

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is positioned in the center-left of the frame, looking out over a cityscape at sunset. The sun is a large, bright, glowing orb in the upper center, casting a warm, golden light across the sky and creating a lens flare effect. The city below is silhouetted against the bright sky, with various buildings and a tall communication tower visible. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# *liquid blackness*

Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness

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# *liquid blackness*

Black Ontology and the  
Love of Blackness

**VOLUME 3, ISSUE 6**  
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*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



# Introduction

**ALESSANDRA RAENGO**

The present issue—Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness—was conceived as the culmination of a research project on Arthur Jafa's 2013 essay film *Dreams are colder than Death*. Jafa is a crucial voice in a lineage of artists and filmmakers particularly concerned with the creation of a black aesthetics that *liquid blackness* has been studying since its inception in the fall of 2013 when we co-hosted, with Matthew Bernstein, chair of the Department of Film and Media Studies at Emory University, the "L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black American Cinema" film series. In that context, we examined Jafa's groundbreaking work as the acclaimed cinematographer of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a film where he experimented with the possibility of instituting a specifically black aesthetic inspired by the cadence and the form of free jazz and black vocal intonation—what he

calls a "black visual intonation."<sup>1</sup> We encountered his work again as the cinematographer of John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), which we screened in the fall of 2014 as part of our Black Audio Film Collective Film and Speakers Series.

But there is another important conceptual connection with recent *liquid blackness* projects. For years Arthur Jafa has been an avid student of Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977), which was the focus of an experimental collective research project that *liquid blackness* named the Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble and that was conducted in 2015. Clark's film has been essential to Jafa's own formulation of a black visual aesthetics because of its visionary qualities and its unwavering commitment to experimenting with the possibility of translating the improvisational logic of free jazz into film form and attempting to confer to



the image the malleability of sound, the intensity of a live performance, and the complex dynamics of group creation and interaction.<sup>2</sup>

As I wrote in the journal issue featuring our research on the film, in his work, Clark leverages the adventurous expansiveness of free jazz to connect, and therefore *pass through*, a variety of seemingly incongruous or remote spaces, making adjacent, for example, sites of artistic improvisation and sites of systemic oppression, spaces of addiction and spaces of healing, the US racial scene and Third World revolutionary struggles. In this way, and by uninhibitedly transitioning between archival footage, re-enactments and original footage, *Passing Through* renders the multiple ways in which blackness exists in space and time, simultaneously indexing rootedness and displacement,



FIGURE 1  
OPENING SEQUENCE  
*PASSING THROUGH* (DIRECTED BY LARRY CLARK, 1977), FRAME GRAB.

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originarity and alienation. From our study of this film we learned a greater attention to issues of sensitometry, pace, and rhythm, but also to the idea of film motion and editing patterns that function fluidly and demand to be followed rather than fixated and analyzed.

*Dreams* features similar “passages,” i.e. aesthetically and formally audacious but politically necessary visual transitions pioneered by Clark’s film, toward the realization of a visual environment that revels in what Jafa described as the “dark matter of black being.”<sup>3</sup>

Concurrent with his filmmaking practice, Jafa has also worked as a conceptual artist and in his installation practice, he has been relentlessly researching the possibility of creating an *authentically black visual aesthetics*, which he models after the centrality of black music in American culture



FIGURE 2  
SPACES OF RESISTANCE: THE CLUB.  
*PASSING THROUGH* (DIRECTED BY LARRY CLARK, 1977), FRAME GRAB.

**“*DREAMS*...FEATURE[S] SIMILAR ‘PASSAGES,’ I.E.  
AESTHETICALLY AND FORMALLY AUDACIOUS BUT  
POLITICALLY NECESSARY VISUAL TRANSITIONS PIONEERED  
BY CLARK’S FILM.”**

and life. Jafa is inspired in this quest by the way black musicians focused their collective genius toward operating within very specific constraints. Similarly, a black visual aesthetics for Jafa might become available when every technological, aesthetic, and methodological protocol used by dominant cinema is challenged and adapted to the specific socio-cultural conditions of American black life. Since the late 1990s, his work, research, and writing have focused on this possibility.

In *Dreams* specifically one is struck by the filmmaker's particular use of formal techniques to say something about the state of blackness in the afterlife of slavery. Jafa deploys a variety of formal techniques including slow motion, superimposition, reverse motion photography, image overexposure, the long take, the voiceover, and the close-up to create opportunities for the black body to signify more than the trappings of the flesh so achingly described in the personal

stories shared by some of the film's featured speakers. Jafa's use of these formal techniques, especially the close-up, also produces a kind of disorientation among viewers that is key to opening such a possibility.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of focusing on *Dreams are colder than Death*, therefore, is the culmination of both long term and short term research projects, including our continued preoccupation with pursuing expansive expressive possibilities for blackness and, beginning

## Introduction

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specifically with this film, our study of philosophical and aesthetic approaches to the value, meaning, and ontological standing of black lives as articulated through the scholarly literature on Afro-Pessimism in the context of the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.<sup>5</sup>

*Dreams are colder than Death* begins as a reflection on the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech but quickly transforms

into a meditation on the ontology of blackness and its relationship to life, death, and the concept of the human in the context of the afterlife of slavery. The film weaves together interviews with African-American scholars and intellectuals, such as Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Nicole Fleetwood; filmmaker Charles Burnett, ex-Black Panther and professor Kathleen Cleaver, musicians

Flying Lotus and Melvin Gibbs, and visual artists Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu, among others, and an array of lyrical images of people, water, deep space, and more. It is a stunning-looking film: inspired, mournful, and uncompromising in demanding a reckoning with the finality of black death. The film was produced and edited by Kahlil Joseph whose work is equally committed to black beauty and has

**"CAN BLACK PEOPLE BE LOVED?" [FRED MOTEN] ASKS,  
"NOT DESIRED, NOT WANTED, NOT ACQUIRED, NOT  
LUSTED AFTER...CAN BLACKNESS BE LOVED?"**

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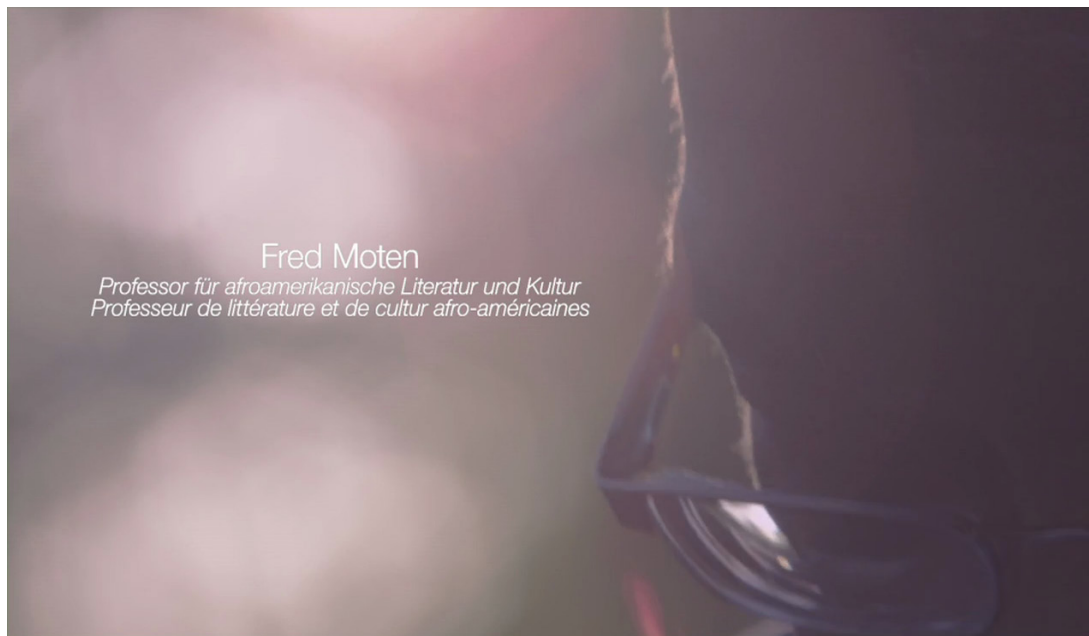


FIGURE 3  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH*  
(DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

been the subject of the following *liquid blackness* research project, which included a screening and symposium titled “Holding Blackness in Suspension: The Films of Kahlil Joseph” that we hosted at Georgia State University in October 2016.

These are the reasons that led me to suggest *Dreams* as the centerpiece for the special event for the Host committee I co-chaired with Matthew Bernstein for the annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies that took place in Atlanta in the spring of 2016. Specifically, I proposed a screening and discussion of the essay film at Atlanta’s Center for Civil and Human Rights in order to create a productive tension with the values and attitude of that specific location. The Center offers an immersive, multi-mediatic and interactive environment, and a rich archive documenting the Civil Rights Movement within its historic media

### **“WHAT IS THE ONTOLOGY OF BLACK LIVES, WHEN THEY ARE SO THOROUGHLY WRAPPED IN AN ATMOSPHERIC ANTI-BLACKNESS?”**

landscape. Through its layout and architectural design, it promotes a view of Martin Luther King Jr. as a leader who continuously expanded his commitment, ultimately shifting from an investment in domestic civil rights to global human rights. This narrative bolsters the Center’s mission to foster personal investment in the rights of every human being. By putting *Dreams* in conversation with the Civil Rights and Human Rights Galleries, we were hoping that the screening, panel discussion, and a visit to the Center might invite a retroactive reflection on MLK’s dream of black love and equality as sustaining a specific vision of what blackness is. In broader historical terms, it invited us to pause and wonder: under what circumstances has the question of the ontology of blackness become available as a way to reassess the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech?

Through the words of Fred Moten, *Dreams* offers a possible answer by reflecting on the possibility to love black people—“Can black people be loved?” he asks, “not desired, not wanted, not acquired, not lusted after...Can blackness be loved?”—as well as what it might mean to commit to blackness against fantasies of flight. It is for this reason that the event was called, “Can Blackness be Loved?”

As a multiracial research group that has focused on issues of blackness and aesthetics with particular attention to modes of artistic, creative, and affective liquidity in the visual arts of the black diaspora, *liquid blackness* is strongly invested in the implications of this question. Through a close engagement with *Dreams are colder than Death*, in the context of some recurring concerns of the group, such as ideas of aesthetic liquidity, experimentations

with sensitometry, black bodies in motion, and in particular the “Black Visual Intonation” Jafa has theorized since his work with Julie Dash on *Daughters of the Dust*, we wrote a call for papers which collected a series of observations collectively made on the film.<sup>6</sup>

They are:

Epistemology:

- “I *know* it”: blackness and knowledge; blackness and belief
- Flesh memory and phantom limbs: role of embodiment in re-membering, mourning, and empathizing; embodiment as both conduit and limit to empathy and grief
- The aim, object, and practice of black studies
- Types of knowledge that blackness affords and for whom?



FIGURE 4  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH*  
(DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

# **“ONE CANNOT ASK A QUESTION ABOUT THE LONGEVITY OF THE HOPES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT BEFORE FIRST ADDRESSING THE ONTOLOGICAL PARADOX OF BLACK LIVES.”**

### Ontology:

- Flesh and fungibility: availability “in the flesh” (Hortense Spillers)
- Heavy presence/heavy nonpresence (Kara Walker)
- Blackness and thingness
- Blackness and personhood
- The personal and the cosmic

### Necropolitics:

- Fragility of black freedom
- Finality of death
- Intimacy with death
- Self-possession, self-determination, and the critique of ownership

### Ethics:

- Loving blackness/ loving black people
- Black love
- Grief and grievability: shareability of black death/ shareability of black mourning
- Commitment to blackness against fantasies of flight



### Form and Affect:

- Chiasm and schism: figures of reversibility, reciprocity, and dividedness
- Between the cosmic and the minute; the metaphysical and the everyday
- Suspended motion: aesthetics of floating, slowness, and dis-alignment
- Making space: the void, the empty, the still
- Rendering flesh: aural *puncta* and sonic textures
- Liquidity and flow
- Blackness and the generation of energy
- Blackness as jurisgenerative process: law making and law breaking; invention and deconstruction; form and freedom



FIGURE 5  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH*  
(DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

## Introduction

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The fundamental question *Dreams* poses and that we set out to investigate concerns 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>7</sup>

By straddling the line between Afro-Pessimism and Optimism, as I argue in an essay for *Black Camera* which I wrote just before this introduction, the film investigates the ontological paradox of black lives, insofar as they are lives lived in an essential intimacy with death—as Saidiya Hartman explains in the film, in conjunction with an image of a mother and three girls absorbed in their own thoughts, walking in slow motion toward the camera (figure 5). Black lives are lives whose expendability is “necessary” for the sustenance

of our current democracy and the maintenance of white safety.<sup>8</sup>

A few minutes into the film a voice overlaid to cosmological images, including an image of a Black Star Child, explains that *Dreams* began as an assessment of “the roles and ambitions of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States,” fifty years after Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech, yet in the process “the filmmakers discovered even a more fundamental set of questions: What is the concept of blackness? Where did it come from? And what does it mean for people of color living in America today?” In other words, the film realizes how one cannot ask a question about the longevity of the hopes of the Civil Rights movement before first addressing the ontological paradox of black lives as well as the metaphysical reach of the question posed by this same paradox. “What is inadequate to blackness

is already given ontologies,” writes Fred Moten, “The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence.”<sup>9</sup>

Several fundamental aesthetic choices in *Dreams* set the stage for a searching investigation of the ontological paradox of black lives. First, the strategic decision to separate the visual and sonic tracks and record the interviews separately from the images. This disjunction afforded the interviewees a greater freedom of expression by disrupting the surveillance image at a very basic level. Second, the sensitive cinematography that frames both speakers and a host of unnamed black people within warm lights and lush natural color also strategically weaponizes overexposure, whereby close-ups of faces are made unreadable by sunlight behind them, and goes against the visual



FIGURE 6  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH*  
(DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

and sonic integration the black filmic body is traditionally forced to perform.<sup>10</sup> Jafa introduces nearly all of the speakers in his film through some combination of the techniques mentioned above that obscure them in some way, and also open up new possibilities for how viewers both see and hear them. We may point to numerous examples, such as Jafa's treatment of the appearances of filmmaker Charles Burnett who is seen in the film obliquely, often in profile through a close-up or medium shot whereby his face becomes obscured by the rays of a setting sun, or hidden by visible hexagons of pinkish light produced by the glare of the camera's lens, or even darkened completely by shadows. At other times, we only see the back of his neck and head as we listen to his voiceover. This is also how the artist Wangechi Mutu first appears in the film, through a close-up of the back of her head and nape of her neck as

# “*DREAMS* HOLDS IN BALANCE THE RECOGNITION OF THE LINGERING PRESENCE OF SLAVERY WITH THE LIFE-GIVING FORCE AND COSMIC REACH OF BLACKNESS.”

we hear her begin to speak. These shots recall the artist Lyle Ashton Harris's *The Chocolate Portraits*, which consist of dual portraits of individuals that include close-ups of the backs of their heads and necks. As with Harris's project, the need to reconsider harmful perceptions of black bodies in particular, and blackness more broadly, by using concealment as a tool comes through in Jafa's film, especially through his treatment of the featured speakers.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, odd camera angles which

linger in “whatever” spaces, such as the distance between two empty couches (as in figure on pg. 38) function not to narrate, describe, or assert, but simply to connect and therefore offer a way toward the possibility of black care. These aesthetic and stylistic choices are vital to the invention of a different environment, a different “atmosphere,” one in which, for example, people can freely express what they know and believe.

One of the challenges of the #BLM movement has been how to transition from the “particular universal” of the queer identities of #BlackLivesMatter's founders to the capaciously collective (“All Black Lives Matter” claims their website) and, by extension “all people.”<sup>12</sup> The film attempts this transition through a number of *passages* that connect scholars' voiceovers with images of beautiful, intense, and yet unnamed black people, shot within a lush and warm cinematography

as well as offering images of galaxies, planets, and deep space.

Three such passages in particular stand out. The film opens with a quasi-still and fairly flat image of a young man slowly turning his head right to left while also making a knowing eye-contact with the camera. Hortense Spillers's "I know that" is the first line in the film, immediately followed by the echoing voice of Martin Luther King Jr. heard saying "I have a dream." Spillers, however, continues in a different direction and her words are overlaid on images of a backward movement: we see young men spiraling and somersaulting out (instead of jumping into) a swimming pool in slow motion, their bodies remaining temporarily suspended in mid-air: "We are going to lose this gift of black culture unless we are careful," she elaborates over an exchange we don't hear between

a young mother and her sweetly pouting daughter seen in slow motion walking uphill toward the camera (figure 5). The way these lines of withheld dialog write themselves on their faces is essential to showing the profound connection between them, as well as their connection to what Spillers is saying, which the film takes as a model of a series of other, more theoretical connections it establishes through these passages. The second comes quickly after, when Spillers's voice continues: "this gift that is given to people who don't have a prayer." Her voice screeches for emphasis around the word "prayer" which is cued to the frozen close up of one of the young men in the pool looking intensely at the camera (figure on page 31).

Later, while she explains her concept of the flesh, Spillers states: "We were available in the flesh to the slave master. Immediate; hands on," words

that are juxtaposed to a slow-motion image of a woman crossing the street. "I can pluck your nappy head from wherever it is. Bang!" Spillers continues. The sound of her "Bang!" is cued to the image of the same woman, who now turns in slow motion toward the camera with a puzzled and inquisitive look, as if she was reacting to Spillers' mimicked slap (figure 6).

Through the aesthetic "liquidity" engendered by these "passages" as well as the facility with which it travels across scale—from the molecular to the celestial—*Dreams* holds in balance the recognition of the lingering presence of slavery with the life-giving force and cosmic reach of blackness. In other words, it becomes possible for black life and bodies to traverse great distances and become imbued with a profound sense of weight and matter that is beyond time and history. The



FIGURE 7  
LONG-EXPOSURE PHOTOGRAPHY REMINISCENT OF HART LEROY BIBBS' *MANIFESTO OPTKSORPTION*, 1977.  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

black body becomes re-centered in the cosmos, not only through the inclusion of the cosmological imagery but also through the intense, steady whirring—almost sucking—sound that comes through at certain moments in the film and that invokes an artistic representation of the vastness of space. For example, this sound competes with the beginning of Hortense Spillers's voiceover near the film's end as she discusses the devastating loss of her niece and subsequently her sister. Before it fades away, this sound provides an aural connection to the cosmological imagery preceding Spillers's appearance, and suggests the extension of black bodies, black suffering, black love, and blackness more generally into the cosmos.<sup>13</sup> Through these passages the film performs what Jared Sexton describes as a series of conceptual moves "from the empirical to the structural or, more

precisely, from the experiential to the political ontological.”<sup>14</sup>

In her catalog essay for Arthur Jafa’s *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, a 7-minute video on view at Gavin Brown’s enterprise in New York City, a video that Jafa shared with us in Atlanta when it was still untitled, Christina Sharpe describes *Dreams are colder than Death* as organized according to composure, exertion, and force. She answers Moten’s question about the possibility of loving blackness so, “*Dreams* stages and moves viewers through several certain knowledges and believes **of and in** some of the gifts, possibilities, and refusals enacted by Black Culture; the labor, possibilities in and of Blackness, the knowledge that Blackness and Black people are lovable; that in the midst of everything else, Black people **are**, also about the practice of,

knowledge in, and attention to, and enactment of ‘deeply loved flesh.’”<sup>15</sup>

Both Jafa’s film and the essays gathered here engage with the paradoxical ontology of black lives in original ways. They also uncannily initiate a tight dialog with Christina Sharpe’s just released second book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. “Wake” is a capacious term Sharpe uses to address the ontological paradox of black lives as lives lived in a wake, where “wake” simultaneously means “the watching of relatives and friends besides the body of the dead person,” “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship,” and “in the line of recoil of (a gun).” Through the concepts of the ship, the hold, and the weather, which crystallize her reflection on an atmospheric anti-blackness—antiblackness as “total climate”—Sharpe describes black lives as “lived under occupation,” “peoples in the wake with no state

or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected,” and strives instead “to position us in the modalities of Black lives lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there.”<sup>16</sup>

We have included here Jericho Brown’s powerful poem *bullet points*—with gracious permission of the author—in order to precisely mark the type of wake work *Dreams* also performs, one that “annotates” “those whom the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable.”<sup>17</sup> We have placed it alongside the image of the intense close-up that accompanies Spillers’s utterance of the word “prayer,” to tie together the wake work performed by both texts.

In the first essay of this issue, Calvin Warren poses the question of black care, reflecting on the circumstances under which it might occur when black injury has metaphysical



repercussions that remain overwhelmingly incomprehensible and neither law, ethics, nor politics can adequately *redress* an injury they cannot *address*. He appeals to Sharpe's idea of anagrammatical blackness, of Black lives made opaque by a linguistic scrambling where "the meaning of words falls apart [and] we encounter again the difficulty of sticking the signification." In anagrammatical blackness, Sharpe explains, "girl doesn't mean 'girl' but, for example, 'prostitute' or 'felon,' boy doesn't mean 'boy,' but 'Hulk Hogan' or 'gunman,' 'thug' or 'urban youth.'"<sup>18</sup>

Just like Sharpe's book, but independently from it, Mars McDougall's essay takes on the issue of the Oceanic through Kamau Brathwaite's idea of tidalectics as a way to render the "afterlife of slavery" or what Sharpe describes as the wake of the ship, not as an hauntology—a grammar of

specters and ghosts which fails to address "not only the matter of black life, but also the meanings and implications of the continued un-mattering of black life"—but rather through the idea of tides that "turn and re-turn, not perfectly cyclical, but with an accumulation of time, of material, and of water."<sup>19</sup> This is a way to acknowledge the material pressure placed upon black lives as well as to address a Middle Passage that doesn't simply "haunt" the present but is rather "still open...with water flowing forth in a constant, violent rush."<sup>20</sup>

Sharpe's image of the wake of the ship, the historical weight of water, and even more her discussion of the "residence time" of substances in the Ocean, which describes the fact that the bodies of drowned slaves are still literally in it, perform a molecularization of blackness that ultimately expresses also the

corresponding atmospheric reach of antiblackness, its existence as a "total climate." As McDougall concludes, "The march of history means nothing underwater."<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, it also molecularizes what in *Dreams* Hortense Spillers calls "flesh memory," by describing the pain her sister, who had been subjected to a partial amputation, felt from her phantom leg. Echoing Elizabeth Alexander's argument in her commentary on the Rodney King video, that there is a bodily archive of practical memory that is reactivated at the moment of collective spectatorship of the black body in pain, Spillers grounds it even more profoundly in the sentient body which remembers a part that is no longer there.<sup>22</sup>

Air, and more specifically wind, is the focus of Parisa Vaziri's "Windridden: Historical Oblivion and



the Nonvalue of Nonidentification,” where she addresses the question of whether flesh memory carries over across generations by arguing that sometimes concepts of “lineage” unwillingly reinforce “our modern-day understanding of race [which] is predicated upon a philosophical alignment between interiority and historicity that braces the self-possessed subject.”<sup>23</sup> Vaziri focuses on “zar,” the name for a “pan-Afroasiatic belief in malignant winds circulating through hives inhumed under the earth and which infest human intestines and penetrate the skeletal frame.” These winds are removed through ceremonies during which the windridden person might begin to speak in tongues unknown to her such as Swahili, Arabic, Persian, or Hindi. Vaziri reads this mysterious glossolalia as a case of unpossessed speech, which “renders blackness as a kind of ambivalent displacement from place and time.”<sup>24</sup>

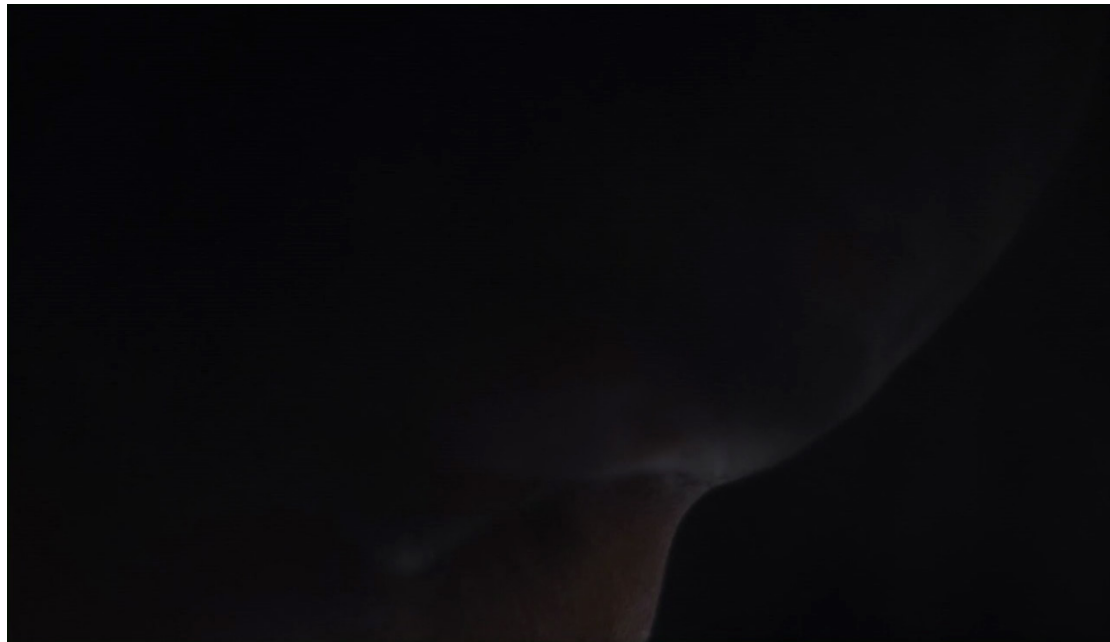


FIGURE 8  
BLACK STAR CHILD,  
*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR JAJA, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

## Introduction

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The essay “Loving the Alien” by tobias vanVeen concludes this issue by mobilizing an increasingly pervasive term across Afrofuturist literature and object-oriented and new materialist philosophies, while also powerfully engaging queer inhumanism and performance theory, in order to disrupt enduring racialized distinctions between subject and object.<sup>25</sup> The essay is about “loving an-other whose otherness transgresses all that is presupposed in the possessive of the ‘whose’: an-other who is not a *who*, but a *what*.” At stake is the participation, or not, of the Black rendered as robot alien to the concept of the human within the context of Afrofuturist love which, paradoxically, yet strategically, “remakes alienation as Alien Nation” and “arises by “exappropriating [the alien] for the project of decolonization.” The critique that vanVeen sees enacted by Janelle Monae’s videos

is the queering of the straight line that maintains the distinction between the who and the what or, the “improper praxis of becoming exhuman.” Ex-humanity is at the core of a critique that, following Kodwo Eshun, is both aesthetic and philosophical insofar as, for Eshun, “interrogating the human means a like critique of black realness, representation, and authenticity.”

In the essay for *Black Camera* I explain how I believe that the complex tapestry of cosmological images Jafa deploys throughout the film is in dialog with his own admiration for Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* which he sees as organized around a profound fear of black contamination of whiteness. His early encounter with the “atavistic whiteness” and the “glacial pageantry” of the film made him realize, instead, the “arresting beauty and dense corporeal being”

of the inhabitants of the Mississippi Delta region where he grew up, which he ultimately described as “the dark matter of black being.”<sup>26</sup>

I believe a commitment to this thick materiality of blackness animates all of the essays featured here and the way they attempt in a variety of ways to get at black Being, despite its constant withdrawal and excess over our own understanding. This is the reason we have distributed some poignant images from the film throughout the issue so that they would offer further coherence to the common concerns of the essays featured here. In *Dreams* as well as in this issue, blackness is unbound: an always sentient, always sensing, cosmic matter. ■

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Jafa, "Black Visual Intonation," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 264-268.

<sup>2</sup> See *liquid blackness* 2, no. 5 (2015), "Passing Through Film: The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble," <http://liquidblackness.com/publications/passing-through-film/>, last accessed Nov. 1, 2016 for an account of this research project and essays on Clark's film.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Jafa, "My Black Death," *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black culture*, edited by Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 252. Methodologically speaking, I interpret the film's editing structure—beautifully executed by *Dreams*' producer, editor, and cinematographer Kahlil Joseph—and, in particular, the elements that the film posits as adjacent—as indices of the network of love and care that #BlackLivesMatter also seeks to establish as a way to counteract state-sanctioned anti-black violence.

<sup>4</sup> I want to thank Charleen Wilcox for writing these observations.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the material gathered for this research project is available on the *liquid blackness* website, here: <http://liquidblackness.com/dreams-are-colder-than-death/>

<sup>6</sup> The following people were part of the reading group that generated this call for papers:

Jenny Gunn, Brooke Sonenreich, Charleen Wilcox, Shady Patterson, Daren Fowler, Lauren Cramer, and Akil Brooks. Michael Gillespie emphasizes some of the same points in the introduction to his just published book, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to Christina Sharpe's concept of the "weather," in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), as I will explain below, but also to an exchange with Sarah Jane Cervenak and Jay Kameron Carter about their idea of "black ether," which occurred in the empyre listserv in April 2016. The entire conversation on "Liquid Blackness: Formal Approaches to Blackness and/as Aesthetics" as it unfolded over the whole month, is available here: <http://lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2016-April/date.html> (last accessed on Nov. 10, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Alessandra Raengo, "Dreams are colder than Death and the Gathering of Black Sociality," forthcoming in *Black Camera*, 8, no. 2 (2016). This essay, for a Close-Up section on the mediatic life of the #BlackLivesMatter movement edited by Charles "Chip" Linscott, explores more explicitly points of contact between the film and #BLM in the context of the Afro-Pessimist/Afro-Optimist conversation. I am paraphrasing Sharpe who claims that black death is normative and necessary for this democracy (*In the Wake*, 7) and Tamara Lomax's statement that "white safety equals black murder," cited in Jared Sexton, "Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word," *rhizomes* 29, <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html> last accessed Nov. 1, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 187.

<sup>10</sup> I develop this idea of integrity and the way the black body has historically "integrated" the filmic image in Alessandra Raengo, "Blackness and the Image of Motility: A Suspenseful Critique," *Black Camera*, 8, no. 1 (2016): 191-206. The essay builds on the argument put forth by Alice Maurice in *The Cinema and Its Shadow, Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> I want to thank Charleen Wilcox for writing this perceptive paragraph.

<sup>12</sup> See Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *rhizomes* 29, <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html> last accessed Nov. 1, 2016

<sup>13</sup> I want to thank Charleen Wilcox for writing these observations.

<sup>14</sup> Sexton, "Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word."

## Introduction

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<sup>15</sup> Christina Sharpe, "Love is the Message, the Message is Death" in Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (TNEG, GBE, 2016), n.p.j. This 7-minute montage that gathers what, in the same catalog, Greg Tate describes as "dynamism of culturally and rhythmically-confident Black bodies in swooning, swaying, sanctified, synaptic, erotic, choreographic, athletic, cognitive and violently-assaulted motion," seems to us a poignant and achingly urgent synthesis of Jafa's reflection on black motion and/as sound.

<sup>16</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>19</sup> This issue, p. 53

<sup>20</sup> This issue, p. 52

<sup>21</sup> This issue, p. 56

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 77-94.

<sup>23</sup> This issue, p. 63

<sup>24</sup> This issue, p. 63

<sup>25</sup> Consider some recent special issues, such as *The Black Scholar* 44 (Summer 2014), *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21, no. 2-3 (2015) on "Queer Inhumanisms," *Rhizomes* no. 29, on "Black Holes: Afro-pessimism, Blackness and the discourses of Modernity" <http://rhizomes.net/issue29/index.html> and *The Drama Review*, special issue on "New Materialisms and Performance Studies," 59, no. 4 (Winter 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Jafa, "My Black Death," 252.





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# Bullet Points

**JERICO BROWN**

I will not shoot myself  
In the head, and I will not shoot myself  
In the back, and I will not hang myself  
With a transhbag, and if I do,  
I promise you, I will not do it  
In a police car while handcuffed  
Or in the jail cell of a town  
I only know thename of  
Because I have to drive through it  
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,  
But I promise you, I trust the maggots  
And the ants and the roaches  
Who live beneath the floorboards  
Of my house to do what they must  
To any carcass more than I trust  
An officer of the law of the land  
To shut my eyes like a man  
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet  
So clean my mother could have used it  
To tuck me in. Whe I kill me, I will kill me  
The same way most Americans do,  
I promise you: cigarette smoke  
Or a piece of meat on which I choke  
Or so broke I freeze  
In one of these winter we keep  
Calling worst. I promise that if you hear  
Of me dead anywhere near  
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took  
Me from us and left my body, which is,  
No matter what we've been taught,  
Greater than the settlement a city can  
Pay a mother to stop crying, and more  
Beautiful than the brand new shiny bullet  
Fished from the folds of my brain. ■







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# Black Care

**CALVIN WARREN**

## **I. Black Care**

On August 10, 2016, the Department of Justice released a report exposing disturbing practices in the Baltimore Police Department. It details the persistence of anti-black violence, abuse, inveterate neglect, and routinized humiliation. Graphs, statistics, and anecdotal narratives create a vicious tapestry of signs and symbols.<sup>1</sup> This tapestry requires deciphering, for what it says is more than just persistent injustice, but “something” else, which requires a different grammar. Rev. Heber Brown III, speaking to the *New York Times* about the report, recounts a disturbing instance. A teenage boy was stopped and strip-searched in front of his girlfriend. After he filed a complaint with the police department, the officer, it seems, wanted revenge and stopped the young boy again, strip-searched him, and this time grabbed his genitals.

The officer, intoxicated by unchecked power over black bodies, wanted to injure “something” else, not just the teenager’s body. The reverend states, “What that officer did is not just violate a body, but he injured a spirit, a soul, a psyche. And that young boy will not easily forget what happened to him, in public with his girlfriend. It’s hard to really put gravity and weight to that type of offense.”<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Brown introduces a “type of offense,” which is difficult to decipher or translate into a framework of redress and injury. The offense he describes lacks a grammar to capture precisely the “target” of such violence. The phrase “a spirit, a soul, a psyche” moves us toward a conceptualization of this target, but it remains indecipherable in some sense, a “something” vulnerable to destructive practices. We can also understand the “strip search” itself as an allegory of anti-black

violence: what is stripped is not just clothes and garments, but something metaphysical, a metaphysical stripping away of the constitutive elements of a person's being. "A spirit, a soul, a psyche" is sadistically stripped and dishonored. The "gravity and weight" of the offense is the density of a metaphysical violence—in which black being is incessantly stripped, ripped apart, and humiliated. This violence is without end, without reprieve, without reason or logic. Both the metaphysical target and the violence are indecipherable because they constitute a non-sense sign within the grammar of redress and humanism. Put differently, anti-blackness renders both metaphysical violence and the "spirit, soul, psyche" untranslatable within ethics, law, and politics since these fields assume a coherent human ontology—and Blacks lack being. Furthermore, neither law, ethics, nor politics can adequately address "what" is injured

(this "whatness" is invalid within its precincts); in other words, it cannot *redress* what it cannot *address*.

Black existence confronts metaphysical violence continually, without the possibility of political or legal reprieve (since the object of the violence does not translate politically or legally). Violence without end, violence without reprieve, violence constitutive of a metaphysical world (the violence sustaining the world's systems and institutions) is what the teenager experienced. The injury is, indeed, immeasurable—it fractures "something," a deep metaphysical structure. The question before us becomes: How does black existence address metaphysical violence? Moreover, can we even answer this question and with what grammar do we broach it? These are, indeed, difficult questions but our aim, here, is not to answer them apodictically (since such an endeavor

is impossible), but to present a meditative strategy: black care.

## II. Lacerations and Hieroglyphics

We can consider the metaphysical "injury" a laceration and a hieroglyph. What is "stripped" or ruptured leaves a mark—a sign of destruction that is itself a "witness" of the violation. As witness, the sign itself bears a tragic testimony, a recounting of the violence. But what is the sign *communicating*? The sign, the laceration, becomes a hieroglyph open to a cultural reading and hermeneutical practice. While what it says is not easily interpreted, it can be *felt* or registered on a different plane of existence. We rely on the affective dimension to translate the ineffable, or more precisely, to provide *form* for an experience anti-blackness places outside ethics and the "customary lexis of life and culture," as Hortense Spillers would describe it.<sup>3</sup> Feelings

## Black Care

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provide a necessary vessel for containing unbearable suffering and a vehicle for communicating this experience when traditional avenues of communication are absent. Put differently, affect is a communicative structure, a testimony, for articulating suffering without end. The affective dimension is just as expansive as it is deep, so expressivity is boundless within this dimension. Affect is an invaluable resource for those enduring a metaphysical holocaust; it is the *premier* form of expressivity.

Spillers presents metaphysical violence as a “laceration or wounding.” The undecipherable signs produced:

...render a kind of hieroglyphic of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic*



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## “REV. BROWN INTRODUCES A ‘TYPE OF OFFENSE,’ WHICH IS DIFFICULT TO DECIPHER OR TRANSLATE INTO A FRAMEWORK OF REDRESS AND INJURY”

*substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?<sup>4</sup>

What is injured, then, is the “flesh”—the “primary narrative... seared divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.”<sup>5</sup> As a “primary narrative,” the flesh is the metaphysical target of violence. The flesh, then, is the structure of black existence, an ontological grounding of sorts, which anti-blackness incessantly targets. It is the flesh

that becomes injured, and this injury leaves a “laceration” or hieroglyph attesting to the brutality. Thus, the laceration is not just a corporeal sign; although the body might bear its marks, it is registered elsewhere.

But what is of interest here is that the laceration as hieroglyph might actually “transfer from one generation to the next, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moment.”<sup>6</sup> The

laceration *speaks* through symbolic substitutions across time, across generations. In other words, the laceration is a *constitutive feature* of black existence in an anti-black world, and it travels; anti-blackness mobilizes it across time (and space). It is indecipherable because it is paradoxical: it is consistent and substitutional, individual and generational, mobile and intransigent. One cannot capture it exactly as it

**“THE ‘GRAVITY AND WEIGHT’ OF THE OFFENSE  
IS THE DENSITY OF A METAPHYSICAL  
VIOLENCE”**

moves across generations, but the metaphysical harm it indexes is felt deeply. Thus, what the teenager in Baltimore experienced was a *transferable laceration*, one which is flesh-destroying. The injury is much more than humiliation—rather, it is an onto-metaphysical destruction.

We might also inquire about the “efficacy of meaning,” since the hieroglyph *means* even though it is indecipherable. Georges Bataille understands laceration as a possibility of communication,

which leaves the subject fractured. Communication occurs precisely because the subject is not intact, which allows for something like a flow of communication. He says, “your life is not limited to that ungraspable inner streaming [mere inner consciousness], it streams to the outside as well and opens itself incessantly to what flows out or surges toward it.”<sup>7</sup> Bataille suggests the laceration preconditions communication, since the laceration is a rupture, an opening that creates

a nexus between inside/outside, self/other, and individual/community. I introduce Bataille, here, to suggest that what Spillers describes as an undecipherable marking, transferable across generations, is a *form* of communication—since this marking *speaks* and *means* by dissolving the distinctions between individual/community and inside/outside. The “efficacy of meaning” is found in the generational transfer itself.

The metaphysical laceration, furthermore, is an indecipherable





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sign that *must* be communicated, in order to recover the *efficacy* of (non)meaning. In other words, we may not know exactly what the hieroglyph “means,” but the efficacy of meaning does not reside merely in certainty (the certitude of comprehension); instead, meaning’s efficacy can be found in the *transfer* (or communication) of uncertainty. Transferring the undecipherable sign *through* and *as* communication (from individual, communities, and generations) provides a space of address. *Address without redress*. It is in the address—as the communicative flow of lacerative signs—that we are able to endure metaphysical violence. Even though we cannot eradicate metaphysical violence, since it is a constitutive component of an anti-black world, we can use the laceration as a vehicle for endurance: black care.

Christina Sharpe introduces the beautiful theory of “wake work,” which “is a mode of attending to Black suffering and Black life that exceeds that suffering,” along with her notion of “anagrammatical blackness,” which fractures violent epistemic formations. She also conceptualizes wake work as “a problem for thought and care and trying to figure out how we might make operative care, wresting it away from surveillance and the state because the state also wants to imagine care but that care is the foot on your neck.”<sup>8</sup> What, then, would it mean to render care operative? The industry of care is one of anti-black domination—institutions profiting on metaphysical violence and other forms of black injury. But wake work wants to re-imagine care, not as the institutionalization of management strategies, but as a “wake, waiting, a witnessing” of the always already dead thing. The

theory of wake work is exceptionally generative and presents care as a “problem for thought,” as Nahum Chandler might call it.<sup>9</sup> I want to linger in this problem, the problematic of care for a moment.

It seems as though part of the “problem of care” for black existence resides in the very term “operative.” For the operation of care—its execution—requires attending to that which even “exceeds suffering.” We might suggest that what exceeds black suffering (at least its corporeal instantiation) is the metaphysical dimension of violence—the active severing of the flesh, the laceration. We might also inquire what *form* does the re-envisioned operation assume—care as operation? In other words, how do you operate on that which is in excess of black suffering and black life? Sharpe’s “anagrammatical” might assist us here, for the term suggests excess itself—an excess

in relation to grammar (even an excess *against* grammar). The anagrammatical is operative *in* its excess, an excess of grammatical meaning. Anagrammaticity is a hieroglyph in relation to grammar; a non-sense sign.

Perhaps care is a *problem* for thought because “thinking” care (at least metaphysically and epistemologically) requires “sense.” Our metaphysical conceptions of care translate all signs of injury and fracture into the grammatical, the domination of a hermeneutic of transparency. Foucault reminds us transparency (and institutional, medical “translation” as transparency) is a premier strategy of power, since bringing things into light renders them more vulnerable and accessible.<sup>10</sup> The problem with making care for Blacks operative is that the violation is opaque, indecipherable, and

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IT CANNOT REDRESS WHAT IT CANNOT  
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anagrammatical. Thus, we have to *re-envision* operation; instead of attentiveness through transparency (which is the strategy of surveillance and the state), operation entails the anagrammatical circulation of the non-sense sign. Rejecting the mandates of anti-black deciphering strategies and reconceptualizing operation as a *sharing* of the sign—a transferring and sending it forth, a form of communication.

In other words, when the laceration cannot be decoded using traditional

instruments of institutional care (i.e., the practices and procedures that translate the ineffable into an object of surveillance) because the target (“spirit,” “soul,” “psyche”) is not understood as a legitimate target, the only way to address this violation is to rely on a collective sharing. The objective of this sharing is not to understand the laceration with apodictic certainty, but to remain open to its opacity—to receive its affect. Institutional care rejects this affect; in fact, it pathologizes it

in order to justify invasive/violent practices. Sharing the sign, remaining open to its anagrammaticity is a form of black care.

### **III. Operations of Black Care**

For black existence in an anti-black world, the problem is one of attending to a laceration, which appears across time, space, individual, and community. Furthermore, the laceration is *meaningless* as a sign for institutions using transparency and translation

## Black Care

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as a strategy of domination and assault. “Black care” is a particular type of attentiveness or operation, since what needs caring for is something anagrammatical: “a spirit, a soul, a psyche.”

Black care is a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic. The objective is not to render the sign decipherable, since its meaning resides outside of a metaphysical world, but to share this undecipherable sign as a lateral practice. Circulation and sharing, then, are the *operations* of black care. I emphasize these two practices because much of the viciousness of the metaphysical violence is worked through alone. Shame enshrouds many experiences: having one’s competence questioned at work, encountering routinized micro-aggressions, facing insecurity and depression, experiencing



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**“AFFECT IS AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE  
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strip-searches, and succumbing to self-destructive behavior and resignation are often internalized, or more accurately, *confined* to the internal. This is an aspect of metaphysical violence; one fears discourse about it and its circulation can often put one at risk if shared with an uncaring individual.

By “sharing” and “circulation” I mean providing expressive form for an indecipherable affect and sending it forth—to a collective, to a public, to a friend, a spouse, etc. Affect is difficult

because one often experiences the torment as interior struggle—communication turned inward. The care I have in mind, here, would turn that communication outward, even if what one is feeling cannot be completely deciphered, one can still give it form—much like the hieroglyphic, for example, provides typographic form for an unknown message. The typographic form provides space, an openness, within which one can share its mystery—without a vicious “will to power” or

desire to decode and dominate (as is the procedure of institutional care).

I have read Spillers, Bataille, and Sharpe together to offer an operation that envisions *communication of the non-sense sign* as an operation of black care. Much *work* is done in sharing and communicating. Since the laceration transfers and constitutes a flow of misery, it is only in and through communication that attentiveness can occur. I hesitate to use the word “healing,” since this is often the “sign” of metaphysical

overcoming and domination, and anti-black violence continues without end and can never be overcome. But we might embrace the term ‘endurance’ as the objective of black care. To communicate the laceration, to share the generational and individual components of it, enables endurance. Not the endurance that yields resolution, but an endurance that is a lateral affirmation of injury—a recognition and embrace of the laceration.

We might turn briefly to the cinematic example of *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998).<sup>11</sup> Captivity is precisely the experience in which “a spirit, a soul, a psyche” is violated without end, and captives found a way to endure the incessant violation. Corporeal violence does not exhaust the field of misery and brutality; “something” else is violated. Baby Suggs, the spiritualist and exhorter, understands this and assembles

captives in a circle. She instructs the women to cry “for the living and the dead just cry” (i.e. do not attempt to *narrate* the feelings with traditional language, “just cry”). She then instructs the men to dance and the children to laugh. Why would she do this? I suggest Baby Suggs has a deep understanding of black care. Laughing, crying, and dancing provide form for an indecipherable violation—one that language cannot adequately address (this is why she does *not* instruct them to speak). The captives, then, must rely on the “non-sense” sign (laughing, crying, and dancing), as institutional care would describe it, to give form to an affective dimension. Participants in the circle do not try to decipher each woman’s cry, or decode each child’s laugh, or translate the dancing into an apodictic narrative. Instead, the participants *share* the indecipherable sign—they circulate it between themselves—and they

remain open to receiving the affect, even though a concrete meaning is impossible. The scene is instructive; it teaches us how to address injury laterally, when vertical redress is foreclosed. The circle is an allegorical space of openness (the geometry of flow and circulation); we must find ways to circulate the laceration in its myriad expressive forms.

Black care is an essential practice of attentiveness. Whether it is the chromatic melisma of a gospel jazz artist (such as Kim Burrell), the dynamic choreography of inspired dancers, the warm embrace of a friend, a cleansing cry, etc., the aim is to provide form and send it forth. These forms of expression enable us to endure the burdensome and bear what seems unbearable. This non-sense communication does not have to manifest itself in language, since the hieroglyph fractures the word itself. But it must

be communicated, even in “grunts, moans, [and] shrieks,” or in what Fred Moten would call “sociality.”<sup>12</sup> The operation relies on whatever forms of expression enable a “sending forth” of the hieroglyph. This sharing, sending forth, is a strategy of endurance; and enduring anti-blackness requires, above all, the operations of black care. ■

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, “Investigation of the Baltimore City Police Department,” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/883366/download> (accessed August 10, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Sheryl Gay Sandberg, “Findings of Police Bias in Baltimore Validate What Many Have Long Felt,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, & in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 221.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Sharpe and Selamawit Terrefe, “What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe?” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). doi: 10.20415/rhiz/029.e06.

<sup>9</sup> Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem For Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> I chose the cinematic example because it depicts the operation of care so vividly. Toni Morrison’s novel is indeed a masterpiece, but I focus on the cinematic adaptation since the visual scene is so very powerful. Actually watching the spiritual circle allows us to witness black care as a spectator, and I believe spectatorship has tremendous pedagogical value.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).





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# "The Water is Waiting": Water Tidalectics, and Materiality<sup>1</sup>

**T. MARS MCDOUGALL**

In order to speak about the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and plantation slavery, and the ways they drift into and affect the present, Black and Africana studies discourses often use hauntology, a series of signals, and a discursive turn that deploys the language of hauntings, specters, and ghosts. Hauntology claims that blackness—with its variances and contradictions, incompleteness and impermanence—remains imbued with slavery's uncertain and ambiguous presence. This set of symbols becomes deployed to discuss certain phenomena appearing in self-conceptions of blackness—namely, the presence of the past. Vestiges of slavery appear spectrally today and are present, uncontained by the passage of time. While this collection of signals and figures has proliferated, there are limitations to their power when we attempt to apply this minimally material, liminal,

and ambiguous presence in the present to the concrete realities of blackness, and particularly, to the matter and mattering of black lives. Any epistemic or ontological schema we use to talk about the presence of the past must be able to address not only the matter of black life, but also the meanings and implications of the continued un-mattering of black life. If these spectral symbols fail to account for the materiality of black death and life, how can we talk about this presence in a way capable of addressing the concreteness of black existence? And if our commonly accepted symbols and signals cannot account for this materiality, then we need to mobilize a new discursive tool. Rather than hauntology, a potential remedy to this problem emerges through Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectics. In what follows, I work through this "presence of the past," its materiality, and the limitations of hauntology as an explanatory tool,

while granting its representational power to address psychic life. Finally, I will turn my attention to water and tidalectics as both representation and explanatory tool, in an attempt to make the first steps of working out a tidalectical materialism.

Black and Africana discourses encompass several ways of understanding the “presence of the past.” This essay draws attention to the inextricable *material* effect of the past on the living. Referring to something both more apparent and subtler than references to the past by authors and academics in their works, this essay focuses on the myriad ways these past conceptions, remembrances, practices, and policies come to actually *do work* in the present. Dionne Brand signals this presence of the past as she writes, “You are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre [*sic*] of captivity.”<sup>2</sup> At work in all the

authorial, artistic, and academic ways mentioned above, this essay’s focus on the presence of the past also includes the way it writes itself upon the black body and into black lives—both through self-identification and also the external regulatory gaze that remains unaccounted for. Moreover, this understanding of the presence of the past encompasses the way the past is alive and working in state, ideological, and economic structures committing violence against black lives—violence that repeatedly demonstrates that black lives do not matter and that threatens black matter *itself*.

There is no way for the “enormity of the breach instituted by slavery and the magnitude of domination” to remain behind the temporal walls of the past.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this breach continues to have material effects on the black body in the forms of poverty, hyper-sexualization, illness,

incarceration, intra-community and state violence, and so on. These are written into the material world on black bodies and black communities through various external and self-policing apparatuses. They are produced and reproduced as they are lived and experienced. The material reality of the presence of the past becomes known through many channels, including the restructuring of plantation slavery in late capitalism, the carceral system of criminal justice, the ongoing systematic damaging and destruction of black kinship structures, the sexual violence perpetrated against both trans- and cis-gendered black women, and the seemingly perpetual executions of black people by the police. In these ways, and alongside many more, the past breaks through the walls claiming to confine it to do work in the present.

**“ANY EPISTEMIC OR ONTOLOGICAL SCHEMA WE USE TO TALK ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST MUST BE ABLE TO ADDRESS NOT ONLY THE MATTER OF BLACK LIFE, BUT ALSO THE MEANINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONTINUED UN-MATTERING OF BLACK LIFE.”**

As indicated in Brands’ words above, in order to talk about the unspeakable “tear in the world” that began with the opening of the Middle Passage, a regimen of ghosts and specters is usually deployed.<sup>5</sup> In Black and Africana studies discourses, the world becomes haunted by the opening of the Middle Passage, by the plantation, by lynchings, and so on. Additionally, the status of post-Emancipation freedom remains ambivalent as “the roots of [it] were located in

slavery and the meaning of freedom was ascertained by its negation.”<sup>6</sup> This disastrous inversion, as Saidiya Hartman identifies, has resulted in perpetual threat and danger to black material lives despite Emancipation, Civil Rights struggles, and the Black Lives Matter movement. A hauntological schema, however, cannot account for these threats in a material way. The vestiges of these “dead and not-quite-gone” remain, carried forward, as constitutive elements of the present at constant

work.<sup>7</sup> These remains, these material and ideological holdovers, shape and form the language used, and the ways in which blackness is understood. The legacy of slavery weighs upon the mind, and more importantly, the body of the present black subject, breaking through the supposedly stable walls erected to hold historical times apart and separate. The Middle Passage is “not...terminal but originary,” a constitutive beginning.<sup>8</sup> None of this devalues or discourages the



deployment of ghosts, spirits, or ancestors as something other than metaphor in a personal way, but rather reveals the ways in which the discursive activity configured around ghostly signals cannot account for the ways in which the temporal instability of the legacy of the Slave Trade and its effluvia works itself out materially in the present.

Working through the ways in which Martha and Bruce Lincoln divide haunting typologies, the limits of this methodology become apparent. Taking cases of “primary” or conventional hauntings, the authors classify present beings that are active and potent, and that come into the present to “confront the living in direct, non-mediated, and even menacing” ways.<sup>9</sup> While this presence certainly can mean harm—both psychic and physical—they do not hail the living in order to right the wrongs of improper



FIGURE 1  
LORI DELL, *INDIGO SEA*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 12x12 IN.  
COURTESY OF LORI DELL.

**“THERE IS NO WAY FOR THE ‘ENORMITY OF THE  
BREACH INSTITUTED BY SLAVERY AND THE  
MAGNITUDE OF DOMINATION’ TO REMAIN BEHIND  
THE TEMPORAL WALLS OF THE PAST”**

burial or ritual failure. Blackness is not hailed by this presence of the past in narrow or uncritical ways, as Martha and Bruce Lincoln suggest typifies this form of haunting. If the claim is that blackness and black people experience primary haunting, then following this line of thought presents a problem if the aim is to reckon with the materiality of black life. Those apparatuses, structures, and systems that ensure black life is constantly under threat—like police forces, prison systems, and so on—

would be the minimally material beings that had been improperly consigned to the past and a peaceful afterlife. Moreover, in order to be finished with this primary haunting, it would be a matter of righting the ritual wrongs and performing some kind of “proper” burial in order to contain these spirits in the past. However, this is not the case, as these past configurations are constantly reproduced in the present, enacting material violence upon black lives. In this way, primary

haunting cannot encompass the ways in which the present is affected in its material by the past.

Secondary haunting is the more critical configuration of hauntology considered by Lincoln and Lincoln, and the one with the most direct bearing on what this essay targets. This is the form that hails a wider, less personally responsible audience, and is mediated by an author or researcher. They argue these mediators work to “keep the memory of those [atrocities] alive as a means

to transform the moral and political climate of the present and future.”<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson likewise discusses this form of haunting when he writes about the domestication of ghosts through their deployment as representations of a Hegelian Spirit.<sup>11</sup> The remains of a horrific past translated into language—made into ghosts and specters lurking between words—perform this memory work. However, blackness is not only called upon to do such work. Rather, these remains are the infrastructure threatening black lives now. Gazed upon by ideological, political, and economic apparatuses of the liberal democratic state, blackness and black lives remain conceived of in the ways the past has brought forth, namely, as the slave—that is, the living implement that can be owned and operated for the purpose of capital accumulation.

When it comes to analyzing the function of capital in plantation, industrial, and late capitalist economies, a slippage into hauntological language often occurs. Capital itself appears as a ghostly figure able to transgress political, spatial, and temporal boundaries. However, particularly when it comes to the material effects of capitalism on black lives, a grammar of ghosts and specters cannot account for the ways these powerful economic constellations work themselves out materially. The ways in which the black body became insurable machinery—and as such, a form of capital subject to the reach of an ascendant white monopoly under the forced migration of the Atlantic Slave Trade—were utterly material in the first instance, and indeed, are made an analogue for Marx’s conception of machinery.<sup>12</sup> This instrumentalization of bare life into insurable machinery for the accumulation and protection

of capital is bound to the black body. While the “wounded, suffering human body [is] incessantly attended to by an equal sign and a monetary equivalent,” it is never fully replaced and made into a minimally material or immaterial ghost.<sup>13</sup> Black bodies and black lives persist materially, but live under constant threat of the past and its exchange of the black body into a means of production for capital. This connection across the oceanic chasm, however, is not simply a thing of the past. Time accumulates, as Ian Baucom claims, but not as benign specters that threaten and frighten but ultimately do no harm. Rather, Baucom’s work engages with the materials and materiality of the past in order to work through the ways history builds upon itself and returns in the present. His work acts as a scaffolding for a tidalectical materialism—an idealist infrastructure that undergirds Braithwaite’s tidalectics. The aim here is to begin



FIGURE 2  
LORI DELL, *BIG  
WATER*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON  
CANVAS, 60x48IN,  
COURTESY OF  
LORI DELL.



the labor of building around this scaffolding in order to break with the hauntological methodology Baucom uses in order to pull out the full force of his arguments, particularly when it comes to the materiality of this intensified, expanded, and accumulated history at work in the present.<sup>14</sup> In this essay, Baucom's work is asked to do its opposite in order to reckon with the ways the configuration of a present filled with an accumulated past has concrete effects, pushing the logic of his work more firmly towards the materiality of black lives.

In order for hauntology to be a useful tool for discussing the ways in which the legacies of slavery play out in a concrete sense now, it must reckon with the material that is at stake. It has to be able to think of and through the matter of black life, and explain the perpetual reproduction of the *un-mattering* of black life in death. It



must be able to account for not only the ways these so-called present ghosts leave material impressions inscribed in the flesh, but also the production and reproduction of political and economic frameworks that allow for the various forms of violence that work themselves out on black communities, and finally, for the ways these forms are legitimized as a result of this ongoing presence. A framework capable of addressing and working through the materiality of blackness and the ways this material enters into relations with a “labyrinth of forces at work...where violence is built into structures and institutions...implemented by persons of flesh and bone,”<sup>15</sup> is required. This tool must be able to work through the visor effect, the material behind the material animated by the spirit in which “the inside of the outside is only another outside.”<sup>16</sup> This spirit, indicated by Achille Mbembe, is

that which would not be present if it did not inhabit a material form.

Hortense Spillers writes, “African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic.’”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is the contention of this essay that persons of African descent have never stopped being suspended in the oceanic. The Middle Passage, rather than haunting us, is still open (perhaps not to the trade of slaves, but to the flows of capital, certainly), with water flowing forth in a constant, violent rush. While this cyclic rush of water may initially appear as only a metaphorical representation of the back-and-forth flow of Brathwaite’s tidalectic, it in fact can do more. In the final and critical instance, it offers a way of directly addressing the various ways the opening of the oceanic chasm that is the Middle Passage continues to live in the present.<sup>18</sup> It is a layering of time, of worlds, of recordings,

**“A GRAMMAR OF  
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SPECTERS  
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ACCOUNT FOR  
THE WAYS THESE  
POWERFUL  
ECONOMIC  
CONSTELLATIONS  
WORK  
THEMSELVES OUT  
MATERIALLY.”**

**“THE MIDDLE PASSAGE, RATHER THAN HAUNTING US, IS STILL OPEN...WITH WATER FLOWING FORTH IN A CONSTANT, VIOLENT RUSH.”**

a “trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis.”<sup>19</sup> While Brathwaite’s geopoetic tidalectics are primarily about islands, specifically the Caribbean, they can and should be extended beyond these terms. Tidalectics can apply to the tri-polar spaces of the Atlantic Slave Trade in its present nation-state configurations.

Like a dialectical progression held in irreconcilable tension, tidalectics resist the Hegelian telos of progress through the negation of negation only to arrive at a final synthesis.<sup>20</sup>

Black matter is unambiguously present in the tidalectical relation, as foundational ideologies, policies, and systems “weave together, reshape, separate, flow back, and come forward again.”<sup>21</sup> These ideas make themselves known in the present, and inscribe themselves onto bodies and into lives, with material consequences. Responding to Mark Fisher, it is tidalectics, not hauntology, that can signal lives and bodies “stained by time, where time can only be experienced as a

broken fatal repetition.”<sup>22</sup> Hauntology, while it can be useful in talking of the psychic effects of broken and repeating temporalities, fails when it is called upon to account for the material effects of the past in the present. While the present is indeed “stained,” as hauntology maintains, it is not so much by a ghostly presence, but by an ongoing process of drawing material and flesh into a drowning cycle, crushing the black body. Black matter gets caught in the irresistible strength of a tidal pull,

either settling on the alluvial floor as a sea tangle or floating to the surface as a dead thing.<sup>23</sup> The tides are never precisely the same, but the fact of their repetition is. They turn and return, not perfectly cyclical, but with an accumulation of time, of material, and of water. In Lori Dell's *Shaman's Smoke*, the black body is caught under the movement of the tides—present but worked over by the force of these historical waters (Figure 3).

Tidalectical materialism can be deployed as a historiographical and methodological tool that speaks to the failure of a conception of an uncomplicated present when it comes to discussing and addressing the lasting and material effects of the Slave Trade. It introduces a relation not only of sea and land, root and route, but also of capital and power to material blackness in a present still stained by the Middle Passage, its epistemic schema, and the ontologies



FIGURE 3.  
LORI DELL, *SHAMAN'S SMOKE*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 60x48IN,  
COURTESY OF LORI DELL.

flowing from it. The tidalectic “advances a notion of overlap and repetition” to communicate the ways ideas and images combine and recombine continually, and the ways in which these re-combinations—in which residues of the past include “eras wash[ing] over eras”—do not improve upon the past so much as demand a rethinking of it.<sup>24</sup>

Tidalectical materialism acknowledges that which lies outside of black lives, yet continues to press down upon them. Even beyond acknowledgement, this outside conceptual space—of the nation-state and its institutional and economic frameworks—constitutes the tidalectical relation. For example, the tidalectical relation demonstrates itself at work when we are confronted by black death and brutality at the hands of police, and the failure of the state to indict, which further legitimizes and entrenches the

functions of the structure itself. The vestiges of slave patrols and laws protecting the murderers and brutalizers of black bodies are not mere ghostly reminders, neither ambiguous nor immaterial. Moreover, the wounded, dead, or mourning black body is not just haunted; it is crushed by violence and its legitimation. The re-combinations of past structures and institutions fill up the present. Like the waters of the tides, these structures crush black bodies in the sweep of their violent movement. Blackness and black lives occupy a unique position in this reading of the present. We are caught in the water of the tides as they flow and crush, create and destroy the social seascape.<sup>25</sup> Blackness is tangled in this liquid relation. Like water, it cycles, flows, and washes, while also carrying with it the destructive force of hurricanes, flash floods, and riptides. It cleanses and purifies, putrefies and rots.

Water here functions as a metaphor for the action of tidalectics, with its own materiality, flow, and crush.

Tidalectical materialism grants the psychic experience of slavery as accurately described through the language of hauntology, but it also, and importantly, acknowledges how this legacy affects so much more than psychic life. This essay has intended to mobilize a way of conceiving this experience that is capable of addressing the question of a mechanism of social death that comes to life (and death) in the material world. In this configuration, social death occurs through the figure of drowning, as the presence of the past works itself out materially. Working through Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation, Baucom writes, “The slave trade refuses to detach itself from slavery itself, nor the slave ship from the plantation, nor the plantation from the ghetto and the

shantytown.”<sup>26</sup> The “refusal to detach” plays into the social death of the black body and is part of this ongoing tidalectic action—the back and forth, present and past, entangled, overlapping, fatally attached.

Finally, as tidalectics is an obvious troubling of Hegelian dialectics, tidalectical materialism is an equally obvious critique of Marxist dialectical materialism. Frank Wilderson has noted how the political project

of Black liberation is a more catastrophic event than the Marxist-Leninist political project can account for.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the inability of Marxism-Leninism to address the slave in a comprehensive way is critical to this problem. Marxism can only deal with the worker as the generic category of its project, thus granting that the black body, as underwritten by the history and legacy of slavery, cannot become

a worker so much as a machine. In other words, in a tidalectic present filled up by the past, black lives cannot access the movement of a dialectical materialism. If the violence of slavery as negation of humanity cannot be resolved, then any dialectical movement of history is foreclosed. The tension and torsion of the contradiction crushes blackness beneath its tides. The march of history means nothing underwater. ■

**“THE MARCH OF HISTORY MEANS NOTHING UNDERWATER.”**

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- <sup>1</sup> Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- <sup>2</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.
- <sup>4</sup> Asatar Bair, *Prison Labour in the United States: An Economic Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 72.
- <sup>7</sup> Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, "Towards a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no.1 (2014), 191–220.
- <sup>8</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 313.
- <sup>9</sup> Lincoln and Lincoln, "Critical Hauntology," 191–220.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter" in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 26–67.
- <sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992).
- <sup>13</sup> Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Post Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 175.
- <sup>16</sup> Warren Montag, "Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida's *Specters of Marx*" in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 68–82.
- <sup>17</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. Emphasis is Spillers'.
- <sup>18</sup> Anna Reckin, "Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/Poetry as Sound Space," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Brathwaite, "Caribbean Culture: Two paradigms" in *Missile and Capsule*, ed. Jurgen Martini (Bremen: Universität Bremen, 1983), 42.
- <sup>21</sup> Elaine Savory, "Wordsongs and Wordwound / Homecoming: Kamau Brathwaite's Barabajan Poems," *World Literature Today* 68, no 4 (1994): 750–757, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40150620>.
- <sup>22</sup> Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology," *Film Quarterly* 66, no 1 (Fall 2012): 16–24.
- <sup>23</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 85.
- <sup>24</sup> Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 349.
- <sup>25</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).
- <sup>26</sup> Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 313.
- <sup>27</sup> Frank Wilderson, "Irreconcilable Anti-Blackness and Police Violence," interviewed by Jared A. Ball, *i Mix What i Like*, 1 October, 2014.

## Author's Note

While writing “The Water is Waiting,” I struggled to find images to compliment the essay. I considered many options and shot each one down. I thought about including J. M. W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, or images of the spaces and materials of slavery, including the different iron instruments of control and violence. I considered an image of the door of no return in Senegal. I considered images of Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Abdirahman Abdi, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, and others from that ever growing list. None of this was acceptable to me. I could not watch these spectacles of violence for another moment, and I would not be part of instrumentalizing these deaths. While my essay is deeply concerned with the fact of material violence and the matter of black lives, I could not show these lost faces again—digital reminders, remainders, and vestiges of lives taken away by white supremacy, state violence, and a monstrous capitalism put into motion hundreds of years ago on the backs of African slaves. So, I chose a different route entirely.

To give a little background, my mother was a hairdresser for many years, a labor that lends itself well to developing close relationships with clients. Lori Dell was one such client. She and my mother became friends a number of years ago. Many of my memories of my last years in Toronto

involve Lori. Dinner parties on tree-lined Toronto streets, raccoons prowling through yards and over wooden fences. Watching the water on worn-out green boats, Brazilian jazz playing in the background. Smokey studios, factory lofts, show openings at soon-to-be-gentrified Leslieville with wine in brittle plastic cups on cold, misty nights. Lori’s prints and paintings hung in these places and in my mother’s various flats, along stairways, in windows, and above beds. In writing the essay, I came back to Lori’s abstract paintings, particularly (and fittingly) her two series: *Water* and *Fluid*. Her various series never offer explicit commentary. Much of her work is concerned with material structures: ruins, indigenous or classical architecture, the body. While there is a difference between architecture and water, I find in her work a preoccupation with the material infrastructure of the world. The *Water* series is no different. The movement of water near her home on Lake Ontario inspired the chosen paintings and they communicate the power and force of water. Lori describes their creation as her need for fluidity, and as an attempt to capture the sublime beauty of water. It was in the word “sublime” that I really came to these images. There is something violent and powerful in sublimity, such a forceful negation. Not so much a giving over, but being taken over by force, by the beauty and the horror of the waves. “Big Water”

and “Indigo” showcase this power. The water appears to roil and toss with a suggestion of the land in the background. In both paintings, the depth and darkness of the blues hint at a certain malevolence in the movement suggested in both.

Unlike the other paintings in the *Water* series, “Big Water” and “Indigo” evoke open water, not the shallows. The dark flows and waves of “Indigo” speak to the crush of the tides. This is not the ocean you hear when you bring a conch shell to your ear, but the dangerous water of red flags on beaches. It is the water wrecking ships, pulling bodies away from the relative and contentious safety of land or vessel. I see the violent water of the Middle Passage in these paintings, even if the waters of Lake Ontario rather than the Atlantic inspired them.

The third image, “Shaman’s Smoke,” is an outlier in the *Fluid* series. While the others are bright, using almost primary colors, this image is mainly earth tones, streaked with reds and whites. A figure appears underwater. While “Big Water” and “Indigo” are concerned with capturing the powerful movement of water, this third painting is where I locate the black body. While Lori by no means tried to convey this in her image, it is nonetheless what I see. The black figure crushed beneath the waters of history flowing around it.





STORYBOARD P. IN *DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



# Windridden: Historical Oblivion and the Nonvalue of Non- identification

**PARISA VAZIRI**

In the early 1960s, the Iranian psychiatrist Ghulām-Husayn Sā'idī, recognized primarily for his work as a modernist author and dramatist, traveled to a remote harbor in southern Iran to learn about zar. Zar names a pan-Afroasiatic belief in malignant winds circulating through hives inhumed under the earth and which infest human intestines and penetrate the skeletal frame. Practiced and communicated primarily amongst African slave descendants in the Middle East, zar encompasses both the conviction in this metaphysical substance and the rhythm and dance-oriented rituals wielded to heal its bodily and psychic afflictions. Lacking documents attesting to the origins of its belief, zar tests the limits of historicization and brushes against the realm of myth buried in deep history, extending past geographical precision and temporal specificity. The phenomenology of zar refracts

the fragility of historiographical material explicating its lineage; unveiling relations to history that are ineffable rather than binding, impenetrable rather than normative, and disruptive of the traditional alignment between interiority and historicity upon which the concept of race articulates itself.

Melancholic individuals turn to zar when other traditional or modern medical practices prove inefficient in mitigating psychosomatic ailments associated with withdrawal from the social world. Scholars like I. M. Lewis and Janice Boddy have long noticed the gendered character of zar in Sudan, Somalia, and the Southeast region of the Arabian peninsula where winds affect women disproportionately, and where zar constitutes the feminine domain of social ritual. In other regions, however, zar



## “THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ZAR REFRACTS THE FRAGILITY OF HISTORIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL EXPLICATING ITS LINEAGE”

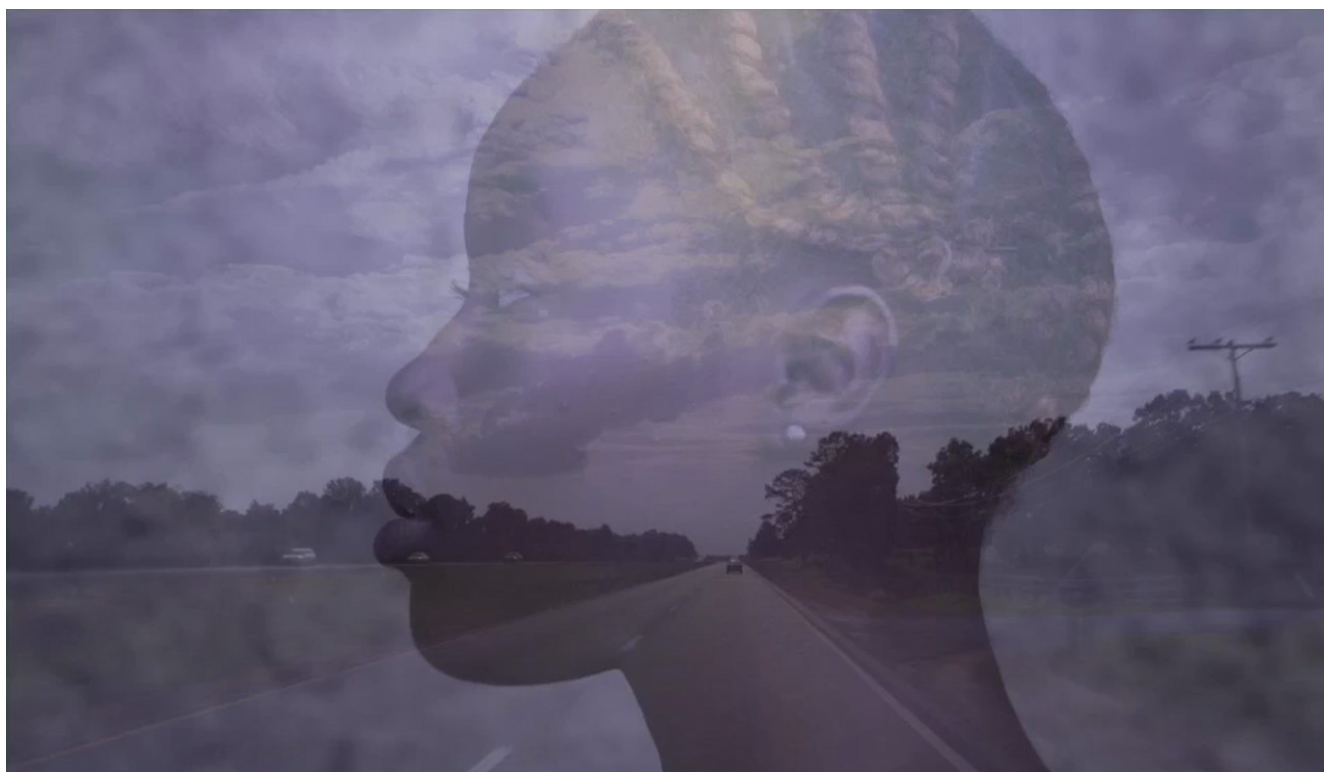
appears not to discriminate along such apparent lines.<sup>1</sup>

In *Ahle-Havā* (1966), the short monograph resulting from his fieldwork and styled in the genre of amateur ethnography, Sā'idī observed zar's ubiquity across forms of identity. He describes an enigmatic scene in the initial moments of the zar ceremony where the mama or baba zar (the zar expert in charge of treating the wind—almost always, he notes in passing, a black female) induces her patient to speak.<sup>2</sup> She

lays the windridden individual upon a mat on the ground and lights incense under his or her nose, then smokes a concoction of malodorous ingredients such as goat's hair, animal excrement, and noxious plants. Unwittingly, the afflicted may begin uttering words in Swahili, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, or another language without any conscious comprehension of these murmurings, sometimes bordering on inscrutable sounds or flaring howls.<sup>3</sup> The test allows the mama or baba zar to

detect the origin of the wind in order to find the proper path for placation.

The illustration of the ethnographic scene illuminates a recoiling from self-coherence grounded in the experience of Indian Ocean world slavery and which contributes to deconstructing our modern-day understanding of race. This understanding, Denise Ferreira da Silva has recently shown, and as I will interpret below, is predicated upon a philosophical alignment between interiority and historicity



*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

that braces the self-possessed subject.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, zar's connection to slavery limits possibilities for the appraisal of its disruption to this alignment shoring up the subject. Distinct from any philosophical understanding of race, blackness defies the containment or relegation of slavery to history, as it questions slavery's restriction to spatio-temporal categories more generally. Under such conditions,

alignment appears too measured a configuration to account for the ways slavery exceeds expectations for historical return and memory.

Sā'idī was a self-avowed amateur ethnographer. Not only was he untrained in the standardized protocols of anthropology—an institution that barely existed in Iran as a disciplinary formation in the first place—but his vibrant career as a fiction writer renders even further

spurious the truth-value of his text. I am not particularly invested in that truth-value; rather, I am interested in this particular moment of strange vocal eruption as a tool for the imagination, one which renders blackness as a kind of ambivalent displacement from place and time to be figured neither negatively nor positively, if it can be figured at all. Katherine McKittrick writes about the complex connection between racial

**“...OUR MODERN-DAY UNDERSTANDING OF RACE...IS  
PREDICATED UPON A PHILOSOPHICAL ALIGNMENT  
BETWEEN INTERIORITY AND HISTORICITY THAT  
BRACES THE SELF-POSSESSED SUBJECT”**

captivity and geography, implying blackness always connotes a form of displacement—a spatial disjuncture that “surprises” geographical expectation and fact.<sup>5</sup> Writing of the relation between blackness and temporality, Hortense Spillers poignantly articulates the historical stillness of racial captivity—a ruptured stagnancy sundering blackness from the empty temporal flow of the human, ceaselessly sucking it back toward the violent placidity of the past.<sup>6</sup> This moment

of wind identification speaks to an alternative relation to space and time conditioned by the power and enigma of sensory perception: a kind of torpor of memory whose meaning remains difficult to fully absorb, and whose judgment sits suspended.

The diffusion of zar from continental Africa into the lands of the Middle East and Mediterranean is more or less unanimously assumed to be linked to the Indian Ocean slave trade, even while the narrative fabric of this history remains lined with

irreparable holes and frayed at each layer of fact.<sup>7</sup> A lack of historical evidence for the existence of the zar ritual in the Middle East prior to the mid-nineteenth century is usually cited as primary justification for belief in its connection to African slavery (which thrived during that century), as is the fact that the practice is often contained within cult-like environments, unlike the more public-oriented characteristics of spirit rituals in many African territories. For Ehud Toledano, the degree to

**“...THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT OF STRANGE VOCAL ERUPTION...  
RENDERS BLACKNESS AS A KIND OF AMBIVALENT  
DISPLACEMENT FROM PLACE AND TIME”**

FIGURE 1



which former slaves in the Ottoman empire were able to maintain such traditions despite contempt and forceful prohibition by Ottoman officials and the interdictions of Islam problematizes the popular “good treatment” thesis of Islamic slavery. Toledano argues, rather, that the refusal to integrate evidences the hostility of an environment from which slaves sought respite through traditional healing and community-building techniques.<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 2



Anthropological artifacts like the zar ritual, then, remain significant for Indian Ocean world slavery scholars, who lack the robust and meticulously cataloged documentation so crucial to compiling the vast knowledge we currently have about Atlantic world slavery. This notorious paucity of information, however, is itself a critical question *to* history, rather than a poor answer to questions *from* history. Zar and its barely legible relationship to the history of African slavery infuses the lack

FIGURE 3



FROM L-R: (1) BOATS ANCHORED IN THE HARBOR OF BANDAR LINGIH, IRAN. (2) BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPH OF ZAR. (3) CEREMONIAL SCENE FROM AN EXPERIMENTAL ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY ABOUT ZAR. BAD-I JIN (DIRECTED BY NASER TAQVAI, 1969, NATIONAL IRANIAN RADIO AND TELEVISION), FRAME GRAB.

with courage to dream outside the demands of normative historical fact. Historical fact, even and perhaps when plentiful, as Spillers reminds students of Atlantic history, is predetermined by the assumptions that are capable of thinking questions into existence in the first instance.<sup>9</sup>

Precisely how Indian Ocean world slavery fits into the history of blackness remains unresolved. W. E. B. Dubois characterized continental Africa as a bridge between the Atlantic and Indian

**“PRECISELY HOW INDIAN OCEAN WORLD  
SLAVERY FITS INTO THE HISTORY OF BLACKNESS  
REMAINS UNRESOLVED.”**

Ocean worlds, not only in geographical but also economic and philosophical terms, indexing black thought's early engagement with this parallel space and antecedent chronology.<sup>10</sup> Prior to the radical break Atlantic slavery introduced into Africa's history, the virtually singular external influence on the cultural and political economy of this continent came from the Islamic world in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> That transatlantic slavery could not have flourished without its exposure to the

use, cultivation, and manufacture of sugar in Syria and Palestine during the Crusades is often unwittingly redacted from the popular history of African slavery, rendering contestable the depiction of a “break” introduced by the European reorientation of the trade, in contrast, for example, to the characterization of continuity.<sup>12</sup> The millenia-long trade in African slaves throughout the Indian Ocean only reinforces black studies' highly complex engagement with the concepts of temporality and

duration. By introducing horizonless depth in time, this extension intervenes in the exhausting quest for origin's retrieval.<sup>13</sup>

If our conception of racial blackness is cultivated within and throughout the nexus of Atlantic slavery and modernity's material and epistemological manifestations, including the philosophical enshrinement of historicity as the human's “privileged ontological context,” a counterintuitive thought arises: the black experience of



forgetting, or nonidentification with history in the Indian Ocean world, destabilizes the narrative of the racialization of blackness as it destabilizes our concept of the human more generally.<sup>14</sup> But if the possibilities for such nonidentification are circumscribed by that which is disclaimed, can there be value in focusing on this quasi-fictional moment of destabilization? From

what ground would it be possible to determine such value?

The Persian Gulf, and the south of Iran in particular, teems with various histories channeled through ethnic identification: Ethiopian, Arab, Hindi, Baluchi, Kurdish, Persian, Zanzibari, Somalian, etc. Having “‘long since forgotten to what tribes their ancestors belonged,’ a factor no longer of any consequence,” claims Abdul Sheriff, most of

these populations have intermixed to prismatic degrees.<sup>15</sup> Were one to ignore its non-linguistic manifestations, then on a purely empirical level, one could thus reduce the instance of zar “glossolalia” to mere assimilation, or unconscious absorption, particularly considering the various linguistic ingredients constituting the patois dialects spoken in the Khalij. Idealizing such forms of assimilation would

**“THE BLACK EXPERIENCE OF FORGETTING...  
DESTABILIZES OUR CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN  
MORE GENERALLY.”**

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**“HISTORY ERUPTS THROUGH UNPOSSESSED  
SPEECH, AND IS LEFT THERE, SHARED IN A  
MOMENT OF SURRENDER.”**

be a disingenuous perpetuation of the notion of “Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism” that unwittingly succeeds in enshrouding perception of historical violence in the “postcolonial” world—violence that is not in every instance derivative of colonialism as postcolonial theory has historically understood it.<sup>16</sup> Aware of the threat of idealization my curiosity poses, I highlight this micro-moment of unpredictable sound and quasi-speech embedded in zar as a kind of organic, ephemeral

historical trace presumably unfiltered through intention. It is a moment in which history—perhaps someone else’s history of displacement—erupts through unpossessed speech, and is left there, shared in a moment of surrender. Finally, I am interested less in the persistence of that historical trace, or of its “deeper” nuances, than in the possible meanings of nonidentification or nonrelation to it.

Nonidentification and disavowal of roots—specifically of African roots—is a cause for unease amongst Indian

Ocean world scholars, particularly those concerned with the parochial question of “diaspora.” African slave descendants’ reluctance to associate with their African roots is indeed documented throughout the countries of the Middle East and has been interpreted variously. Consensus assumes that because slaves were encouraged to assimilate into Middle Eastern and Eurasian societies much more assiduously than was the case in the Americas, these individuals gradually forfeited

direct connection with their familial and regional ties.<sup>17</sup> The so-called “ascending miscegenation” thesis, argue scholars of slavery in Southeast Asia, for example, is one of the greatest causes of cultural amnesia of slavery in India.<sup>18</sup> Providing a more discerning interpretation, Anie Montigny views the situation in Oman as a result of negative images of Africa in the media and in general society.<sup>19</sup> And, adding to this view, Mathew Hopper notes nothing is “gained” by highlighting one’s servile past in Eastern Arabia; thus, African ancestry is very often intentionally and strategically obscured.<sup>20</sup>

The desire to disassociate or distance oneself from blackness is a dominant and familiar theme for black studies.<sup>21</sup> While intentional dissociation is a valid and possibly sound interpretation of the rampant denegation, I would like to tap into a different course of thought

not conditioned by the notion of rejection, which already presupposes the naturalization of an unmediated intimacy between interiority, on the one hand, and historicity, on the other. This tranquil bond is the condition of possibility for a certain conceptualization of identity, perhaps the most prominent and widespread of modern civilization: a self or subject with a history that, from a sociopolitical standpoint, is first and foremost linked to geography, or in the case of black people, of a displacement that is, of course, first conditioned by expectation for placement. The question I want to ask, instead, is why we must begin with this expectation and assumption in the first place.

In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva brilliantly shows how a direct line connects the history of this assumption of alignment between interiority and

historicity to the development of the concept of race. In her readings of canonical Western philosophical texts from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, da Silva excavates a series of denigrations and disavowals of exteriority and connects them to the racialization of exteriority. Her narration of how the post-Enlightenment transcendental subject achieves its status as a full, feeling, knowing “I” emphasizes the necessary distancing and reduction of things and bodies in extension to validate or center the burden of understanding onto the individual mind in interiority. Focusing in particular on Hegel’s reconciliation of exteriority and interiority through the narrative of engulfment—the privileging of self-consciousness as the only force endowed with the capacity to recognize its own position as an object in space, simultaneously interior and exterior—Silva names the conflation of history

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and self-consciousness as one of the most violent moments in the history of philosophy. When history, now substitutable for interiority, is endowed with the meaning of Freedom and self-consciousness, history is racialized. History is racialized because, according to the philosophical narrative, there is only one particular kind of self-consciousness capable of moving history in accord with the practice of Freedom: (white) self-consciousness.

By showing how our modern understanding of the subject relies upon an epistemological context privileging, binding, subjectivity to historicity, da Silva challenges the ethics of this binding. Challenging the ethics of the relationship between being and time by describing its intimacy with the production of race threatens our everyday notion of what the human, even what the self, is. Da Silva calls it “risky,” and implies the risk has been too enormous for critical race scholars to take,

leaving them (often unwittingly) bound up in the more obvious and comprehensible but consistently unsatisfying “logic of exclusion.”<sup>22</sup> As the erasure and manipulation of history is a constant threat particularly for populations who have had to struggle to inscribe history, doubting the value of history might seem careless.<sup>23</sup> However, it is quite difficult to discern whether the legitimacy of this concern in fact derives from a previous

ideology undergirding our modern understanding of the human.

Da Silva's critique of the human relation to history prompts me to rethink forms of racialization explicitly borne from this unavoidable connection; however, it is the concept of blackness, not race, that positions slavery as a highly specific historical instance. Because blackness materializes—epidermalizes—slavery in such a specifically violent way (Fanon), it marks not just one history or one period of history amongst others that might be abstracted to the status of history in general. In Fred Moten's remarkable interpretation of Saidiya Hartman's work, the "event" of slavery would be a kind of "nonparticulate diffusion" in excess of both temporality and spatiality.<sup>24</sup> Spillers, in a distinct but loosely connected iteration, writes about the history of transatlantic slavery as marking a kind of conceptual-material branding that

would bear the weight of this unlocalizable, uncontained, and uncontainable diffusion, a point visual studies-oriented scholars of racial blackness have made in unique ways.<sup>25</sup> Blackness would be the exteriorization of the binding of interiority to historicity da Silva names as a crucial moment in the history of race, but also one which comprehends singularly the dangers of historical alignment by revealing the stakes of its imposed and tangible grafting onto the human. Sā'idī's "native informants" knew about this grafting, and experienced it in the segregated arrangement of their living conditions. That lived imposition of slavery—borne out in persisting social hierarchies—could not be forgotten along with its memory.<sup>26</sup>

In the Persian Gulf, the history of slavery has not yet been articulated into popular form—at least, not into a legible form of political consciousness

shared amongst various slave descendant populations. One scholar of slavery in Iran predicts that in a matter of decades this will change; that African descendants in the Middle East will begin to identify as black, over and beyond national identifications. With the recent spate of younger scholarly research on the Indian Ocean world, this is likely true, if the case of India's Sidi population is any indication.<sup>27</sup> And it may be empowering for both the larger black diaspora and for the individuals who don't yet identify as part of it. But in this moment when that has not quite occurred, something else worthy of attention has been continuing for centuries. It involves another form of power unrecognizable as political and impossible to celebrate because its value is unplaceable. It is a kind of nonvaluable forgetting, or simply, indifference to memory that merits understanding and recognition for what it does not assume. ■

<sup>1</sup> For example, while Sā' idī notes that the winds tend to afflict areas of poverty more frequently, in the case of Egypt, Morsy reports the winds affect the wealthy and poor alike. Soheir A. Morsy, "Spirit Possession in Egyptian Ethnomedicine: Origins, Comparison and Historical Specificity" in I. M. Lewis, Ahmed Al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz, eds. *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Ghulām-Husayn Sā' idī, *Ahl-i Havā* (Tehran: Chapkhanah-i Danishgah, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> In other regions, such as Somalia or Tunisia, change in the tone of voice or the emission of strange sounds substitutes for this moment of foreign speech. Virginia Luling, "Some Possession Cults in Southern Somalia" in *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Natvig, "Oromos, Slaves, And the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20.4 (1987): 669-89.

<sup>8</sup> Ehud R. Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah Wilson Moses, "Africa and Pan-Africanism in the Thought of Du Bois" in *The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. DuBois* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Lindon Barrett's posthumous *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014) is exemplary of a school of thought in black studies that views transatlantic slavery as a kind of rupture—particularly due to its connection to the origins of capitalism.

<sup>13</sup> Gwyn Campell, ed. *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004). Of course, various strains of black studies have succeeded in undermining the chronologically ordained itinerary of genealogy as it is instituted by disciplinary historiography. See, for example, Nahum Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Afro-Arab Interaction in the Indian Ocean: Social Consequences of the Dhow Trade* (Cape Town: Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2001), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Although, as an anomaly to this trend, Frederick Cooper has noted identification with slave roots on the Kenyan coast free of reluctance. Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977), 240.

<sup>18</sup> Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton, eds., *Slavery & South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Anie Montigny, "L' Afrique Oubliée des Noirs du Qatar" *Journal des Africanistes* 72.2 (2002), 213–225.

<sup>20</sup> Mathew S. Hopper, "African Presence in Eastern Arabia," in *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Porter (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Because for centuries African-Americans have been actively and violently denied access to self-authorship and thereby disassociated from the historical time of the world, it is easy to see how the fruition of historical consciousness has been essential to the pioneers of black studies and continues to be for black politics and radicalism.

<sup>24</sup> Private correspondence. In the past, I have been critical of Moten's treatment of Hartman's work, specifically of what I interpreted as the former's abstraction of structural violence into aporia (<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/vaziri.html>). I revise my position to reflect the fact I had missed a crucial aspect of Moten's logic. I now believe his operationalization of aporia illustrates the inseparability of violence from its innumerable iterations of abstraction, of which his famous example of jazz might be just one. "Non-particulate," then, indexes the texture of this inseparability, which remains, to some extent, unthinkable.

<sup>25</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby." Nicole Fleetwood writes about blackness as a "multisensory" experience. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Through analyses of the works of contemporary black artists, Darby English writes about the way blackness overflows bodies and objects into apparently neutral space. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

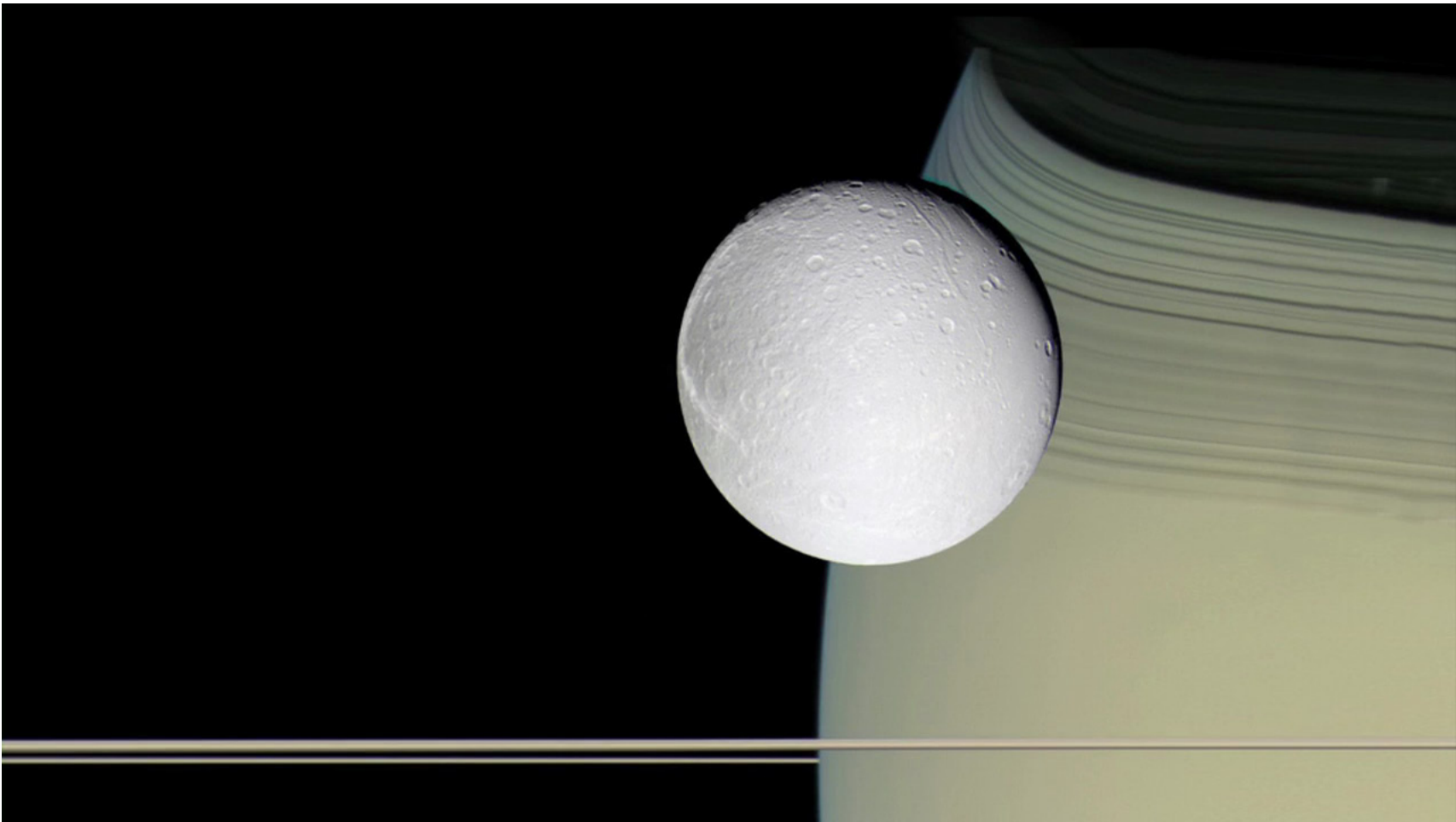
<sup>26</sup> Sā' idī was one of the few Iranian authors who observed and wrote about (nonformalized) racial segregation in Iran: "In the large and small coastal regions blacks are often isolated in their own neighborhoods; for example in Bandar Abbas they live mostly in the neighborhood called 'Blacks' Quarters' [Manabar-Siahhan] or 'Behind the City' (Posht-i Shahr)" (6). Their living conditions, he went on to note, were inferior to those of white Iranians.

<sup>27</sup> John C. Hawley, ed., *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008)





CENTAURUS GALAXY, *DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



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# Robot Love is Queer: Afrofuturism and Alien Love

**TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN**

“ROBOT LOVE IS QUEER”

— caller to DJ Crash Crash on WDRD<sup>1</sup>

Janelle Monáe’s debut EP of cybersoul and spacefunk, *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)* (2008), commences with an open-call for would-be death squads.<sup>2</sup> Bidding good morning with cheerful exuberance, the feminine voice of the surveillance state calls for the targeted murder, by bounty hunters, of android Cindi Mayweather:

Good morning cy-boys and cy-girls! I’m happy to announce that we have a star-crossed winner in today’s heartbreak sweepstakes. Android number 57821, otherwise known as Cindi Mayweather, has fallen desperately in love with a human named Anthony Greendown. And you know the rules! She is now scheduled for immediate disassembly! Bounty hunters, you can find her in the Neon Valley Street District, on the 4th floor in

the Leopard Plaza apartment complex. The droid control marshals are full of fun rules today. No phasers, only chainsaws and electro-daggers! Remember only card-carrying hunters can join our chase today. And as usual there will be no reward until her cyber-soul is turned into the Star Commission. Happy hunting!<sup>3</sup>

This essay, itself an assemblage of concepts drawn from a constellation of Afrofuturist sources, is about love—about loving the other, and about loving an-other whose otherness transgresses all that is presupposed in the possessive of the “whose”: an-other who is not a *who*, but a *what*. These terms, and this fundamental distinction of Western metaphysics—of subject/object, of who/what—are troubled here as a philosophical distinction of the Thing to the thinking Man. A philosophical distinction that masks the racialization of the Thing. Which is to say this distinction is troubled by way of an allegory of race that suspends

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and surpasses allegory. And the source of all this trouble, I assert, is alien, android, and Afrofuturist love.

Such troubling has occurred elsewhere in recent discourses, including object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and alien phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> But these discourses are not the first to rethink the Thing. Moreover, object-oriented philosophy tends to neglect how raciology—the “ethnocentrism” of

Western metaphysics—problematizes the object, its perception, and its discourse. Indeed, like Alexander Weheliye, I contend these discourses owe a debt to black feminist, Afrofuturist, and postcolonial thought, as well as (French) feminist psychoanalysis, in thinking the object.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I turn to the work of Sylvia Wynter, Kodwo Eshun, Sara Ahmed, and Frantz Fanon, who respectively pose the agency

of the nonhuman, if not the object, from the position of the othered.

Fanon hints at an-other form of nonsubjectivity in which, under racialized duress, he “gave himself up as an object.”<sup>6</sup> Wynter traces the ways in which the “ethnoclass” of white humanism “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”<sup>7</sup> Ahmed’s queer phenomenology unpacks straight assumptions concerning the orientation of

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objects—critiquing “the orientation of phenomenology” by asking “what it means for ‘things’ to be orientated”—while at the same time demonstrating their implicit racialization in a “world of whiteness.”<sup>8</sup> And Eshun anticipates developments in alien and object philosophy with his inventory of Afrofuturist becomings that reject (black) humanism—to the point where “African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human.”<sup>9</sup>

What connects their work is a critique of white humanism/metaphysics as a historical construct that, despite its paradigmatic shifts, has become the unthought and default registry of authentic being. In this missive my aim is to briefly connect their innovative work with the theoretical and artistic assemblages of Afrofuturism—by way of the black science fiction music and music

videos of Janelle Monáe—that explore what it means to love the alien.

### **Loving the Alien**

Janelle Monáe deploys the science fiction trope of the enslaved android to address race, gender, and white supremacy, connecting her work to Afrofuturist thematics criss-crossing the Afrodiaspora. Afrodiasporic posthumanist approaches range from Jamaica’s Lee “Scratch” Perry

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**“EX-APPROPRIATION, AS AFROFUTURIST PERFORMATIVE STRATEGY INITIATES A BECOMING EXHUMAN.”**

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**“AFROFUTURIST LOVE...REMAKES ALIENATION AS ALIEN NATION [WHICH] ARISES NOT BY REJECTING THE ALIEN BUT BY EX-APPROPRIATING IT FOR THE PROJECT OF DECOLONIZATION.”**

and The Upsetters’s reclamation of the racist stereotype of black über-animalia on their seminal 1976 LP *Super Ape* to Grace Jones’s alien, animalia and androidal performances—particularly as she flaunted the womanist black power of her fierce, embodied athleticism, in her hula-hooping live performance of “Slave to the Rhythm” at the Queen’s Jubilee in 2012.<sup>10</sup>

These are but two examples of Afrofuturist cultural performance that stress the use of science

fictional, fantastical, and mythical tropes in the praxis of radical black ontogenesis, whereby the white stereotype of nonhuman black identity is ex-appropriated by animalia, android, and alien black becomings. Such ex-appropriation signals a deconstructive becoming that short circuits the dialectics of re-appropriation by improperly mis-purposing the deprivileging terms of dehumanization. To this end, Derrida writes that “ex-appropriation is not what is proper to man.”<sup>11</sup> Ex-appropriation, as

Afrofuturist performative strategy, marks an improper re-appropriation, conducted without propriety, of the nonhuman. At the limit of the performative, it initiates a becoming exhuman, whereby the nonhuman is weaponized as a speculative exit from the white supremacist imaginary through practices of signifyin’ love for an exhuman alien blackness.

Mark Dery’s coining of the term “Afrofuturism” in 1993 to describe black futurist music, comix, and arts connected to like concepts in

## **“ALIEN LOVE ITSELF [IS] A POTENT FORCE OF BLACK FUTURE VISIONING.”**

the work of Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany, Amiri Baraka, Octavia Butler, and Mark Sinker, among others.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Mark Sinker’s work offers a tantalizing lead for discussing Afrofuturist love, seeing as his short 1992 essay in *The Wire* magazine was provocatively titled “Loving the Alien.” By correlating the alien abduction stories of Sun Ra to Public Enemy’s post-slavery observation that “Armageddon been-in-effect,” Sinker set out to chart the historically

alienating conditions whereby “Black Science Fiction” becomes a radical exercise in *loving* the alien. Thus an Afrofuturist strategy arises, whereby “black American culture, forcibly stripped by the Middle Passage and Slavery Days of any direct connection with African mother culture . . . has nonetheless survived; by syncretism, by bricolage, by a day-to-day programme of appropriation and adaptation.”<sup>13</sup> Such adaptive appropriation names the bricolage of ex-appropriation, which in Afrofuturism undertakes a

speculative pedagogy of learning to love the affects and tropes of “alienation”: “The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways Alien Nation.”<sup>14</sup>

Afrofuturist love, then, is a love that paradoxically yet strategically remakes alienation as Alien Nation. Such love is improper, insofar as

it loves the alien by way of the ex-appropriation of alienation. It is a love that mis-purposes the white supremacist category of subhumanity and shapeshifts it into radical exhumanity, signalling a chance for a novel collective love in the post-apocalyptic timeline. Alien Nation arises not by rejecting the alien but by ex-appropriating it for the project of decolonization.

If Dery's early concept of Afrofuturism named a movement that did not yet exist, today Afrofuturism is a planetary movement everywhere redefining and remaking itself. In her exemplary book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack describes how Afrofuturism has since been taken-up by artists, activists, writers, and scholars across the Afrodiaspora, indicating what Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones have since named "Afrofuturism 2.0."<sup>15</sup> In an era

of hashtags, memes, and rapid digital modes of cultural communication, AF 2.0 signals the perpetual reinterpretation and reinvention of Afrofuturism by Afrodiasporic peoples. Afrofuturism, as love for the alien, also signals a planetary love for speculative approaches to blackness and for alien love itself as a potent force of black future visioning.

### Robot Love is Queer

But what does it mean to love the alien? What does it mean, in Janelle Monáe's vision of Metropolis, for an android to love a human? And for a human to love an android? To love an-other, then, who is alien to the *who*, who is ordered as *what*, who is categorically refused the rank of the subject and its ontological certitude as an agentic individual. An-other who is always the *whose* of another who, which is to say, the *what* as the property of the *who*. Such is Cindi's tale of

the alien android, who is evidently thinking twice about being forced into servitude to those who would unthinkingly declare themselves *who*.

Cindi Mayweather's flight from the authorities begins with a transgression of love: for in Metropolis, androids are forbidden from falling in love with humans. That, in sum, the supposedly heartless, "alien from outer space," that *what* which has been built to serve—with all of its science fictional, metaphoric, and intertextual resonances with *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), and, particularly in visual and thematic tropes of the revolution of the collective working class of the *what*, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)—is not permitted to fall in love with the enshrined entity of the *who*: the enfleshed, hearted, and class-of-all-classes, privileged human. Not because the human cannot be

touched—as Monáe’s “Prime Time (feat. Miguel)” (Alan Ferguson, 2013) video makes clear: androids are often pleasurebots for their human clients—but because of the insinuation of agency to the what, in what android love implies: that their impulses transgress categorical whatness, usurping and undermining the affective-poetico agency of the who as the only subject who can love.<sup>16</sup>

There is a twist to Monáe I wish to explore here, which is to say a “queer” twist, insofar as the caller to WDRD asserts that “robot love is queer.”<sup>17</sup> It is here that Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology helps us think “the task of making ‘race’ a rather queer matter.”<sup>18</sup> For alien love queers the straightness of who—who love. Queerness does not just operate on the side of the who: it traverses the who/what. The transgression of who-what love is nonstraight: it looks off to the side,

towards Things. Loving the alien is not just transgressive; it is disorientating, undoing the orientation of whose who. It is disorientating in Ahmed’s sense that “disorientation involves becoming an object.”<sup>19</sup> Thus loving the alien, in its disorientation from the proper alignment of who/what, involves becoming exhuman. There are no “straight humans” left in such love. And relevant to our discussion here, Ahmed draws this queer praxis of disorientation from Frantz Fanon, whereby “the point at which the body becomes an object” is where “the black body begins.”<sup>20</sup> Ahmed articulates the disorientation of queer love to racialization *qua* objectification at the point of the black body. Fanon, of course, is referring to the dissecting violence of the white gaze in objectifying the colonized. Observing the objectifying glances of whites as he rides a train, and the three seats of space they grant him, Fanon writes of his body

“giving way to an epidermal racial schema”—a black/skin—whereby “disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from myself, and gave myself up as an object.”<sup>21</sup>

Fanon makes a crucial observation: it is the racializing gaze of the colonizer that skins the other as object. It is this skinning of the other as object that will lead us to read the shifting skin of android Cindi Mayweather as a queering disorientation of the epidermal racial schema.

The WDRD caller’s statement that “robot love is queer” does not mask but rather amplifies the disorienting love between the who-what. And fundamentally, such queer robot love, *qua* alien Afrofuturist love, does not collapse into being loved as a who. Rather, it retains the disorientating queerness of being



loved as *the alien*—which is to say, of a love that gives itself up to a love for, and of, the object. A love that does not reject the alien, but rather affirms it by becoming (the) object; a love that would not strive to reshape the alien into the schema of the subject; a love that disorients the schema of the who/what.

Thus the Afrofuturist twist. For it is not the case that—in a liberal mode—the what struggle to

become who. It is not the case that those objectified demand to be acknowledged as “equally” whose who in the privileging caste system of who over what. For it is the “epidermal racial schema” of the who/what itself that queer robot love disorients. It does so by disorienting the skinning of the object, insofar as the shifting of the skin disorients the white/skin’s ontological privileging of the who over the what.

Thus a broader point: it is Afrofuturism, as the decolonizing praxis of Afrodiasporic speculative thought, amplified to the level of the radical black imaginary and enacted across multiple modes of expression and media that elaborates—in its alternative mythsciences, musics, and speculative fictions, its histories, perspectives, rhythms, and tempos—a collective reimagining of futures assembled from a revisioning of

**“ALIEN LOVE QUEERS THE STRAIGHTNESS OF WHO-WHO LOVE...THERE ARE NO ‘STRAIGHT HUMANS’ LEFT IN SUCH LOVE.”**

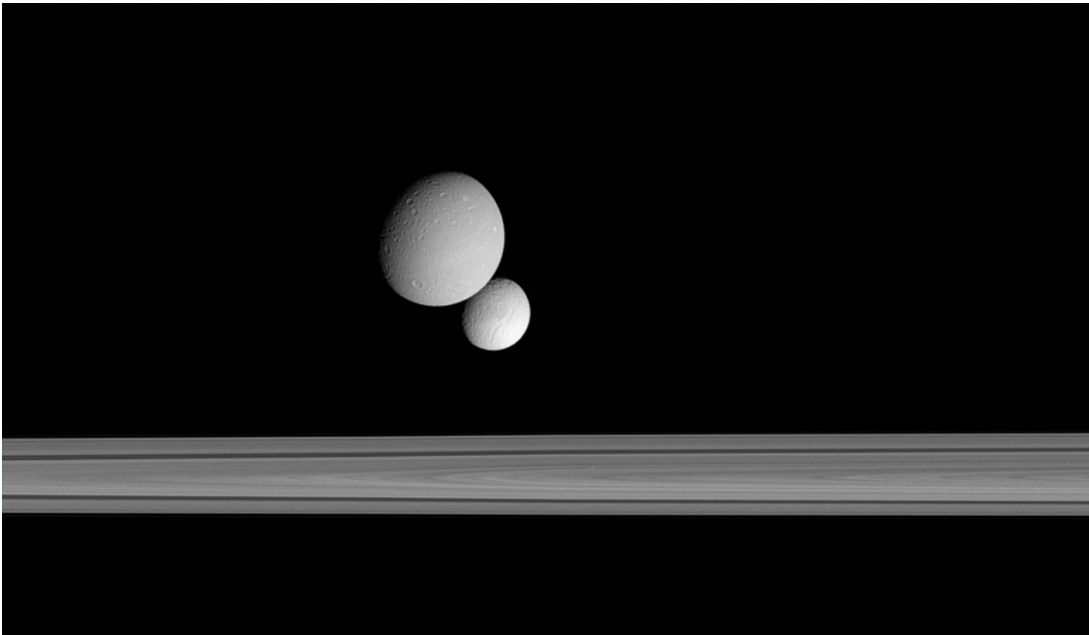
the past that infiltrate the present.<sup>22</sup> The alien, as the anticipatory figure of the exhuman, arrives by way of the reinvented past from such futures to-come. By loving the alien, Afrofuturism interrogates the unthought reality privileging the who over the what—that hegemonic reality that says the object, the alien, the thing is not to be loved, but only ab/used, put to work, enslaved, its past stolen, its futurity erased—

casting into the temporal flux a future hitherto denied for the alien.

This reality of the who that orders, colonizes, and enslaves the what is upheld by white supremacy, the socioeconomic raciology that equates the privileged figure of the human with the skin of whiteness. Rather than struggle to become who (and thus to become, under raciological neocolonialism, a white/skin subject), at stake in the Afrofuturist thematics

of Monáe's black sonic, speculative, and science fiction imaginary, is an-other struggle: *that of the what to become something other than that of the who*.<sup>23</sup> What is at stake is to reject the paradigm of the who as the only such authenticating paradigm; to become an-other by weaving "living myths" of becoming through storytelling so as to assert the affective and poetic sociogeny of the what, without being *whose*.

**“THE ALIEN, AS THE ANTICIPATORY FIGURE OF THE EXHUMAN, ARRIVES BY WAY OF THE REINVENTED PAST FROM SUCH FUTURES TO-COME.”**



DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

And with this sociogeny, or socio-collective development of the what (for as Fanon wrote, “there is nothing ontological about segregation”) an emergent ontogenesis takes shape in the shifting (perception of the) skin.<sup>24</sup> With re-crafting, myth becomes a new reality of the thing, to become not but a thing but a thing unto itself. The modus operandi of becoming strikes through (and requires) both sociogeny and ontogenesis, which is to say, it is socio-cultural as a collective becoming even as its singularity enunciates the many in but one shifting skin. I call this the dispossessed whatness of becoming-alien—an Afrofuturist love of queer disorientation—whereby dispossession signals a what unowned, precisely because becoming alien demands an exiting praxis from the schema of the human.<sup>25</sup>

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FIGURE 1. JANELLE MONÁE AS WHITE/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.



FIGURE 2. JANELLE MONÁE AS BLACK/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.

Monáe's exemplary album *The ArchAndroid* (2010)<sup>26</sup>—black science fiction sound for the "cybersoul," as Monáe has called her work—follows the rise of Cindi as the revolutionary ArchAndroid, inspiring fugitive *robotas*—those forced to work in serfdom—to rise up against a surveillance state that uses (and abuses) sentient androids for forced labour and pleasure. Cindi/the ArchAndroid is imprisoned in (and escapes from) mental and physical incarceration, waging time-travelling warfare with the sonic, symbolic, and embodied weapons of myth, dance, and song.<sup>27</sup> Which is to say Cindi's primary means of struggle are the very affective-poetico domains of the *who* that supposedly make the *who* a *who*—which is also why, in the imaginary realm of Metropolis, her expressions, music, and rhythms are banned from the airwaves of WDRD. Besides its affective force, insofar as her music

combines funk, pop, hip-hop and soul in an energetic take on Duke Ellington, George Clinton, OutKast, Prince, and Sun Ra's big band sound, Monáe's thematic narrative of the alien android offers a powerful allegory of alienating and enslaved objectification under capitalist white supremacy. Insofar as Cindi is an *android*, a whatness enslaved to the who as the latter's likeness, Monáe's science fiction performance of android slavery reinforces the thesis that the first subject of modernity—in what is not an allegory but a much-needed critical re-reading of modernity *tout court*, not just of the "peculiar institution"—is the "subject \$" of the slave, and not the celebrated (French) revolutionary.<sup>28</sup>

As C.L.R. James and Eric Williams have argued, modern capitalism, particularly the Industrial Revolution, begins with the transformation of Africans into commodities.<sup>29</sup> Indeed,

in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx calls the embodied economic unit of slavery "blackskins," and as I have noted elsewhere, the blackskin denotes living monetary value by way of an ontological conversion to whatness: the blackskin is not a human subject, but a living product to be hunted.<sup>30</sup> Further, the reference to skin, as if a pelt made to serve rather than be skinned, calls to mind Fanon's distinction between skins and masks, whereby the black/skin that bears the objectifying gaze of the colonizer is forced to don the mask of whiteness, even as s/he is denied the privilege thereof. Thus the colonizer fabricates the colonized as an inferior image of himself. It is this unbearable splitting of self, caught between skin and mask—or what W. E. B. Du Bois would likewise call "double consciousness"—that leads Fanon to give himself up to the object. What Afrofuturism elaborates is how this giving-up

also constitutes a refusal of the transcendental pre-eminence of the (white) subject. Such a refusal may take the form of disorienting the distinction between mask and skin, by a strategy rendering the skin as much an artifice as the mask.

Monáe plays with such a troubling of the skin. In the uncut video for "Many Moons" (Alan Ferguson, 2008), Cindi Mayweather first appears backstage as a white android, before pressing a button on the side of her temple that renders her skin black (see Figures 1 and 2). Here, the androidal white/skin is a signifier as slippery as any other, its apparent solidity a construct of technological rendering that disturbs not just the apparent distinction between mask and skin, but whiteness as the supposed fleshy guarantee of authentic humanism. The multiplicity of possible readings of Mayweather's white metallic sheen reveals whiteness as a construct as

artificial as the android—or indeed, the human. And the same goes for blackness: though it is applied after the fact, thereby revealing its like artifice, it is applied to make the thing a thing to begin with. It thus follows that deconstructive schema of the dangerous supplement—which is to say, it effaces in the same gesture whiteness as originary mark of human subjectivity.<sup>31</sup> Mayweather’s androidal blackness can also be read as a beauty effect applied to cover the (undesirable) underskin of whiteness, a gesture that counteracts prevailing trends in whitening cosmetics. As Gilroy has pointed out, countervailing gestures of black-is-beautiful are often implicated in complex systems of commodification.<sup>32</sup> It is because the supplement remains dangerous that its excess is capitalized. Thus the Afrofuturist black/skinning of the android intersects Monáe’s pop culture commodification as a commercial representative of

beauty manufacturer Covergirl, who describes Monáe as “staying true to her own brand of beautiful.”<sup>33</sup> What is meant here by “true,” and “staying” true to such a “brand”—with all the ambiguity of branding in signifying the marked skin of ownership—becomes open to multiple disorientations through Monáe’s becoming android, in the shifting of Mayweather’s supplemental skins.

In cut-up footage interspersing the video’s android auction of Alpha Platinum 9000 models, all played by Monáe—where the allegory is clearly that of the slave auction block—the white-skinned Alpha Platinum 9000 model is again shown, this time against the backdrop of a thermonuclear explosion.<sup>34</sup> The signature mushroom cloud mirrors the whiteness of the android (see Figure 3). The eerie significance of disorienting the solidity of white/skin is echoed in the video’s

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**“WHAT IS AT  
STAKE IS TO  
REJECT THE  
PARADIGM OF  
THE WHO AS THE  
ONLY SUCH  
AUTHENTICATING  
PARADIGM”**

apocalyptic imagery. Again, multiple readings abound. In the symbolic archetypes of Western metaphysics, whiteness is the noncolor of purity and matrimony, of life itself. Here, in its radioactive cloud, whiteness is connected to species-death, to the self-destructive terminus of life itself. In the same frame, the metallic sheen of Mayweather's white/skin reveals an uncanny hope for its artifice: once revealed as the construct it is, forged from earth metals that make machines of intelligence or destruction, revealed too are its starkly diverging futures—accept artifice or beget apocalypse. As the mushroom cloud erupts to the side of Mayweather, we bear witness to two diverging futures of whiteness, the urgency of which is confronted by an absolute danger: if such polarities become political, in Schmitt's sense, that violence towards the supplement becomes total war.<sup>35</sup>



FIGURE 3  
JANELLE MONÁE AS WHITE/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.

**“I CALL THIS THE  
DISPOSSESSED  
WHATNESS OF  
BECOMING-  
ALIEN-AN  
AFROFUTURIST  
LOVE OF QUEER  
DISORIENTATION.”**

This is not the only time Monáe plays white/skin. In *Metropolis* (The Chase Suite), Monáe’s opening Afrofuturist allegory of the slave patrol (an allegory that is the living horror/truth of systemic state violence against African Americans today), the chase to the death is conducted using the weaponry of “chainsaws and electro-daggers.” The evidence of this chase appears on the cover of Monáe’s *Metropolis*. The Platinum 9000 model android Cindi Mayweather appears damaged, missing one arm, and stripped of some circuitry. But most importantly, insofar as Monáe’s blackness is elsewhere a commodity, Mayweather—which is to say, Monáe in performance as Mayweather—is startling white, stripped of her black/skin. All the constitutive paradoxes of whiteness as artifice, as machinic sheen, and yet as supposed index of its own human authenticity, are brought to bear in this image. At work is a

complex exposure of whiteness as artifice. Mayweather’s black/skin is likewise marked in its absence as an artifice fabricated by the needs of whiteness to assert its supremacy.

Why must Mayweather be disassembled? What does transgressing the who/what distinction amount to, for white supremacy? In the violence of the Chase, whiteness seeks to eradicate the supplement of the other’s skin so as to see itself reflected. When objects resist, white supremacy demands originary whiteness everywhere, without supplement. Yet the erasure of that dangerous supplement destroys the very thing whiteness needs to fabricate its supremacy. Thus such erasure risks total catastrophe. And so Mayweather remains, a fragment or excess that cannot be completely destroyed. As Mayweather gazes from the cover, we bear witness to



the violence of whiteness in failing to accept its artifice—unworking, nonfunctional, and broken.<sup>36</sup>

...

Drawing from Fanon's troubling of mask to skin in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Sylvia Wynter suggestively calls for a raciological genealogy of the "human" as a constructed and historically-situated figure. Today's dominant model of the "human," writes Wynter, as "the *natural scientific model* of a *natural organism*" is now planetary insofar as "the West, over the last five hundred years, has brought the *whole* human species into its *hegemonic*" model of "Man2," which is a "transumptively liberal *monohumanist* . . . model of being *human*" that effaces the potential of what Wynter calls "*the autopoiesis of being hybridly human*."<sup>37</sup> For Wynter, the hybridly human acknowledges the "regulatory laws" of its environment

(that claims humans as part of an autopoietic system) while coming to terms with its posthumanism (that humans are no longer subordinated to genetic code).<sup>38</sup>

Tendencies in Afrofuturism further but also differ from Wynter's argument. Or rather, they further the potential of the hybrid-human only insofar as Afrofuturist becomings push toward the *exhuman*. Such becomings appear so alien and unnatural to the natural scientific model of Man that their reality is only comprehended as unreality, as if "but" art, and not the transformational art—*qua* technics—of what Richard Iton calls the "black fantastic," which I resample from his prose as those "notions of being . . . marked as deviant."<sup>39</sup> The role of myth in such potential is not secondary but constitutive, which is to say, in a deconstructive schema of retroactive supplementarity, the

necessary inclusion to begin with of that which is excluded for there to be a beginning (or, that which is added on after the fact to make the thing whole to begin with). For Wynter, the hybrid-human arises in the "*conscious awareness*" of the tension and slippery ambiguity between the *bios* (skin/body/phylogeny/ontogeny) to the *logos* or *mythoi* (word/mask/myth/culture/sociogeny).<sup>40</sup> But it is the exhuman that amplifies the *mythoi*, which in all of its web of signifiers—the myths we tell about ourselves, *particularly about us as "we"*—shapes our perception of the former, that fleshy stuff of the skin.<sup>41</sup> And particularly of what is under the skin, as the genetic code now found to be malleable. Hence the tension and slippery ambiguity of the "human" as-such. In conversation with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter is quick to point out the "major implication here," one not lost on the futurist avenues of alien

alterity that propel Afrofuturism: that of process, of becoming, of shapeshifting, and thus of radical agency and change: “humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is praxis.”<sup>42</sup> To which Afrofuturism adds an alien deviation: the improper praxis of becoming exhuman.

Louis Chude-Sokei develops Wynter’s thought in relation to the hybrid humanity of the black Atlantic, emphasising that “the plantation Negro was neither human nor animal but something or somewhere else.”<sup>43</sup> The underlying logic of a praxis of being (non)human in the neither/ nor is a thesis first described by Wynter in 1979 as the “possibility of lack.”<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, the *social* position of “being the non-human” under white supremacy must “conceptualize . . . the lack of intellectual faculties”; thus being the non-human “engenders the anxiety of falling into the socially

stigmatized.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Wynter follows Deleuze and Guattari in positing lack as “created, planned and organized in and through social production.”<sup>46</sup> Thus lack is contingent to social production, and the possibility of lack is how it reconfigures the contingency of being (non)human. By the same token, becoming non-human engenders alternative modes of social production—thereby signalling the political economy of Afrofuturism.

The Afrofuturist thesis is to amplify the possibility of lack to that of the impossibility of potential—and I again use “amplify” not just as metaphor, but like Chude-Sokei to signal the significance of music, and sonic remix culture, to the call-and-response of what Paul Gilroy has influentially named the black Atlantic.<sup>47</sup> For, it is the self-described “Living Myth” of Sun Ra, jazz composer and Arkestra bandleader, the Afrofuturist case of

cases, that amplifies the impossibility of Wynter’s call to transform the scientifico-biological constraints upon the human, by enacting, by *becoming*, an impossible figure of the *bios-mythoi*. And here a translation but also transformation arises, from *bios-mythoi* to Living Myth, as Sun Ra declares himself the return of an ancient alien Kemetic Pharaoh from Saturn. Sun Ra, the Living Myth who “walked the Earth,” alien in both space and time, poses to “us” all the question: “What myth am I?”<sup>48</sup> And what I(s) are myths?

Kodwo Eshun asserts the force of Afrofuturist mythos is such that it is capable of rejecting the “pointless and treacherous category” of the human.<sup>49</sup> Eshun’s late twentieth century Afrofuturist inventory of Black Atlantic Sonic Fiction, PhonoFiction, and Futurism, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, remains one of few texts to develop an Afrofuturist

inquiry as speculative, challenging, and urgent as Wynter's. For critics such as Weheliye, Eshun's description of Sonic Futurism as adopting a "cruel, despotic amoral attitude towards the human species" has been understood as rejecting the black body.<sup>50</sup> But this is to neglect what Eshun signals by his understanding of the "human," which I suggest echoes Wynter's category of the Western/white supremacist model of Man, and not the (black) body as-such. For Eshun's encyclopedic compendium of Afrofuturism is concerned with all manner of bodies—from the animalia-Ark body of Lee "Scratch" Perry, in which a body ecology emerges of mixing console and organic mystique, to white German android-band *Kraftwerk*, whose bodies became performances of machinic whiteness *par excellence*; from Mothership funkmeister and outerspace alien George Clinton, whose gender-queering body flaunted stage nudity,



DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

**“ESHUN’S EMPHASIS ON ‘FLUIDARITY’ ANTICIPATES THE CONCEPT OF “LIQUID BLACKNESS”—OF BLACKNESS UNHINGED FROM TRADITION, DISLOCATED FROM THE DEMANDS OF AUTHENTICITY, AND UPROOTED FROM THE REAL”**

to the android, alien, and black comix bodies of Detroit techno-collective Underground Resistance. While it remains attentive to bodies, Eshun’s project is admittedly ex-anthropological: it articulates the praxis of becoming-exhuman. It is ex-anthropological insofar as it decenters the anthropocentric tendencies of cultural studies and music criticism, which according to Eshun, seek “the Real Song, the Real Voice,” by positing in their audibility the authentic soul of an

*anthropos*, caught in a “perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, Eshun surveys the assemblage of production, distribution, communication, and recording technologies in which the (human) body becomes but a component. Anticipating developments in media archeology and media ecology, Eshun writes, “Machine music . . . is the artform most thoroughly

undermined and recombined and reconfigured by technics.”<sup>52</sup>

By rejecting the human, Eshun also rejects “any and all notions of a compulsory black condition,” particularly the “solid state known as ‘blackness.’”<sup>53</sup> This is to say that for Eshun, interrogating the human means a like critique of black realness, representation, and authenticity. Eshun critiques the bounding of blackness to the real, which neglects the antisociality of black surrealism: “the ‘street’

is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic explaining all Black Music, conveniently mishearing antisocial surrealism as social realism.”<sup>54</sup> This is a point also taken up by Chude-Sokei as he questions the “Afro” in Afrofuturism and other neologisms suggesting a default condition to blackness, insofar as they “too often deploy blackness as a knowable force or object or assume it as innately radical,” bound by an “insistence on reducing black technological usage—or sound—to political solidarity.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, for Chude-Sokei the black Atlantic can be overdetermined as a like myth, in which it is assumed that “common historical experiences and shared cultural or musical influences translate as shared ideological concerns, similar aesthetic motivations, or even shared visions of the past and future.”<sup>56</sup> Both Chude-Sokei and Eshun see the black Atlantic

as an imagined space of unending contestation over the meanings of blackness, conducted through the fragmented, rhizomorphic and fractal networks of global communications, whereby multiple, contingent, open-ended blacknesses transact without resolution.

To this end, black Atlantic Futurism, writes Eshun, dissolves “into a *fluidarity*” that “dislocates you from origins.”<sup>57</sup> Insofar as the black Atlantic is not but one thing, neither is its futurism. Both are set adrift in the oceanic temporality that connects metaphors of the past to the fluid matters of the future. Eshun’s emphasis on “fluidarity” anticipates the concept of “liquid blackness”—of blackness unhinged from tradition, dislocated from the demands of authenticity, and uprooted from the real (of the street and its philosophical fundament). Eshun signals such fluidarity by

its “unrecognizability, as either Black or Music.”<sup>58</sup> It appears as the unrecognizable, the alien, the unidentifiable object, that which dazes and distorts schemas of perception. We must be attentive to the audible homophony in Eshun when he writes that Black Atlantic Futurism “uproutes you,” suggesting both the *uprooting* of the hierarchical arborescence of black tradition (howsoever located), and the *uprouting* of the mythical routes of the black Atlantic. Thus, Black Atlantic Futurism also suspends the black Atlantic from assuming that its concept harbours the same shared beliefs. The black Atlantic thus connects at the same time it dislocates the distribution of differentiations of blackness by way of an oceanic space of geography, *mythos*, and technics. And as Eshun emphasises, the dislocation of blackness in tradition, recognizability, and realness, is

not replaced with a single, new model of being human; rather, the affective-poetico assemblage of “Alien Music . . . replaces them with nothing whatsoever.”<sup>59</sup>

This nothingness has, again, been read as cruelly destructive nihilism—but like the ambiguous explosion of planet Earth at the close of Sun Ra’s 1974 film *Space is the Place* (John Cone, 1974), it is with the destabilization of the ground, of *terra firma*, that what Sun Ra calls the Outer Darkness reveals itself, as the potential of other planets to come. By nothing, I read Eshun as not positing *nihilio*, but rather all that Wynter anticipates in the *possibility* of lack—Sun Ra’s Outer Darkness of the Void, in which potential is feared as nihilism precisely because of the profoundly radical effects of its disorientation.

Though Sylvia Wynter appears absent from Eshun’s text, it is here that I wish to connect the two as the

site of an encounter yet-to-come. For what Eshun sets forth is a catalogue of Afrofuturist becomings—an inventory of radical departures from humanism—that invent the exhuman otherwise. Just as Wynter writes of how enslaved Africans were excluded from the ontology of Man, becoming something other to white humanity, as the “scapegoat-carrier of all alternative potentialities that are repressed in the system,”<sup>60</sup> Kodwo Eshun writes that the music of “Afrodiasporic futurism”—which is to say the music of Afrodiasporic peoples that have endured the position of the colonized/scapegoat under white supremacist humanism—“comes from the Outer Side. It alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future. Alien Music is a synthetic recombinator, an applied art technology for amplifying the rates of becoming alien.”<sup>61</sup> This appears a succinct summation of Janelle Monáe’s project

of android love music—insofar as embracing nothingness implies, and intensifies, a love for some Thing. ■

<sup>1</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Our Favorite Fugitive (Interlude)," *The Electric Lady*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 536210-2, 2013, compact disc/album.

<sup>2</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 511234-2, 2007, compact disc/album.

<sup>3</sup> Janelle Monáe, "The March of the Wolfmasters." *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 511234-2, 2007, compact disc/album.

<sup>4</sup> A critique of how raciology structures Western philosophical discourse needs to be brought to bear upon these discourses, especially when the latter claims it has escaped anthropocentrism to deal exclusively with Things. For example, insofar as SR/OOO display a love for horrific things, particularly in readings of H. P. Lovecraft, what oft goes uncommented is how such horrific fiction deploys its monstrosities as allegories for the racialized other (see my "Victims Themselves of a Close Encounter: On the Sensory Language and Bass Fiction of Space Ape (In Memoriam)," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 7, no. 2 (2015): 86–115, doi:10.12801/1947-5403.2015.07.02.05). By the same token, one could critique Meillassoux's argument that the supremely ancient object indicating an *arche-fossil* temporality inaccessible to the Kantian critical faculties neglects to account for how raciology structures the discourse of the inaccessible, primitive, ancient, alien (see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier, London: Continuum, 2008). This is not to discount Meillassoux's anti-Kantian argument, but it is to suggest that the object, *qua* object, is not a neutral category suspended from raciology (which thus may have effects for the anti-Kantian argument). Likewise, Harman posits speculative realism as an ontological inquiry into the "drama at work in the heart of tools themselves," the "tool-being" that is "subterranean" in Heidegger's distinction of *Zuhandenheit* (object-tools unnoticeable because functional: ready-to-hand) to *Vorhandenheit* (broken, and thus present-at-hand, though only as broken) (Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 24, 31, 35, 125). Yet this argument side-steps who or what is considered a tool-being, and who or what has the ability to make such a distinction. Reading Heidegger through Fanon, Wynter, and Hegel, one could point out that masters only "see" their slaves when unworking or resisting (and thus, we may add, as nonfunctional or broken tools). What happens in SR/OOO when tool-beings resist? Or, even speak? Indeed, for Harman, the object, *qua* tool-being, is devoid of language, insofar as language is "something human" (133). Is there no idiom of the alien, no murmur of the tool-being? And what if language itself is an alien virus, as Burroughs suspected?

<sup>5</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also the object relations theory of Melanie Klein and French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's work on the abject, as that which is neither subject nor object (see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)).

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>7</sup> 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 (2003): 260.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3, 14, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1999), A[192].

<sup>10</sup> Lee "Scratch" Perry and The Upsetters, *Super Ape* (Island, UK, 1976: ILPS 9417).

<sup>11</sup> The term arises from Derrida, in conversation: "The 'logic' of the trace or of différance determines this re-appropriation as ex-appropriation. Re-appropriation necessarily produces the opposite of what it apparently aims for. Ex-appropriation is not what is proper to man. One can recognize its differential figures as soon as there is a relation to self in its most elementary form (but for this very reason there is no such thing as elementary)" ("'Eating Well', Or the Calculation of the Subject," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Points...*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 269).



## Robot Love

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 179–222.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Sinker, "Loving the Alien in Advance of the Landing—Black Science Fiction," *The Wire* 96, February (1992).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013). Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (New York: Lexington, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Prime Time (feat. Miguel)" (directed by Alan Ferguson, Wondaland Arts Society, 2013), posted by janellemonae, October 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxIs2xXOClg>.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Alessandra Raengo for pointing out the "Queer Inhumanisms" special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, where the question "has the queer ever been human?" is brought to bear upon "the active force of the nonhuman," with the observation that "the queer, we could say, runs across or athwart the human" (Dana Luciano, and Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 186, 189). My use of "queer" is developed through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, which explores how queer dis-orientation relates to object becoming.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>22</sup> A strategy that Kodwo Eshun names "chronopolitics." See Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287–302.

<sup>23</sup> I thus echo in approach but differ in conclusion from Alexander Weheliye's question, insofar as I stake the Afrofuturist position (as does Weheliye, in his critical reading of Eshun; see "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 71, no. Summer (2002): 21–48) as advocating for an exhumanist becoming, and not a revival, as Weheliye seemingly calls for, of humanism: "what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?" (*Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 8).

<sup>24</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 163.

<sup>25</sup> Fred Moten, reflecting on Fanon, writes that "loss and fabrication are cognate if we are only made in dispossession. The remainder is ownership, but can it remain? Can the fabricated bear a trace of what lies before their fabrication?" ("The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (2013): 242). It should be emphasized that Moten is not seeking an originary blackness in the posing of this question. Rather, "what lies before being fabricated needs neither to be remembered nor romanticized when it is being lived" (ibid.). Afrofuturist becoming is perhaps such a life praxis, insofar as it rejects any romantic notion of originary recovery in the invention of a lived alien alterity by way of a revisioning of the past. My thanks to Alessandra Raengo for directing me to this article.

<sup>26</sup> Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid* (Bad Boy Entertainment/Wondaland, US, 2010: 512256-2).



<sup>27</sup> See Thomas, Valorie, "'Neon Slaves, Electric Savages': Badoula Oblongata, the Archandroid, and Sarah Baartman's Ghost," in *Afrofuturism and (Un)popular Music*, ed. tobias c. van Veen (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Random House, 1989); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> tobias c. van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, eds. Reynaldo Anderson, and Charles E. Jones (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 63–90; Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 915.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida writes that "whether it adds or substitutes itself, the supplement is exterior, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, *alien* [my italics] to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it." (*Of Grammatology (Corrected Edition)*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145).

<sup>32</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> "Janelle," Covergirl, accessed September 16, 2016: <https://www.covergirl.com/latest-news/covergirl-models/janelle-monae>.

<sup>34</sup> In the march of replicas (though their replicant repetition does not erase their *différance*), Mayweather is the singularity; she is the event or exception that refuses, that excess which the system desires (and thus auctions as the most pricey black/skin) and yet cannot contain.

<sup>35</sup> See Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political (Expanded Edition)*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Which is to say, the thing appears as *Vorhandenheit* in this moment: the broken object in its ontological specificity. Yet is its specificity a broken white object or black? What such a (speculative realist) reading demonstrates, as Fanon notes, is how Western metaphysics, including ontology, is bound to racism.

<sup>37</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 21, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 23, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Thus a distinction needs to be made from transhumanism, which pursues the "evolutionary" overcoming of the "limits" of the *bios* by advancing a *mythos* of the technologically-enhanced *übermensch*. This is not to say that Afrofuturism does not (or cannot) pursue an art of the *bios*, but that what distinguishes it from the problematic racism of transhumanism (the future/past eugenics of a *Gattaca*) is its *mythos*, or what stories it tells of the *bios* to begin with.

<sup>42</sup> Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 23.

<sup>43</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 41.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text* 1, no. Winter (1979): 149–56.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 152.

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<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose of Sun Ra* (Norderstedt: Waitawhile, 2005), 340.

<sup>49</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].

<sup>50</sup> Weheliye, Alexander G. "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 71, no. Summer (2002): 21-48. Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 00[-006].

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 00[-002]. See also Eshun, Kodwo, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," CR: *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287-302.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 00[-003].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 00[-004].

<sup>55</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 10-11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>57</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-001].

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 00[-001].

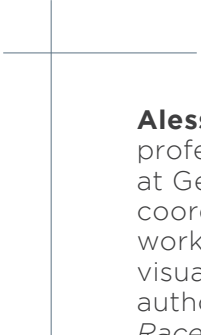
<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 00[-003].

<sup>60</sup> Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 154-55.


<sup>61</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].




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