

Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity

by Alessandra Raengo

There is no way for me to say, think, or write “blackness” without activating innumerable points of tension.

There is no way for blackness not to do so – no matter who is speaking and for what aims.

The idea of “liquidity,” placed alongside the idea of “blackness” has been a way to activate yet another series of (tender) pressure points that have to do with two main scenarios:



Chris Hunt,
Joey Molina,
Michael Sanders,
liquid blackness 3242
2014, digital photo

The first scenario is what Harry Elam has described as the ability for blackness to travel on its own, separate from black people.¹ In this scenario, blackness flows from the subject to the object² and appears as a quality that is acquirable, purchasable, fungible, without regard for people, modes of existence, and concrete living experiences. Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* (2001) is the work that prompts Elam's statement and it makes the point well: blackness is the product fashioned by the very transaction that the work initiates, and yet it is never univocal or exhaustible; rather, it offers a multiplicity of entry points which exist in an irresolvable state of tension with one another.³ We recognize in it blackness as commodity, possibly blackness as a phantasmagoria, as I have argued elsewhere, and certainly blackness as "property enjoyment."⁴ In this scenario, liquidity grants access to blackness as a detachable and usable experience.

The second scenario considers blackness as lived in the body. This is how it is normally discussed, but it is also the reason why the terms of the conversation continue to quarantine blackness and race as a matter that concerns only *some* people. Blackness is indeed a bodily matter, but I want to suggest ways in which it is also *everybody's matter*. In different ways, obviously: "the black suffers in his body quite differently from the white man," writes Fanon critiquing Sartre, or "the subordinated are in no position to doubt the existence of the world and other people, especially that of their oppressors," claims Charles Mills in his critique of the Cartesian cogito.⁵

Blackness is constructed with the cooperation of everybody's sensorium

In this second scenario liquidity refers to the fluid ways in which blackness organizes the human sensorium. Said otherwise, blackness is everybody's



Yanique Norman
The Soggy Moons 1 (2011),
graphite, collage and gouache on
paper, 20" x 30," detail

matter because it is constructed with the cooperation of everybody's sensorium. This is what Mark Smith has described as the *sensorial construction of race* – the way race is *sensorially made* (i.e. built, constructed, produced) and *made to make sense* (i.e. given meaning, sense, and the sensation that it is real). For Smith race was given a sensorial foundation so that it could always be vulnerable to sensorial detection.⁶ With a double purpose: on the one hand, Southern whites' investment in constructing race through the senses – with ideas about black smell, skin texture, voice, sound – was crucial to the maintenance of a racial world order. On the other hand, the color line was instrumental to its own violation, since a racial regime both abhorred and demanded a variety of forms of proximity. After all, "blacks labored for whites and of necessity engaged in sensory exchange. [...] Black hands had to prepare

white food.”⁷ The sensorial construction of race requires intimacy; but segregation requires its disavowal. *Liquid blackness* instead, claims this common and fluid sensorial terrain as one of its objects of focus.

The choice of liquidity⁸

These are difficult issues. Predictably, the very expression liquid blackness is simultaneously attractive and uncomfortable, inciting and off-putting, definitive and haunting. Its instability is intentional in order to maintain a productive tension between experience and expression, between people and sensorial or aesthetic regimes. And it is meant to resonate differently with each person who says it, thinks it, or writes it.⁹

As a racially diverse and multigenerational group, we have chosen to direct our focus to the tensions spurred by the intricate relationships between these two scenarios.¹⁰ We have decided to do so by *seeing the first scenario through* to its sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, but always immensely complicated conclusions, where blackness acquires immersive qualities, becomes seemingly touchable, all enveloping, and often erotically charged. We do so in the conviction that it is the *commonness of blackness*—its being made across everybody’s sensorium—that is the first foundation of its potential liquidity. It is also what grounds possibilities for its *expansiveness*—for the many things that *blackness can do*—as evidenced by the artwork brought together in this issue and in the *liquid blackness* Symposium in general.

***liquid blackness* claims this common and fluid sensorial terrain as one of its objects of focus**

This exploration is not easy and not always pleasant. We have found, for example, that often the idea of blackness as a liquid form of being comes with affective attachments to particular notions of materiality and to

blackness itself as a form of dense matter. This, as I will address throughout, can be leveraged in dramatically different directions. On the one hand, this attachment to black matter has fueled fantasies of incorporation and non-committal interracial contact, but on the other, it has offered a rhetorical strategy to articulate some coherence for the black subject whose integrity is being assaulted. On the one hand, it has licensed melancholic relationships, but on the other, it has created room for being *in excess* of predictable limitations.¹¹



Chris Hunt,
Joey Molina,
Michael Sanders,
liquid blackness 3242
2014, digital photo

Predictably, the...expression *liquid blackness* is simultaneously attractive and uncomfortable, inciting and off-putting, definitive and haunting

Overall, we move from the exploration of the commonness of blackness – its aesthetic form, in the broad sense as I will explain below—as the aspect that attaches to, and concerns, everybody’s embodied existence in the world. We are committed to traveling this fine line and probing, rather than reconciling, these tensions. Between “the fact of blackness” and “the lived experience of the black man,” as Fred Moten argues, there is an infinite space that is largely unaccounted for.¹² And there is no subject position or object that can fill it and no positive ontology that can ground it. For us, this is the space that needs attention. Our hope is not only to understand more subtly what blackness does, licenses, facilitates, or absorbs in our contemporary culture, but also to leverage this gap as it affords new possibilities for *both* experience and expression.

First Scenario: Detachment

The facility with which the definition and understanding of blackness in *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. What happens to blackness as a result of that demands further reflection. Especially since, as Elam further observes, this detachability has now made it entirely possible to “love black cool and not love black people.”¹³

This does not need to be the only option, and one might find the opposite to be true: blackness might be imagined as separated from black people out of love rather than indifference. A vivid example – which I have tested over several years of teaching – is Toni Morrison’s short story “Recitatif.” I have discussed it elsewhere, but the pressing point I want to make here

concerns the premise of the story, i.e., that it is about two people for whom race is paramount, but the narrative is written without using racial language.¹⁴ This is how Morrison misleadingly describes her intention, but, in fact, this is not what actually happens.¹⁵ Indeed, even though the story is *blind* to the two characters’ race, it is not deprived of racially loaded language.¹⁶ In the attempt to figure out which character is black and which is white, readers are unavoidably drawn to attribute racial connotations to a whole host of descriptors and statements, effectively producing the characters’ racial identity as the story progresses. More profoundly, one comes to doubt what counts as racial, wondering whether one is falling back into prejudicial assumptions as they are attempting to attribute what they perceive as racially loaded statements: “my mother said... that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny.”¹⁷ Who does this statement refer to? And who makes it? By refusing a conclusive attribution of racial identity to the characters, Morrison effectively shows how blackness and whiteness are made *commonsensically*, i.e. through the senses we have in common, as we exercise them to articulate what is here *in our common*. Importantly, through this unintentionally cooperative work, blackness emerges both as a (built) thing and as a *sensibility*.¹⁸

The commonness of blackness...is the first foundation of its potential liquidity. It is also what grounds possibilities for its expansiveness

Second scenario: bodily matters

Both *Blackness for Sale* and “Recitatif” effectively illustrate the inadequacy of the oculacentric notion of the color line. The color line is not simply a visual phenomenon but must be understood instead as a series of different sensorial arrangements. The color line is what makes possible for the same sense experience to lead to very different ways of *making sense*.

This idea crystalized for me while reflecting on Billie Holiday's anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit," due to the way it renders the sensorial entanglement of segregation.¹⁹

I follow Sam Perry's argument that "Strange Fruit" needs to be approached as an example of ekphrastic poetry – the verbal description of a visual scene – and I focus on the way the song enlists the cooperation of the listener's senses to first conjure up the visual culture of lynching and then re-route its erratic sensorial experience in unexpected directions and toward very different results.²⁰ Throughout the song, the listener is jolted several times in and out of competing sensorial experiences. The scent of magnolia leads to the smell of burning flesh, which then leads to a sense of its taste, as the stanza circles back to the idea of the lynched body as fruit. This body produces an invasive proximity – not only does it disrupt the previously idyllic view, but it fills the nostrils and colonizes the taste buds. The wind sucks, the crows pluck, and the body rots – all actions of consumption and incorporation to which the listener is the involuntary accomplice, for the simple fact that these actions are reconstructed across and over the listener's sensorium.

Arguably, the lynched body's very blackness is a function of this sensorial scenario: its hemorrhage, its grotesque distortion (the bulging eyes and

SOUTHERN TREES BEAR STRANGE FRUIT.
BLOOD ON THE LEAVES AND BLOOD AT THE ROOT.
BLACK BODIES SWINGING IN THE SOUTHERN BREEZE.
STRANGE FRUIT HANGING FROM THE POPLAR TREES.
PASTORAL SCENE OF THE GALLANT SOUTH.
THE BULGING EYES AND THE TWISTED MOUTH.
SCENT OF MAGNOLIAS. SWEET AND FRESH.
THEN THE SUDDEN SMELL OF BURNING FLESH.
HERE IS FRUIT FOR THE CROWS TO PLUCK.
FOR THE RAIN TO GATHER. FOR THE WIND TO SUCK.
FOR THE SUN TO ROT. FOR THE TREES TO DROP.
HERE IS A STRANGE AND BITTER CROP.

"Strange Fruit"
by Lewis Allan,
recorded by Billie Holiday,
1939

twisted mouth of the song's lyrics), the frozen remnants of its spasm, as well as its slow decay as it remains exposed to the natural elements. What other human body—and under what conditions—could be swinging, rotting, decaying and therefore overtaking the entire landscape, the majesty of Southern nature, and thus the pastoral ideals connected to it? "Strange Fruit" rhetorically and ekphrastically activates a line that runs through the sensorium to immediately establish a division between "me" and "you," even as we are unmeshed in one another. This is a paradoxical outcome, secured only by ideological commitment to a division between black and white. In fact, what one discovers by the song's end is that there is no clear sensorial separation, and one smells and "tastes" the (burning) flesh of the other. In this so typical and so aberrant scenario, how can we not recognize that blackness is effectively *in the middle*?

**Blackness and whiteness are made
commonsensically... through this unintentionally
cooperative work, blackness emerges...as a (built) thing
and as a *sensibility***

Densely described: "I secreted a race"

Blackness creates the impossibility to deny the body. The black body produces a *rupture* when encountered in the field of vision – "look, a Negro" – but it is also *ruptured* in return.²¹ In this case, the density of the body, and of blackness as a sensorial and bodily experience, can become a rhetorical resource to allow the black subject who is fragmented and disarticulated by the Other's gaze to reconstruct a coherent bodily experience for herself: "my body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day," writes Fanon. "What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body." "My blackness was there, *dense* and *undeniable*."²²

In these passages, the trope of density is mobilized in order to guarantee the black subject a sense of presence, aliveness, and sentience against the experience of a “disassembled corporeal state of ‘nonexistence’.”²³ “There are physiological reactions,” insists Charles Johnson in his essay “The Phenomenology of the Black Body”: “the pulse and adrenalin increase, the seen skin becomes moist, as if the body is in open conspiracy with the white Other to confirm the sudden eclipse of my consciousness entirely by corporeality. I feel its sleepy awkwardness, and know myself not as subject but slumberous, torpid matter.” Or, again: “Epidermalization spreads throughout the body like an odor, like an echoing sound.”²⁴ Blackness seems to be something that *happens* to the body when hailed as black. And it happens *in* the body as a series of disorienting sensorial experiences to which the subject is attempting to give coherence. “I have become a sensor,” writes Fanon, “I *secreted* a race.”²⁵



Corporate Cannibal
(Grace Jones,
Nick Hooker, 2008),
frame grab

Thickly Made: Patsey's Soap

Before I turn to contemporary forms of liquidity and what they afford I want to attend to the liquidity that was always there—in particular during slavery, which is where race is first thickly made and most profoundly sensorially rooted; ideas of black skin as supple but thick, and black odor as distinctive, for example, are both crucial to *sensing* race as well as the direct product of a variety of forms of proximity and intimacy between the planters and the slaves. Furthermore, unlike the oculacentric model of the color line in which blackness remains a frontal experience, *sensing* race, instead describes it as a *pervasive* and *immersive* experience.

Patsey is Master Epps's slave and object of desire in Solomon Northrop's 1853 narrative, *12 Years a Slave*, which Steve McQueen adapted for the screen. Patsey can be seen to “secrete” a race, primarily because of her position at the center of a series of competing forces and sensorial arrangements in the plantation order. Patsey is petite and dark, yet she picks almost three times more cotton than any man. She is also entirely vulnerable to the capricious and vile conduct of her mistress who repeatedly attacks her, violating her flesh with sharp objects or even her own fingernails. This, and many other erratic behaviors, are part and parcel of the *aesthetics* of slavery and the way slavery imposes a complex and minute regulation of touch, spaces, and movements, but also glances, word use, and even diction.²⁶

Blackness...happens in the body as a series of disorienting sensorial experiences to which the subject is attempting to give coherence

Patsey is also the object of Master Epps' “peculiarities,” the point of an expected fluid reconciliation between “a lusty visit in the night or a visitation with the whip,” as mistress Shaw, an emancipated slave who has

married her former master, explains to her. At the Shaw Plantation, blackness and whiteness are caught up in even more fluid relations: Northrop, for example, is greeted by a “Platt Epps! Good Sunday morning!” from the master but a matter-of-fact “Nigger Platt” from the mistress. She invites him to join her for tea and then elaborates on the different bodily experiences she now has access to – “I han’t felt the end of a lash in more years than I can recall. I han’t worked a field either. Where once I served, now I have others serving me.” It is precisely her leveraging of the fluidity and capricious structure of her master’s peculiarities that has so dramatically changed her status. Yet, her body, just like Patsey’s, is still assumed to be the place where all extremes are peacefully reconciled.



12 Years a Slave
(Steve McQueen, 2014),
frame grab

The film, however, refuses to do so and instead orchestrates the eruption of an added sensorial dimension: odor. “And for that I’ll be clean,” announces Patsey, who has acquired a piece of soap from mistress Shaw because, she explains, “I smell so bad I make myself gag.” Her odor is the direct consequence of her labor, since she picks “500 lb. of cotton day in and day out; more than any man here.” Yet the appearance of this bar of soap adds another dimension to the sensorial life of the slave body as it is imbricated in this complex mingling of violence, desire, subjection, and abjection in plantation life. The emphasis on her odor highlights the fluid density of race relations in conditions of captivity, including the odor of her master—and why should that not be discussed?—whom we see spiraling down into an increasing state of disarray, intoxication, sweat, and dirt. Forced to punish her because of the mistress’s objection to his obsession with Patsey, Master Epps eventually executes what mistress Shaw has already described: the “visitation with the whip,” as the expression of a troubling but solid continuum with the “lusty visits in the night.”

Like an oil spill

The larger point is this: fluidity, as an unrecognized premise of slavery and segregation, has become now a vehicle and fantasy for interracial contact. Works such as Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies*, Tavia Nyong’o’s *Amalgamation Waltz*, and Sharon Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* all convey a sense of the density of blackness – the way in which it is fluidly and yet thickly made and remade through a remarkable sensorial work occurring through various forms of real or imagined intimacy – blackness as that which ultimately licenses the fact that “there is no raceless course of desire.”²⁷ In this case, unlike the Fanonian “thick description” where density is called upon to afford coherence to the subject, density is a quality accrued in consequence of an overflowing of blackness apart and away from black people. Here blackness is understood as tangible and tactile matter, whose viscosity and thickness *may* offer an eroticized immersive experience. The work that brings this together for me is Nick

Hooker's video for Grace Jones's song *Corporate Cannibal* (2008).

I have already written about *Corporate Cannibal* in the context of a photochemical logic that still seems to attach to blackness across the digital turn.²⁸ Since then, however, other aspects of the work have continued to haunt me. More specifically, Steven Shaviro's analysis in his book on *Post-Cinematic Affect* has directed my attention to the quality of this video that is central to his definition of affect: the sense of the materiality of blackness. Even in a digital form, Grace Jones's image feels like/behaves like/presents itself as a dense, sticky, mercurial and deeply thick dark substance. Shaviro describes the video image as "fluid and mutable, but at the same time thick and viscous" with a "dense materiality, even within the weightlessness realm of digital, electronic images." It is a "ripple of electronic disturbance," "unstable and in flux," which is "twisted out of shape...before we are able to *take it in*."²⁹ There are at least two sources of ambivalence here: the first between fantasies of digital immateriality and the tactile qualities of the video images, and the other caused by Shaviro's progressive erasure of Grace Jones's profilmic existence. Her presence before the camera slowly dissipates and instead Shaviro increasingly describes a blackness that transcends the embodied subject, spills out from it, and bleeds into its environment, with a dense and viscous materiality—an oil spill.³⁰

Sticky fingers

In part, the idea of the liquidity of blackness emerged for me from a discomfort with the way in which in Shaviro's discussion of *Corporate Cannibal* blackness appears crucial to the description of affect—its ground zero, so to speak. In other words, the density of blackness that in the Fanonian "thick accounts" is mobilized to create a sense of the presence and aliveness of a sentient being, in this case appears to fuel melancholic attachments to the materiality of affect, a longing for its tangibility and tactility. I describe it as a melancholic attachment because it expresses a



Corporate Cannibal (Grace Jones, Nick Hooker, 2008), frame grab

yearning for an object that is both inside and outside, desired and reviled, introjected and ejected. American race relations are profoundly melancholic, claims Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, and in *The Melancholy of Race*, Ann Cheng has convincingly shown how this melancholia can be richly described when seen through a Freudian lens. Not only is melancholia a structure of loss-but-not-loss, insofar as the "lost" object cannot be let go of or replaced, but, in broader terms, melancholia is also a form of incorporation, a feeding off the lost object, which eventually intrudes into the body. In this sense, melancholia can be a voracious and insatiable appetite.

On this score, it is important to know that Richard Wilson's *20:50* (1987) was an inspiration for Nick Hooker's rendering of Grace Jones in the video. *20:50* is a site-specific installation composed of a waist-high tank of sheet metal filled with 200 gallons of recycled engine oil. The work plays on a series of oppositions: between liquidity and the effect of a solid, dense, and peaceful stillness; between weight and a sense of lightness; between absorption and reflection—given the deep reflective blackness of its surface—between floor and ceiling, top and bottom; between immaculate beauty and the hazardous nature of its material.³¹ *20:50* creates also a sense of suspension, the sense of hovering over a bottomless depth—another vivid opportunity to contemplate the ambivalence of fluidity.³² Part of the success of the work is its ability to activate an intriguing cross-referencing of vision and touch. People have in fact touched it and new restrictions have been applied: one can no longer stand where Richard Wilson himself is standing in this image.

Richard Wilson,
20:50
Site Specific
Oil Installation,
1987,
used sump oil
and steel,
dimensions
variable



20:50 involves viscosity, density, and stickiness, but one is pressed to ask what might be the quality of *20:50* that supposedly translates into *Corporate Cannibal*. Both works provoke or emphasize some attachment to black matter, and to what it seems to do for the non-black subject who feels entitled to extract it, seize it, and purpose it for her own goals.

But that's not all: one quality of *20:50* that I have not found acknowledged in the work's reviews is the intensity of its smell. Apparently (and here I have to trust those I know who have seen it at the Saatchi Gallery in London), the work literally reeks. The recycled engine oil that makes up its "matter of expression" asserts its concrete presence by emanating an almost unbearable smell.³³ If that is the case, how can that not be mentioned? What kind of disavowal is required to ignore it?

This spatial quality of odor...suggest[s] yet another way in which blackness is indeed something in common...the dynamics of this commonality that *liquid blackness* seeks to understand

Unless the work is only encountered as a photographic image, which is the way I have become familiar with it, and its odor is not made part of the experience, the sublime beauty described above would hardly be accessible. Odor marks space—and confounds the distinction between self and other—in ways that counteract the longing for immersion the work's blackness instead seemingly conveys. Odor creates another pressure point that brings us back to the paradoxical viscosity of the troubled encounter of the black body in the field of vision. To quote Charles Johnson again: "epidermality spreads like an odor; like an echoing sound." This spatial quality of odor has the ability to suggest yet another way in which blackness is indeed something in common—constantly made and remade, whether disavowed or not. And it is the dynamics of this commonality that

liquid blackness seeks to understand.

Pornotopias

So, how do we balance these two valences of liquid density? One offers rhetorical tools for thickening a sense of selfhood in the face of a missing ontology, while the other licenses a melancholic relation with the object. One place to start is to recognize how density was always part of *how race is made*, as I have suggested thus far. This is where an expanded—maybe vernacular—sense of blackness *as aesthetics* might become helpful. In its etymological sense, aesthetics brings together a variety of ways in which the senses are involved in *making sense* of things: the construction of *sensorial* experience, the making of what is considered *sensate*, as well as the way the *sensible* is distributed. Aesthetics can be a way to comprise all of these partially overlapping ideas without abiding to obligations to the beautiful. Rather, aesthetics always has a chance to be the site of the political.³⁴

Thus, liquidity, density, and materiality offer a multiplicity of options to think about political action in its broadest sense and whether it becomes more or less available when we think of race and blackness as something filling the space between bodies—just like odor, just like sound. This is to some extent a form of “magical thinking,” insofar as it assumes that entities exceed their corporeal boundaries and can affect each other at a distance, yet it accounts for many of the ways that blackness seems to transcend the body and open up a space for thinking about distributed agency. This is a case of embracing the way in which blackness abides by the same form of “contagious animism,” that is so effectively at work in, for example, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*.³⁶

Aesthetics brings together a variety of ways in which the senses are involved in making sense of things



Yanique Norman
Fatherlessness 3 (2011),
graphite and gouache on paper,
20" x 30," detail

I also find this realized in some digital environments that are created with a sense of the possibilities of density in mind. Virtual worlds can experiment with the expansiveness of blackness because of their ability to creatively activate the human sensorium and to fill all spaces in between the subject and her environment. This is the characteristic I want to describe as pornotopia, a concept developed by Darieck Scott in his book *Extravagant Abjection*, where he explores a different way to understand “black power” through/in abjection. The book begins with a discussion of “Fanon’s muscles,” the recurring image of the colonized in a perpetual state of muscle contraction as well as the mental rigidity Fanon discovers in his medical practice as the expression of a “political refusal.”³⁷ Fanon’s muscles describe both how the colonial regime is lived at the level of the body as well as a situation of political possibility: if not political action, then at least an *acting out*.³⁸ The book ends with an analysis of Afrofuturist writer Samuel R. Delany’s novel *The Mad Man*. The choice of focusing on the genre of interracial gay porn is vital for Scott’s argument because it affords the opportunity to think about the possibility of pleasure and (black) power in the midst of abjection. This is what he describes with Delany’s own term *pornotopia*, i.e., “the place where all can become (apocalyptically) sexual, ... where every relationship is potentially sexualized even before it starts.”³⁹ I find this idea ripe for expansion in the direction of seizing the “magical thinking” described above.

If pornotopia describes an environment in which anything can be sexualized or eroticized, it is also a densely liquid concept: it implies the imagination of a thick space in which any one particle, any one molecule is susceptible of being both the object and the subject of desire, both sensible and sentient, both contracted under the pressure of containment and in a state of spasm, about to release and explode. I am thinking very specifically about some of Jacoby Satterwhite’s work (the *Reifying Desire* series for example, which experiments with reorientations, eroticizations, wild multiplications, uncanny materializations of fantastical objects, and so

on)⁴⁰ as well as Nettrice Gaskins’ work as discussed by Michele Prettyman-Beverly in this issue, where virtual worlds seem to afford the possibility for every element, every figure, to harbor at least a form of sentience, if not agency.⁴¹

Pornotopia...implies the imagination of a thick space in which any one particle, any one molecule is susceptible of being both the object and the subject of desire



Yanique Norman
The Soggy Moons 1 (2011),
graphite, collage and
gouache on paper, 20" x30,"
detail

Precariously

A theoretical and ethical conundrum remains: in many ways, the very thought of a “liquid blackness” might foster eroticized fantasies of immersion, incorporation, and metabolization. That is, if, as Sharon Holland claims, there is “no raceless course of desire” then “liquid blackness” risks being the place *where the melting pot turns into lubricant*.

This prompts us to ask, after Emmanuel Levinas's question which Holland also re-proposes: "is the desire for another an appetite or a generosity?"⁴²

The gap...between "the fact of blackness" and the "lived experience of the black," is not lived as a place of loss or alienation, but rather seized as a place of possibilities.

Yet, the path adopted by the works we have collected here for this publication devoted to an initial reflection on ideas of blackness, aesthetics, and liquidity, as well as the artists featured in our *liquid blackness* Symposium, leverage the possibilities of liquidity to pursue the expansiveness of blackness.⁴³ In their work, the gap that exists between "the fact of blackness" and the "lived experience of the black," is not lived as a place of loss or alienation, but rather seized as a place of possibilities.

Yanique Norman's bulging humanoid shapes, a collage of found photographs, graphite and gouache, for example, confound ideas of bodily membranes, boundaries, and orientations. Her uncanny landscapes offer a place of habitation precisely in this missing ontological ground, thus making visible "how blackness exists within the lacuna of the body and the psyche."⁴⁴ Nikita Gale's choice of media – office supply material, acrylic black paint, and, she claims, "solitude" – in *Look at All of the Fun I Had Without You* creates instability between "me" and "you," at the same time as her work makes available a reflection on the physics of black matter, its state changes, and the possibilities this creates to envision other states of being blackness might be able to both afford and describe.⁴⁵ Consuela Boyer puts pressure on the idea of multiplicity of black lives by manipulating the relationship between one and many, image and sound, liveness and video.

By doing so she challenges the expectation of the coherence of blackness across the senses and across representational technologies.⁴⁶ Carla Aaron-Lopez's remix aesthetics exploits the incongruences of collage and the encounter with the found object it affords in order to scramble gender roles and relations. Cut out or torn from a preexisting visual culture, bodies in her work are free to abide by a different gravitational and representational logic and rehearse novel subject positions in their interaction with one another.⁴⁷ Finally, as Michael Gillespie argues in his interview with filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson, sometimes ontology is not a desirable outcome: blackness deserves an ontological ground, but not a prescriptive univocal core, imparting constraining expectations about forms of being, actions, representations, and art. Playing with blackness and form, with the expectations of the "documentary conceit and avant-garde techniques," Everson's interest in gestures and duration in time-based media brings a nuanced approach to black lives in their time and space, realizing a filmmaking of "the every day political and the every other day political."⁴⁸



Yanique Norman
The Soggy Moons 1 (2011),
graphite, collage and gouache
on paper, 20" x 30," detail

Aesthetic liquidity refers to forms that refuse to localize or abide by the fixation of blackness, but foreground instead its plasticity, mobility, malleability

Art-making becomes a commitment of the everyday: "I'm not a doctor so I don't heal and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts... Art has got to be made."⁴⁹

In its generative possibilities, already foreshadowed in the idea of pornotopia, aesthetic liquidity refers to forms that refuse to localize or abide by the fixation of blackness, but foreground instead its plasticity, mobility, malleability, pervasive qualities, and its capacity to creatively infiltrate and imbue a multiplicity of environments. Liquid blackness offers a way to think about the relationship between race, matter, and the senses in a way that foregrounds, in fact, seizes, the instabilities connected to the idea of liquidity. Liquid blackness, then, is a deliberate pressure point that, because of its precariousness, might help us think about the multiplicity of blackness, its inner diversity, the many ways in which it exists, and the many things it does: blackness queers, blackness mobilizes, blackness multiplies, blackness collages, blackness invents new forms of spatiality, temporality, sentience, co-existence...

I would like to acknowledge Lauren Cramer's insightful feedback on this essay as well as the vivacious contributions of the entire *liquid blackness* group, which have pushed me to clarify what "liquid blackness" means and especially what it can do.

¹Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Change Clothes and Go: A Postscript to Postblackness," in *Black Cultural Traffic. Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Jackson Kennell (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 386.

²See Cameron Kunzelman's essay in this issue.

³Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* can be found here: <http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html>

⁴Alessandra Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," in *Beyond Blackface: Africana Images in the Us Media*, ed. Akil Houston (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2010); *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), Ch. 3. Property enjoyment means that "there is no relation to blackness outside the terms of its use," Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 188.

⁵Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), 117; Charles W. Mills, "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience," in *Blackness Visible. Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8.

⁶The senses, he argues, "facilitated the rule of *feeling* and made men and women *unthinkingly* comfortable with their racial worlds." Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.

⁷*How Race Is Made*, 6.

⁸It should be already clear how the notion of liquidity employed here does not participate in the diagnostic effort Zygmunt Bauman undertakes with his notion of liquid modernity in *Liquid Modernity* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁹I want to acknowledge a conversation with Shady Patterson for this concise way to express some of the stakes.

¹⁰The group is multigenerational in academic terms, given that members range from the undergraduate to the postdoctoral.

¹¹As I will explain later my sense of melancholia comes from Ann Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

¹²Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008). The masculine language is directly lifted from Fanon's text.

¹³"Change Clothes and Go," 386.

¹⁴Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, ed. Amiri & Amina Baraka (Quill, 1983). I discuss it in the introduction of *On the Sleeve of the Visual*.

¹⁵Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), xi.

¹⁶I teach this short story as a challenge to the notion of color blindness: Morrison does not offer a visual description of the characters therefore creating a far more literal effect of (color) blindness in the reader who is the only one who doesn't know the racial identity of the characters. The story unavoidably triggers a desire to see and to find a univocally raced body on the other side of Morrison's prose. The students find themselves unintentionally "cooperating" in constructing the race of the characters from clues that unavoidably lead in dramatically opposite directions.

¹⁷"Recitatif," 243.

¹⁸The idea of blackness as a sensibility comes from James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998), discussed in Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 202.

¹⁹As known, the song was actually written by Lewis Allan (born Abel Meeropol). See David Margolick, *Strange Fruit* (Ecco Press, 2001). Here is a link to live footage of Holiday's performance (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>)

²⁰Samuel Perry, "'Strange Fruit,' Ekphrasis, and the Lynching Scene," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 5 (2013).

²¹Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions. Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²²Emphasis added. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93, 92, 96.

²³Dariecek Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (NYU Press, 2010), 60.

²⁴ Charles Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32, no. 4 (1993): 607.

²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 99, 102.

²⁶ Unlike more traditional narratives Northrop, a virtuoso fiddler player from Saratoga, NY, did not earn literacy and eloquence as a result of his emancipation, but he rather loses "access" to them as consequence of his kidnapping. His descent into slavery is marked by swift dramatic changes as he crosses over an ontological line between personhood and property. In this new environment, some of Solomon's personal traits become incongruous or even dangerous: even his perfect diction and articulate speech, for example, are suspicious and he is advised to keep quiet and not let anybody know that he can read; the glance he can't help but give to a list of goods he is charged with fetching from a far away store earns him his mistress's scolding – first her inquiry as to whether he happens to be educated and then the injunction to not 'bother' with it, for his own safety.

²⁷ Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Duke University Press, 2012), 43.

²⁸ Alessandra Raengo, "Reification, Reanimation, and the Money of the Real," *World Picture*, no. 7 (2012).

²⁹ Steven Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales," *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 13. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Ibid. This is actually Hooker's description in a 2009 email to Shaviro.

³¹ "Richard Wilson's *20:50* at the Saatchi Gallery," *The Telegraph*, 14 Jan 2010, reviewed by Alastair Sooke

³² As Michael Glover puts it: "for *The Independent* puts it: the "ceiling looks as if it is way beneath us. What is more, it is so dense – unlike water, which shudders with apprehension almost as you approach it – that it stays very, very still indeed, so that it is not immediately obvious that reflections are not realities." *20:50* Richard Wilson, Saatchi Gallery, London," reviewed by Michael Glover, *The Independent*, 18 Jan 2010.

³³ "Matter of expression" is a concept developed in Russian formalism, but I like to think about it quite literally, especially in relation to blackness.

³⁴ The obligatory reference here is to Jacques Rancière, yet Rancière's notion of common sense as well as *dissensus* are already foreshadowed in black cultural expressions, for the simple fact that any symbolic manifestation (whether it is the slave vernacular, drumming, dance, singing, etc.) both features and responds to a peculiar distribution of the sensible. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

³⁵ It is important to reference the work of William Pietz who explored the colonial origin of the idea of fetishism over the course of several essays. See at least Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 13 (1987).

³⁶ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991 is a pile of individually wrapped candies whose weight corresponds to the ideal weight of the artist's partner Ross Laycock who died of AIDS-related illness in 1991. Since gallery visitors are encouraged to take and eat some candy, the diminishing mass of the work corresponds to the diminishing body mass of the dying lover. See Christopher Braddock, "Contagious Animism in the Artwork of Felix Gonzales Torres and Dane Mitchell," *Drain* 8, no. 1 (2013). <http://drainmag.com/contagious-animism-in-the-artwork-of-felix-gonzales-torres-and-dane-mitchell/> accessed March 10, 2014.

³⁷ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 70.

³⁸ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 66.

³⁹ Samuel R. Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview," in *Short Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 133, quoted in *Extravagant Abjection*, 208.

⁴⁰ *Liquid blackness* member Kristin Juarez has been working on this series.

⁴¹ As Scott concludes: "the power of blackness-in/as-abjection also lies in its providing ways to confront the problem of history by transforming that history and that problem into the basis for pornotopias, such that the eroticizing of everything in our worlds, but most especially its ugly history of the production of races, becomes

a useful practice." Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 259.

⁴² Cited by Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 50.

⁴³ The artists who are participating in the Symposium are Carla Aaron-Lopez, Consuela Boyer, bubba carr, T.Lang Dance, Gathering Wild Dance Company, Chr!s Reel, Nikita Gale, Nettrice Gaskins, Joey Molina, Yanique Norman, Fahamu Pecou.

⁴⁴ See essay by Christina Price Washington and Kristin Juarez in this issue.

⁴⁵ See essays by Kristin Juarez and Cameron Kunzelman in this issue

⁴⁶ See essays by Lauren Cramer and Kristin Juarez in this issue

⁴⁷ See Joey Molina's essay in this issue

⁴⁸ See Michael B. Gillespie's essay in this issue

⁴⁹ Ibid.