

BLACK UP (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2011), FRAME GRAB.



Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspensions¹

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The idea for the seventh issue of the *liquid blackness* journal, which welcomes the contribution of a newly assembled editorial board that includes Derek Conrad Murray (UC Santa Cruz), James Tobias (UC Riverside) and Charles “Chip” Linscott (Ohio University), alongside Lauren M. Cramer (Pace University), who is one of the founding members of the group, came together in occasion of the October 6–7, 2016 screening and symposium titled “Holding Blackness in Suspension: The Films of Kahlil Joseph,” which explored the intensely arresting aesthetics of the Los Angeles-based music video director and installation artist. Joseph was also one of Arthur Jafa’s closest collaborators on *Dreams are colder than Death* (2013), which was the subject of our previous research project on “Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness,” and is a film that crystalized for us the idea of a growing aesthetic mode pivoting

around forms of suspension in artistic practices that move fluidly between a number of exhibition venues and visual forms, including filmmaking, music video, and installation art.² The experimental cinematography, the frequent movement across scale—from the mundane to the celestial, from the individual to the cosmological—synched to a carefully calibrated “durational drag,” and the way it holds in balance the thinking of life and the thinking of death, place suspension at the heart of Jafa’s film.³ Whether we approach the idea of suspension as a way to bring into focus formal concerns or thematic/philosophical ones, since our research on *Dreams* and the symposium on Kahlil Joseph’s work, we have found a somewhat similar sensibility in a growing list of works and practitioners, which include Bradford Young’s cinematography for *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011), *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013), *Middle of*

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Nowhere (Ava DuVernay, 2012), *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), and *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), as well as his directorial debut *Black America Again* (in collaboration with Common, 2017); Céline Sciamma's *Girlhood* (2014), Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016)—on which Joseph collaborated—Berry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), Donald Glover and Hiro Murai's *Atlanta* (2016)—especially given the way Murai recognizes a debt to Joseph's work—Joseph's video for Sampha's debut album, *Process*

(2017), and Jafa's most recent work as a cinematographer for Solange's videos for *A Seat at the Table* (2016), as co-director of the title video for Jay-Z's *4:44* (2017), and as sole author of *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016).

In the article, "The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos," for *The New Yorker* (October 24, 2016), Cassie Da Costa highlights the challenge of tracing the development of distinctive black aesthetic modes across diverse instantiations spanning

different artistic practices, modes and venues. Yet, as *liquid blackness* member Jenny Gunn has argued, it may be precisely where the proper terms of the lineage seem the least transparent that the work of the archive becomes most necessary.⁴ Indeed, the unruly genealogy of a black aesthetic demands eclectic (or "liquid" as we have called them) forms of collection and analysis. It requires a willingness to follow hints, hunches, and family resemblances, with the idea that they might

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succeed in providing, supplementing or at least complicating, existing tools of formal analysis.

It is in this spirit that we have slightly revised the structure of the present publication in two important ways: first, past issues of the *liquid blackness* journal have pivoted around existing research projects usually built around a limited set of objects (such as Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* for the research on “The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble,” or Jafa’s *Dreams are colder than Death* for the last issue on “Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness”), as a way to engage this complicated archive and continue to emphasize the cultural and political work of form. Here, however, we are experimenting with a more inclusive gesture to test whether “suspension” might be a productive concept to describe a less ambiguous connection between

liquidity as a mode of formal analysis and a foundational commitment of the group: to keep blackness philosophically safe. In other words, we are testing whether “suspension” can offer, as Daren Fowler puts it in his essay for this issue, “a praxis for the ethics of black liquidity.”⁵

The need to clarify both ethics and praxis prompted me to evoke the concept of suspension since the very first public statement I ever made about *liquid blackness* as a way to characterize the “critical act one might perform in attempting to understand its contours....What if we held blackness in balance,” I asked, “not necessarily to sever it from its lived experience, but in order to confront and come to terms with the many *other* ways in which it exists?”⁶ While these questions posed blackness as a concept and a thing in and of itself—as a way to take seriously, as a legitimate object

of scholarly investigation, processes of cultural and aesthetic liquefaction we had seen already underway in our contemporary visual and sonic culture—they also responded to a concern for the difficult ethics of that same critical operation. “Liquidity,” I have repeatedly claimed, functions as a pressure point: it is diagnostic and critical, descriptive and generative, equally evocative of processes of objectification, commodification, and fungibility, as well as expansiveness and inexhaustible formlessness and potentiality. Similarly, suspension seeks to identify sites, moments, and modes where the tension between these two poles is placed at a distance or held in some form of temporary, if precarious, balance.

Similar to black “liquidity,” *seeing* suspension is complicated and thus it too requires a hermeneutic decision. Even at a basic level, as Lauren M. Cramer puts it, when understood

as the lifting of forces of gravity, it implies a quasi-contradiction between its “visual effect [...] (hovering and lightness) and the process that creates suspension (force and pressure).”⁷ This willingness to *read for it*, we feel, is also at its core an ethical choice—that is, a willingness to have it orient one’s scholarly and pedagogical practices.

For this reason—and this is the second revision to our usual publishing structure—we have decided to *hold* this very journal issue *in suspension* and offer ways to continue to “think along,” collectively, around this productive topic.⁸ To this end, we will release a working bibliography surrounding this idea and some of the objects that have crystalized it for us, as well as an interactive version of the month-long conversation around the concept and methodologies of

liquid blackness I curated in April 2016 for the listserv *empyre*.⁹

Although not directly visible in it, questions of hermeneutics, ethics and praxis animated the list of terms I wrote to announce the launching of the *liquid blackness* group, terms that were supposed to function evocatively, particularly for artists who might have been exploring forms of black liquidity in their work or modes of unmooring blackness from the body and the subject so that they (i.e., blackness, the body, and the subject) could be momentarily addressed in their own terms. The list appeared on the *liquid blackness* website for the first time in fall 2013 and in summer 2015 and was reprinted in the exhibition catalog for Mark Bradford’s show *Scorched Earth*, curated by Connie Butler at the Hammer museum in L.A. (Figure 1) Bradford is an artist whose use of abstraction

can productively be regarded as a practice of suspension, insofar as it is often the outcome of several processes of layering, machine-sanding, and therefore distancing and repurposing concrete, everyday public objects such as street posters, as he has shown again with his work for the 2017 Venice Biennial, *Tomorrow is Another Day*.¹⁰

FIGURE 1. LIQUIDITY LIST

- **Sensuousness** – liquid blackness is sensorially rich and erotically charged
- **Affectivity** – liquid blackness exists and moves in between bodies
- **Formlessness** – liquid blackness fills all available space and fluidly transforms with the shape of its container.
- **Penetration** – in its shape-shifting qualities, liquid blackness is capable of infiltrating anywhere.
- **Fluctuation** – liquid blackness moves through ripples and waves, like electronic signals
- **Modulation** – liquid blackness oscillates and vibrates within a spectrum of possibilities
- **Absorption and assimilation** – liquid blackness manifests fantasies of racial amalgamation
- **Intensity** – liquid blackness channels “intensive affective flows”¹
- **Viscosity** – liquid blackness produces fantasies of tactility and experiences of stickiness
- **Density** – liquid blackness is tangibly material and thick
- **Slipperiness** – liquid blackness can be seemingly touched, but not held, or held in place
- **Elasticity** – liquid blackness can stretch, bleed, and slightly give in
- **Allure** – liquid blackness beckons and yet withdraws
- **Vibration** – liquid blackness is animated by the vitality of black matter
- **Unboundedness** – liquid blackness is unstoppable and pervasive
- **Vitality** – liquid blackness proliferates and procreates, gaining incremental vitality with each reproduction.
- **Channeling** – liquid blackness is a channel, a vehicle, a medium – it carries, funnels, and puts in contact
- **Plasticity** – liquid blackness mutates within constantly mutating conditions
- **Organicity** – liquid blackness wades fluidly through processes of appropriation, sampling, grafting, injecting, rejecting, implanting, and transplanting.
- **Glide** – liquid blackness slides transversally across and between surfaces

FIGURE 2. SUSPENSION LIST

- **Holding up**, holding safe, and holding in balance
- **Unmooring** from predictable scripts, performances, and aesthetic conceits
- **Floating**, flowing, and moving unattached
- **Lifting up** from misery, death, danger
- **Withholding** judgement, predetermination, finality and demanding different modes of engagement
- **Rearranging** formal properties, expectations, functionalities
- **Interrupting** given scripts, expected performances, and predictable aesthetic conceits
- **Defying** temporal linearity and contiguity
- **Deferring, Delaying and Partaking** in forms of circularity, stasis, repetition, and recurrence
- **Halting** forms and modes of surrounding, closing in, and shutting down
- **Preserving** and keeping intact
- **Making space**, making place, making time.

The call for papers for the current issue contained another list (Figure 2).

Read alongside one another, their relationship is undeniably confrontational: only the second list makes explicit the group's ethical commitment. Yet, this greater clarity updates our mission statement towards a more direct engagement with what in our last issue we addressed as "the love of blackness," as a way, in Daren Fowler's words, "to give weight and necessity to blackness as an ontological question for love."¹¹ With suspension—just like with "the love of blackness"—we seek to deliberately leverage a productive undecidability of location: *of*, in fact, acts as a relay between "for," "from," and "toward." Similarly, suspension moves freely between reading practices, aesthetic strategies, rhetorical structures, and media affordances and specificities.

In this introduction, therefore, I will move through examples from previous and current *liquid blackness* research projects that show this productive undecidability at work across a number of locations, beginning with *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), the text that first brought to my attention the idea that suspension begins with an act of will.

Holding up, Unmooring, Floating, Lifting up...

At the end of *Fruitvale Station* Oscar Grant's mother, played by Octavia Spencer, asks her dying son's friends to "lift him up." Arranged in a circle, on their knees in a hospital's waiting room, she then leads them in prayer. She asks God to place his "healing hands around [Oscar] so that we can hold him and see his smile again." In this case, "suspension" indexes a radical reorientation—at least the application of a mental or spiritual

force that is equal and opposite to the obscenely unthinking gesture that made Officer Johannes Mehserle shoot Oscar in the back as he was lying on the platform floor of the BART Fruitvale Station—as an act of care. Oscar is undergoing surgery and she has not yet been able to see him, but, following her prayer, the viewer gets to see him again: a short flashback shows Oscar carrying his daughter Tatiana on his back as they leave the daycare center as warm sunlight bathes them from behind.

The flashback is drained of sound and in slow motion, momentarily performing the "lifting" his friends have been asked to pray for. The film has accompanied Oscar's moves throughout the day, following him through rather prosaic moments and Oscar's own struggles and shortcomings, with an understated realism, inspired by the sensibility of Charles Burnett's cinema.¹²

Yet this mode, whose ethical grounding relies precisely on an alignment with a quasi-Zavattinian sensibility towards regarding all "small" events as having an "equally concrete density," is suspended here to give in to a clearly marked poetic gesture—what in a more classical Hollywood film would have appeared as a melodramatic one—that seems to fulfill, although only momentarily, the mother's request.¹³

The flashback is abruptly cut by a close-up of a bag of blood being thrown in a trashcan. Because the death is ruled a homicide, Oscar's mother will be unable to hold her son and can only look at him from a large window outside the operating room. The film ends brusquely suspended, in yet another sense, before Oscar's girlfriend Sophina facing their daughter Tatiana, whom she has picked up from a sleepover with her cousins

and placed in the shower in front of her—water running down both of their bodies—is able to answer her question: “Where is daddy?”

In her writing on Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977), Paula Massood characterized the film’s formal choices as adopting an “aesthetic appropriate to conditions.”¹⁴ *Fruitvale Station*, for me, re-proposes the same issue with an emphasis on aesthetic modes appropriate to *ethical* conditions. The current focus of the *liquid blackness* group stems from a similar concern and is interested in family resemblances among works that pursue strategies of halting, unmooring, untethering, deferring, and the like, understood as “operations” and “clearing gestures”—as Derek Conrad Murray might describe them—that can produce acts of refusal and defiance and, at times, make space, place or time for alternative



FIGURE 3. *FRUITVALE STATION* (DIRECTED BY RYAN COOGLER, FOREST WHITAKER’S SIGNIFICANT PRODUCTIONS/OG PROJECT, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

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moves.¹⁵ In many ways, the goal of suspension is to produce some form of disentanglement: formally, theoretically, and pedagogically.

Daren Fowler's and Arzu Karaduman's essays in this issue reflect this investment. Cinematography and sound design in Berry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), Fowler explains, produces a "pedagogy for caring, holding, and loving (queer) blackness without containing, suffocating, and freezing its vital movements."¹⁶ In this manner, it creates some kind of buffer zone, so to speak, around its vulnerable main character. At least until he builds himself "hard," Fowler shows, seeking to achieve the sheen of self-contained reassured masculinity he admires in Juan, the drug dealer and substitute father-figure who finds him hiding from his persecutors at the beginning of the film. In Fowler's perceptive reading, what Chiron is missing and

attempts to retrieve throughout the film is Juan's glistening sheen of sweat, as indicative of a porous movement between solidity and liquidity and therefore of an opening between the self and the world. In this "gap" or zone of discrepancy, he argues, lies the possibility for an ethics and erotics of relation.

Arzu Karaduman's careful attention to the suspended sound-image synchronization in *Moonlight* identifies in the mother's scream, which is repeated twice—the first time drained of sound, so that only the mother's lips are seen moving and the second time replayed backwards—a wedge in the film's temporality as it concerns Chiron's coming-out. While a cut to Chiron knocking on Juan's door to ask what "faggot" means suggests that that is indeed what the mother just called him, the specific suspenseful sound-image configuration deployed in this

repeated moment does not allow the film itself to reenact the violence performed by the epithet, but instead opens up a strategic discrepant gap within which Chiron can be shielded from the world's violent shaming and slowly pursue his “sideways” growth.¹⁷ Similar to the end of *Fruitvale Station*, this asynchronicity keeps the audience from “consuming” black pain as entertainment and from “touching” Chiron’s body, possessing him, or giving in to the charged sensuality that pervades the film.

Withholding, Rearranging, Interrupting, Defying, Deferring, Delaying, and Partaking in forms of Circularity, Stasis, Repetition, and Recurrence.

Retrospectively, suspension also seems an appropriate way to characterize the determination to explore the expansive capacity of blackness that animates so many of the films of the L.A. Rebellion,

where it features always as a lived experience *and* a philosophical position. These films include first and foremost, Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* (1977), but also a number of experimental films such as Ben Caldwell’s *Medea* (1973) and *I & I: An African Allegory* (1979), and Barbara McCullough’s *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979), among others. Caldwell’s *Medea*, structured around a pregnant woman and her delivery, establishes a connection between cosmological and generational cycles and black history across the African diaspora. Opening shots of moving clouds juxtaposed to a soundtrack that mimics breathing sounds and then a heartbeat usher in a woman’s voice that recites Amiri Baraka’s poem, “Part of the Doctrine.”¹⁸ Her quasi-hypnotic chant, punctuated by a recurring refrain—“to raise the race . . . to raise the race”—propels a montage of still images of various

genres (from the ethnographic and documentary to the protest and art image) of African and Black American figures, rapidly flashing on screen, and claims them as part of a collective memory that recapitulates the breadth of the diaspora in the ontogenesis of every soon-to-be-born Black child in America.¹⁹ As it unfolds, the montage increasingly conforms to the pace of the mother’s heartbeat, her breathing, and her chanting all at once, and then concludes with a close up of a pregnant belly. It thus suspends the anti-black logic that governs the organization of these archives and substitutes for it the vitality of a life to come, figured in the poignant image that concludes the film: announced by the cry of a newborn, a small child enters the frame carrying a white balloon.

Evoking circularity as well as perfection, this image gestures

EVOKING CIRCULARITY AS WELL AS PERFECTION, THIS IMAGE GESTURES TOWARD THE IDEA OF A SELF-CONTAINED BLACK HISTORY — SUSPENDED ABOVE ITS HOSTILE SURROUNDINGS — THAT FINDS WITHIN ITSELF THE RESOURCES FOR ITS FULFILLMENT

toward the idea of a self-contained Black history—suspended above its hostile surroundings—that finds within itself the resources for its fulfillment.

Nettrice Gaskins's images for this issue point at a similar sense of self-reliant circularity. They are inspired by the theme of flight common to Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Kendrick Lamar's video *Alright* (2015), and they dialog with a long deep-rooted imaginary of "flying Africans" who traveled

the Middle Passage backwards, seeking to go back home. Using DeepDream software as a way to connect to the algorithmic genius blackness has maintained across the Middle Passage, the goal of Gaskins's work is ultimately to render black consciousness as constantly moving, untethered, and unmoored.

Similarly, grounding his reading of *La Haine* (Matthew Kassovitz, 1995) in the film's hip-hop sensibility, Steve Spence identifies the genre's striving toward suspension, including

the weightlessness and defiance of gravity in b-boys performances, in opposition to the joke that frames the film: it's about a guy falling from a skyscraper and, as he is falling, repeats to himself, "so far so good, so far so good." The joke locates the film's narrative in a moment of suspension before the deadly crash so that it acts as a mechanism that delays the "inescapable doom." The same "delay" is reproduced also by the Steadicam shots following the three friends—Vinz, Hubert and

Said—throughout the film and is most effectively dramatized in the high angle shot onto the projects courtyard as DJ Cut Killer’s sound exits his window and floats through the air overcoming the architectural boundaries put in place by a history of State policing of the *banlieues*. While the framing joke “sketches a kind of dangerous limbo, a freedom that might feel like flight but that must end in catastrophe,” in this scene the unmoored camera transforms surveillance footage into contemplation.²⁰

Halting Forms and Modes of Surrounding, Closing In, and Shutting Down

The critical valence of suspension can further be brought down to scale to bear upon the very understanding of the photographic image itself, as a way to place a wedge between the image and its profilmic subject, which, in the case of black bodies,



FIGURE 4. *MEDEA* (DIRECTED BY BEN CALDWELL, 1973), FRAME GRAB.

THE CRITICAL VALENCE OF SUSPENSION CAN FURTHER BE BROUGHT DOWN TO SCALE TO BEAR UPON THE VERY UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE ITSELF, AS A WAY TO PLACE A WEDGE BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND ITS PROFILMIC SUBJECT

has been historically made to coincide, as if flattened onto the same truthful surface. Yet, as long as it involves a lens, photography also always comprises a space (with a specific architecture), a duration (however small), and the possibility of movement and of its repression. Thus, it is possible to regard suspension as the byproduct of a belabored immobility, as does Tina Campt, who deploys for visual analysis Darieck Scott's emphasis on what he has described as "Fanon's

muscles," the state of muscular tension Frantz Fanon diagnoses in the colonized who are captive of a cycle of spatial and temporal denials that offer no true mobility and no release.²¹ Campt reads suspension in the facial expressions of a series of women featured in a colonial photographic archive compiled by a Trappist mission in the Eastern Cape of Africa in 1894 as the result of tensions produced by holding competing forces in balance

and managing their potentially eruptive and disruptive force.²²

Similar to the "aesthetic deception" practiced by Sojourner Truth, as discussed by Sarah Smith in her essay in this issue on selected works from Gallery Momo's exhibition, *Selling the Shadow* (Cape Town, South Africa), this rhetorical indirection can be productively deployed to suspend foreclosed conclusions, associations, and reading protocols. In Smith's reading of Truth's deliberate use of early photographic technologies

and her oratory to support the abolitionist cause, suspension produces a space for a crafting or “curating” of the self that, however, is kept out of sight, or, more precisely, in what Smith describes as “plain/ plane sight,” that is, not immediately visible because that self is *folded* in the architectural structures of anti-blackness.²³ This is what happens in Torkwase Dyson’s *Anthony Burns (In Plane Site: Fugitive)* (2016), which Smith discusses in her essay as enacting bi-dimensional renderings of architectural space as a way to suspend technologies of domination and captivity. These renderings presuppose architectures of enclosure but refuse to reproduce them. Instead, they place them at a remove, through abstractions that figure the alternative vectors and trajectories that unmoor the body and allow it to “steal itself away” into freedom, as happened in the case of Anthony Burns, who hid in

the hull of a ship in order to do so. Mary Sibande’s sculptures, created from casts of the artist’s body, also featured in *Selling the Shadow*, make suspension even harder to see, but this is because they upend the domestic-madam relation via processes of incorporation and implosion, rather than prying open or keeping apart, so much so that only one sculptural body is left to signify the outcome of this “monstrous intimacy.”²⁴

Again, these conflicting and unresolved tensions remind me of an L.A. Rebellion film, in this case Julie Dash’s *The Diary of an African Nun* (1977), adapted from a short story by Alice Walker, where this tension unfolds dramatically as a question of the protagonist’s relationship to the sound of her immediate environment: the young and beautiful nun, played by Barbara O, is torn apart by competing alliances to the

rigidity demanded by her religious habit and the riveting beat of the African drums she hears outside her bedroom window. Her habit was her coveted prize and greatest childhood desire—a form of “regal” and dignified “liveness” she envied in the nuns and priests who taught at the mission school she frequented. She dreamed of wearing it, being “shrouded in whiteness like the mountains I see from my window,” her voice-over explains, and earn the “right to never be without it.”

Shot in black and white, the film emphasizes the contrast between the immaculate whiteness of her dress and the richness of her complexion. But at the end of the day, when she retires to her room the habit has to come off. As she disrobes to the drumbeat she remarks, “...I sing my whole chant in response to theirs.” The drums she hears carry other impulses and desires: the food, wine,



FIGURE 5. *DIARY OF AN AFRICAN NUN* (DIRECTED BY JULIE DASH, 1977), FRAME GRAB.

and conviviality she no longer has access to, or the equally unattainable spark of a young romance. They awaken an unbearable conflict between the deep mortification required by her vows and the promise of incessant movement folded in the energy of each drumbeat. Forced to maintain a composure both threatened and undermined by the sounds surrounding her, her body becomes a battlefield. Yet, while she struggles to suspend the competing impulses that tear her apart, the editing gives in to her inner agitation, transitioning to rapid cuts and repeated canted shots of her hands coming together in prayer as she falls to her knees. Even the window's shutters move rapidly and rhythmically to convey the emotional charge of the scene.²⁵ The film ultimately stages a form of embattled stillness underneath the cloak of whiteness she embraced as a vehicle toward some kind of transcendence

(including of the overembodiment of racialization), which ultimately will not do, because the more profound mechanics of the colonial relation still agitate underneath it.

Dreams are colder than Death also gestures toward a place underneath racialization but from a different perspective. In the film, Kara Walker's comments describe the space of her creativity as a *type of suspension*: under the skin, a skin slightly detached, just enough to allow her some measure of freedom. Perhaps, but it's not fully clear, this type of retinal detachment also gives her the ability to "look at the underside of race a little bit."²⁶ However fleeting and precarious, this space becomes available once blackness is untethered from the body and held in balance, as if hovering above it. Conversely, Christina Sharpe reads this retinal image evoked by Walker as the "optic of the door

of no return on our retina."²⁷ As such, she regards it as descriptive of the epistemological, ethical but, ultimately, ontological position held by the cell phone photograph Oscar Grant was able to take of the BART officer who shot him moments later. In this sense—from this view from the hold—black consciousness emerges still as the place where whatever is suspended (for a moment, for a breath, for a thought) is also ultimately and unavoidably the place where it also still lands.

Suspension can also open a productive space between the moving image and the (black) subject's movement, which the cinematic apparatus has historically harvested to gain an effect of surplus liveness.²⁸ Here suspension is meant as disruption, refusal, and endurance as it is involved, for instance, in the "still act" Steve McQueen performs in his installation *Deadpan* (1997), might

be a way to unglue, unmoor and untether the black body from the way it has historically borne the burden of *integrating* the moving image and lubricating its mechanisms.²⁹

In *Deadpan*, as I have discussed elsewhere, McQueen remakes with a spectacular stillness a famous Buster Keaton stunt from *Steamboat Will Jr.* (1928): the façade of a house collapses on top of Keaton who barely stands up and quickly runs away. McQueen, instead, stands perfectly immobile *through* the falling façade and the same stunt is shown repeatedly from a variety of different angles so that his upright stillness functions as a gesture of suspension. Building on McQueen's work on the limits of the film frame and his stated desire to "pass through" the image "like in a road movie," I ultimately read this installation as staging a form of trespassing and perhaps also an escape through the porous

VISUAL AESTHETICS OF SUSPENSION CAN PRODUCE LOOPHOLES AND ESCAPE ROUTES, OR OTHERWISE UPHOLD AND HALT FORMS AND MODES OF SURROUNDING, CLOSING IN, AND SHUTTING DOWN

black screen that early cinema made exchangeable with the black body.³⁰ Yet, this does not mean that the body is necessarily set free, but rather that visual aesthetics of suspension can produce loopholes and escape routes, or otherwise uphold and halt forms and modes of surrounding, closing in, and shutting down sanctioned or legitimate moves.

But here is a productive complication: in his talk at the 2014 Cinematic Migration Symposium at MIT

organized by Renée Green on John Akomfrah's work, Fred Moten critiqued the overdetermined manner in which black subjectivity in the cinema unfolds between the dream of exaltation into sovereignty and the shame that comes from the realization of the impossibility to fulfill that dream—an oscillation that the cinematic apparatus, in turn has institutionalized in the tension between movement and stasis.³¹ For Moten, McQueen's work is perpetually (and delusionally)

preoccupied with this wavering between euphoria and shame. Arthur Jafa's attempt to create a Black Visual Intonation (BVI), instead, can perhaps be seen as an effort in the opposite direction, as the search for a mechanism to withhold and halt this closing in of the apparatus around the black body and its movements. This is nowhere more evident than in Jafa's more recent work *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016), as well as the video he co-directed for Jay-Z's *4:44*.³² While the

ekphrastic efforts to describe the former—a seven-minute montage of original footage (including shots from *Dreams* and stills that have appeared in previous works), YouTube clips, archival footage, Civil Rights imagery, and film clips to the pace of Kanye West’s gospel-inspired song *Ultralight Beam*—accumulate as the installation travels from New York to L.A. and beyond, the emphasis continues to fall on the seemingly incomprehensible and yet sublime logic that strings this montage together in a constantly reversible continuum between exhilaration and pain. Jafa has described it as an attempt to build empathy, which, as Hortense Spillers articulates in *Dreams*, is the experience of the *flesh*, and to show, exercise, and ultimately develop “empathy muscles,” which black people already have because they have to identify with people other than themselves.³³ Ultimately, he claims, “I’m trying to make my



FIGURE 6. *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR JAJA, TNEG, 2016),
FRAME GRAB.

shit as black as possible and still have you deal with my humanity.”³⁴

Greg Tate describes the video as “an alternatively mirthful-cum-melancholic-cum-cardiac-arresting meditation on race-agency wrapped in a visually sermonic recitation of race tragedy wrapped in a nuanced and feverish exultation of diverse Black American lives at various states of collapse and regeneration.”³⁵ Sharpe describes it as an oscillation between exertion and composure, noting how, although at times flowing quickly, its images require “a biophysical response of a held breath, an elongated sigh.” They demand lingering: “We are left...to linger in the reverb, to experience duration, to live in the body split and reconfigured by sound..., in the afterimage of the suffering that forged Blackness and the joy and song that yet, and still, emerge.”³⁶ Helena Molesworth, Chief Curator



FIGURE 7. *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR JAJA, TNEG, 2016),
FRAME GRAB.

for The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, where the installation showed earlier this year, further points out how “all the movement and gestures [Jafa] has chosen are expressions of bodily compression and release.”³⁷

The pursuit of a Black Visual Intonation can be seen as an attempt to pry wide open this gap between exertion and composure, exhilaration and pain, compression and release—a gap that, in another conversation with Jafa, about the difference between painting and photography, Kerry James Marshall characterized as a place of “discrepancy”—and suspend black bodies within it, making it a suitable dwelling place where they might at *their own chosen* direction and pace, and where all *e-motions* from the human spectrum can equally take place.³⁸

In Jafa’s sustained focus on rhythm and vectoriality, and black people’s facility with “spatial arrays,”

trajectories, or, “flow through figures,” architectural meanings of “suspension” begin to come into focus.³⁹ This is in Torkwase Dyson’s *Anthony Burns (In Plane Site: Fugitive)* (2016) that Smith discusses in her essay, and even more so in Lauren M. Cramer’s reading of Kahlil Joseph’s “Until the Quiet Comes” (2012), which was central to the *liquid blackness* group’s decision to address suspension as a thematic, methodological, and formal concern.

Architectures of suspension

In architecture, suspension describes the technique of dispersing a structure’s mass across multiple grounding positions so that even the most complex and weighty structures can appear “light” because of how their material elements are held in tension.⁴⁰ While immediately descriptive of Joseph’s camera movements, sometimes traveling upside down or vertically

situated in relation to their subjects, suspension for Cramer describes the way a much deeper logic of anti-blackness *diagrams* spaces, including cinematic spaces, their architectures and their “joints,” and the way Joseph brings that logic to the brink of catastrophe and then unfolds it toward a different outcome. Indeed, she argues, “‘Until the Quiet Comes’ practices suspension by fully inhabiting its tension: it “renders a seemingly weightless image of blackness ... by becoming denser,” by diagramming its predictable outcome, its already predetermined doom, and then unfolding that very diagram according to vectors that are possible within it, but have not been imagined, conceived or desired, by the structures of anti-blackness. Blackness is excluded from the “world” we live in, Cramer argues by building on Katherine McKittrick’s argument in *Demonic Grounds*, and yet it provides the ground on which



FIGURE 8. *BELHAVEN MERIDIAN*, (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2009), FRAME GRAB.

it is built. What happens then, when black bodies leave this ground?

“Where Are We Going?”

Belhaven Meridian (2009) is the first video Joseph directed for Shabazz Palaces. Shot in Watts, in 35mm black and white film, it is an homage to Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977). It begins with the roar of a car engine over a black screen, then a side shot of a car. A young man is at the wheel and a young woman is sitting on the roof of the car. There is no diegetic dialog but a caption, instead, appears:

HIM: IT’S TIME.

She slides off the roof and swiftly turns around the car while he stretches towards the passenger’s seat and opens the door for her.

Then another caption:

HER: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

BLACKNESS IS EXCLUDED FROM THE “WORLD” WE LIVE IN ... AND YET IT PROVIDES THE GROUND ON WHICH IT IS BUILT. WHAT HAPPENS THEN, WHEN BLACK BODIES LEAVE THIS GROUND?

She gets into the car—the car that *Killer of Sheep*’s protagonist Stan could never get to work—and they quickly ride away. The camera follows them until they disappear behind a row of houses, then it tilts to the left to frame an empty street, as an attractive woman enters the frame from the right strolling confidently in the middle of the street. Quickly, and predictably, a young man approaches her and tries to make small talk. They are young and brash and at home. As they walk away from the camera

his step quickly conforms to her stride and their combined movement lulls at the beat of the soundtrack.

As if by chance, tilting to the right, the camera picks up the (re-enacted) shooting of a scene from *Killer of Sheep* itself, which took place on the front steps of Stan’s house as two of his “buddies” attempt to lure him into a more facile life of crime as a way out of his predicament: the perverse cycle that entraps him as both the killer and the sheep he routinely slaughters in his day

job. This precious glance into the “making” of *Killer of Sheep*—a labor of love and respect, and patience and community—is enough to cause the camera to rotate on its axis and turn upside down. In this new world, where the top and bottom have exchanged places, the silhouette of a young man appears running down the same street.

Juxtaposed to the silhouette there appears also an African mask floating on the surface of the image, but not for long: the young man inexplicably grabs it and rushes through a group

of boys who are trying to tackle him, like a running back going for a touchdown. The camera remains upside down and the long take continues as we see him eventually passing the mask to a bike rider from a group of motorcyclists who suddenly ride through the same street. The music settles on a quieter register and the camera follows them gliding through streets progressively filling up with traffic, moving freely and almost floating effortlessly away.

The answer to her question finally comes here:

HIM: WHEREVER WE WANT.

This is one of Joseph's earliest films but suspension is already central to it. The camera upside down in the middle of a long take upholds the world as we know it, but it does not compromise the integrity of the space. It simply makes it feel a bit more miraculous

by disrupting the experience of the ground and the forces that anchor bodies to it. Suspension features as weightlessness, but not as an un-grounding—not a severance from home, experience, intimacy or community. Propelled by the movement of various bodies in the frame—the couple in the car, the couple in the street, the lone silhouette and so on—the camera progressively leaves behind tractions and attritions and ushers in an experience of lightness that, however, is never divorced from gravitas. Extraordinarily, the camera's nimbleness in Joseph's work always adds to the solemnity of the image.

Thus, while the camera hovers over a number of bodies dressed in white and draped over architectural ruins reclaimed by lush vegetation in a scene shot on location in Puerto Rico from his later video for Shabazz Palaces titled *Black Up*—described

as a “fever dream” inspired by the duo's music— (the image we chose for the cover of this issue) and vertically looks down on them, they too possess a sense of levity and composure that defies the idea that they might be dead. Now that the ground has become the ceiling, the “weight” of their stillness has shifted from possible death to rest, from stiffness to softness.

This quality of Joseph's camera—just like the logic of Jafa's montage—are very hard to describe. Yet, in James Tobias's account, when asked about the reasons for some of his camera movements, Joseph related that sometimes he is thinking about the way an uncle speaks—in my understanding—and I'm paraphrasing and interpreting here using a critical idiom that Joseph doesn't necessarily value—the words themselves may not matter, but there is a larger question of speech beyond the semio-

grammatical unit, a question, that is, of style, and stylistics not necessarily dependent on word (or image) and rather communicative of something like the “Black Talk” which Ben Sidran famously introduced back in 1971 by describing “listening to a Coltrane solo and hearing my mother’s voice.”⁴¹

Toward the end of *Black Up*, we hear Gil Scott Heron’s raspy voice: “There were some African poets that would only speak syllables,” he intones, with a slight stutter, “it’s like reading the yellow pages backwards.” This communicative opacity that highlights the musicality of words over their signification inspires the suspension Joseph’s seemingly always-moving camera performs around his characters who become part of what feels like a much more sensitive environment. By removing the black body “from the architectural function that requires its subjection,”



FIGURE 9. *BELHAVEN MERIDIAN* (DIRECTED BY KAHLIL JOSEPH, WHAT MATTERS MOST/PULSE FILMS, 2009), FRAME GRAB.

Cramer claims, Joseph articulates cinematic spaces that are no longer “brutalizing to black bodies.”⁴²

Black Up’s closing image offers yet another illustration of architectural suspension, as we see Ishmael Butler (one of the two artists who make up Shabazz Palaces) standing in line in front of a restaurant window at night in the Bronx, while a/his girl huddles in a gray hoodie leans against him and, her weight now slightly suspended, closes her eyes.

Like liquidity, suspension works best when it is pursued in all its rich polysemy and undecidability. Unlike liquidity, suspension demands to be *held* and to be, in turn, *suspended* so that the critical work it performs can be amplified and built upon. Yet, suspension does not indulge in fixation and it defies the stillness of fetishization. Suspension acknowledges that pressure requires release, elevation will eventually end,

and there is only so much tension that can be reconciled or absorbed before implosion or explosion: as Cramer’s analysis of “Until the Quiet Comes” reminds us, “any violence visualized in the process of building *this* world always lands on the black body,” which remains this world’s very ground.⁴³ ■

Endnotes

1. More than usual, this introduction has benefitted from the careful comments of Lauren M. Cramer, Charles “Chip” Linscott, Jenny Gunn, John Roberts, Shady Patterson, Daren Fowler, and Charleen Wilcox.
2. The research project included public screenings and artist’s talks, and culminated in the publication of the sixth issue of the *liquid blackness* journal.
3. Jafa’s use of the term “durational drag” is reported in Angela Brown, “Video Art at the Tempo of Emergency: Arthur Jafa on His Recent Work,” *ArtNews*, February 15, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/15/video-art-at-the-tempo-of-emergency-arthur-jafa-on-his-recent-work>. For a more detailed discussion of *Dreams are colder than Death* in the context of questions of black ontology and the love of blackness, themselves a form of holding blackness in suspension, see my introduction to the no. 6 issue of *liquid blackness* as well as my essay “Dreams are colder than Death and the Gathering of Black Sociality,” *Black Camera*, 8, no. 2 (2016): 120-140.
4. Jenny Gunn, “Re: ‘The Profound Power of the New Solange Videos,’ by Cassie da Costa, October 24, 2016,” letter to the editor of the *New Yorker*, November 18, 2016.
5. Daren Fowler, “To Erotically Know: The Ethics and Pedagogy of *Moonlight*” in this issue, 45.
6. Alessandra Raengo, “*liquid blackness*: A Research Project on Blackness and Aesthetics,” in *Mark Bradford: Scorched Earth*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, exhibition catalogue ed. by Connie Butler and published by DelMonico-Prestel, 2015, 170.
7. Lauren M. Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe: Diagramming Blackness in *Until the Quiet Comes*,” in this issue, 145.
8. Within the *liquid blackness* group, we describe as a “think along” what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might describe as “black study,” which is a practice of *thinking with others* that, since our research project on Larry Clark’s *Passing Through*, we have attached to the dynamics of the jazz ensemble, see Lauren M. Cramer and Alessandra Raengo,

“Freeing Black Codes: *liquid blackness* Plays the Jazz Ensemble,” in “Black Code Studies,” ed. Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal, special issue, *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 8-21.

9. As a project that seeks to continue our experimentation with digital forms of “black study” the hyperlinked text of this lively discussion invited by Derek and Soraya Murray will also be open to feedback and other forms of contribution and augmentation.
10. Bradford, *Scorched Earth*. Bradford’s contribution to the Venice Biennial, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, occupies the U.S. Pavilion very much in the mode of a suspended obstruction. Visitors can only enter from the side door and are immediately confronted by densely labored masses suspended from the ceiling (*Spoiled Foot*, 2016), sprouting from the ground (*Medusa*, 2016), or colonizing the vault of the rotunda like overgrown vine (*Saturn Returns*, 2013). The video that concludes the exhibition, *Niagara* (2005), shows Bradford’s LA neighbor walking away from the camera with recognizable swagger. Slow motion comings and goings of cars in the street index the passage of real time but, in terms of spatiality, progress is not being made. He seemingly does not gain any ground and remains suspended instead, almost hovering over the sidewalk, as if walking in place.
11. Fowler, “To Erotically Know,” 44.
12. *Killer of Sheep*, obviously, which Coogler has indicated as influential in his aesthetic choices, but I am thinking also about his Project One film, *Several Friends* (1969).
13. Andre Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” 37, in *What is Cinema?* Vol. II, transl. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). In “Eyes at the Back of His Head: Precarious Masculinity and the Modern Tracking Shot.” Speaker series sponsored by the Corporeality Working Group and the Franklin Humanities Group. Duke University, 14 April 2014, Jennifer Barker calls attention to the film’s commitment also to exposing the limits of the representational logic of realism, to the extent that it never affords a point of view shot from Oscar’s camera although it opens with cell-phone camera footage of his death. More importantly, she focuses on the camera position throughout, in what she describes as “follow shots” which enact a form of “witnessing at a

distance,” that is precariously similar to the constant surveillance Oscar undergoes as he moves in public spaces. Her observations make the tone of the flashback even more strikingly discontinuous to the rest of the film. See also Jennifer M. Barker and Adam Cottrel, “Eyes at the Back of the Head: Precarious Masculinity and the Modern Tracking Shot,” *Paragraph* 38, no. 1 (March 2015): 86-100.

14. Paula Massood, “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse,” *Wide Angle* 21, no. 4 (2004): 20-41.
15. See Derek Conrad Murray’s contribution to *empyre*, April 2016, and specifically his characterization of the similarities between the concept of “post-blackness” and “liquid-blackness.” <http://liquidblackness.com/twine/empyre.html>.
16. Fowler, “To Erotically Know,” in this issue, p. 45.
17. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
18. Amiri Baraka, *Part of the Doctrine: Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art: Collected Poetry, 1961-1967* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).
19. For a longer discussion of these films see Alessandra Raengo, “Encountering the Rebellion: *liquid blackness* reflects on the expansive possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion films,” in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Stewart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 291-318, and Allyson Nadia Field, “Rebellious Unlearnings: UCLA Project One Films (1967-1978),” *Ibid.*, 83-118.
20. Steve Spence, “Hip Hop Aesthetics and *La Haine*,” in this issue, 100.
21. Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

22. A tension that strains the muscles and might be visible in the face if one is willing to “listen” to the photographic image. Without reference to the rich theoretical backing by Fred Moten in his discussion of “Black Mo’nin’ in the Sound of the Photograph” (a chapter from *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Campt describes as “listening” her attentive, sympathetic reading for the counter-archival moves that might be articulated even by the most seemingly disciplined photographic archives. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
23. Charleen Wilcox suggested that Truth’s aesthetic deception can also be regarded as a type of self-curation. For a rigorous approach to the architectures of anti-blackness see Lauren M. Cramer’s essay in this issue.
24. I take liberally this expression from Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies. Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
25. In a way that is reminiscent of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).
26. *Dreams are colder than Death* (Arthur Jafa, 2013).
27. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.
28. Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
29. Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness and the Image of Motility: A Suspenseful Critique,” *Black Camera*, 8, no. 1 (2016): 191-206. For Andre Lepecki, the still “acts because it interrogates economies of time, because it reveals the possibility of one’s agency within controlling regimes of capital, subjectivity, labor and mobility.” André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.
30. See *What Happened in the Tunnel* (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1903) when the association of the black screen with the maid’s

epidermal blackness becomes one of the pretexts for the narrative and racial switcheroo. See also Trond Lundemo, “The Colors of Haptic Space,” in *Color: The Film Reader*, edited by Brian and Angela Dalle Vacche Price, 88-101 (New York: Routledge, 2006); Stephen Best, *The Fugitives’ Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 203-267; Susan Courtney, *Hollywood’s Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

31. As Alice Maurice takes steps to show in *The Cinema and Its Shadow*.
32. Jafa showed the video that became *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* in Atlanta in the context of the special event that *liquid blackness* hosted for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (April 2016), still untitled.
33. Arthur Jafa and Tina Campt, “Love is the Message, The Plan is Death,” *e-flux journal* #81, April 2017.
34. Arthur Jafa qtd. in Antwaun Sargent, “Arthur Jafa and the Future of Black Cinema,” *Interview* (January 11, 2017): <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/arthur-jafa>. Because grounded in the “flesh,” empathy deepens and suspends at the same time: *Dreams* presents it both, and equally, as a profoundly personal, intimate and singular experience, especially when Spillers talks about her loss of family members, while it is also one black people share, as black people.
35. Greg Tate, “The Changeling Mise-en-Scène—Arthur Jafa’s Meta Love and the New Black Reportage,” in Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (New York: Gavin Brown Enterprise, 2016), n.p.
36. Christina Sharpe, “Love is the Message, The Message is Death,” in Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message*, n.p.
37. Helen Molesworth, “Arthur Jafa: *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*,” brochure for exhibition at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, April 2-June 12, 2017.
38. Writing for *Art News*, Angela Brown reports a conversation between Jafa and Kerry James Marshall where the latter characterized the difference between painting and photography as one about “discrepancy,” a gap between the rendering of something and what is being rendered, “a very complicated thing for black folks, because we live in [it] all

the time.” <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/15/video-art-at-the-tempo-of-emergency-arthur-jafa-on-his-recent-work>.

39. Jafa and Campt, “Love is the Message,” 6. Jafa has also repeatedly indicated that, at Howard University he had initially studied architecture and had brought to that discipline similar questions about how an architectural structure might correspond to a black sound.
40. Lauren M. Cramer, “Building the Black (Universal) Archive and the Architecture of Black Cinema,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (2016): 131-145.
41. James Tobias, “Untitled,” *In Media Res* (October 13, 2016), <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2016/10/13/untitled>.
42. Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe,” in this issue, 149.
43. *Ibid.*, 155.

