Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies
Vol. 21, No. 3 (2025)

Migratuse Ataraxia: Race, the Antebellum South and Critical Fabulation

Myron M. Beasley

> *Migratuse*: Migrated, departed, to have gone away, having been changed, and the habitual patterns of moving from one place to another.
>
> *Ataraxia*: Calmness or peace of mind, emotional tranquility.
>
> "conjur[e] something new from the absence of Africans as humans that is at the heart of the text"
>
> —NourbeSe Philip[1]

I have a complicated relationship with the South. I am enamored with the vast green spaces and the grand Magnolia trees whose scent is just as pronounced as the lavish white flowers that emerge from the ruby seeds. The grandness of the southern colonial architecture. The Grecian columns, wide porches, the red brick and the wood floors. I appreciate the pace of life, so evident in the southern draw, the mode of speech which is marked with paralinguistic elements of generosity. I was excited then when in 2016, I was invited to participate in a performance project about the South, *Migratuse Ataraxia* which was envisioned by Thaddeus Davis and Tanya Wideman-Davis, founders and choreographers of Wideman Davis

Myron M. Beasley, Ph.D., teaches in the areas of American Studies and Women and Gender Studies at Bates College. He is also an international curator and cultural critic. He is the author of *Performance, Art, and Politics in the African Diaspora* (Routledge Press). His research explores the intersection of cultural politics, art, and social change. He has garnered distinguished awards and fellowships from the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Whiting Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Davis Family Foundation, the Reed Foundation, and the Dorathea and Leo Rabkin Foundation. Most recently, he was awarded the Constance H. Carlson Public Humanities Prize. Website: myronbeasley.com.

[1] Philip, Marlene Nourbese, and Setaey Adamu Boateng. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2008, http://site.ebrary.com/id/10528309. 5.

Dance. The request corresponded with my appointment as the Paschal P. Vacca Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Montevallo, Alabama. As a male-identified person of African descent, the excitement was replaced with my fears of the American South. A place of fear and horror of racial intolerance. The despondent narrative retold and replayed in media and the often-told historical narrative foregrounded in my schooling. I was not born in the South, but I have an extensive array of experiences from education, familial and professional occasions that would take me to segments of that region of the United States. New Orleans is one of my favorite cities that I frequently visit. I try to convince myself that New Orleans is not in the South, even though the city's primary economic engine is tourism based on a performance of the Antebellum South. In contemporary New Orleans, black individuals perform hospitality roles, often dressed in costumes, serving as shoe shiners, bellhops, chauffeurs, and cooks. The city's reputation as a culinary capital, the birthplace of jazz music, and the celebratory debauchery of Mardi Gras obscures the reality, at least for me, that it is indeed part of the South. The relics of the haunted antebellum south is very present, but the public performances blur the realities of the heaviness that lingers for me that New Orleans is THE South.

In her book, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*, Imani Perry compellingly emphasizes the South's significance in shaping the United States.[2] The book, a collection of reflexive narrative, explores her personal experiences in the region of her birth. Through her visits to key cities and historical landmarks, she highlights her interactions with others, revealing the depth of shared humanity within these encounters. Perry beautifully presents precious and cherished stories of human connection that are often overlooked in the broader narrative of the American South. Imagining the South as "ugly," "backwards," and "racist," as I had embraced, is challenged by Perry for a more complicated and nuanced portrait. In *The Devil You Know*, Charles Blow advocates for a reverse migration, suggesting that African Americans return to the South.[3] He

[2] Perry, Imani. *South to America: A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*. First edition., ECCO, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2022.
[3] Blow, Charles M. *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto.* First edition. New York, NY, Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2021. Blow, Charles M. *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto.* First edition. New York, NY, Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2021.

describes this move as potentially "the most audacious power play by Black America in the history of the country."[4] According to Blow, the Great Migration was a failure because the destination cities—major urban centers where African Americans sought refuge in the North and West—never truly provided a functional or supportive environment for Black lives. Blow argues that a return to the South could empower African Americans politically and contribute to dismantling the systemic inequities entrenched in political institutions. Both Blow and Perry, who are African American and were born in the South, call for a reevaluation of the American South, particularly regarding the experiences of Black Americans.

From 2015 to 2019, I traveled regularly through Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Alabama with Wideman Davis Dance. Other collaborators and fellow travelers included performance artist Michaela Pilar Brown, dramaturge /dancer Gina Kohler, visual artist Eto Otitigbe, and sound and lighting designers Toni Stoeri and Allen Hahn, with the aim of creating a site-specific performance. The group spent weeks traveling throughout South Carolina, visiting historical landmarks and sites such as St. Helena Island, McLeod Plantation, Hobcaw Barony, the Cotton Museum, and many more.

We studied memorials and explored how African Americans are commemorated in the South, including their relationship to architecture through the work of Mabel O. Wilson[5] and Shabazz.[6] We also analyzed city grids and spatial racial geographies as they relate to historical and contemporary cultural politics, inspired by Katherine McKittrick.[7] Alongside our reading and research, we physically walked and sat in places to help us grasp how the mere design of cities and buildings of the American South inform and continue to echo the narrative of

---

[4] Blow, 10.

[5] Wilson, Mabel. *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. 1st paperback printing, University of California Press, 2012. Wilson, Mabel. *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. 1st paperback printing, University of California Press, 2012.
Wilson, Mabel (Mabel O.). *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*. University of California Press, 2012.

[6] Shabazz, Rashad. *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. University of Illinois Press, 2015.

[7] McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. 1st ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

white supremist patriarchy. The topics of history and space have long been a preoccupation of performance theorists, including Pollock[8] who expresses that it is imperative to consider performance as a significant frame to explore history, while Bowman & Bowman[9] and Schneider[10] consider the political and cultural problematics of replaying or reenactments at historic monuments and tourist sites. *Migratuse Ataraxia* is neither a re-enactment nor a traditional theatre production; rather it seeks to situate performance a method of discovery and a creative tool for critical interrogation grounded in what Hartman refers to as critical fabulation. *Migratuse Ataraxia* builds upon and highlights the efficacious nature of performance to dismantle and complicate the master historical narratives and one that engages in the concept of fugitivity.

Saidiya Hartman's generative essay, "Venus in Two Acts" ponders the limits and silences of the archive.[11] Her query into the black "woman" who is nameless in historical documents only to realize the constraints as "no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said or observed that she refused to say anything at all". [12] How can we tell the story of those who have been rendered nameless, voiceless, essentially stripped of their humanity. Critical fabulation is a methodological process of investigating the archives to produce speculative action that utters stories of those omitted or disregarded. It is a radical positionality that aims to "tell an impossible story" while simultaneously foregrounding the "impossibility of its telling".[13] The "Venus" in the title of the essay, then is a symbol, a representation of the enslaved black women of the transatlantic slave trade. Through the speculative telling, an imagining beyond the historical record is an act of fugitivity, which Moten defines as, "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed".[14]

---

[8] Pollock, Della. (1998) "Making History Go." in Della Pollock (ed.), *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
[9] Bowman, M.S. (1998) *'Performing Southern History for the Tourist Gaze: Antebellum Home Tour Guide Performances'*, pp. 142-58 in Della Pollock (ed.), *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
[10] Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge, 2011.
[11] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2, 2008, p. 1-14. *Project MUSE*, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.
[12] Hartman, 2.
[13] Hartman, 11.
[14] Wallace, David S. "Fred Moten's Radical Critique of the present." New Yorker April 30, 2018.

I consider myself to be a hauntologist in my understanding of performance. This concept positions performance as a continuous activity that leaves a lasting impression. When we engage with and witness events, activities, or creative productions, we may not immediately comprehend what we have experienced, but it will resonate with us over time—the meaning may unfold later—it will haunt. While this idea is often attributed to Derrida, I want to emphasize that the cyclical nature of time and the non-linearity of history are rooted in Indigenous and African epistemologies. Performance is also resistance. *Migratuse Ataraxia* use performance as a means for "imaginative summoning and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggle" highlights the contested nature of history.[15]

The premise of *Migratuse Ataraxia* is ongoing the precarious nature of blackness. Moten reminds us that blackness is the subject always working to be detached from the object. The oeuvre of Moten and Hartman intellectual enterprise catechize the heaviness, the ongoing psychological trauma that even through celebratory and creative aesthetic action is tinged and layered with pain and hurt. "Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering," writes Moten, "which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study."[16] In the production literature of Wideman Davis Dance, *Migratuse Ataraxia* is described as an "interdisciplinary performance that reveals the dormant and silenced histories of the Black experience in antebellum plantation homes." *Migratuse Ataraxia* is a creative action built on historical factuality that imagines black lives through the residuum and traces and through its unearthing liberates future selves.

Between 2019 and 2021, *Migratuse Ataraxia* traveled to three locations: the Hampton Preston Mansion, the Klein Wallace House, and the Bellamy Mansion, which are situated in South Carolina, Alabama, and North Carolina respectively. In 2022, WDD was awarded a grant from the Mellon Foundation, which allowed the collective to perform *Migratuse Ataraxia Re-imagined*. The upcoming articles in this performance review segment will focus on the original "Migratuse Ataraxia" performance. Therefore, I will foreground the performances at the Hampton Preston Mansion and the Klein Wallace House to discuss the specifics of the installations.

---

[15] Conquergood, Dwight. "Storied Worlds and the Work of Teaching." Communication Education 42.4 (1993):337. Print

[16] Moten, (2017, xiii).

The performance at the Hampton Preston Mansion was the premiere, while the production at the Klein Wallace House was part of the Alabama Dance Festival. The basic scaffolding consists of a series of independent creative actions, which the audience is led through in various chambers of the domicile. However, the structure is fluid enough to allow for incorporating local history. Guests gather out-side of the building where a spokesman emerges and reads from a scroll–usually the slave code of the state (in South Carolina for example, *South Carolina 1740 Negro Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes*[17]). After reading the proclamation, the master of ceremonies guides the audience through the front doors into the foyer, where they can witness and hear the performers cascading down the stairs, moving in unison like a Greek chorus. The women wear simple cotton dresses with their faces covered by veils, while the men are dressed in muslin slacks and vests. Their costumes pay homage to the attire of enslaved workers during the Antebellum period. The spokesman concludes his monologue by inviting the audience to join him on a journey. The oral reading of the slave code and the artists somnambulism like movement evoked a foreboding undertone.

A diverse range of creative activities takes place in each room of the mansion, reflecting the complex and multilayered stories of the space. One example is a choreographed movement piece, where two male dancers perform alongside projected videos on the walls. The projections depict powerful images of Black men running and working in what appears to be the lush fields of the South. As the audience stands against the walls of the room, the dancers—who remain silent—move in sync with both the sound and the silent projections.

In another room, the "Barbershop Scene" offers a more interactive experience. As the audience enters, three male performers engage in lively banter across generations. The barber, an older man, grooms a middle-aged customer while sharing narratives from his past. He recounts a story from the WPA Slave Narrative Project[18], prompting the younger performer to express doubt and disbelief at first. However, he eventually realizes his ignorance regarding his cultural history. On the walls of the barbershop, beautifully illuminated price lists, designed by artists Eto Otitigbe and Adrian Cameron, alternate between displaying the prices for different haircut styles and the prices of enslaved individuals. The

[17] https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/ls261/chapter/ch-1-1-the-slave-code-of-south-carolina-1740/
[18] The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection: An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives |Articles and Essays | Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 | Digital Collections | Library of Congress. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.

posted information is specific to the location and is based on extensive research conducted by the designers.

The audience witnesses a haunting and disturbing performance by artist Michaela Pilar Brown. The space is filled with mounds of torques, brown and indigo sand, and glass, all set in a darkened room with ropes and chains hanging from the ceiling. The audience enters silently and observes Brown as she marks the floor with white chalk. She strives to mark the number of bodies that once endured the horrors of the mansion. As she increases her speed and intensity, her chalk markings grow louder, and she lets out a violent howl—a screeching scream that transitions into a hopeless, grieving whimper and moan. The sound and lighting design are meticulously crafted to work in unison, enhancing the overall impact of the performance.

Quilts, some antique and all made by a community of Black women in Alabama, are creatively displayed in the room. The thoughtful lighting design and sound enhance the significance of the objects, which bear witness to history and convey powerful narratives. At times, the lighting highlights the raw features of the space, from the uneven pine floors to the torn wallpaper and chipped dishes. In the case of the Wallace House, the performers and crew had to sweep and clean away the layers of dust and dirt, as this was the inaugural event in a newly designated historical house. In contrast, the Hampton Preston House, managed by Historic Columbia, is a well-preserved venue. The politics surrounding what could be moved and what had to remain, along with various restrictions, sometimes limited the scope of the performances. This contrast between the two historic antebellum homes emphasizes the challenges and politics involved in executing such creative interventions within these landmark institutions.

The final segment of *Migratuse Ataraxia* is the culinary experience. I served as the culinary art historian because of my research which interrogates food, history, race and performance.[19] At each site I would research the foodways and would invite local African American chefs to participate in the creation of the menu and the preparation of the meal. At the Preston House in Columbia, I collaborated with the archivist to examine letters, manuscripts, and records of the gardens, detailing the produce grown and the meals that were once prepared. Working with noted chef BJ Denis, every menu item reflected the Antebellum

[19] Beasley, M. "Performing the Untold: *Repast.Malaga". Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies,* vol. 15, no. 2, 2019, 1-8.

foodways and historic agricultural realities of that land. The menu at the Preston House:

> First course:
> Fish and Grits Canapes
>
> Second course:
> African Guinea flint cornbread, Sea Island red pea sauce and Sapelo Island blue ribbon cane syrup
>
> Third course:
> Steamed Carolina Gold rice, seasonal greens, BBQ Ossabaw Island Pork Belly
>
> Dessert:
> Cotton Candy and Bourbon Ice Cream

Situating food—the culinary arts—as an integral part of the performance was intentional from the beginning of the creative process. The importance of foodways and other aspects of material culture is frequently overlooked. Food is a form of performance. Food items carry multiple meanings related to economics, class, religion, labor conditions, as well as familial traditions and histories. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes food, "… is already performative and theatrical. An art of the concrete, food, like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory. It is already performative and theatrical. An art of the concrete, food, like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory".[20] By concluding the performance with a communal meal, the audience is allowed to engage in the various narratives presented. In this setting, they not only digest the food but also participate in a discussion about the experience they have just witnessed.

The segment opens with Uhuru's essay, *Acts of Memory.* A most apropos theoretical promulgation that situates visceral memory recovery and black art making as philosophy. Tony Stoeri provides a punctilious sonic tour of the performance. He exquisitely narrates, *Migratuse Ataraxia* through sound elements of the show. Winston Benon's essay contemplates aurality by theoretically situating *MA*

[20] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium". *Performance Research*, vol *4 no* 1, 1999, 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.1999.10871639.

in the panoply of African ritual movement traditions of affect and performativity. WDDC co-founder Thaddeus Davis contributes a video essay detailing the South's racial landscape by highlighting Montgomery, Alabama, his birthplace and the site of the National Memorial of Peace and Justice with economic development and racial geographies of the South. Brian Evans, "There was Love," is a generative response to witnessing the performance in Columbia, South Carolina. Evans' autoethnographic essay is a theoretical treatise on negotiating identity and memory. Evans attention to the topic of love helps return again to Hartman and Moten. With much ardor, and cited in Evans' essay, bell hooks positions love as a contrivance to freedom. I engage in art and performance because it does not just "represent" the human condition; it *is* the human condition. The final creative action before the audience is led to the dinner is a dance performance by the co-founders of WDD to Al Green's *Simply Beautiful*. The dancers move in unison, always touching. The intimacy and vulnerability evoke an intangible, dare I say, a forgiving kind of love. Performance has the power to pierce, provoke, and present truth in public. Can a love story be told in the structure and frame of white supremist patriarchy? *MA* is about love as it is about the pain and horrors of enslavement and continued racism in the United States. Is it a love that propels protest? It is a love that encourages scholars to pine the archive for the nameless and unheard. Love grounds *Migratuse Ataraxia,* and in that love is a freedom, fugitivity.