

# 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.)?

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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.”<sup>1</sup> *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.

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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.

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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.

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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*.

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



Mammal Gallery, street view