

liquid blackness
blackness, aesthetics, liquidity
april 2014



Yama

This publication is released in occasion of our first *liquid blackness* Symposium hosted by the Department of Communication, at Georgia State University, April 11-12, 2014.

The purpose of the Symposium is to begin a conversation about liquidity as an aesthetic form in which blackness is encountered in our contemporary visual and sonic culture. Ideas of liquidity also inspire the structure of the Symposium, which brings together scholars, curators, artists, and community venues in a fluid exchange among different ways of generating art and expressing thought.

The Symposium features lectures by Hamza Walker (Associate Curator, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago), Derek Conrad Murray (Assistant Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture at UC Santa Cruz), and a panel of multimedia artists: Carla Aaron-Lopez, Nikita Gale, Nettrice Gaskins, Yanique Norman, and Fahamu Pecou.

The Symposium also includes a collaboration between *liquid blackness* and The Window Project, a public art platform developed by DAEL, the Digital Art and Entertainment Lab at Georgia State University. Using six screens and spanning eighty feet wide, The Window Project supports experimentation for artists working with moving images. For the Symposium, four artists were invited to adapt existing works for the unique dimensions and

capabilities of the platform. Their work is showing for one week each throughout the month of April. These artists are Consuela Boyer, Chris Reel, Joey Molina, and Fahamu Pecou. The curator for this installation of the Window Project is Kristin Juarez.

For more on the Window Project visit:
atlantawindowproject.wordpress.com

Thanks to another collaboration with Community partners, The Mammal Gallery and The Sound Table, two of the Symposium events take place off-campus. The Mammal Gallery will host two live performances by T.Lang Dance and Gathering Wild Dance Company and the projection of a short film by Bubba Carr on the first night of the Symposium. The Sound Table and DJ Kemit will host the closing event on the second night of the *liquid blackness* Symposium with a release party for this publication and a screening of all Symposium artists' work.

A follow up publication to be released after the Symposium is currently being planned. It will have other interviews and essays addressing the artwork shown at the Mammal Gallery as well as the remaining Symposium artists from the Window Project that have not been discussed here.

liquid blackness would like to thank sponsors and supporters who have made this publication possible, as well as the first *liquid blackness* Symposium on blackness, aesthetics, and liquidity, April 11-12, 2014, Georgia State University, Atlanta:

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liquid blackness 1248
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Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity

by Alessandra Raengo

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

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

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



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

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

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

Blackness is constructed with the cooperation of everybody's sensorium

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



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

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

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

The choice of liquidity⁸

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

First Scenario: Detachment

The facility with which the definition and understanding of blackness in *Blackness for Sale* changes across the various scenarios listed in the product description indicates a preexisting liquidity, which in turn grants access to blackness as a detachable and usable experience. What happens to blackness as a result of that demands further reflection. Especially since, as Elam further observes, this detachability has now made it entirely possible to “love black cool and not love black people.”¹³

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

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

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

Second scenario: bodily matters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Densely described: "I secreted a race"

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

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



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

Thickly Made: Patsey's Soap

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Like an oil spill

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

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

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

Sticky fingers

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

liquid blackness seeks to understand.

Pornotopias

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

Precariously

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

²See Cameron Kunzelman's essay in this issue.

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

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

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

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

⁷*How Race Is Made*, 6.

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

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

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

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

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

¹³"Change Clothes and Go," 386.

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

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

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

¹⁷"Recitatif," 243.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁷ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 70.

³⁸ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 66.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁷ See Joey Molina's essay in this issue

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

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Nettrice Gaskins



My Steampunk Dream (with "Lalee's Kin"),
2010. Courtesy of the artist.

The Liquidity of the Virtual Body: A Conversation with Nettrice Gaskins

by Michele Prettyman-Beverly

Nettrice Gaskins is an artist, educator, digital media practitioner, and theorist who creates multi-dimensional worlds that allow past, present, and future to interface, creating multi-layered sensory experiences in virtual installations. She creates space for her “beings” to have an almost tactile encounter with remnants of history, experience, dance, and objects, disseminating a stimulating flow of cultural consciousness.

As part of *liquid blackness*'s research project into aesthetics and blackness, I wanted to explore the digital sphere by asking Nettrice about the contours of her work and gain some perspective on the notion of the “liquidity of blackness” and the aesthetic markers that make liquidity both possible and resonant. I am also interested in her response to potential tensions in the juxtaposition of her digital and virtual worlds to a contemporary time that is increasingly marked by an excess of both embodied and digital hostility and outright assaults on black bodies.

MPB: My first question takes shape around the explosion of visual, new media, and new ways to imagine and construct human-ness and embodiment and the pervasive uses of violence to limit the mobility of black bodies in public space. Like many of us, I have been contemplating (and mourning) the spate of violence and trauma imposed on black bodies, specifically of young men and women who have been brutally murdered simply for existing, or often times, when seeking help: Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Renesha McBride among many others. While my work tries to free black artists from the expectation that their work do something

explicitly political, we know that the body is political and that our creative and scholarly impulses are not detached from our experiences of pain and grief. How can we articulate a context for the work that you do in the midst of this kind of violence. In other words, is the digital body political?

NG: My answer to this first question is: it all depends on the intention of the artist/maker. The standard techno-optimist argument in favor of expanding the Metaverse goes something like this: Virtual worlds hold the promise of communication without regard for distance, physical ability, gender, or race. Every aspect of the avatar is flexible, rendering prejudice obsolete.

We know that the body is political and that our creative and scholarly impulses are not detached from our experiences of pain and grief

It appears such wishful thinking might be snagged on the heated issue of race. There's a little noticed study that shows that avatars responded to social cues – as well as revealed racial biases – in the same ways that people do in the real world.¹ One of the first choices I had to make for my avatar was the “skin” it would wear. Skinning an avatar involves choosing from a collection of 2D textures that are applied to the base 3D avatar figure. The textures/figure does not have to be representational (i.e. human). In *Second Life* I chose to be black/African American as well as a machine/cyborg (think “fembot”) with lovely afro-styled hair in various colors. However, I could have also chosen to be a ball of light. If an avatar is black other users may attach labels based on existing perceptions and experiences. I was always surprised when I met users who were black in *Second Life* but non-black in real life.

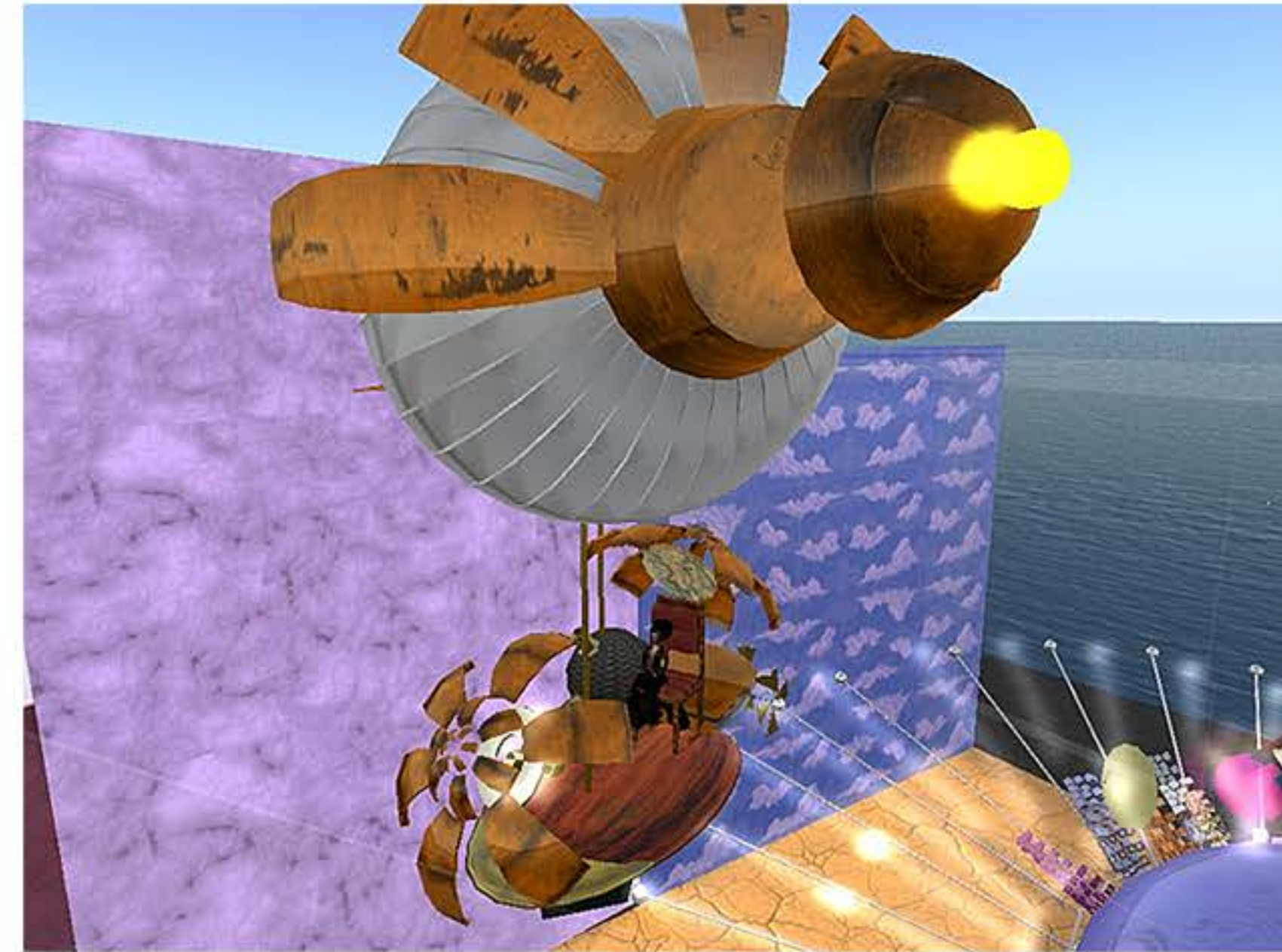
MPB: This is a follow-up to the previous question. In the broad context of

Escape could be viewed as a lack of concern about the real challenges that black bodies face. Yet... 'escape' has always been a necessary metaphorical and literal pursuit for black people

the Afrofuturist paradigm are a range of themes, objectives, and aesthetics, but issues of time, space, remaking bodies and the worlds that these bodies inhabit are paramount. If you could for a moment, speak to someone unfamiliar with this context. I think some might view this practice and theoretical approach as an escape from lived experiences or the “real world,” and one that attempts to evade or ignore them. I think the term ‘escape’ here is very important. On one hand it could be viewed as a lack of concern about the real challenges that black bodies face. Yet on the other hand “escape” has always been a necessary metaphorical and literal pursuit for black people. Can you speak to the question of Afrofuturism as escapist?

NG: When creating my Afrofuturism simulation (installation) in *Second Life* for IBM, I was tasked with simulating utopia and dystopia or the two themes that frequently come up in science fiction, fantasy, etc. The challenge for the dystopia side was how to simulate surveillance such as how to get users to feel what it was like to always be watched, whether they are black or non-black. I created a large wall of three-dimensional eyeballs that were scripted to follow avatars wherever they went in the installation. This side of the installation was more intriguing to the visitors. I also saw a lot of avatars in the Skybridge section where avatars became immersed in Afrofuturism-related artifacts and mini-universes. My intention was to show a broad range of things, not just escapist spaces.

MPB: Central to the notion of the *liquid blackness* research project is to find language and visual objects and experiences to capture the notion of



Nettrice Gaskins
*My Steampunk
Dream (airship)*,
2010. Courtesy of the
artist.

“liquidity.” Can you speak to the places in your work where “liquidity” might be felt?

NG: For me liquidity is about using creative tools to push and revise the fundamental constructs of reality. Artists who do not use representational images in virtual worlds may find a safe haven in abstraction/abstract art. I find it through light, sound, color and, of course, virtual 3D space. I also find liquidity in layers of imagery, collage or movement. In my research I look at how black artists recombine, remix and assemble materials in order to subvert dominant technology. Take, for example, Jacoby Satterwhite who merges his physical performances with his performances in virtual 3D space. One of the things I used to do a lot was draw portraits of the young people I worked with. Portraiture was a great icebreaker and I found that most, if not all, of the black (and Latino) children wanted to sit still and pose for me. They didn’t even mind that I kept some of them. When

drawing their portraits I am looking at lines, shapes and values, not race/color but more than that. I am giving them my undivided attention as they and somewhere in that exchange we discover who we really are.

MPB: I became acquainted with a set of still images from a series of works that you did some years ago and then viewed your *Second Life* digital installations. I found your still images to gesture toward what your virtual work somehow makes possible. What do you think the digital medium offers that is different from traditional visual art i.e. still works? How is your experience of creating the work different?

NG: For one thing, I can't move through my physical works but I can in virtual 3D space. I often apply my tangible artworks as textures on virtual 3D objects that can be scripted to move, become transparent, or permeable. Virtual 3D space allows me to extend the 2D picture plane into three and four dimensions. Also, I explored how to take some of the characters (avatars) from my 2D work and create virtual 3D sculptures out of them. I tend to move back and forth between dimensions.

MPB: In a number of your works, you bring to life aspects of black culture and experiences from the past. For instance, in your *Cry* series, which is almost a kind of adaptation of the classic Alvin Ailey performative piece, *Cry*, the bodies in your works seem to inhabit multiple spheres or dimensions and multiple subjectivities simultaneously. Can you describe your approach to constructing time and space?

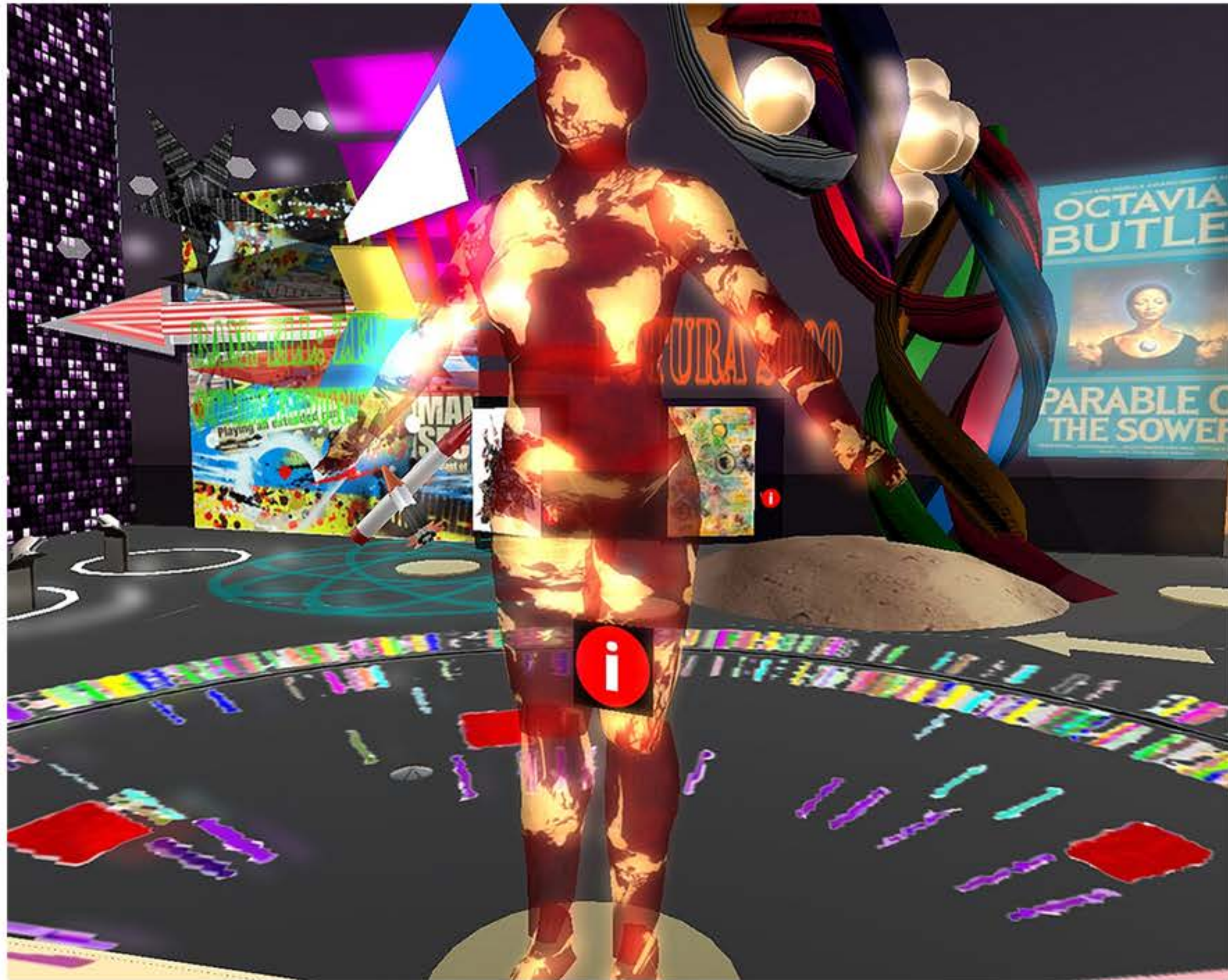
NG: W.C. Abraham and M.F. Bear came up with the term "metaplasticity" to describe a conceptual state of the mind and art process in virtual 3D space. Plasticity refers to plastic reality, or the synthesis of virtual and real art — bending the rules of how we define reality and how artists create images/objects. Historically, in 2D art such as Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, the syrupy plasticity of the artist's painted objects

suggests the possibility of time slowing to sludge the flow of the invisible river of time. The key revelation enabling *SL* artists to push and revise the fundamental constructs of plasticity (brain, space, time, light) is the use and control of the avatar in virtual 3D space. In other words, it is through the avatar that the user/person inhabits multiple spheres, dimensions and subjectivities.

Liquidity is about using creative tools to push and revise the fundamental constructs of reality

MPB: Do you think of your work as constructing blackness in a virtual context, or is there another kind of subjectivity that you are trying to access?

NG: One of the issues I have with new or next wave academic terms such as "intersectionality" is that it often operates from a foundation of white supremacist patriarchy. We get caught up in discussions over who is "left out" of the current model because the actual model itself is exclusionary. In Beth Coleman's view, race can exist *as if* it were on par with an instrument. When race is "denatured" from its historical roots, it can then be freely engaged as a productive tool. For example, in *SL* I can say, "I'm a cyborg" and it becomes real to me and the others who can only see my avatar. The experience of being a historical "subject" changes when I can teleport, fly around, or walk through permeable 3D objects. I am still creating from the same mental models I use in real life but with the expectation that I can change some of those models (ideas) in virtual 3D space.



Nettrice Gaskins. *Genetics and the Digital Body (avatar)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

I asked Nettrice about the difference between the digital space and the virtual space. She explained the virtual space is about shifting our perceptual awareness and that we do not fully comprehend the virtual sphere if all we do is replicate the constructions of our lived reality. For instance, she explains that some people have trouble “letting go” and create avatars and images that do not challenge the expectations of lived

reality. She also describes digital space as configurations of data organized into a range of algorithms, whereas virtual space is all about perception.

When race is “denatured” from its historical roots, it can then be freely engaged as a productive tool

Lastly, I asked her to discuss her recent piece *Genetics* which was also part of a larger installation. She described in a written statement that “This image of a virtual 3D avatar explores the unboundedness of the digital body as well as the ways in which the body is coded (as a map).”

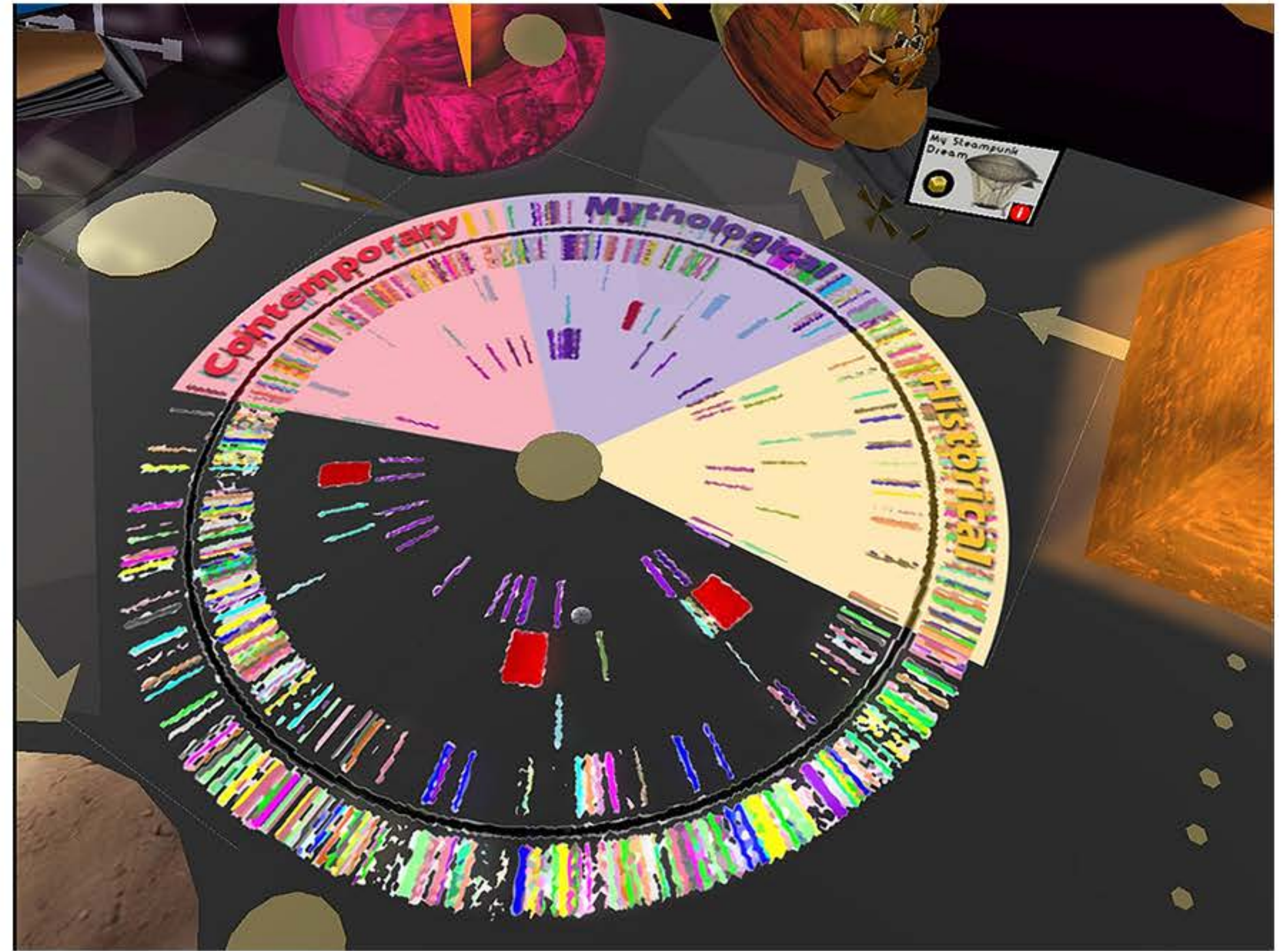
She explained that the “unbounded” nature of the body is critical as we can write, impose, and manipulate this body to do and be whatever we want it to be. Thus her piece features a digitized body marked as female, but also marked as translucent, but taking its form from an image of the earth. This body is in many ways not a body at all, hearkening back to Nettrice’s admonition that artists should fully take advantage of the capacity of technology to reimagine rather than reify bodies and objects. We can both see through this figure, while also reading the racial codes that are visible and which are often features in Nettrice’s work—a mass of hair, crown or head wrap, and a kind of bodily curvature. This mapped being hovers above a genome map, which, when taken together, redefines subjectivity as not confined solely to race, corporeality, or human-ness. Instead, we are able to see through a figure that is mapped as worldly, ethereal, cellular, and genomic, depicting how black bodies do not simply imagine alternative universes (multiverses) and forms of embodiment but create them.²

Gaskins’s work evokes racial inscription just long enough to for us to experience the sonic and visual pleasures of what bodies create, but then simultaneously frees us from the rigid, intractable nature of time, space,

and convention and, using the constructs of digital space and virtual technology, compels us to leave our old ideas of the world behind.

¹ Northwestern University. "Real-world Behavior And Biases Show Up In Virtual World." *ScienceDaily*. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/09/080909074104.htm (accessed April 3, 2014)

² See Drew Ayers. "Humans without Bodies: DNA Portraiture and Biocybernetic Reproduction." *Configurations*, 19, no. 2 (Spring 2011).



Nettrice Gaskins. *Genetics and the Digital Body (map)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Yanique Norman



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

Dislogging the Visual: Yanique Norman's Amorphous Beings

by Kristin Juarez and
Christina Price Washington

Yanique Norman's body of work demands active viewing of the anthropomorphic, disembodied, bulbous beings that emerge from her drawings and paintings. Coupled with the exploration, contemplation, and deciphering of the shapes and forms, her titles both ground and complicate the images, dislodging any signs of familiarity made available to viewers. The resulting pleasure comes from untangling how history is fragmented in her work, which is only awarded to prolonged viewing, and does not give way easily to delight or accomplishment. Referring to mental and somatic recourses, her work mobilizes an affective response that causes stimuli mediating between body and intellect. Our ability to finally crack the codes depends on recognizing how images have maintained their cultural meaning, despite their initial disguise in her work.

The body is the central point of Norman's work, but her expression of the body is seen as an amorphous substance or membrane, as Norman manipulates found photographs of black men and women (often anonymous, but always objectified) that have persisted in our collective cultural memory. Working in the manner of collage, her work stands out from the kinds of collage that are often anchored in popular and glossy print media. Norman gives them unique and altering effects by reproducing them by hand and adding color to them.

At first, the re-purposing and re-positioning of these images remind us that photography's history is intrinsically linked to the edification, inscription, and sealant of race onto skin. As Coco Fusco examined

extensively in her 2003 exhibition *Only Skin Deep*,¹ photography's indexical ability fixed with the capacity to capture physical difference historically served as evidence for the invisible elements of race. In some ways, the multitude of these images has made them invisible, but Norman's ability to manipulate these images gives them new life as cultural images and new life within fine art. Photo practices have been intrinsic to the racialization and the subsequent de-humanization of the black body, while their plenitude in contemporary culture and historical distance have re-contextualized, shifted, and irreparably changed how these images function.

Norman's interest goes beyond the formal similarity of their origin; rather, her work attempts to visualize what the artist calls "the psychological body," which has, and arguably continues to, remained out of view, invisible, and denied. Specifically, Norman creates work that speaks to the psychological position of the female raced body. The black female body is a springboard for fantastical aesthetic play that art filmmakers Maya Deren and John Akomfrah both describe as a constant state of becoming in which identity is regularly gaining wisdom and experience. In her work, the body is simultaneously depicted as abject and beautiful, authorizing a contagious enjoyment of looking.

**The body is the central point of Norman's work,
but her expression of the body is seen as an
amorphous substance or membrane**

Rendering her subjects as soft and grotesque bodies, they are carefully composed; in addition to collage, the use of graphite and gouache on paper facilitate material and interpretative layering. Predominantly fashioned in graphite colors, her images range from iron black to steel gray, and when used as a wash, the graphite appears a deep blue that seems to transmit light as giving her subjects a liquid quality.

Areas of pooled graphite and gouache read as skin that is lightweight and translucent and are juxtaposed with disproportional body parts signifying a personal investment in the weight of epidermalization and colonial history.

For example, *Fatherlessness 1* (2010) depicts a small person walking towards the left side of the page looking at the viewer. The face is collaged onto the body and arms, the neck, and one foot are shackled to a huge balloon-like substance that resembles an oversized, distended parade float. The balloon is big, round, and blue, like marble. It is an extension of the body, grotesquely enlarged to correspond to a woman's chest with two protruding shapes. Although it appears light and happy, ostensibly depicting a person and balloons, the complexity of the image is recognized after a moment of delay. The result is an image that is already familiar to the viewer. It is not only a raced body that is shackled, but also a disfigured female body. Norman carefully formulated a double construction of race and gender that calls on the viewer to investigate while conjuring both pleasure and horror.

Areas of pooled graphite and gouache read as skin that is lightweight and translucent, signifying a personal investment in the weight of epidermalization and colonial history.

The Soggy Moons 1 shows two anthropomorphic creatures crawling along a curvy landscape. Again, there is a delay of recognition as the landscape emerges as a female torso lying on her side. The two creatures crawling from left to right are dark, hunched over, and each carry a load on their backs that almost consumes the carrier. Their shape is an organic, bulging, and amorphous substance and the viewer has to contemplate where one body ends and the other begins. The protruding shapes resemble the curves of the female body that reveal globular light-detecting



Fatherlessness 1 (2010), graphite, collage and gouache on paper, 20" x 30"

organs and limbs almost like hermit crabs carrying their mollusk shell. Drawn in graphite and gouache, the torso representing the landscape is dark and textured and stands in contrast to the bulging amorphous shapes that have a plump, filled-out quality, like skin stretched to capacity. The little figures carrying their weight are drawn, but seem to be created as if liquid graphite drips shaped them. The figures emerge distorted, and the realization that these bodies are barely intact means the viewer's visual pleasure oscillates between what is beautiful and grotesque in the image.

Within her work, the experience and expression of black bodies are catalyzed in converging and misaligned forms that make visible how blackness exists within the lacuna of the body and the psyche.

It becomes possible to read how the excessiveness of material bodies are symptoms of a larger social condition, within which there has been enormous pressure for skin to signify and project desires and fears, power and powerlessness, beauty and the abject. Yanique Norman's work pushes the boundaries of these depicted bodies visualizing the persistent inadequacy of the epidermal surface, offering its possibility to re-imagine temporal and physical dimensions on a spatial plane. Within her work, the experience and expression of black bodies are catalyzed in converging and misaligned forms that make visible how blackness exists within the lacuna of the body and the psyche.

In preparation for the *liquid blackness* symposium, Christina Price Washington and Kristin Juarez conducted a studio visit with Yanique Norman to view and discuss the formal and conceptual drives behind her work. This essay comes out of our conversation with her.

¹ Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (International Center of Photography/Harry N. Abrams, 2003).



Fatherlessness 3
(2011), graphite
and gouache on
paper, 20" x30"

Nikita Gale

Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You! (2014),
acrylic, bubble wrap,
solitude, 4" x 6"



Ekphrastic Fear: The Invisible Bodies in the Work of Nikita Gale

by Kristin Juarez

With a background in advertising and archaeology, Nikita Gale's body of work often reflects on the unknowability of material objects by imbuing them with intensely personal and enigmatic addresses, dredging up the personal for others to view. For her work for Living Walls, the public art series established in Atlanta, she left the line "I almost loved you" dripping down a cinderblock wall. Beginning with the strict rigidity of font-like text, the artist's hand gradually slips into the messy and uncontrollable.

In Gale's *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* The viscous black acrylic gathers and pools over and within the bubble wrap. In an act of conjuring, its petite 4x6 inch size materializes the physical and temporal distance between two bodies as both insufficient yet palpable. The deflated bubble wrap encapsulates the compulsion, cathartic release, and futility of the puncturing process embodying both the passive-aggressiveness and longing the title is reacting to. Exposing itself as a reaction, or symptom of the unseen, the work emphasizes the traces of the artist's now-absent hand, as well as the phantom culprit the title alludes to. The personal exerts its presence at the expense of the bubble-wrap's original form and purpose, manifesting as an imperfect object to stand in for a relationship's emotional and durational arc.

Exposing itself as a reaction, or symptom of the unseen, the work emphasizes the traces of the artist's now-absent hand, as well as the phantom culprit the title alludes to.

For *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* the list of materials reads: "Acrylic, bubble wrap, solitude." Immediately Gale zeroes in on the verbal and material surfaces that individuals construct as deflection when a relationship turns sour. The slip from the tangible material into the invisible interior reflects a visual practice where marks are loaded with both subjective meaning and visceral physical presence. The relationship between text and image emphasizes the artist's weighted hand with a psyche and loss that could be read as her own. Because the words express such a familiar sentiment, the words are open for viewers to read themselves as the subject, or "I." Simultaneously, the direct address of "you" pierces the viewer in a way that feels vulnerable and emphatic, making you (as viewer) want to step aside and let the blame of "you" (as implied in the text) target someone else. By using "you" as the sentence's syntactical object, Gale pushes on the slippery nature of subject and object, creating the space for viewers to interpret, imagine, and replace real bodies out of abstracted ones. Gale's work also pushes on common conflation between artist and artwork, particularly through her employment of personal text, and the tendency to objectify artists.

Gale zeroes in on the verbal and material surfaces that individuals construct as deflection when a relationship turns sour.

The tension between text and image in Gale's work relies on "ekphrastic fear," which W.J.T. Mitchell describes as a desire for the visual to remain out of view in order to maintain the imagined subject.¹ The question arises, if we demand to maintain an imagined body over a real one, while also demanding that the artist's body stand in as the work he/she produces, what is the place and function of black artist's body?

¹W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other" in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 154.

Solidity and Liquidity

by Cameron Kunzelman

Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You! black paint marking plastic substrata, taunts the viewer who comes to it with any assumptions. We can read it as thoroughly modern art reflecting on a common office supply material that is both ubiquitous and wholly abnormal when removed from its box or trashcan—*umwelt* that always, inevitably, leads to the landfill. We can take the other end of the spectrum and embrace a vulgar critique, claim that it is nothing or that a child could create it, but these are koans that close eyes.

I want to write a few short words about *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* that avoid reading it representationally, as speaking about experience or its material, or saying anything about Nikita Gale or even taking into account her existence. This is not about claiming that the author is dead, but rather that *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* has a particular life that we should have fidelity to. To make this claim is to agree with Darby English, writing about the representational space of black art, who argues that “conception too often replaces perception, in effect suspending the life of the object and replacing it with a predetermined social one.” Instead, letting perception reign, I want to suggest that *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* helps us think about the physics of blackness.

As a research collective, *liquid blackness* begins with the assumption that blackness possesses a quality of liquidity. By this, we mean that the material embodiment of lived blackness both remains material and lived but has also become abstracted and ephemeral so that it quite literally flows outward and away from bodies, sticking to objects, commodities, and anything and everything else. But what about this process? What happens in the moment of abstraction when blackness moves from being grounded in the life of a singular human and into a set of qualities

that circulate as if they were a liquid? At that moment we might speak of a state change from a solid, an ordered latticework of experiences, into a more dispersed and less-ordered state of things, or the “liquid” of liquid blackness.

What, then, are the effects of this state change? One is increased entropy, or increased disorder in the system. When solids become liquids, or when an understanding of blackness grounded in the body is abstracted into a flowing and sticky process, then it becomes much more difficult to pin it down, to find it, to speak of it in its own terms. After all, it does not look like it did in its previous state, it is denied a ground in a recognizable and identifiable form; the solid blue-green glaciers, melting in an anthropogenic sauna, do not retain their shapes when transformed into polar icewater. What ground does *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* possess?

What happens in the moment of abstraction when blackness moves from being grounded in the life of a singular human and into a set of qualities that circulate as if they were a liquid?

I’ll linger on perception here. *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* is constructed of half-spheres spread along a grid. Some are more inflated than others. The black paint spread over everything catches in the crevices between spheres, draws semi-lines between them, obscures and highlights the grid all at once. The black paint pools in the center of some of the semi-spheres, filling them up, making sure that they are not seen as well as the others. Some spheres drown in the paint.

To look at the fun that was had without me (who is the “I” and the “you” here?) is to see the effect of state change. It is to see a moment of abstraction, of solid to liquid, manifested physically. It is a visual example for a moment we have to read constantly in the context of liquid blackness: what happens when something becomes liquid, or alternately, what happens when a deluge of liquid manifests itself in such massive relation to the solidity of blackness? We should not read this work purely as a metaphor for something that is happening once, but as a physical process that is happening in the ontoepistemological order of things all of the time. Or, in other words, *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* stands in as a rendering of the physics of liquid blackness, of the complex interrelationships between solidity and liquidity. It also forces us to ask another question. If abstracted blackness that flows from grounded subjects onto objects is liquid, then what might be gaseous blackness? What are the possibilities for roiling black suns, supermassive and superconductive, as concentrations of power? Not black holes, absences, but vast profoundly dense and radiating entities?

¹Darby English, *How To See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), 34.

Consuela Boyer



The triplets, *Blaque Woman* (2014),
photograph

When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong: the Incoherent Image in Consuela Boyer's Video Work

by Kristin Juarez

Consuela Boyer's video work *Blaque Woman* (2014) includes photography, sound, and performance and belongs to a series of investigation around the fabricated lives of the triplets Le-Ah Blaque, Anna-Renae Blaque, and Tiffany Blaque. Dressed as three distinct characters, Boyer changes everything she can about each of the sisters. Her hair, her clothes, her gestures, the syncopation, and modes of address range from hood to pious. In the real world, it is not unfathomable to consider that black triplets might find their comfort zones within distinct aspects of society, and together they reflect the diversity of Black life. But there is something unsettling about Boyer's performances because they are, in fact, not different people but one. As viewers, we are forced to reconcile how our desire to view and review authenticity imposed on Black people both restricts the possibilities of Boyer's characters, and divides Boyer's physical body into pieces that cannot be put back into place.¹ By misaligning the speed and synch of her speech to her body, Boyer's performance creates the effect of a glitch in the digital videos that causes our perception of her body-as-bodies to continually readjust.

Re-formatted for The Window Project, the Digital Art and Entertainment Lab's public art platform, the triplets will play at once providing them with a simultaneity of being. While the camera remains static in medium close-up, Boyer's body is mobile in her performance of the sisters. As the artist turns and gesticulates the camera is left running, as one long uninterrupted shot, giving the viewer the ability to consume her body, blurring the boundaries between her physical body and the performed

body. Dressed in a bright pink brimmed beanie and bandana, doorknocker earrings, lace camisole, and a lime green cardigan, we catch the first sister, Le-Ah Blaque, priming for a fistfight. This includes removing her earrings.² The next sister, Anne-Renae, attempts to seduce the viewer with a stylized coquettish weave, shiny chandelier earrings, and leopard-lined robe that she opens to reveal a negligee. The intensity of her gaze as her body becomes more exposed feels so successfully bold, that I can't help but be a little nervous. Boyer has made me fall into her game. The last sister, Tiffany, is a little preachy, and in contrast to her sisters she states, "I'm the kind of woman that doesn't necessarily need a man." She continues on to say she needs the women of this nation to realize that they are the backbone of the country. Wearing a body-conscious sweater, she speaks of uplift with soft eyes and make up. Relying on the guilty pleasure of recognizing an "authentic" black female body, Boyer plays with a viewer's tendency to believe that they recognize these individuals, splitting and fragmenting her body in order to fulfill this schematic categorization.

By misaligning the speed and synch of her speech to her body, Boyer's performance creates the effect of a glitch in the digital videos that causes our perception of her body-as-bodies to continually readjust

In the videos of each of these performances, there is layering and manipulation of sound that both adheres and functions independently of the image. ~~Their voices~~ Her voice is slowed down and altered to a speed and tone that makes it sound like a man's. The music in the background of the two "ratchet" sisters sounds like the chopped and screwed sound of Houston rappers. And while her lips are visually synched to her voice in each video, her gestures do not always act in slow motion but at a natural speed. Further complicating the manipulation, other sounds that her body makes, like handclaps, maintain a natural duration. This unidentifiable

sliding moments of real-time versus slow motion, turn the performance into an uncanny spectacle, where her physical gestures, lips, and voice operate independently of each other, but sometimes align. The deep altered voice that synchs to her image stops being unusual, as we try to comprehend what Boyer's characters are saying and maintain a temporality closest to her actions in order to singularize or flatten her body into a coherent image.

Boyer plays with a viewer's tendency to believe that they recognize these individuals, splitting and fragmenting her body in order to fulfill this schematic categorization

It is their excessive gestures and their cultural implications that make these videos first appear like a gag. The distinction between performance and imitation is central to Boyer's work, and what fuels its challenge to viewers to reconcile where the humor is, and at whose expense are they having a laugh. In an interview with Boyer, she described people's reactions to her as similar to Tyler Perry's Madea character, or Eddie Murphy playing an entire family in the Nutty Professor films. These are frankly disturbing cultural references that undermine the subversive potential of her work and drag. In one of her performances playing these characters, Boyer assured people that they could ask her anything. Questions included:

"Do you and your sisters have the same father?"

"Are you on welfare?"

"Where do you live?"



Le-Ah Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

So while her characters get relegated to the level of slapstick when the critique is directed at Boyer as herself, the audience reacts to Boyer as a stand-in for a particular fantasy of the black woman. The pervasive myth of "welfare queen" emerges once again in the space between Boyer's body and the audience. Boyer's work exposes difficulty in maintaining a critical and perceptual distance when attempting to pin down a real body that can slip in and out of our cultural confinements.

¹A seminal concept made clear by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

²Le-Ah's gestures seem "real" or authentic in the way that "keeping it real" demands.

Chopped and Screwed: Mediating the Black Body

by Lauren M. Cramer

By performing well-known racial stereotypes, Consuela Boyer's *Blaque Woman* engages directly in the discourse surrounding black female representation in popular culture. It is explicit that *Blaque Woman* is a piece that is contending with issues of racial performativity; however, Boyer's specific approach to these issues gives us another layer to consider when determining the place of blackness in black performance—the voice. In Boyer's five-minute video, she dramatically changes her physical appearance, but her voice remains "screwed" (slowed down to the point of distortion) throughout the performances. These aggressive, sexual, and emotionally engaged performances would seem to provide an intimate space to engage with the black body. Instead, in Boyer's work, that intimacy is replaced with the awareness that a whole black body is not available for our viewing/listening pleasure. As a result, what appears to be a perfect recreation of black visual culture's most familiar images challenges the entire repertoire.

As a result, what appears to be a perfect recreation of black visual culture's most familiar images challenges the entire repertoire

In *Blaque Woman*, Boyer carefully reconstructs her own image, changing her appearance and mannerisms to ask, "what does it mean to act black?" By extension, I think this piece also asks, "what does it mean to sound black?" Asking both questions forces us to arrive at a similar place—"I know it when I see it/hear it/smell it/taste it/etc." It seems the best way to understand "sounding black" is to think about the black voice as a



Anna-Renae Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

guarantor of the black body. It is present (I heard it!). This is clearest in the discourse of music appreciation when applied to African/African American music. In "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music," Susan McClary and Robert Walser explain the tendency to describe black music in bodily terms (i.e. the rhythm or accompanying dance).¹ Another way to understand the link between black sounds and black bodies is to consider how blackness, as an aesthetic configuration, needs to appear "correct" across the senses. This coherence is in danger if/when non-black bodies "sound black" or "look black" (and vice versa). In *Blaque Woman*, Boyer purposefully creates something that is all wrong—that voice should not come from *that* body.

Boyer's manipulation of her voice places her work within the lineage of what Alexander G. Weheliye calls "sonic Afro-modernity," the intersection of black popular music and sound technologies that theorizes about



Tiffany Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

materiality, ephemerality, and embodiment. Weheliye describes the black voice as always mediated.² As a result, we can discuss black sounds in the same ways we've learned to address the black body as an overdetermined image. Boyer's work counters attempts to make sense of her body. The result is a kind of aesthetic alienation that is consistent with hip-hop's similar use of "screwed" black voices. First, it is difficult to make sense of what Boyer is saying, so explicitly this image is resisting legibility. Second, Boyer's specific vocal manipulation borrows from a distinctly regional hip-hop style meant to distinguish and draw discreet boundaries around Southern rap production. Finally, *Blaque Woman* also displays a shift in the black popular culture values of a previous generation that would be wary of Boyer's humorous combination of sex, technology, and "bad" behavior.

Perhaps the most provocative way Boyer's screwed voice forces a

renegotiation with the black body is the way it challenges the link between the organic and inorganic. Blackness can feel available for fantasies of ownership or consumption precisely because of its firm connection to the physical body. That black body has been understood as primal, earthy, grounded, sensuous, and pre-modern. But the technological barrier in *Blaque Woman* complicates the representational reading that insists on making sense of the black body from the outside. *Blaque Woman* is about a performer animating her own body and making that labor explicit in both the sound manipulation, slow motion, and even her intricate costumes. The foregrounding of artifice, or each character in *Blaque Woman* as inorganic, opens a space to reconsider the way the black body is encountered. In fact, if she is "keeping it real," she is actually "keeping it (blackness) really fluid," as she blurs the lines between organic/inorganic, presence/absence, and surface/substance.

I know it when I see it/hear it/smell it/taste it/etc.

As opposed to completely removing her voice to emphasize the mediation of her body, Boyer's decision to screw her voice introduces the additional wrinkle of temporality. During *Blaque Woman*, viewers/listeners do not have a clear sense of the source of the voice, both literally (was it recorded at the time of her performance?) or temporally (when is this from?). There is a technological *too-much-ness* that allows Boyer's performance to exceed itself and the present moment (this is clearest when the sound of her clapping does not appropriately synch with the image of her hands clapping). *Blaque Woman* makes visible and audible, when blackness does not land squarely on the body. Instead, like the lazy sound of a screwed voice, it seems to slide right off. In Boyer's piece there is a sense that the voice is emanating from a past point and slowly reaching the present moment, at the same time the use of technology is decidedly futuristic. By shifting the question from "where is the black in black popular culture?" to "when is the black in black popular culture?" I

think *Blaque Woman* can initiate a conversation about the centrality of blackness in the development of technologies of representation and reproduction, and the way discourses of modernity failed to include the black experience.

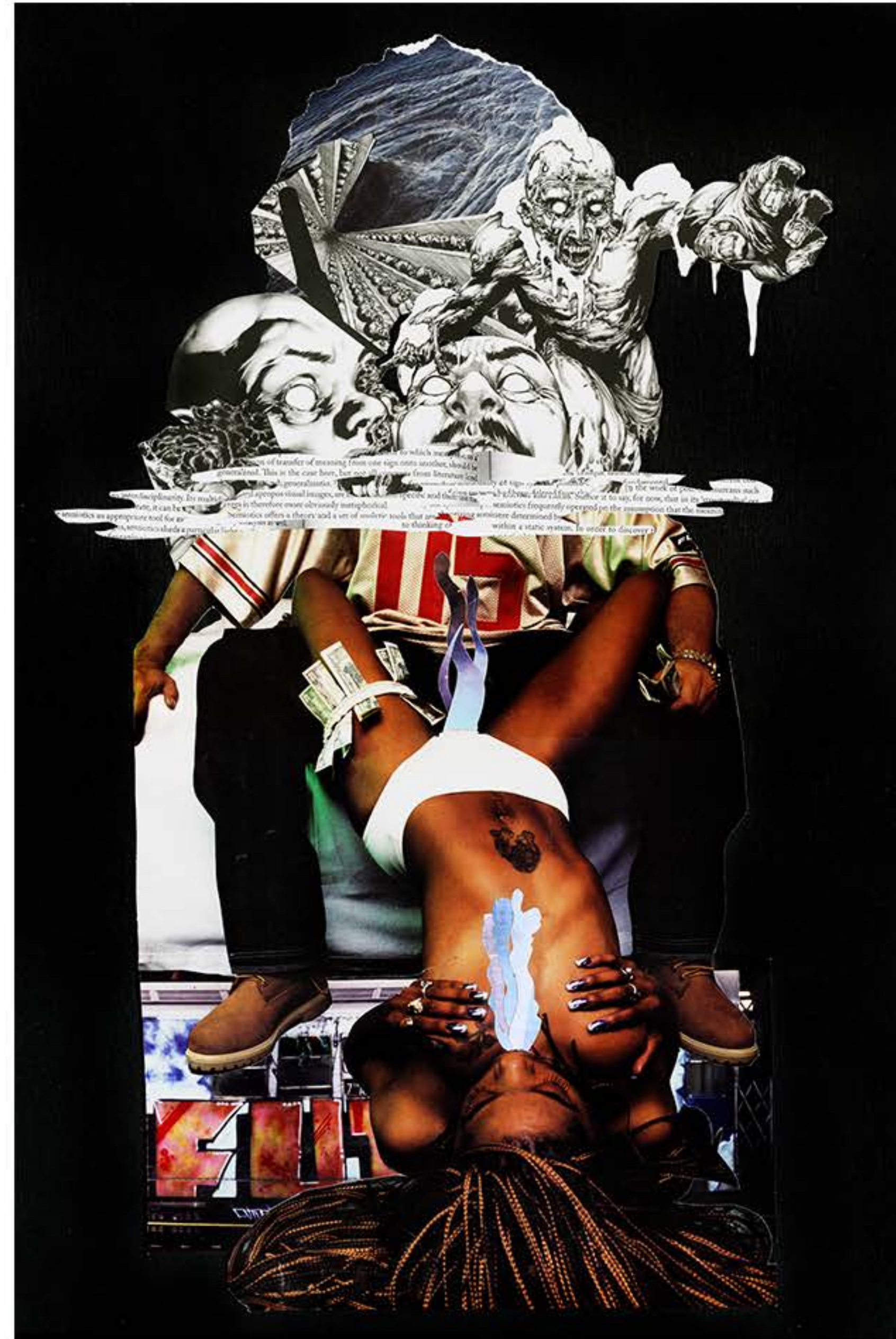
***Blaque Woman* makes visible and audible, when blackness does not land squarely on the body. Instead, like the lazy sound of a screwed voice, it seems to slide right off.**

Blaque Woman is a piece of art that seems to clearly give the viewer what is desired—images of the black body behaving in perfectly clear, predictable ways. Yet, Boyer’s vocal performance not only makes the piece less legible, it makes visible and audible the process of abstracting blackness from the body. This abstraction, in turn, helps us understand the vitality of liquid blackness because of the way it relies on the kind of intimacy, locality, immediacy, and (dare I say it) authenticity that feels present in Boyer’s work.

¹Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75–84.

²Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005).

Carla Aaron-Lopez



Zombie, (2012), archival pigment print on BFK Rives, 24 x 36 in.

Collage and Hip-hop: The Remix of Feminine and Masculine

by Joey Molina

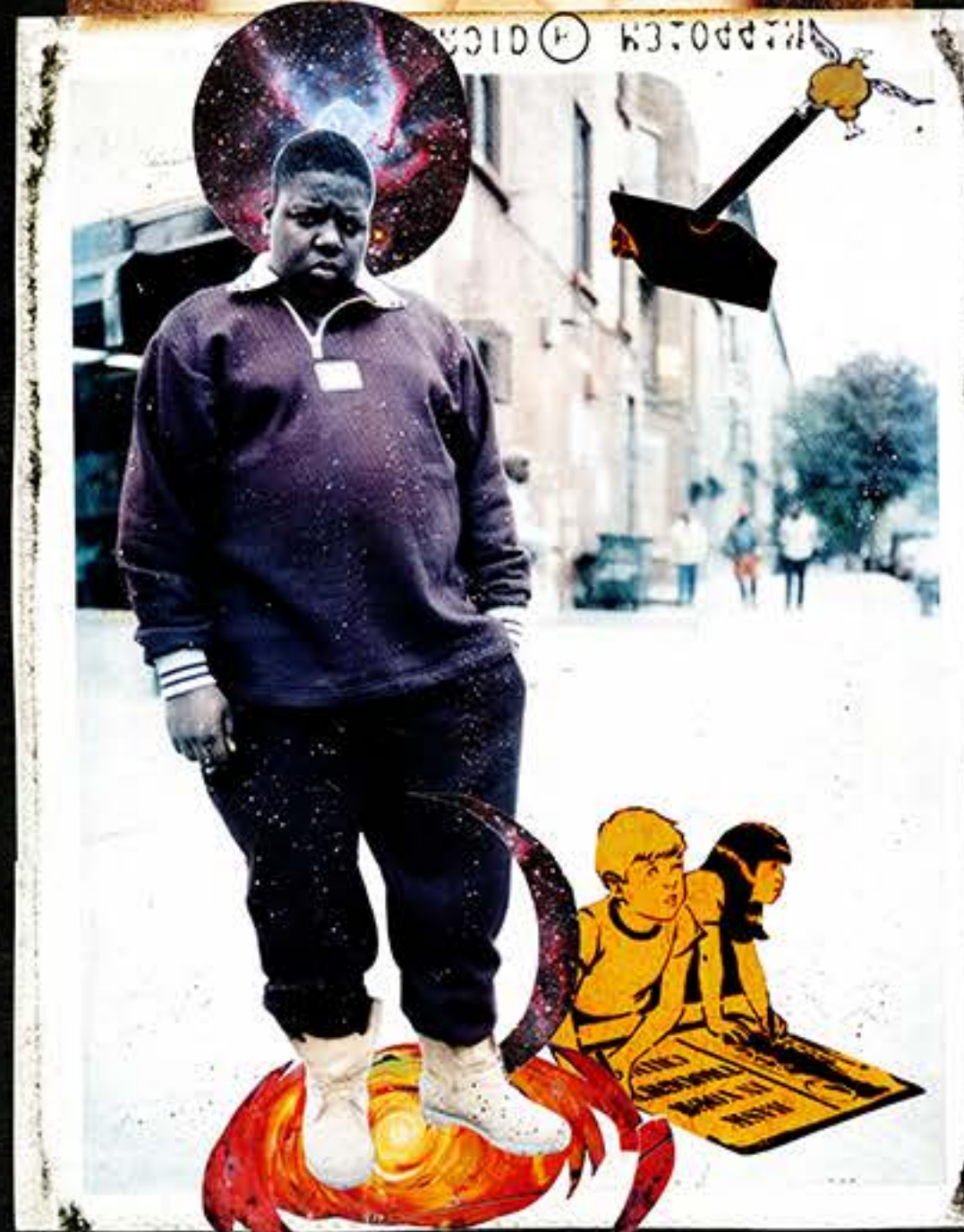
Long Live the Dirty South (2011-2013) is a series of collages by Carla Aaron-Lopez. Her work pursues the idea of remix, which refers to the practice of sampling in hip-hop and describes the reorganization of images in collage. Aaron-Lopez describes her affinity with hip-hop and its influence on her work, “when you go to collage, I fancy it to be similar to making a beat.”¹ In these surreal assemblages of images, Aaron-Lopez creates a strikingly obscure reinterpretation of “the Dirty South.” Her attraction to “disgust and unsavory” revels in the possibilities of these shape shifting conglomerates that feature a variety of cut-out pictures from magazines, coffee table books, and flyers. The attention to detail that collage requires—the positioning of images and the use of cutting vs. tearing—relate to creating “depth and texture to each finished piece.” She takes inspiration from hip-hop culture in an attempt to show a different side, where “black underdog” characters become “larger than life.” These “characters,” as she refers to them, exist in a wonderland filled with chimerical scenarios in abstract settings. The fact that Aaron-Lopez uses images from multiple sources that depict various people/celebrities, fantastical landscapes, outer space, food, and ironic ads creates points of identification that transcend stability while freely fluctuating particularly between masculinity and femininity.

Aaron-Lopez uses images from multiple sources that depict various people/celebrities, fantastical landscapes, outer space, food, and ironic ads creates points of identification that transcend stability



Black Angel, (2012), archival pigment print on BFK Rives, 24 x 36 in.

The resulting images offer a poignant observation about hip-hop and its portrayal of gender roles. “Women are always conveyed as number two in Western cultures,” states Aaron-Lopez. She also mentions that in rap music, particularly the early 2000’s dirty south crunk, “the lyrics are violent and push women into a hypersexualized context.” This overt sexuality has been an issue of contention in hip-hop for some time now, but she also sees the genre as a mode of “power and confidence.” She delves into her connection to the genre, “I began to fall deeper in love with the history of hip-hop.” These varying aspects of hip hop culture as depicted in her work “transform into something else.” That notion rings



Biggie Alone, (2011),
archival pigment
print on BFK Rives,
24 x 36 in.

true when considering that postmodern black portraiture "transformed conventional definitions of blackness into alternative, aberrant, yet strangely appealing entities."² Aaron-Lopez doesn't necessarily fixate on the hypersexualization of women as much as she takes the black figure, primarily the black female, out of its previous context and reassigns it a different position. She describes her interest in manipulating images, "I am focused on the disfiguration of the cut image from its original state into a new state." Aaron-Lopez's collages are reminiscent of the work of Wangechi Mutu and Marcia Jones. They each share an interest in female bodies as portrayed in media and in designating new meanings to them. Yet Aaron-Lopez seems more concerned with women's social position/roles as objects of desire rather than critiquing messages about body image. In Aaron-Lopez's work, the feminine figure is granted a dominant position in relation to the scale of the image itself and the male figure is portrayed as an enigma. Aaron-Lopez's collages appear as mystical illusions that diminish the gender binary, equating masculine with feminine.

This isn't a sexy video scene; rather, it is a war zone in which two gendered figures struggle for space

A piece that most suggests the fluid qualities of blackness is *Zombie* (2012). Blackness, in its expansive possibilities functions here as a channel for the analysis of gender performance in relation to hip-hop. The way Aaron-Lopez problematizes points of identification resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."³ Butler defines the fluidity of gender and therefore can be seen as enhancing the ability to understand blackness as a moderator for dissecting gender in visual culture. This is how remix, collage, and women, as depicted in hip-hop, formulate a new vision that opens up an

investigation of images and the role of gendered bodies. The collage *Zombie* depicts a scene familiar to any hip-hop enthusiast: a stripper performing a lap dance. But this isn't a sexy video scene; rather, it is a war zone in which two gendered figures struggle for space. In Aaron-Lopez's reimagining, the black male figure (the gangster) is defaced and replaced by a scene of soulless zombies reaching out to grab the viewer with a background that depicts an isolated and distant realm. The black female figure (stripper) is defying gravity by hanging upside down with her thighs wrapped around his waist in full control. A sense of pleasure and dread can be assumed as she gropes her chest, tentacles sprout from between her legs and fluid drips from her mouth (a trend that follows throughout the rest of the work). As these perplexing pictures contradict their typical presentation, a spectator must make the connections themselves, which is a move by the artist to engage the viewer in critical thinking of gendered bodies and social positions. The intriguing aspect of this piece is how both the masculine and feminine are shredded. Neither of the two figures in the piece is granted a sense of authority; each has been reduced to a character and both are equally obscene. Aaron-Lopez's piece illustrates a self-awareness that inhibits both masculinity and femininity and different ways in which they can exist in the same space.

She creates characters that inhabit otherworldly spaces. In this forced coexistence new gender negotiations have to take place.

In *Black Angel* (2012) the black female is front and center of the collage. The feminine figure stands dressed in undergarments draped in black lace as the split between two scenes, her gaze looking back at the viewer. On the left side there's a car amongst a combination of landscape images, and on the right side there is a meticulously organized living room, with numerous objects located throughout, most notably art by Jean Michel

Basquiat. Gendered figures are located all over this collage but the divided sides underscore the binary and they become more apparent and easier to disassociate. Likewise in *Biggie Alone* (2011) Aaron-Lopez takes rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and transports him to her galaxy of connect the dots where he stands remote with a cloud of cosmic imagery behind his head. More characters appear in this scene: a topless woman whose eye peeks from behind another face with tribal face paint and a clipping of two animated children, a boy and a girl, looking up above. The masculine and feminine characteristics of the images remix to formulate a story. The inability to identify with a single character allows the spectator to pinpoint the character's performance of gender. The spectator actively visualizes shapes and patterns that appear to establish gender roles while illuminating the performativity each character embodies in the scene. This alteration and re-contextualization of pre-existing images emphasize the unruliness of gender. There lies a link in Aaron-Lopez's collages and her ability to bring the significance of gender performance in visual culture to the surface. Ultimately, what Aaron-Lopez is doing is a form of storytelling in which she creates characters that inhabit otherworldly spaces. In this forced coexistence, new gender negotiations have to take place.

¹ Carla Aaron-Lopez, interview by Joey Molina, E-mail, March 20, 2014. All other quotes from the author come from the same email exchange.

² Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 176.

³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519, doi:10.2307/3207893.

**Kevin
Jerome
Everson**



Chevelle (2012, 7:30),
frame grab

2 Nigs United 4 West Compton: A Conversation with Kevin Jerome Everson

by Michael B. Gillespie

Growing up people thought we were rich because both of my parents worked. My mom was a bank teller and my dad was an auto mechanic. Also, people thought we were rich because we had two cars. The illusion of art is that it is of the leisure class. But, that's a projection in a weird way. When I was doing street photography and considering how to frame things, the subject matter I was concentrated on was people of African descent performing or posing. In this way, the job site for me became a performance piece of a craft. I don't pretend to be working class anymore but I respect it and appreciate it.¹

Kevin Jerome Everson

Kevin Jerome Everson's work represents a distinct processing of materials, craft, and blackness. While he has worked across media (e.g., photography, printmaking, sculpture, painting) for over twenty years, his work has significantly shifted since the late 1990s to primarily film and video. In particular, the last few years has seen a greater circulation of his work at film festivals, museums, galleries, and other exhibition sites throughout Europe and America. His growing catalogue of film and video now includes over a hundred shorts and six feature films. Everson's film and video work defies easy categorical claims by a refined disregard for the way black art can be presumed to embody or dictate cultural policy. Instead, Everson approaches film and video as a fine artist; while his work sometimes gives the impression of a documentary conceit, it is moreover

Everson's films and video work always functions as [an] invitation for contemplation that never proffers anything resembling an essence or ontology. Instead, he pursues a devotion to quotidian tasks.

mediated by an experimental/avant-garde attention to gestures. His work illustrates a refined insistence on the everyday, black people, history, and repetition. As Ernest Hardy notes about Everson's aesthetic, "Without pedantry or grandstanding, he locates the grace within the grind."² Yet, Everson's films and video work always functions as a distinct invitation for contemplation that never proffers anything resembling an essence or ontology. Instead, he pursues a devotion to quotidian occurrences and tasks. As Ed Halter observed,

Everson rejects the role of cultural explainer in his work, opting instead to place the burden of understanding on the audience and its own labor. In this way, he has carved a place for himself outside both the typical expectations of documentary and the conventions of representational fiction, attempting to work from the materials of the worlds he encounters to create something else.³

In 2011, Everson experienced two significant events as an artist: a solo exhibition (*More Than That: The Films of Kevin Jerome Everson*) devoted to a selection of his short films at the Whitney Museum of American Art (April 28-Sept. 18, 2011) and the release of *Broad Daylight and Other Times: Selected Works of Kevin Jerome Everson*, a DVD box set through the Video Data Bank that includes a feature and twenty three shorts. Everson's work and career as an artist has garnered more attention than ever over the last few years. This short piece addresses Everson's work by way of an

extended conversation we had over the course of several months in 2011 that addressed his then-new work and thoughts about his practice. That work focused on among other things, the black cowboy and the western, noir detection, General Motors and black labor, the Tombigbee River, and above all, Everson's continued address of blackness and form. Kevin generally refuses to look back in terms of his work but after some cajoling and laughter we were able to revisit and reconsider together what that year meant to him and his craft. His work continues to challenge the artistic rendering of blackness, he explains, "I am attracted to the art object/subject and form more than straight storytelling. I like folks who play with blackness and form [e.g. Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Cauleen Smith and Terence Nance]." This piece examines an artist with a desire to push his craft and grow during an intense period of practice. Ultimately, this piece offers an opportunity to consider the stakes of the art of blackness through one artist's practice.

MBG: You used to say that your work was better received across the pond than it was here in the States. How has that changed in the last few years?

KJE: Well, the last two or three years I have been showing more in the States. I think the structuralist quality of *Cinnamon* [2006] and *Erie* [2010] along with the found footage shorts might have had a lot to do with that. I just think there wasn't a context for the work. I'm always in the experimental film programs because my work is not really documentary or narrative in the classical sense. Maybe the formal qualities and the temporality issues of my work took time for people to appreciate. People are getting more comfortable with talking about the work. Regardless, I've always had a lot of support. I was grateful for the Whitney show.

MBG: When did you start thinking of yourself as an artist?

When I look through the viewfinder, I'm looking at different histories

KJE: I began when I was getting my BFA in Photography at the University of Akron. I continued growing as an artist while getting my MFA in Photography at Ohio University. I was doing a lot of street photography, but really I was always dealing with multiple media. I was doing sculpture, printmaking, painting, and film.

MBG: Your work it defies the expectations of black art, experimental art, and the meeting between the two. Why have you been primarily working with film and video in the last ten years? What does film and video do for you, more than sculpture, painting, or photography?

KJE: Well, I haven't stopped working with multiple media. I had finished my last large body of serious photography when I was in Rome at the America Academy back in 2001. Beyond the fact that I've been teaching film more, my move to working more with film and video has a lot to do with the things I'm trying to say about gestures, tasks, and conditions. I'm interested in duration and time-based media works best for that.⁴

MBG: How has Ohio informed your work?

KJE: I identify as someone from Northern Ohio. Unemployment, employment, migration from the South, language, weather, benchmarks, and basements. These are the keywords for my craft as I continue to try and get better as an artist. I'm drawn to what gestures might represent.

MBG: Could you talk a bit more about blackness and regionalism?

KJE: When I look through the viewfinder, I'm looking at different histories. During Q&As, I'm still asked, why do I only film black people. First, I answer, "why is it that Steven Spielberg's *ET* [1982] is only white people?" There's usually no answer. Then I say when I'm looking through the viewfinder of the camera, either film or digital, that I'm looking at black folks and seeing a history of a relationship to a place—whether it's Natchez, Mississippi; St Louis, Missouri; Summerduck, Virginia; or Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. I'm responding to a history of people and a place. I can see a relationship between black folk and a place that is different than black folk from Harlem or Detroit or Atlanta or whatnot. That makes the work come alive for me. Like I've said, there are more black Americans than Canadians, but why can't we appreciate the diversity of black folk within a certain landscape.

MBG: Do you still bristle at being called a black avant-garde or experimental artist?

KJE: I would still prefer to be called an artist. I'm still down for the everyday political and the every other day political.

MBG: Kevin, people have got to write dissertations. Don't hate. You can't be just an artist. On that note, why do you refuse to be known as a documentarian or want your work thought of as documentaries?

KJE: Because nothing is real in my work, everything is made up. My work documents artifice. I'm working on a project with a colleague who wants to do documentary. The first thing that I was thinking about was when to start auditioning actors.

MBG: We've spoken before about how you connect black intellectual practice with "being satisfied." I'm thinking about the footage of your family in *Erie* [2010] discussing how working in the factory used to be



Kevin Jerome Everson, *The Mayberry Practice Calf* (2012, 3:50), frame grab

about a certain kind of pleasure derived from a craft, but that eventually as management became less labor identified, it became just work and finally, drudgery. How is labor and this sense of being satisfied inflected in your work?

KJE: For me, being an artist is the practice of getting better. Art is not necessarily a job; I don't just want to do my work well. I want to develop.

MBG: How does this point connect with your audiences?

KJE: I am trying to create a language. Not in the sense of readability, but in the sense of a language for my practice. My audience is the work, the subject, or the object in front of my viewfinder. I want to know the

subject's intellect of that focused condition that I'm filming. Also, I want the subject to project an intellect that the audience doesn't have. The subject or object is always smarter than the audience because they know what they are doing which, in turn, allows me to let them do their thing. That always informs my art and I know how to frame the subject or object in such a way to further enhance that particular intellect. I believe the artist is always trying to create a language. For me, this language is changing and I am always reading it but I can't predict an audience's response. I can only engage with what I see in the viewfinder. I'm not sure if I'm changing the game but I'm changing and challenging my game constantly.

Chevelle (2012, 7:30)

This short features a static, long take directed at the procedural act of a car crushing. Two cars, a Pontiac Grand-Am and later a Chevelle, are placed in the crusher by a forklift. The film details and observes the process by which the cars lose dimension as they explode while being collapsed flat into recyclable scrap that is then lifted away by the forklift. The film obviously suggests something about the history of the American automotive industry and the post-industrial scraping of an industry that fueled the class aspirations of labor. As Kevin and I spoke about the piece, he revealed a more personal investment in the crushing process.

MBG: Much of your work refers to a history of black industrial labor.

KJE: I'm not sure if I can speak on the auto industry because I'm not a historian. But, I'm hip to the Revolutionary Black Workers and their contributions to the working folks. I also know about the experiences of my family members who worked in the General Motors stamping plant in my hometown, Mansfield, Ohio. The workers made a huge contribution to the economy of the city. They were the richest folk in the area, especially with a two-income family. If you had a daughter who was getting married you'd

just work a shit load of overtime to pay for the wedding. No sweat. There always seemed to be money there. It was the old hat. You can rely on that type of money.

MBG: The piece seems to be documenting a sculptural process.

KJE: I shot it in Cookstown, Ontario. The initial idea was that I wanted to film automobile parts and to create art that was formed from those materials. I treated the Chevelle as a found object. It's a General Motors car that was probably made at the Fisher Body Plant in my hometown. I wanted the framing of the image to emphasize the door panels because the hands of my cousins most likely touched those panels as they worked in the factory. There was black labor that worked overtime on that Chevelle. That Chevelle used to give black folk a job in Mansfield. They built it, drove it, and pumped gas in it. So, crushing the car shifts it from one form of creation. The form changes as I use the materials to create sculpture, a post-industrial sculpture.

The Tombigbee Trilogy: Rita Larson's Boy, Chicken, and Early Riser

Rita Larson's Boy (2012, 10:53)

MBG: So, each film seems loosely organized around narrativity, history, culture, and place. There's a cartography being enacted. How did you conceptualize this as a trilogy?

KJE: Each short has a relationship to the Tombigbee River, a river that starts in Mississippi and travels through Alabama before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. The trilogy is a collection of films based on famous objects and famous people associated with the Tombigbee River.

MBG: *Rita Larson's Boy* is a series of ten repetitions of actors auditioning for a role, Rollo from *Sanford and Son*. What's Rollo's connection to the Tombigbee and the episode?⁵

KJE: I have family in Columbus, Mississippi and for years I wanted to do a piece on the local celebrity everyone made a point of mentioning, Nathaniel Taylor. Taylor played "Rollo" on *Sanford and Son*. I was writing a feature project [*Spicebush*] that was about the juxtaposition of artifice and craft. I had written a scene where Nathaniel Taylor would teach my son how to act while he was delivering school furniture. I ended up not doing the scene, but the Rollo character still stuck with me. The title of the short comes from the way Aunt Esther always addressed Rollo as Rita Larson's boy and how each time that happened he would drop his cool and immediately respond with a 'Yes, M'am.' Anyway, the premise of the episode is that Fred comes to believe that Rollo and Lamont are a gay couple. The whole episode becomes about Fred trying to turn Lamont straight and also Lamont's suspicion that his dad might be gay.

MBG: Taylor is amazing in Larry Clark's *Passing Through* [1977]. He and Ted Lange ["Isaac" from *Love Boat*] co-wrote it. *Rita Larson's Boy* made me think about how much of the comic effect of Fred Sanford and Aunt Esther on that show was how they were both marked as these signature avatars of the vernacular, one of the Saturday night variety and the other more Sunday morning. Regardless, neither one was inclined to break bread with the likes of Rollo. Rollo is a constant target for Fred and Esther because he is treated as though he has no class, in a social and economic sense, because he is too modern, too not-from-back-home.

KJE: Yeah, there's also the way that the junkyard itself represents back home and the past, not the future. Also, in terms of thinking about black masculinity, it seemed to be that Rollo was the most progressive character on the show. He was open-minded to the idea of being gay as opposed to Lamont or Fred.



Kevin Jerome Everson, *Early Riser* (2012, 5:00), frame grab

MBG: That surprised me as well. But, there is a general way that Rollo is played out as out-of-step with the times. Lamont and Fred ridicule him for different reasons for his progressiveness. Where did you shoot this and what kind of notes did you give the actors?

KJE: We shot it in a church in Cleveland. For me, I always liked thinking about the extent to which so many of the 70s Blaxploitation actors were Shakespearean trained. Acting black is theatre. For me "What it is, Jack?" is the same as "Romeo, Romeo, where for art thou?"

MBG: 'Acting black' intersects with the issue of black performativity. Rollo's cool pose of the 70s black-hip as cultural and political practice becomes coupled to craft and a script. The ten actors are professional actors. Ten black performers of blackness, ten different applicants for a

role of blackness. The repetition is quite poignant. None represent that Rollo-hipness the same way. Did you ever contact Nathaniel Taylor?

KJE: I've tried, but it looks like he changed his name at some point. There's no trace of him.

**Ten black performants of blackness,
ten different applicants for a role of blackness.
The repetition is quite poignant.**

Chicken (2012, 3:20)

Chicken: I wonder something about you.

Myrtle: Wh-What do you wonder?

Chicken: If the attraction would still be terrific if I was to tell you the talk an' suspicion about me are based on fact.

Myrtle: What? What, uh, talk an' suspicion?

Chicken: That I got colored blood in me.

Chicken is based on a scene from a later work by Tennessee Williams. Myrtle's buzz over the terrific attraction of sex with Chicken is abruptly checked by the one-drop paranoia of interracial desire, taboo, and violation. Everson stages this brief exchange with the barest of mise-en-scene that emphasizes Chicken's boredom and indifference in the face of the off-screen Myrtle and her post-coital gushing. In the midst of zooms, shifts in camera angles, and slight hand held rocks, *Chicken* details a character in control and ever registering.

KJE: So, Tennessee Williams is from Columbus, Mississippi. But again, the association of the all the films is loose. I was interested in the style of the kitchen table monologue along with the choppy rhythm of Tennessee

Williams' dialogue. The dialogue comes from *Kingdom of Earth* [1968]. "Chicken" is a grounded character that has this kind of downstairs mentality. To me, he is as much an observationist as Loboy is in *Early Riser* and 'Rallo' in *Rita Larson's Boy*. Sidekicks are artists performing a service and looking for form. Nothing gets by these characters.

Early Riser (2012, 5:00)

The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books.

Chester Himes⁶

The Harlem novels of Chester Himes are chilling comedies of violent irrationality. Men and women are set ablaze, bludgeoned, amputated, run down by all manner of conveyance, and have their throats slit like hogs. In this Uptown, people do not simply die from gun shots as much as their corporeal beings are itemized in a haphazard toss to the air of brain, blood, and teeth with a healthy dose of bone and random tissue—disintegrated. In this Harlem, mother-rapers out trump motherfuckers every time as black people stir in dark places, sweating, banging themselves, and drinking smoke. Yet Harlem is mutually informed by 'hate is like a gun' and 'home is where the hatred is.' As Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed always say in a variety of ways, their job often appears to be really about 'Keeping Harlem safe for white folks.' For Himes' detectives, a crime and subsequent investigation occur, but solving the crime never means a return to the social order, for the a priori crime *is* white supremacy and antiblack racism. *Early Riser* is comprised of the intercutting of two single take, long shots. The film restages a scene from the film adaptation (Ossie Davis, 1970) of Himes' *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1965). Gravedigger and Coffin Ed beat down a character named Loboy in a police interrogation room who is the

only witness to a robbery crew escaping in a delivery van.

KJE: Once when I was applying to Sundance, we were asked to talk about our favorite scene after a film. For me, I've always loved this scene from *Cotton Comes To Harlem*. Lobo's sees his partner [Early Riser] get run down by the delivery van and ends up giving Gravedigger and Coffin Ed the information that the robbers were white. Even though they wore masks, he knew they were white because of the way they ran. "Cuz they run white, damnit!" To me, what's so cool is that Lobo is an artist and that he is the only one capable of making that observation. Of course, in terms of the trilogy, the bale of cotton that becomes central to the film and the Himes novel is a symbol for migration, the past, and the way the river carries a significant and historical product. For me, noir films are mainly form and I like *Cotton Comes To Harlem* because people come out of the shadows with a backstory that disrupts the form.

Ten Five In The Grass (2012, 32:00), *The Mayberry Practice Calf* (2012, 3:50), *Second Place* (2012, 2:54), and *The Wooden Calf* (2012, 1:53)

The black western richly provokes the mythology of the American West and the idea of film genre as a historiographic imagineering by tacitly revealing how the narrative form has covertly borne a racial and cultural ideal. The genre's classical themes of nation-building, the civilizing of savage lands, utopianism, and the discreteness of good and evil become refabulated as Everson draws attention to absences, disavowals, and the difference of a culture other than pale riders. Everson's *Ten Five In The Grass* examines the craft of the black cowboy. The film illustrates Everson's interest in everyday intellect by observing the rituals of the grooming of horses, riding, and roping. The piece is set in a practice space in Natchez, Mississippi run by Fred Mayberry, a rancher and professional rodeo calf roper. *The Mayberry Practice Calf* is a silent film that observes the ritual of calf-roping practice. The hand-held shooting focuses on the repetitious act

calf-roping practice. The hand-held shooting focuses on the repetitious act of roping practice with an old tire repurposed as a calf dummy. The roping exercise illustrates the formal process of developing a skill, the way one becomes identified as a cowboy by way of proficiency. The short piece suggests how the black western and the black cowboy demonstrate a tradition and a procedure. *The Wooden Calf* offers a similar detailing of this process with a focus on lasso practice with a wooden calf model. *Second Place* is a poignant observation of the black bull riders preparing for rides and riding bulls. The contemporary content (a modern rodeo) and the vintage look (Super-8 film stock) produce the effect of blended and dialogical temporalities. These black westerns, or more precisely, Everson westerns, consider the generic practice on the level of repetition and performativity. In this way, blackness functions as a cultural tool and an artist's prerogative.

I'm not a doctor so I don't heal and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts...Art has got to be made.

KJE: "Ten five in the grass" is an expression for the length of rope used to rope fast calves. I shot the films in Lafayette, Louisiana and Natchez, Mississippi. I've always wanted to do a western and I shot one black cowboy last year that became a test for this new stuff. I originally wanted to do a feature length western that was going to include Chester Himes, Bronze Buckaroo, and other things. I always liked the way that "Harlem" was used in titles for the black-cast westerns.

MBG: When I was looking for information about Fred Mayberry, I came across the Real Cowboy Association, a touring black rodeo group, and decided to re-watch *Black Rodeo* [Jeff Kanew, 1972]. I still enjoy how Woody Strode functions in that film as an inheritor of John Ford, a sign of

the American West, and the historiographer of the black cowboy legacy. The film does make some interesting gestures towards linking cultural nationalism with the promise of the American West.

KJE: Woody Strode was a world-class bulldogger. Like the mechanic in my drag racing film [*Cinnamon*, 2006], rodeo cowboys invest a lot of time and money in something that is over in seconds. But what interests me most is how these black rodeo associations give black cowboys an opportunity to display their craft. There's a different sense of history and tradition than the white rodeos. Black rodeos are a historical event and a family affair with folks always coming out for rodeos. It's an instance where the community gathers and supports its own.

MBG: In *The Mayberry Practice Calf* and *The Wooden Calf*, there is the repetitiousness of practicing. Could you talk about how this connects with developing as an artist?

KJE: Yeah, I wanted to focus on the roping exercise without necessarily dwelling on the accessories or the costumes. I didn't ask these folks to put on chaps or dusters, I wanted to observe them just doing their business. So, they were wearing their regular clothes and just practicing. I wanted to show that cowboys have their own language and complexity and also I liked the way that they are casually taking care of their business. That's part of why I don't identify these works as documentaries I'm asking them to teach me a language. When I was working on *Cinnamon* [2006], I was exploring the relationship between composition and performance. For me, the mechanic was the composer and the driver was the musician. Being around the cowboys did the same thing for me. I've been practicing my roping with a dummy and it inspired me to do some sculpture, a bronze-cast roping dummy.

MBG: What was it like shooting a rodeo?



Kevin Jerome Everson, *Ten Five in the Grass* (2012, 32:00), frame grab

KJE: Well, I called the film *Second Place* because I missed shooting the guy who won first place. The focus for 8mm was too delicate. I tried to do single takes because I like that form of shooting where you have to find the action.

MBG: When are you going to shoot your first feature length Western?

KJE: I'll make a longer film next summer based on the stuff. Church bells, moonshiners, catfish, shoe cobblers and some other scenes. I didn't write anything down because I didn't have the mental mindset to deal and figure the shit out. I just went to Mississippi but nothing happened. Anyway, I

was basically just reacting to what I was seeing. It's kind of like my oldschool street photography and just shooting. There is nothing wrong with that though. I was just falling back on the old, looking for things like folks practicing their craft. That's fine, but when I think about the stuff I shot in 2010 and 2011, the work seems flat.

MBG: We've spoken a lot about 'flatness.' Your son was murdered and then there was a trial. It's incredible that you continued to work during that period.

KJE: When my boy passed away, I didn't have the mindset to plot and plan. I was showing up with the equipment and just reacting. It's not like I feel the work was bad, but I knew that emotionally I couldn't do things the way I was used to doing them. Producing art was hard during mourning. It still is. DeCarrio was the person who saw the stuff first and we collaborated on a ton of stuff. I'm going to miss that. I just loved being in Mansfield and watching the [Cleveland] Browns or [Cleveland] Cavaliers with him. When it was half time we would go shoot some stuff, *Undefeated* [2008], *Thermostat* [2000], or *Company Line* [2009]. It took minutes, but it was a lifetime for sure. But producing art has been difficult and actually easy. The difficulty is what I just said. The easy part is that it's my responsibility to make art. I have a responsibility to my family, my hometown of Mansfield, close friends, and a history of former students to keep making that art. I'm not a doctor so I don't heal and I'm not a lawyer so I don't advocate. I'm an artist so I have to keep cranking out cultural artifacts. I tell my students I am an artist and a teacher, but mostly an artist. I want them to believe that. So I prove it every day, week, month, season, and year. Art has got to be made.

Thanks to Tess Takahashi, Nicole Fleetwood, and Allyson N. Field for their feedback.

¹Michael B. Gillespie, "'To Do Better': Notes on the Work of Kevin Jerome Everson." *Kevin Jerome Everson* (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2011).

²Ernest Hardy, "The Lives of Black Americans, Depicted Via a Single Alabama Dry Cleaners," *LA Weekly*, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.laweekly.com/2013-03-14/film-tv/lives-of-black-americans/>.

³Ed Halter, "The Practice of Everyday Life" *Artforum* (May 2010): 33.

⁴Everson is a Professor of Art at the University of Virginia.

⁵Each actor reads the same script: an episode entitled "Lamont, Is That You?" (October 19, 1972). The episode restages the comic conceit of *Norman, Is That You?* (Ron Clark and Sam Brobrick, 1970), a Broadway play about a Jewish couple dealing with the fact that their son is gay. Redd Foxx and Pearl Bailey would later star in the film adaptation of the same name (1976).

⁶Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997): 103.

Contributors

Alessandra Raengo is Associate Professor of Moving Image Studies in the Department of Communication at Georgia State University. Her work focuses on blackness in the visual and aesthetic field. She is author of *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and coordinator of *liquid blackness*.

Lauren M. Cramer is a PhD student at Georgia State University. Her work focuses on visual culture, hip-hop, and the racial encounter in everyday life.

Michael B. Gillespie is an Assistant Professor of Film at Ohio University. His research focuses on black visual and expressive culture. He is completing a book entitled *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* and co-editing two volumes, *Black Cinema Aesthetics Revisited* and *New Chester Himes Criticism*.

Kristin Juarez is a PhD student in the Moving Image Studies program at Georgia State University. Her interests include curatorial strategies of contemporary art, film, and video for the art space and the public sphere.

Cameron Kunzelman is a graduate student in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University. His work is about nonhuman life.

Joey Molina is an artist and writer who holds a BFA from Georgia State University. His interest is in film and video with a concentration on gender and sexuality.

Michele Prettyman-Beverly is a scholar of film, and visual culture, currently a Visiting Instructor at Emory University. Her work explores race, aesthetics, and embodiment.

Christina Price Washington is a graduate student in the department of Art History at Georgia State University and completed an MFA in the Photography department in 2012. She is interested in questions of movement between analog and digital photography.

Featured artists

Carla Aaron-Lopez also known as “King Carla,” is a multidisciplinary artist engaged in photography, collage, and video. She has completed her undergraduate work in Visual Communications and Art at North Carolina Central University and attained her Master’s Degree in Photography and Printmaking at SCAD in Atlanta, Georgia. Currently, she is working as an art educator in Charlotte, NC.

Consuela Boyer is an Atlanta-based visual artist with a concentration in photography and video. Her works combine observations on identity, race, hip-hop culture, Atlanta communities, and popular culture. She is currently a BFA student at Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design at Georgia State University.

Kevin Jerome Everson was born and raised in Mansfield, Ohio. He is a Professor of Art at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. His artwork (paintings, sculpture, site-specific installations, photography, video, and films) has been featured at museums, art institutions, and film festivals around the world.

Nikita Gale is an American conceptual artist based in Atlanta, Georgia. Her work explores the ways in which desire, identity and memory are mediated through language, material and image. Her work can be found in numerous collections including the Howard Greenberg Gallery collection in New York.

Nettrice Gaskins is a Ph.D. Candidate and researcher in Georgia Tech's Digital Media Program. Her work investigates culturally situated arts-based learning and new media, their invention, and use in underrepresented ethnic communities of practice.

Yanique Norman is a multimedia artist who is completing a Bachelor degree in Fine Arts from Georgia State University. Her work is in the collection of the High Museum of Art, private collections in Georgia, and in the public collections of Hammond's House Museum and Clark Atlanta University.

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