

2014
liquid blackness
Symposium:

Reflections
and
Movements



The present publication has been conceived as a follow-up to our first *liquid blackness* Symposium, hosted by the Department of Communication at Georgia State University on April 11-12, 2014.

From the first “call for submission” to the final structure that the Symposium assumed—with two keynote lectures, an artists’ panel, live and video dance performances, and a concurring exhibition of artwork at the DAEL Window Project—the key idea has been to pursue a free form. This approach was inspired by the desire to put in dialogue scholarly, artistic and curatorial practices as well as bring into contact different institutional and non-institutional spaces and audiences. In keeping with the idea of fluidity, malleability, and porosity that *liquid blackness* pursues as a research group, the Symposium too was an exciting, risky, and certainly “messy” concept and enterprise—as Hamza Walker described it in his opening remarks. This beautiful/fluid/organized mess would not have succeeded without the careful and generous work of a number of people. Thus, this is where some proper acknowledgments are due—some of which are, admittedly, also overdue.

To begin, it would have been impossible to navigate the territory of the Atlanta art scene without the capable guidance of Kristin Juarez who delivered our theoretical questions to destination with many of the artists that contributed to the Symposium. Among the very first interlocutors about the viability of an initiative around the idea of “liquid blackness,” Kristin has shared her experience and personal contacts to make possible not only the exhibition of artwork for the April 2014 edition of the DAEL Window Project, but also the artists’ panel featured at the Symposium. She was key in the drafting of the calls for submissions as well as in determining the very structure of the event.

Similarly, Lauren Cramer and Cameron Kunzelman have been crucial to the intellectual work behind the structure of the Symposium and its publications, while Katharine Zakos has been the key social media operator and, together with Dorothy Hendrix, central to our fundraising efforts in the community. Window Project artists Consuela Boyer, Chris Reel, Joey Molina, and Fahamu Pecou were shepherded by Kristin Juarez and Christina Washington in the process of adapting their work for the venue. Writers contributing to our pre-Symposium publication worked

primarily under the editorial guidance of Lauren Cramer and Cameron Kunzelman.

Chris Hunt designed all publicity visual materials generated for the Symposium, with original images he created together with Joey Molina and Michael Sanders. Chris and Joey were also responsible for our publication’s design and layout.

Michael Sanders was instrumental in establishing a collaboration with Brian Egan at the Mammal Gallery (an event that came together also thanks to the hard work of Christina Romo and Richard Moye), while Lauren Cramer, Chris Hunt, and Cameron Kunzelman were central to our connection with Karl Injex at The Sound Table where we mingled with the artists and speakers after the end of the Symposium.

Gathering Wild Dance choreographer Jerylann Warner’s enthusiastic reaction to the “clusters” of ideas we initially formulated, in our first attempts to describe and reflect on the idea of “liquid blackness,” was key to attracting the attention and commitment of fellow choreographer Bcarr[works] and T.Lang. My exchanges with Jerylann were the impetus behind the idea of incorporating live performances in the Symposium, as a way to use bodily movement to both complement and challenge more traditional scholarly reflections.

Finally, my conversations with Dr. Michele Prettyman-Beverly and her invaluable input have been central to the pursuit of the *liquid blackness* initiative. For years, Michele and I sought ways to bring together the very dialogue that materialized at the Symposium and to create a forum for a more uninhibited, experimental, and open conversation about race, visual culture, and aesthetics to take place. As she articulates in her contribution to this publication, this public exchange has made it possible for a variety of people to openly care about these issues.

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Reflections on the First *liquid blackness* Symposium

by Katharine P. Zakos

What is *liquid blackness*?

What is *post-black* (as opposed to *post-race*)?

How/where can we see evidence of “liquid blackness” in media and popular culture?



For both the members of the *liquid blackness* research collective and the general public alike, the April Symposium at Georgia State University provided a unique opportunity to interrogate the multiple meanings of the term “liquid blackness.” As outlined in the Symposium announcement, the weekend was merely intended to start the conversation, and each event (the opening lecture by Hamza Walker, the dance performances by T.Lang Dance and Gathering Wild Dance Company, the short film projection by Bubba Carr, the keynote by Derek Conrad Murray, the Artists’ Panel, and the issue release party at the Sound Table) contributed to the discussion. Furthermore, with each event taking place in a distinct setting with representatives from across the academic, artistic, and broader communities, these physical and ideological shifts further affected and shaped the conversations taking place.

In light of all of these considerations, this essay will provide an overview of the Symposium itself and, in the process, attempt to offer some answers to the overarching question—what is liquid blackness? These ideas will not (and should not) be limited to the members of the collective and the invited speakers, but rather will encompass all of the weekend’s participants—faculty, staff, students, speakers, guests, etc.—and their contributions to this intellectual endeavor. After all, the Symposium was organized in an attempt to build upon and extend Coordinator Alessandra Raengo’s initial framework in “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity,” and further shape and tease apart the foundational concepts of this research group.¹

The Symposium began on Friday, April 11th with a lecture by Hamza Walker, the Associate Curator of The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. In Raengo’s opening remarks, she acknowledged the unique structure of the *liquid blackness* collective, calling it both “fluid” and “open to new forms of scholarship.”² She proceeded to frame the notion of “liquid blackness” as a concept as “creating or stimulating pressure



Hamza Walker

points.”³ This theme was immediately taken up by Walker, who began his address by half-jokingly asserting that liquid blackness is indeed “messy.”⁴

This “messiness” was evident in the complexity of the topics up for discussion; Walker displayed several works of art from his field-defining 2008 show, *Black Is, Black Ain’t*, and many dealt with difficult themes. Demetrius Oliver’s piece, *Till* (2004), seemed to resonate especially strongly with my students, and with me as well. Walker contextualized the piece with newspaper clippings and photographs of the event, as well as Jason Lazarus’ piece, *Standing at the Grave of Emmitt Till, Day of Exhumation, June, 1st, 2005* (2005). This series seemed to provide a point of identification for students.⁵ Since many of the students were familiar

with the story of Till’s brutal murder, the smeared face of the subject in the Oliver piece evoking the haunting image of tortured flesh seemed to strike a chord.

Not all of Walker’s presentation was quite so somber. After relaying a story about his “Charlie Brown moment,” when he failed in his attempt to light the Kwanzaa candles in his elementary school holiday pageant, Walker leaned into the microphone and quietly sang the first few bars of Whitney Houston’s “Greatest Love of All” to the surprise and delight of the crowd. He told this story to explain his inability to unequivocally and securely locate blackness when he was jokingly accused by curator Thelma Golden of being a “part-time black man.”⁶



This anecdote and the accompanying musical interlude served to illustrate the complicated relationship that Walker (and certainly many scholars and artists of his generation) has with the notion of blackness. This “Charlie Brown moment” exemplifies the internal and external struggles that occur over issues of race and the notion of authenticity. Walker acknowledged how the proud Afrocentric blackness that is evoked by his own name worked to emphasize the magnitude of his inability to fulfill his duties in the holiday pageant by pointing out the disconnect between his failed performance in that event and his blackness. He continued this line of thought when he recalled later how hard it was to take the racial categories discussed in his social studies class seriously (“we laughed at the terms...because they fell on colorblind ears”) and emphasized his later work on race as “a space to share my own confusion.”⁷

“What race is cannot necessarily be disassociated with what race means” –Hamza Walker

A question and answer session followed Walker’s lecture, during which audience members attempted to relate some of the issues raised in the discussion to current popular culture examples like Steve McQueen’s filmic adaptation of Solomon Northup’s memoir *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Walker likened the film to the Quentin Tarantino revenge narrative *Django Unchained* (2012) because they both expose the messiness of slavery and the complicated notions of blackness that exist to this day.⁸

After the question and answer session, Symposium attendees were invited to reconvene at the Mammal Gallery on Broad Street for a wine reception and the remainder of the evening’s program. The Mammal Gallery is located a few blocks away from the Georgia State University campus in the heart of downtown Atlanta, and the resulting walk over provided a unique opportunity to reflect on the questions and issues

Walker had posed. Dr. Raengo acknowledged that she chose the location intentionally and envisioned the figurative and literal transitions effected by traversing this urban space as another point in the process of thinking about “liquid blackness.”

At the Gallery, the program continued with *Flô*, a short film by bubba carr[works], which addressed the complex and multilayered dimensions of liquidity through the use of inventive sound design, visual overlays, and eroticized images. Following carr’s projection, there were two dance performances—Indya Childs of T.Lang Dance performed an excerpt from T.Lang’s upcoming show, *Post Up*, and the Gathering Wild Dance Company presented an original piece, *Heart of Palm*, choreographed by Jerylann Warner and created exclusively for the event. Many of the participants enjoyed the transition to the new location and the inclusion of the live performances as part of the collective thinking process because of the way these performances kept the lived body at the center discussion, even as the event framed blackness as an abstraction or extractable from the body.

The second day of the Symposium commenced Saturday afternoon with a lecture by Derek Conrad Murray, professor of the History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Murray’s lecture, “Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness,” discussed the use of satire to engage with the queering possibilities of the notion of “post-black,” which he claims “refers to a time after black power,” and is often criticized due to it being likened to a post-racial ideology. Murray acknowledges that post-black is difficult to define, but maintains that it does imply an “ambivalence to compulsory solidarity,” an “existential crisis,” and critiques of both heteronormative black masculinity and representations of black women.⁹ Murray presented a collection of work from artists such as Glenn Ligon and Mickalene Thomas (both of whom were featured in Hamza Walker’s *Black Is*, *Black Ain’t* show as well as in his Friday lecture

at the Symposium) in an effort to show how the diverse and frequently contradictory implications of post-blackness are addressed. My students seemed to walk away from this part of the event with the idea that post-black culture represents an era where race still matters (unlike notions of post-race), but that the post-black generation refuses to be solely defined by race and racial performance.

After a brief break, the Symposium commenced with an artists' panel, featuring local Atlanta artists Nettrice Gaskins (who served as both a

panelist and moderator), Nikita Gale, Carla Aaron-Lopez, Yanique Norman, and Fahamu Pecou. The artists briefly displayed and discussed samples of their work (which also appeared in the second issue of the *liquid blackness* publication). The panel concluded with a roundtable discussion during which the artists were able to engage in a dialogue with Symposium attendees.

The *liquid blackness* project started with the assumption that the idea that blackness exists separately from black people is "increasingly

Flo (bcarr[works], 2014) frame grab.



Indya Childs performs *Post Up* -- an excerpt, choreographed by T.Lang Dance

Gathering Wild Dance Company performs *Heart of Palm*, choreographed by Jerylann Warner



accepted today,” but that notion was challenged during the artists’ panel at the Symposium. Raengo asked the panelists to address Darby English’s question in *How to See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (“what happens to black art when black artists stop making it?”) and panelist Carla Aaron-Lopez questioned the legitimacy of the situation and Raengo’s position as a white, privileged academic asking about her [Aaron-Lopez’s] identity as a black artist. At this moment, a rupture seemed to occur—Aaron-Lopez’s response was slightly hostile, but the entire exchange lasted only a matter of seconds; moments later this act of resistance was contained when moderator Nettrice Gaskins stepped in and glossed over the comments, returning the discussion to a more comfortable and congenial tone.

Derek Conrad Murray



However, the moment was not forgotten. Evidence of this rupture appeared in my own students’ responses to the event. The students overwhelmingly favored Aaron-Lopez in their evaluations of the proceedings, which could be understood in a myriad of ways—the accessibility of her work, her claims to authenticity, her challenge to authority, etc. Incidentally, all of the artists continued to come back to blackness as something that defines their identity as artists, even though their art is in many ways exploring other possibilities that are not necessarily bound by (or to) black identity (or blackness as a fixed identity). For instance, Aaron-Lopez utilizes collage to provide new context for the images of strippers and dancers featured in her work, Norman creates figures to explore how the black body is made to stretch beyond its normal boundaries, and Gaskins positions race as technology in her work in the digital space.

While Walker and Murray emphasized the relevance of their generational background (Walker admits to having been “weaned on the ideology of colorblindness” in the post-Civil Rights Era and Murray notes his own struggles with idea of “post-black”), the artists’ panel overall was noticeably silent on their own generational context (however, this point did come up in the question and answer portion at the end of the panel).

The significance of one’s own socio-historical background to ideas about race and blackness has recently been brought to the forefront in popular culture as well. Hip-hop musician Questlove, a music producer and drummer for The Roots, just released the first installment of a six-part series on hip-hop for the pop-culture website Vulture.com entitled “When the People Cheer: How Hip-Hop Failed Black America.”¹³ Questlove compares the evolution of hip-hop to the Exxon-Valdez oil spill (“It spilled and spread”) and admits that he does not necessarily view this mainstreaming as an unequivocally good thing.¹⁴ This is not the first time that forms of blackness have been likened to an oil spill; Steven Shaviro



Artists' Panel: Pecou, Aaron-Lopez, Gale, Norman, Gaskins

addresses other examples of this trend in "Post Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*,"¹⁵ and Raengo builds on his work in "blackness, aesthetics, liquidity"¹⁶. Questlove goes on to note that hip-hop has become a catch-all term synonymous with black culture at large, which increasingly functions as an empty signifier—it stands for everything and nothing, all at once.

Murray has expressed similar reservations about hip-hop culture. In his 2004 article for *Art Journal*, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle," he claims that "[hip-hop's] legitimacy is both a sign of optimism as well as a symbol of its potential demise."¹⁷ When asked about

his views on the subject today, Murray admitted to a slight decrease in the intensity of his feelings, but acknowledged that his position has remained largely consistent.

"Once hip-hop culture is ubiquitous, it is also invisible. Once it is everywhere it is nowhere" –Questlove

Overall, the first *liquid blackness* symposium served to address an increasing sensibility in ways in which blackness is discussed and also attempted to push the conversation toward a more direct engagement with the repercussions of the new forms in which blackness is encountered. Hip-hop is central to this line of thinking, and both the *Vulture* series by Questlove and the work of artists' panel member Fahamu Pecou speak directly to the timeliness of these themes.¹⁸

¹ Alessandra Raengo, "blackness aesthetics, liquidity," *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (2014): 12-15.

² Alessandra Raengo, "Opening Remarks," *Liquid Blackness April Symposium*, Georgia State University, 11 April 2014.

³ Raengo, "Opening Remarks."

⁴ Hamza Walker, "Untitled Lecture," *Liquid Blackness April Symposium*, Georgia State University, 11 April 2014.

⁵ As an instructor at Georgia State, I saw this event as an opportunity to extend classroom discussion and encouraged my students to attend the symposium.

⁶ Walker, "Untitled Lecture."

⁷ Walker, "Untitled Lecture."

⁸ Northrup's version is actually titled *Twelve Years a Slave*; the use of the numerical value "12" in the film title is unique to that version.

⁹ Derek Conrad Murray, "Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," *liquid blackness Symposium*, Georgia State University, 12 April 2014.

¹⁰ Murray, "Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness."

¹¹ Alessandra Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," in *Beyond Blackface: African Images in the US Media*, 3rd ed., ed. Akil Houston (Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2010), 160.

¹² Darby English, *How to See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 27.

¹³ Questlove, "When the People Cheer: How Hip-Hop Failed Black America," *Vulture.com*, 22 April 2014.

¹⁴ Questlove, "When the People Cheer."

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, "Post Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*," *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 13.

¹⁶ Raengo, "Blackness Aesthetics, Liquidity."

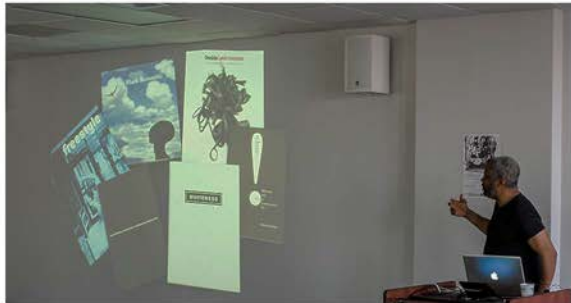
¹⁷ Derek Conrad Murray, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle," *Art Journal*, 63, no. 2 (2004): 5.

¹⁸ See Shady Patterson's essay in this volume.

Getting Outside an “Always-already”: Form, Medium, Figure.

A Conversation with Hamza Walker

by Kristin Juarez



Hamza Walker

Following the events of the *liquid blackness* symposium, I had the opportunity to sit down with Hamza Walker to pick his brain about curatorial processes, identifying how audience reception shapes artwork, and homegrown scholarship. Our conversation began with a follow-up to his lecture on his 2008 exhibition *Black Is Black Ain't*. The exhibition book, published in 2013, features writings by Huey Copeland, Krista Thompson, Darby English, Greg Foster Rice, Amy M. Mooney, and Kimberly Pinder.

Walker spoke of a desire to capture a particular moment in which prominent scholars addressing race and blackness in the arts were all working in the same backyard of Chicago. This idea of harnessing the local for the production of concentrated scholarship resonates with the goals of *liquid blackness* as a research group. In many ways, the conversations we are having and the theories we are wrestling with have broader significance, and they are being played out in popular visual culture across the country. Our focus on local cultural producers attempts to mark a moment of convergence of scholarly work, a significant art scene, a specific hip-hop identity, and burgeoning film and television production.

Creative Loafing heralds the legacy and comeback of hometown heroes Outkast, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* gets recapped on the radio, and the High Museum of Art collaborates with Art Papers to interview T.I. in a “rap session” at the museum. This feedback becomes a point of pride: to watch local acts get swept into the jumble of the mainstream milieu allows us to see how blackness is proliferated within a commercial network and reflected back at us. Their images are reshaped from individualistic to polished surfaces where local identity becomes part of what Walker describes as a “black public sphere.” I believe this simultaneously provides more material to a prismatic idea of blackness but it also flattens its multidimensionality, perpetuating its overdetermination.

Our focus on local cultural producers attempts to mark a moment of convergence of scholarly work, a significant art scene, a specific hip-hop identity, and burgeoning film and television production.

As part of a network of cities rooted in particular histories of black migration from the South to urban areas such as Chicago and Los Angeles, local specificity refracts the larger system of people and institutional structures. For Walker, moments like the destruction of Cabrini Green housing projects is locally important but also symbolic of a larger national moment that changed the skyline of Chicago and resonated with the politics of project housing across the country. As such, Daniel Roth's *Cabrini Green Forest (Portal)* (2004) illustrates the artist's investment in place that visualizes both a formal and social inquiry that simultaneously engages with a political environment through satire.

One of Walker's goals for the show was to explore a concept of race that did not already seem overdetermined but instead playful and open ended. What arose from our conversation was the way blackness moves in and out of popular culture, fine art culture, and personal experience. This fact makes addressing blackness in art a matter of refraction—identifying how the idiosyncratic personal expressions of an artist are visualized and later interpreted, utilized, and popularized by a larger audience. This came to bear as we discussed the way that audience, in very concrete terms, has to come into the conversation. The following is an edited excerpt from the interview

KJ: You mentioned that you initially never wanted to do a show about race and blackness, but that as you explored your rejection of the topic you realized that you, in fact, *needed* to. How did *Black is Black Ain't* emerge? Were there certain works you felt you *had* to have in a show about race?

HW: The show considered representation (at a literal level of image making) of a black subject that considered how black subjects appeared before the lens as an "always-already." The works of art have a measure of self-consciousness and reflexivity about what it means to portray a black subject speculating on knowing the self—getting outside of an

"always-already" subject in representation. So it's not necessarily affirmation, but a questioning. The show emerged as a dialogue between works, and as I added and removed works I would see how these speculations created a circle or loop. As a result, the show cannot be reducible to any singular premise, but it is a set of coordinates.

KJ: What became visible in your show and also visible in the artists on our panel was a slippage for artists to work between different mediums. Is there something more at stake when black artists move between mediums—something beyond the idea that many contemporary artists select whatever medium suits the issue they are trying to resolve?

The issue of race alongside that of feminism and queer theory are the places that the most sustained critique of subjectivity is taking place. And for that critique to proceed, it is incumbent on the figure.

HW: Yes and no. It's not a question of medium, it's a question of the *figure*. So how do performance, photography, and video lend themselves to reflections of subjectivity, and what are the pitfalls when it comes to "representing THE self" when thinking that "THE self" has already been spoken for? So that's something when it comes to the body, questions—if one's going to use oneself, or who is one representing, who's representing whom—at this point are wrought for everybody. Now the issue of race alongside that of feminism and queer theory are the places that the most sustained critique of subjectivity is taking place. And for that critique to proceed, it is incumbent on the figure. So it's not necessarily fraught only for black artists, but the way black artists and women artists, because of their interrogation and investigation, have to consider the self, makes it so that anybody who is going to deal with the body—even if you are

white, male and straight—are all marked. So that's where I would want to position black artists and the stakes of the figure. So how the figure works its way into paint is going to be a different thing than photography and other modes. Each medium is freighted with a different kind of discursive baggage, from an art historical point of view, so that's that. But I still think it's first and foremost a question of the figure. And maybe there's a hierarchy of performance and the way it has a greater purchase on immediacy, in the here and now. And performance is just a different discourse than how photography treats immediacy.

KJ: During the panel discussion, you asked the artists about their commitment to depicting the body, and their stance on abstraction, noting that they all relied on the figure through their various media of choice. The question prompted a back-and-forth between you and Derek Murray about the historical role of abstraction and identity. Could you elaborate on this

What are the stakes and the political ramifications of deciding that one was going to entertain the purging of history, memory, and biography from their artwork, in a bid to go where?

idea of abstraction, and do you think the reliance on the body is set within a particular contemporary movement?

HW: After multiculturalism and after a particular moment of race and representation, artwork was being guaranteed a measure of cultural authenticity because of the race and gender of its maker. That seems to be taken for granted now. What I meant by abstraction is an almost ideological sense, where one would have to insist on the elimination of the figure. When I say abstraction, I mean a “no shit” abstraction. What are the



stakes and the political ramifications of deciding that one was going to entertain the purging of history, memory, and biography from their artwork, in a bid to go where? [For young artists] working with the figure seems to be ideological in so far that ideology is invisible, taken for granted, and the everyday. It's the reigning ideology that we've naturalized especially given that the dominant discourse that's been done is about race and the self.

KJ: It was interesting to me that the panel as a whole turned towards this historical conversation about the role of the black artist that's been taking

place for a long time, that ultimately worked to recreate an unending thread to this old conversation about the social responsibility of “black art.”

HW: We didn’t talk about audience—you know no matter what you do, how do you communicate to the people looking at your work? How a work communicates is more important than intention, in a way. Yes, as much as one would want to see their work as it tethers itself to a larger historical conversation, if you think about it, to what extent does that history stop one from really asking—in terms of race, representation, and dialogue—where that stuff is in popular culture? In terms of other narratives, the work—just as soon as it’s having a dialogue with some kind of historical mandate—should in fact have its eye much more toward popular culture if you want to talk to a black audience, and secure a position for your work. So if you take a painting and ask, who is the audience? You may be making Romare Bearden-based collages, but what does that say about the use of photomontage by the makers of *South Park*?

But that’s a general problem. Art is a bubble that’s navel gazing. You could ask the average person what the last artwork they saw was and they wouldn’t be able to tell you. They watch TV and go to the movies. This is where the discussion is actually happening in a certain sense. That’s not to say there isn’t room in fine art in this kind of reflection. But I think the issue of race and representation and audience has always really been the issue of the black public sphere and of popular culture, making the general

Can we use “black” as a weapon against that kind of essentialism, and talk about it as always becoming, a state of becoming? Becoming black—what a beautiful thing.

public a much more permeable membrane than a fine art audience. It’s not just about a message to our folk, but how are you going to get that message out?

KJ: We’ve been discussing work that expresses ideas of increasingly nuanced identity or conceptions of self that converge at multiple intersections of identity. Where is there room for audience investment in work that is increasingly idiosyncratic?

HW: What I was saying about a critique of subjectivity, of self, of a lack of articulation—this is a space where those terms are being mapped with increasing refinement and reflection so that there’s no corresponding binary of masculinism or whiteness. The very questions of what constitutes “we” or “I” in a very critical fashion—as difficult as it is to cake words on that subject—you have to start somewhere. And when you get that spark—it’s not that David Hammons or Felix Gonzalez Torres came out of nowhere. It’s powerful work when it speaks for and on behalf of people. So that’s the greater investment. What do we say about work that forsakes its autonomy? That says “This is not a Jonald Judd.” I want the work to say something for people to people. That turn, that work that ideologically and consciously wants to do that—that’s a very strong position to take. And who’s doing that kind of work? Artists from the margins, the periphery. That’s where the stakes are. What does it mean when David Hammons blackens out a room and just has the lights? That’s the answer to James Turrell. It’s a different kind of phenomenology.

KJ: So where do you fall on form? Are you interested in work that is strictly formal?

HW: Work has to work. And how does work work? Form is the medium through which something speaks. But it can also be ab-form, un-form, anti-form, the choice not to have objects, the choice to be a performance

artist, language—all these things as form and formlessness. A pitch-black room is a counter or opposite to Richard Serra's all form.

KJ: So for me, the best theory is meant to help you live your life better. Can art do this? Can it help you change the way you see other people?

HW: Yes, but it has to release you. Art is not an end in itself, it's a means to an end, where I choose to apply meaning. Is art a privileged site of meaning? In some sense, yes. But I'm thinking about whether I am able to apply that meaning out into the world and not exclusively to art. So I can see better, or more clearly. For example, I can be a better reader, or read more closely. But it's not all with the crusade that art can change your life. I think there are plenty of things that can do that. Art is not the only place where that can be done.

KJ: So after a symposium that's trying to frame or pose the concept of black liquidity or "liquid blackness," does it resonate with you as a term that needs wrestling with, that needs questioning, or does it seem intuitive?

HW: It seems intuitive. I mean I don't have a problem with it. I have my own wrestling with the very notion of blackness. But I definitely prefer that it be liquid. So the idea of being fluid or some how transmissible, or having attachable-ness is something to think about and play with that's beyond essentialism. I have a problem with term, "black-ness." The "ness" part. I suppose we can trace it to Ellison, but where is it, what is it? Can we use "black" as a weapon against that kind of essentialism, and talk about it as always becoming, a state of becoming? Becoming black—what a beautiful thing.



Flo (bcarr[works], 2014), frame grab.

Hamza Walker is the Director of Education and Associate Curator for The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. His curated exhibitions include *Several Silences* (2009), *The Age of Aquarius* (2011), *Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven: In a Saturnian World* (2011), *Local Metrics* (2012), and *John Neff, Photographs 2010-2012* (2013). He was the recipient of the 2005 Walter Hopps Award for curatorial achievement, a 2006 Emily Hall Tremain Award for the landmark exhibition *Black Is, Black Ain't* (2008), and the 2010 Ordway Prize given to an outstanding contemporary art curator and essayist for their influence in the field.

Post Liquid Blackness: Form, Satire, and Clearing Gestures.

A Conversation with Derek Conrad Murray

by Lauren M. Cramer

The mission and theoretical concerns of the *liquid blackness* research collective are still forming. Like the list of “conceptual clusters” that help us think about the liquid qualities of blackness, our group is constantly evolving and adopting new language. Each publication we release and event we organize is an opportunity to take our individual and collective work one step forward. That growth process requires serious engagement with a diverse and expanding collection of cultural objects that represent both the most refined realms of high art and the most popular forms of mass culture. Derek Conrad Murray’s article, “Hip Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle” is a model for this kind of fluidity. Ten years after its publication, Murray’s article has become required reading for *liquid blackness*. So, when tasked to organize a symposium and invite a scholar that could engage equally with artists, curators, and the academic community, Murray was a clear choice.

We asked Murray to update the ideas in that piece, particularly his thoughts on (dis)embodiment and the place of the black body in art. His talk, “Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness” delivered engaging art objects, queering as a new facet of post-black discourse, and satire as an aesthetic model that could afford new possibilities for black art. While we rely on different terms (“liquid blackness” and “post-blackness”), *liquid blackness* and Murray’s current work are operating on similar registers.



Derek Conrad Murray

We’re both thinking about how blackness as an aesthetic can make, organize, and collapse space around the black body.

After two days of talks, panels, and performances at the Symposium, we wanted to get Murray’s thoughts on “liquid blackness” as a concept and formal analysis as an approach to black cultural production. He addressed those topics and many more, including the vexed question of academic neologisms and the political potential of “selfies.” He was kind enough to continue the conversation with us, and we are printing that interview here.

LMC: How did the Symposium confirm/alter your initial impressions of “liquid blackness” as a concept? What connections did you see between

your work and the event as a whole (Hamza Walker, the local artists on the panel, the dance performances at the Mammal Gallery, etc.)?

I see these terminologies as space-clearing gestures [...] that make room for new ideas, new subjectivities, and expanded understanding of racial and cultural formations.

DCM: The notion of “liquid blackness” is significant to my research on several fronts. In fact, I think it expresses the concerns and anxieties that have emerged around the concept of “post-black.” I see these terminologies as space-clearing gestures (in reference to the writings of Kwame Anthony Appiah) that make room for new ideas, new subjectivities, and expanded understandings of racial and cultural formations. These kinds of interventions are necessary and almost always reflect major generational shifts. “Liquid blackness” is in some ways connected to my writings on the “queering of blackness,” a concept that is looking critically at new developments in black queer aesthetics, but also engaged in the process of propelling blackness beyond its ideologically over-determined cultural/historical legibility.

If I were to look cynically at “post-black” and “liquid blackness,” I would probably have to see them as marketing terms that allow for the further commoditizing of black bodies. Hamza [Walker] said it best in his talk: everything there is to say about blackness was articulated in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (and perhaps more eloquently than anything written today). In a way, I agree with that, even though there is always innovative work to be done. I’m critical of the tendency for black cultural producers to create cynical (if at times annihilating) representations of blackness, while simultaneously marketing it as their product (they are ambivalent about it, yet bound to it). I tend to see this rather hypocritical

phenomenon as capturing the very essence of these embattled concepts, meaning the creation of a kind of condescending, embarrassed way of looking at blackness, versus its rapacious commoditization (or pimping, to be somewhat crass).

Along these lines, the dance performances at the Mammal Gallery were really fascinating because they opened up new possibilities for expression. Movement operates on expressive and affective registers that evade the semiotic limitations of language and the ideological perils of visual regimes. It’s also harder to commoditize, isn’t as readily saleable, and often functions in an abstract mode. I’ve been thinking quite a bit about dance since seeing the performances because they displayed a blackness that was at once legible, but ultimately elusive and in a state of perpetual transformation. There was something very absorbing and consuming about the way blackness took on a type of fluidity in the dance performances. It made me think of a recent film by the director Jonathan Glazer that I’ve been writing about. It’s called *Under the Skin* [2013] and tells the bizarre tale of an alien (in human drag) who drives around Scotland in a van, preying on unsuspecting men. Promising anonymous sex, the otherworldly creature lures her victims into a dilapidated home, where they become entranced and then immersed in a black liquid and ultimately harvested. It’s a strange and unsettling film that explores difficult themes around class and gendered violence.

The notion of “liquid blackness” relates quite literally to the film, but particularly in relation to the moment in [Alessandra Raengo’s “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity” in liquid blackness Volume 1, Issue 2] where [she] expresses an interest in the point at which “blackness acquires immersive qualities, becomes seemingly touchable, all enveloping, and often erotically charged.”¹ *Under the Skin* images blackness as a sort of creeping Otherness that engulfs and overwhelms. It doesn’t merely take over; it extracts and absorbs the essence of things.

At least, that is the ideological fear of blackness that I think is well articulated in the film, even though the narrative is framed as a discussion of rape culture and as a reversal of gendered power dynamics. I find that framing to be slightly reductive (if not dishonest), or intentionally obfuscating, because the film depicts a black alien creature—that is hiding in white skin—and uses some otherworldly form of black liquid matter to extract human essences (leaving only the skin as a floating ghostly shell). This mysterious, organic alien technology metaphorically alludes to the symbology of race and, in my reading of the filmic text, expresses a kind of anxiety around the increasing diversity of metropolitan Europe. In the film, the threat of blackness is concealed under a seductive, albeit predatory, veil of normative white femaleness. But the black matter also enslaves. It's a trap both for the alien and for the men who fall victim to it.

At the end of the film, when the human skin is torn and the black Alien is revealed, we ultimately see this threatening blackness destroyed. The peeling away of the skin in a sense gives birth to blackness: liberates it, only to be punished through violent annihilation (in this case, cleansing by fire). It's a metaphorically powerful scene and one that presents blackness as a danger that lingers underneath an ideological veneer: a pleasing fiction of assimilation, or normative shell that is also a repression. In a literal sense, blackness tends to function in this way, as an unknowable heart of darkness that goes unseen, yet is always visible. It's entirely possible that Glazer wasn't thinking about blackness at all, but it is nonetheless depicted in powerful ways that allude to the complexity of its ideological meanings.

LMC: Why do you see aesthetics/formal analysis as a productive way to engage with black art/popular cultural production?

DCM: Formalism (and formal analysis) has always been the domain of Euro-ethnic subjectivities and has tended to disallow the possibility for the

work of black artists to produce more complex and esoteric meanings. The dominant rhetoric has continually positioned formalism as the antidote to identity politics, but this is a lie. In fact, whether we look at its early iterations in the nineteenth-century, to the 1950s era of high modernist abstraction, identity and ethnicity were at the forefront of its formulations. Jewish critics like Harold Rosenberg and especially Clement Greenberg were instrumental to the evolution of formalism as a value system that advocated for universality and anti-essentialist attitudes (while still remaining rooted in a self-conscious engagement with anti-Semitism and the post-War Jewish experience). The art historian Louis Kaplan has written meaningfully about Greenberg's modernist formalism in light of Jewish identity, ultimately characterizing the notorious critic's formalism as a kind of Jewish unconscious. I mention this because blackness, with its ideological legibility, tends to enslave us. Formalism has always represented a point of departure from the limitations imposed by the body. It's a utopian strategy, but it nonetheless functions as a gesture towards a more open-ended engagement with the complexities of culture.

Formalism has always represented a point of departure from the limitations imposed by the body.

Whenever I talk about black art, I always foreground formal concerns and engage with the work's materiality. Doing so allows for the unexpected to occur. It forces me to look carefully at objects and to encourage an encounter that produces new meanings. Art objects are not just ideological props. On the contrary, they produce spontaneous and unexpected sensations and experiences that can be extremely profound. All too often, critics and scholars use art to essentially illustrate their political commitments (and the critical discourses that accompany them). The beauty of art is its ability to be unpredictable—but needless to say, the viewer must approach these objects with openness. So, when we talk about blackness as “liquid” or in terms of “post-ness,” are we not also

gesturing towards an expressive freedom? Engaging with the form and materiality of things should ideally open up blackness to a space of spontaneity that is not so ideologically weighted (and semiotically vulnerable). I know this sounds romantic, but it's not just cheap sentiment: it does function as a self-critical gesture that attempts to resist the tendency towards using blackness as an ideological foil. There is no way to transcend the complexities of identity, and that should not be the aim. However, there is merit in attempting to push into the unknown, into the future and to envision blackness as a beautiful abstraction with limitless possibilities.

So when we talk about blackness as “liquid” or in terms of “post-ness,” are we not also gesturing towards an expressive freedom?

LMC: You mentioned the frustration you felt that helped you write “Hip Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle.” What is making you angry/frustrated/excited now?

DCM: I feel a certain sense of frustration around the popular notion of the “selfie.” I’ve been giving lectures on the topic in recent months. I’m particularly perplexed by the legitimization of the term (Oxford Dictionaries proclaimed “selfie” their 2013 Word of the Year), and the simultaneous condemnation of the gesture itself. In the past two years, the term “selfie” has become the focus of considerable debate. In fact, the phenomenon of compulsive self-representation on social media sites has been written about in major news outlets like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, among many others. However, most talk of “selfies” is focused (unfairly, in my opinion) on young women: forming into a critique of their apparent narcissism as a kind of regressive personality trait. The young women themselves often characterize the “selfie” (on social media sites) as a radical act of political empowerment, as a means to resist the male-

dominated media culture’s obsession with (and oppressive hold over) their lives and bodies. This notion takes on great significance in social media culture when confronted with the sheer volume of self-representations by women in their teens to mid-20s. Viewed individually, they appear rather banal: commonplace and benign. Taken *en masse*, it feels like a revolutionary political movement—like a radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body. Even if there is no overt political intent, they are indeed contending with the manner in which capitalism is enacted upon their lives.

In the media however (and in respected venues like *The New Yorker*), there has been a steady stream of female journalists and psychologists quick to condemn the supposed navel gazing of over-indulged teenage girls. The scapegoating and ridiculing is what I find most offensive, because when looking at social media, young women clearly wield the self-portrait as a form of resistance. Constantly bombarded with objectifying and unattainable images of beauty in popular media, young girls in the blogosphere respond by constructing an image of themselves as a fantasy, to be consumed online, and in the public domain. But this gesture is not meant as titillation for the male gaze *per se*. Rather it is designed to embrace femininity and sexuality, celebrate the history of women; reject unhealthy beauty standards promoted by the media, and advance a body-positive attitude.

But I am most intrigued by “selfies” produced by marginal constituencies, primarily women of color and trans men and women. These individuals tend to use self-portraiture and social media to give themselves visibility and a sense of value in a culture that all-to-often erases, marginalizes, or maligns them. “Selfie” culture on social media has been quite instrumental in shaping my notion of “queering blackness,” because the Internet has given queer communities (and young women of color) a visibility that is unprecedented. So, I’m quite rejecting of this cultural

tendency to heap the sins of technology, not upon the makers (and their abusers) themselves, but on the backs of the marginalized who are attempting to speak back to a culture that either despises them or fails to acknowledge them entirely. So, ultimately, I feel that the legitimization of the term “selfie” is a type of ideological scapegoating that synthesizes a range of fears about technology’s creeping infectiousness into a legible subjectivity: a new Otherness designed to absorb our judgment and condemnation. Like the single mothers of former Prime Minister John Major’s conservative “Back to Basics” campaign in the 1990s, or the enduring social blame placed on single African-American welfare mothers in the U.S., the young female is the perfect foil for a menu of clichéd anxieties about technology’s uncanny ability to make fools of us all.

LMC: I think satire, and humor in general, is a very interesting part of your project because it creates a spatial relationship surrounding the art object (i.e. “being *in* on the joke”). I think this may be clearest in the Glenn Ligon examples from your talk. The reason this issue of space and positioning is interesting to me is because post-black art is explicitly about a new position for the black body in black art. That new position may mean removing the black body from art or making it “strange.” Do you think satire, or other kinds of queered black art, should make us reconsider the body of the art consumer?

Simply—does removing one body put a new body (the art consumer’s body) in play?

DCM: My engagement with satire and “post-black” was really an effort to think seriously about the often unflattering depictions of black folks commonly presented in the work of post-Civil Rights era artists. For quite a while now, many of these artists (Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles, Glenn Ligon, and Kehinde Wiley come to mind) have been critiqued for creating images of blackness that were ridiculing African-American culture and

history. But I think their work was grossly misinterpreted. In fact, I believe that satire has always been a major component of their work—a strategy that enables them to look critically at black culture and to skewer its foibles and intolerances. It’s now common practice to look at it through a harsh (and at times mocking) critical lens. Dislodging blackness from romanticism and racial obligation is quite liberating and opens it up to new aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities. But I also see satire as a means to create a much-needed intra-cultural dialogue that makes it possible to articulate ambivalent and cynical understanding of what blackness is. Unfortunately, I see this kind of discussion only occurring among the intelligentsia. It needs to reach the masses, where it can perhaps create a cultural climate where a broader and more diverse understanding of the black experience is made possible.

Dislodging blackness from romanticism and racial obligation is quite liberating and opens it up to new aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities.

LMC: It seems post-black artists face pressure from two sides. As you mentioned, there is a market desire for the black body in art. On the other hand, there are post-racial critiques of post-black art. How do you see artists productively navigating these constraints?

DCM: This is a difficult question to answer, because the artist’s perspectives and personal motivations vary quite dramatically. In my conversations with them, I see a spectrum of viewpoints that range from the politically engaged, socially committed, activist cultural producer, to the cynical capitalist who exploits. These individuals participate in a market that is extremely competitive and economically rapacious. It has its intellectual dimensions, but money largely drives its value systems. Most African-American artists are simply trying to find success in the art market, and if being associated with “post-black” will help them achieve

this goal, then they will embrace it. Otherwise, for some it's just another label that ghettoizes and restricts. There is a lot of suspicion and animus around the notion of "post-black," and as you say, it's often mischaracterized as a post-racial stance. I understand that criticism, but it's still incorrect and dismissive of significant generational shifts. It's the job of historians, critics, and curators to make sense of the cultural moment, and so terms such as these have a specific function. There is nothing wrong with that, but intellectual frameworks and new interpretive models should not encumber or limit the expressive possibilities of artists. Their role is to push beyond boundaries and to resist labels, so I tend to think of terminologies like "post-black" and "liquid blackness" as somewhat intrusive or burdensome for artists—even if they are culturally and intellectually indispensable.

Derek Conrad Murray is a theorist in the History of Art and Visual Culture department at the University of California, Santa Cruz and was an invited speaker at the 2014 *liquid blackness* Spring Symposium. His talk, "Afro-kitsch and the Queering of Blackness" combined his research focus on aesthetics, post-blackness, and art practice, topics he will address in his two upcoming books, *Regarding Difference: Contemporary African-American Art and the Politics of Recognition* and *Queering Post-Blackness: Rethinking African-American Identity After Civil Rights*.

¹ Alessandra Raengo, "blackness, aesthetics, liquidity," *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 7.



Mammal Gallery, street view

Towards an Uncodified Vocabulary: Movements in *liquid blackness*

by Dorothy Hendricks



Gathering Wild Dance Company performs *Heart of Palm*, choreographed by Jerylann Warner

Before the first *liquid blackness* Symposium, I was able to interview choreographer Jerylann Warner about the dance piece she put together for the opening night program. She explained the process of choreographing the dance that the Gathering Wild Dance Company would perform, and when I asked how she introduced the concept of “liquid

blackness” to the performers, she answered that she moved from the “literal to the abstract.” She underscored the importance of the music speaking to the dancers, a tenant that the troupe unanimously agreed with. This perspective is a highly unusual one because it is a reversal of the ways “liquid blackness” has most commonly been approached from an academic standpoint: as academics and students we tend to lead with the abstract, the conceptual. In my own writing and research, I’m guilty at times of failing to reconcile theory with the material present. The choice to include dance at the *liquid blackness* Symposium enabled a concrete envisioning of movement from the literal to the abstract. Certainly, performance art resists the impetus to hover just above the physical and instead collapses the two in compelling ways.

Performance art resists the impetus to hover just above the physical

The structure of the opening night of the Symposium capitalized on these tensions. In focusing specifically on the dance performances presented at the Mammal Gallery reception (two live performances and a short film), it’s my contention that the night was, ultimately, about movement, crossing boundaries and moving between registers and through embodied modulation. In his study of Grace Jones’s video *Corporate Cannibal*, Steven Shaviro describes the modulations of Jones’s imaged body as: “Schematic and implosive rather than free-floating and expansive [...] There is no proliferation of meanings, but rather a capture of all meanings.”¹ Where modern dance appears more free-flowing than the notoriously strict ballet—just as experimental and short video appears more open-ended than narrative film—I’d like to frame the two kinds of work offered at the reception in terms of Shaviro’s description of something that entails more than just open-endedness and ambiguity. By all accounts, most art forms harbor the potential of loosing what remains restricted and it’s also true that the scholarly aims of initiatives like *liquid*

blackness work to do the same. Although the Symposium was invested in particular kinds of art and their specific theoretical underpinnings, the very form of the Symposium resisted a limited approach. We were then faced with the possibility to experience the capture and collapse of multiple conflicting meanings instead of indulging the desire to chase down defined meanings or generalized definitions.

The friction caused between different modes of viewing is a place that I think bears further scrutiny. The reception opened with a short film by Bubba Carr, titled *Flô*, and was promptly followed first by soloist, Indya Childs performing an excerpt from *Post Up* choreographed by T. Lang, and concluded by the Gathering Wild Dance Company performing *Heart of Palm* choreographed by Jerylann Warner. Thus our mode of spectatorship fluctuated between the funneling of our collective omniscient gaze, unobstructed and directed at an accessible screen, to two different configurations of dancers that fell in and out of individual fields of vision. Though the pieces were unconnected and conceived apart from each other, their tenuous relationship reflected more than thematic relevance but also an impulse towards a resistance to representation. Jerylann Warner explained her proclivity to employ modern dance, asserting that the form “doesn’t have to stick to a codified vocabulary.” Viewing all three of the pieces framed by “liquid blackness,” it’s undeniable that they share this same position.

bcarr[works]’s *Flô*, was projected on an overhead screen and became a collective focal point. Bodies moved sensuously, dripping with unknown liquids; figures were superimposed atop one another and the movements were lyrical, stylistic, and utterly exposed. Viewing practice, here, reflected content and rewarded the desire to see and fetishize physical bodies. Our relationship with the content was problematized by the flatness of the medium, encouraging haptic encounters with the on-screen bodies that were both intimate and distanced at the same time. In her piece, “Video

Haptics and Erotics,” Laura Marks writes:

The term haptic visuality emphasizes the viewer’s inclination to perceive haptically, but a work itself may offer haptic images. Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.²

Marks goes on to suggest that it is the shallowness of video and the desire for “a multisensory experience” that speaks to a “dissatisfaction with the limits of visibility.”³ Reading the short film as an invitation towards identification forecloses the potential trajectory that *Flô* sets into motion. We long to see more, even from our choice vantage points; even while the film immerses us in flesh, it’s not enough to satisfy. We might read this

Indya Childs performs *Post Up* — an excerpt, choreographed by TLang Dance



in terms of Alessandra Raengo's discussion of the idea of pornotopia in which, she writes, "any one molecule is susceptible to be both the object and subject of desire."⁴ Carr's work speaks simultaneously to desire and lack even as it visualizes Raengo's explanation of "liquid blackness" as viscous, dense, and liquid.⁵ It also forces the viewer to separate the two (the object and subject of desire) and experience them disjointedly and literally as liquid on physical bodies, mediated by a camera and further distanced by our comfortable viewing position.

Bodies moved sensuously, dripping with unknown liquids; figures were superimposed atop one another and the movements were lyrical, stylistic, and utterly exposed.

Following the film, audience members shuffled forward to crowd a ground level stage while Indya Childs performed a solo. The dancer fluctuated between altitudes, at times center stage, standing upright and other times stage right or left, at ground level. This modulation between stances and her propensity to drop out of sight caused an obvious physical response in the audience and we collectively picked up aspects of modern dance as well, shifting our weight, engaging out kinesthetic memory. The desire to see was physically articulated in the shifting crowd and the restricted visual access. The visceral reactions caused by a single dancer, standing close enough to touch, not on a platform, created a jarring denied distance—though the performer never made eye contact with the audience, there seemed little literal or figurative distance. Perhaps most distinctive was not her obvious skill and technique or even the more recognizable aspects of modern dance as a genre but the aesthetics of her body and the affect created as her rib cage expanded, filling with air horizontally through violent, stylized breaths. What's the difference between the two? Why differentiate between a jeté and a breath? Why distinguish a contraction from a sharp breath?



Gathering Wild Dance Company performs *Heart of Palm*, choreographed by Jerylann Warner

We might turn to Jose Gil's discussion of modern dance in his piece "The Dancer's Body" to tease out the potential of suppressing (even if only for a moment) the desire to consume bodies that self-represent:

This explains why the emptying out of the body's gestures can never attain a 'degree zero of movement,' or a 'degree zero of gestures.' If the body can negate the world and the representation of itself without self-destructing, it is because something of it escapes its self-representation. Something that resists, prior to representation. In taking a bow, a body is representing a body taking a bow, but the representing body never fully coincides with the represented body it is 'figuring.' Something holds back, remaining outside the actualized image of the body: something that is not only of the order of actual movements, but also of the order of virtual movements; something that is neither represented nor representable, belonging to the blind zone of their imbrication. What holds back is also what triggers the expressive or mimetic image. It is the body virtual.⁶

Gil also writes, “dance always preserves a non-representational element that escapes the production of signs.”⁷ I think this encapsulates precisely why modern dance corresponds so well with the abstract underpinnings of “liquid blackness.” There is also the desire for the body to be a readable surface and also for a “profound desire for race to represent difference.”⁸ Still, in this performance, even the dancer’s physical body slipped in and out of view, falling sometimes completely out of the field of vision and denying any fixed understanding of the material body available to us. In addition to the self-imposed shifting elevations of the performance, the choice of micro-movements might also be read as a resistance of resolution and a rejection of a traditional and desired crescendo. The Gathering Wild Dance Company finished the program with *Heart of Palm*, a work that offered a coda that spoke to the two performances that came before. Where T.Lang’s work demanded that each audience member search for a window from which to view the soloist, Jerylann Warner’s dance dispersed perspectives and resisted one complete picture. The dancers emerged from the crowd to take their places. The dance consisted of beautiful lines, leaps, and flexed bodies but there was also a strange unevenness that the performers articulated through balance work, lateral shifts, and releases. The dancers leaned on each other, often bearing each other’s weight before quickly breaking away, moving just out of reach and creating more unresolved tension. The dynamics were ever-changing and responded to a mixed meter leaving the audience unsure of what came next and unable to differentiate the middle section from the end. Warner’s choreography visualized the move from concrete to abstract in waves. The dancers were heavily weighed down, leaning, bracing themselves, and then freed for a moment, at times alluding and referencing the material real but then flowing away from any fixed set of meaning. Thus, the performance also spoke to the open-endedness of a conversation that has only just begun to take place.

In searching out and employing the uncoded vocabulary of

contemporary performance art, the performances at the *liquid blackness* Symposium certainly reflected liquidity, a foundational aspect of the research initiative itself. As the material moved in and out of vision, whether overlaid in static video or physical bodies dropping from sight in a performance, the pieces call out to our bodily reactions and desires. They demand that we put forth the effort to see, follow, and continue to experience the back and forth between the abstract and the concrete, always underscoring how the two promise to collapse but always dissolve again.

⁷ Steven Shaviro, “Grace Jones, Corporate Cannibal,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, entry posted July 23, 2008, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=653> (accessed May 1, 2014). A longer version of this post was published in Shaviro’s essay, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*” published in *Film Philosophy Journal* in 2010.

⁸ Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁰ Alessandra Raengo, “blackness, aesthetics, liquidity,” *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014), <http://www.liquidblackness.com/LB2.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2014).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jose Gil, “The Dancer’s Body,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 117-27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 5.

Blackness Bubbles: Figure, Form, Movement

by Adam Cottrel

bubble

n.

1. a thin film of liquid inflated with air intransitive

v.

2. to flow with a gurgling sound

— Merriam-Webster Dictionary



"Blackness Bubbles" is a response to two dances performed at the first *liquid blackness* symposium on April 11, 2014 at the Mammal Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia—*Heart of Palm*, a piece commissioned for the event to choreographer Jerylann Warner and an excerpt from T. Lang Dance's forthcoming production *Post Up*.¹ My interest in dance pivots on reading movement as form, which raises the more general question of the role of form in thinking about blackness as aesthetics. Seen through the lens of "liquid blackness," aesthetics describes forces that produce affects and intensities for which liquidity may be the mode of production. The conceptual value in rendering blackness as an aesthetic concept, as Alessandra Raengo phrases it, is the possibility to provide "a deliberate pressure point that [...] might help us think about the multiplicity of blackness [...] and the many things that it does: blackness queers, blackness mobilizes, blackness multiplies".² To help us think movement as form and to account for how the two dances performed blackness as a site of liquidity necessitates an additional qualifier: blackness *bubbles*. I offer the linguistic interplay of *bubble*, which is both a noun signifying a thin, translucent shield of liquid ungrounded, suspended in air as well as a verb signifying its drifting flow. This essay makes two suggestions about the contribution dance offers to "liquid blackness": movement is the aesthetic form of dance, and, read with "liquid blackness," this form "ceases to be representative and becomes real" through the affective athleticism of the dancer's body.³ The value derived from these suggestions is found in how we are able to read liquidity through a specific embodied form—movement—in order to more fully articulate the aesthetic and figural ramifications of blackness.

To better appreciate how dance contributes to black liquidity we must think seriously about forms of movement and, equally, movement as form. Form provides an important addition to the discourse of "liquid blackness" because it attends to the aesthetic specificity of the artistic text, object, or performance, producing forces of affect and intensity.

Form also provides the ground for a theory of blackness divorced from explicit representations of race. Eugenie Brinkema persuasively articulates the importance of textual specificity for affective aesthetics: "Reading affects as having forms involves de-privileging models of expressivity and interiority in favor of treating affects as structures that work through formal means, as consisting in their formal dimensions (as line, light, color, rhythm, and so on) of passionate structures."⁴ Form, in this sense, questions how we understand liquidity as an aesthetic category because its affective and intensive quality is not predicated on the "myth of asignifying affective immediacy."⁵ In other words, if "liquid blackness" is to provide the ground for a radical reformulation of both aesthetics and blackness its potential must be grounded in form. For dance, movement is the form allowing us to deliver specificity to a reading of black liquidity.

The twin play dance offers between movement as form and forms of movement importantly grounds this discussion in the dancer's body. Through collective movement in *Heart of Palm* and the hip-hop inspired movement of *Post Up*, dance allows us to read the affective and intensive qualities of "liquid blackness" embodied by the dancer. Dance requires an effervescent conception of the body, a body moved and moving because, as Erin Manning writes, "continuity of movement subverts any idea of a stable body [...]. Any positionality in this process is not a stopping but a quality of movement: the body never stops."⁶ If we follow Manning's point as a call to think dance's form as constant and continuous movement, we understand the dancer as a site for forces to play out, as a body that bubbles, shifts, and floats drawing attention to the productive tension between consistency and movement. What remains consistent, i.e. the form that allows us to read dance for black liquidity, is the bubbling movement of the body that subverts the idea of a stable body. For Manning, the body's movement is an explicit subversion of an "imprisonment of the self as self-same."⁷ Reading movement as form in dance for liquidity lends us the critical acumen to specify "liquid

blackness" as the active exercise of self-variation which complicates calcified and preconceived notions of blackness.

If "liquid blackness" is to provide the ground for a radical reformulation of both aesthetics and blackness its potential must be grounded in form.

Constant and continuous movement emphasizes the dancer's body as a site of destabilization where forces converge relegating representation to an afterthought. Reading these performances as a comment about how the moving body can stage the idea of destabilization echoes Gilles Deleuze's notion of a body without organs. In privileging the body as a site where forces affect and offer potential for difference, Deleuze writes, "the body does not have organs, but thresholds and levels [...] which no longer determines within itself representative elements, but allotropic variations."⁸ Deleuze's "allotropic variations" suggests the complexity liquidity affords blackness because it is never a single, stable, or solitary. Blackness, to echo Raengo, is always multiple: in its affects, intensities, images, and actions. The dancer's moving body troubles representation by producing sensations through dramatizing the forces acting on it. Blackness bubbles in the fluctuation of a material body producing immaterial sensations we read through this form embodying liquidity.

The bubbling of blackness between bodies affected by intensive forces is dramatized in these two dance performances. *Heart of Palm* and *Post Up* enact—in fact, they act-out—the variation of movement as a material reality of "liquid blackness" in order to demonstrate the destabilization of bodies by forces. For *Heart of Palm*, we find this explicitly in how the dancers embellish their bodies through movements that oscillate between synchronization and disorganization, proximity and distance, contact and rejection. *Heart of Palm* chooses to stage the liquidity of blackness as

forms of movement amongst a multiplicity of bodies responding and responsive to each other. The excerpt from *Post Up* suggests an entirely different production of black liquidity. For this performance, the dancer's body rode the wave of the music's force more literally, ebbing, flowing, and posing in rhythm with the beat of the bass. These performances demonstrate how the dancers bubble under and over the action of forces upon the body. Blackness, as the dancers' bodies perform it here, is liquid to the degree that movement is a form that can be read through dance. Put another way, what I have argued is how dance does not simply bring forth movement, but how movement brings forth the form of liquidity in dance.

¹*Heart of Palm*. Choreographed by Jerylann Warner. Performed by Gathering Wild Dance Company; *Post Up* (an excerpt). Choreographed by T. Lang Dance. Performed by Indya Childs.

²Alessandra Raengo, "blackness, aesthetics, liquidity," *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 17.

³Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 40.

⁴Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 37.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), 24.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 39.

The Art of Blackness: Queering and Advancing the Black Representational Space

by Jasmine Tilman



Foxy Lady, Dorothea Rosenthal Art, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36"

In his lecture at the *liquid blackness* Symposium, Hamza Walker asked the question, "how do we know race?"¹ One way he approached the issue was by discussing Jason Lazarus's *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, The Day of Exhumation* (2005), a kind of dedication to the narrative of Emmett Till and to the 2005 exhumation of his body. Walker described this photo by Lazarus as "unearthing history" and the curator's statement about the piece references an observation by Susan Sontag that history is mediated through iconic photographs.² The theme of history was consistent throughout Hamza Walker's and Derek Conrad Murray's lectures, and Walker further described this idea as "transmission of fate." Murray's talk complemented Walker's and offered insight into the policing function of black art as well as the ways that some contemporary black artists strive to liberate themselves from rigid definitions of blackness. Specifically, Murray discussed the complicated notion of "liberation," whether it is liberation from racial polemics or liberation from the heteronormative ideas of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. Murray argued that queer black art applies pressure to the kinds of ethnic authenticity that negate non-heteronormative forms of sexuality. Both Murray and Walker echoed Darby English's concept of the black representational space, which implies that blackness is always undergoing a constant policing or renegotiation. While the "transmission of fate" has in some ways bound black artists to an ascribed blackness, its very contradictory nature has allowed for black artists to "queer" it in order to fit their own articulations of blackness.

In the introductory chapter of *How To See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* Darby English explains that the black representational space "imagines the history of black art in America as an institution of refusal, too frequently bent on ordering, as a distinct series, a range of phenomena that, when approached differently, enable us to discover chance, the discontinuous, and materiality at their very roots."³ Beyond this, English further describes the black representational space as a "society of objects, whose members share...an agreement about honoring rather than testing their limitations."⁴

Similar to Walker's discussion of Lazarus's Till piece, English singles out the practices of Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, William Pope.L, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson because their experimental approaches confront some of the "biggest and oldest problems accompanying black visual representation."⁶ Some of these problems include the marginalization of black women, the assumption that black artists will privilege black viewers and Frantz Fanon's fact of blackness, which describes a blackness that promises a visual gift (the black body) to its viewer. In focusing on these artists and the problems they address in their work, English maintains that he privileges cases with "broad historical implications [...] which can indicate black representational space's complex contemporaneity precisely as a matter of history."⁶ Understanding the black representational space in this way means that artists, whether they know it or not, are part of a larger revisionist project on black history. While they may not explicitly refer to a singular moment in black history, the origin of their work stems from a black cultural artifact or institution, whether their art critiques or accepts that particular origin.⁷ English understands the history of black art as an institution of refusal, but black people's existence, historically, has also been one of refusal (and resistance).

Reflecting on Hamza Walker's lecture, I recalled his article, "Domino Effect" introducing the 2008 *Black Is, Black Ain't* Exhibition at the Renaissance Society, where he previously questioned notions of race: "But what kind of fact is race?" Walker asks.⁸ One of his responses: "Although a biological fiction, it remains a social fact whose history more than compensates for all that science disavows."⁹ In the article, Walker discusses race as a social fact, meaning it is part of public discourse and monitors social progress. While Walker notes that these social facts of race more than compensate for biological myths about it, blacks have inherited from our Civil Rights forebears the task of transcending race. This task is paradoxical because as we seek to break free of racial limitations, public racial discourse (or discord even) heightens our race consciousness. As debates about race

While the "transmission of fate" has in some ways bound black artists to an ascribed blackness, its very contradictory nature has allowed for black artists to "queer" it in order to fit their own articulations of blackness.

and blackness become more public, black artists will not be able to escape and resist the influence of these social facts. The task put forth by the Civil Rights generation of transcending race is (and was) ambitious but also potentially an undesirable pursuit since it hardly considers that race could be interpreted in a myriad of ways by artists and therefore unlock new understandings. Like the black representational space, blackness and its definitions are always in constant renegotiation. Race, does not need to be erased, but rather foregrounded and embraced in its complexity. In English's words, black artists "accentuate the difficulty of representing a historical and cultural position."¹⁰ In a moment where intraracial polemics are very public, how can black artists free themselves from compulsory solidarity?

Revisiting Murray is helpful at this juncture because I think he discussed some ways in which black artists, like Mickalene Thomas, transition from black art that serves as a didactic political narrative to art that serves as post-black satire. This process does not come without obstacles, especially because of what Murray called the "profitable marketing of otherness." Black artists can subscribe to this limited lens through which their otherness is marketed, but as English notes, "few serious ones can afford to limit either their practice or their market [to black audiences] in this way."¹¹

As we seek to break free of racial limitations, public racial discourse (or discord even) heightens our race consciousness

Thus, while blackness can be seen as an unavoidable framework for the reception of their work, black artists possess also the ability to “queer” blackness as a response to the often limiting and restrictive definitions of the concept. Murray suggested that one of the ways that black artists queer blackness is by addressing marginalized identities within blackness, sexual identity being one example. In this way, according to Murray, black artists attempt to liberate themselves from the heteronormative expectations of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, which have often forced them to subscribe to an “ethnic authenticity that negates sexuality.” Here is where the black representational space becomes relevant to this liberation because the “enforcement of [it] is set forth, in a familiar turn, as a means of ‘diversifying the field’ that won’t diversify itself. Perhaps, but seldom does this diversification also entail the analysis of our role in reinforcing the blind spots.”¹² By addressing those in the blind spots within blackness (i.e. the marginalized) a more heterogeneous blackness can emerge. Using the artist Mickalene Thomas as an example, Murray described how artists can intervene in black historical eras like the Black Power Movement and reinterpret cultural models to include diverse sexual identities.

In the end, I think Walker and Murray address both sides of the same coin that is the black representational space. Walker stressed that blacks cannot be disconnected from history because the concept of blackness becomes its own cause and effect, or a “domino effect.” Complementarily, Murray suggested that liberation is an achievable pursuit through the “queering” of blackness, or by interventions that revise cultural models of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Murray was initially troubled by his

ideas about post-black being conflated with post-racial, specifically by scholar Touré in his book *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*. Despite this confusion, there are some elements that are useful for liberation of black artists. The post-black paradigm is beneficial because it transitions from a black cultural model that only critiques the dominant culture’s bigotry to one that critiques the former as well as the black community’s prejudices. English argues that “thinking about specific contemporary interventions by many black artists into this history of resistance necessitates a view that recognizes the multiple meanings of blackness and the plurality of ways of living under the black sign but also sees beyond them to another realm of complexity.”¹³ Black artists then have the twisted pleasure of being in a liminal space, where, Walker explains, their art serves as a “site of unresolved soul searching” but still continue the process of revising blackness to accommodate its multiple identities.¹⁴

Black art serves as a “site of unresolved soul searching” but still continue the process of revising blackness to accommodate its multiple identities.

Keeping this in mind, I think black artists do have a responsibility—that is, a responsibility to continually negotiate what blackness means and to incorporate marginalized identities within it. This continual revising process reminds us of the historical and cultural lineage from which we come and even if black artists disagree with the concept of blackness, they must understand that they continually add new layers to the conversation. Certainly this is not a small burden to bear, but constant policing is an essential piece of black art and culture, whether or not you engage in compulsory solidarity because, after all, “regardless of how you vote, you have to admit, watching history being made is better than watching it repeat itself.”¹⁵ Without this continual negotiation and dialogue, the black representational space (and black art) loses its purpose and work produced

by black artists will indeed be monolithic. Symposiums such as this one, along with scholarly discourse and other forms of racial dialogue are necessary if the goal is to achieve a blackness that is fluid and ever-changing.

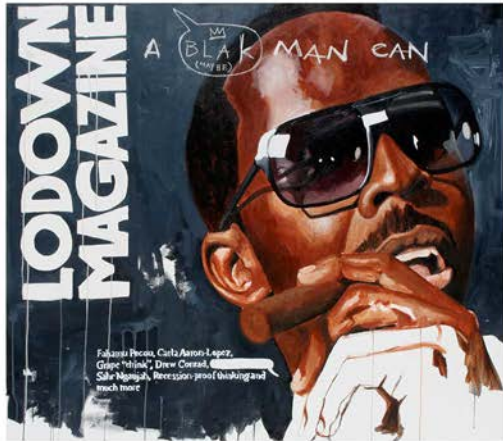
- ¹All quotes from Hamza Walker and Derek Murray, which are unattributed to his written work, are from their lectures at the 2014 *liquid blackness* Symposium at Georgia State University, April 11-12.
- ²The Renaissance Society, untitled, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, accessed 5 May 2014 http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Benefit/Preview.html?benefitID=1&benefit_auctionsID=277&printable=1
- ³Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 9.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁸Hamza Walker, "Domino Effect," *Black Is, Black Ain't*, Hamza Walker, ed. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2013), 11.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁰Darby English, *How to See*, 15.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁴Hamza Walker, "Domino Effect," 13.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 13.



The Code (2009), Fahamu Pecou acrylic and oil stick on paper, 42" x 26"

All That's Black Ain't SOÜLD: Performativity of Blackness in Fahamu Pecou's Work

by Shady Patterson



Fahamu Pecou, *Blak Maybe* (2009), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 66 x 51 in.

"The facility with which the definition and understanding of blackness in [Keith Obadike's] *Blackness for Sale* changes across the various scenarios listed in the product description indicates a preexisting liquidity, which in turn grants access to blackness as a detachable and usable experience."¹

Alessandra Raengo

One of the tenets of *liquid blackness* is articulated through detachment. Keith Obadike uses the metaplasticity of the virtual/cyber world to offer blackness as an "experience" to those non-blacks who desire it or to the blacks whose "blackness" is "at stake" or "in limbo."² This imagined alternate universe is made pervasive by today's gaming possibilities and technologies. Yet, if Obadike's commodifying and auctioning of his blackness might prove to be potentially profitable, for the buyer and seller, in an imagined universe, what about in real life?

In "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," Alessandra Raengo offers a basis for understanding *blackness* as a social construction distinct from the experience of *being black*, citing Marx's explanation of commodification: "That blackness and whiteness are distinct from black and white people is increasingly accepted today as is the overwhelming self-referentiality of the images circulating in our contemporary visual culture."³ Therefore, blackness does not describe the experience of black people, but attends socially constructed ideas and issues attached to peoples whose bodies are recognizably "black."

Raengo also affords a framework for attending issues and concerns civil society presents in the construction and maintenance of race and blackness using Henry Louis Gates' definition of the "Naturalist Fallacy." She explains, "the expectation that visual signifiers of race are responsible for faithfully and authentically representing 'black people,' rather than social relations" is helpful in interrogating the distinction of being black

and “experiencing” Blackness.⁴ Today’s technology-based society, social media outlets (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter) offer instantiations of this paradox, where individual’s cyber surrogate enables an experience akin to realistic situations though lacking sensorial elements and the existential depth associated with the real/lived experience.

Fahamu Pecou offers a place to engage with the tension existing at the cusp of the real and imagined worlds [...] his body.

Fahamu Pecou offers a place to engage with the tension existing at the cusp of the real and imagined worlds thusly understood: his body. Pecou explores issues of black masculinity and race in contemporary culture. The performance aspect of his exploration offers insight into how society engages with the stereotypes, fantasies, and the fallacies of American hip-hop while working to subvert the image of the Black male body. His music videos, paintings, and “scholarshit”⁵ are loaded with a “trap” lexicon, in-vogue delusions of grandeur, and dandyism. Objectifying his body not only offers a site for society to safely examine a multiplicity of issues, but also exploits his body as a marketplace for the fostering of personal opportunities. Using himself as subject works successfully as a ploy for self-promotion and media saturation. In his work, Pecou muddles the boundaries between parody and reality by interrogating relevant contemporary social and pop culture issues, performing and lionizing blackness, and employing seasoned local hip-hop talent, like Starchile, Ekundayo, and Boog Brown. Though Pecou interrogates very specific issues, I will touch on topics of consumption and “black cultural traffic,”⁶ the mobility of blackness, and how it might operate in relation to African spirituality and practice.

Using the format of renowned magazine covers, Pecou reimagines himself

as a celebrity by painting a glamorous version of his likeness on large, oversized canvas. Unassigned to any particular series of work, these self-portraits appear and re-appear throughout his portfolio becoming narrations of his accomplishments as they are recognized by the world he imagines. *Blak Maybe* (2009) uses the format of *Lodown Magazine*, *American Gothik* (2009) mimics *Literal* magazine, and *The Code* (2009) uses *Creative Quarterly*. Through this convergence of real, tangible material worlds and imaginary marketing of self, these works doubly function as creative art pieces and as validations of worth using the influence, evaluation, and audience loyalty of each magazine he occupies. Instead of being pimped and sold at the discretion of today’s arbiters of culture through mediated materials, Pecou tasks himself as the artist and the master of his destiny reversing how identity is constructed and translated. He employs “celebrity” as a mechanism to introduce himself into the stream of pop culture and black cultural traffic, rather than his celebrity being the consequence of his efforts. Though interesting and maybe unfamiliar to the traditional Western canon of art, this stratagem is popular in hip-hop culture, European black dandyism, and furthermore West African traditions.⁷

In the early 1980s, Dapper Dan’s clothing boutique in Harlem revolutionized street wear and helped shape the look of hip-hop by pirating European designer logos and customizing clothing geared to his market. As a result, his clientele was able to access the lives of the rich and famous through the livery respective to their lifestyles.⁸ This performativity is engrained in the composition of African aesthetics, constitutive in black cultural products and surfaces time and again in Pecou’s work.

Irony (2012), a commentary on society’s relationship with black bodies through visual pop culture, was inspired by Jay-Z’s lyric “Truthfully/I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/but I did 5 mill/I ain’t been rhyming like Common since.”⁹ Here, Pecou scrutinizes the simultaneous recognition and



Fahamu Pecou, *American Gothik* (2009), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 63.5 x 49.5 in.

dismissal of social responsibility in hip-hop artists. The amassing of capital seems to take priority over ethical reasoning. The tabling of one's own values and principles exposes the root of compromise and sacrifice constantly negotiated in a plagued and troubled community or the unforgiving mandatory performance in hip-hop. This psychological rupture is visualized on screen in the duplication of performing individuals throughout the video. Each performer appears cloned, bifurcated by the gray and in-static television screen, as the two different characterizations allude to an acknowledgement of the real/authentic self and the imaginary representation of self, however never distinguishing, which is which.

The pressure to perform at peak capacity, as a black man, is riddled with confrontation within the operating social order.

West African spirituality offers a framework to deal with this tricky-ness and reaffirms the value in the individual's mentality and lived experience. In *Tangled Webs* (2011) from Pecou's *Second Childhood* series, Anansi, the trickster and also West African Orisha, surfaces. In this illustration, Anansi, the spider, is depicted graphically on a child's pajama shirt worn on Pecou's adult, male, black body. As a mediated energy, Anansi percolates ideas about the Black man's anxiety surrounding the fulfillment of social expectations and obligations due to failure in the early childhood development in their lives. This piece can be thought of as a call to arms, a commandment of forces against the prevailing degradation of the black man, or in a less revolutionary vein, a resignation of the socio-corporeal experience. The pressure to perform at peak capacity, as a black man, is riddled with confrontation within the operating social order. Institutional racism and the prison industrial complex, mythologies and spectacularization of the black male body, and the panic and suspicion of intention living on the surface of their bodies explains the desire to escape

often felt and temporarily realized through performance and imagination. This consternation and negotiation can be deemed symptomatic of the historical trauma and an attempt at reconciliation with it; alternatively, it can be seen as illustrative of subsequent and constant propitiation experienced within the black community surfacing at points of racial interaction, survival, and approximation of freedom and indicative, or prototypical, of black and African aesthetics.

Fahamu's most current project *GRAVITY*, explores the clothing practice of sagging to comment on and illustrate the psychosocial conflict common in the "contradictions of mobility, access and agency for young Black men."¹⁰ In this series of portraits on paper Pecou depicts himself cramped and confined by the limits of the paper. In each portrait he wears the same uniform: he is bare-chested and only wears a pair of jeans and sneakers and multiple pairs of boxers. This exaggeration of underwear not only points to the actual practice of layered bottoms, but it also exaggerates and satirizes it in order to draw attention to issues of self-expression and fixity. Pecou depicts himself in different instances of mobility; in black and white, while splashes of brown watercolor appear where we imagine skin. While the parameters and style of dress challenge his mobility, his brownness facilely exceeds the edges of his depicted corporeality. His brownness has a liquid quality, suggesting the racialization of this style of dress; underscoring the "visible seam" of blackness in popular culture, it destabilizes one's perception of the body and respective ethnic categorization.¹¹ This thorny troubling pricks, but also visualizes the anxieties surrounding the profusion and irruption of "black" cultural material in national and international markets.

¹ Alessandra Raengo, "Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity," *liquid blackness*, 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 8.

² Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Blackness for Sale."

³ http://www.blacknetart.com/index1_1.htmlhttp://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html (accessed on May 28, 2014).

⁴ Alessandra Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," in *Beyond Blackface: Africana Images in US Media*, ed. Akil Houston, 4th edition (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2013), 159.

⁵ Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," 160.

⁶ Fahamu Pecou "Art. Rap. Scholarshit." <http://scholarshit.tumblr.com> (accessed May 26, 2014).

⁷ Harry Justin Elam and Kennell A. Jackson, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁸ Emily Zobel Marshall, "Anansi, Eshu, and Legba: Slave Resistance and the West African Trickster." *Bonded Labor in the Cultural Contact Zone: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Slavery and Its Discourses* (Münster: Waxman, 2010): 177-192.

⁹ Jane Yeomans, "Dapper Dan's Designs". *New Yorker*, March 19, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/photobooth/2013/03/dapper-dans-designs.html#slide_ss_0=1 (accessed May 28, 2014).

¹⁰ Shawn Carter and Marshall Mathers, "Moment of Clarity" (song lyrics), <http://www.metrolyrics.com/moment-of-clarity-lyrics-jayz.html> (accessed May 28, 2014).

¹¹ Fahamu Pecou, "Gravity." <http://www.fahamupecouart.com/#/gravity/cfyo> (accessed May 28, 2014).

¹² Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Visible Seams: The Media Art of Fatimah Tuggar," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 177-206.



Fahamu Pecou, *Gravity and Lord* (2013), graphite and acrylics on paper, 42 x 26 in.

liquid blackness **meets** **The Window Project** by Christina Romo

As a means of spreading the concept of “liquid blackness” to a greater audience, *liquid blackness* collaborated with Georgia State University’s Digital Arts Entertainment Laboratory (DAEL) and the lab’s curated outdoor media installation space, The Window Project. In the weeks leading up to the symposium, *liquid blackness* called for submissions from local artists. In the end, the selection for The Window Project included works produced by young, local student artists and established artists alike.

This partnership led to varied interpretations of the answer to the question, “what is liquid blackness?” Each piece represents the blurring of lines between dynamic and static work, the idea of liquidity manifesting itself on the screen before your eyes. It also facilitated an exchange between *liquid blackness*, the featured artists, and the public space.

The collaboration between *liquid blackness* and the Window Project began with the multi-video piece by Consuela Boyer, *Blaque Woman*. Each of the videos features Consuela performing one of three separate characters: The Angry Black Woman (named Le-Ah Blaque), The Gold-digging Black Woman (Anna-Renae Blaque), and The Independent Black Woman (Tiffany Blaque). The resulting work includes a mash-up of all three videos (and, as a result, all of the Blagues) and explores media representations of African American women.

Joey Molina’s *genderFLOW* is a collaborative project between photographer Brandon Johnson and models Mia Selph and Rodney Oliver Banks. The high fashion poses and photographic aesthetic, combined with the models’ androgynous style, illustrates the relationship between gender and clothing. For The Window Project, Molina transformed his still images into a seamlessly flowing video presentation. As a result, his work not only blurred gender boundaries but also emphasized the ephemerality of fashion and his moving-images.

Chris Fergusson’s installation *Martin Martyrs* features several black and white photographs of various young men and women donning a grey hoodie, which has become a symbol associated with the murder of Trayvon Martin. While each photographic subject varies in their race, gender, facial expression, and position toward the camera, it is hard to understand each model outside of their shared costuming. Like Molina’s piece, clothing becomes a way for viewers to consider the visible layers that orient bodies and work to define those bodies from the outside.

Fahamu Pecou’s *OVREXPOS(d)* is an experimental piece that features a hand-drawn, moving illustration of a black man. As the man makes his way across the white screen, his pants begin to sag, thus limiting his mobility. The stop-motion style of animation allows each previous frame to resonate on top of the current frame, illustrating a steady, fluid transformation from

one moment to the next.

The artists and work featured in The Window Project illustrate an important part of the *liquid blackness* mission to bridge the gaps between the academic, curatorial, and artist communities. Their work, curated by *liquid blackness* Editorial Board member Kristin Juarez, is a collection of diverse objects that manage to present current issues in politics and popular culture at the same time that they are informed by the history of black visual culture. We believe the value of this project is in both its content but also its form and placement at the heart of Georgia State University's campus. The beauty and sophistication of this work had a clear impact on the *liquid blackness* Editorial Board—this is evident in our last issue—and we believe this public work is capable of making a similar impression on our Atlanta home.

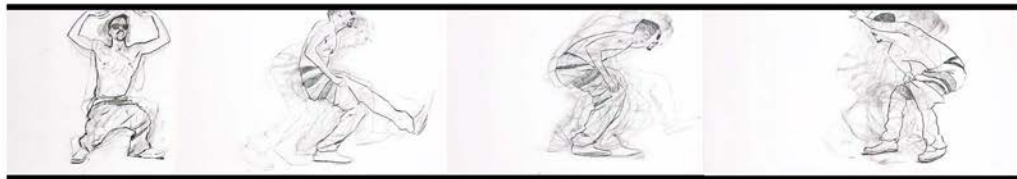


Window Project site, street view.

liquid blackness Window Project



Joey Molina,
genderFLOW, fashion
photography, 2014.



Fahamu Pecou,
OVRSPOS(d),
hand drawn, moving
illustration, 2013.

liquid blackness Window Project



Consuela Boyer, *Blaque Woman*,
multi-video instillation, 2014.

Chris Ferguson, *Martin Martyrs*,
black and white photography series,
2014.



Post-Symposium Reflections

During the first *liquid blackness* meeting after the Symposium it was suggested that the Editorial Board, and our contributing staffers and friends of *liquid blackness*, consider writing a brief reflection on the events of the previous weekend. These short commentaries are collected below and, together with Katharine Zakos's introductory essay, are offered here as ways to provide some glimpses into an exciting multifaceted event.

Creating Space

by Michele Prettyman Beverly

As part of *liquid blackness's* spring 2014 Symposium, Hamza Walker, Associate Curator of The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago gave a presentation that was followed by a two dance performances and the screening of a short film. I was asked to reflect on the events and context of the symposium, and also to think about how "space was being created" for the work that liquid blackness is doing.

Here, space refers to a number of things. First and foremost is the institutional context. Georgia State University, whose Department of Communication houses *liquid blackness*, occupies a unique space of its own. GSU is one of the largest and most diverse research universities in the South and is nestled in downtown Atlanta. Its population is both regional and international and it is geographically positioned in a city that makes engaging race a strangely unavoidable and yet almost antiquated

pastime. I am thinking here about the profound resonance of the lineage of Martin Luther King Jr. (and the sometimes precarious existence of the King Center), the heredity of the SCLC and the Civil Rights Movement, and the legacy of the schools of the AU Center (Clark-Atlanta University, Morris Brown, Spelman and Morehouse Colleges). These mammoth institutions are an invaluable part of the city's and nation's history, specifically a history that attends to understanding race and culture. Georgia State, though just a few miles from any of them, at times feels separate from this legacy and from the vital scholarly field of race and visual culture, which includes studies of race read through art/art history, film, and post-colonial studies among others.

Institutions not identified as "historically black" must recognize that it is not only the responsibility of the "black" institutions to embrace the work of scholars, artists and filmmakers of color, but also the responsibility of non-historically black schools.

This distance, however, is now collapsing as GSU and other Atlanta institutions become more invested in the cultivation of intellectual and cultural spaces that both appreciate and challenge the trajectories and scholarship that are defining how race and visual culture are studied and presented in this new millennium. Institutions not identified as "historically black" must recognize that it is not only the responsibility of the seminally "black" institutions to embrace the work of scholars, artists and filmmakers of color, but also the responsibility of non-historically black schools.

In years past, I argued that Georgia State owes its students more course offerings, faculty, and overall exposure to these disciplines. As a graduate instructor at GSU I have taught students from around the world

(including New Zealand, the Philippines, Pakistan, South Korea, from countries in Europe and Africa and from all parts of the US) and was at times frustrated by the reliance on African American Studies to adequately include the vast and diverse bodies of knowledge reflective of contemporary studies of race, visual culture, media and film studies. This attitude reproduces the classic argument, the “diversity needs diversity” model, which suggests to some that only students marked or identified as “ethnic,” “minority” or “people of color” need exposure to these intellectual and cultural vectors. This model is often the last resort, one that the powers that be should not ignore in the face of such a racially diverse student body.

Another model of creating space for race and visual culture studies is revealed in the work of Hamza Walker. Walker’s presentation reflected on how his work as a curator, an observer, and a scholar creates a literal space for artists and the energy that their work attempts to codify relates to his role as a gatekeeping, a mediator of public and private or institutional space. His award-winning exhibition *Black Is, Black Ain’t* featured artists of different racial backgrounds, all whose work in some way challenged, reflected, and engaged the provocation of racial identity, public space, performance, and signification. His presentation style was reflective of his unique role in bridging these spaces as well as opening them up for all of us to experience. After his presentation at GSU’s Department of Communication, participants traveled on-foot to The Mammal Gallery, an off-site gallery and performance space. There we chatted, shared libations, and watched three amazing and innovative

The symposium was unchained from a single room in a single institution to circulate between a range of diverse spaces: from body to body and from intellectual to performative.

dance performances created specifically for the *liquid blackness* symposium. The symposium was unchained from a single room in a single institution to circulate between a range of diverse spaces: from body to body and from intellectual to performative.

liquid blackness similarly creates space for students many of whom have never studied race and visual culture to recognize that these discourses and the work of scholars, filmmakers, and artists previously unknown to them might actually be relevant to their own interests and sensibilities. This project literally makes space for all of us to experience ideas and work that we might not have known existed, but which is right here living and breathing amongst us. It is driven by the underlying premise that this work is for everyone, while it also provides space for scholars and artists of color to become visible and accessible to broader publics. Like Walker’s seminal exhibition, it foregrounds a whole range of profound theoretical queries and arguments, not only the race of the participants, theorists or media-makers.

This research project is both the answer and the question; it recognizes that space must be made in our institutional and individual frameworks to account for and to produce scholarly, public, and creative work that responds to more than our historical and experiential understanding of race, communication, and culture in this Southern institutional space. Our task is to create and invigorate space for these new frontiers, new ideas, and new configurations of race and visual culture in the hands of innovative thinkers and scholars, artists, media-makers, and students.

Reflecting on *liquid blackness*

Symposium

by Dorothy Hendricks

The most distinctive aspect of the first *liquid blackness* Symposium, to me, resides in its very form—in its permeable boundaries. That audience members, speakers, and even the organizers could not offer a single definition that encompassed everything the Symposium offered is indicative of the kind of work that *liquid blackness* allows. The slippage between form and content, between “liquid blackness” as theory and as methodology, was readily evident as the symposium’s program unfolded across mediums and registers. Moving from curator Hamza Walker’s talk to a reception that featured video and modern dance presented an opening to discuss these frictions that consciously fluctuate between different viewing practices as well as formats. Transitioning from one physical space to another for different pieces of the Symposium offered a rather unusual detour from more traditional scholarly formats. The choice to change locations and mediums coincides with the term liquidity as explained by Alessandra Raengo in her piece, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity.” Raengo underscores the impermanence of *liquidity*, writing, “Its instability is intentional in order to maintain a productive tension between experience and expression, between people and sensorial or aesthetic regimes.” This tension rightfully permeated the Symposium and as conversations moved from curatorial practices to theoretical work on art (in an incredible lecture given by Derek Murray), the distinctions between art and scholarship seemed tenuous. For me, perhaps the most notable take away from the experience is the wide range of discourse and responses that *liquid blackness* motivates—how, we seem to be thinking and looking at one thing and yet always reaching across spaces and experiences to reference something else.

Finding Humor

by Lauren M. Cramer

The *liquid blackness* spring Symposium was an incredible event. There were challenging theoretical questions about the meaning of black art and the place of the black artist’s body within that work. We had the opportunity to look at provocative art objects that facilitated a productive dialogue. I think the aspect of the Symposium that was most beneficial for understanding the relationship between blackness and liquidity was the fun we had. It was refreshing to be at a Symposium on the touchiest and even ugliest of topics (Race! Blackness!) and laugh. It seems appropriate that trying to grasp blackness—which we’ve already described as formless, fluctuating, slippery, and unbounded—would be a playful endeavor. On the first night of the Symposium, we screened bcarr[works]’s short film *Flā*. The film was an apt choice for the program because it is a filmic exercise in texture, but frankly, the film was also erotic and titillating. One goal of *liquid blackness* is to address the vitality of blackness, and any serious examination of this topic must also consider forms of desire, allure, and pleasure.

For the speakers at the Symposium, one way to pursue the slippery nature of blackness was being explicit about what is unspeakable in racial discourse. For example, Fahamu Pecou’s hilarious video, *Shit Rappers Say*, foregrounds the taboo elements of hip hop culture. Not surprisingly, saying or seeing the unspeakable can incite nervous giggles. In the opening lecture, Hamza Walker shared a childhood story about stage fright when he was asked to light the Kwanzaa candle in front of his entire class. He explained the memory as a failure to live up to his name and his race. Then he began singing lyrics from Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All.” It was playful and funny, but also a devastating example of the weight of blackness.

Like any kind of joke, timing was essential to the effect. As a result, the humor at the Symposium provided an excellent way to begin thinking about blackness and temporality. For instance, a collective “ahh” signaled the precise moment when everyone in the room recognized the satirical edge in the images Derek Murray presented. This moment captured the ways queer black art can operate on different registers and makes conceptual use of difference and deferrals. It also illustrates the value of these kinds of events, where we can think about these difficult topics collectively. I can describe these jokes in writing, but ultimately, you had to be there. This humorous energy vibrated through the symposium spaces, reminding us that the qualities of blackness can be affective, flickering, and fleeting.

Digital Bodies

by Kristin Juarez

The artist panel, comprised of Carla Aaron-Lopez, Nikita Gale, Fahamou Pecou, Yanique Norman, and moderator Nettrice Gaskins, began with explanatory slide shows. Gale’s and Pecou’s video work use images of the artists to investigate how black bodies are perceived and overdetermined in mainstream culture; Lopez’s collages create mythology from pornographic images; Norman’s watercolors imagine the psyche of popular historic images of black people whose individuality has long been lost; and Gaskins’s creations in *Second Life* question the distance between blackness and the digital body. While discussing the influences in their bodies of work, they each addressed the various ways digital interfaces have impacted and influenced their style, their content, and the issues they seek to resolve. While their work cannot be summarized with similar formal characteristics or use of medium, the artists’ discussion put a spotlight on how *YouTube*, *Google Images*, and *Second Life* shape their

understanding of how blackness exists within popular culture. Not long after the Symposium, I attended a presentation by Lauren M. Cramer, whose scholarship investigates the interface of WorldStarHipHop.com. From these presentations a few questions have arisen that I can’t shake or easily answer. *Google* collates a hodgepodge of images across time, place, and relevance; what can we learn from the de-contextualization and dematerialization of these images of blackness that proliferate throughout the site’s interface? With the ability to call up any image instantly, how do we reconcile the oscillation between their immediacy and the conceptual distance these artists create in their work that clearly pushes beyond mere appropriation? Finally, within a broader visual culture, what role can coded aggregation play in visualizing or deconstructing how blackness is assigned and ultimately recoded to the body?

Thinking Through Space

by Alessandra Raengo

I would like to contribute two comments to this informal conversation.

The first is a word of acknowledgment for the powerful talks delivered by Hamza Walker and Derek Murray and for their generosity in continuing the conversation with us after the end of the Symposium. Their work is already part of our “reading list,” but their contributions at the Symposium offered yet another critical lens on the stakes involved in issues of blackness, post blackness, identity and representation. In their talks and interviews they touched on important ideas of form, abstraction, and the potential and limitations of the “figure.” At the Symposium, they revisited for us two defining moments of the present conversation: Walker’s *Black Is*, *Black Ain’t* exhibition and the public discourse channeled by the publication of Touré’s book, *Who’s Afraid of Postblackness*. Putting these moments in the context of current attempts to complicate—and queer—

understandings of blackness strengthens what we already see as an emerging critical tradition (to which *liquid blackness* is also contributing) committed to exploring forms of expansiveness for blackness. Furthermore, both Murray's and Walker's talks gathered audiences that do not usually come together in the same room and cleared the space for a conversation that is, at times, still difficult to initiate in institutional settings.

The second point I want to make has to do with the events at the Mammal Gallery. I had a personal stake in the possibility of incorporating ways of thinking through the body, particularly the body in motion—where motion is seen as a form of thought and the physical presence of the body in space has an important ethical resonance. This was especially powerful in consideration of our own bodies moving through a downtown space (between the GSU campus and the gallery) that, quite quickly and abruptly, connects radically different environments. "Fluidity" was a guiding idea behind this decision but there is a specific precedent I also want to acknowledge.

In the 1990s, as a college student in Milan, I had the opportunity to attend a production of Franz Kafka's *America* by experimental director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti. The performance began in a theater but then continued on a trolley car that traveled along an unused track across town to a barren post-industrial area in the city's outskirts. The play continued through a series of vignettes built around open-air stages set up in the area. Several video installations were also scattered in this environment. Barberio Corsetti's phenomenally athletic actors were involved in highly physical, indeed quasi-acrobatic, performances onto minimalist architectural structures (such as gigantic ladders, grids, columns, etc.) that functioned as sets. Throughout the piece, it was the audience that had to move from set to set, relocate, and adapt to physically experience—to think through—the disorientation of Kafka's alienated text.

Inspired by this experimental stage adaptation I thought of the Mammal Gallery event as addressing an idea of immersion: both as movement through the urban space as well as an opportunity to think about issues of race's adherence, proximity, or removal from the body as different bodies, thinking modes, and critical investments came together for a brief experience of a somewhat intimate collective viewing.

Contributors

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Featured Artists

bcarr[works]
DRosenthal Art
Fahamu Pecou
T.Lang Dance

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