A YEAR IN BLACK ART

2018 to 2019

The Black Embodiments Studio

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www.blackembodiments.org

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Another Year in Black Art

Kemi Adeyemi, Director

The Black Embodiments Studio (BES) is an arts writing residency and public lecture series that I began in 2017 to enhance conversation around black art in Seattle, and to contribute to arts critical discourse in this city that has seen support for arts writing rapidly decline.

Through BES, scholars, creatives, and critical thinkers from within and beyond the University of Washington subsequently gather together to see, discuss, and write about the abundance of black art that is staged throughout the city. They also engage in close conversation with visiting curators, artists, and writers also working on black embodiments. The 2018-2019 guests included Claire Tancons, who shared her experiences curating the 14th Sharjeh Biennial; artist Danny Giles, who let us into his process of developing exhibitions for Jacob Lawrence Gallery and SOIL; and new media artist shawné michaelain holloway, whose experimentations with form and genre infiltrated BES residents own practices.

This second annual publication of *A Year in Black Art* features BES residents' writing about just a selection of the black exhibitions and performances that they experienced in 2018 and 2019, as we could not cover all of the incredible installations, readings, performances, and films that took place throughout the year. A critical goal of BES is to help writers become more flexible and fluid in their writing, making their voices accessible to broad audiences. Toward this end, in these pages you'll find residents pushing back against histories of writing in the academy and in the arts that have long been characterized as stodgy and inaccessible. They instead turn toward the poetic, embrace the short-form, and let readers into the confusions, questions, contradictions, and self-doubt that are part of any arts-viewing or arts-writing experience.

Through arts writing that is as open and conversational as it is conceptually

rigorous, BES residents demonstrate multiple entry points into the larger work of the program: creating evermore complexity around the forms, functions, definitions, and experiences that inhere in the words "black" and "blackness." As you read, you are invited in as a collaborator invested in this critical and difficult work of thinking with black art. *A Year in Black Art* is free in order to help this happen; in order to make the practice of critical thinking as broadly accessible as possible. (You can also find a digital version on our website, which also hosts video documentation of guest visitors' public lectures and a regularly updated calendar of black art in Seattle.) We can distribute *A Year in Black Art* for free, and continue with The Black Embodiments Studio's multi-platform endeavors, because of the incredible support from the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, and from Emily Zimmerman and the Jacob Lawrence Gallery.

Read the *A Year in Black Art*, give it to your friends, come to BES events, go visit your nearest gallery or museum, check in on your artist friends, keep supporting black art.

Rethinking "Knowledge" with Edgar Arceneaux's Library of Black Lies (2016)

Brittney Frantece

I approach the structure of Edgar Arceneaux's *Library of Black Lies* (2016) and immediately thought of an old cabin where enslaved Black people lived. Once there, I stood at the doorway looking in. The inside brought the underbelly of a boat to my imagination, in particular, a boat from the transatlantic slave trade. Still standing at the doorway, I see of myself in a mirror on the other side of a narrow path. This mirror reminds me of one in a funhouse––long and a little warped, showing me a slightly distorted reflection of myself. I enter into the structure and hear deep thuds from my feet stepping on the wooden floors, the sound resonating underneath the hollowed floorboards.

As I walk down the path lined with raw, wooden bookshelves, I see black books and scrolls with some patches of green. They are bound individually with strings, some stacked on top of each other, some leaning onto each other. Continuing on the path, there are children books telling stories of Jesus, showing him on the cover with a long wooden staff with children surrounding him or showing him on the edge of a cliff looking out. Alongside these books are ones that tell Black American history but mostly detailing slavery or civil rights. I've seen these books many times in my childhood and early education. These books are coated with sugar crystals, and the covers are still intact. They rest neatly beside each other. Many are propped up as if on display.

The positions of the bookshelves and walls create a path that travels around the edge of the structure and into the center. The mirrors lining the walls fool me as a traveler, making the structure seem bigger than it is. From afar the path seems sufficiently wide, but as I walk it, the path is indeed narrow, and the corners are tight. I arrive at the end of the path to see myself reflected in a large mirrored pole

that runs through the center. I stand there, staring at my odd and slightly warped reflection, smelling raw wood and old books, and not really knowing where or who I am.

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Arceneaux's piece is a multimedia installation of wood, glass, newspapers, and sugar crystals, that critiques how certain knowledges about Black peoples and ways of life are acquired through imperial modes of education and institutional rule, modes that seem to uphold white, imagined histories and display them as truths. Through the installation, he makes it clear that such truths are actually fictions and illusions. I see this in the books of Black history coated with sugar. Black life is not only conditioned by trauma, but these narratives would have readers believe otherwise. By detailing slavery, jim crow, or civil rights, these texts connote Blackness with trauma or strife in order to give a progressive narrative about the ways in which people overcame these conditions. In a filmed walkthrough of the installation at Vera List Museum, Arceneaux discusses how the US "likes to share its history [in a way that's] progressive and triumphant," but he describes acquiring knowledge this way "as 'getting lost' or getting things wrong." In *Library of Black Lies*, Arceneaux's touching on the ways knowledge is manipulated in order to give way to an enlightened, reformed US. But this only creates an illusion, a maze that we get lost within.

Arceneaux states that his structure is a labyrinth, which he says "is designed for you to find yourself in the middle." This structure is not a maze, but when I arrive at the center of his labyrinth, I only see myself distorted. Is this the self I'm supposed to find? The sugar-coated books aid in the distortion by only telling half-truths of Black history and a overzealous portrayal of Christianity. The texts tell a story of my life and past lives, but only tell the story that benefits their liberal narrative. These illusions and fictions (the mirrors and books) passed as knowledge and truth, stare back with a sly smirk. As much as I want to find myself, I feel lost.

But Arceneaux insists that the structure is a labyrinth, so what if the distortions are Arceneaux's way of indicating that something is not quite right here? The hollowed floors, the wayward mirrors, and the coated black, mysterious

books stacked on top of each other all indicate that there is something more/ another part of the story that dominant narratives of slavery and civil rights do not include but is actually a significant part in creating knowledge and history. The piece wouldn't be the same without the mysterious books, hollow floors, or mirrors. Arceneaux seems to indicate that I need to go past the surface to experience the labyrinth. I need to focus in on the gaps, the not-so-obvious, the mundane and see where this focus leads me to find that something more. If I focus on the tight, cramped space and the black books bound together by ropes and stacked up on top of each other, silent, I can feel the embodied memories of being in the belly of a boat during the middle passage flow through my body, memories passed down through generations. I feel anxieties and worries as I make eye contact with a stranger in this intimate space, wondering if they also feel just as anxious. Even though I don't know them, I feel an unexplainable relation because of this nervous experience. If I focus in on the books about Christianity and Black American history written by academics, and other western canonical texts that are coated with sugar crystals, I can see the ways in which these texts are preserved and growing as more people buy into, celebrate, honor these myths. The hollow thuds underneath my feet that echo when I walk warns me that something is missing, that someone, something has been emptied out to make this structure possible. Perhaps I have to dig underneath the find what missing. By focusing on what can easily be ignored, I create a new narrative within the structure. One that includes my narrative of myself.

Arceneaux's installation is extremely important, especially on a university campus where many are trained to find some narratives more truthful than others without questioning why that is so. Arceneaux wants us to redefine what knowledge is and critique any single view as truth because more than likely that single view is more of an imagined narrative than truth. Rather, we should open up to other possibilities and view the complexity of what makes up our world knowledge as well as our personal embodied knowledge.

Do You See These Black Lies?

Brian Evans

Do you see these black lies?
This, black aesthetic prophetic profound.
Take this down.
Script it on book after book after book after book after book that shook and took me this long
To understand.
Wrapped up - dip in tar - twined up droppings of a discarded newspaper night stand.
And this is plan...Edgar told me himself.[1]
Artiste Arceneaux.
That knowledge is a hammer that swings both ways from November to June.
Perhaps, it is coming to you soon.
A library of falsehoods tucked neatly on a boat.
Remember the journey? Wasn't too long.
Them books got dat smell of some sad negro song.
Perhaps a cabin in the woods is where your fancy fly?
Hats off to the question:
Do you see these black lies?
This non-maze pays for itself
A crystalline labyrinth of living sweetness
Glimpsing glimpses of self-warped echoes of insights inset in walls
A caustic non-laugh as we see Cosby's fall
Fallen falling down to the lowest of the low-level shelves
Accompanied by beige rage encomiums to *Jesus' Stories: Self-Help*

1 Edgar Arceneaux met with BES on May 17, 2019 at the Henry Art Gallery for a discussion.

A tribute to Alexandria's great fire of forty-eight[1]
A hard wood crematorium for those who lie in weight
By the thousands upon quintillions of dishonesty's alibis
Here-Here goes the query:
Do you see these black lies?
Stamped–Stomped–Stuck in my teeth–Stuttering slights to the Stonehenges of yesteryear.
DO NOT TOUCH! DO NOT STAY TOO LONG! DO NOT LEAVE YOUR COFFEE ON THE LEDGE AS YOU WILL DESTROY THE ALREADY DESTORYED BOOKS INSIDE!
#Anddonotsayanythingwhensomeoneelsedoesthesamethingbecuzthatisnoty-ourjobnotyourjobatall
#yolo
What to leave and what to bring, when to rest and
when to sing out the shattered remnants of
Truth
Fortunes' photo booth to youth sleuthing veritable tells of a rhizomatic addicts
Up in attics with cataracts in their eyes
They go forth to seek the question:
Do you see these black lies?
I surmise, as I tend to tip-toe around theoretical jargon against a white back drop of spaces where there is no room for hiding; that the pursuit of comfort at a time when fear has seeded the roost is like frying up those same birds and pretending that isn't my comfort food. Internalizing hatred as an exposé on blast, is it no wonder the past won't stay in the past tense as it already happened and what has been done is done.
A single story[2] dictating truth, is a dangerous one.
A story often told with a wink and some aged wry rye
All heralding the question:
Do you see these black lies?

1 The Library of Alexandria was burned down in 48 BC as a part of Julius Caesar's conquest.

2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED Talk.

Now, for those in the cheap seats not close enough to hear or for those swinging solo from mylar chandeliers, swinging low time, low tech, low gear hauling up histories—no bodies. Want to hear that noise as the silence deafens? Here the steps you take resonate bombastic cacophony in the hollow of your throats, take notes when less then strangled pleas leave the lips of loaded letters and coded books. They tap-out in Morse, morosely... _ _ _ ...
All at once. Altogether, now. All in time to get those last-minute library cards. Cards that gain you access to hammers. Hammers that swing both ways slinging whys.
More's the pity question:
Do you see these black lies?
Library labyrinths are made to reveal truths by exposing the lies we've been taught as yutes. You find yourself.
Standing.
Alone.
In the center.
Supposedly better off as what was cast off in blast off feels far-off.
So, I shake it off and try to playoff the feelings that are feeling nearly broke off as I faceoff this tradeoff like Romanoff's roll-offs as when their heads were lopped off.
Shit...
I must be stuck in the past.
Afraid to let go to the future.
Because if I do: What will I have to hold on to?
I am the nail jammed through my own foot.
'Til I opened up this book. Crystal pages flipped the script. A hammer that swings both ways. This Library of Black Lies.
See the answer to this question:
Within—Ayes.

Henry Jackson-Spieker's Sight Lines

Frances O'Shaughnessy

Henry Jackson-Spieker's Sight Lines at Method Gallery respatializes one's visual methods. Using the differently sized windows of the gallery space as the installation's grounding, this piece works to disrupt the interiority of the museum as the central position from which to view art. With the windows at street level, bright yellow and pink lattice string stretch across the room, moving in a downslope slope to various wooden platforms, which act as the anchors of basement gallery space. In their travels from the anchors to the windows, the lines of the string move out, cross and weave together, before expanding out once more along the borders of each window. Spatializing the string's direction as moving out first from anchors and then to the windows, is, of course, from the position of being inside the gallery space; when you are outside and looking *into* the installation, the direction may very well be seen in the opposite way, with string moving from the window's borders and then down to regather themselves once again to their respective anchors. As such, the lattice-string materialize particular sight lines, which the viewer may then follow or transgress.

The dynamism of the sight lines' directionality made me continually return to anchors across the room. Although the string itself is static in the installation, the title's emphasis on sight lines makes the analogy of the string-as-light quite clear. With human eyesight being unable to capture the travel of light *as it travels* (because of its speed), the "static" quality of the string is almost an attempt to suspend this travel, for the suspension is the only way to render materially apparent the sight lines' groundings and the connections between the windows and the anchors. This materiality also disrupts one's movement within the installation, with the viewer having to duck and slide across the piece to avoid the string overhead. This, one is outside its primary line of sight when *inside* the art, and in turn, one's own lines of sight/flight became treacherous and ill-defined.

Thus, in the materially rendering of certain slight lines between the windows and anchors, which in turn disrupted certain lines of flight for the viewer, other sight lines became obscured. Namely, within each of the anchors, there is a mirror-lens at its centre, whose curvature creates a sort of distortion, wherein a supposed "direct" reflection of the viewer is impossible. These mirror-lens distort the viewer's line of sight, as the light bouncing onto the object and then into one's eyes curves, bends, and warps the visual in the production of inexplicable images. The mirror lens could not be contained; its reflection cannot be tracked much less lined by lattice-string.

For the viewer's line of sight and the installation's sight line to become one, the installation demands that one take themselves outside the gallery space and onto the streets of Pioneer Square. There is, in a certain way, linearity that forms in being able to follow the lines of lattice-string as it ends/begins at the anchoring platform. As one moves from one window to the next, the end/beginning of the sight lines as they hit the mirror lens become distant, with the focus being the overall static mobility of each sight line. From this outsider position, the viewer is able to experience their own line of sight through the sculpture's materiality; our lines of sight became seen through their very materialization.

In traversing the windows, with myself and others crouching down and shifting our bodies to align with sculpture's sight, we also encountered people in the streets. Some simply passed by while others stood and chatted with us as we all engaged in the art. These moments of inter-class contact would have not happened had Jackson-Spieker not demanded of museum attendees to go outside and be within the public space. In the interweaving of people across difference along the lines of public art, *Sight Lines* demonstrated the power of viewing art from an outside perspective.

Lessons from the Institute of Empathy

Anisa Jackson

The Institute of Empathy is in the African Art Galleries on the path to the main exhibition hall at the Seattle Art Museum. Before this show, I rarely stepped into this gallery because it often seemed to take a more anthropological approach, feeding into colonial white supremacist narratives cast upon African environments and peoples, with emphasis on artifacts from a way of life that is already set up as other and inferior, and with little discussion on the artist merit, relation to canon or movement, among other means that dictate ascribed value to the work that you might see in the museum's main exhibit halls. The orientalist systemic and structural framing of African art galleries across the country is not unique to SAM. *The Institute of Empathy* poses another form of engagement within this politicized space. Including various Black and African artists like Nick Cave, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Chukwu Okoro, and spanning from traditional masks, jewelry, and costumes to contemporary sculpture and multimedia work, artist and curator Saya Woolfalk presents the question, "What does this teach us about empathy?" The question is simple, yet visualizes the stark void of empathy in museum spaces in particular for Black and indigenous artists and artists of color. We might further employ this inquiry by exploring what it means to ascribe value to art through an intimate engagement with our own positionings.

A video near the entrance of the gallery sets up the room as an exercise by "The Empathics," a fictional race of women, who ask for participants to enhance their capacity to empathize with others. The Empathics have identified Empathy Deficit Disorder (EDD) as corroding the present era. Viewers are invited to sit with various pieces to work through these questions and develop skills of empathy and connection. Nowhere in the gallery does the wall text provide direct answers to what each art object's lesson on empathy is—however, the audience is invited to sit with the object to find the lesson themselves alongside

alongside subtly guided, open-ended questions and ponderings.

EMPATHIC LESSON: ADMIT TO YOUR OWN FOOLISHNESS

A collection of figures sit around clad in masks and Nike trainers. The costumes come from the Afikpo of Nigeria with masks by Afikpo Nigerian artist Chukwu Okoro. Masks embody certain hiding traditions, but may also be used to showcase certain vulnerable acts that could not be done unmasked for example criticizing elders and taking on other personas. The masked figures are facing a central figure holding the "Pot of Foolishness". This is a part of a competition among the Afikpo community where each player explains to the group why they are the most foolish of them all. Each player attempts to one up each other, sharing their own story, each time, even more ridiculous, to prove that they are actually the most ridiculous of them all. Whoever is deemed the most foolish person, then takes the soup pot and dances with it.

In my own engagement with the piece I wonder if empathy can mean critical self reflection, sharing our most vulnerable moments, and thus taking less seriously the way we live as individuals (in contrast to the ways we are connected and relate to others.) When we value foolishness, what implications does that have for how we understand ideas of power and greatness?

EMPATHIC LESSON: HONOR IMAGINARY WORLDS

Above the escalators and just outside the exhibition space is a projection of T*he Country Ball, 1982-2012* (2012), a video by Jacolby Satterwhite. It begins with a very slow camera pan across a computer generated landscape that includes home videos of family cookouts, multiple renderings of Satterwhite voguing donned in brightly patterned and shimmering jumpsuits (often hooded and repeated right next to each other), and re-tracings of his mother's graphite sketches. Satterwhite's mother, diagnosed with schizophrenia, spent hours watching infomercials after leaving her job. These programs inspired countless drawings of her own inventions, which Satterwhite meticulously reproduces, duplicating his mother's somatic ritual to import the sketches into a 3D animation program

where the drawings come to life as neon wax like figurines in his otherworldly topography. The slow pan evolves into a quick dizzying 360° spin yet every time it fully loops back, it does not return to where the spin began. Towering cakes appear with children dancing on each layer, each bodily projection endlessly multiplied.

What does repetition and ritual teach us about empathy? Does imitation bring you closer to someone or is it a harsh reminder of difference? As two individuals move their bodies in the same way, it could produce the same outcome while still differing in purpose, meaning, and lived experience. Someone else's movements can be repeated through performance, but even the utilitarian shift between the original movement and its later iteration presents its repurposing.

How do we empathize with those different from us? How do we make room for the ways that other people make sense of and experience the world while also recognizing that while we can try our best to empathize we must also reckon with our inability to fully understand the experience of another as our own, or that appropriating another's experience as our own cannot be a pathway for complete empathy?

EMPATHIC LESSON: WALK IN THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FOREST

ChimaTEK: Virtual Chimeric Space (2015), Saya Woolfalk's narrative-based work sits on the back wall of the gallery tying many of the pieces in the show together, conceptually and visually. Combining science fiction, anthropology, technology, and art in a sculptural multimedia installation, the ChimaTEK shares the story of a fungus growing on a bone. This part-animal, part-plant organism is seen as a vanguard in empathy research, inspiring a scientific transformation patented by The Empathics, to alter the genetic make-up of humans to merge with plants. The Empathics are displayed as three female figures centered along the walls in various meditative poses. All have similar faces, while the middle Empathic is balanced standing on one foot and clothed in all white with gold stitchings and the surrounding Empathics are sitting wearing multicolored fabrics sewed into armor-like protections. Accompanied by an oceanic soundscape, kaleidoscopic prisms

are projected through frames that resemble scientific tubes and vessels connecting to each of the Empathic and also bleeding off the platform upon the gallery floor, inviting viewers to sit, stand, and dance, within them. As Woolfalk's multimedia piece integrates the bodies of others, the audience become hybrids of their own, incorporating the fantastical and technological projections into their bodies.

Chimatek incorporates an exchange between various pieces throughout the exhibit but most visibly the Sowei masks situated directly across. The masks, attributed to Sierra Leone and the Sande society (a women's secret society off the Western coast of Africa and spans across multiple countries), are dark black, referencing the correlation between the words black and wet in the Mende language, as well as the Sande's tradition of hiding within deep, dark pools to avoid male voyeurism. Oversized eye carvings indicate knowledge and wisdom, while small mouths indicate feminine beauty and mindfulness. Woolfalk's iterations of the masks incorporate the same expressions and features but inverses the color for white ceramic masks attached to bodies wearing bright colorful costumes. Still, the spatial proximity between these pieces and the source of their inspiration provides an ekphrastic narrative by revealing the unavoidable history of how these pieces came to be. Similarly to Satterwhite's retracing and repetition of his mother's drawings, we might consider how embodying the assembling of the craft might lend lessons to empathic experiences.

Chimatek offers one of the more contradicting pieces of the show and it knows it. The patent is cheeky, the process to empathize (a concept centered around collectivity) is commodified for individual gain and profitable. Additionally, The Empathics offer the most troubling solution to empathizing and my conflict with it pushed my reflection on my understanding of empathy for months after first visiting the show. I was primarily troubled with The Empathics need to fuse with plants in order to become most empathetic. It seemed to reinforce the idea that you have to embody the same identity to be empathetic to another. In this case, being part plant allows for the possibility to empathize with plants and the natural world more broadly; likewise, being part human allows for full understanding

of humanity that would otherwise be impossible for an organism that was fully plant. If this is the case, is that even empathy? Or is it showcasing the ease at which we can project another's experience onto our own when we are more able (or willing) to do so because we can directly replace ourselves with another through a shared identity. Isn't that logic reinforcing that we could never truly empathize with someone who shares a different identity than us? Must we experience something ourselves, and must it be a part of who we are physically to empathize? I have to believe that that isn't true. But my countering of this logic forces me to consider what the boundaries of relationality are. There's a limit to understanding empathy through your body—it's important to reckon with your position and difference from another, but perhaps more important to think through the interconnection and how we exist in webs dependent on one another. When we consider subjectivity as radically open and challenge individualized formulations of self we might find more multifaceted ways of understanding empathy.

We're On the Same Page: In Conversation With Danny Giles

Meshell Sturgis

Upon entering the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington (UW), four texturized black lines entirely frame an opposing 10' x 10' white wall. The wall's dark edges make the space at the center pointedly white. More white than the usual white-washed walls that sterilize gallery spaces. Could it be that the several-inches-thick border of combined charcoal, ink, pumice, and other media facilitates this brightening effect? Without noticing the frame's subtlety at work, the wall might otherwise go unnoticed as one of the several drawings on display in *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background* (2019). The placement and size of this particular drawing however, makes it a central object in the exhibit even as it unassumingly looks like a blank wall. With this drawing, the artist is not simply contrasting coarse carbon medium and smooth alabaster plaster. Along with exploring the aesthetics of sharp contrast, in this exhibit Danny Giles also blurs the lines between objects, individuals, and institutions.

Curated by Emily Zimmerman, Chicago-based Giles' January 2019 exhibits The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background, and concurrent Figura at SOIL, made use of drawings, sculpture, collage, and installation to critique current moment politics of power.[1] At the Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Giles creates an artist book the size of the entire exhibit in the form of social sculpture in order to critique the ways in which "Western aesthetics have structured whiteness by responding to various moments in the interwoven histories of science and visual art practice" (2019). Braided together, science and art practices have historically operated in the interest of the West by creating a sharp white background. Similarly, the prominent wall drawing's perceived

1. As Emily Pothast describes in a feature for Art Practical, the title of the exhibit is drawn from Harold Speed's The Practice and Science of Drawing (1972) and Glenn LIgon's Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background) (1990) which is a quote borrowed from Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How it Feels to be a Colored Me" (1928).

brilliance is only of substance because of its relationship with a tenebrous border; both exist as part of the same object despite being starkly different. While framing whiteness and drawing attention to the latent and blatant white supremacy of our world order, Giles' work simultaneously renders visible the hegemonic material implications of non-Western being, albeit in an abstract way.

The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background

Panning the gallery, it becomes evident that not all of the gallery's walls are as equally strident. Several of the drawings are made from the same black mixed-material medium that frames the large wall dividing the gallery space. With variously sized pieces of paper adhered to the walls, some of the pages' corners lift away, casting additional shadows. More than a dozen mixed-media drawings line the gallery with undecipherable writings and bold figures made by what looks like crushed black tourmaline. Each untitled, they beg to be touched despite the obviously messy consequences. There are a few figures present including a portrait of the cartoon character Elmer Fudd who resides in a small gallery room under a dramatically installed spotlight. Many of the muddied drawings produce an array of backgrounds as the black medium bleeds into the whiteness of the page: each set against a slightly different tone of gray, all a bit fuzzy and murky despite moments of sharp contrast.

Taking the large wall drawing as both the front and back (hard)cover of an atypical artist book, the drawings that follow make up the internal soft pages of the book, including a semi-legible table of contents and a much less intelligible index. One page looks like an indecipherable letter, another like the close-up of a fingerprint, and another like a map. Giles' drawings themselves are individual works of art that cumulatively come to reflect the summary narrative depicted on the cover wall. Individuals visiting the gallery fill the spaces between the pages and thus animate the book. Perusing the pages of the book, the audience too, becomes captured by the cover(s) and arranged by the book's spine (or, "arraigned"). The more people fill the space, like a plot, the book thickens. In this, Giles performs an indictment of Western aesthetic practices of bookmaking in a way that sheds light

on the institutional role of figuring difference.

The Jacob Lawrence gallery glues Giles' drawings specifically to the UW, just one volume of many that rest on the state's bookshelf. Everything and everyone in the exhibit is somehow connected to the institution whether that be as guest, artist-in-residence, faculty, staff, or student, and even those excluded or unsolicited. The academy is a bottom line that structures the historical weaving together of science and art practices. Giles' specific endeavor then, is to materialize this oppressive line of power and animate its process in abstract art form. He playfully occupies the space between difference such that contradistinction becomes gradient. The drawings' tracks, treads, trellises, and traces of the dense midnight medium tunnel across once-crisp white pages smeared with grayish bits of crumble and stained by blackish inky runoff. Giles' artwork revels in the material spaces of resistance that exist in excess of limiting forces. Further, it encourages the visitors-turned-performers to occupy the space with an awareness of ontological and epistemological possibility.

We're On the Same Page

Giles re-assembles the artist book sub-genre of book sculpture into a public performance. The exhibit reveals how the spinal column in Western bookmaking practices is anatamopoetically involved in the narrative subject's characterization as well as where and how the subject materially remains objectified as a page in that very book.[1] While the stern spinal column of the academy restricts patrons to linearity, Giles' exhibit pulls apart the spine such that individuals can move about in counter directions. As Kemi Adeyemi explains in a 2019 *Women & Performance* article, "Beyond the 90°: The Angularities of Black/ Queer/ Women/ Lean," whiteness is "oriented around, if not obsessed with the verticality and perpendicularity of the 90° angle" (2019).

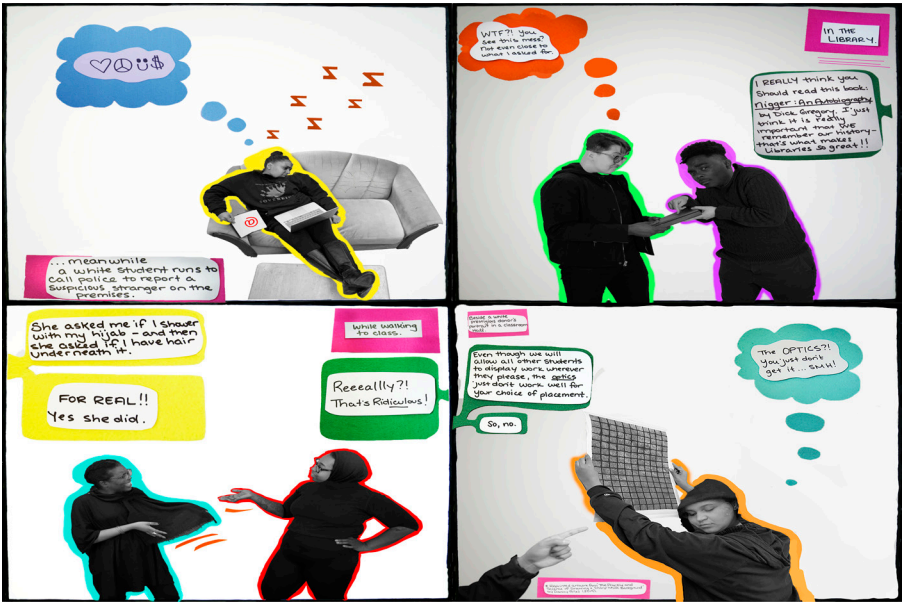
1 In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), C. Riley Snorton blends Foucault's "anatamo-politics," the "disciplining of the body constitutive to biopower" with the term "poiesis... which refers to all manners of creative and cultural production." Snorton uses the term to "highlight the ways black literature has been multiply corporealized as the author's black body and, by metonymic extension, a black body politic" (109).

The response offered by Yabsira Wolde and I, a 2019 UW undergraduate and current doctoral candidate, respectively, is to paint a figure for the cover of Giles' book. Since some might not "get" Gile's abstraction and its claim on the scientific and artistic material implications of 90° spines, our representative piece fleshes out the project by providing characters in concrete situations.

We're On the Same Page is a quadrant comic comprised of panels whose thickset borders converge. Black and white photographs populate each panel, depicting university students caught amidst institutionalized oppression. Colorful auras surround their bodies as sleepy "zzz's" and thought bubbles drift up from their heads. Backed by green, pink, blue, orange, and yellow felt, the handwritten speech bubbles and text boxes give voice to the students and set the context for their precarious situations. While it remains clear where the students are, whether that be in a dormitory lounge, walking to campus, in the library, or classroom hall, who the students are is intentionally ambiguous as each of the student's heads have been swapped with another. This representational move crosses multiple identity and body-based political boundaries. The comix points to a place where critical intervention is desperately needed. The four black lines dividing the comix reveal the bounds of the institutionalized spinal column, its operative 90° angle in politics of power, and opens up spaces of possibility for counter angularity.

Using Giles' wall drawing as the panel and frame for each image, the work uncovers the material realities of being a black student on campus despite university efforts to superficially promote us as diversity tokens. The first panel depicts the 2016 incident at Seattle University which eventually led to the resignation of the humanities dean Jodi Kelly after she inappropriately suggested a black student read Dick Gregory's *Nigger: An Autobiography* (1964). In it, two students stand close sharing a book while having different relationships to it. The second panel re-enacts Yale University graduate student Lolade Siyonbola's 2018 experience of being awakened by a fellow student who called the police on her after she fell asleep in a graduate student dorm lounge. A student lays back on a couch with her feet kicked up on the table, computer on her lap, and an open book in hand. The book is splayed open with an upside down red "@" symbol printed on the inside of one

of the white pages. Regardless of her freedom dreams, the panel forecloses upon her with confrontation and police harassment because of her location and performative angle.



The third panel shows two black women discussing the all-too-common microaggressive comments people make about their hair and religion. Mirroring each other, they share a hijab and experiences of being black in America despite having different origin stories, similarly gesturing while candidly leaning back. Within their differences they find similarity that stabilizes their counter-direction opening up a space of possibility between them. The final panel depicts the lone black student of a summer arts program attempting to display their artwork, borrowed from one of Giles' drawings. Eyes closed with a finger pointing at her face, the student is told that the image is inappropriate for the academic space despite other students being allowed to show their work without question. Where the first two panels were situations that received national news coverage, and the third moreso quotidian exchanges that many black and hijab-wearing Muslim students experience, the final represents an unresolved event at UW that dirctly impacted Yabsira and I in 2018.

Borrowing Giles' white wall as the frame for our project, we pinpoint material manifestations of interpersonal and structural microaggressions experienced within the academy. *We're on the Same Page* (2019) brings the cover page of Giles' artist book under the microscope. The larger tensions of Giles' artist book still surface on a single comic-strip in which several university students exemplify unique yet ultimately similar moments of constriction. Vibrantly cast as dreamers and artists with friends and colleagues, the stark contrast between their colors and the panel's sharp white background continually proves to be consequential. Focusing in on the cover page's tethered nature to the spine draws on the dialectical tension between abstraction and representation; between form and figure; between the institutionalized 90° spinal column and the quotidian ways in which underrepresented students lean into and against its discipline.

We all aren't always necessarily on the same page like these students. But, for brief moments we may find ourselves part of the same story, sutured to the same spine in the same book, sitting on the same shelf. In conversation, we visualize and practice resistance in aesthetically different ways. Yet, in order to unravel the detrimental linearity of Western aestheticized biopower, we must bear witness to the ways in which we each are entangled with one another in the practice of tethering the object, individual, and institution. Whether an article pinned on a clothes line like Carletta Wilson's *Letters to a Laundress*, an artist book hung at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, or the opaque and crystallized books that line Edgar Arceneaux's *Library of Black Lies* in the Henry Art Gallery, and just as Spillers attunes us to note: we all are cerebral characters fluidly navigating space in ways that demand the spine to respond even as we are bound to fill its pages, lines, and panels in the dramatic animation of life. But, in order to "get" all of that, as Snorton suggests, bookmaking and making sense of bookmaking "requires contravening commonsense notions of the body" (136). Giles' work pulls apart the spinal column to create new public spaces of possibility for those in this material moment. The non-human materials of Giles' book have precisely everything to do with the construction and deconstruction of the neoliberal human.

keyon gaskin's [lavender]: a self portrait

...a living sculpture of un/becoming, to be every/thing, and no/thing

Berette Macaulay

keyon gaskin's *[lavender]: a self portrait* was presented by On the Boards as an off-site performance at Oxbow Gallery in Georgetown, Seattle. gaskin is a formless, indefinable artist based in Portland, Oregon, who "prefers not to contextualize their art with their credentials." So how do you write about someone who endeavors to remain contextually unfixed?! In what I read as a continuum of their 2015 work it's not a thing, gaskin has created another subversive and mysterious experience, pushing further into the uncategorizable. *[lavender]* (the color) is a work of gesture around ordinary objects stripped of context and granted little to no symbolism for us to exalt. We came to watch, and to be watched, rarely knowing when these roles would shift or with whom. As an exhibition of immersive theater with a rotating cast of performers,[1] the audience or viewers double as objects or performers with the artist as a presence in the room, watching the proceedings with minimal engagement. gaskin's *self portrait* contorts the traditional authority of a static two-dimensional "self" within a portrait.

We had to check in at a desk just inside the door.
We were then handed a pressed cardboard spiral bound book before weeding into a low-lit space.
It was kind of like a program but not, because really, it was another artwork—of poetry, scribbles, collage works, and a page of lavender sequins.
Vignettes were set up at various corners in the room.

1 Rotating Cast March 22-24, 2019 at Oxbow: David, Karen Nelson, Vivian Phillips, Fox Whitney, and Markeith Wiley

A single lamp was placed at the center of the space,

and a potted plant – devil's ivy...

A person was seated on a raked set of deep wooden stairs (that lead up to a blank wall), another potted pothos vine balanced atop their head while they very, very, very slowly shifted

their seat down

each step.

...a simmering pot of water on a hot plate in another corner.

Sound mixes of Hip Hop and House filled

the space

We were clustered at different points without knowing shit about

where the starting point was.

There was a sound mixer board and computer on the floor under a work lamp,

–eventually we saw the artist sit by it on the floor.

We starting yet?

Nope.

Maybe not right here.

It was opening night so there was also a buffet table of finger foods and wine that kind of ended up as part of the performance, partly because it was in the way.

On purpose?

Don't know.

I ate the strawberries and some hummus and waited on the stairs.

It had already started.

Who is a portrait?

We might understand portraiture as an image on a cold gallery wall; and a dance performance as the *feeling* of a person embodied on a stage. Alternative expressions of either might still yield the expectation of a clear distinction between the artist a between the artist and the viewer, or the performer and the

audience. gaskin intentionally creates within the slippages of these roles and... it's disconcerting.

What is a *self*?
re/con/textualize
the formal form
the aesthetic dictate
UNLEARN[1]ing a fetishized politik
to un-
fix an identitarian
credential
as evidence of *Being-ness*
to *be* here
in space
take it up
to exist

This performance/exhibition is an abstracted gesture of *a self*, occupying a gallery, as an ephemeral artistic labor that cannot be *collected*. And thankfully, in no way does it signal (or aspire to) a reach for permission *to belong* or to be understood—by black or any other name. It is after all, an allowance we see white artists and writers embody, to abstract themselves to infinitude, a right continuously denied within the "subtitles" and feelings of otherness. This claimed allowance is the insistence that embodied *presences* can impact space without the use of voice, showing the face, or narrativizing a character. But since gaskin is a black person erecting this work in a white space within a white geography, one must look to the elusive power of how they conceptually background this fact so effectively.

What is a portrait...?
...if we are set within it
as impermanent

1 UNLEARN is a name of a recently released book by Humble the Poet

i m
n a
a t
e d pieces in a gallery
collecting moves
like debul[1] walks
unmasking Artaudian rounds
shapeshifting
re/turning
queering
objects stalked
where no one is
and everyone is watching
gazing | ungazing
who's grazing
the audience?

who's the agent?

If "self-determination is a drag," as Fred Moten says in *Black and Blur* (214), then how do we unsettle or rupture the ontological nightmare of "Black [as] a modifier that changes everything" that Treva Ellison, et al describe in "We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies? Is it possible to *trans*cend the powerful tendency of "blackness to change all that comes after it?" All my life I've wanted to escape the absurdities of how nuanced socio-cultural narratives are contracted into violent (non)descriptors of the black body. It is palpable, though not an immediate catharsis, to experience gaskin's experimentation in negating *the gaze* by *othering* other things other than being black. There is trickery, an invisible mask employed without the tired reactionary assemblages to look back at the gazer. In fact, in comparing *it's not a thing* to *[lavender]* one can even assert that gaskin is making us exchange powers of the gaze while shifting our focus elsewhere, like an illusionist, intentionally offering no hint as to where our focus actually is or will go next. Just try to figure out your own trick.

1 Debul (devil) masks traditionally worn by secret society members in processional street dances in colonial and post-colonial Sierra Leone.

Where is a portrait?
you watch
yourself
d
i
s
s
e
m
b
l
e
and
re/
form
wards
p p
u u
ground

dancing still by the DJ mixer
fabulating the interpretive walk
of their embodiments to re/ground something familiar:
will they drop that plant?
what's that smell? is that Ramen noodles boiling?
that lampshade makes a cool spotlight in the center tho...
maybe we should we sit under it,
or stay away...?
just hug the walls
can't see them
move around, look for them

we move in a memory of an imaginary apart/ment
a mapping
of *thing-ness* with/out agency

By using their "lived experience," by foregrounding "the ordinary" as a concept of particular exception for engaged inter/actions, gaskin has managed to make a work that refuses the singular significations of radical spectacle expected of black bodies, of "contemporary" or "conceptual" black artists by rejecting categorization, thus refusing adjacent codifications, and thereby eluding commodification. FREEDOM! - from the occupation of blackness! Or, at least a type of freedom that comes close to fulfilling curator Céderic Fauq's call in "Curating for the Age of Blackness" (2019) to "*unperform*" blackness. In Ligia Lewis's minor matter, keyon gaskin unperforms as much as a dancer, speaking into a microphone with a sweaty bare back to the audience: "I want to be intentionally boring."

When is a portrait?

ever

"the residual value of resurrection is b e l i e f"[1]

no beginning
no reason
no moment
for all the moments

By abandoning the aesthetic dictates of beauty, edginess, or even legible arrangements of banality, gaskin conceptually offers an unconventional cure that

1 From a public lecture with Theaster Gates on May 2nd, 2019 at Kane Hall, University of Washington Seattle

that we need, or at least that I need, to what J. Halberstam calls the "toxic positivity of contemporary life"(*The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011). And Hallelujah for that. It's a delicious fuck you to the demands art and social practices value as successful, that further flattens any chance of a complex existence. "Resist Mastery!" (Halberstam, 2011), forget the master's tools. And released of such concerns, we can get to some realness worth witnessing...

Why is a portrait...?

a flower, a colour, a wig of steaming Ramen, a pair of leopard print stilettos,
one body glides slowly over to the lamp
another is at home among us in a robe carrying a coffee mug with a cell phone in it
blasting out Rihanna inside it,

"sex with me'so amazin"
making selfies with us strangers
"stay up off my Instagram with your temptation"
the only picture portraits are digital, taken by them
and, the book of poems
a reflective glitter page
each one, teach one,
flashlight apps on
we refract it against the walls
and our uncertain bodies
making a live disco sculpture,
of everything and nothing
...but an *unfinished sympathy*[1]

1 *Unfinished Sympathy* is a 1991 composition by the UK based Trip Hop group Massive Attack.

gaskin "performs" a clearance in this work, a way we might create the same in ours...for black artists and non-artists alike. As artist Edgar Arceneaux quite rightly cautions "to become too heavily invested in a category over 10, 15, 20 years may not bear the fruit that you want." Make nothing of this one color, in order to make more with all the colors.

Maybe the drag of Being-ness here can be riffed mystically as an ancient memory, existing long before any record of time, reaching into the future, whipping ahead of horizons, and warping back around to a longer memory we have yet to imagine, but are creating right now. I don't know if this is the invitation to the color of *[lavender]* but it is all we could hold from the final sculpture gathered at the center – the shoes, the cup, the phone with photos of us, the lamp, the devil's ivy, the cooked Ramen noodles, cold, sticky, and dragged across it all...

did we witness gaskin's portrait, were we in it,

or were we the portrait?

We returned the book though.
We could keep nothing,

but ourselves.

Those Imperfect Moments Made Perfect

Matthew Howard

This is my second time seeing *In This Imperfect Moment* at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). A walk among these pieces is like being given a booklet of compiled international poetry. But the black diaspora is as disparate as it is linked. 15 artists' portraits, sculptures, and photography capture what Toyin Ojih Odutola refers to as moments: creations that re-create instances that need more time for dissection and discernment. Moments are fleeting and not held onto. Their messages become lost if we look at every moment as a singular incident. And if nothing is connected, we stand to lose these moments.

I interrupted my own initial visit by not giving these moments their due time. The first time I went to see *In This Imperfect Present Moment*, I browsed the gallery much too fast because I had originally gone to see Jeffrey Gibson's *Like A Hammer*, just one floor above. Admittedly, I fell into a trap of my own doing: Gibson's exhibit seemed more...major. Like a headliner and *Imperfect Present Moment* was the opener. Surprise, surprise when *Like a Hammer* did not come down with the fury I thought it would. As I Ieft SAM that evening I realized that *In This Imperfect Present Moment* stuck with me because of the gravitas of Lawrence Lemoana's *Newsmaker of the Year* - if only for a moment. Political scandals have always gotten a rise out of me. The irony of my too-fast visit hit me - I'd read Odutola's description of the "understated in art" in the exhibit blurb just outside the collection room but hadn't fully comprehended just how fleeting moments actually are. I went to SAM for a main course and had received an appetizer that I didn't take the time to appreciate. I had to go back.

I fancy myself a very by-the-book person. I try to engage with art spaces the way I think the artists would have intended. In fact, I often expect artists and curators to have created a logical flow lest I become fearful of not knowing enough about what's going on. *In This Imperfect Moment*'s physical space is not formulaic. You walk into

a room and see four white walls lined with portraits, photographs, and tapestries. Interrupting the space's center are two ornate sculptures that converge seven or so feet from the room corners. Each wall corresponds with four primary issues the artists engage with: Leaders, Portraits, Faith, and Labor. I did not notice these themes in my first viewing. This time, I let my eyes rove along the walls in search of how the artist and curators set up the pieces. The first wall troubles "Leaders," and two brightly colored tapestries are the first thing I'm meant to engage with: *Newsmaker of the Year* and *Things Fall Apart* by Lawrence Lemoana, which utilize kanga cloth, sacred to South Africans. *Newsmaker of the Year* is gut-wrenching: the figure depicted is the dancing President Zuma – who "went on trial for rape in 2006…[and] claimed that a young woman wearing it was offering him an invitation to assault her." Heinous. And to think his victim-blaming is a moment that many would not fixate on when they heard it. Time and again, rape culture becomes a running joke at the expense of girls and women who have to watch rapists dance and empower themselves. The fact that this man is preserved in kanga cloth seems a fitting criticism of why moments like these are so important to re-observe. My phone chimes.

It's a Facebook Message from my girlfriend with a video titled "Cop Threatens to Kill Black Mom Over 99 Cent Barbie Doll." Yet ANOTHER moment that our cultural memory will fail to preserve, unlike Zuma in Lemoana's tapestries. After watching the video, I look at "*Things Fall Apart.* I never read did get around to reading that book… From this point forward, my interpretation of the collection is disturbed by what I've just seen. The video is a record of oppression that is (re) created far too often. But in this moment (and the ones following it), I'm unable to dissociate what I just saw in the video from what I view right now because I better understand what Odutola means about moments. During my first viewing, I failed to recognize the captured ephemera's role in creating continuous conversation. Try as I might, there is no brushing dirt off a psyche meant to be cool, calm, collected in the face of oppression – and somehow, for this very reason, *In This Imperfect Moment* resonates even more with me since this art is framed around those things I or anyone else would simply overlook

this art is framed around those things I or anyone else would simply overlook if we feel we are too often bombarded by the imagery of it all.

After watching that video, I felt unabashedly more in tune with *In This Imperfect Present Moment* because I had just been privy to a mode of black existence that speaks through the moments. Henda forever preserves the Dictator, Mussunda N'Zombo, as a relic of the past and makes him an exhibit and point of study. Odutola re-creates black skin's appearance and texture and layers this interpretation of feeling with sight - yet the black women in her portraits stare back at you too. Saya Woolfalk's bedazzling *ChimaCloud Crystal Body D* sculpture sits in the center of the room, in front of Odutola's portraits that stare out of their frames. Crystal Body reframed death with ornate construction that reminds me of candy skulls on the Day of the Dead. Death, for the bad rap it gets is nothing more than a moment that needs redefining and re-creation. Athi-Patra Ruga's *The Ever Promised Erection* is the other sculpture that interrupts the space of the room, with an extravagantly clad bust meant to mock exaggerations of African wealth from American myths and fantasies. If these myths are taken at face-value (which they often are) we see the result is buy-in at a large social scale that continues to reverberate today (i.e., are all black people the descendants of kings and queens? I think not, but one can hope and dream!).

I end my time in the exhibit looking at the kanga cloth tapestries again. The title of the video my girlfriend sent me rings in my ears as I make out the bold letters Lemoana wove: THINGS FALL APART. These are all here-and-then-gone moments, things that might have been lost to our imagination just because we operate at such a break-neck pace. I realize that it wasn't just my girlfriend who interrupted my second visit to Imperfect Present Moment by sending the video. I did by watching it. I chose to view content that could have waited until afterward. And for it, I created an imperfect series of moments forever warped.

Nina Simone: Four Women

Paulette Q. Thompson

"But I've often pointed out that some of my very earliest childhood memories are the sounds of dynamite exploding."

- Angela Davis, "Terrorism is Part of Our History" on Democracy Now!, September 16, 2013

What worlds do we inhabit? In this imperfect present moment, there is a Southern city that is not New Orleans or Atlanta becoming a destination for fine dining and critically acclaimed restaurants, Whole Foods and boutique grocery stores, and upscale shopping sprees made possible with the arrival of such stores as Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue. For some, gentrification, commercialism, and cosmopolitanism have helped to create a new luxurious Birmingham, Alabama, one on the surface that is seems quite removed from "Bombingham," a city known for white supremacy, terrorism, fire hoses, police dogs, and yes, bombings. While the bombings of black homes and churches were commonplace in the 1950s and 1960s, as Birmingham-born scholar Angela Davis reminds us, it was the Ku Klux Klan bombing death of four girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church that is considered a watershed moment in the civil rights movement.

This tragic act served as a catalyst for the classically trained singer/composer/musician Nina Simone. At that point in her career, Simone, born Eunice Waymon, decided that her art would reflect the times in which she lived, no matter the cost. Her music becomes a weapon.

It is the intersection of these two events or two worlds that Christina Ham's play, Nina Simone: Four Women begins. Nina Simone is a play with music, but it is not a musical. Even though Simone's life and her political music such as

"To Be Young, Gifted and Black," and "Mississippi Goddamn" help provide context, this play is not a biographical piece.

Why would Ham, a Southern California-reared playwright, provide us with a play set in the 16th Street Baptist Church, with Nina Simone? It turns out that that bombed-out Birmingham church is a part of Ham's DNA: it is her family's church. While Ham considers herself a child of the punk movement, she cannot remember a time when she did not know Simone's music.

Why should a viewer enter this world created by Ham? For one thing, the play is well written. And the music is incredible. These actors can sing! The characters in the play are lifted directly from Simone's song of the same name which details the look, perspectives, and struggles that Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches face. Are these four women stereotypes? In a weaker hand the characters could come off that way. Ham gives us a domestic servant, an activist taking a back seat to men in the movement, a sex worker, and a character very much like Nina Simone herself. In the play they meet, debate, and share their stories concerning colorism, sexuality, politics, gender, spirituality, and racism. These discussions are not just about the past, they resonate into the present.

Nina Simone ends by displaying the names of black women activists. These activists, both from the past and the present, are listed in alphabetical order. "Freedom Song" brings the play, but not this historical moment, to a close.

adore, hold me, and not alone by Ariella Tai

Ayanda Masilela

Ariella Tai's work was featured in the *Let it Go* art exhibition at Wa Na Wari. The work integrates black-directed and black-starring films from the 1990s and the early 2000s, with particular attention on science fiction and films routinely broadcast on television networks, such as Comedy Central. They dig into this media of their past, re-imagining the relationships and events of these films in ways that the original publishers had not intended. As a queer black youth, representations of Tai were non-existent in popular media, and today they venture to craft new narratives from works of old. We joked about our shared love of fan fiction, and how formative it was as a young queers to express our own reconceptualizations of fictional worlds and exchange those ideas with others on the web. Their work today emulates that generative process using film rather than text, with a more shocking, often tongue-in-cheek approach to these reconstructions.

Tai's collection featured five videos and a handful of glitchy animated GIF clips. They were presented upstairs at Wa Na Wari, a new black-centered arts institution tucked on a quiet residential strip in Seattle's Central District, just southeast of 23rd and Union. The space is a former single-family residence in a historically black neighborhood that has seen intensive displacement of its black residents, thus the cultural significance of this space bears mention. The atmosphere is cozy, equipped with furniture that matches the age of the house, a small library of black academic texts, and large plants that give the impression this establishment has always belonged here. Upstairs, several large flat screen televisions equipped with headphones displayed their short films, as well as glitchy animated GIF clips fragmented to tell alternative fictions. Tai deploys "Black Grotesquerie" to describe their work, fusing perspectives from black

media scholars concerned with the black body's representation as excessive, uncontrollable, etc. with Mikail Bakhtin's theories on "degradation of form." Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman describes how, for Bakhtin, "degradation" simultaneously offers the possibility for replacement or new growth in the midst of material loss ("Black Grotesquerie," 2017). Abur-Rahman argues the counter: that, when concerning blackness, degradation does not guarantee regrowth, and the failure to operate beyond assumptions of regrowth and regeneration renders invisible the precarity of black life, let alone queer black life.

Tai's productions walk between Abdur-Rahman's pessimism and Bakhtin's optimism, rewriting the often violent, sexually coercive, and ham-fisted representations of blackness in film. If, according to Abdur-Rahman "the grotesque is a process of revaluing and repositioning the debased elements of bodily, structural, conceptual, and worldly configurations" (p. 688), Tai's refigured outputs render the pieces of old works into uncanny Eldritch Abominations in some cases, and cinematic chimeras in others.

The notion of "rendering" makes for a curious collision as Tai discusses their working process through a horror lense. "Rendering" is a term used to describe deconstructing the bodies of livestock in a slaughterhouse and processing waste products into usable materials. In that sense, Tai dismembers the body of a film. From those parts, they digitally render, make, a new production that speaks to new narratives that render visible queer narratives where previously such a story was not present. If one regards film representation as a vehicle for expressing the worldly configuration of heteronormativity and recialization, such orderly structures are dismembered with the cleaving of the film and processed into something unrecognizable but useful in the conveyance of queer and black desire. Truly grotesque, abominable. It is a stark but compelling way of framing one's creative process. For the works below, Tai accomplishes this through editing clips from multiple films. In the work entitled adore, Tai utilizes a single video feed, alternating between clips of the three movies and lacing them together as a single visual series. In hold me and not alone, the films are presented simultaneously in parallel boxes, two distinct feeds. Each film

conveys brief scenes laced together out of order from the original. Activity trades off from each side: as one side cycles through a scene, the other side repetitiously glitches actions or gestures that emphasize the action of the parallel film. *Adore*, and features clips from *Bad Boys* (1995), *The Wild Wild West* (1999), and *The Wood* (1999) set to the soundtrack of Prince's "Adore." Tai envisions Will Smith and Martin Lawrence's characters as longing lovers separated due to the necessity of dangerous work. Between scenes of their working lives, clips of a nude Smith crashing through a floor surrounded by water, barely masking his groin, as well as the three main characters from *The Wood* nude and spraying each other with hoses in a secluded backyard grafts the genuinely playful homoeroticism of the scene onto conventionally masculine (read straight) action films. The short production climaxes as Lawrence is thrown through a fish tank wall, again surrounded in water, as he lands before his distant lover, Smith.

Hold Me, features a clip from *Girls Trip* (2017) during which Jada Pinkett Smith rides on a swing that squirts liquid from her crotch over a crowd of onlookers who scatter in horror. This is displayed in the parallel video feed arrangement to a scene in *Boomerang* (1982) where Grace Jones delights in the scent of a gift perfume, removes her thong, and rubs it in the face of an elderly suitor. Both scenes depict situations of hyperbolic black sexuality, but in light of these depictions, Jennifer C. Nash poses a re-reading: that these productions offer room for "naming and claiming desires"—that black women can enjoy a spectrum of sexual expression, be that expression exaggerated or normatively reserved" (*The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 2014: 58). We can own our pleasure, whatever that may be. Here, Tai juxtaposes a heavy-handed ejaculation simulation with the unquestioned dominance of the one and only Grace Jones. Jones's body language speaks for herself, while Jada Pinkett's scene repeats in reverse, depicting her swinging away from the swing technician who initially assembled her rig, only to continue showering the onlookers. Tai's film concludes with a still image of Pinkett throwing her entire body back in joy. To the right is a clip repeating forward and in reverse of Jones's much-appreciated perfume swab dipping in and out of a graduated cylinder. The pleasure is all theirs.

The most jarring of the works is a reclamation of the horror-trash film (Tai's own words) that is *Gothika* (2003). Set to the soundtrack of "Free" by Deniece Williams, Tai's not alone rewrites the narrative of a possessed Halle Berry killing her husband into a story of Berry freeing herself from her great white horror. The film opens with a single video feed of the shower attack during which Berry's demonic possessor, "Rachel," slashes Berry's arms. The next scene (again a single feed) depicts a possessed Berry carrying an axe up a flight of stairs. In the original this scene preceded possessed Berry killing her husband. Tai then transitions to the parallel video pane arrangement like that of hold me. In the left pane, Berry is depicted languishing in the bloody bathtub, while on the right is a scene of a woman opening a bag with the severed head of a another blonde woman resembling Berry's possessor. Where in the original, Berry is contemplating her murderous actions in the bloody tub, this re-rendering shows her "relaxing" as the remains of her now dead demonic possessor are discovered. Berry stares in the mirror, and the scene shifts again to the shower attack. In the original rendition of the shower scene, Rachel attacks Berry, this time Berry showers peacefully, and she reemerges free of blood. At this point, the soundtrack's chorus plays: "And I've got to be freeeeeeeee..." *sexy trumpets mewl*

Tai noted that they took particular care in preparing this reimagination. For Tai, *Gothika* represents the pinnacle of wanton mysoginoir so common in film. This was a deeply personal work of reclaiming self love and the possibility of black femme freedom and love in the wake of Monster's Ball (2001) and Gothika, both films centering the destruction of black women's relationships with black men via white violence. Dismembering the latter film and rendering its waste parts into an empowering product was a necessary step towards producing an emancipatory narrative through the film career of an actress who has been rewarded for being a convincing victim in her most popular films.

In their collection for Let it Go, Tai renders new narratives from those they have seen as inadequate. Tai takes these films to their digital slaughterhouse. They render conventional masculinities into queer fan fiction. They render opportunities for sexual autonomy in a world that views

black womanhood in a perpetual state of sexual difference (Nash 2014), and render liberation from narratives of graphic sexualized violence. These films are an abomination of normative representation, of black masculinities, heterosexuality, and the regimentation of sexual violence against black bodies. These are defiant works that damn the originals for their narrative shortcomings, producing chimeric reworkings of imaginative possibilities.

f1esh(form) f1esh(form)(f1esh)form(f1esh) f1esh(form)

Jennifer Williams

Sorrow Swag and *minor matter* are the works of choreographer Ligia Lewis, who performed them together at Seattle's On the Boards in May 2019. Taking up the themes of flesh and embodied form, Sorrow Swag is the first part of the triptych *Blue, Red, White.* It thinks of affect and empathy through and embodied in gesture. *minor matter* is the second part of the triptych, an inquiry on the ways that the black box (as a metaphor on being black; full and always rendered empty) can transform identity politics of blackness, particularly as it relates to time, sound, gesture and flesh. Flesh, as a contested surface of *fullness* and rendered knowable legible lack.

flesh

/fleSH/

Learn to pronounce

Noun

noun: flesh

1. A contested surface containing fullness and rendered knowable legible lacking.

Sorrow Swag begins with the smoke of a fog machine and the sounds of deep synths, introducing Lewis onto a large white square-shaped paneled platform. Those of us who make up the seated cast are not required to see to still be participants in the fog that is enveloping the space—a *dampeningnthickening* mysticism (*mist*icism?)

As fog begins to take up each corner of the auditorium, it is a conjuring of Sara Ahmed's theory of affect as a circulating and tactile force of emotion, possessing a "stickiness" that is made material on bodies ("Affective Economies," 2004). Seated in the auditorium, the fog engulfs Lewis' movementsgestures to illuminate for the audience the always already present affective atmosphere. Sorrow Swag is a reflection within and around the body in its deep relation to the material world; it thinks on flesh as a surface of a(ny) particular body in a state of affective (resonance) - which, in the logic of circulation, is a constant.

Even the cerulean tinge of Lewis' body takes on a different meaning than when the same effect covers the body of the white masculine dancer that the work was originally intended to be performed by. The dancer was denied a temporary visa to the U.S (the same fate awaited one of the minor matter dancers). Screenings of the original performance were played preceding the live work each night of the shows run, calling on a looping imagery of time and place, past and *here*. Lewis in *Sorrow Swag* and keyon gaskin in *minor matter* take on new negotiations of the choreography and situate these works firmly in the *now*.

In the present moment, the compositional elements of the piece *are* the thematic contours. The mist creates motion throughout the space by way of its looming but soft and gaseous state. Transforming states of matter, Lewis wears white basketball shorts and a t-shirt. In cerulean blue, her slow(ing) body plays in almost constant motion. She runs in circles around the stage, mimes athletics, spotlights a grill on bared teeth and she screams, gives a breathy telling on survival in a world of competition - a junction of black cultural symbolism, feeling and sound that craft an embodied deliverance of exhausting herself into manic depression *wasteaway*. *Sorrow Swag* is an unfiltered and uncensored work as a means of translation (read=gesture) that illustrates, *in motion*, what the processural impact practices

of naming[1] manifest as when inscribed onto people. It reduces life into flesh. In this practice of reanimating the flesh (or animating a different flesh, animating the cyclical nature of the present).

And in this rendition at On the Boards in Seattle, it is Lewis and not the intended performer, who moves in and through gesture as the fog dissipates: sports enactments/exhausting her body/body in movement/ theexhaustingexperienceofbeinginthisflesh/dog eat dog world and I'll be damned if

Sound bouncing off the wall, telling things you never know - 'love and anguish' curling around each other

Circulating affectedemotion

An economy of flesh manages

Can it hold space for a circulatory nature of (b)lackness; lack economy lack ownership no return or transaction

not being able to place meaning onto flesh (read: being able to know the form) inscribes a thinking through flesh that is *(b)lack*

(b)lack

minor matter is the second part of triptych *Blue, Red, White* and Lewis, keyon gaskin, and Corey Scott-Gilbert time travel in sound and flesh. The set now darkly staging an undefinable present, undefinable sense of black identity within the literal and metaphoric "black box."

1 On naming and black art, see Cédric Fauq, "Curating for the Age of Blackness," *Mousse Magazine* (Winter 2019).

minor matter extends on play within the way the (b)lack boxthemysticisthelackofisemptyisnothingnessistheetherisspaceouter.

negotiating consensus

Full to the brim in and by blackness, it is at the same time empty to the touch.

unknowable and ungraspable lingering with

taking up difference in flesh lift shirt pull down bottom show skin.

(re)making is sm(all) gestures,

want to see this difference, want to know the difference.

Sorrow Swag and *minor matter* do not take up the question of whether blackness is, but think about how it looks to be in constant motion—the unsettled *settling* body changing states of matter, traversing materiality traversing mattering.

building physically building on top of each other bodies creating s(pace)ense in difference sense in distance.

Bodies can inscribe, bodies can be negotiating consensus and bodies can be in dis sonance

Huddle bring bodies together on top of each other tear down a logic of consensus hard breath *and struggle*

(b)lack

A monologue that which cannot physically fit, that which is difficult and unable to be fully grasped by

subject or conduit — both conduit and conductor

Aggressive bitch .... a bad bitch ... walking down the street ... - exhaustivedissonance

i. Last dance last chance last dance last chance
ii. I feel love i feel love i feel love i feel love i feel love

(b)lack

/Traversing time in space through sound Bolero to Donna Summer time is multilinear in the black box, the black box staged to examine futurity/Futurity as it is multi-linear with (b)lackness/When the black box is lit by a single spotlight, that sense of futurity becomes immediately unknowable and all around — because if, the only field of vision, the only seeing you can do is look— look at hands twisting tryingitoutforsize— then, doesn't that mean that this frame is situated in that black box, too? / the mystic/ You: too *std n blk bx* doesn't that mean that / doesn't it mean you now are on this plane in multilinear possibility / The black hands/body bobs through nothingness, bouncing up and down/shifting visibility bending hand fingers splayed hand gliding arm/makes play in nothingness/is *full* of nothingness