

Black Critical and Cultural Theory

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Abstract

This chapter reviews black critical and cultural theory under the following headings: 1. Introduction; 2. Black Performance Studies (Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: Consent Not To Be a Single Being*; and Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts: A History of the Impossible*); 3. Black Gender Studies (Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*); and 4. Black Music Studies (Paul Steinbeck, *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago*).

1. Introduction

This year's contributions to black cultural studies saw a tremendous uptick in texts centered on rethinking paradigms of black gender formation through performance and, in a related register, more culturally trenchant considerations of black musical, theatrical practices and aesthetics. The 1920s Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the internationalist threads of the black arts movements and black power politics of the 1960s were in varying degrees explicit and implicit specters for the texts on review this year. It is rare and perhaps overstated to say quite similarly that the work of black feminist critic Hortense Spillers represents a theoretical and intellectual keystone for many if not all of the works on offer this year. While Spillers's work in the 1980s emerged primarily out of a newly academically established sense of black feminism as a critique of Western (read white) feminism and its overrepresentative authority in authoring and authorizing the human, man; her essayistic thought has been the bedrock for an entire field for rethinking black genders and rethinking gender through blackness, performance, music, literary and textual analysis, and of course through the structural erasure of black women as a category and force for, in, and of

politics. The varied range and theoretical sophistication of many of the texts on offer this year owe an intellectual debt to Spillers's work explicitly and implicitly as they shape and reshape a contemporary moment in black studies around an ancestral and ongoing tracking of black aesthetics, politics, and performance. Avoiding a reductively sociological register, 2017s texts attempt to consider—very much in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement of a half-century ago—how gender, performance, and sociality are created through black art and how black art in turn bears on the practice and creation of black gender, performance, and sociality.

2. Black Performance Studies

Spillers's work, as it informs the expansive academic and poetic writing of Fred Moten, emerges as another genealogical link in this year's releases, as every text under review this year makes citation of Moten's seminal text *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). The range of Moten's influence within the humanities, arts, and social sciences concerning black studies can hardly be charted, but the texts under review give some partial insight into the impact of Moten's thinking.

Black and Blur: Consent Not To Be a Single Being

A fourteen-year-long period of waiting for Fred Moten's second book has finally come to a close with the arrival of 2017's *Black and Blur: Consent Not To Be a Single Being*. The seismic impact of Moten's first text *In the Break* is simply incalculable, as a text that staked out its own vital legacy within a black rethinking of modernity and Western civilization with the likes of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983), C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1938), Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* (Jones/Baraka 1963), and Sylvia Wynter's philosophical—and as of this writing yet un-monographed—corpus. Moten's *In the Break* also insistently ruptured the myopic intellectual whiteness of fields such as sound studies, performance studies, visual theory and art history, poetics and poetry, political theory, jazz studies, and literary criticism. Fred Moten's work can, in this regard, hardly be placed within one field, set of approaches, or intellectual genealogy. For the last decade and a half the question after the appearance of such an influential tome as *In the Break* has been: What will Moten's next step look like? Will it walk in its own wake or, like *In the Break*, shift step and form an entirely new path altogether? *Black and Blur* seems for

the most part to dance in the shadow of the former while tiptoeing tentatively into the light of the latter.

The subtitle of the book, *Consent Not To Be a Single Being*, and potentially its thematic, are poached and then modified from the words of Édouard Glissant in a 2009 interview conducted with filmmaker and scholar Manthia Diawara, in which Glissant states:

It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity. I think that's what's important in all the movements of the world, and we, the descendants, who have arrived from the other shore, would be wrong to cling fiercely to this singularity which had accepted to go out into the world. (Diawara, 'Édouard Glissant in Conversation', 2011)

At its most essential level Glissant's statement here seems to refer to Moten's writing, which in *In the Break* was a more unified continuity, almost manifesto-like, but which in *Black and Blur* is far more formally scattered. The poetics of *Black and Blur* recall some of Moten's characteristic philosophically poetic approach, but this style, especially in his newer writings, straddles the line between poetic and programmatic—in some cases even taking on the structure of the list or (mathematical) proof as a poetic material. Numerically spilling over from the meatier essay 'Collective Head', the essay 'Cornered, Taken, Made to Leave' is emblematic of this skittering style, which finds Moten numbering his paragraphs almost as stanzas and unfurling non-sequitur phrases like:

Blackness isn't a people problem; it's a problematization of the people. Black study—which is to say blackness: the preoccupied breath of the ones who have been taken who have been made to leave—is the medi(t)ation of things as, breaking and remaking every law, every bond, they shimmer in the absolute disappearance, the absolute nothingness of their sociality. (p. 202)

For anyone familiar with Moten's poetry, and particularly his award-winning collection *The Feel Trio*, this skittering structure will appear more familiar than to those exclusively acquainted with his academic oeuvre. The question of structure and referentiality may even supersede most of the arguments of *Black and Blur*—for there are countless and undoubtedly fragmented arguments in the text.

Structurally the book bears more similarity to Hortense Spillers's *Black, White and In Color* (2003), a collection of essays by a profoundly original thinker, with whom Moten has shared a career-long intellectual affinity and interlocution. Like Spillers's tragically singular book, *Black and Blur* is essentially a composite collection of, on the one hand, long-form and varying revised previously published essays and, on the other, new materials of fluctuating quality and length that primarily engage institutionalized aesthetics and art practices but which also still tarry with Moten's characteristic revitalizing erudition of the black popular. Among the more potent previously published essays are 'Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia', 'The New International of Rhythmic Feel/ings', and 'The Phonographic Mise-en-Scène'. These are surrounded by numerous distinct and varying new essays ranging from more traditional art-historical and cultural analysis to poetical-theoretical pastiche. One generally refreshing aspect of Moten's more original works is that they carve out imminent responses to relevant debates, always in a mode which expands and makes more dense the reductive tendencies of slogan and formula that predominate in much humanistic discourse. His work resists oversimplification and generally, even when prompted to do so, bucks institutional platitude in exchange for thorough theoretical and philosophical rigor. Though it may seem odd, this density is a strength of Moten's previously published essays but the book offers a much more mixed bag in the context of his pithy and longer new works.

'Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia', 'The New International of Rhythmic Feel/ings', and 'The Phonographic Mise-en-Scène' all find Moten rearticulating a dynamic split from *In the Break* around blackness's and black art's radical critique of the avant-garde in terms of temporality, sound, structure, and language. Moten's critique of Theodor Adorno's critique of musical seriality through Glen Gould's 'image of the music' and the rethinking of phonographic listening and Eisenstein's performative dispensation of temporality in montage is sublime. Similarly, 'The New International of Rhythmic Feel/ings' fulfills some of the diasporic promise implied by the Glissant reference in the book's subtitle. This quite lengthy essay tracks Ornette Coleman's Calypso past as a kind of experimentally affective black diasporic practice rooted in a complicated politics of feeling. Like the aforementioned essay, this piece represents perhaps the best modality of Moten's writing about art and as art. The essay 'Interpolation and Interpellation', which discusses sampling in the context of Maya and Pras's 'Ghetto Superstar' (1998), attempts, in an extremely economical fashion, a confluence of these older modes of theoretical exposition around form, identity, sound, and subjectification in a playful and elucidating manner. The ethical stakes of

these writings bear a similar kind of relation to Moten's previous writing, carving out a black social through black music, which, unlike the legalistic conception of black life/death under the symbology of the law, is rooted endlessly in an unwieldy mode of practice. The scattering logic of some of Moten's newer writings, however, circles around an at times confusing ethical practice, particularly with respect to institutionally hegemonic contemporary fine artists and artworld institutions.

In the final chapter of *In the Break*—the path-breaking rereading of Adrian Piper's ephemeral performances against the static authority of the art-historical cannon—Moten makes a more decisive turn, from arguing for a revision of the legacy of black power within a largely internalized world of black critique to rebuking the whiteness of the mainstream institutional modernist and avant-garde criticism of Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried. At this turn we might have wondered whether Moten was broaching such patently conservative, white racist, and narrowly studied thinkers of art to dialectically instantiate the overcoming of the black avant-garde in a manner resonant with Larry Neal's writing in the Black Arts Movement, or rather whether, like the neoliberal assimilation that followed the radically abolitionist tides of the 1960s and early 1970s, Moten was functionally or implicitly making a demand of inclusion or appeal to recognition of black art within the kind of conservative institutional critique that Krauss and Fried represent. While *Black and Blur* does not subscribe to an aestheticized respectability politics, the collection of essays, and particularly the 'new' writings by Moten, seem to forge a vexed path toward some kind of black institutionalization—namely Moten's style of art-critical writing in many of his newer essays and the subject of mostly institutionally established black artists.

The most egregious example of this is Moten's poetically ruminative essay on Theaster Gates entitled 'Everywhere, Nowhere'. Theaster Gates's artistic project purportedly takes the form of art institutionality itself as a medium wherein the artist obtains highly lucrative funding to revamp 'run-down' buildings in low-income black neighborhoods in Chicago and turn them into non-profit art institutions that archive kinds of black art including the 'newly built' institution itself. Moten celebrates Gates's practice as 'dark speculation', but Moten never extends any kind of critique to the reality that what Gates is speculating on is the supposedly dark—and therefore in need of illumination—black life that capital wishes to primitively accumulate, evaluate, and commodify. Gates's work essentially aestheticizes the practice of gentrifying black neighborhoods—an institutional practice that predominantly white-owned art galleries have of course perfected throughout the Western world. Moten's quietude on the symbolically celebratory yet

materially and practically anti-black politics of Gates's aesthetics speaks volumes as to the way a performative poetical aesthetic in Moten's more recent writing has run roughshod over the sonic ethic his work was perhaps most famous for in and through the rereading of Frederick Douglass's scene of subjection/objection in relation to Aunt Hester. Even if Moten's work, in its sheer originality, has become in many senses a reference unto itself, one wonders how Moten would overlook such a vital pivot for the consideration of black practices that are being brutally erased through the assimilationist agendas of highly financed official arts institutions. This is to further stake out the space and mode of accumulation and valuation that the Black Arts Movement criticized as part of the Eurocentric regime of anti-communal art that must end, and quite tragically the mode of consumption of black art that would make practically and institutionally impossible something like the Black Arts Movement in our current moment.

Black and Blur, not entirely unlike Moten's *In the Break*, will be a text for black studies and cultural studies scholars to return to over the coming years, along with perhaps 2018's forthcoming compliments from Moten: *Stolen Life* and *The Universal Machine*. However, it still remains for Moten's project(s) to pair the unquestionably ethically driven aesthetics of his poetics with the exhaustive criticality, and in particular the ethical depth, characteristic of his earlier work. *Black and Blur* is recommended for scholars of black aesthetics, performance, music, poetics, and cultural criticism.

Black Performance on the Outskirts: A History of the Impossible

Malik Gaines's *Black Performance on the Outskirts* represents an interestingly split engagement, on the one hand expanding a fairly traditional and formally conventional sense of performance within the 'official' spaces of theatrical display, and on the other hand expressing a kind of theoretical engagement with race and gender. The former is more centrally located in Gaines's crosshairs and more readily carried out than the latter. The dramatic expansion of the field of performance studies, and specifically black performance studies, has taken place through the writings of Fred Moten, Jayna Brown, Anne Anlin Cheng, Michelle Ann Stevens, Ashon T. Crowley, Uri McMillan, and many others. While the context for Gaines's work is well fleshed out by these authors, upon whom Gaines draws, the scope of Gaines's book feels at times less clear. The historical parameters of *Black Performance on the Outskirts* are well defined through the objects of analysis and performance that Gaines tracks, all of which occur post-war and primarily in the 1960s and 1970s. The performers Gaines focuses on, such as Nina Simone, the Cockettes with

Sylvester, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Efua Sutherland, all represent important and under-studied sites of black performance, and in this sense Gaines's project conjures the archival drive of Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars* (2015). Yet, unlike McMillan, Gates does not establish as clearly defined a genealogical or formal thread between these performers and their performances. The disjointed connection between the objects of study seems largely to emerge from a muddled theoretical framing in the introduction. Gaines seems to want to explicate something like the carefully wrought mix of theory and aesthetics of Anne Anlin Cheng's book-length treatment of Josephine Baker, *Second Skin* (2012), while also discussing objects that are, again unjustifiably, rather analytically obscure.

Black Performance on the Outskirts attempts to set itself out as reconfiguring the theatrically performative conception of subjectivity through understanding canonical modes of dramatic subjection as structured on specific racial affects or structures—this is a hugely promising conceit. In the first chapter Gaines attempts to reread Nina Simone's theatricality against Brecht's historically appropriated sense of 'alienation effects'. The drive to analyze Simone's performative repertoire with a kind of analytical majesty is important and bespeaks Cheng's *Second Skin*, in which Josephine Baker's profound influence on and cutting through artistic modernism are rigorously and eloquently theorized. Gaines's treatment of Simone tries to argue how Simone's performances, through voice, body, and instrument, reconfigure the subject; a structure or restructuring Gaines calls 'quadruple consciousness', 'an expressive mode' that Simone enacts through 'persona, costume of voice' (p. 22). The explicit reference to Du Bois's double consciousness here, even when theorized directly through Du Bois, seems to come up short of making a substantial claim to a new understanding or critique of the subject. Undoubtedly one could link the respectability of Du Bois's mournful doubled and simultaneously half-made conception of black subjectivity to Simone's generalized political stance throughout the 1960s, and in particular through her investment in the acquisition of rights-based progress through the respectability performances during the civil rights movement. Gaines overlooks the intensely class-based or even classist dimensions of Du Bois's 'double consciousness', or perhaps more generously the way double consciousness inherently thinks the limits of subjectivity as it is prescribed by the very 'white world' in which it is realized. At the end of the first chapter the question remains whether Simone's subjectivity, the contours of which remain still perhaps too elusive, is a critique of the limitations of subjectivity itself or whether it is in the vein of the rights-based pleas of the civil rights movement—a kind of argument for the expansion of subjectivity and the

inclusion of this quadruple-ness. Is subjectivity merely a joke, a ruse, to which and through which Simone affixes and enacts multiple ruses that expose its illusive power? These massive questions, which Gaines's text briefly raises, are just as capriciously moved on from through the somewhat scattered nature of the following chapters.

The tension between producing a wide-ranging, theoretically speculative text and a more formal historical account of black performance is more resolved as Gaines chooses to focus more on the latter in Chapter 4, 'The Cockettes, Sylvester and Performance as Life'. Although all of *Black Performance on the Outskirts* broaches sites of black performance that are generally under-studied, this is indeed much of the text's successful daring. The archival and historical research and framing of this section of *Black Performance on the Outskirts* are perhaps the strongest in the text. Recalling the kind of fascinating archival research and material connections that characterize Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars*, Gaines spends this chapter in a focused analysis of Sylvester and the Cockettes' 'celebratory excess' as both relating to and contrasting with the contemporary codes of style of black power and black nationalism (p. 136). How 'The Cockettes' ambivalent drag performances constructed a provisional world to live in, while also critiquing the normative social world and its regulating images', is interestingly theorized in a manner that exposes the carnivalesque nature of power that is conventionally associated with the spectacle of drag. To this extent Gaines's work develops a meaningful rethinking of drag beyond its naive celebration of gender transgression—which has in the field of queer studies now been roundly critiqued. Gaines focuses on drag's 'grotesque critical mode' that 'make[s] travesties of the revered figures of the elite class who are participants in the state-sponsored sanctification of [the] heterosexual' and the gendered politics of respectability therein (p. 142). Yet this is also crucially tempered by the way the excessive grotesque mode of critique in drag, in tending toward an excessive irony, also risks and often falls into an absolute ethical nexus wherein the political context of the original referent becomes parodically abstracted into simulacral oblivion. Here blackness makes an important intervention.

The attempt to read Sylvester's black performative embodiment into a largely white context is intriguing for how it might make claims to a kind of black camp or irony. Yet the question of a political reality—in a distantly Marxist sense of the materiality of the world one lives in—remains a conflicted and contested space. Here Gaines tries to think of Sylvester and the Cockettes' mode of confrontation as distantly connected to their contemporaneous fascination with the Black Panther party's intensely stylized

conception of black politics (p. 161). This is a fascinating expositional turn in Gaines's text, as the Black Panthers' militant masculinized aesthetic is read as both an intensely functionalist and, in its very functionalism, weighty mode of gender performance for the putatively feminine subjects it engenders. The expansive archive of Black Panther performance, including an analysis of party member/leader Elaine Brown's propaganda record album, expands the scope of drag's exposition of the normative carnivalesque of *the* black political. However, vitally, Gaines makes sure to critically distinguish the kind of critical light Sylvester's black drag shines on black politics and the artistic but not necessarily radically political self-expression that Sylvester's drag affected in the world. There is a necessary irresolution to this chapter that actually intensifies the stakes of the political antinomy Gaines draws, and lets stay drawn, between black politics and art.

Black Performance on the Outskirts is at times an intellectual hodgepodge, which, from the opening moment of the text's historical framing, leaves the reader somewhat confused as to the relationship between the chapters and the objects of study the work discusses. That being said, a generous and strategic poaching of the text by scholars in performance studies, black studies, drama and theater studies, and black gender theory will give its at times disparate contents meaningful critical clarity.

3. Black Gender Studies

Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity

Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is the most path-breaking work in black studies for 2017. Snorton's text responds to the very real urgency of lived black gender realities, yet oddly there is little academic precedent for Snorton's vital project outside of a select few and intellectually variegated texts. *Black on Both Sides* is an ambitious text that strives to stake out the genealogies and histories of black genders and hence take seriously the foundational claims of Hortense Spillers's 1987 article 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book'. Spillers's work emerges out of the radical trajectories of black feminist theorizing and political organizing around black women and black relationships to gender, which began by thinking through the conflicted category of women through the inextricably linked lived complexity of blackness. Spillers's project, then, like Snorton's text, while operating through an implicitly intersectional paradigm, actually attempts to theorize the split between the symbolic coherence of race/gender and the lived imaginative rupture through which that symbolic is bandied about and comes vaguely

to misrecognition. For Spillers this is the genealogy of blackness as the constitutive race/gender of the captive subject; Spillers writes (and is cited in Snorton): ‘the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory’ (p. 17). The tendency of more explicitly assimilationist and implicitly assimilationist (in their doubtful yet ambiguous mourning of this object) treatments of blackness has been to frame this ‘objectification’ and its attendant laboratory as (symbolically) barring blackness from obtaining the ‘fullness’ of the prescribed genders of the human. However, Snorton (and many would argue this of Spillers, including Fred Moten) completely re-frames the necessarily experimental relationships that blackness operates in, through, and as gender. This is the occasion to think of black genders as not merely subordinately isomorphic with white genders, white sexualities, white transness, or white queerness, and to flesh out, as Snorton’s text sets about doing, a necessarily radically different understanding, performance, and lived reality of gender through blackness.

Snorton begins his text with a theoretical staging and restaging of transness, of which his work refuses the prescribed representative yoke, writing: ‘For the transitivity and transversality of blackness and transness exist prior to their articulation, which is to say that the connections within these concepts occur in the formal anterior to their various calcifications of meaning or territorializations or permutative normalizations’ (p. 9). This theoretical framing distinguishes Snorton’s text from the earlier generation of works in queer of color critique—though Snorton’s work could be said to have evolved in some sense from this discourse, though more obliquely than one might guess—and establishes Snorton as doing a wholly original (however generously indebted) kind of project around black gender as what Snorton calls a ‘collateral genealogy’. Indeed the emphasis in Snorton’s project is not, in an exhaustive sense, about giving the reader a litany of black gender objects in the vein of early trans studies work by the likes of Susan Stryker. Yet nor does Snorton’s work present a ruthlessly ungrounded or (perhaps understandably) ever evasive purely discursive tracking, something a bit like the incredibly important but at times aloof work of Gayle Salmons. Snorton engages these works and the seminal queer studies and gender theory work of Eve Sedgwick, Elaine Scary, Judith Butler, and numerous others, but on the whole it is from the work of Spillers, a range of black studies and black feminist texts, and from an imaginative realization of black critical sites of performance and lived reality that Snorton completely re-theorizes gender and sex in, through, and across blackness.

The first chapter of *Black on Both Sides*, 'Anatomically Speaking', draws upon a growing body of scholarship in the history of black obstetrics and motherhood as rooted in the violently different experience of reproductive black embodiment via slavery and its aftermath. Chapter 1 tracks the literal 'laboratory' history of black engendering through gynecological and genital surgical experimentation. This chapter bifurcates along two profoundly antonymic paths: (1) asking if the implicitly anti-black transphobia of hetero- and homonormative conceptions of sex (that emerge out of the white/colonial homo/heteronormative conceptions of gender) is a product of transatlantic and plantation slavery; (2) (and this is connected to the first) reflecting on the fragile task of theorizing black gender from the violence and violation of black flesh that constitutes these procedures. It must be noted first that Snorton does not reduce either the ethics of his project or the specific ethics of the performances, instances, and objects he tracks to a naive celebration of 'resistance' or an equally naive (in its reductive cynicism) display of total abjection. Wisely, Snorton never wavers from the original impetus for his project that gender always involves, evokes, and emerges out of a certain form of captivity and capture, the formal nuances of which Snorton is trying to trace and think critically about. Snorton writes:

From this vantage point, one could consider the various ways 'gender' functions as an effect of plantation visibility, wherein captive flesh expressed an ungendered position that defines race as the *sine qua non* of sex. In this arrangement, gender socially constructs sex, and captive flesh becomes the material and metaphorical ground for unsettling a view of sex and gender as neatly divided according to each term's relation to medicoscientific knowledge. (p. 33)

This is to dislocate the presumed embodied totality of gender as biologically or even socially-symbolically constitutive prior to race, as Snorton further writes:

The founding of American gynecology and the distinct contrast between chattel experimentees and an 'imagined constituency of suffering white womanhood' highlights how flesh acted as a condition of possibility for the hospital as laboratory, creating a structure in which bodies were made flesh by way of medicoscientific discourses, techniques of experimentation and objectification born from a possessive scopophilic dynamic that characterized the enslaver's relation to the captive. (p. 40)

For the remainder of this chapter Snorton sets about, in rather graphic archival detail, reconstructing this fractured yet vital record of black engendered flesh in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gynecological experiments. Snorton is politically and ethically astute to focus on the medicalization of black genitalia and reproductive organs, but not in the transphobic or trans-exclusionary interest of simply reconstituting something either synonymous with or symbolically possessive of that genitalia as woman. Rather, as the quote above implies, the attention in *Black on Both Sides* is to focus on the captivity of the discursive formation of socialized and medicalized black genitalia as they become violently conflated with and used to disciplinarily produce something that eventually, perhaps only in the late twentieth century, ‘gets’ to be called black woman.

From this rethinking of the medicalized conception of black genders, which emerges as a conflicted space of being experimented on—discursively bearing down upon as gender—Snorton begins to think of a more explicitly trans-conception of black genders as necessarily rooted in the movement or ‘trans’ of the transatlantic slave trade its in numerous passages. Rather than taking a historical archival approach, this second section of Snorton’s text is centered more around literary analysis in a somewhat more conventional sense. Specifically, Snorton turns to the more recent (within the last decade) reinterpretation of slave narrative sparked by, amongst other things the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten. Snorton’s approach, however, is incredibly original in its further exposition of not only clinical but narratological and temporal complexities with respect to gender (dis)formation. Snorton attempts rather interestingly to theorize the way black art’s engagement with the ‘precariousness of representing the real’ contradicts even as it weaves through ‘the way blackness—marked and marked as male—was apprehended (p. 113). The foray into literature and aesthetics is no mere diversion, as Snorton moves with intent and execution to argue that the very fabricated nature or fungibility of blackness (from Spillers) signals its profoundly unwieldy relationship to gender. This aestheticization is essential to the capacity to conceive of ‘Blackness, as a condition of possibility that made transness conceivable in the twilight of formal slavery’ (p. 135). In the final sections of *Black on Both Sides* the articulation of black gender formations shifts from a reinterpretation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century (in some cases canonical) texts toward a more variegated consideration of black gender fugitivity under the violent brush of sumptuary laws that criminalized but in some cases actually made invisible black gender transgression/formations. The numerous cases of black gender variance that Snorton tracks represent an invaluable archive for those trying to do teaching

and research in black gender studies. The names of Anna Lee Grant/Jim McHarris, Ava Betty Brown, Carlette Angianlee Brown, Lucy Hicks Anderson, and Georgia Black will, for those living and studying the life of black gender transgression/non-conformation, provide an excitingly vibrant archive that affirms the very possibility of their impossible existence, but does so, quite profoundly, without succumbing to the trap of representation, which Snorton expertly argues is precisely the reason and force of black gender variation's attempted annihilation from the historical record. Chapter 4's apposition of the 'silhouette' of black gender variation against the still dominant narrative of white transness both critiques the commonplaceness of black trans erasure while criticizing—in a way immanent with the historical archive of lives and laws that Snorton exposes—the positions that would simply argue that 'we need more representation'. Snorton's work, then, runs in stride with an exciting new thread in the field of trans studies, widely emblemized in Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton's *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017), which is critical of the conflation of 'increased representation' with increased life-chances for trans and gender non-conforming people of color. This crucial skepticism around blackness and representation again recalls Snorton's theoretical indebtedness to and critical expansion of the work Fred Moten and Hortense Spillers respectively.

While Snorton's text, in its powerfully necessary originality, bears no exact academic precedent, readers of contemporary black gender and black queer studies—those familiar with Snorton's earlier work, the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman's writing, Roderick Ferguson, the award-winning recent collection *Trap Door*, and early thought by black feminists like Toni Cade Bambara, will find a wellspring of vital material in *Black on Both Sides*.

4. Black Music Studies

Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago

The exposition of the sonic and performative experimentations of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the Art Ensemble of Chicago represent a critically under-studied aspect of genuine black artistic innovation. Paul Steinbeck's *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble* aims to partially fill the gap in scholarship on these innovative black artists of the 1960s. Walking in the paths laid out by George Lewis's *A Power Stronger Than Itself* (2009) and Benjamin Looker's *Point from which Creation Begins* (2004), Steinbeck's text takes two primary registers as a kind of

socio-cultural archiving of the Art Ensemble of Chicago—so providing a more focused extension of the latter half of George Lewis’s tome—and a more formalist rendering of the improvised compositions of the Ensemble. While the more formalist work on black experimental music and free jazz emerged only as a blip in the 1970s and then disappeared, perhaps most singularly emblemized in Ekkehard Jost’s *Free Jazz* (1974) and its seminal attempt to formally render the transcendent work of the late improvising icon Cecil Taylor, Steinbeck’s *Message to Our Folks* rekindles some similarly structural attention to the oft-overlooked music of the 1960s. In particular, Steinbeck focuses on specific recordings and performances of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, including shows in Paris, a particularly exemplary set at Mandel Hall, and the Jazz Showcase in Chicago, throughout the 1970s. Like Jost’s *Free Jazz*, Steinbeck’s focus seems to be a way of both aesthetically distinguishing the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s work from the institutionalized conceptions of jazz that were generally dying out at the time, as conventional jazz stewardship under greats like Miles Davis was just as likely to capitulate to the dominant jazz tradition as it was to launch a career in the popular music scene that ambivalently held Davis’s late funk-laden experimentations—Herbie Hancock’s career trajectory illustrates this. Steinbeck, though, focuses more resolutely on the kind of bottleneck moment created by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the AACM, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, the later John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Bill Dixon, Sun Ra, the Black Artists Group of St. Louis, and myriad black musicians and collectives that sought very much in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement to establish their music with a formal and institutionally based seriousness that had been denied them precisely through the highly exploitative (albeit debatably profitable) albatross of the recording industry and the circuit of jazz club employment.

The visual and structural rendering of the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago thus plays a dual and perhaps ambivalent function. Steinbeck’s transcriptions are extensive and thoroughly accurate in representing an oftentimes unwieldy, chromatically rich, and structurally dense form of elusive improvised music—something which Steinbeck’s predecessor Jost simply avoided and instead vaguely gestured at, using the concept of ‘sound surfaces’ to describe such compositions. Granting the music an unquestionably deserved esteem does, on the one hand, fulfill the stated aspirations of the musicians cited in Steinbeck and elsewhere to have their music granted the utmost serious critical reception and formal understanding. But the fixation on validation through representation perhaps attempts to formally resolve kinds of music that were profoundly about creating infinite kinds of radical openings

at the level of practice and form. The exchange between Roscoe Mitchell and Alvin Fielder, cited by Steinbeck, when Mitchell asks, 'Can you play free music?', to which Fielder replies 'Yes I can play free music'; '[then] Come to my rehearsal on Thursday' (p. 37). What the 'free' in the music is, perhaps in the vein of Fred Moten's writing, which Steinbeck briefly cites, is a more imaginatively rich and yet materially real consideration that the book on the whole doesn't quite broach.

The at times brutal pragmatism of Steinbeck's approach, not entirely unlike that of Lewis's *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, does not always embrace a language or poetics for staking out an ethical relationship to the music not founded exclusively on its formal or, we might say, phenomenological representation. The closest such attempt to think both speculatively and practically in *Message to Our Folks* occurs in perhaps the best chapter of the text entitled 'Great Black Music'—recalling the Ensemble's famous slogan: 'Great Black Music Ancient to the Future'. In this section of the book Steinbeck discusses the more black power-rooted politics of the group as they wove through their formal and practical attempts to revise the entire understanding of music in the West. 'The Art Ensemble's slogan appeared at a moment in history when race and ethnicity were intensely politicized, and certain critics dismissed Great Black Music as a reductive notion that was better suited for a protest march than a concert stage' (p. 225). Throughout this chapter Steinbeck's formalist renderings and structuring of the book in terms of the concert-hall-centered performances of the Ensemble are more directly put into political attention to the kinds of political debates around representation in and beyond the Black Arts Movement that were critical to the cultural and aesthetic context out of which the Art Ensemble arose and the path they would profoundly carve for future generations. It is at this point that Steinbeck's text more resolutely attempts to weave in, however partially, the kinds of questions that dominate such critical discussion of black music and representation staked out by Amiri Baraka, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Larry Neal, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, and Nathaniel Mackey. These black writers, writing in the swell and shadow of the Black Arts Movement, have implicitly problematized the kind of validation and exegesis of black music that arose in the 'Jazz and the White Critic' mode famously represented in Gunther Schuller's tract of academic validation in 'Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation'. Thus the tendency toward musicological and notational renderings of the music risks returning to a modality of jazz exposition by white critics in a way of which Steinbeck would theoretically be critical. Though this discussion in *Message to Our Folks* is all too brief, one cannot help but appreciate the

complementary practical and social framework that accounts for the majority of the text.

Because the music and, most importantly, the collective politics and practices of the AACM, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and the Black Artists Group are so ludicrously under-studied, Steinbeck's contribution remains invaluable. The archiving and exposition of how the Ensemble made decisions, discussed and theorized music and performance, and organized collectively and socially are originally engaged in *Message to Our Folks*. A particularly startling instance of this is depicted in Steinbeck's description of Joseph Jarman's dealing with a death in the family through music, and the consolation of practice with his Art Ensemble found family is an intriguing moment in the text relating an affective relationship to the music as an alternative sociality to the given world. This kind of moment marks a subtle departure from the rigorously detailed but less affectively centered work of George Lewis around the same material and groupings of musicians. The general tendency to linger on moments, where George Lewis's text ultimately glosses in the interest of maintaining its massive foundational breadth, is an analytical strength of *Message to Our Folks* and marks its contribution to an all too under-studied thread in the history of black experimental music.

Though *Message to Our Folks* attains nowhere near the theoretical or intellectual breadth that characterizes some of the more innovative work being done in black sound studies, readers looking for something approaching the conceptual scope of Moten, Mackey, or Nielsen will find in the book's depth of historical and social documentation a meaningful addition to jazz studies, improvisation studies, black experimental music, and, more broadly, music and musicology.

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