film”—a stark examination of contemporary life in France’s embattled banlieues, the suburbs that ring major cities like Paris and

Marseilles. Like many inner cities in the U.S., the banlieues are home to Black and Brown communities of the African diaspora—most with roots in former French colonies in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Antilles.<sup>6</sup> And while white supremacy and anti-black racism of course have distinct histories and manifestations in France, in some cases their workings are grimly familiar: as are many U.S. cities, the banlieues are plagued by ongoing police violence.<sup>7</sup> What are called police *bauvres* (blunders) routinely cause serious injuries and deaths among banlieue residents, and *La Haine* was conceived specifically as an indictment of both this violence and public indifference toward its persistence.<sup>8</sup> Kassovitz asserts that he began the script in 1993, on the day that police shot and killed a 17-year-old Zairian, Makomé M’Bowole, while he was handcuffed to a radiator in a police station

house. M’Bowole had been arrested on suspicion of stealing cigarettes. The film’s narrative culminates in a similar *bauvre*, and its fictional story is framed by a complex set of devices that undergird the film’s claims to realism. The narrative’s opening shot, for example, is preceded by an intertitle—sparse, plain text on a black background, with no music—that dedicates *La Haine* “to those who died while this film was being made.” A similar title card follows the final shot, thanking the residents of the cité (public housing project) in which *La Haine* was filmed. As this suggests, the filmmakers presented *La Haine* as an exposé on life and death in Paris’s trouble banlieues, and French audiences embraced this claim to realism.

Nevertheless, *La Haine*’s flamboyant style seems to point in other directions. Ginette Vincendeau, for example, notes that since the

1960s the banlieues have served as backdrops for the experimental and highly personal work of many French auteurs, including, for example, *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966) and *Le Camion* (Marguerite Duras, 1977).<sup>9</sup> Many reviewers within France’s cinematic establishment drew similar comparisons. *Cahiers du Cinema*, no fan of the “sociological,” praised Kassovitz for his ability to “escape naturalism,” and *Le Nouvel Observateur* compared *La Haine* favorably with *A bout de souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960).<sup>10</sup> Vincendeau argues that *La Haine* deviates from the “dreary” and “rough” form of contemporary sociological films, and therefore, should be understood as a hybrid: “From the ‘sociological’ films it takes a genuine interest in the working-class suburb as setting and topic, and from the ‘aesthetic’ films a stylistic distancing

from it.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike its sociological contemporaries, Vincendeau notes, “...*La Haine* is polished and seductive. It aims to shock and please....”<sup>12</sup>

As it happens, “to shock and to please” offers a useful summary of the aims of hip-hop aesthetics, evident in the outrageous moves of b-boys and b-girls as well as the smooth flow of hardcore rappers. Hip-hop artists rarely feel a need to choose between commitments to form and commitments to realism. “So many people can’t see,” the U.S. artist Jay-Z observes, “that every great rapper is not just a documentarian but [also] a trickster.”<sup>13</sup> As Will Higbee notes, during the 1980s and early 1990s Kassovitz immersed himself in Paris’s emerging hip-hop scenes, and their influence is quite evident in the soundtracks of his early shorts and his first feature film.<sup>14</sup> By 1993, when he began work on *La Haine*,



the 26-year-old director was already fluent in hip-hop forms and the possibilities that they offered for cinema. In sum, then, the best models for *La Haine*'s complex form are not to be found in the traditions of French auteurism. A better guide is *La Haine* itself, which highlights hip-hop artistry in its content precisely in order to pay homage to its most important formal influence. In what follows, I investigate two intertwined ways that hip-hop's formal system contributes to *La Haine*'s achievements: in the kinetic beauty embodied by its camerawork, and in its densely layered intertextuality.

### Defying Gravity in the Cité

The Steadicam allows for multiple points of view while never committing to one of its own....It can go anywhere—indeed, it's built to be able to go anywhere....and it's also

never fully anywhere. It never lands. It hovers. — Eric Hayes<sup>15</sup>

*La Haine*'s narrative is framed by a joke, told in voiceover, about a man in free-fall. The device signals a larger truth about the narrative: it exists in a moment of suspension, in spaces of relative calm that are pregnant with the possibilities of violence. The film's story begins on the morning after an uprising has engulfed a cité in Chanteloup-les-Vignes, a banlieue located northwest of Paris. It ends in another spasm of violence. In between, *La Haine* follows 24 hours in the lives of three young friends from the cité: Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz. For much of the film the friends move through the wreckage left by this violent confrontation with the police that includes burned-out cars and businesses, smashed windows, wrecked police and train stations. This mise-en-scène contributes to the film's palpable

tension, which is reinforced by the voiceover joke, told by Hubert:

It's the story of a guy who falls off a skyscraper. On the way down past each floor, he keeps telling himself, 'So far so good; so far so good; so far so good.'

Hubert repeats the joke midway through the film, and it appears a final time in voiceover during the film's concluding scene, after the police have shot Vinz in the head, and as Hubert confronts his killer. Each time, Hubert follows the punch line with a dénouement: "But it's not how you fall that matters. It's how you land."

One of the joke's implications, of course, is a sense of inescapable doom. It sketches a kind of dangerous limbo, a freedom that might feel like flight but that must end in catastrophe. This sense of impending disaster is certainly a

## STEADICAM SHOTS ... REMAIN GROUNDED IN THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EMBODIED HUMAN SUBJECT

critical aspect of *La Haine*'s vocation. Like the final version of Hubert's joke, *La Haine* served as a kind of alarm cry regarding France's fracture sociale.<sup>16</sup> And yet both the joke and *La Haine* as a whole convey much more than this. The film's brutal portrait of the banlieue is also shot through with exuberance, warmth, and humor—qualities often neglected by critics, but which nevertheless give lie to any radical pessimism. In other words, both the joke and the film raise the possibility of

landing differently. However, these possibilities are not clearly conveyed through *La Haine*'s narration. Instead, they are most vibrantly expressed by the film's form.

In many interviews, Kassovitz claims that he set out to make the banlieue beautiful.<sup>17</sup> He succeeded, but it is a kinetic sort of beauty—more akin to dance than photography or painting. It results from the fluid integration of the characters into their social/material world, an effect supported by the intricate

social connections revealed as the three friends move through their neighborhood. Kassovitz's choice of a densely layered soundtrack also plays a role. The sonic world of the cité is teeming with life: dogs barking, children playing, music, traffic, helicopters, and conversations all flow around the friends as they make their way through their home. But *La Haine*'s kinetic beauty largely can be credited, in addition to the director, to the talents of four people. Three are the film's principle actors—



FIGURE 2. PERFORMANCE BY DJ CUT KILLER [ANOUAR HAJOUI] IN *LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.

all athletic young men who move with an easy grace and vitality. The fourth is the film's veteran Steadicam operator, Jacques Monge.<sup>18</sup>

*La Haine's* highly mobile camera has been often remarked, but it is the particular affordances of the Steadicam that are primary; the cité in particular is revealed through a series of long and tightly choreographed Steadicam shots. As the three friends make their way through streets, cellars, apartments, and rooftops, Monge's camera engages them in a smooth and intricate dance, imparting the Steadicam's unique sense of human embodiment combined with preternatural fluidity. As Eric Hynes writes in a tribute to the form,

Steadicam shots are uncanny. They mimic how we move and see, and furthermore they seem to anticipate how we expect to be able to move and see, but

can't....They do come from a body: a person carrying a machine that's making these images, at human height, usually at human speed, moving and turning and observing....[but] the technique doesn't settle for approximating how we move through the world; it makes improvements, surpassing our capabilities with a precognitive fluidity of movement.<sup>19</sup>

The Steadicam's contributions are most evident during *La Haine's* elaborately choreographed sequence shots—single takes that often extend more than a full minute. (The longest runs for 1:54.) These shots are “outrageous,” like the dance moves studied by McCarren, and for many of the same reasons. Because they are Steadicam shots, they remain grounded in the proprioceptive perspectives of the embodied human subject. And yet they glide and flow and curve and bend,

hitting a half dozen marks along the way, upending our expectations, flaunting their technical skill, and conveying a vibrant energy.

The Steadicam's contributions to *La Haine* can be gauged through comparison with a very different sequence that achieves similar results. The scene featuring DJ Cut Killer's performance begins with a high-angle, static camera shot into a busy courtyard playground. The camera pans and tilts as it picks out different groups in the courtyard, eventually arriving at the window in which Cut Killer is setting up his turntables and speakers. The effect resembles surveillance footage—a distanced, objective point of view quite different from the human-scale perspectives that dominate *La Haine's* cité. The film then cuts to the interior of Cut Killer's apartment, and he begins his performance. The film returns to an exterior

shot, but then something quite unexpected happens: the camera becomes unmoored, both from the ground and from any particular point of view. Instead it floats above the treetops, meanders out of the courtyard, down the street, and pans to look out toward the horizon. This fluid, gravity-defying movement suspends the narrative trajectory, transforming surveillance into contemplation. It also functions as a visual analogue to the poetic, pointed, and highly skilled sonic performance by DJ Cut Killer, which dominates the scene's soundtrack.

#### Sampling, Intertextuality, Generosity

The major things black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things, and it must look effortless. — Toni Morrison<sup>20</sup>

*La Haine* is replete with references to other films and filmmakers, and many critics attribute this to the director's pedigree, as both a second-generation filmmaker and an avowed cinephile.<sup>21</sup> Like the earlier New Wave, Kassovitz was praised for his innovative riffs on Hollywood genre films, and many noted the parallels that connect *La Haine* to U.S. filmmakers including Martin Scorsese and Spike Lee. This reading of the film is fine as far as it goes, but critics also often present *La Haine*'s many cinematic quotations as a claim against the film's realism. Ruth Doughty and Kate Griffiths, for example, suggest that *La Haine*'s viewers find themselves "entrap[ped] in a maze of cinematic allusions, a hall of mirrors reflecting upon other films."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Vincendeau remarks on

an interesting slippage in several cinematic references that the

film indulges in: Kassovitz makes his heroes inhabit his own cinematic and visual culture rather than theirs. Vinz talking to himself in his bathroom mirror imitates the 1977 hero of *Taxi Driver*, where a similar young man in 1995 would more likely have copied Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger....<sup>23</sup>

Vincendeau's readings of *La Haine* are generally sensitive and insightful, but in this case she is simply wrong. A young man like Vinz might well possess an exhaustive knowledge of *Taxi Driver*, along with dozens of other classic films.

Hip-hop culture as a whole is marked by its reverence for and homages to past masters, a fact documented in multiple ethnographic studies.<sup>24</sup> "Crate digging," for example, is a foundational skill prized by both DJs and producers. Practitioners spend hours combing through the stock

of used record stores, searching for the rare, golden breaks that will distinguish them among their peers. Similarly, b-boys and b-girls insist that newcomers master a repertoire of canonical songs and dance moves. Today, forty years after the form's genesis, the b-boy canon remains grounded in a select group of funk songs recorded in the early 1970s. Justin Williams's argument about hip-hop music applies to the culture more generally:

[T]here exists an audience expectation that hip-hop is a vast intertextual network that helps to form and inform the generic contract between audiences and hip-hop groups and artists. And in many cases, hip-hop practitioners overtly celebrate their peers, ancestors, and musical pasts, though reasons why this is so may diverge, and how references

and sources are textually signaled (or not) varies....<sup>25</sup>

This applies to cinema as well. Turn-of-the-century hip-hop maintains a durable appreciation for the movies that shaped the culture at its birth, mostly drawn from early Blaxploitation, Hong Kong cinema, and Hollywood gangster films. Tupac Shakur, for example—arguably the world's most influential rapper when *La Haine* was made and released—shared with his peers an encyclopedic knowledge of Blaxploitation and Kung Fu films.<sup>26</sup> Hip-hop culture always has been marked by a serious and sustained search for a usable past. It is just a different past than the one that is familiar to most scholars writing about *La Haine*. Beyond French auteurism, therefore, it's worth thinking about the film's ostentatious intertextuality in parallel with hip-hop's sampling

aesthetic, an entire musical form created from borrowed material.

A contemporary film, also influenced by hip-hop aesthetics, offers a useful analogue.<sup>27</sup> Released three years before *La Haine*, the U.S. film *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992) also focuses on a group of teenage friends from an impoverished urban neighborhood. As in *La Haine*, the men's friendship is tested as one of their group becomes increasingly enraged, unstable, and homicidal. And like *La Haine*'s Vinz, *Juice*'s Bishop (Tupac Shakur) manifests his instability through an extended riff on a classic cinematic anti-hero. Finally, both films showcase the art of DJ-ing, signaling the inspiration for their cinematic sampling.

Despite their similarities, the two films' use of sampling differs in one important respect, and Serge Lacasse's useful distinction between "autosonic" and "allosonic" quotation

**THIS FLUID,  
GRAVITY-  
DEFYING  
MOVEMENT  
SUSPENDS THE  
NARRATIVE  
TRAJECTORY,  
TRANSFORMING  
SURVEILLANCE  
INTO  
CONTEMPLATION.**



can add precision to this discussion.<sup>28</sup> Most hip-hop sampling is autsonic: a producer digitally captures a discrete section from a previously recorded song (e.g., a single drum beat, a melodic line, an extended riff) and then combines this with other elements to create a new composition. Often these quotations retain no explicit connection to their original contexts, though many are quite recognizable. Most within the community certainly will recognize, for example, the 8-bar drum solo from James Brown's 1970 single "Funky Drummer," a sample used in dozens of subsequent hip-hop songs.

*Juice* uses a form of autsonic sampling, weaving footage from the classic gangster film *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) directly into the newer film's fabric. This integration is motivated by an establishing shot that shows the principle characters watching the earlier film on television.

Scenes from *White Heat* then fill the movie screen, complete with artifacts signaling its televisual reproduction, akin to the "crunchy" vinyl artifacts prized by hip-hop producers. As they do in music, these media artifacts add a sense of dimension—of temporal and cultural depth—to the film. It is also in this scene that Bishop first "acts out" *White Heat*—demonstrating his passionate identification with the film's psychopathic protagonist, played by James Cagney.

Unlike autsonic borrowing, an allosonic quotation does not directly incorporate previously recorded material. Instead, it borrows from an earlier work by commissioning a new performance of it.<sup>29</sup> Producers often use this technique to explicitly signal the borrowed element's original context, as in parody or homage. Further, producers often modify lyrics, arrangement, and/or contexts

in ways that signify on the meanings of the original. A contemporary example is Tupac Shakur's 1992 "Changes," which borrows chorus and melody from "The Way It Is," a multi-platinum single by Bruce Hornsby and the Range. Both songs are about the possibility of racial and social progress, and Shakur uses the sample to challenge Hornsby's facile optimism. As Shakur's chorus insistently repeats, "I see no changes."

*La Haine* uses a parallel technique, in the form of a disturbing, hilarious riff on *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) that erupts at an early moment in the film (Figure 3). Rather than autsonic quotation (e.g., a film poster or television broadcast inserted into the mise-en-scène), the film re-stages one of *Taxi Driver*'s key scenes. Vincent Cassel, playing Vinz, rehearses dialogue spoken originally by Robert De Niro playing

Travis Bickle. Scorsese's version already plays with the homology between mirror and cinematic screen. Kassovitz does him one better, and the scene's blocking reinforces this effect, creating a play-within-a-play-within-a-play that shatters the film's fourth wall. Cassel-as-Vinz, ostensibly practicing the lines in front of a bathroom mirror, stares in direct address at the camera. As Vinz threatens his (imaginary) interlocutor—"You looking at me, motherfucker?"—the audience is pulled through an unstable series of subject positions: we are interlocutor, cinephile, camera, mirror, and Vinz himself. The effect implicates the film's characters, the filmmakers, and its audiences in a web of relationships that signify in multiple directions.

What this playful sampling of Scorsese does not do, however, is undercut *La Haine*'s sociological mission. Instead, by shattering the



FIGURE 3. VINZ REHEARSES LINES FROM *TAXI DRIVER* (MARTIN SCORSESE, 1977) IN *LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.





FIGURE 4. BILLBOARD REFERENCE TO *SCARFACE* (BRIAN DE PALMA, 1983). GRAFFITI WRITER SAÏD CHANGES VOUS TO *NOUS*, RENDERING THE TAGLINE, “THE WORLD IS OURS” IN *LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.

fourth wall’s protective barrier, the performance jerks spectators into unexpected relationships. Vinz/Cassel’s aggressive performance is so unhinged that it reads as parody, but it is also literally in our faces. We may laugh, but we do so to cover an atavistic discomfort.

#### “The World is Ours”

But perhaps the motif that hip-hop sampling can best illuminate is a billboard that *La Haine*’s protagonists encounter twice while in Paris. Dominated by a photorealistic image of a globe, its tagline reads, “The World is Yours” (Figure 4).

This is a direct reference to two earlier films: *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) and the remake, *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983).<sup>30</sup> In an interview, Kassovitz says this about the motif:

There are lots of references in the film. Hawks’s *Scarface* with the

poster “The world is yours;” I put that in because in the cités they all know De Palma’s *Scarface* by heart. You speak to them about cinema and they tell you: “Yeah! like *Scarface*!” and they don’t know the original, of course.<sup>31</sup>

Whatever its provenance, *La Haine*’s incorporation of “The World is Yours” is inspired. Like both versions of *Scarface*, *La Haine* focuses on an immigrant community whose inhabitants are pushed to the margins of their society. In all three films, the protagonists are positioned to “overhear” this advertising pitch, which in each case is attributed to a corporation engaged in international business and tourism. In other words, all three advertisements are targeted at members of the dominant class, the beneficiaries of increasingly globalized capital. In *La Haine*, for example, the billboard advertises a resort in Morocco; it promises

“the world” only to those able to finance expensive beach vacations.

As the quote above suggests, Kassovitz was aware of the motif’s origins in the 1932 Hawks film. However, it is worth emphasizing the quote’s central point: “I put that in because in the cités they all know De Palma’s *Scarface* by heart.” In fact, it is likely that “The World is Yours” was in the air during the four months that the filmmakers lived and worked on location in Chanteloup-les-Vignes. In April 1994—five months before principle shooting began—the European branch of Columbia Records released *Illmatic*, the debut album by the U.S. rapper Nas. Embraced by the hip-hop cognoscenti on both sides of the Atlantic, the album is now routinely cited as one of the most influential of all time.<sup>32</sup> During their time in Chanteloup-les-Vignes, the filmmakers probably heard Nas more

than once. *Illmatic* includes its own extended riff on *Scarface*, a track titled “The World is Yours.” With an insistent refrain—“Whose world is this? The world is yours!”—Nas boldly appropriates the message of *Scarface*’s fictional advertisement. It is worth attending, therefore, to the particular uses that Nas makes of his borrowed material.

*Scarface*’s 1983 protagonist, Tony Montana, reacts to the forces arrayed against him with a paranoid and predatory individualism. Nas takes this model and bends it. As James Braxton Peterson observes, “What immediately distinguishes Nas’s world from De Palma’s is that the motif functions in hip-hop discourse as a call and response rather than as the one-sided text messages in the film. This is a signal distinction.”<sup>33</sup> The song recasts the motif as a question, “Whose world is this?” and then offers multiple

answers in multiple voices, including “It’s mine!” and “The world is yours!” Nas even name-checks his neighbors, moving from his home base outward through New York’s many struggling neighborhoods:

To everybody in Queens, the  
foundation (It’s yours!)  
The world is yours  
To everybody uptown, yo, the  
world is yours (It’s yours!)  
The world is yours  
To everybody in Brooklyn  
Y’all know the world is  
yours (It’s yours!)<sup>34</sup>

This restructuring of “The World is Yours” into call-and-response, or “antiphonal” form, renders it both multivocal and communal. The change opens Nas’s claims “to all of his listeners and by extension an entire generation of black and brown people living in oppressive urban conditions.”<sup>35</sup> This is precisely the move made by Saïd, when he uses

spray paint to change the billboard’s vous to *nous*, transforming the commercial come-on into a defiant “The World is Ours” (Figure 4).

And, as it happens, Nas’s move also parallels the turn that *La Haine* makes with *Taxi Driver*. Scorsese’s Travis Bickle is the prototypical “lone gunman;” he lives an isolated, solitary existence. Vinz, on the other hand, is immersed within and supported by his community. He lives with his noisy family and spends most of the film in the company of a wide range of friends, including Saïd and Hubert, his closest mates. The three friends tease and bicker, play pranks, and tell jokes. They back each other during multiple scraps, Vinz cuts Saïd’s hair, and Hubert works hard to save Vinz from his corrosive, homicidal rage. It is the depth of these friendships that allows Vinz’s death to rise to the level of tragedy, unlike the blank nihilism that marks *Taxi Driver*. Like *Illmatic*,

then, *La Haine* combines harsh realism with a playful, generous, and endlessly surprising form. And like *Illmatic*, *La Haine*’s ironic humor and vitality can help to illuminate hip-hop’s appeal among the dispossessed in many parts of the globe.

### Conclusion

In the quote that opens this essay, Felicia McCarren writes that the discipline called *le hip hop* demands “dancing that is not only for oneself but also for others.” The b-girl performs for the greater glory of herself and her crew. Moreover, she dances paradigmatically within the “cipher,” or circle, formed by the larger community, and it is this community that affirms or discounts her expressive claims. It provides space for individual achievement, but only within the context of group solidarity. This structure is fundamental to multiple forms of hip-hop culture, but this is often

overlooked by outsiders familiar only with the more individualistic concerns of commercial rap music. Nevertheless, the pattern is also evident in *La Haine*, a story that turns, after all, on the pleasures and responsibilities of friendship.

In sum, hip-hop provides *La Haine* with far more than just flashy production numbers and a modish, subcultural style. Its influence is both thoroughgoing and formal, and the aesthetics of b-boying and sampling undergird the film’s most fundamental, forceful themes. In form as well as content, *La Haine* is a hip-hop film. ■



FIGURE 5. ANOTHER ECHO OF NAS: HUBERT FRAMED BY GRAFFITI READING “THE FUTURE IS US.” IN *LA HAINE* (DIRECTED BY MATHIEU KASSOVITZ, 1995, LE STUDIO CANAL+), FRAME GRAB.

Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Felicia McCarren, *French Moves: The Cultural Politics of Le Hip Hop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xxxvii.
- <sup>2</sup> For Anglophone readers, the best introduction to French hip-hop remains Alain-Philippe Durand, ed. *Black, Blanc, Beur: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World* (Lanham, MD, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> McCarren, xx. For more on Africanist elements in hip-hop practice, see Halifu Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> McCarren, xvii.
- <sup>5</sup> Although the film garnered generally excellent reviews, there were notable exceptions, including Karen Alexander, “La Haine,” *Vertigo* 1, no. 5 (Autumn/Winter 1995), [https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo\\_magazine/volume-1-issue-5-autumn-winter-1995/the-children-of-godard-and-90s-tv/](https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-1-issue-5-autumn-winter-1995/the-children-of-godard-and-90s-tv/).
- <sup>6</sup> In recent decades, immigration from the former colonies to the metropole has dramatically altered France’s demographic makeup. However, long-standing federal laws prohibit the French census from asking questions about racial or ethnic identity, and as a result the precise makeup of France’s population is unknown. Because the state is officially “color-blind,” French authorities use euphemisms like “visible minorities” to discuss the country’s Black and Brown immigrants and citizens. People with roots in the Mehgrebi countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya are widely thought to make up France’s largest minority. Crystal Marie Fleming, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 9-11.
- <sup>7</sup> On recent activism challenging past and present racism in France, see Fleming, *Ibid.*, and Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom, eds. *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> Police *bauvres* have become a political flashpoint, and new incidents often trigger demonstrations and violence. In

- 2005, a particularly widespread and intense series of uprisings sparked a nationwide reckoning. On the uprisings and their aftermath, see Tshimanga, Gondola, and Bloom, eds., *Frenchness and the African Diaspora*.
- <sup>9</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, *La Haine*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 20.
  - <sup>10</sup> Cited in *Ibid*, 88.
  - <sup>11</sup> Vincendeau, “Designs on the Banlieue,” in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau *French Film: Texts and Contexts* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 313.
  - <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 316.
  - <sup>13</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau), 55.
  - <sup>14</sup> Will Higbee, *Mathieu Kassovitz* (New York: Manchester University Press), 32. Higbee’s book remains the most thorough discussion of hip-hop’s importance within Kassovitz’s early films.
  - <sup>15</sup> Eric Hynes, “Center of Gravity,” *Film Comment* (November-December 2016), 29.
  - <sup>16</sup> On first appearance, the joke describes a falling homme [man]. By the film’s end, the figure falling has become *une société*.
  - <sup>17</sup> Claire Vassé, “*La Haine*, un regard metisse,” *Positif* 412 (June): 6-7.
  - <sup>18</sup> Monge was a pioneer Steadicam operator, trained by the rig’s inventor, Garrett Brown. After Monge’s death in 2017, Brown and many other prominent camera operators contributed eulogies to a professional tribute. “The International Community pays its respects to Jacques Monge,” French Association of Directors of Photography. <http://www.afcinema.com/The-International-Community-pays-its-respects-to-Jacques-Monge.html>.
  - <sup>19</sup> Eric Hynes, “Center of Gravity,” *Film Comment* (November-December 2016): 29.



- <sup>20.</sup> Paul Gilroy, “Living Memory: An Interview with Toni Morrison,” in Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 175–182.
- <sup>21.</sup> See, for example, Higbee, *Mathieu Kassovitz*, 7–11.
- <sup>22.</sup> Ruth Doughty and Kate Griffiths, “Racial Reflection: *La Haine* and the Art of Borrowing,” *Studies in European Cinema* 3, no. 2 (2006): 122–23.
- <sup>23.</sup> Vincendeau, *La Haine*, 74.
- <sup>24.</sup> Excellent ethnographic studies include Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Joseph G. Schoss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- <sup>25.</sup> Justin A. Williams, “Theoretical Approaches to Quotation in Hip-Hop Recordings,” *Contemporary Music Review* 33, no. 2 (2014): 203.
- <sup>26.</sup> *BaadAsssss Cinema*, directed by Isaac Julien (2002; Los Angeles: Docurama, 2003), DVD.
- <sup>27.</sup> I am indebted to my students Kiralfy Kennion and Terrell Barlow for pointing out this parallel.
- <sup>28.</sup> Serge Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality in Recorded Popular Music,” ed. Michael Talbot, *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 35–58.
- <sup>29.</sup> Producers often label this technique “interpellation.”

- <sup>30.</sup> For a good reading of this motif see Higbee, *Mathieu Kassovitz*, 50.
- <sup>31.</sup> The interview originally appeared in *Positif* (1995), by Thomas Bourguignon and Yann Tobin, 412 (June): 4–13. Translation by Higbee, *Mathieu Kassovitz*, 77.
- <sup>32.</sup> Regarding *Illmatic*’s impact in France, see Brice Miclet, “Pourquoi *Illmatic* de Nas est l’album de rap le plus commémoré de l’histoire,” *Slate*, 06.08.2014. <http://www.slate.fr/story/90467/illmatic-nas-album-rap-anniversaire>.
- <sup>33.</sup> James Braxton Peterson, “It’s Yours,” in *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic*, eds. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010).
- <sup>34.</sup> Nas, *Illmatic*, Columbia CK 57684, 1994, CD.
- <sup>35.</sup> Peterson, “It’s Yours,” 78.



MARY SIBANDE, *THE ADMIRATION OF  
THE PURPLE FIGURE*, 2013, DIGITAL  
ARCHIVAL PRINT 150x110 CM /  
59.1x43.3 IN. GALLERY MOMO/  
LICENSED BY GALLERY MOMO, CAPE  
TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.



# Aesthetic Deception in *Selling the Shadow*

**SARAH STEFANA SMITH**

The carte-de-visite is perhaps the *truest* historical record we have that Sojourner Truth left behind.<sup>1</sup> The carte-de-visite assisted in making portraits less expensive and reproducible. Combined with wet-plate negative technology it was possible to produce multiple prints from one negative. Through the use of this new technology, Nell Irvin Painter notes, “Truth established what few nineteenth-century black women were able to prove: that she was present in her time. Her success in distributing her portraits plays no small role in her place in historical memory.”<sup>2</sup> While appearing unmediated these photographs were strategically and carefully staged. Juxtaposing the careful staging of these cartes-de-visite with Truth’s publicized oratory practice and a speech in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851—widely known as *Ar’n’t I a Woman*—is to negotiate the terms of *aesthetic deception*.<sup>3</sup> The

cartes-de-visite present a counter representation of Truth and reveal historical interpretation as neither utterly objective nor transparent. These historical narratives of black women often suggest that they are not afforded the right to be strategic and unconscious curators of their own image or put differently, *aesthetically deceptive* in the development of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> This article meditates on the burden of the real and the fictive as it becomes capable of producing aesthetic modes of suspension.

*Selling the Shadow*, exhibited at Gallery Momo in Cape Town, South Africa (2017), takes its name from Truth’s practice of selling photographs to finance her livelihood as a traveling preacher and activist. Captioned with, “I sell the shadow, to support the substance,” the “I” in this phrase warrants further scrutiny. Given the inability of the slave or

freed black to own their labor let alone their bodies, Truth’s caption suggests an understanding of the importance of controlling her visual presentation and performance. By selling her likeness, to support the substance—the body that was located elsewhere from the image—Truth holds in suspension blackness as an ontological position that sutures modern capitalism, while simultaneously disrupting its logic of surveillance of blackness. Taking a nod from Truth, *Selling the Shadow* grapples with this juxtaposition between blackness, aesthetics, and capital. The exhibition offers several considerations on the politics of deception through the works of a diasporic collection of artists while holding in space Truth’s influence on black visuality.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I argue, much like the contexts and interpretive enmeshments in which Sojourner

Truth sells her likeness and precisely where black embodiment struggles through illicit criminality, that blackness re-writes subjecthood and the human through strategies of aesthetic deception. Through the suggestive connotations of ‘liquid blackness,’ whereby suspension grapples with the ethics, aesthetics, timespace and forms blackness may take, I understand aesthetic deception to be a re/invention, both strategic and unconscious, conventional and outside of convention, of blackness itself. We might think of deception as a set of practices that utilize illicit subject formation, in time; is subversive and ruptures normative logics of deviant blackness; and conjures pause where the very terms of blackness befuddle and frustrate pathology.

Aesthetic deception is to invade and trespass on anti-blackness. Yet, deception is not without the

**THE BURDEN OF THE REAL AND THE FICTIVE ... BECOMES CAPABLE OF PRODUCING AESTHETIC MODES OF SUSPENSION**

## ULTIMATELY TRUTH’S TRUE AND “MULTIPLE MEANINGS CANNOT BE RECONCILED

burden of neoliberalism’s moral compass of “common sense,” which understands deception as criminal, illicit, and the propagation of beliefs and ideas that are *not true*. This iteration of deception assumes a relationship to race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality that mobilizes white supremacy, to mark a universal subject as the barometer of subjectivity, and relies on the over-determination of what is truth, real, and authentic.<sup>6</sup> Thus, much like Mirzoeff’s counter-visuality, as

a reading practice that responds to TransAtlantic slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, I understand deception as strategic, useful, productive, and at times a discombobulating mode of aesthetic practice. Because systems of oppression mark racialized, gendered, and classed bodies continually as illicit, criminal, and in excess of a universal subject; aesthetic deception re-writes these experiences against the normative subject. While aesthetic deception draws on the black fantastic and

fugitive flights to conjure black life as possibility, I particularly pay attention to the racialized gender dimensions of Jillian Hernandez’s uses of the politics of fakery and excess in contemporary Black and Latina women’s sexual aesthetics and find it informative for my use of aesthetic deception in this article.<sup>7</sup> I take seriously fakery and strategic manipulation as the battleground in which blackness makes room for pause and undermines its pathology. I begin by utilizing the

messy figuration of Truth to tease out two modalities of deception: archetypical embodiments and timespace. The latter half of this article turns to specific examples that perform aesthetic deception: the work of South African artist Mary Sibande’s *Sophie* series and African American artist Torkwase Dyson’s *The Fugitive Project*.

### Shadow Seller

It is to the cultural symbol of Sojourner Truth’s oratory and visual practices that I turn to think through deception. The 1851 Woman’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio and the lack of corroboration on *how* Sojourner Truth performed this speech make legible the complication of historical interpretation and its contemporary neoliberal convention.<sup>8</sup> It is through differing depictions of her speech—recorded by Frances Dana Gage and Marcus Robinson as well as what Nell Painter calls the

“historical impossibility” of Truth’s Southern dialect—that bring us to two instances of aesthetic deception: embodiment and timespace.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, the use of the body through gestures, adornment, and speech are evoked to project the knowable subject onto the body. Because subject formation is a precarious site for black bodies, deception repurposes the constraints of blackness and utilizes subterfuge to mark a different truth. Secondly, I use the concept of timespace to engage with geography (space) and futurity in the here and now (time) as a corollary process that marks black life despite the logics of black death. The mode of deception at play here exposes ways blackness is both precarious and exceeds an always looming death.

Gage renders Truth’s speech as a grand performance of Southern dialect, brands the speech, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, and utilizes rhetorical

strategies and thick description to describe Truth’s likeness and speaking voice as a force to reckon with the problem of race.<sup>10</sup> However, Gage’s account—written in 1863, several years after the convention—starkly contrasts with journalist Marcus Robinson’s measured account of the convention. Robinson depicts Truth’s words through standard English with little reference to her bodily gesture.<sup>11</sup> Both accounts render Truth as the strategic embodiment of slavery’s problem and present her as a symbolic figure with which to rally support for the abolitionist/feminist cause. However, as Painter notes, this Southern dialect starkly contrasts with a historical record of slaves in rural New York, where Truth was born. Slaves from this region commonly lived on farms with Dutch families and likely spoke Dutch as their first language.<sup>12</sup> These accounts remind us that what is known of Truth is filtered through secondary sources



that are fraught. Ultimately Truth's true and "multiple meanings cannot be reconciled."<sup>13</sup> Both accounts reflect an entrenched white racism that relied on particular stereotypical modes of illiteracy and regional symbols of slavery to be legible to such an audience at the convention.<sup>14</sup> Like the slave narrative, speech-making, as a reputable form, required "the former slave-cum-writer to properly execute generic conventions and utilize a form already familiar to readers" and *simultaneously* navigate the conventions of white racism, even within the context of abolitionist practices.<sup>15</sup>

The rhetoric of the visual does not escape such deception. As I previously suggested, the carte-de-visite might be the only *real* document of Truth bearing an explicit mark of her self-crafting. Of this representation, Painter notes Truth's very clear and strategic placement of

objects, down to the lace and book in her hands evoking a respectable and literate subject (despite her inability to read) that would strike a chord in those that encountered her. Truth understood the symbolism of the carte-de-visite as a new technology that represented a sign of mobility and what Grigsby notes as "the fragile phantom substitute for the presence of persons exercising their freedom of movement."<sup>16</sup>

The juxtaposition of how Truth's Akron speech is conjured and the strategic craft of her carte-de-visite disturbs notions of racial authenticity and simultaneously adheres to conventions of racial and sexual respectability. Deception whereby the symbolic imagination of Truth as an embodied subject and one located in timespace rather than the historical provability of her figuration make this disruption possible. This vacillation between the provable and

the imaginative, the conventional and the non-conventional of Truth's figuration compels the following questions: what can we bear to acknowledge about blackness? What cannot be tolerated in imagining blackness, black gender, and the *will* of deception? How can deception veer and travel into unpredicted directions? Truth's embodiment and its disorientation to a real, true, and authentic subjectivity reveal other orientations to blackness that are here rather than in the background waiting to emerge. Truth's aesthetic deception through embodiment disturbs notions of racial authenticity (particularly prevalent in the hero narrative) and simultaneously adheres to iterations of sexual respectability (e.g. grandmother figure in the carte-de-visite) that continue to reinforce hierarchies of race and gender. These embodiments are undergirded by racialized and sexualized concepts of personhood laid bare in the

Antebellum United States. Drawing on McMillan, I understand Truth's embodiment to be "an elastic means to create new racial and gendered epistemologies" that interfere with the very anti-blackness that creates the contours of her existence.<sup>17</sup>

My recounting of the above historical traces of Sojourner Truth are not to generate a provable record nor to ignore the climate in which Truth lived as a factor in managing her presence, but to arrive at two important points. Firstly, Truth's performative and visual depictions (imagined and otherwise) contribute to her legibility as an abolitionist and activist. Secondly, this legibility relies on aspects of imagination and contradiction within the biographical details that we know of Truth. To take seriously these juxtapositions (e.g. Truth's Northern upbringing against a Southern dialect) is to firmly grapple with deception as

both embodied and located in time and space as well as how deception is wielded as both a means of survival and subject formation. I now turn to two examples within the exhibition *Selling the Shadow* where the historical traces of Truth and strategies of deception makes space for blackness's multiple subject formations.

**Aesthetic Deception:  
Archetypal Embodiment  
and in Plain/Plane Sight**

Embodiment as aesthetic deception is exemplified in the work of South African artist Mary Sibande. Sibande uses sculpture and photography to comment on the intersections of race, gender, class, and nation. Drawing on an alter-ego figure named Sophie, Sibande develops the character of a domestic worker that draws on the historicity of four generations of women in the artist's family.<sup>18</sup> As the figure of Sophie

**DECEPTION IS  
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AND SUBJECT  
FORMATION**

## WITHIN ONE FIGURAL EMBODIMENT, SIBANDE RUPTURES THE DICHOTOMY OF MAID-MADAM, CONSTRUCTING A SUBTLE, ALBEIT PERNICIOUS SUBTERFUGE OF THE TROPES OF DOMESTICITY

grows larger over time, the work blurs the boundaries of domestic laborer and madam, fusing and disrupting a binary formation of these embodiments while acknowledging their violent relation. Sibande's potential to agitate visual codes of race, gender, class, and nation is not a result of unmediated agency, but rather presents an attentiveness to the aesthetic and political work that is performed through the complex signification of her sculptures.

Linking Sojourner Truth's iconicity to Sibande and the productive uses of deception might be better made through the regional specificity of the Khoisan woman, Krotoa/Eva—an indigenous woman who moved from Khoisan society into the Dutch colony of the Cape after its founding in 1652. Although Krotoa's primary position was as a domestic worker, she later became a translator between the Khoisan and European settlers.<sup>19</sup> Distiller and Samuelson note that Krotoa was “the first female cultural

broker in the colonial contact zone and...one of the most significant go-betweens of the period.”<sup>20</sup> Further, Baderoon identifies Krotoa as a significant symbol of the ambiguity of domestic service by black women in white households, whereby “ideas about domesticity were frequently used as a weapon in the colonial power struggles between and among Europeans and Africans.”<sup>21</sup> Domestic labor in present day South Africa continues to be a major source of work done by black women. Given

this context, Krotoa's ability to function as a go-between among settler and indigenous populations represents the fraught and intimate terrain of domesticity, power, and racial and sexual aesthetics that Truth embodied. Furthermore, this ability to code-switch as an interlocutor between different populations disfigures normative values of sexual and aesthetic truth while maintaining an attentiveness to colonial conquest as an intimate and disciplinary site of culture comingling.

Mary Sibande's sculpture uses the human form and ephemeral embodiments to explore the construction of identity in a postcolonial South African context, while critiquing stereotypical depictions of women, particularly black women.<sup>22</sup> Crafted from fiberglass and silicone casts of her own body, Sibande uses the body as the site of vision and transformation.

Sibande first introduces *Sophie* (2008) through a life-size cast of her body wearing a domestic's uniform with a collar and apron rimmed in Brodeirie Anglaise, which originated in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and is widely used in the apron and collar details of contemporary South African domestic workers.<sup>23</sup> The nod to the Victorian era is present in much of her work through stylization and it historicizes South Africa's colonial past/present, where Britain has not only consolidated its empire but also expanded its colonial reach.<sup>24</sup> This approach presents a similar thread as the Nigerian-British artist, Yinka Shonibare, who takes up the colonial and post-colonial era as filtered through globalization while utilizing Victorian costuming to visualize such encounters.

In *I'm a Lady* (2009), deception is visible through the physical and epistemological intimacy of violence

of the domestic-madam relation, which is literally stitched into the overlapping forms of blue maid uniform and blue gown (Figure 1). The bellowing tulle skirt and cuff, parasol, scarf and apron visualize the entanglements of entitlement and service, opulence and labor that figure into the domestic-madam relation, while the facial gestures present an opaque comportment. This installation is deceptive. Sophie intertwines stereotypical symbols; the uniform of a working-class maid and the attire of a bourgeois madam “...are fantastically stitched together around the idea of a single persona, disrupting the entrenched and highly politicized dichotomy that has tended to govern popular depictions of the maid and madam.”<sup>25</sup> Within one figural embodiment, Sibande ruptures the dichotomy of maid-madam, constructing a subtle, albeit pernicious subterfuge of the tropes of domesticity. These embodiments

evade dichotomies of domesticity while visualizing its violent intimacy.

Mary Corrigan (2015) understands the juxtaposition of attire as satirical excess, in which Sibande uses exaggerated style codes to liberate the domestic worker.<sup>26</sup> Yet these modes of self-fashioning are deployed within the terms of sexual politics that negotiate a fraught relationship between domestic (blackness) and madam (whiteness). This connection is perhaps more explicitly made through the work of a contemporary of Sibande, Zanele Muholi, particularly her piece *Massa and Mina(h) II* (2009). The photograph depicts Muholi as a domestic worker scrubbing the floor of the living room. The viewer can see the domestic from the perspective of the fashionable legs of the madam. The madam is disembodied as her upper body is not visible. This gives way to an

affect of absolute dominion over the domestic space. Here, the sphere of domestic labor is juxtaposed within a nuanced gendered and sexual matrix of domestic labor, and it depicts the libidinal twist of labor and dominance that lurks under the fray. Jillian Hernandez uses sexual-aesthetic excess to mark the way modes of dress and comportment are framed as *too much*, and consolidates sexual deviancy with sexual impropriety.<sup>27</sup> These modes of sexual impropriety often articulate themselves through fakery in which questions of authenticity and proper performance are couched in hierarchies of racial, gendered, and sexual codes of conduct. While *I'm a Lady* mobilizes both satirical excess and sexual-aesthetic excess, I also believe deception is mapped onto the Sophie figure through the signification of femininity and ladylike-ness, the criminalization of blackness, and the purity of

whiteness. Aesthetic deception is undeniably linked to the libidinal and structural implications of managing blackness in spaces of colonial and racial dominance. Subsequently, it is this relational play of power and domination, and despite deception and its illicit burden, that deception *also* serves blackness by befuddling its very systems of subjugation.

Aesthetic deception is further made visible in how Sophie, over time, grows in scale—signaling an aesthetics of excess that consumes its site of domination. *The Admiration of the Purple Figure* (2013), which appears in *Selling the Shadow*, depicts a figure in the center of the photograph (Figure on page 117). Sophie is wearing Victorian regalia where an opening can be seen at the bases of the gown. The deep purple against the smoky black background engenders an apocalyptic sentiment whereby the cylindrical figures

emerge from the ground to envelop, shroud, and surround Sophie. On closer investigation, Sophie appears to clasp the harness that puts these creatures at bay. The dark background mimics a turbulence, perhaps foreshadowing something brewing in the distance; yet the bright radiation of light gestures to a growing dominance of the purple figure. Under the left-most arm, the bright part of the image vibrates. Above the figure in purple, another set of cylindrical beings circle at the head with a crown. Through both the juxtaposition and blur of domestic labor and Victorian opulence and a gradient radiance between light and dark, *Admiration* holds these contradictions, these dialectics as a collective persona whereby the very line of demarcation between domestication and control are obscured and blurred. The viewer, in this instance, might be left with the question: Do these creatures



FIGURE 1. MARY SIBANDE, *I'M A LADY*, 2009, DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRINT, ON COTTON RAG MATTE PAPER, 90x60 CM/ 35.43x23.62 IN. GALLERY MOMO/ LICENSED BY GALLERY MOMO, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.



## SOPHIE, OVER TIME, GROWS IN SCALE — SIGNALING AN AESTHETICS OF EXCESS THAT CONSUMES ITS SITE OF DOMINATION

grow from within the purple figure or are they parasitic, representing the underbelly of relation? If Sojourner Truth's oratory practice and photographic likeness disrupt a catharsis of capital and pathological blackness through the performative of a figuration, Sibande's use of the domestic-madam relation mobilizes the deception of the madam-domestic troupe to call into question subjectivity reflected in Krotoa the interlocutor.

The spatial dynamics of aesthetic deception are apparent in the work of others presented in *Selling the Shadow*. Drawing on the relationship between spatial and geographical technologies of management (space) and the overlaying of the geometry of the future (time), Torkwase Dyson's contribution to *Selling the Shadow* depicts black survival as aesthetic excess. Dyson is most known for paintings, drawings, and sculptures

that utilize the built and architectural environment, to comment on the ways place and space circulate discourses of inclusion and negation. Using the geometrical form as a site of abstraction, Dyson "uses the language of architecture to produce a visual grammar that rescales and renders legible dominant systems of population control and social engineering."<sup>28</sup> It is these geometrical abstractions and the stories they tell that lead to a productive contribution to a theory of aesthetic deception.

*Anthony Burns (In Plane Site: Fugitive)* visualizes the story of the slave who was known to have hid in the hull of a ship to escape to freedom (Figure 2). Anthony Burns was captured a year later under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Using acrylic, wire, graphite, and plexi-glass, Dyson notes, "This work asks viewers to experience geometric forms—lines, grids, curves, optical

illusions—and light as a way of seeing hidden histories in architectural space."<sup>29</sup> The flat black materials that Dyson uses create a stark contrast against the architectural white of the gallery, forming a visible juxtaposition between the uses of negative and positive space. Returning to Truth's management of her photographic likeness, we are reminded that the *carte-de-visite* as a technology required the management of exposure on light (highlights) and dark (shadow) to render a representation legible. It is here that Truth, through selling the shadow, utilized "the fragile phantom substitute for the presence of persons exercising their freedom of movement" in the photographic plane.<sup>30</sup> Truth utilizes the mechanics of the *carte-de-visite* to undermine the very logics of photographic form, which, in the parlance of Darcy, further mobilized race by making the chemical process of exposing



FIGURE 2. TORKWASE DYSON, *ANTHONY BURNS (IN PLANE SITE: FUGITIVE)*, 2016, ACRYLIC, WIRE, PLEXI, GRAPHITE ON GALLERY WALL, 360 x114 INCHES. GALLERY MOMO, CAPE TOWN/ LICENSED BY GALLERY MOMO, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.



FIGURE 3. TORKWASE DYSON, (DETAIL VIEW) *ANTHONY BURNS (IN PLANE SITE: FUGITIVE)*, 2016. ACRYLIC, WIRE, PLEXI, GRAPHITE ON GALLERY WALL, 360 x114 INCHES. GALLERY MOMO CAPE TOWN/ LICENSED BY GALLERY MOMO, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.

the negative for darker skin tones a challenge.<sup>31</sup> Through a practice of aesthetic deception through timespace, we might read Dyson's installation as a mobilization of the tenants of design through light and dark, negative and positive space, and shape and form to render the illicit and criminal impossibility of an escaped fugitive, Anthony Burns, a tangible possibility. Put differently, the success of Burns's escape requires the mobilization of the geographical landscape of the Antebellum South (space) and the measure of time, illegible and thus legible, for such an escape to be made possible.<sup>32</sup>

The installation mimics the folded contours of a shipping crate, a slaver hull, a garret that is flattened into its two-dimensional plane. If assembled at the conjoining joints and flaps, the viewer can manage an imagined three-dimensional form (e.g. hull,

## THE SUCCESS OF BURNS'S ESCAPE REQUIRES THE MOBILIZATION OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH (SPACE) AND THE MEASURE OF TIME, ILLEGIBLE AND THUS LEGIBLE, FOR SUCH AN ESCAPE TO BE MADE POSSIBLE

garret, crate). It is no surprise that Dyson utilizes the historical figures of Harriet Jacobs and Henry "Box" Brown, two other slaves that escaped from captivity by hiding in plain sight. Upon closer interrogation of *Anthony Burns* one might notice that the flat black spatiality of the installation is a combination of tonal blacks and openings that conjoin around a line drawing (Figure 3). Is this set of lines the figuration of Burns in the hull? Do the reflective surfaces of the plexi-glass that pick up components

of the surrounding landscape suggest the haunting of Burns? Unlike Glenn Ligon's *To Disembark* (1993) series of crate sculptures, to express Henry Brown's experience of shipping himself from the captivity of Richmond to Philadelphia, Dyson's rendition of the hull is a figure on the two-dimensional plane. Suspending normative strategies of sight, Brown crafts a worm-hole into the scaffolding of economic production, where the object literally steals the self.<sup>33</sup> Dyson's work tells these stories

of fugitive movements through the geographical scaffolding of the box, crate, garret and its negotiation with the built environment. The use of architectural techniques renders these objects into abstraction, whereby the viewer literally encounters the holding space, as a flat plane in time. No longer able to hold the object that hides within its confines, these installations use slight of the eye, illusion, the not-quite-true, to formulate a mode of survival and liberation. Holding in suspension

## TO DEFY THE TEMPORAL-SPATIAL LANDSCAPES OF CAPTIVITY IS TO PARTICIPATE IN DECEPTION, WHEREBY THE FIGURE OF THE SLAVE ILLICITLY STEALS THE BODY, TAKES THE BODY, UNMOORS THE BODY, ON THE WAY TO FREEDOM.

even in the absolute dominion of American slavery, this relationship between captivity and enslavement, Dyson uses strategies of architectural drawing, floor and building plans, to render captivity and freedom as contradiction, negation, and deception. These liminal spaces between freedom and captivity that are located on top of one another hold in suspension and defy the temporal and spatial landscapes of captivity. To defy the temporal-spatial landscapes of captivity is to

participate in deception, whereby the figure of the slave illicitly steals the body, takes the body, unmoors the body, on the way to freedom.

This fusion of libidinal and hyper-visible timespace outlines not only a transitional and illusive state, but also mediates between the terms of what is a reliable and unreliable trace, with which strictures of racial management and violence function. Aesthetic deception suspends normative logics of sight and visualizes the sites with which

black subjects—particularly women—construct alternative futures (or futures that are always already here, rather than on the verge of occurring) within current timespace. Mary Sibande's *Sophie* studies present us with archetypes of domesticity, purities of whiteness, and the management of black woman's labor alongside the emancipatory politics of the imagination, while Dyson's work turns to aesthetic deception through abstraction and how the built environment

manages black death and how black lives exceed its management.

### Conclusion: Befuddlements

*Selling the Shadow* utilizes the likes of a range of artists in the African and Black diasporas to arrive at some of the fundamental questions implied in Sojourner Truth's strategic development of her persona and visual likeness. While I have only touched upon two of the works in the show, I would like to suggest we might think of Truth as a diaspora figure and symbol that puts to use aesthetic deception in formulating a persona-figure through her speech and visual orientation. Much like the contexts and enmeshments where Sojourner Truth sells her likeness, Krotoa similarly helps visualize the tenuousness of historical embodiment and its relationship to criminality that simultaneously rewrites the logics of subject formation through that which is delayed, strategically

manipulated, and revealed. Aesthetic deception presents a modality that might hold in suspension the space of pause with which to apprehend the management of the visual and its aesthetic counteraction. I argue, much like the context in which Truth sells her likeness and precisely where black embodiment struggles through illicit criminality (e.g. stealing the body, selling the body), that we might envision liminal spaces where blackness re-writes subject-hood and the figure of the human. Such a liminal space might better be understood as the suspended alterity where blackness baffles and throws into disarray an understanding of aesthetics. I am less concerned with creating a grand narrative of the way in which Truth's legacy might be applied to places outside of the Americas than with thinking about some of the questions her very figure brings forth and what those questions might suggest for other locations. ■

## AESTHETIC DECEPTION PRESENTS A MODALITY THAT MIGHT HOLD IN SUSPENSION THE SPACE OF PAUSE WITH WHICH TO APPREHEND THE MANAGEMENT OF THE VISUAL AND ITS AESTHETIC COUNTERACTION



Endnotes

- <sup>1.</sup> The carte-de-visite, a form of portraiture developed by French inventor André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri in the mid-1850s, utilized a camera with multiple lenses that exposed different portions of a large glass plate.
- <sup>2.</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 199.
- <sup>3.</sup> Painter reminds us there is no clear idea of what Truth said in Akron, particularly because every record and document of the speech comes through a secondary source with a relationship to Truth. Marius Robinson (1851) provided a straightforward report, however Frances Dana Marker Gage in 1863 published a different version of Truth’s speech. The latter has become more widely available while Robinson’s account might be more reliable to historians. For more information, see Painter (1996) 174-175. Additionally, my use of deception is specific and intentional. While I later draw on its ramifications for a gendered body through Jillian Hernandez, these insights are informed by genealogies of Black Study (Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten and Sylvia Wynter) that have previously argued blackness must rewrite the terms of criminality in its varying formations at the very moment of the act of maneuvering the body into a self. The very act of self-curation or self-fashioning, in the logics of white supremacy, requires that the black object/subject participate in acts that are criminal to the absolute dominion of racial slavery to curate and fashion a self, even a mere idea of the self. Deception as it pertains to visual and performative likeness takes stock of this lineage and conjures the implied criminal and illicit modes of “stealing the body” and “fugitive flights” as a significant site of subject formation to the ontology of blackness. For more see: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (March 4, 2003): 257–337.
- <sup>4.</sup> I would like to thank Anya Michelle Wallace for her insightful thoughts that have helped me tease out the uses of Truth’s photographic image and the inability of black women to utilize fakery or aesthetic deception in strategic ways and to their own means.

- <sup>5.</sup> The artists included in *Selling the Shadow* are Coby Kennedy, Cosmo Whyte, Dread Scott, Elizabeth Colomba, Torkwase Dyson, Maurice Mbikayi, Joël Mpah Dooh, and Mary Sibande.
- <sup>6.</sup> I am drawing on Kara Keeling’s use of “common sense” in the context in which black femininities in the cinematic landscape disrupt normative modes of knowing. See *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- <sup>7.</sup> Richard Iton’s use of the fantastic draws on the subversive elements of blackness in modernity and provides the juxtaposition of the underground in which the Other engages the dominant order. Fugitive movement (e.g. stealing away and unconscious resistance) is where Fred Moten makes a case for blackness as conjuring moments in and out of the frame of external “imposed social logic—a moment of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure”. Iton and Moten present the necessary paradoxes of blackness and subjugation that make clear deception. Hernandez’s contemporary formulations fold into discourses of the fantastic and the illicit fugitive, strategic and unconscious modes of resistance and curation by navigating claims to the rational and respectable *gendered* subject. See Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 50, no. 2 (2008): 179; Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3; Jillian Hernandez, “Carnal Teachings: Raunch Aesthetics as Queer Feminist Pedagogies in Yo! Majesty’s Hip Hop Practice,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 88–106; Ibid.
- <sup>8.</sup> I am thinking about the ways Sojourner Truth is made legible as a formative figure in Black and feminist study. I am particularly interested in how contemporary investments in certain depiction of Truth often rely on an overdetermined set of characteristics. This is visible in the contradiction of *Ar’n’t I a Woman*. Frances Dana Gage’s interpretation of Truth’s speech marks this juxtaposition between the performative conventions of abolitionist rhetoric and entrenched white racism that illuminates how a historical record is documented and remembered.
- <sup>9.</sup> Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, 164.

- <sup>10.</sup> Nell Painter, “Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic” in *Gender & History* 2, no. 1 (1990). Painter notes how Southern speech pattern was used to symbolically align with the stronghold of American slavery in the Southern states and with the prerogatives of white abolitionists.
- <sup>11.</sup> Ibid., 128.
- <sup>12.</sup> Gage’s rendition of Truth’s speech is consistently taken up and reproduced in Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies classrooms and texts as a formative example of the intersectional approaches of feminist praxis. I take issue with Gage’s rendition, which is held as true, often without distinguishing the nuances of Truth as symbol.
- <sup>13.</sup> Ibid., 129.
- <sup>14.</sup> Nell Irvin Painter notes Gage’s interest in presenting a more *true* and riveting version of Sojourner Truth after reading “The Libyan Sibyl” by Harriet Beecher Stowe. See Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 164.
- <sup>15.</sup> Uri McMillan, “Mammy-Memory: Staging Joice Heth, or the Curious Phenomenon of the ‘Ancient Negress,’” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22 (2012): 32; Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters : Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Cultural Studies of the United States (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 20–21.
- <sup>16.</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, “Negative Positive Truths,” *Representations* 113 (2011): 16–38, 20.
- <sup>17.</sup> Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 6.
- <sup>18.</sup> The Sophie series was first developed for a solo exhibition in 2009 titled “Long Live the Dead Queen” (2009) about her grandmother, but the character quickly evolved, appearing in different outfits and poses for installations and photographs at exhibitions and art fairs. In 2013, some of the works were displayed on billboards in Johannesburg.

- <sup>19.</sup> Gabeba Baderoon, “The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2014): 175–76.
- <sup>20.</sup> Natasha Distiller and Meg Samuelson, “Denying the Coloured Mother’: Race and Gender in South Africa,” *L’Homme: Eurpoean Review of Feminist History* 16, no. 2 (2005): 31.
- <sup>21.</sup> Ibid., 177-178. These methods found their way in apartheid regimes that sought to divide black households by creating systems of migrant labor, creating single sex townships through dormitory enclaves, and destroying rural economies. See also Elizabeth Elbourne, “Domesticity and Dispossession: British Ideologies of ‘Home’ and the Primitive at Work in the Early Nineteenth-Century Cape,” *Deep Histories: Gender and Colonialism in Southern Africa*, eds. Wendy Woodward, Patricia Hayes, and Gary Minkley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 27-54, 27-28.
- <sup>22.</sup> See “Mary Sibande South African Born 1982,” [www.gallerymomo.com](http://www.gallerymomo.com).
- <sup>23.</sup> Dodd, Alexandra, “Dressed to Thrill: the Victorian Postmodern and Counter-Archival Imaginings in the Work of Mary Sibande,” *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 24, no. 3 (2010): 467-474, 468.
- <sup>24.</sup> Ibid., 467-474, 471.
- <sup>25.</sup> Ibid., 470.
- <sup>26.</sup> Mary Corrigall, “Sartorial Excess in Mary Sibande’s ‘Sophie,’” *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 146.
- <sup>27.</sup> Jillian Hernandez, “The Power of Sexual Aesthetics: Women and Girls Crafting Bodies” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2013), 1-340, 5.
- <sup>28.</sup> See, Torkwase Dyson. “About.” <https://www.torkwasedyson.com/about1>.
- <sup>29.</sup> See, Torkwase Dyson. “Installation.” <https://www.torkwasedyson.com/installation>.

<sup>30.</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, “Negative Positive Truths,” *Representations* 113 (2011): 20.

<sup>31.</sup> Ibid., 22–23. Grigsby offers a substantial argument on the way photography, as a rather rudimentary set of chemical reactions, sacrifices background detail when creating the shadows that are required to make darker skin legible. This points to considerable labor on the part of photographers when producing cartes-de-visite that could even render the skin tone of an African American woman.

<sup>32.</sup> Dyson also draws on the fugitive movements of Harriet Jacobs and Henry Brown to craft her *Fugitive* series. Each story further iterates the subterfuge of time and space, whereby Jacob “hides in plain sight” in the garret of her grandmother’s slave quarters for seven years and Brown ships himself to freedom in a packing crate.

<sup>33.</sup> This line of thinking is indebted to Fred Moten’s concept of stealing the self, through the notion of fugitive movements. See Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 5 (2008); Moten, *In the Break*.



"UNTIL THE QUIET COMES" (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.



# Icons of Catastrophe:

## Diagramming Blackness in *Until the Quiet Comes*

**LAUREN M. CRAMER**

Kahlil Joseph's "Until the Quiet Comes" is a short film about a series of miraculous and catastrophic events. The camera moves gracefully through a dreamy Los Angeles sunset as black children play and, as if it were predestined, die. Then, without warning, bodies begin to move gracefully in reverse while the world around them continues to move forward. Finally, in the dramatic conclusion of the film, a man bleeding from bullet wounds on the ground miraculously rises and begins to dance. He removes his bloodstained shirt and, evidently, the finality of death. Then, he enters a car and drives off into the night. The film moves effortlessly between different settings and times, without giving viewers a sense of direction, but this stunning possibility for change (and even reanimation) does not feel like a traditional happy ending. In fact, as the dancer rides away in a lowrider playfully

leaning to the right, the camera pans to an ambulance parked on the street. It is possible the emergency vehicle arrived in response to the dancer's wounds, but now its red flashing lights illuminate the entire neighborhood with a warning signal. Even as the film fades to black—the editing transition and color that has become cinema's definitive last word—this discontinuous narrative about black bodies remains incomplete and in suspension.

The central conceit of "Until the Quiet Comes" is contradiction. The film subjects viewers to violence that is horrific yet beautifully surreal and to an unending cycle of death and vibrancy. Similarly, we see blackness through the contradictory forces that shape it, boundless possibility and crushing confinement. Instead of coming apart at these formal and thematic fault lines, Joseph's film finds balance between

its oppositional spatiotemporal organizations. As a result, it visualizes the aesthetic possibilities of "holding blackness in suspension." Suspension presents a provocative set of aesthetic possibilities because allowing blackness to float means unmooring it from the histories, policies, and technologies that cohere the notion of blackness, most notably in the realm of representation. Thus, seeing suspension is admittedly complicated. Perhaps fitting of its contradictory style and content, the way "Until the Quiet Comes" renders a seemingly weightless image of blackness is by becoming denser, diagraming blackness's many forms of expression simultaneously and consequently redistributing the forms of knowledge that rely on blackness to establish the humanity, freedom, and value of others. As a result, the suspended aesthetics of Joseph's film not only critique the specious task of representing



FIGURE 1. "UNTIL THE QUIET COMES" (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

## WE SEE BLACKNESS THROUGH THE CONTRADICTIONARY FORCES THAT SHAPE IT: BOUNDLESS POSSIBILITY AND CRUSHING CONFINEMENT

blackness, they disrupt the cultural logics that are sustained—literally grounded—by blackness.

The idea of suspension is evoked in “Until the Quiet Comes” in multiple ways; the term aptly describes Matthew J. Lloyd’s gliding cinematography and literally refers to the motif of water and floating that provides a thematic connection to the discontinuous narrative. These two kinds of suspension are not contradictory, but they explicate the complexity of suspension when its

colloquial and technical definitions are placed side by side. For example, the film opens underwater with shots of bubbles effortlessly gliding to the surface. Like the film’s cinematography, the shots of bubbles are dreamy, ethereal, boundless, and almost immaterial. However, in the next shot red fabric swirls underwater and slowly it becomes clear that it is clothing that belongs to a submerged body. Despite the possibility that the person has drowned, the shot still *feels* quiet

and serene and this small addition to the frame is a reminder that the only reason a body feels weightless underwater is because, technically, suspension occurs when a mass is disbursed through the bulk of a fluid. There is actually nothing weightless or immaterial about suspension; in fact, water and gravity are exerting pressure against each other and the position of the body is a result of being caught in the middle of this tension. This distinction is important because it signals the difference

between the visual effect of suspension (hovering and lightness) and the process that creates suspension (force and pressure). Thus, seeing blackness being held in suspension in “Until the Quiet Comes” begins with identifying the points of tension within the whole, including the places where blackness, which will always exceed the frame, and the representational image, which aspires to absolute visibility, come together.

Fortunately, hip-hop provides a vocabulary for these potential places for suspension because it has been referring to oppositional points as “joints” for decades. Used to describe a good song (which likely includes sampling), a popular place, prison, or a marijuana cigarette, joints refer to the sites where varied things and people come together. Similarly, Spike Lee refers to his films as “joints,” which is an accurate description of the tension between

his film style and the established meanings of blackness in visual culture. In each case, regardless of the appropriateness of their combination, joints are the points of articulation that bring together black bodies and “black cultural traffic” that sustains race relations in the image.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the editing and narrative in Joseph’s film is not traditionally continuous; instead of utilizing traditional cinematic techniques to mask its style or even the cut, the film actually draws attention to transitions between shots and settings using expressive cinematography, semi-diegetic inserts, and jump cuts. Yet, “Until the Quiet Comes” still manages a kind of connectedness by drawing parallels between the film’s real spaces and times and those created by the film’s style. The story takes place in the Nickerson Gardens housing projects in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles and the film translates

## SEEING BLACKNESS BEING HELD IN SUSPENSION ... BEGINS WITH IDENTIFYING THE POINTS OF TENSION



the spatial concerns of the heavily surveilled housing project that limits black bodies' options for mobility aesthetically through the use of formal techniques like tight framing and discontinuous editing that similarly deny characters space. The result is a story about blackness as a particular (restricted) spatial arrangement. The fact that a close-up or a change in screen directions cannot be exclusively linked to blackness affirms the value of attending to the joints, especially those that are already overdetermined like the mediated history of Watts, as the key to understanding the apparent blackness that is the sum of these parts.

The approach this essay is offering to understand blackness being suspended across the film's diegetic and non-diegetic spaces through close reading of the joints mirrors

an architectural practice called diagramming. The film briefly tells the story of two black people, a child and a man, who face the restraining forces of both literal and figurative racialized architectures and the question of suspension asks how these characters, their blackness, and the blackness of the film can float between the meanings that attempt to fix them. Architectural diagrams are similarly seeking detachment and other modes of existence; diagrams are renderings that visualize all of the possible arrangements of a structure, considering how its joints could be alternatively arranged. Of course, borrowing from architectural theory and practice means acknowledging its unique terminology and that includes the architectural definition of suspension, which is the technique of distributing a mass across multiple grounding points. As I have already suggested about holding blackness in suspension, architectural suspension

not only affects the floating object, but also the laws of the world around it. Because mass is actually a measure of an object's gravitational force, when a weighty architecture is suspended it can become "light" because it is technically not subject to the singular pull of gravity. Architecture is therefore offering suspension as a way to defy gravity. Something similar happens when suspension is introduced in the image because our world, that is made knowable through the image and is fundamentally ordered around anti-blackness, would be radically—even catastrophically—reorganized by images of blackness that float.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to speak directly to this essay's methodological intentions. There is a clear disciplinary divide between visual culture studies and architectural theory that I hope to bridge for the specific reason of

shifting attention away from the beautiful and violent imagery in "Until the Quiet Comes" to the beauty and violence in its construction. The former, a representational reading of the film's transgressive moments, like the dancer's reanimation, returns us to familiar concerns about imaging black life on screen (Is this film too violent? Does it represent the black experience?). For example, the dancer's "survival" affirms the value of black lives and is a welcome respite from images of black death; on the other, as we have seen in other films about black strength and resilience, the conclusion could be used to reinforce racist claims about the black body's ability to endure pain or to attest to the strength of white bodies. Suspension disrupts the existing order (racial violence), but the joints formed in its wake can be liberating (pro-black) or devastating (anti-blackness); it should be noted that the results are *unsettling* in



FIGURE 2. THE SÃO PAULO MUSEUM OF ART (LINA BO BARDI, 1968).

## SHIFTING ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE BEAUTIFUL AND VIOLENT IMAGERY IN “UNTIL THE QUIET COMES” TO THE BEAUTY AND VIOLENCE IN ITS CONSTRUCTION

more than one way. Diagramming is a kind of close reading not unlike the methodologies used in visual culture, but because the diagram is an abstract expression of a structure's internal relations and clears space for alternative possibilities, it does the non-representational and speculative work of suspension while anticipating all of the other (liberating or dangerous) ways the joints could be formed. This essay will begin by exploring the joints in Joseph's film, particularly the visual

articulations that the filmmaker borrows from other racialized architectures; then it will consider what it means to use diagrammatic analysis to open up these joints and find alternative pressure points to initiate suspension; finally, it will conclude with a close reading that considers the potentially catastrophic results of placing blackness in suspension, or creating an image of anti-gravitational blackness.

Kahlil Joseph is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker whose surreal imagery, rich

textures, and moody cinematography have appeared in vastly different cultural spaces: on concert stages for thousands of fans at Kendrick Lamar/Kanye West concerts, in advertisements for the designer fashion label Kenzo, at both the Sundance and Toronto International Film festivals, Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art, and on MTV. These varied outlets are examples of the way the filmmaker and his work move between filmic genres and use unexpected influences

from fine art and popular culture to make meaningful alterations to familiar forms. For example, his stylized documentary *Wildcat* (2013) is an all-black Western. Often, he creates these juxtapositions by combining under-theorized genres with iconic imagery. The same is true of “Until the Quiet Comes,” which is a critically acclaimed work and the Special Jury Award for Short Film from the prestigious Sundance Film Festival at the same time it is a music video for an album of the same title by Flying Lotus that features the familiar iconography of hip-hop videos including dancing, inner-city streets, and violence.

Joseph's genre-play is important, because invoking familiar imagery is one way “Until the Quiet Comes” builds a distinctly black architecture. The film brings black bodies together in a historically dangerous place and dictates their ability to move

around in these structures; thus, “Until the Quiet Comes” expresses the logic of racializing assemblages, which Alexander Weheliye explains “represent, among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived.”<sup>2</sup> Like the repeated deployment of certain cinematic forms, the racializing assemblage is responsible for making events appear natural, commonsensical, and even lovely. Watts is not only a geographical location, it is a visual culture of striking images of broken windows and black bodies silhouetted in front of a backdrop of flames. As a result, a shot of a streetlight illuminating the edges of the dancer's bloodied body in “Until the Quiet Comes” fits perfectly and logically into an image repertoire that precedes it by a half century and is inextricable from the history of American photojournalism and television. However, these joints, where familiar formal markers come

together to make the new appear old, are not always stable. These joints can be disarticulated so that the representational weight of Joseph's stylistic and thematic allusions can be rearranged into a black structure that is not brutalizing to black bodies.

Suspension is not an effect of a change in material or social conditions but in methodology, so when “Until the Quiet Comes” utilizes the same technologies and visual styles as other short films and videos, those that have traditionally grounded blackness in the visual realm, it is an example of the effect of the film's diagrammatic process. The diagram is a tool that maps a structure's joints, identifying and superimposing all of the places it could be alternatively oriented while remaining intact. Architect and theorist Peter Eisenman, who has likely contributed more to the theorization of the diagram

## SUSPENSION IS NOT AN EFFECT OF A CHANGE IN MATERIAL OR SOCIAL CONDITIONS BUT IN METHODOLOGY

than any other architect, explains the function of the diagram is synthesizing the structure's past, present, and possible future to reveal its "interiority," which explains the design's fundamental consistencies, its capacity to change, and its material limitations. At any singular point in time and space it would be impossible to see all of these things and appreciate their common denominator; thus, interiority is necessarily unrepresentable.<sup>3</sup> "Until the Quiet Comes" mimics these processes using Lloyd's fluid cinematography to alternatively map the diegetic space while the nonlinear editing creates the diagram's complicated temporality that flattens many times into one image.

As a diagrammatic film, "Until the Quiet Comes" is a combination of hip-hop's adaptive style and an architectural practice. The notion of a hip-hop diagram is particularly

interesting for two reasons: first, it is an image of what blackness has yet to build and second, because revealing the anti-black forces that operate as the interiority of our world could cause irreparable harm to a structure that is (externally) ordered around principles like universal freedom and equality. Blackness is the "absented presence" in the world, meaning it is not simply excluded, it serves its function in the world by being radically outside of it.<sup>4</sup> As a result, censoring images of black exclusion, absence, and pain is not a radical or even counter-visual strategy because dispossessed blackness is the status quo. Diagramming, like black studies, makes a commitment to the absent figure.<sup>5</sup> In lieu of traditional techniques that resist visibility or legibility, the diagrammatic film confronts the representational image by demanding it shows more, suggesting the possible

disarticulation of blackness in the world that devalues it must be initiated from the inside. For example, the film's diagrammatic nonlinear chronology shows us black people enjoying life after we have seen their deaths; unfortunately, that reorientation is incapable of ending the debate about whether or not black lives matter because diagrams do not destroy the structures they analyze, but that diagram does reveal the interior fraudulence of the response "all lives matter" to a culture that presumes to be built on that promise.

The chaos caused by the diagram is an example of suspension because, as Eisenman explains, the diagram hovers in the space between figure/ground, form/function, and sign/signified.<sup>6</sup> Unlike linguistic signs that have an arbitrary relationship to their signified, making it easier to imagine remixing language, architectural signs

are internally "motivated" because they have a material and structural relationship to their signified.<sup>7</sup> For example, a column is an architectural form that is aligned with its function, so it must literally bear the weight of a building.<sup>8</sup> The diagram needs to be the catalyst for un-motivating the sign. Of course, the diagram cannot eliminate the column, as the structure will topple over. Instead, the diagram need to perform the somewhat contradictory work of *un-building*, by allowing architects to rework existing designs and establish spatial relationships that remain vague and open to change.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a diagrammatic methodology is clearing a path to suspending the historically overdetermined image of blackness by rendering all possible iterations of blackness across space and time. Thus, it aids the challenge of conceiving, let alone visualizing, the ontology of blackness outside of the conditions of slavery. As Frank

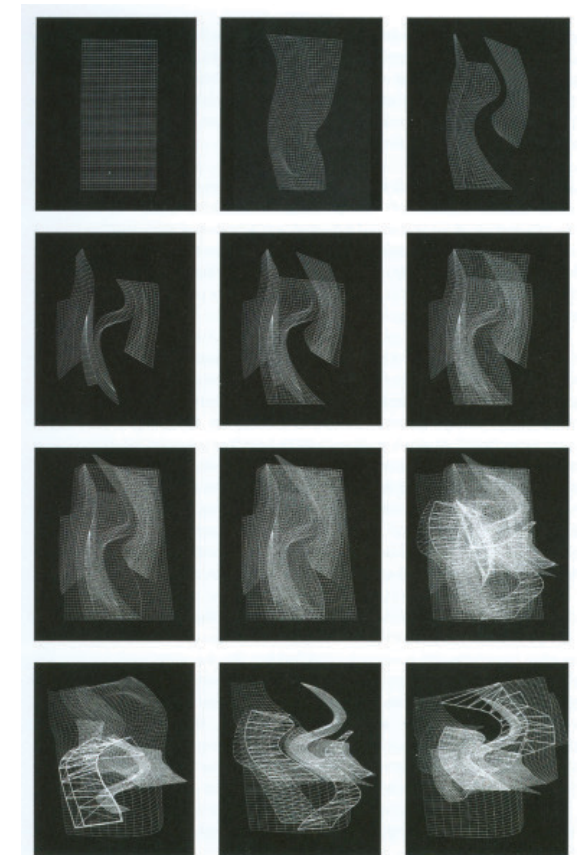


Figure 3. Diagram Concept Images of Staten Island Institute for Arts and Sciences (Peter Eisenman, 1997-98).



# BLACKNESS IS THE “ABSENTED PRESENCE” IN THE WORLD, MEANING IT NOT SIMPLY EXCLUDED, IT SERVES ITS FUNCTION IN THE WORLD BY BEING RADICALLY OUTSIDE OF IT

Wilderson III explains, “the onus is not on the one who posits the Master/Slave dichotomy, but on the one who argues there is a distinction between Slaveness and Blackness. How, when, and where did such a split occur?”<sup>10</sup> The diagram makes that split visible. Moreover, in the process of rendering a mobile and flexible image of blackness, the diagram un-motivates blackness from every structure it supports. The structure may remain erect, but the joints are changed.

Diagramming is a repeating cycle of generation and degeneration because every un-motivated architectural joint will produce another point of articulation; as a result, diagrams exist in a feedback loop with themselves, paradoxically instigating their own destruction.<sup>11</sup> Simply, the diagram is “an icon of catastrophe.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, as the column example explains, a diagrammatic catastrophe that *un-motivates* and *un-builds* the architectural form is not actually destructive. Indeed,

mathematician René Thom developed catastrophe theory to predict and interpret the places where mounting pressure results in overturnings and the beginning of new systems. If suspension is catastrophic to the existing structure, catastrophe theory helps us identify the point when enough equal pressure is created for flotation. For instance, how much can a dead man dance before the meaning of death must change? At any scale, catastrophes “represent abrupt transformation across a

continuous surface,” meaning holding a paper with two hands and gently applying pressure towards the center constitutes a (mini) catastrophe.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the paper will create a ripple, a “cusp,” but it will not tear. Diagramming proliferates potential architectural joints that are like the mounting pressure applied a piece of paper that represents a spatiotemporal plane; thus, the process of diagramming is inherently catastrophic and, not surprisingly, catastrophes are visualized via diagrams.

To summarize: a diagrammatic process brings a joint’s many spatiotemporal organizations onto the same page and attempts to maintain this catastrophic chaos as long as possible before conditions return to equilibrium; in this case, the result is disbursing blackness’s mass across these different joints and suspending it above the things that

burden it. The imagination of black visual culture seems available for a methodology that seeks catastrophe because, as James Baldwin explains, black people can consider these possibilities because they “never had anything to lose.”<sup>14</sup> At every scale, anti-black architectures pull apart the structural joints that value and support black bodies, from the family to diasporic identity. Yet, the violence does not stop there; it is formalized in the new dehumanizing structures. This is no different from the diagrammatic practice being offered in this essay, but Joseph’s film attempts to orient that same violence toward those anti-black architectures and suspend it by refusing to be subsumed by a new rule of law. Specifically, diagramming performs its disruptive function by creating a spatiotemporal crisis. Diagramming produces an excess of forms from alternative times and spaces and allows them to exist at once. As a

result, maintaining the current order becomes untenable and the results are catastrophic until there is a return to the status quo. For example, consider the distress and the struggle to regain power/order in historical moments when the *de jure* and *de facto* definitions of blackness were momentarily held in suspension like during Reconstruction in the U.S. The function of diagramming structures like “Until the Quiet Comes” is to stop making the subjugation of black bodies feel familiar by making it clear that violence is not an unintended side-effect, but a structural necessity in the formation and deformation of anti-black architectures. Yet, the return to equilibrium always threatens to reveal what Saidiya Hartman soberly refers to as “the limits of emancipation.”<sup>15</sup>

The loosely constructed narrative in “Until the Quiet Comes” addresses catastrophic violence against black



FIGURE 4. "UNTIL THE QUIET COMES" (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

bodies in very clear terms, but the film's form is responsible for un-motivating that violence. It is certainly feasible that diagrammatic analysis could be performed on any film by identifying the joints and superimposing the alternative configurations, but Joseph's film is interesting because a case can be made that the film does this work itself by both representing and annotating. In other words, this essay's close reading is simply following along. It is easy to observe the sudden shift in the equilibrium in Joseph's film, in which a miraculous reversal from the constraints of time and space allows a dead man and bodies in an infamous ghetto to move freely forward and backward in time. Catastrophes are rarely subtle. However, the film's diagrammatic analysis of its own joints, which are primarily performed by the gliding cinematography, indicate the tipping point that creates this upheaval

comes about a minute earlier. These moments are like plots on a graph that correspond to the catastrophic fold—before, during, and after—and each of these segments presents its own formal possibilities.

The first section of "Until the Quiet Comes" is about "diagrammatic inevitability," the parameters established by an architecture's interiority that determine its potential for change. In the case of the film, a world that relies on (aestheticized) violence against black bodies limits the possibilities for black life.<sup>16</sup> The film opens underwater with disorienting shots of floating bubbles and a tangle of red fabric, so not until the first scene where viewers have some sense of time and space does the film begin to make note of the alternatives. The first scene in the film begins with a long shot of an empty concrete pool surrounded by palm trees. The camera tracks

forward to reveal a child standing in the pool, staring off into the distance. Then the camera cuts to a low angle shot of the boy and the camera slowly rises as if to prepare for his next move, slowly raising his hand in the shape of a gun and firing his imaginary weapon. The camera cuts to the reverse shot and, inexplicably, an imaginary bullet ricochets off of the curved sides of the pool, hitting four walls before hitting the child. The scene ends with a shot of the boy lying on the concrete as a massive amount of blood pours in a graphic curve out of his body and stains the ground.

The architecture of this early scene requires the boy's death. Not until this scene does the film incorporate continuity editing, like the way the trigger of the gun triggers the reverse shots of the pool's walls surrounding the child. Thus, the death of the black child is a motivated sign in

this (cinematic) world-building and, like the column example, removing his death would pull the film apart. Similarly, what appeared to be a non-diegetic insert of floating red fabric in the opening now makes visual sense through its graphic similarity to the bloody, wet red curve. Visually, the death justifies the film's prelude so that, even retroactively, this film's discontinuities gain coherence via the death of the child. The opening section maps the deterministic architecture of the racialized assemblage where violence against a black body can be anticipated. The irony is that the child cannot participate entirely in this world—he does not even have a real gun. Yet, any violence visualized in the process of building this world always lands on the black body, so that he becomes its (literal) ground.

The beginning of "Until the Quiet Comes" is distinctly "graphic;"

## ANY VIOLENCE VISUALIZED IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING THIS WORLD ALWAYS LANDS ON THE BLACK BODY, SO THAT HE BECOMES ITS (LITERAL) GROUND.

seeing a child die alone on the hard and barren concrete of an empty man-made pool that is slowly being surrounded by red blood in saturated color is boundary pushing even in hip-hop visual culture.<sup>17</sup> The only elided event in the opening is the actual force of the bullet penetrating the black “flesh.” Thus, this part of the filmic diagram makes it clear that even the possible ways black death can be imagined are constrained and determined by the architectures that death supports. Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson explain the impossibility of rendering violence against the black body in the architecture of the Human as “the position of the unthought.”<sup>18</sup> To be clear, this moment of bloodshed is not impossible to visualize because it is too horrific, rather it cannot be expressed as violence because “blackness disarticulates the notion of consent.”<sup>19</sup> A body that is defined as violable cannot be a victim and

violence that is constitutive cannot be considered damage. The purpose of un-motivating the black body is removing it from the architectural function that requires its subjection.

True to Joseph’s referential style, the specific way the horror of the child’s death and the beauty of the setting are combined to disavow the brutality of the moment is a well-worn racial trope that has existed in visual culture since slavery called the pornotrope. Borne out of the physical and sexual domination of slavery, the pornotrope is an anti-black architectural joint that uses erotic imagery to modulate violence against the black body. Consider the aesthetics of the plantation film that incorporates slaves into the architecture of grand homes and their lush landscapes. Sofia Coppola’s recent decision to remake the Southern gothic *The Beguiled* (Siegel, 1971) without any slaves is

a striking example of the pernicious nature of this architectural joint because, as perhaps Coppola failed to realize, the suffering of slaves is the backdrop of the erotics of the genre regardless of their absence on screen. Sexual pleasure creates the space for rapture away from the actual cruelty of transforming a black body into flesh.<sup>20</sup> The pornotrope is therefore the perfect example of an architectural joint. Diagramming this hinge visualizes the spatial relationship between blackness’s form (violation) and function (white delight and affirmation). Moreover, the pornotrope is part of the process of constituting the boundary between bodies and flesh; thus, the pornotrope has a “motivated” relationship to Human architecture. However, a diagram that superimposes the pornotrope’s contradictory impulses reveals its precarious arrangement.



FIGURE 5. “UNTIL THE QUIET COMES” (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.



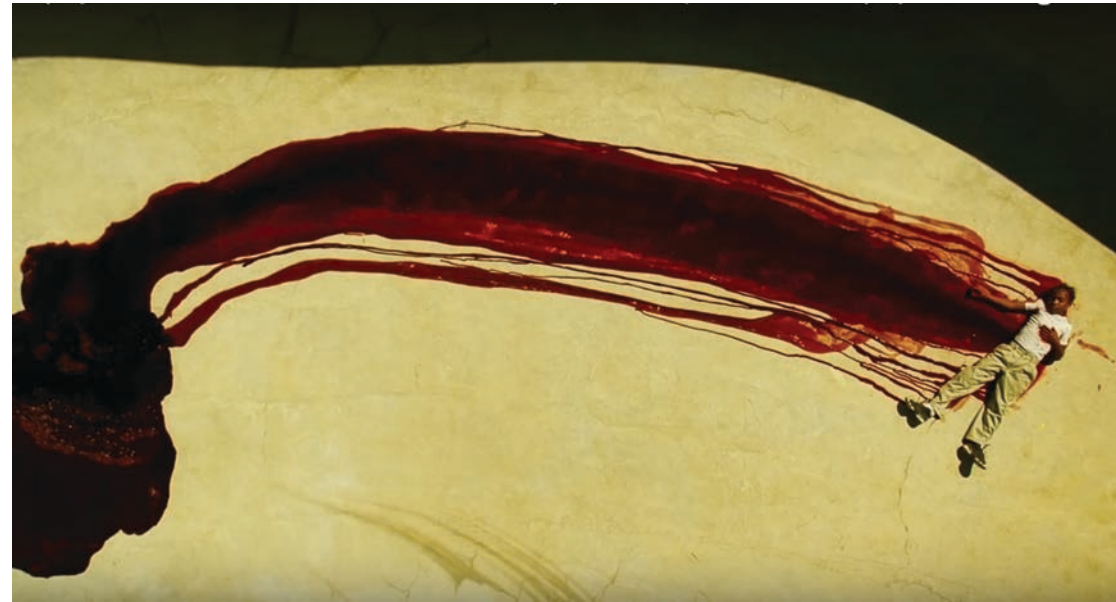


FIGURE 6. "UNTIL THE QUIET COMES" (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

The aerial shot of the boy and the deep-red curve around him is a pivotal point in the film that begins the cusp section because it is an avowed image of the pornotroping joint, a spectacular flattened image of black pain and white pleasure.<sup>21</sup> Typically, the pornotrope operates like a cinematic cutaway, containing the horror of black dehumanization in the narrow space between shots, but Lloyd opts to let the camera linger and slowly glide past the action.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other avant-garde techniques that self-consciously interrupt, glitch, and otherwise trouble form, he uses the camera to lay the joint bare and give equal attention to the horror and beauty. Articulating this point creates an unmanageable affective surplus because this violent eroticism exceeds the boundaries of "normal" sexuality. The shot's rich, painterly appearance makes visible the folding of black pain into the aestheticization of the image and, ultimately, the

impossible amount of blood functions as a taboo sexual climax. There is simply no rapture or available space to travel away from that unnatural conflation. Like the example of the pressure applied to a sheet of paper, at any point that flatness that is moving in two different directions will succumb to a catastrophic ripple. Yet, the paper will not tear.

As if to purposely emphasize the durability of racializing architecture, the final section of the film following the cusp reveals a cinematic space that feels largely intact as the film continues to reference real life spaces captured on 35mm film. Ultimately, the history of black visual culture will not be jettisoned so easily. The appearance of a curve painted in the blood of a black child visualizes the joint where the violent interiority of anti-black architecture pushed against the seamless surface of the racialized

assemblage and the latter finally gave way. This *détournement* expresses the need for an insurgent black architecture working on the inside. When blackness is suspended at the joint between form (eroticization) and function (dehumanization), other architectural configurations becomes conceivable—specifically, a world where black bodies are not inextricably linked to the structural function of being whiteness's oppositional ground. More simply, the unspeakable catastrophe in the film is not (exclusively) the repeating image of black death. Instead, the film stages a catastrophe by removing blackness from the anti-black architectures that order the world and allowing blackness to emphatically exist on the other side of the catastrophic cusp.

The cusp of "Until the Quiet Comes" visualizes a space that black artists and thinkers often muse about, where

black "is" and "ain't," what this essay has called suspension.<sup>23</sup> The first shot after the cusp, follows a police helicopter flying overhead while the words "Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles" appear across the bottom of the screen. After the catastrophe, the boy who died in the opening of the film is alive. Thus, the first evidence of the upended world of the film not only brings the child back to life, it positions the police as the beginning of violence, not as a response to it. Consequently, surveillance and housing projects are un-motivated, meaning they are no longer framed as essential, unchangeable support structures. They could in fact operate differently. In the next shot, two children, including the boy, are playing on a football field. Then the camera tracks past more lighthearted moments: a man cleaning a car; another young man offering the previously dead child a snack; and, poignantly, a

group of boys with boards strapped to their backs pretending to fly. The seemingly uneventful moments in the middle of the film are clearly distinct from the deterministic violence that appears normal in the opening. Thus, the mundane events, when black bodies are safe, are tragically evidence of suspension.

Using frequent images of water and floating and its fluid cinematography, the final portion of “Until the Quiet Comes” uses thematic and aesthetic suspension to express the malleability of blackness once it is suspended across the film’s complex spatiotemporal organization. The last time we see the boy he is alive, proudly walking home after playing, but after this point the film quickly accumulates more dead bodies. It is important that the film ends this way because all catastrophic diagrams return to equilibrium. There is a man wearing a red jacket

who we see lying on the ground in the housing projects’ courtyard and later submerged in the water. Then there is a different body lying in the courtyard, performed by the dancer Storyboard P. He wears a black shirt and, like the man in red, we have seen him before giving the young boy a snack and mingling with neighbors. In fact, his prone body appeared even earlier in the film in a very quick graphic match after the boy was struck by the imaginary bullet. At this point the film has included three bodies and folded them into multiple temporal ripples as if the film momentarily folded in on itself. As a result, the reoccurring images are like diagrammatic superimpositions that bring a form’s past and future into close proximity.

Storyboard P’s character performs the most dramatic visualization of the new black architecture formed in the wake of catastrophe and its

formal potentialities. The sequence begins with the dancer’s character lying on the ground. Suddenly, the body slowly begins to move to the beat of the music. He rises from the ground and starts to dance in a style that combines fluid, balletic motion and the inhuman postures of a dance style known as “animation.” Animation, both a hip-hop dance style and the work of cartoonists, are examples of diagramming. The architect and theorist Mark Rakatansky argues American illustrator Chuck Jones, best known for his contributions to the *Looney Tunes*, created diagrammatic characters capable of incredible transformation organized around the character’s specific interiority. For example, even when Bugs Bunny impersonates his adversaries, he does so with his own distinct spatiality.<sup>24</sup> This digression is important in the context of Storyboard P’s performance because it is a reminder

that diagramming is still a material concern. The different disciplinary traditions that inform this essay have repeated this point: physics and architecture tell us that suspension does not eliminate an object’s mass; Eisenman distinguishes between unmotivating and demolishing; Thom’s catastrophic diagrams always return to equilibrium; and, in clearest terms, Hartman warns there are limits to emancipation. Thus, when Storyboard P maintains the bodily posture he had when he was a corpse throughout the dance, by keeping his eyes closed and leading with his chest so that his limbs follow but his body appears only loosely connected, he is transforming while expressing his character’s interiority. The effect of Storyboard P’s performance is actually of a dead man dancing, not a man coming back to life. In the final moments of Joseph’s film, the dead man dances away from the courtyard, where he laid dying, to the parking

lot, and finally contorts his body to fit through the window of a waiting car that rides off into the night. Again, viewers should be reluctant to read the end of the film as an escape. Instead, segmenting the film as this close reading has done shows that even with a catastrophe in the middle, the death of the child and the death of the dancer are mirror images. Thus, the car waiting to give an un-dead friend a ride is a vehicle for the film’s circularity.

The restraint of the film’s conclusion does not mitigate its significance. The dancer may not be alive, but he can dance after death and those implications are far reaching. First, the postmortem performance occurs without the help of any cinematographic tricks or digital tools. As a result, operating beyond the diegesis, the dance reorganizes the analog film’s claims to indexicality. Second, at stake in

**LLOYD ... USES  
THE CAMERA TO  
LAY THE JOINT  
BARE AND  
GIVE EQUAL  
ATTENTION TO  
THE HORROR  
AND BEAUTY**



FIGURE 7. "UNTIL THE QUIET COMES" (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, 2013, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS), FRAME GRAB.

this pessimistic reading is ensuring that the unrepresentable violence that is the structure's architectural interiority is not recouped to prove the violability of the black body or to buttress "white flights of fantasy," the belief that the dancer's capacity for survival guarantees full-Humans' ability to escape death or any other obstacle.<sup>25</sup> In other words, precisely because the dancer is still dead his dance cannot be used to affirm anyone else's life. Finally, because the balletic and tragic dance is yet another example of the pornotrope laid bare, it does not function traditionally. In this case, the dancer is the one who has the opportunity for rapture and by simply leaving he inverts his "impotentiality." As Weheliye explains, "impotentiality, once actualized, kindles the originary potentiality that rests in the slave thing, which is nothing other than 'a potential for pornotropeing.'"<sup>26</sup> This suggests an important, and ethical,

part of a diagrammatic practice means maintaining suspension, even between negative outcomes. Other objects of black visual culture that proclaim the beauty of black bodies and spaces but fail to reorient the structures that rely on devaluing blackness illustrate the problem of lifting up blackness and forgetting to attend to the joints.

The diagram leads toward abstraction, but before concluding it is impossible to discuss Watts and catastrophe theory without considering the events that occurred almost a half century earlier in the same place Joseph's film takes place. In fact, catastrophe theory has been used to describe the social tensions that lead to upheavals just like the Watts Riots and later the L.A. Riots. A catastrophic diagram could not anticipate when the force of violent encounters between the black community and police would

create a catastrophic joint, which we know now was a mundane traffic stop, but these diagrams visualize the mounting pressure that began as early as the migration of black Americans to the West Coast decades before. The purpose of tracing the diagrammatic analysis of violence in "Until the Quiet Comes" is to consider what it means when the events of that summer are described as catastrophic by asking what that insurgent action was catastrophic to. Guy Debord argues riots occur when people need to distance themselves from their status as commodities. Specifically, "people who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities."<sup>27</sup> In other words, anti-black architecture pulls black bodies and commodities into the same commensurable plane so that it would be too simplistic to claim the Watt riots were catastrophic because of the destruction of property.

Instead, as Debord suggests, they were catastrophic to the racist logic that aligns black bodies and things.

After the riots the joints that previously connected the black community through violence and systematic discrimination became expressions of the creativity of black power.<sup>28</sup> Los Angeles's artistic community was vibrant in the decades before the riots and the focus on community action manifested itself in aesthetic practices and forms that emphasized the ensemble. Perhaps the most famous examples of this architectural assemblage are the Watts Towers. The construction of the Watts Towers preceded the riots; they were built between 1921 and 1955 by Simon Rodia, an immigrant from Italy. However, the three towers covered in tiles, glass, and other debris have become an important expression of black Los



## OTHER OBJECTS OF BLACK VISUAL CULTURE THAT PROCLAIM THE BEAUTY OF BLACK BODIES AND SPACES BUT FAIL TO REORIENT THE STRUCTURES THAT RELY ON DEVALUING BLACKNESS ILLUSTRATE THE PROBLEM OF LIFTING UP BLACKNESS AND FORGETTING TO ATTEND TO THE JOINTS.

Angeles and the arts movement.<sup>29</sup> Chronologically, the towers cannot be a response to the riots, but piled high, the towers superimpose the items' past and future and, through Rodia's improvisational style, the structures are non-deterministic and non-narrative.<sup>30</sup> As a result, they do effectively diagram the racial resonance and internal spatial relations of a community likened to junk and thus the catastrophic events that occur when those people demand their value and humanity. It

is therefore not surprising that the Watts Towers can then, retroactively, become a symbol of L.A.'s black expressive culture. The purpose of thinking about the looting of electronics by people who did not have working electricity and the junk art practice emerging in Los Angeles in the years surrounding the riots alongside a hip-hop film like "Until the Quiet Comes" is to note the repeated diagrammatic impulses that reject the inevitability of black subjection through the rearticulation of black joints. By

making direct reference to the Watts Riots, "Until the Quiet Comes" is a mediation on violence that can be "hard to look at," and although that remains true throughout the film, an architectural sleight of hand shifts that unrepresentable violence from black bodies to anti-blackness. ■

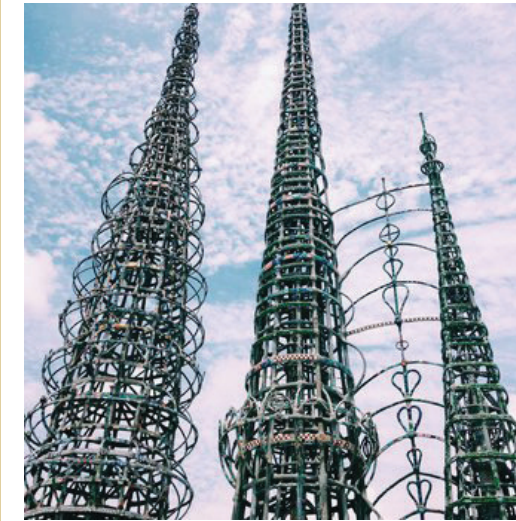


FIGURE 8. THE WATTS TOWERS (SIMON RODIA, 1921-55).



FIGURE 9. THE WATTS TOWERS (SIMON RODIA, 1921-55).

Endnotes

- <sup>1.</sup> Harry Justin Elam and Kennell A. Jackson, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
- <sup>2.</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.
- <sup>3.</sup> Peter Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
- <sup>4.</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxv.
- <sup>5.</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Christina Sharpe, “Black Studies: In the Wake,” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 59–69, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413688>.
- <sup>6.</sup> Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries*; Peter Eisenman, “Diagram: An Original Scene of Writing,” in *Diagram Diaries* (New York, NY: Universe, 1999), 27–35.
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- <sup>8.</sup> Eisenman, “Diagrams of Interiority,” 50.
- <sup>9.</sup> Greg Lynn, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays*, Books-by-Architects (Bruxelles: La Lettre volée, 1998), 41; Anthony Vidler, “Diagrams of Diagrams: Architectural Abstraction and Modern Representation,” *Representations*, no. 72 (2000): 11.
- <sup>10.</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

- <sup>11.</sup> Eisenman, “Diagram: An Original Scene of Writing.”
- <sup>12.</sup> Anthony Vidler, “What Is a Diagram Anyway?,” in *Peter Eisenman: Feints*, ed. Silvio Cassarà and Peter Eisenman (Milano: Skira, 2006), 26.
- <sup>13.</sup> Lynn, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, 125.
- <sup>14.</sup> James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992), 217. It would be remiss to not mention that then-candidate Donald J. Trump, in a surprising display of Afro-pessimism, asked black voters “what the hell do you have to lose?” during a rally in the Spring of 2016.
- <sup>15.</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.
- <sup>16.</sup> Eugenie Brinkema, “Violence and the Diagram; Or, The Human Centipede,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 24, no. 2 (2016): 91.
- <sup>17.</sup> Ibid., 87.
- <sup>18.</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201.
- <sup>19.</sup> Ibid., 186.
- <sup>20.</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64, doi:10.2307/464747; Alexander G. Weheliye, “Pornotropes,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 65–81, doi:10.1177/1470412907087202.
- <sup>21.</sup> Weheliye, “Pornotropes,” 71. Spillers uses this term to describe the sexual component of black dehumanization that she understands in gendered terms, but when Alexander Weheliye adopts the term he argues it is not necessarily erotic. He expands the concept to describe the simultaneous and opposing tension of subjugation and rapture, which describes

pleasure or, in spatial terms, deliverance.

<sup>22</sup>. Weheliye, “Pornotropes.”

<sup>23</sup>. Marlon Riggs, *Black Is... Black Ain't* (Independent Television Service (ITVS), 1994).

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<sup>26</sup>. Weheliye, “Pornotropes,” 77.

<sup>27</sup>. Guy Debord, “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,” *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 10 (March 1966), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decline.html>.

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<sup>29</sup>. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup>. Ian Buchanan and Gregg Lambert, eds., “To See with the Mind and Think through the Eye: Deleuze, Folding Architecture, and Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers,” in *Deleuze and Space*, transf. to digit. pr, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008), 53.



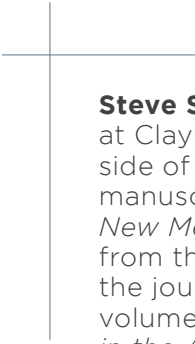
# Contributors

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# Acknowledgements

This research project on aesthetics of suspension, which will continue beyond this issue (look at [www.liquidblackness.com](http://www.liquidblackness.com) for updates) began with the screening and symposium “Holding Blackness in Suspension: The Films of Kahlil Joseph” which took place on October 6-7, 2016. The event began with an intense and widely attended artist talk by Kahlil Joseph moderated by Lauren M. Cramer and Alessandra Raengo on Thursday October 6, 2016 and continued the next day with a Symposium featuring talks by Regina Bradley (Armstrong State University), Derek Conrad Murray (University of California, Santa Cruz), Lauren M. Cramer (Pace University), Gregory Zinman (Georgia Institute of Technology) and Kara Keeling (University of Southern California), facilitated by Jenny Gunn and Daren Fowler. It concluded with a show of two video installations by Shady Patterson summarizing part of the intellectual history of the *liquid blackness* group at Gallery 72 and a screening of her documentary on the 2015 Symposium on “The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble.”

*The call for papers for this issue was written with contributions from Lauren M. Cramer, Jenny Gunn, Daren Fowler, Charleen Wilcox, Shady Patterson, and John Roberts and the event was organized thanks to the additional hard work of Brooke Sonenreich and Cameron Hubbard.*

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