

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.

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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

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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.