

## *liquid blackness* 3, no. 7 (LB7) – Call for papers

### **Holding Blackness: Aesthetics of Suspension<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Background**

The idea for the 7<sup>th</sup> 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), 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 is also one of the closest collaborators of Arthur Jafa’s in *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (2013), which first suggested to 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. Since then, we have found a somewhat similar sensibility in works such as: Ava DuVernay’s *Middle of Nowhere* (2012), Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood* (2014), Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (2016), Berry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016), Donald Glover and Hiro Murai’s *Atlanta* (2016), Solange’s videos for *A Seat at the Table* (with cinematography by Arthur Jafa, 2016) and Bradford Young’s cinematography for *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011), *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013), *Middle of Nowhere* (Ava DuVernay, 2012), *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), and *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 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 such diverse instantiations. Yet, as *liquid blackness* member Jenny Gunn argues, it may be precisely where the proper terms of the lineage seem the least transparent that the work of the archive becomes most necessary.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the unruly genealogy of a black aesthetic demands eclectic (or “liquid” as we have called them) forms of collection and analysis. Past issues of our thematic journal pivot around, spur from, or amplify research projects and are 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 Arthur Jafa’s *Dreams are colder than Death* for the last issue of *liquid blackness*, ["Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness"](#) as a way to engage this archive and continue to emphasize the cultural and political work of form.

Several meanings of suspension informed the ethical and aesthetic framing of the Kahlil Joseph screening and symposium, but others have become available since.

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<sup>1</sup> This cfp is written with contributions from Lauren Cramer, Charleen Wilcox and Jenny Gunn

<sup>2</sup> 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.

In the very first instance, the word “suspension” was evoked as a way to think about how scholarly and artistic endeavors might change once one “hold[s] blackness in the middle of [one’s] conversations and concerns.”<sup>3</sup> “What happens when blackness is deliberately held in suspension, by the critical act one might perform in attempting to understand its contours?”<sup>4</sup> asked the very first public statement about *liquid blackness* asked, “What if we held blackness in balance, so to speak, 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?”<sup>5</sup> While these questions posed blackness as a concept and a thing in and of itself, they also responded to an ethical concern. The inspiration for the latter came from the moment in *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), when Oscar Grant’s mother, played by Octavia Spencer, asks her dying son’s friends to “lift him up.” In this case, “suspension” indexes a radical reorientation as an act of care. Indeed, one of the first commitments of the group, since the beginning, has been to find a scholarly practice that would keep blackness philosophically safe.<sup>6</sup>

More directly in relation to Kahlil Joseph’s work, Lauren Cramer advanced another important sense of suspension, by focusing on its architectural sense, where it 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.<sup>7</sup> Thus “suspension” offers a concrete way to seriously interrogate the discrepancy between popular culture’s unwavering obsession with blackness and the continued devaluation of black lives.

Finally, when understood at the level of the photographic image itself, suspension might be a way to place a critical wedge between the image and its profilmic subject, which, in the case of black bodies, has been historically made to coincide as if flattened onto the same truthful surface.<sup>8</sup> Here suspension, meant as disruption, refusal, and endurance as it is involved, for instance, in the sill 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 producing photographic truth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The founding editorial board members in the Fall 2013 were: Lauren Cramer, Kristin Juarez, Cameron Kunzelman and Michele Beverly)

<sup>7</sup> Lauren M Cramer, “Building the Black (Universal) Archive and the Architecture of Black Cinema.” *Black Camera* 8, no. 1 (2016): 131-145

<sup>8</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness and the Image of Motility: A Suspenseful Critique,” *Black Camera*, 8, no. 1 (2016): 191-206.

## **Call for Papers**

In keeping with our interest in archiving family resemblances across media and exhibition venues, formats and genres, we welcome contributions that explore, and expand on, the following ways of understanding “suspension” as it concerns ethics, aesthetics, temporality, spatiality, and form, as well as the ontology of the photographic image:

**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.

Please send an abstract (maximum 500 words), 5 bibliographical sources, and a short bio to [liquidblackness@gsu.edu](mailto:liquidblackness@gsu.edu) no later than February 18, 2017. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by February 25, and complete essays (2,500–3,000 words) will be due on April 4. Projected publication date: June 2017. For more information, contact *liquid blackness* at the above email address.