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Acts of Memory: Performance in Black Artmaking

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> *Blackness troubles vision in Western discourse. And the troubling affect of blackness becomes heightened when located on certain bodies marked as such. By arguing that the visible black body is always already troubling to the dominant visual field.*
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> —Nicole R. Fleetwood

> *As a fugitive and intertextual practice, black performance emerges at times without warning and seemingly without precedence. And yet, I chase black performance down in an attempt to be in its presence whenever possible. As it grunts, twists, and pounds itself into being, it also dissipates, and its power startles and disappears simultaneously. Power expended within powerlessness has the numbing effect of enhancing possibility while remaining obscure and ineffectual.*
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> —Thomas F. DeFrantz

Introduction

Since the forced migration across the Atlantic Ocean, people from the continent of Africa have been tasked with grappling with social racialization and recovery of memories. The body that is deemed black is both socially and experientially

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marked by this phenotypical marker.[1] However, it is not just the way that social structures influence economic, political, and social mobility, and individuated agency but also its impact on how cultural and ancestral practices are either retained or erased from memory. The purpose of this essay is to think of the embodiment of memory recovery and the performance of Black artmaking as a philosophy. I want to think through how Black art-making and memory recovery goes beyond the racialized body. Moving beyond the racialized body complicates how we think of Black artmaking because it is a metaphysical practice. Thinking of Black art as metaphysical incorporates the material and the transcendent duality of Black world-making through an aesthetic practice. The legal definitions of ataraxia and migration collapse because it is defined as any tangible thing, including land that can be owned but not moved.

I begin this essay by defining and thinking through three words that will ground my argument for memory-making through the performance of Black art making. They are corporeal, migration, and ataraxy as the grounding to introduce a philosophy of Black embodiment performance. First, the corporeal from the Latin root *corporālis* the physical aspects of and or relation to the body. Philosophically defined, corporeal is the body. The task of thinking corporeally or about the body is to think about, and beyond the social construction of race and gender, the categorization and valuation of humans are divided into either body or flesh. The valuation of racialized bodies into flesh begins in 1551[2] and is brilliantly articulated by Hortense Spillers.[3] To philosophize about the Black body is to think about the performance of being into flesh or a transformation of the body into flesh. To transform outside of a eucharistic ideology of transignification is to thingify it into flesh that breathes. Meaning that the Black body is not a body because of the phenotypical markers and capitalist markers because it was purchased during enslavement and their descendants were vilified, exploited, and dispossessed. These acts become formulated by social contracts that transform the body into flesh.[4] Yet, corporeal is legally defined as any tangible thing, including

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[1] Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. "The Theory of Racial Formation." *Racial Formations in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 105-36.
[2] Byun, Chang-Uk. "The Valladolid Debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda of 1550 on the Conquest and the Intellectual-Religious Capacity of American Indians." *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology*. Vol. 42, 2011.
[3] See Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*. Vol. 17, No. 2, 1987, pp. 64-81.
[4] See Charles W. Mills' *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press, 1997.

land, which has physical substance and can be owned. I bring in the definitions of law because the law has impacted the ataraxia and migratuse of Black bodies since their arrival in what is now the western hemisphere. The transformation, although social, renders the black body fungible and, because of the political, fiscal, and social control, renders a socio-ontological hold. The hold acts as a transfinalization of the black body. The corporeality of the body as flesh rewrites how and if that fleshed trans-substantive object breathes and performs in the socially constructed world it occupies.

Migration from the Latin (migrare) to pass from, to move from, to relocate, to change position, to begin. The study of migration is to analyze the origins and motivations behind migration and the factors that influence the maintenance of migration flows over time. Therefore, to think of migration philosophically is to also think of why and how one migrates. Unfortunately, Black migration in the Western imagination is fractured because of colonization, imperialism, slavery, and white supremacist terrorism. Therefore, the movement of Black bodies is steeped in surveillance and embracing fugitivity. Hence, studying Black movement and its patterns is a practice and performance that is in conversation with agency and fugitivity.

Ataraxy/ataraxis/Ataraxia- from the Greek, translates to the state of being unperturbed, serene, or calm. Ataraxia, according to philosophy, is "Freedom from trouble or anxiety. In Epicurean theory, there is ataraxia and eudaimonia. Ataraxy is serene or calm; the other is eudaimonia, meaning freedom from bodily pain. Since for Epicurus, the absence of pain or distress was the highest form of pleasure, this conception of eudaimonia was not merely negative."[5] The writings of Black Atlantic thinkers address the movement of Black bodies as being in response to a lack of freedom and their presence as being seen as an absence from having a voice or influence on pursuing a good life. As C. Riley Snorton contends, "but how to attend to the psychic life of fungibility? Even if one does find some room to maneuver within confinement." (On Thon, 25). When Black bodies move, they disturb the socially constructed atmosphere of places and spaces that were not intended for them. To think through this further, I turn to the creative space of choreography and quilting. These mediums have and continue to tease out the duality of confinement from and flights toward freedom.

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[5] *The Oxford companion to philosophy.* 2nd Edition. Ed. Ted Honderich. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Act(s) of memory making

The art of quilting is the process of piecing together and layering of fabric. Its literal function is to warm the body. The practice of quilting involves the body because it requires hours of cutting, measuring, stitching, and basting while being seated in a crouched position. All of this is done as callouses form on the fingers to deaden the response to needle pricking and the mastery of needlework. Similarly, a trained dancer develops callouses on their toes to withstand the repetition of footwork to withstand turns and jumps as the feet encounter and leave the floor. Choreography and quilting, whose artifacts are visual, begin in the psychic space as a response to the unanswerable questions of social hierarchy. Both mediums work to respond to the quotidian aspects of life. Whether one wants to imagine and then choreograph a romantic-pre-Victorian love story as a sylph, a swan, a lovestruck teenager, or a figure responding to music. A quilter looks at pieces of fabric that will form a log cabin, a double wedding ring, or a half triangle that simply uses scraps that refashion itself as a functioning blanket. The piecing together and layering that is Black quilting and Black choreography are a recuperative praxis that produces tactile artifacts that express the multilayered and multifaceted aspects of Black life.

The archive of Black Life consists of pieces that are layered with fragments of memory that constitute a whole. These memories are filled with scrapes, blisters, and bruises, and highlight those same markings that a dancer or quilter acquires as they fine-tune their crafts. The art of choreography or quilting is piecing together to form a whole. The recuperative praxis of Black life does the same. Yet, recuperation has its limits, Saidiya Hartman speaks of this: "I have endeavored to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known" (4). The piecing together and retelling of stories leaves those who are the descendants of those who were enslaved with the task of wake work. Wake work, as Christina Sharpe notes, is holding the space of what was to allow room for what may come. The contending with what was is what Toni Morrison calls re-memory. However, it isn't just grappling with what was it is also working through and making sense of the current state of Black life while carving out notions of futurity. Therefore, those who do this work are doing so while both grappling with and transcending the inherited legacy of destabilization, disassemblage, and dispossession. These artmakers do so as they hold space for their inherited legacy by assembling and creating.

Quilting and memory-making

Figures 1 & 2: "What We Mutter Under Our Breath" (left) and "What They Yell in the Streets" (right), quilts by Andrew I. Wilson. Photos by William Jenkins.

The solo exhibition *After the After* displays the quilting technique of multi-media artist Andrew I. Wilson, in it, he uses cyanotype and a quilting technique that creates a raised text effect. This technique foreshadows his later works which he uses the boutis style. Wilson reprints the 1788 images of the Brooks/Brookes slave ship by way of cyanotype.[6] Cyanotype was invented by chemist Sir John Herschel

[6] https://encyclopediavirginia.org/4303hpr-7e68246b9587078/

in 1842 and is considered an early photography technique used for architects (blueprints) and scientific illustration. The duality of photo imaging and 19th-century technology at the time of the enslavement of Africans and the increase of fugitive slave laws is the catalyst for Wilson's technique. In addition to cyanotype photo imaging, Wilson uses the quilting letter technique that is a lesser complicated style that he later evolves into his use of boutis. Boutis, a Provençal word that means to stuff. To stuff is the process involved because two layers of fabric are quilted together with stuffing yarn or other materials that are sandwiched between the two layers of the design, creating a raised effect.

The quilts that I will discuss in Wilson's exhibition are titled "What We Mutter Under Our Breath" and "What They Yell in the Streets." These two quilts have similar construction and presentation with two distinct messages. Both quilts are made with cyanotype and quilted lettering and are constructed to be viewed vertically. The cyanotype imaging is a reprinting of the 1788 image of the Brooks/Brookes slave ship, and the quilt top is stitched in the form of letters. The quilted letters are in vertical panels to mimic stripes, and the cyanotype reconceptualizes the stars and stripes of the American flag. The words are distinct for both quilts: "what they yell in the streets." The word *colored* repeatedly appears vertically in white panels as the cyanotype images of the Brooks/Brookes vessel appear in alternating blue panels. The other quilt is "what we mutter under our breath" in the alternating panels of white raised text that appear in vertical stripes are *ofay*. The startling images of those held captive on the slave vessel were cataloged as mere cargo after weeks and, subsequently, months of dehumanization. The quilts do not stop with the startling images of enslaved people stacked in the hulls of a ship. The quilts are not considered complete without the flag boxes that hang above the quilts. Each box is made of poplar wood and filled with bronze castings of cotton husks.

Wilson's quilts are tasked with piecing together the fragments of history that are silenced to the point of erasure. The silences begin when the enslaved Africans are captured, marched, held in forts and castles near the coastal shores of Africa, shackled and stacked on top of one another, forced to dodge the waste of the person stacked above them. They were forced to endure starvation, bodily functions, rape, torture, childbirth, illness, and the possibility of death or being disposed of because they did not fit the quota. However, those men, women, and children survived the multilayered torture and trauma whose descendants would piece, stitch, and tell their stories through their art. Yet, it is not just the printing of the

Brooks/Brookes ship but the flag and box to carry the quilt that is made to replicate an American flag. The materials that Wilson uses are cotton fabric, cotton yarn, and bronzed cotton husks. The bronzed cotton husks are placed inside a flag box made of ebony and poplar wood. The same poplar wood that is well known in Black Sonic memory from the lyrics of "Strange Fruit." The song became both famous and infamous by Billie Holiday, which is an adaptation of Abel Meeropol's poem originally titled "Bitter Fruit," which is his artmaking and memory piecing in response to lynching.

The quilts "what they yell in the streets" and "what they mutter under their breaths" are death shrouds that honor those who fought for a nation that did not and arguably could not fight for them. The death of Crispus Attucks during the Boston Massacre foreshadows the American Revolution that would lead to a rebellion and independence from the British Empire. People of African descent continued to fight in every war since the beginning of the Republic. Yet, most of them were not free but fought for the possibility of freedom. Instead of the abolition of slavery or the end of segregation, Black Americans get the flawed aspects of the 13th Amendment those flaws appear as, lynching, mass incarceration, dispossession, and death. The performance of memory-making through art practice is the undoing of dispossession and erasure.

According to Sheryl Tucker de Vazquez, "quilt and collage embody a reimagining of a fragmented individual and collective African-American self that counters the flattened dominant cultural view of sameness" (15). The hours of cutting, piecing, and stitching together images from the Brooks/Brookes to create a tableau of Black life before, during, and after the formation of the United States. Wilson's choice of form which is quilting is an act of memory formation. The repetition of printing images to then cut, piece, and stitch, which he does as a solitary practice and not with the fellowship of a quilting circle but instead he communes with the ancestors. He is tasked with not just the discomfort of the stories that he must tell but also the endurance that comes with telling the stories. For example, the pricking of the needle as it pushes through the fabric as it pulls quilting yarn as it binds together pieces to form a tableau. Black quilting is not just the repetition of piecing and assembling but the performance of piecing and assembling acts of memory.

Performance and memory-making

The performance of artmaking is an assemblage of piecing together fragments of memory while contending with stagnation. Stagnation can appear as blockages, fragments of fragments, silence, and things that are not easily translatable that may seem like dead ends. Yet, when you add racialization and other forms of marginalization and dispossession, stagnation is a duplicitous state. The stagnation of black bodies, even though they are always moving, creating, and innovative, contends with a sense of stagnation. Because when Black bodies move, they must do so with restraint and composure. Despite encountering hostility and oppression, Black people must remain calm and unruffled, especially in situations that can be unwelcoming and potentially harmful for Black people. If not, the encounter can result in violence and or death. Unfortunately, this is what people of African descent must perform to survive in a dysfunctional social structure. How do you capture the moments of concealment, captivity, and angst while smiling or remaining silent? I think of not just the visual arts but also the performance arts. In my essay "Imbedded" Belonging and Black Being: A Critical Analysis of Hip Hop Beingness in Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy Awards Performance," I wrote that the "space of artistic performance African Americans can fully imbed themselves in the space, despite the temporality of the performance itself, and therefore in the act of performing, African Americans can fully be recognized as a human whole" (35). The task of art making is to imbed oneself and the story they are tasked to tell while grappling with the temporality of human existence and the social fragmentation of Black life.

Like quilting, choreography is piecing together and layering. The difference, however, is instead of fabric, words and sounds tell the choreographer and the dancer what to do and the speed to do so. The etymology of the word choreography is derived from the word khorus/chorus, which means dances, khoreia/choreia, which means dance in unison, and the word graphy means to write. Therefore, choreography means to write dance. To see, learn, or create choreography is the experience of artmaking and performance. How do Black choreography and the experience of Black life grapple with human temporality and the social fragmentation of Black life? It means that words that signify steps, musical phrases, and experiences as both the performing of choreography and the performing of artmaking are layered within the art form and between the choreography, the composition, the dancer, and the audience. The Black choreographer is tasked with the memory of Black joy and the re-memory of Black torment.

Choreography that captures Black joy and resilience can be seen in Alvin Ailey's "Revelations," it captures the role of the Black church as a place of respite and captures the wholeness of the Black experience. Yet, Wideman Davis Dance chose to think of Black choreography as a response to Black torment and Black fugitivity. Their ballet titled, *Migratuse Ataraxia,* takes the audience to the site of the plantation, not on a stage that looks like a plantation but the actual plantation. Migratuse Ataraxia is the artistic brainchild of co-directors Tanya Wideman-Davis and Thaddeus Davis. The co-directors of Wideman Davis Dance conducted extensive research by combing through historical archives of the antebellum south and geographical spaces to create this hauntingly beautiful multimodal ballet.

The ballet begins on the steps of a plantation with a Black man dressed in a suit who addresses the audience and begins to read the Alabama slave codes, which were originally drafted in 1833 and revised in 1852. The reading of the slave codes grounds the audience in the performance space and creates a duality. Meaning it is both a site for re-memory and erasure. The demonic grounds, as Sylvia Wynter calls plantations, work as a place of erasure, dispossession, and death. Yet, the reading of the slave codes and the accompanying words are a reminder that the space itself performs as an erasure of being, but the audience must work against the plantation's natural purpose. By reading the laws out loud on the steps of the plantation, the audience disappears into the performance. Peggy Phelan states, "performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity...becomes itself through disappearance" (146). The audience is not just watching the performance they are participants who must contend with the scenes that they will be subjected to as they agree to bear witness to the multimodal ballet. The agreement is sealed as the watchers ascend the steps and enter the plantation. The role of the plantation itself, as Foucault notes, functions as a heterotopia, a world within a world, not like a utopia, which Foucault argues is a "placeless place" (48). A heterotopia functions as a place that is both a sanctuary and a prison. For example, a brothel, a mental institution, a colony, or a plantation, functions to provide relief from and containment for two types of people. A brothel is a sanctuary for the client and a prison for the worker. An asylum is a sanctuary for society but a prison for the patient. It is, as Agier asserts, a heterotopia can be seen as "epistemological decentering" (15). Therefore, a plantation is a sanctuary for the owner, the overseer, and their families, but a concentration camp for the enslaved.

Through choreography, migratuse ataraxia treats the plantation as a counter-heterotopia by undoing the epistemological decentering. It is most evident in

the solo danced by Tanya Wideman Davis to Aretha Franklin's recording of "Mary Don't You Weep." The song, whose origin predates the Civil War, was first recorded by the Fisk Jubilee singers in 1915, and 57 years later, Aretha Franklin recorded her version. The song begins with the haunting tempo of the piano and the cadence of the choir's opening words of "oh, oh, Mar-ry," and then enters Aretha's voice as the soloist encourages and welcomes the spectators to enter her room. The song continues as Wideman-Davis begins dancing her solo in a sparsely furnished room that has one chair diagonally placed to the left of the room's fireplace and a few chairs against the wall allowing those who enter her space to have a seat. Historically, the room is meant to be for either a guest or resident of the home, not for an enslaved person or their descendants. Yet, the soloist claims this empty room as her room for viewers to enter. The significance of the soloist inviting people into her room is a reclamation of a Black woman having agency over who and when she will allow someone to enter her space. It is suturing the historical significance of a Black woman inside of white-owned homes in general and a plantation mansion in particular.

Consequently, no space in the white imagination is safe for a Black woman because she is vulnerable to the ill intentions inflicted upon her. Tanya Wideman-Davis's invitation to enter her space does not come with a warm cup of tea accompanied by scones, watercress sandwiches, and pleasantries. Instead, you are to bear witness to her attestation through dance. She is costumed in a long dress reminiscent of Martha Graham's "Apalachin Spring," and her hair is styled in the Martha Graham- style chignon, too. Wideman-Davis's movement showcases her exquisite training and facility as she emphasizes the weighted intensity of the choreography, Aretha's belting, and the memory-making as she conjures Black maternal re-memory. The choreography intensifies as she transitions to sitting in the chair, holding herself as she shudders and rocks while Aretha sings, "Come on and show me/ Show me where you/ show me where you buried him." The rocking and shudders are as though the soloist is caught in the spirit. Catching the spirit is Wideman-Davis's moment of disappearing into the performance. Spiritual possession, or as I would like to think of it as, bodily transcendence, is common in Black Spirituality in general and the Black Church in particular.

To be possessed in the Black Church tradition is when the Holy Spirit or God in the nonmaterial form encounters the material body. The encounter suspends the physical body from the grounded state of being bound by the body and its material conditions. The person experiencing the encounter is suspended into a state of being in direct communion with the Divine. Spiritual encounters are

experienced in other African Diasporic spiritual systems such as Vodun, Candomblé, Santeria, and other spiritual practices that originate from the continent of Africa. It is not to be interpreted as a negative experience. Instead, it is anticipated, welcomed, and encouraged because the encounter solidifies one's connection to the Divine. The soloist gets up from her chair as her body undulates and pulses, which symbolizes her communion with the spirit. She takes steps as she reaches out to an audience member who extends their hand to her as she braces herself and leads the way out of the room. Others follow the audience member and the soloist out of her room and into the hallway of the mansion.

The mansion sits sturdy and practically unscathed despite the elements of time. Yet, the function of the mansion and the land surrounding it still haunts those descendants and anyone who encounters it. Wideman-Davis's solo probes the space within a space to interrogate its form and function. The solo transitions from the weighted and grounded movements that accentuate the role of Black women in white domestic space into a seated possession. The possession takes the Black body from the weighted condition to that of flight and transcendence. The seeds are planted the moment she gives the invitation to enter her room because it is an invitation to look into the interiority of Black womanhood to have a place to be. Her solo undoes the historical project of not granting her a place or any space to be exhausted, to mourn, to contemplate flight and transcendence. The room is the soloist's watch service.[7] By watching the watcher, the audience is left to wonder, will Freedom's Eve arrive, or will she take flight? That is her choice because she allows us into the room with her as she watches and waits for the spirit to arrive.

Conclusion: Piecing together peace

To be or not to be, a phrase penned by Shakespeare, is palpable when thinking of Black artmaking and the performance to create it. Black artmaking exists because of the memory-making and piecing together fragments of fragments. The artmaker is tasked with the ceaseless question of how one exists when the social project of anti-Black racism says otherwise. It is, as De Frantz states in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay that they do so "as a fugitive and intertextual practice." Fugitivity is the state of being illegible to the state. Illegibility is when one's

[7] See "The Historical Legacy of Watch Night." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*. https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-watch-night

existence is not cataloged in the social apparatus because no precedent or statute factors in that person or community's humanity. Therefore, they exist outside of what is socially and legally sanctioned.

Black life resides outside of what is socially and legally sanctioned because their humanity is never fully factored into the white imagination. Instead, it exists within the margins, and it is exploited to feed the insatiable appetite for whiteness. The intertextual practice of memory formation and artmaking is a fugitive act because it does so without asking permission or sanction from white spectators. The act of black artmaking and its performance resists the social constraints of white supremacist ideology and its imposition of dominance and plunder by re-memory and piecing together. Once the artist pieces together their tapestry, it dissolves socially imposed notions of fragmentation and dispossession and welcomes the ability to contemplate peace. Peace for the fugitive who is Black is the right to be and the choice to not be. Ultimately, Black thought can move beyond social constructions of the body, how that body is allowed to move and exist in a state of being unperturbed.

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