UrbanApa presents:

BLACKNESS & THE POSTMODERN

Preview version
Blackness & the Postmodern – preview

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FOREWORD

by Sonya Lindfors

Dear Reader,

You are holding a preview of the art community UrbanApa’s forthcoming publication *Blackness & the Postmodern*. This preview contains four texts of various forms, each of them approaching the friction between blackness and postmodern contemporaneity in one way or another. The writers come from different backgrounds and localities; they are artists, curators, researchers, performers, activists and much more. The collection is not seeking coherence, but juxtaposing different voices and perspectives. It uncovers personal strategies, structural abrasions and fundamental questions:
Can blackness be postmodern, abstract or contemporary?

Who gets to represent neutrality or humanity?

Who is assigned to the canon?

In general, who are the creators of discourse in dance, choreography or performing arts?

Who are the gatekeepers and invisible holders of power?

Who get their voices heard, who are given visible agency?

Is blackness a niche for the contemporary capitalist art market?

How can we collectively dream about a better future?

But why these writers and questions right now?
This publication, like UrbanApa’s previous publication *Toiseus 101 – näkökulmia toiseuteen* [Otherness 101 – Perspectives of otherness], was born from a very personal need.

Over the past few years, I have endeavoured to stir up debate on the exclusivity of our art institutions and contemporary art in general, as well as the homogeneity of our arts field. By exclusivity, I mean here both concrete exclusion and the underlying ideologies. Why – barring a few exceptions – only people from certain backgrounds or in possession of certain qualities are admitted or end up in art institutions? What is the reason for the fact that in 2017, European stages still continue to show predominantly white, slim, able, cisgender bodies?

The causes of such concrete exclusivity lie deep in our concept of art and, therefore, in the structures of the arts field. Even though structural obstacles always call for an intersectional approach, the title of this publication suggest a frame which centralizes questions around blackness.

The postmodern concept of art – like the entire concept of western—is defined by the great narrative of whiteness. In other words, despite postmodernism as an ideology being based on the deconstruction of great narratives, it has failed to deconstruct its own whiteness.

Moreover, the norm of whiteness is not a question of mere skin colour, but it is a large and complex ideological field. It includes the perception and ownership of certain values, like equality or democracy, and certain qualities, like civilisation, education, intelligence and beauty, as ‘western’ and ‘European’ and white. Whiteness is neutral and invisible, but at the same time desirable. Any other art apart from ‘white art’, not originating from the western European white canon, is primarily perceived as cultural, symbolic,
archaic and infantile, exotic and energetic, primitive but at the same time without a history.

However, during the past years the world, and with it the field of art, has changed a great deal. Words like *blackness*, *otherness*, *intersectional feminism* and *decolonial practices* have entered our everyday language. Art festivals around Europe are presenting works (my own included) where brown and black artists explicitly address their otherness, blackness and pain. These works are emancipatory and revolutionary, but at the same time otherness or blackness has become a trendy theme in the arts markets. It sells tickets, attracts media attention. It creates political debate and ‘*bold initiatives’*. Today, more and more art institutions welcome a POC artist with open arms onto their stages, but for an antiracist and intersectional feminist ideology to permeate the whole operation of the institution is much more of a rarity. In any event, the arts field is always defined by its structures; the context is always in the content. If the arts field does not diversify from the top down, including the ruling gatekeepers, there is a danger that blackness and its treatment remain but a passing trend. The texts by both Olawale Kosoko and Johnson-Small address this complex relationship between the black artist and white institution.

Analysis of blackness and otherness, exposing the historical and structural layers, is both extremely important and challenging. For now, the arts field is informed by whiteness, and addressing blackness and otherness within essentially white contexts is a source of friction. It is inevitable, but we are all involved in a process of learning. On the other hand, when there is a sufficient impetus for change, enough voices all demanding change, we can alter the structures despite the friction.
I am eternally grateful to the contributors of this preview. The essays are personal, political, courageous, wild, precise and analytical. Each of them has taken the time from their own work for the common good. Each of them makes their own contribution to the change.

The final collection will be published in May 2018, but until then enjoy the preview.

I hope the publication will inspire questions, ideas and discourse.

Sonya Lindfors
Choreographer and Artistic Director of UrbanApa - arts platform
The story is [...] we are still talking/thinking about diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism (conversations that started three or four decades ago) when we need conversations
about cultural equity, cultural democracy, cultural justice. We are still talking about a paradigm shift when, in reality, we are often engaged in (unspoken) power struggles. We are fighting a revolutionary struggle on two battlefronts with a two-edged sword: the need to build, support, sustain community-based/culturally-grounded/culturally-specific institutions on one hand; and opening up opportunities for board participation/employment opportunities in “major/mainstream” organizations on the other.

–Ms. Baraka Sele, A Black Paper: Revolution/Resilience/Race

_When we speak radically of the dark divine, the invitation is for each and every one of us to transcend race and gender, to move beyond categories, and into the interior spaces of our psyches to encounter there the_
ground of our being, the place of mystery, creativity, and possibility. For it is there that we can construct the mind that can resist, that can revision, that can create the maps that when followed will liberate us.

–bell hooks, Lorde: The Imagination of Justice

PART 1: Colonial Distortion

What does a radically inclusive curatorial practice look like? How does this practice become a lived experience that moves beyond the predominantly white cultural institutional frame? Throughout my travels in Europe, Canada, and the United States, I have consistently encountered a lack of supportive inclusionary cultural spaces for individuals who identify as trans*, queer, disabled, Black, indigenous, and/or people of color. Performance curators and audiences alike ask me the same question in regards to creating more inclusive spaces for people who exist outside the sphere of white cisgender hetero-normality and ability: How do we begin to break the border between art and culture to allow diverse audiences to feel more welcomed inside predominantly white spaces? In her blog post, “Policy Briefing: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice”, the independent curator and educator Chandra Frank speaks directly to this question. She makes a case to broaden and decolonize modern curatorial practices by altering the current conventional predominantly white structural frames of curation. Frank writes:
A decolonial curatorial process is committed to undoing coloniality that is embedded in the existence of the Western museum space, and disrupts the power dynamics that lie beneath the development of exhibition making. This commitment creates an environment where the incorporation of alternative epistemologies becomes a core part of the politics of curation. That said, the application of this informed process requires the curator and the institution to contribute to the unearthing of hidden histories. (Frank 2015)

Before I discovered the language to identify my curatorial practice, I found the act of organizing performance, exhibition, and the humanities fascinating because of my consistent impulse to focus my thinking within Black study and artistic communities. My first job, as a teen usher, was at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan. For me, that museum was a place of refuge, mentorship, employment, professional development, and community. It sparked my engagement in “conversations about cultural equity, cultural democracy, cultural justice” (Sele 2017). I understand my curatorial practice today because of the foundation I gained within those museum walls.

As I have grown to define it, curating is a practice that requires “unearthing” hidden histories to reveal social structures and creative practices through oblique or slant readings of modernity both inside and outside the cultural institution. Curating involves selecting, organizing, and presenting live works, objects, and ideas to realize the possibility for one’s own imagination (and perhaps spark the imagination of others); curation shares embodied practices and resources to centralize new cultural production, and practice radically inclusive strategies that heal, induce care, and support multiple expressions of freedom for all people.
Unfortunately, due to embedded systems of coloniality, this curatorial ideology—while shared by many—is not a standard practice. The concept of care as it pertains to curatorial practice simply cannot co-exist within this “perverted logic” (Fanon) of racialized institutionalized power. In his acclaimed book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes about the distortive effects of colonization:

*Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (1963: 210)*

With this understanding of the corrosive effects of colonization and the crisis located within institution of the American project, I am left with a series of inescapable questions. How does care operate as an essential part of survivalist tactics and freedom strategies for diasporic people? How does predominant whiteness distort curatorial praxis? Are predominantly white institutions (PWIs) actually able to care for Black and other “minoritarian” (Muñoz: 1999) people? How do we curate health in the wake of such overwhelming tribulation?

If alternative decolonial epistemologies are to become a core part of the politics of curating, practitioners within the field must be willing to wield a paradigm shift within their institutions (as they relate to education, activism, and the sustenance of culture). A commitment to undoing coloniality in curation must be a central goal for those in positions of power if we are ever to realize radically inclusive cultural spaces for all people.

Curation, when practiced with radical care at its foundation, is inevitably inclusionary and holds itself accountable for oversights
American scholar Nicole Martin speaks to this point in her essay, “Rep’ing Blackness: Curating Performance as a Practice of Radical Care,” where she outlines a series of radical care attributes. She writes, “Radical care does not shy away from the unfamiliar. Radical care is unamused with ego and considers community the cornerstone of practice. Radical care is gracious, healing, and affirming” (2015: 56). In my own independent curatorial projects such as Black Male Revisited: Experimental Representations Through the Ephemeral Form (2014), legible/illegible: opening beyond the space of identities (2015), Imaging Justice for the Dark Divine (2015), and, most recently, The Blood Was On Their Shoulders (2017), I have worked to institute these same strategies of collective care and inclusivity by centering the voices of women, queer, trans*, indigenous, and people of color (QTIPOC) artist-curators allowing us, as an ensemble, to frame the curatorial rationale and presentation of these projects.

The work of undoing coloniality is difficult. The American project is built on a systemic colonial doctrine. The case might even be made that modernity is intrinsically linked to coloniality whereby “race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification” (Quijano 2000: 534). Thus, the racial biases informing curatorial practices in the United States and beyond are still deeply entrenched in colonial systems of power. Undoing this will require a communal methodology that allows the laborious work of imaging justice and implementing decoloniality to be shared among multiple individuals (both inside and outside of the institution) whose central goals cohere.

While my curatorial work centralizes Black and other minoritarian communities, much of my academic study before graduate school was rooted inside a traditional predominantly white liberal arts training of literature, performance, and visual arts. To create the
inclusive curatorial ideology, hereby named Socio-Choreological Mapping (SCM). I draw from my academic performance studies in complexity theory and Emergent Improvisation (under the tutelage of Susan Sgorbati at Bennington College) and am influenced by dance theorist and mathematician Rudolf Benesh’s term “choreology.” He coined the term in 1955 with dancer Joan Benesh—his wife—to notate movement systems in the body (Kando 2016). I situate choreology and Emergent Improvisation within a Black/minoritarian social context to identify how queer, trans*, indigenous, people of color (QTIPoC) move together, document, communicate, and realize their own freedom strategies.

Clear examples of SCM ideological application can also be found in trans-digital reality and social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #TransIsBeautiful and #GirlsLikeUs. These examples, when considered through the lens of performative movement actions created by Black and queer women of color, decentralize the voice of one single curator. Decentralization is critical because it allows the behaviors of Socio-Choreological Mapping to have the nuance, reverberation, and emergent complexity needed to empower any person seeking to participate within a shared goal or project. The versatility of decentralized systems allow multiple points of entry within the digital world, the physical world, and the psychic/theoretical world. A self-proclaimed activist can tweet, write, march in protest, create a mural or theatrical work, all as legitimate notated and/or archived forms of performed protest.

In identifying Socio-Choreological Mapping as a conceptual framework for inclusivity, it has become clear that the role of the

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1 Socio-choreographical mapping is a practice and conceptual frame to discuss how minoritarian people create radically inclusive spaces where they notate, archive, document and strategize themselves (their bodies, ideas and movements) into the cultural record.
Curator is deeply situated within the practice and sustainability of care (both for self and others). Some examples of projects that centralize care and serve as examples of how the model of SCM works successfully in partnership with various institutions include *The Gathering* (a project created by Camille A. Brown that has been held at New York Live Arts and Gibney Dance among other locations), *Dancing While Black* (a project created by Paloma McGregor that has collaborated with institution such as BAAD in the Bronx and BAX), and *Dancing for Justice* (a project created by Brittany L. Williams with team members based in Trinidad & Tobago, Miami, Detroit, and DC). These curatorial projects, while created by a single artist-curatur, encourage deep collaboration between institutions and artists/activists allowing new voices to enter the institutional frame and cause much needed disruption.

My goal in writing this paper—as artist, academic, and curator—is to consider care as a technology derived from centuries of documented and undocumented fugitive knowledge (Harney & Moten: 2013) while providing case studies that highlight value systems that are integral to the SCM conceptual frame. I argue for SCM as a healthy alternative for the creation of radically inclusive care-giving within the dominant culture of the art world. Through collected interviews, rehearsals, workshops, performance showings, readings, and personal reflections that give voice to the ways in which artist-curators render themes of fugitivity, illegibility, and healing in their work, I ask my readership to consider if we—as members of the cultural sector and global citizens invested in the resistance against white supremacy and coloniality—are genuinely committed to providing the socially engaged artist-activist with the sustained resources needed to continue creating “the maps that when followed will liberate us” (hooks).
PART 2: Personal Reclamation

I consider SCM as pedagogy linking my early explorations with art making and embodied theory to my contemporary approach to curatorial practice. SCM is a way of thinking and considering the self in relationship to one’s practice as well as the environment inside which that practice takes place. It is a psychic process before it is articulated through action.

For example, one of my early creative projects, *The Night Dances* was an attempt to begin a conversation with myself about what my performance of Blackness would mean. It was an effort to locate some aspect of myself while creating a space where my unconscious could perform freely within my environment. I became curious if another kind of unarticulated set of Black identities would emerge. Might it be possible to disrupt the finite notions of colonized Black identity already programmed into my perception of self? I wanted to better understand how I might be in dialogue with the various intersectionalities that I noticed were surfacing inside me. Eager to decolonize my performance of Blackness inside my daily life at Bennington College, *The Night Dances* became a means for me to vent, to unleash my creativity and find the refuge, space, tools, and systems of self-care I needed to materialize (and create space for) the deep unknowing that was growing inside me. While I could not openly articulate this internal need at the time, I was thirsty to locate myself and those like me inside my performance practice and education.

Years before I was exposed to the writings of Michelle M. Wright, James Baldwin, Fred Moten, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, José Esteban Muñoz, and Stuart Hall, *The Night Dances* allowed me to begin a nascent investigation of fugitive theory, Black existentialist thought, and explorations into alternative digital-reality performance.
But these Black and Brown scholars and poets were omitted from my undergraduate experience and as a result of this eraser, a significant amount of mentorship, embodied knowledge, and cultural negotiation was lost to me—and my entire undergraduate community—because there were so few representations of racial diversity among the faculty, students, and staff. I believe Black and Brown professors simply would not have let this kind of literary omission take place at a renowned liberal arts college, although it can be argued that scholars of color teach the white supremacist heteropatriarchal canon because otherwise tenure may not be an option. As a result the act of teaching outside the white masculinist lens becomes a radical act.

In 2013, I found myself again at a kind of artistic crossroads where I would have to take on a practice of unlearning certain kinds of normalized creative tactics dominant within the post-modern franchise of professional American concert dance. During that year, I took on a practice of decolonizing my creative work in order to become the kind of artist and thinker I knew was forming inside me. Similar to my practice with The Night Dances, I found myself wanting to express myself through digital media to reveal a complexity of Black masculinity rarely caught on camera. The project was titled Black Male Revisited: Revenge of the New Negro, but this line of research evolved into various configurations of video and live performance, including works entitled other.explicit.body. (2013/14) and #negrophobia (2015). This series of projects was influenced by a theoretically queer ecological study of performance and curation. Central to these projects was the idea that a performance site can serve as a container for multiplicity and queer study, and could ‘unearth hidden truths’ regarding my understanding of Black masculinity.
With the 20th anniversary of *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* approaching the following year in 2014, I found myself deeply inspired by Thelma Golden’s writings and curatorial approach with this exhibition. Currently working as the Chief Curator and Director of The Studio Museum in Harlem, Golden curated *Black Male* in 1994 as the first African American curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. I set out to create a platform that would celebrate the original exhibition while continuing to push forward and open a conversation as to how performance and Black trans identities might fit into the ‘Black Male’ exhibition lexicon.

In her essay *My Brother* written for the *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* exhibition catalogue (1994), Golden writes,

“One of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century is the African-American male—‘invented’ because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fear and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male’s existence” (19).

I found this passage particularly striking for three reasons. First, the concept of being *invented* articulates a specific framing and perspective in regards to the creation and experience of the Black male’s presence in America. Second, the idea that the invention became a catalyst for fear-mongering within the American psyche articulates a very clear understanding of the Black male’s positionality both within the historical context as well as the current socio-political climate. And third, the notion of truth as a idea embedded neither in the conception of the invention nor in the result of the fear projected onto his body struck a chord in me emotionally.
and profoundly influenced my thinking and understanding of self.

Being Black is belonging to a state organized according to its ignorance of your mind—“a state that does not, cannot know your mind” (Wagner, 2009: 1). As Black people forced to either conform to white social norms or risk utter annihilation, it’s worth asking: What shape might my practice of living, curating, creating art take given the opportunity to exist outside of a normative white masculinist system of oppression? The diagnosis of trauma within Black and other minoritarian communities is nothing new. Black people in America have been forced to master the art of coping within the wake of trauma as proven in both the people and the environments inside which these people are forced to exist.

Socio-Choreological Mapping requires these kinds of issues to be constantly interrogated. In locating the vital curatorial questions located in this essay, I become an active participant inside the SCM framework. By engaging in a thought process that challenges current positions of privilege and power, examines a strategic process that can serve as a tool to decolonize my thinking and undo the learned protective reflexes I employ to protect my oppression, as well as challenge standard stereotypical notions of Blackness so often presented in the public domain, in turn, I reclaim the history of my Black body in the present moment as an infinite space of unlimited evolution and possibility.

PART 3: Fugitive Survival

Before I knew who I was, my being was already rendered into a social construct that understands me to be non-human, invisible, illegible, criminal, disposable, trauma-stricken, policed, a thug, a nigger, a negro, colored, an incomprehensibly Black fugitive. But even as these
labels mark my past and present, I choose how they obtain the power to mark my future. Black theory allows a space for infinite imaginative performance and psychic experience to occur. It allows escape, refusal, transgression, and practices of freedom to be felt and materialized in the body, transmitted into action through creative forms of expression and activism. As a Black artist-curateur I am a remarkable expression of freedom and futurity risen from a stolen past. The practice of creating and curating live performance is deeply intertwined with the ability to dream limitlessly and, as a result, “create the maps that when followed” (hooks 2011: 243) articulate the possibilities for a liberated society.

I like to imagine what if my ancestors had not been colonized, reinvented, labeled, and rendered marginal? What if the diseased illusion of race had never become a preordained performance assigned to my body, and all bodies alike, for generations? What performance of self might I be able to engender had those before me been curated into a condition of freedom instead of enslavement?

Knowing loss is an epistemology located in my blood memory. My Black being came into existence within an American context where loss is an epigenetic system embedded in the DNA of how I have come to understand the performance of my identity. The strains trace back to my father’s too frequent disappearing acts and sudden death. They take the shape of my 22-year-old brother who was murdered outside a 7-Eleven in Denver, Colorado. In the alcoholic tears and schizophrenic episodes that led to my mother’s premature death at the age of 36, I know loss because my entire immediate family is dead, and so everyday I live in the wake of that ultimate truth.

Within the American colonial project, historical loss is the single unifying factor that still connects us, that holds us “always living in the push toward our death” (Sharpe 2016: 10). Blackness, “the
extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption [...] a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity” (Moten 2003: 1) forces us to imagine new experimental ways of practicing achievement “in the wake of loss” (Sharpe 2016) because one is never quite at ease in the world. Always forced to live on edge, Black life is constantly in the throes of the avant-garde, always considering new imaginative methods of being because it is constantly negotiating the obstacle of being. From popular music to visual art to literature, Black people are in the habit of conjuring magic, medicinal potions, stories, and other anecdotes of Black joy and survival for the world to eventually consume and/or shun. Black artists are vital to the contemporary cultural discourse more now than ever before. The cultural production that we offer the public domain is integral to the healing of all people as we attempt to navigate through this turbulent atypical political moment in world history known as the Trump administration.

In bringing attention to the issues plaguing the art sector within the US and western world cultures, I return to one of my leading questions for researching this idea of self-care as a curatorial practice. What can Black thought teach all people about living, being, and creating meaning in a world where “we were never meant to survive” (Lorde 1995)? The SCM concept is an ideology I needed to research and name because I had to develop a strategy for my own survival in the wake of immense loss; a strategy that might translate into various communities and creative practices. Learning how to exist inside this wake, how to do the work of the wake (Sharpe) was how I was able to begin identifying SCM, and as a result, allow myself to find new meaning within my life’s work as an artist-curator.

But for my Socio-Choreological Mapping ideology to be applied successfully within the white cultural frame, more inclusionary
practices within the arts field must occur. A reorganized methodology surrounding the consistent and highly problematic implementation of “predominant whiteness” must transpire within the field of curation (Wethers 2015: 15).

The statistics are not surprising. We live in an incredibly pain-stricken civilization, still trying to heal from the traumas of war, enslavement, and segregation. And while many enlightened white contemporary curators and artistic directors know the importance of incorporating Black and other minoritarian voices into their staffs, exhibitions, and performance seasons, much of the art world is still managed under a structurally violent white supremacist’s doctrine that ordains European aesthetics and creativity as the highest level of intellectual and/or conceptual rigor. Even if it is not practiced, I believe most people within institutions recognize the importance of diversity within art and culture. The issue, in my opinion, goes far beyond the concept of creating diversity within predominantly white spaces.

What I am arguing for is a revision in the way we care and support individuals who are QTIPoC once they arrive within the walls of the predominantly white institution. No matter the capacity (staff member, artist, audience, board member), I question if the modern American white institution is actually capable of delivering the kind of care and hospitality needed to sustain members of minoritarian communities who have been forced to work within spaces where the white gaze (and its corresponding micro-aggressions) are endured on a daily basis.

In response to this cultural erasure, many artists of color have managed to become far less dependent on cultural institutions. The internet has changed the way visual and performance art is
experienced. The mainstream distribution of the world-wide web has allowed multiple artists a platform to challenge the structural racism within the art field. Today, contemporary Black experimentalists can work online and/or in video and film mediums to push their work towards greater public consumption, and in some cases, monetize their work without the backing of an established cultural institution. Digital platforms circumvent the institution as mediator, connecting the artist directly with public.

Experimental Black artists such as Juliana Huxtable, M. Lamar, IMMA, Lawrence Graham-Brown, and Jacolby Satterwhite, among many others, have created significant audiences for themselves online. The hyper-Afro-queer futuristic digital personas they often portray in their works locate them in situations that create structural, multi-layered, and sexually complex mystique. These artists use their bodies—sometimes as sexual subjects, sometimes as radical racial metaphors—to bridge the gap between “high” and “low” art, pop and avant-garde, all the while connecting their work to digital audiences as a means to distribute their work to the public regardless of gallery or venue representation.

But just as the internet has excelled the careers of many Black artists, it has also aided in the viral sharing of Black death. Advancements in cell phone technologies have allowed many of the illnesses that plague Black communities to be displayed online, gaining an international audience, simultaneously making celebrities out of murdered Black people. With the constant threat of death looming like an evil shadow over our heads, the potency of this question feels particularly vital. The contemporary digital age has QTIPOC positioned under constant surveillance.

The policing, killing, lynching, and public assassinations of these
people by negrophobic badge-and/or cape-wearing white men is an awful habit. America has a long, deranged history with this kind of pass-time, too often displaying the mutation of these bodies in the public domain for mass consumption. Loss and mourning have always plagued the Black/minoritarian experience in America, and even more specifically the Black mother’s experience because too often she is left with the unfortunate duty of burying her children. In the preface to her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, feminist scholar bell hooks argues, “[B]lack men endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity” (2003: xii). She writes:

Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day. Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. (2003: xii)

When so many lives are hanging by a thread, I am forced to consider the role of radical care and decoloniality even more closely. What is the connection between curation and larger societal issues? How do artists of color curate spaces, environments, and communities that are brave enough to bring to light the sociopolitical issues of the contemporary moment? It is the role of curators and artists to concern themselves with these questions. As cultural citizens, I believe it is our duty to respond to these circumstances. Most curators and artists of color have a deep knowing and practice of this.
Whereas many of those operating within white dominant culture, who have positioned themselves under the cloak of whiteness and neoliberalism, are just becoming ‘woke’ to the urgency of the matter now that many of their civil rights are also in danger. Arguably, it may be the historical lack of social engagement, political investment, and the delusion of national socio-economic progression among white curators and cultural producers in positions of power within most institutions throughout the US and the Western world that got us in this predicament of monotonous curatorial praxis and vague societal understanding in the first place.

In a time when financial and educational resources in the arts are scarce across the board, no matter one’s race or gender, if contemporary institutions are to remain embedded in the criticality of current artistic concerns, then they must be in constant discourse with artists, producers, and curators who are on the horizon, self-taught, outsider, minority, and independent. More than ever before, individuals are in control of their experiences, carefully curating the cultural content which they ordain as most important to their lives (as displayed most concretely by social media), and so the role of the art institution of the future is to create more spaces for this kind of experiential, innovative, even-leveled, interaction to take place without judgment, prejudice, and highbrow critique. Because “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde: [1984] 2007: 110), in order to implement the real work of diversity, inclusion, and radical care, cultural hubs must meet Black and Brown people with new creative strategies. The tools and frameworks used to support the work of the artists of color need to be just as multilayered, dynamic, and radical as the work itself.

Hand over your old tools and allow those who exist on the outskirts to enter into the center. Watch and listen. Curators and presenters
can no longer use passé systems support work and make hires if their institutions are to remain vital for decades into the future. The American cultural infrastructure has spent hundreds of years mastering barriers that facilitate non-inclusion and segregation to locate, intrigue, and attract white, wealthy prospects. Now it is time to devote the same amount of energy to centralize the “dark divine” (hooks) and gain the trust and attention of disabled communities, QTIPoC communities and the like, allowing us the cultural equity, support, and care we deserve.

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In my head, I am an old white man. Growing up, I was what you would probably call a culture nerd: my introversion pushed me towards literature, music and philosophy, around which I quickly built my imaginary world. Nietzsche became my best friend, and I would laugh out loud reading Flaubert, as I was sure he made those clever jokes just for me. When life felt like too much to handle, I would
just listen to Mozart at full volume on my Walkman, crying in rage and relief for the most extreme catharsis. Old white men were my heroes and closest friends: I saw myself as one of them. My body nonetheless seems to tell a different story. People existing in the real world, my living friends and family, would indeed most likely describe me as a young brown woman.

There is probably no greater diametric opposite along the spectrum of body features, but this contrast never bothered me. On the contrary, I saw it as a good fortune: it never occurred to me that I could not identify with the character of a novel or a movie because he was male, and/or white. It never occurred to me that my body eventually limited me in the eyes of society. I genuinely always believed that I could do whatever I wanted and become who-ever I wanted. And as long as I was not made aware of what people might say behind my back, I did not care. But my awareness grew and I tried not to care. Eventually, I definitely cared. More precisely, I started to feel guilty.

The first “people” who made me care happened to be my two-years-younger brother. Although the both of us are métissés and not even métisses\(^1\) – we grew up with our white mom, white step-father and white younger siblings in a white neighborhood – my little brother claimed his Black identity. A bit out of the blue, he started to speak in slang, changed his walk, listened to rap and hip-hop, got obsessed with Malcom X, progressively dropped out of school etc. There has already been a lot written about racialization, structural racism, and great discussions about how representation and stereotypes can influence one’s identity, so I am not going to go into that here.

\(^1\) The French language distinguishes the “métisse”: mixed-race with the culture of both parents, from the “métissé”: mixed-race with the culture of only one parent.
While I, for some mysterious reason, escaped this fate, it is clear that my brother did not. But as much as his not-so-unique-case still deeply fascinates me, I found the way he perceives me even more interesting.

By the age of ten he indeed started to call me “le bounty”. “A bounty”, this chocolate bar with coconut inside, is the French equivalent of the American insult “Oreo”: you may be brown or black on the outside, but you are white on the inside. This accusation of being “white-washed”, of not being “true to myself, my origins and my people”, progressively took away the innocence of my (supposedly white) inner world from me, and I was forced to question its nature and authenticity. Was I really just a parody? Had I lost myself? Was I pretending to be something I am not? Something I cannot be and will never be? Realizing the absurdity of those questions – as if my identity was related to my skin color by essence, in the same way that we long believed that gender and sexuality defined each other- I was not spared from the feeling of being the bad guy in the house. Reading further about my brother’s “Oreo complex”, I realized that his fear of being out-blacked was surprisingly common among mixed-race and other POCs. In some extreme cases, an explicit disgust of the idea of being associated with white people even occurred. On the other side – the ones called Oreo-, their testimony had the common aspect of calling out the representational problem of associating success, education, good language, high cultural capital etc. with Whiteness.

Turning to literature, I found the avant-garde and one-of-a-kind satirical novel *Oreo* by Fran Ross (1974), which depicts the adventures of a young woman of African-American and Jewish background, Oreo, with a hilarious picaresque tone. With direct references to the Greek myth of Theseus, the story cleverly problematizes the idea of authentic ethnic identity by telling the heroine’s quest of her lost
Whiteness (her white Jewish father disappeared when she was a baby). But, like Theseus came back confused from the labyrinth after he killed the Minotaur, Oreo comes back from the search for her identity in a black-sailed ship, flagging her defeat. For my part, an optimist, I kept searching, but I could not find a text about what I will call “happy Oreos”: non-white people not caring about being considered “white inside”. Maybe they don’t need to write about it, if they don’t care? Or is it more that no one is really allowed to be a happy Oreo?

Beyond a simple skin color, Blackness as a sociocultural concept² started to be developed in the USA around the twentieth century. Evolving from the history of slavery, it can be considered to encapsulate ideas and movements going from Black power, Black pride, Black love, Black excellence, Black Lives Matter, to a certain defined culture and behavior, and experiences and feelings such as cultural exclusion and inferiority, racial terror etc. As early as 1903 the African-American scholar W.E.B Du Bois talked about *The Souls of Black Folk* and pointed out its double-consciousness: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. In other words, the vertiginous feeling of being aware of what you are and of what others want to see at the same time; eventually taking yourself to be a problem in and of a set social arrangement. It is the fixed and persisting awareness of existing simultaneously both within and outside of the dominant white culture. A century later, building from this idea of double consciousness and within the project of modernity, Paul Gilroy developed the concept of “Black Atlantic” (1993). He argues against

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2 I write “Black” or “Blackness” with a capital letter when referring to this established sociocultural concept, otherwise “black” when referring to a simple skin color.
essentialist visions of racial identity and racial nationalisms, in favor of a shared, though heterogeneous, culture that joins diverse communities in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa.

So, there you have it: the black cream filling my brother accused me of betraying. From where I stand, calling myself Black would be a really artificial thing to do; a performance of cultural appropriation reciprocally as grotesque as the one we all accused Rachel Dolezal\(^3\) of doing in 2015. But unlike Dolezal, and despite my helpless social awkwardness anytime I end up outside my limited comfort zone, my skin and hair seem to make the choice for me every day. In the eyes of the white majority, I am Black. Yet, in the eyes of (at least) my brother, I am not. Trying to formulate how I see myself through my own eyes, it struck me that as Oreo, I suffered from a triple consciousness\(^4\): I was made to look at myself through the eyes of both a racializing white majority, and a judgmental -eventually as racializing- black minority. Add the insidious feeling of being a traitor against black people by lack of association, I have long seen myself as a pathologically selfish, irresponsible and dysfunctional person. Today, I have understood that a lack of association does not mean a lack of solidarity, anti-blackness, nor a lack of shared experiences or a deep understanding and concern for invisible power structures. Given that, I found myself at the conclusion that it is fully my right to have brown skin without identifying as Black and without feeling guilty for that.

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3 Rachel Dolezal (1977-) is an American former civil rights activist and former Africana studies instructor. In 2015 Dolezal was publically accused to have committed cultural appropriation and fraud as she lied about being African American.

4 The expression “triple consciousness” is commonly used in black feminism and queer studies to express the problematics of intersectionality: the burden of being both black and a woman, or black and gay. I mean triple consciousness in another way here, but the gender perspective is of course important to have in mind.
At a time of super-Blackness -romanticization of the ghetto and encouragement to embrace our black features without compromise—this claim may sound provocative. This internal battle being highly personal, it appears however that defending an identity in a “neither-nor” dialectic is symptomatic of postmodernism. In contrast to “either-or” dualities (either black OR white), or “both-and” reconciliations (both black AND white), the logic of double negation (neither black NOR white) could come as a much-needed exit door in today’s racialized discourse. Parallel to my attempt to articulate a postmodern identity in dialog with blackness, I also want to acknowledge manifestations of postmodernity within blackness.

James Baldwin in “Princes and Powers” reported the big “Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs” that took place at La Sorbonne in 1956. Delegations from Africa, Europe and America were present (including figureheads like Alione Diop, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, Léopold Senghor to only name a few), with the project of allying black men across the planet with the establishment of a “cultural inventory”. The project did not quite work as planned, the variety of geographical, political, spiritual, and historical backgrounds making the crowd irreconcilable. Yet coherent “grand narratives” of Blackness like Du Bois’s or Gilroy’s are still dominating today, ignoring most individuals’ realities. In reaction to this unwanted homogenization, and parodying the Black nationalist movement, Trey Ellis argued for “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989), and became one of the first black postmodern figures. Going against the separatist doctrine, Ellis expressed the idea of dual identity and defended the concept of “cultural mulatto”, meaning someone who can relate to multiple cultures the same way a métisse can relate to different heritages—“some of the only blacks who admit liking both Jim and Toni Morrison”. On the other hand, he talks of “neutered
mutations” while referring to Whitney Houston and Lionel Richie, as examples of commercialized “assimilationist nightmares”. Since Ellis, other postmodern Black movements have seen the day, from “postliberated” to “post-soul” to “post-black” to “NewBlack” and beyond. These movements all have in common not defining Blackness as primarily opposed to Whiteness. Rather, they trouble Blackness, blur and challenge its limits from within by telling non-traditional Black narratives. Tragically, scholars have pointed out the absence of a sociocultural paradigm shift that would have permitted a real impact for these postmodern movements. The New Black Aesthetic today – if not dead – is still fighting for the same things and on the same racial terrain it was already fighting fifty years ago.

Talking of terrain, the European ground, and even more precisely the Nordic scene, is displaying a very interesting trend. Although Rosa Emilia Clay became a Finnish citizen as early as in 1875, no one could really argue that any black narrative was ever developed after that. Instead, the local understanding of Blackness is largely inspired by African-American aesthetic and history, progressively adding the traumas of colonialism, war, and dislocation of the last waves of refugees. Lately, use of words like “afrosvenskar” and “afrosuomalaiset”, as well as the creation of separatist spaces, illustrate the will to give a cultural echo to the experience of racialization. I am glad that things are finally happening so that a growing number of people can find a way to better express their identity. There was a real need to create a narrative in which non-white people can feel safe and accepted, and despite the tense political climate, a renegotiation is in full progress. And yet, my postmodern reasoning challenges me to think outside this current battle. In the spirit of Trey Ellis and my imaginary friend
the deconstructivist Jacques Derrida, I would argue that it is not enough to expose and deconstruct the way oppositions work and then stop there in a nihilistic or cynical position. Highlighting the construction and establishment of the dichotomy between Blackness and Whiteness is a needed step to dismantle our excessive loyalty to one or the other idea. This is the only way we learn to see the aspect of the truth that might lie buried in the opposite. Then to be effective, deconstruction needs to create new terms, not to synthesize the concepts in equal opposition, but to mark their eternal interplay. In this dynamic, I got seduced by the interesting concept of “betweenship”. Originally an independent and non-profit Swedish organization, Betweenesship (Mellanförskap in Swedish) is a postmodern movement which offers a Blackness-free cultural neutrality, while still putting words to the experience of racialization, triple consciousness and more. No cultural inventory nor big narratives there, just a bunch of other Bounties and Óreos, métisses and métissés, transnational-adoptees and second-generations trying to resist cultural projections.

“We all have our own way of relating to our betweenship, but our common denominator is the search for a place where our identity is not questioned” claims Betweenship. This place would be, for me, one permitting me to be a happy young brown woman, at peace with my inner old white man –eventually nothing more than an allegory for freedom and equality.

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PLEASURE IN RACIALIZATION—SEXUALIZATION

by Anh Vo
Foreword

I am an emerging choreographer and performance theorist, born/raised in Vietnam, currently studying and working in the U.S. My current scholarly research interest lies at the intersection of choreography and pornography, where I look into pornography’s mobilization of bodies and affects in a prescriptive pathway, consequently extracting sexual pleasure as capital. I turn to contemporary dance/performance artists and porn stars, using their works as a tool in my search for orgasmic freedom – a mode of freedom that is unfortunately often experimented with as bodily intensities that are immaterial, internal, and inherently colorless. Pleasure has been conceptualized without regards to, and at the expense of minoritarian subjects’ racialization-sexualization.

This project of internalizing pleasure within the body, yet without the specificities of whose bodies are at stake, should not come as a surprise, since the public representation of pleasure in pornography, dance or any other cultural industries is fundamentally a realm of whiteness. In the West, non-white folks are never in control of their mass representation – their bodies are constantly deployed by whiteness to confess their racial difference, most prominently in mainstream pornography, where there are categories for any imaginable races, except for white. Therefore, if white artists have endlessly explored pleasure as a subject matter throughout history because they are entitled to, non-white artists do not have the (same) authority and agency to bare their bodies-in-pleasure in public. How can we artists of color get pass the pain of racialization and colonization? How can we even allow ourselves to feel anything other than pain, let alone pleasure, let alone in public?

The public in contemporary dance, more often than not, is white, which brings to my mind the most prominent question: how can we
artists of color bare our racialized pleasure for the white gaze? Yes, in the downtown New York dance scene there has been somewhat more diversity among the younger generation, more awareness of race, more grappling with whiteness; but essentially the theatre goers who donate and pay the most are white, the curators and presenters who hold the most power are white, the donors and institutions with the most resources are white, the whole social structure, architectural structure, and structure of viewing/making performance are also deeply rooted in whiteness. Thus, even when efforts are made to drag non-white performances into visibility, there is still this pressure for artists of color to bare their racial difference in order to assimilate into the existing white structures – white folks are only interested in black artists if their works look black, and are about blackness. Adding another layer of racialized pleasure on top of this question of assimilation, the extra danger of not only baring racial pain, but also of selling this pain for white pleasure, can become too overwhelming that it can paralyze scholars and artists of color like me who want to experiment with the orgasmic body.

Nonetheless, Narcissister dives straight into this risky space, engaging in a process of striptease and “reverse striptease” that literalizes racist-sexist stereotypical images across her own explicit body, making visible the tight grip of fetishization on the racial-sexual subject. In the following text, I will examine her latest evening-length show *The Body Is A House* (2017), looking specifically into section seven *Everywoman*, and section three *Basket*, respectively. I argue that even though Narcissister bares herself in front of a predominantly white audience, pleasure does not emerge either from the female sexualization or the racial exploitation. Rather, there is pleasure in a collective laughter that at once enlarges and deflates racist-sexist these controlling images.

Narcissister is a Brooklyn-based performance maker, known for her signature use of mannequin-like masks in every public performance and video work to construct a persona that is at once anonymous, aloof and attention-grabbing. Never appearing as her personal self yet always performing by herself, Narcissister is situated in the liminal space between the singular narcissism and the collective sisterhood, mobilizing her own explicit body while masking and emptying it of any personal essence, to address larger-than-self issues of racial-sexual identity, and its mass representation. In particular, her tropes rely on a virtuosic manipulation of masks, costumes and various bodily orifices (mouth, anus, vagina) to spectacularly constructs and deconstructs stereotypical imagery on her own naked physicality – her body becomes a prosthetic doll with such extreme mutability that she can transform into almost any images imaginable.

I first encountered Narcissister’s work recently during Performa Biennale 2017 in New York City, when she presented her latest evening-length show *The Body Is a House* (2017) in a small gallery space in the Lower East Side. Structured like a burlesque performance with a similar sexually inviting and suggestive quality, *The Body Is a House* contains seven distinct dance/performance/video numbers where the artist quite directly performs for the (predominantly white) spectators. She teases the audience’s imagination with her mannequin-like naked body, stripping in and out of different racialized-sexualized icons around womanhood. In turn, she confronts, with her own visceral yet prosthetic body, the prevalence of racist stereotypes in sexual fetishes, expounding the process behind the production of pleasure that has always been
contingent upon the manufacture of racial difference. Narcissister makes explicit that “race is necessarily a pornographic fantasy”: the bodies-in-pleasure of the racialized others have been persistently deployed in pornography and popular culture to bare their racial difference—a difference essentially invented by, and exploited for white pleasure. Race is a fantasy, a fantastical wet dream perhaps, that nonetheless haunts the racialized subjects in reality, taking hold their flesh, constraining their presence and limiting their identification within the exhaustion of white imagination.

### *Everywoman*: Pulling Womanhood Out of Her Ass

The regulatory power of stereotypical imagery is made most prominent in the finale *Everywoman*, in which Narcissister tackles the fantasy of seeing black woman as a hypersexual creature, by quite literally pulling this fetishized image out of her ass. *Everywoman* structures itself around the high-energy and feel-good disco anthem “I’m Every Woman” (1978) by Chaka Khan, whose lyrics unapologetically celebrate the sexual prowess of womanhood. Dancing through the entirety of the song, Narcissister enters the stage naked – that is if I do not count the mask, the merkin, the pair of red gloves and the giant Afro wig that she has on her head – performing what she calls a “reverse striptease”. If a striptease relies on the suspension in shedding layers of clothing and the titillation in uncovering the flesh hiding underneath, this “reverse striptease” plays with a similar kind of excitement in teasing and revealing, but not of the “natural” unclothed body – instead, what keeps me on my toes is the donning of apparels and accessories that are tucked

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away in the artist’s various bodily orifices. A red mesh bandeau top, a gold belt, a pair of yellow hoop earrings inside her mouth; a pair of sparkly bracelets, a pair of heels and a small purse inside her Afro wig; a pair of red stockings, a black-and-white stripe mini-skirt, and a colorful summer scarf inside her vagina/anus – slowly over the next four minutes she pulls them out one by one to wear on her body, constructing in real time the physical image of an “every-woman”.

“I’m every woman, it’s all in me
Anything you want done, baby,
I’ll do it naturally”

– Chaka Khan, Lyrics from *I’m Every Woman* (1978)

“Every-woman” becomes the destination point in this “reverse striptease”, an expression of a fetishized black femininity that Narcissister meticulously designs: a woman in high heels with tight and revealing clothes (her breasts can be seen through the bandeau), dressed in bright colors and adorned by over-the-top shiny jewelries. This over-rehearsed over-sexualized stereotype of black womanhood, is further enhanced and parodied by the artist’s hyper-feminine choreography, whose vocabulary borrows significantly from the flirtatious and suggestive convention of female striptease. Her hips highly articulate, her fingers animated and expressive, her gestures playfully drawing along the contours of the body and the objects, Narcissister performs successive poses that are culturally stylized as sexy, enacting the script for femininity, for sexualization and commodification of the female body that these costumes carry with them².

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² Robin Bernstein defines “scriptive things” by their ability to hail an individual into subjecthood, to script the subject’s behavior but not without opportunities for resistance and variation, creating a dance between people and things. See Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race.” Social Text 27, no. 4 (101) (2009): 73.
As the catchy anthemic hook “I’m every woman, it’s all in me” infectiously echoes in my head, the irony is not lost when the objects that make Narcissister an “every-woman” are quite physically in her. Bringing a whole new frame of understanding to the song by literalizing its lyrics, Narcissister pulls womanhood out of her ass, and in such a shockingly explicit act, she reveals the artificiality of the fetishized black femininity, and at the same time how this artificiality been normalized in society through the fixing of stereotypical imagery. As the slang would imply, pulling something out of one’s ass suggests a process of fabrication with no real basis of evidence – yet, despite this arbitrary fabrication, a representational synthesis of an “every-woman” has very real cultural effects, generating a concrete regulatory and fetishized image, which has nothing to refer to but itself. Through the slow unfolding of this “reverse striptease”, Narcissister makes explicit the grip of this controlling image on the black female subject: like a mannequin, Narcissister’s naked body only gains cultural meanings and identities, insofar as it is adorned and costumed in a way that makes itself socially and visually legible. In other words, her corporeal status as a blank canvas waiting to be made into an “every-woman” reveals that the terms of racial-sexual construction as not so much contingent upon skin color or biological determinants, as it is an imposition of style and “visuality”\(^3\), an invented racial fiction.

For Narcissister as a racialized female subject, there is no way out of this controlling visuality. Yet, by making explicit racial mythology across her visceral yet prosthetic body, Narcissister deflates the authoritarian stereotypical imagery, rendering it absurd in front of a predominantly white audience. Pleasure emerges, not from

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the sexualization of the womanhood nor from the exploitation of blackness, but from the parodying literalization, from the absurd enlargement of the fetishized sexual-racial difference that is often subsumed, and made invisible for the sake of pleasure. Thus, even though she bares herself performing for white spectators, Narcissister does not feed into the manufacture of race as a pornographic fantasy that is constructed by and for white pleasure. On the contrary, Narcissister bursts this fantasy open, reversing the pleasure agency away from the (white) spectators towards the performer in this “reverse striptease”. It is no longer Narcissister, the racialized female subject, who has to exclusively bear the regulatory burden of racist-sexist images, but it is the (white) spectators, who are passed on this weight of racialization-sexualization, who are revealed as being complicit in the production and reproduction of racist-sexist stereotypes.

**Race-humor: Pleasure in Racialization-Sexualization**

Pleasure produced in *The Body Is a House* is not so straightforward or at times even expected, but it is quite visceral, sudden, and uncanny in moments of cleverness, virtuosity and shock. It is not a form of derivative pleasure, but a radical form of ecstasy that Jennifer Nash, a black feminist scholar on pornography, calls “race-humor”, “where racial fictions are played with, exaggerated, rendered absurd, deflated, and even rendered exciting and sexy”⁴. Nash coins the term “race-humor” to describe how black female porn actresses manage to find agency within the extreme condition of racialization-sexualization on-screen, which aligns with Narcissister’s project of composing minoritarian pleasure by literalizing racial-sexual

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fetishes across her body. Narcissister’s race-humor relies not only on the suspenseful and comical construction of black femininity out of her ass, but it also manifests in her spectacular mutability, which allows her to switch from one image to another in the blink of an eye. In the third section Basket, the artist utilizes layers upon layers of costuming and masking, disassembling and reassembling multiple stereotypical images from black to white, from a maid to a stripper. In such uncanny transformations, race-humor comes in to act, generating laughter that gestures towards a collective pleasure in face of such racist-sexist stereotypes.

Basket opens with Narcissister in a white mask, her body stuffed up, her hands holding a big laundry basket on top of her head. She performs an Eastern European folk dance routine, accompanied by folk music and colorful costume that are also culturally specific to the dance. However, this character is shortly after interrupted by a ringtone, from which she answers with an old school phone buried in the basket: it is a call to strip into a different avatar, a call so sudden and abrupt that it unsettles any comfort that I have developed with the image currently unfolding, a call that will constantly return throughout the piece to rush Narcissister into the next image. She slowly takes off the layer of white mask to reveal another black one, turning herself into a caricature of African American mammy. No longer standing upright dancing, the artist is now on the ground, using one of her head-wraps as a cloth to wipe the floor while Nina Simone’s sorrowful version of “Wild Is The Wind” is being played in the background, evoking the mythology of black womanhood during and after slavery as docile, nurturing and overweight housekeepers serving in white families.

With each of the image construction, Narcissister composes a wholesome package of not only visuality but also of audio-kinetic
experience that meticulously interlaces costumes, music, and movements to make her caricature immediately recognizable as caricature. As two more phone calls interrupt the performance, the artist in turn offers the spectators two more stereotypes: first an off-duty African-American mammy in a leopard-print dress grooving to Nina Simone’s “Blues For Mama”, flattering her giant boobs and butt to the audience; and second, an oversexualized black woman in provocative red and black lingerie, performing a striptease to Lil Kim notoriously vulgar “How Many Licks”. Four very distinct icons in under five minutes, Narcissister’s virtuosic and dizzying mutability overwhelms and disorients my experience, depriving me of any opportunities to sit with these problematic stereotypes and to come to a resolution – nonetheless, I laugh, a lot.

I laugh not only because the characters Narcissister strip in and out of cannot be any more dramatically different, but also because I feel extremely uncomfortable watching these problematic racialized-sexualized images constantly popping up in front of me. As oppose to the slow teasing in Everywoman, Basket bombards the spectators with a range of racial-sexual mythologies around the female figure as a basket holder. There is no unfolding in Narcissister’s extreme mutability here, but these culturally legible images in its sudden appearance immediately hail the audience into a “bind of representation”, which feminist film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu defines as a “hypersexual interpellation” of marginalized racial and sexual subjects5. As this bind multiplies and intensifies after each of Narcissister’s transformation, laughter as an effect of race-humor nervously breaks out among the audience, demonstrating a collective acknowledgement of the tight bondage between subjectivity and

visuality. As a result, a sense of commonality emerges that makes the bind visible while somewhat loosening its arresting grip on racial and sexual subjects.

As race-humor permeates the space, there emerges a utopic feeling and a sense of agency in face of such racist–sexist stereotypes. However, Narcissister’s virtuosic mutability does not suggest so much a “transgressive magic” that performs “a utopic fluidity of identity” as dance scholar Ariel Osterweis theorizes\(^6\). Quite the contrary, the artist makes it very explicit that identity is not at all fluid, as the body is constantly being policed, regulated and molded into multiple static visualities. The “fluidity of identity” that Osterweis extrapolates from Narcissister’s mutability appears to signal more of an extreme self-erasure that magnifies the working of racial-sexual fetishes across her body, than an enactment of a utopic ever-changing self. Nonetheless, the utopian still emerges not from the promise of a reflexive self, but from a reflective and introspective laughter that brings less of an affective relief, than a collective sense of responsibility and awareness around the “bind of representation”. Such radical race-humor allows racist-sexist stereotypes to paradoxically be enlarged, made explicit and at once be laughed at, deflated, to the point where there can be pleasure taken in Narcissister self-racialization and self-sexualization.

My argument that Narcissister utilizes racialization-sexualization as a possible technology of pleasure can appear quite unintuitive, but as Jennifer Nash points out, “black pleasures can include racialization even when \((and\ precision\ because)\) racialization is painful”\(^7\). It is important to not mistake Narcissister’s literalization effort as an act

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6 Ariel Osterweis, “Public Pubic”, 104.

of baring pain in front of whiteness in order to critique the white-centric mode of pleasure production. Rather, it is a radical form of ecstasy in racialization-sexualization itself, an effect of race-humor that plays with the painfully tight bondage between visuality and minoritarian subjects. By expounding the matrix of social relations that cut through the explicitly racialized female body, Narcissister paradoxically shifts the urgency away from the pain of the cut, towards the pleasure in the cut, the collective responsibility around the cut and the potential healing of the cut that can happen along with the residual of historical racial-sexual pain itself.

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Fingers On My Desire / Is My Body Just A Niche

(Fragments of Texts From Work in 2017)

by Jamila Johnson-Small
Some things are taken from Unacademic unprofessional unneutral unperformance: a poetic lecture about navigating fragility, accepting nonbelonging and decolonising my mind including ideas for anti-assimilationist holistic practice with tangible, focused manifestations as dance performances (ie stuff about my art practice) thoughts about gaze, resistance, surrender, alienation, destruction and transformation... Considering not ‘Otherness’ but entanglement, complexity, hybridity and blurred boundaries / in relation to movement and removal and harnessing of power etc. Delivered as part of Performing Otherness conference, Helsinki November 2017.

More struggling

I have been struggling with the preparation of this presentation, asking myself what I want to say on these topics, suspecting that I am here to ‘represent’ and give voice to The Other, one of ‘the others’, wondering whether I need to address this... I always find it strange to be given time, to be given time...what am I required to ‘give back’ in exchange for the privilege? Does this scenario turn me into a curiosity, something distinct, the other? I have titled this lecture/notlecture ‘unperforming’ because I don’t think of otherness as a performance but a projection, an expression of distance and distinction, a system of relation, something produced through the effects of a gaze usually to describe those with (culturally) less power (the kind that allows for ease of movement in and through the global North). If this is about relation how does space denote or create situations of otherness or an othering? Otherness as currency (that can never be cashed in by those who produce it). Otherness and oppression. ‘Otherness’ and co-option, corporations, festishisation.... I find the idea that otherness is an objective, possessed, to be picked up and put on, confusing. It reads like the perpetuation of boundaries.
Working with dance I find the idea of boundaries interesting, practice as constantly transgressing, holding the multiple and disrupting patterns and codes of language and feeling and being. As a black, if you like, queer, artist making dance performances that use my embodiment as medium I am working a lot with these gazes that other me.

What happens when we shift the centre? What happens with the centre is always shifting and the focus is never clear and meaning is always slippery, forming, reforming, unforming? What happens when the spotlight is on you? What happens to you when the spotlight is on me? What happens when ‘the Other’ does not accept that position?

Backstory

I was born and and am still based in London. I trained in ‘Contemporary Dance’ and I make shows, organise events and host conversations. Two weeks ago I was in Munich with my collaborator Alexandrina Hemsley, with whom I work with as Project O. We were speaking at Spielart in a section of the festival called ‘Crossing Oceans’. This title makes me think of the bodies of my ancestors that were forced to cross oceans hundreds of years later my grandmother on a boat from the South American continent to England...these
oceanic crossings as epic for different reasons and representing the impossibility - to me - of Home, the embodiment of a long history of displacement. Ironically then, the presentation we were invited to give was on Brexit, under the banner ‘Britain in Pieces’.

*Last Yearz Interesting Negro* is the name I give to my solo projects. This name came up after watching Basquiat the 1997 dramatisation of the life of Jean-Michel Basquiat by Julian Schnabel. I didn’t know how I wanted to use it - the title of a work, the name of a book, and then eventually I realised that it was a name for me.

The way I’ve operated so far is just to go where I am invited so I guess this has taken me and my work into a range of spaces - galleries, squats, museums, theatres, concert venues, fields, shops, living rooms... I about my practice making responses to my environment, and I think about this happening on different scales. - scenario responsive, context responsive, pragmatic somehow - I will work with whatever I can get and of course that affects the shape and form that what I make will take, but my interest is maybe more in how ideas can be embodied or communicated in a multitude of ways, rather than through one formal language. I did a performance the other day of my show *i ride in colour and soft focus*, no longer anywhere and as I was dancing I felt like nothing was mine, like I was just a sequence of references, a channel, some kind of medium (at best), I felt as though I was ’no where’ but afterwards I realised that I was sort of Everywhere; my practice is interested in developing a meta-logic for thinking about how and why to do things, driven by questions around how to undo so much that I have learned without rejecting or disregarding, how to develop working processes that are anti-assimilationist and not interested in seeking innovation or newness but dealing with the present, my present. I am interested in thinking about choreography as atmospheric temporary world
building, dancing as state altering, working with emotionality, sadness, attempts to produce states of alienation and discord and to find the flow in these tensions, accepting that I am at odds with my environment and the processes of hybridisation that produce me mean that I am at odds with myself...

I am thinking a lot about the professionalisation of art and practice to the point of the destruction of the artistic gesture and how this might relate to processes of othering and fetishisation... I don’t make work in order to have a career, I make work because I feel moved to attempt to make spaces for my body and my experience to be included, to be counted, to be visible and to connect, to take up space in discourse and encourage the necessary shifts to allow for my inclusion, because it’s a way for me to process, respond, heal and also, to be in control and set the terms which is the opposite of my experience of daily life. So to make space where my unadulterated presence is welcomed and facilitated, where my political/ethical/aesthetic agenda is prevalent (control) and where my potential growth through abandon can happen. But not to assume that this taking up space to Be looks/sounds any particular way.

Right now, I want to talk about Destruction.

Small rant

I will read an extract from a review of my work, written by Eve Allin about my show *i ride in colour and soft focus*, no longer anywhere performed at Fierce festival in October:

Before this review continues, I want to make it clear that I’m not sure I have a foothold here. I’m a cis white woman. I do not want to take this story as my own to analyse; I can’t. I can attempt to observe through a lens of critic, and reflect the show back to you. I have to ask what
gives me the right to enter this space, and comment on it. I write this from a place of ignorance and of privilege. I also write this from a place of admiration, and of wanting to learn, to be educated. I don’t think that was the intention of the show, but I wanted to preface with that, because it is important to not claim space where it is not yours to be claimed.

I have a questions about dialogue and change in response to this - what is the lens of a critic? Why is analysis the first way of relating instead of response? Why does she need to ask what gives her the right to enter ‘this space’ - being a public performance to share my work (which I obviously have desired and consented to share) to which she has a ticket? I often come up against this sentiment, the feeling that ignorance and privilege mean you have the right to abdicate. I think that this can often, once again, affirm and centre the narratives and feelings of the person/people feeling too ignorant and privileged to comment and comes across as confused and ungenerous as a response to an act of sharing. How does this abdication disrupt that ignorance or privilege? How does the work disrupt ignorance or privilege if it leads to abdication? What does it mean to ‘give space’? That space is not only physical space but a request for space in the minds of other people who can move about the world not having to consider the experiences of people who are ‘othered’.

**Now**

I think we are bored of ‘the other’, I see trends in dance and performance that attempt to create some sort of collective with collective feeling and energy. I see this in the growing interest in dance performances that speak or relate to club spaces. I think the one who is not the other feels they need liberation, want to take off their skin and celebrate energetic
meeting spaces where one is not singular but multiple, many-headed...

Sometimes I think that this denies and erases histories of oppression that work to produce our present identities, intellectual positions and social status as qualities seen in or movements made by ‘the other’ are adopted for the purpose of ‘liberating’ the oppressor

There are so many cliches about black people and rhythm, black people and dance and song and ritual...People suggest that I must be working with dance because I struggle with words. I am bored of this ring being drawn around dancing, separating it from thinking processes, archival processes, practical healing processes and making it purely about ‘expression’ as though expression is abstract, presupposing limitations on choice or agency or intelligence of people working in dance/me. This all feels super old fashioned.

I am thinking and dancing about alienation a lot at the moment, the impossibility of un-fractured togetherness and the acknowledgement of constant, shifting divisions and points of separation rather than a quest for wholeness, oneness, unity, that at this point just looks and sounds like forgetting and erasure. Instead of looking for commonality to be a starting point, can we just start from here? (wherever here might be) I could speak about dancing and say that I am not interested in creating a shared language that deals in repeated forms and fixed definitions but an understanding or engagement that happens on different, multiple levels through some kind of performance of an embodied engagement with myself and my forming/unformed logics as a space of rupture to everyday practices of communication. We all speak in tongues across continents and back and forth through time, simultaneously telling many stories at once. Bodies are complex time-travelling beasts of many intersecting and conflicting systems.
I had a conversation the other day and it reminded me that the future is contained in the present. Not some dream but the thing I create with all my actions and choices and the thing that I am imagining when I make those actions and choices. Looking at what is here now, already, and the politics assumed within gestures, taking them apart and looking at the little pieces and seeing what they tell about the past, and about the future...

At the moment I am thinking about ‘instinct’ and rhythm, musical genres, what these rhythms have to tell about a body, about a moment, and about what will follow. What vision of the future is contained in those aesthetic choices?

Nothing ever really goes away, and fetishising newness and innovation is totally colonial, the performance of a continued forgetting, erasing and ignoring. I had a Year 3 teacher who told me that energy cannot be made or destroyed, only transformed. I have thought about this every day since. Every day I am trying to figure out how to transform.

**London and me 2017**

In London, we’ve had what people called the ‘Black Summer’. Black artists presenting and represented in large institutions, white people braiding their hair with extensions, blackness and queerness intermingling in the mainstream, white people wearing tracksuits and trainers to work, everyone lathering themselves in coconut oil, white people endlessly quoting bell hooks and Audre Lorde to me…. and you know, a part of me feels like BACKTHEFUCKOFF because we have got so much shit for all these things for so long and then you walk around in your hoodie like it is nothing. I’m like, stay in West London, keep your brogues on and shave that beard. At the end of
the year I was left with so many feelings of conflict, compromise, contradiction and ______ that my brain switched off, went on holiday as soon as the clock struck December 1st.
I was invited by Zinzi Minott and Imani Robinson, alongside Errol Anderson and Joy Miessi, to participate in ‘Work It Out’ a workshop at Tate Modern as part of the public programme of events alongside their current Soul of a Nation exhibition.

The brief for the text that I am sharing here was to make a 10 minute presentation on my practice and reflections to the exhibition, to open a group discussion around a contemporary Black British context for ‘art in the age of Black Power’.
I find it easier at the moment to move rather than to speak, a place where I do not need to deal with the complications created in the gaps between perceived and intended meaning. It’s 22:40 on Friday night, the night before I am due to deliver this presentation, and I am clutching at straws trying to imagine relevant ways to speak about my practice or imagine my practice at all. It all feels like a void...but maybe I am just tired. So, a stream of consciousness:

meaning

I struggle – I feel like it would maybe be more on trend to say ‘grapple’ – with meaning, at this point, I do not know about ‘Meaning’, I am possessed by feeling and an instinct for survival. In this moment, where there is demand (from institutions at least) for ‘political’ art, I am often asking myself what it is that makes something ‘Art’, maybe more so than what it might be that makes something political. All actions contain a politic, all thoughts processed through ideology but I am curious about the art part, the thing that weaponises the statement, represents the reality more clearly than the reality itself whilst doing away with the possibility for singular realities,
something my body encounters and my mind rearranges itself around...transgressions, transcendence...understanding as sensing...

I participate in a few ‘professional’ conversations, public and as research, and we often say we want the conversation to be productive (too much of a capitalist agenda); generative (privileges the tangible and the immediate and expansion); now I have started to say that I want these conversations to be Transformative. It made me smile that this was also what Zinzi [Minott] said regarding this conversation in our meeting on Thursday. That’s the thing right now: FUCKING TRANSFORMATION. Not change, shift, little by little but actually transformation. I had a teacher in Year Three – and these were the days when the curriculum in the UK seemed less strict – and this teacher loved science and she would always say, it was her motto, “Energy is the go of things” and “energy cannot be made or destroyed, only transformed”. This stays with me and informs my practice.

Walking through the exhibition I hear this sentiment echoed in a quote from Frank Bowling, about the way that black artists disrupt conventions of signification in their work, imbuing the signifier with new ‘meaning’ about experience that was not initially represented. Feelings make facts. David Hammons in Room 6 is quoted “I feel it my moral obligation as a Black artist, to try to graphically document what I feel socially”.

At the moment my work is a lot about energy transformation. Arriving in a space, feeling it out, letting it in, processing it and transforming it into something else. I guess you think about this as sampling, remixing, collage, ritual, trance....

*abstraction*
There’s this annoying debate about abstraction that is referred to in Room 10 – can black artists make abstract art? Should black artists make abstract art or is that shirking responsibility? can black artists make art that isn’t political?

I realised something the other day, which is that I cannot be a Contemporary Dancer. I thought that I was, I trained for years in ‘Contemporary Dance’, I have an MA in Contemporary Dance but actually, what I do, cannot be that, will always disrupt that or otherwise become an obstacle for me.

Can black artists do contemporary dance? Can black artists make abstract art? In a way, always no, because we do not have the privilege of pseudo-neutrality aka whiteness – perhaps this is sometimes possible to gain when your body (or your name) are not visibly racialised in your work, but I walk down the road and I know full well that everything I do is loaded here, that my being presents a threat, there is no “freedom from representation” or ability to deal with “ideas rather than events” because my black body appears in front of you with a history of events, encounters, death. But new languages are always being created and what was once abstract is now an aesthetic convention and ‘abstract’ is also often a word used to describe a person’s perceived distance from the thing.

This energy work I am doing, it is on one level a strategy for attempting to engage with a public or an audience as many, not a singular mass. There are different conversations to be had with different people but when you don’t choose – or even know – who is in a space and engaging with your work, it feels important to try to acknowledge that this. I have seen – and felt sadness and erasure at – too many shows that are by black and poc artists that address themselves to a white audience, I am sure I have also done this, it is a
gaze that I think I have had to internalise for survival but it feels very important to try not to continue this culture of exclusion and centring of whiteness. How to have many conversations at once? How to hold all the contradictions and conflict and continue? In discussion with someone I work with, they said that in discussions about the work I “open all the doors” and they wanted to close them so that we could ‘focus’. I found this very interesting. I think about focus as some kind of epic holistic awareness and want to find all the ‘doors’ possible, open them, and feel the breeze.

improvisation

Room 10 speaks to improvisation. This is another word I struggle with. I describe what I do as dancing. It is technical, it is improvised, it is no freer than I am, it is choreographed, it is experimental as it is working its way from knowns and into unknowns. The way that this word ‘improvisation’ privileges certain kinds of knowledges I do not think is helpful for black experience and black art when lack of representation is a thing, and experience is your reference point because there is no book in the local library that will explain the situation to you. (This is said, I hope the collections in the libraries I frequented as a teenager, desperately looking for myself, have changed) Feelings have to become facts, and we need to validate them ourselves. Fantasies and visions become Guides.

Improvisation is defined in this dictionary here (google): “create and perform (music, drama, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation”. Running through this text, I guess is the idea that everything can be material; one of the most striking works in this show for me is the tights Zinzi referenced by Senga Nengudi. I think life is preparation enough for art making. One of the questions I ask myself a lot is, what is here already? And what can be done with it?
Objects, energy, ideology, power structures, the tensions between things that we call relationships.

I wonder about the curation of the exhibition, the journey could perhaps have been designed with a logic that relates to that history, those intentions, a vision of and a struggle for a world that doesn’t centre whiteness and exploit and crush blackness, could it employ those strategies used by artists working to create (intentionally or by virtue of history) a Black aesthetic tradition? I am struck by the experience of moving through that space full of art that describes, represents, presents, produces complex experience as a black body, as a living body. What if chronology shifted from the calendar logic? What if locations of the production of the work or the artist’s birth were not mentioned? What if Nationhood was not invoked? What if different forms of contextualisation were presented? What if the gaps and absences were marked? What if we were not spat out into the shop? What if it wasn’t called ‘Soul of a Nation’ but actually referenced some kind of embodiment when bodies are the ground on, through and over which the work and politics are activated or enacted?
In my thirty years I wonder the number of times that I have walked up and down these streets Mare Street Kingsland Road Dalston Lane Balls Pond Road Lower Clapton Road Homerton High Street Morning Lane Well Street Hackney Road

Sometimes I am walking
and it would seem as I am wading through the debris of this past that is unwilling to be suppressed by the paving stones
by a daily trampling
good n proper
from the thousands
millions
of footsteps
just rises up

I have this recurring dream
it is about waste
we’ve tried to bury it beneath the pavement and the roads but it pushes up
like the roots of those angry trees driving up the cement and tarmac
on some roads
regardless of the destruction
Life will out
Nothing is forever
And why should the tree give a shit anyway
Anyway
the rubbish pushes up, expanding the cracks in the street on which I am walking
initially
I’m like
bobbing up and down as I walk
buoyed by the masses of waste emerging from what I pretend on a
daily basis is the ground
I keep walking
colours rising
Soon I will be drowning
Would you rather
drown
or burn

I am afraid of water
I am also afraid of time
because of the things they keep
and the things that they take away

My metropolis
fresh nike creps on credit
reebok stepping up once again

I buy a new pair of shows for every show
but I don’t have a home
2016
baby
walk with me
walk with me

The parks and canals are full of constant joggers
trotting towards self-improvement and looking like something
sinister
self-contained machines of purpose
desperation in sports tech and buggies

Coherence is stifling me
I try not to spend all day reacting
people so loaded up with signs they look like code
between one and zero there isn’t really much nuance

what happens to my body when growth is an abstract concept

Acts of love
of unruly feeling like sabotage
to my daily existence
inside the binary
sometimes
engaging with feeling is just too much
and life
becomes managing this sensory overload

A good tactic is to overload the senses so much
on purpose
that this excess overloads the overload and confounds the bodily
systems
another
is to devote yourself to a single source of stimulation
and engage it
repeatedly

I like our shared and casual fantasies
this world building
Do you think that’s ground you’re walking on
so many things made real
what incredible potential
nostalgic word something is being chased and something else is
what it is chasing and that something else already left

a long time ago
I am happy to be imprinted upon
say
to gain the extra code
in an endless act of composition
addition

I wanted to write a text about dancing
a prologue
or something

Last night I dreamt that I have two huge clitoris growing from my iliac crests
and I worry
how my jeans will fit

*Last Yearz Interesting Negro* is the solo project of [Jamila Johnson-Small](#), she makes shows with dance, choreography, sound, video, sculpture and works with in-between spaces – things that exist in and through cracks in time/memory/attention – syncopation, trance states, internal narratives, intensities, electronic music, and a love of dancing on the spot. In her performances, bodies of public and performer(s) are navigated as object, animal, human, machine, environment, energy, to build atmospheric landscapes created by the live unfolding of the tensions between things that produce meaning. Not interested in invention or innovation she uses things that are already there and rearranges them in an effort to encounter some unholy combination that resonates with the horror, discomfort, cringe, confusion and sensuality of this contemporary moment and her position within it, opening up spaces in thinking, feeling, reading and dancing. The landscapes she creates for her dancing body to inhabit with a public, seek to access and utilise her own power for her own ends, disentangling from – or entangling herself further with – the isms that instrumentalise her existence on a daily without her consent.

Of Caribbean descent, born and based in London she has formed long term collaborations with other artists including Project O with Alexandrina Hemsley, immigrants and animals with Mira Kauuto. More recently she performs in work by Fernanda Munoz-Newsome, runs HOTLINE with Sara Sassanelli, and GUSH with David Panos, a semi-regular low-key DIY event.
Thank you for reading!

This was a preview of the forthcoming publication *Blackness & the Postmodern*. Full publication will be released in May 2018.

Stay tuned.
UrbanApa presents:

BLACKNESS & POSTMODERN

full publication out in May 2018