# Haunting Gathering: Black Dance and Afro-Pessimism

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[25] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

[26] Quoted in Mandla Mbuyisa, "A Response to Steve Lebelo," *Black Opinion*, December 8, 2016, https://blackopinion.co.za/2016/12/08/response-steve-lebelo/.

[27] Huey Copeland, "Tending-toward-Blackness," *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 143, doi:10.1162/OCTO_a_00249.

[28] "Philo-aesthetic-praxis" extends from the concept of philo-praxis; philosopher Ndumiso Dladla builds on the idea that philosophy, despite its capacity to self-examine, isn't orientated toward itself but instead toward the reality that it interprets. It goes without saying, a philo-aesthetic-praxis speaks to what we are trying to develop as a theory of aesthetics that is coterminously enunciative and emerging out of the reality it reflects. For a thorough development of the concept of philo-praxis, see Ndumiso Dladla, "Towards an African Critical Philosophy of Race: Ubuntu as a Philo-praxis of Liberation," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 6, no. 1 (January/June 2017): 39–68.

[29] See Hortense J. Spillers, "Formalism Comes to Harlem," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85.

[30] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1.

[31] Mogobe Ramose, "Feta Kgomo O Tshware Motho," *Culture Review Magazine*, February 11, 2017, https://httpculturereview.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/feta-kgomo-o-tshwaremotho/.

[32] Nigel Gibson, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo* (Pietermaritzburg, ZA: UKZN Press, 2011), 10.

[33] See Wilderson, "Vengeance of Vertigo," 30.

[34] Sexton, "Afropessimism."

[35] Frank B. Wilderson III, "Grammars and Ghosts: The Performance Limits of African Freedom," in "African and Afro-Caribbean Performance," ed. Catherine M. Cole and Leo Cabranes-Grant, special issue, *Theatre Survey* 5, no. 1 (May 2009): 123, doi:10.1017/S004055740900009X.

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# HAUNTING GATHERING: BLACK DANCE AND AFRO-PESSIMISM

**MLONDOLOZI ZONDI**

When a group comprised primarily of African-derived "people"—yes, the scare quotes matter—*gather* at the intersection of performance and subjectivity, the result is often not a renewed commitment to practice or an explicit ensemble of questions, but rather a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are

the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture.

—Frank B. Wilderson III[1]

The relationship between aesthetics and Afro-pessimism is central to my research, which focuses on the work of Black artists in the US and South Africa that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, a period after the "culture wars," or "culture struggles" as they are known in South Africa. I engage formal performance strategies that Black artists invent and deploy in order to reveal freedom as an "incomplete project" for Blackness around the world.[2] With dancer-choreographer Ligia Lewis's *minor matter* (2017) in mind, I aim to demonstrate how this creativity exists in the midst of (and not in spite of) the persistence of Black subjugation, *the dereliction of Black corporeal integrity*, and the normalization of Black death.[3] Afro-pessimism expands the conception of death as not only biological but also psychic, social (lived), and imbricated in desire. Theorists of Afro-pessimism turn to Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies* (2006) as texts that radicalize Black performance studies insofar as they home in on those banal brutalities and grotesqueries of everyday Black life that are "breathed in like air."[4] Both thinkers demonstrate how for the Black, the neat binary between mundane and

**Figure 1.**
*Hector Thami Manekehla, Jonathan Gonzalez, and Ligia Lewis in* minor matter *(2017). Photographer: Martha Glenn. Image courtesy of Ligia Lewis.*

spectacular violence does not cohere and that anti-Blackness is irreducible to discreet hostile interactions with Black people. In particular, they reveal how for survival, Black political and aesthetic articulation have had to suppress the coexistence of these horrors with pleasure and desire.[5]

The body is everywhere in critical theorizing about performance, particularly dance. When it appears, it is whole; it is sensational; it is invaginated; it becomes; it is without organs; it is on the line; it affirms presence; it is a repository of memory and experience; and despite strides made to discuss it away from a reduction to biology, it disappears and/or remains as a given. My research, informed by and contributing to Afro-pessimist theorizing, questions these conclusions about the body. My concern is performance studies' (and by extension dance studies') assumptions about the body's sentience as evidence for subjectivity. The idea of the presence of the body reifies Western conceptions that underplay how the African "body" in particular, as Hortense Spillers argues, "was made to *mean* via the powerful grammars of capture" such as colonialism as well as the Arab and transatlantic slave trades.[6] Instead of theorizing from performance studies' presumption that there *is* a body endowed with (restricted) agency and capacity, what can be gained from taking seriously Spillers's assertion that,

> the "body" is neither *given* as an uncomplicated empirical rupture on the landscape of the human, nor do we ever actually "see" it. . . . it is an analytical construct [that] does not exist in person at all. When we invoke it, then, we are often confusing and conflating our own momentousness as address to the world . . . with an idea on paper, only made vivid because we invest it with living dimensionality, mimicked, in turn, across the play of significations.[7]

Spillers's work demonstrates the body's irreducibility to its anatomical features and functions, describing it instead as a meeting point of discursive-material maneuvers tied to the accumulation of power. For Spillers, "the flesh" is a more apt concept for understanding Black captive personality and creative speculation, which is distinct from the "the body" as that which demarcates liberated subjectivity. This distinction allows a reassessment of presuppositions about the Black's access to the profits of intersubjective empathy and catharsis. In theatrical performance, it reveals the violence of applause/affirmation. As opposed to studies that take for granted the Black body's wholeness and relational capacity, I am interested in how aesthetic motifs associated with formlessness and disassembly assert certain claims about Black captive personality. The performances I study attempt to refrain from amending silences and gaps in archives of Black death. In assessing these works, I share Huey Copeland's curiosity about what he calls "the limits of the sayable" when he asks, "what is

being said by not saying, and why must it be said in this particular way?"[8]

Literary scholar Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman tends to the limits of narrative in performance and aesthetics, specifically the limits of realist and figurative gestures that attempt to translate Black suffering for the purpose of transcending it. The concept of "Black grotesquerie" is Abdur-Rahman's way of attending to Frank Wilderson's call that "we need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror."[9] Abdur-Rahman emphasizes the role of Black aesthetic practitioners as critical thinkers whose art confounds representational logics of liberal humanist recognition. Black grotesquerie is an artistic critical posture that acknowledges catastrophe as the context for Black being and considers Black social life as "the practice of living on in outmoded shapes."[10] This compositional disassembly is also a "recombinant gathering" that does not assume a prior corporeal, narrative, temporal, and topographical integrity for Blackness or Black people whose fragmentation or loss is not mournable in conventional ways. Abdur-Rahman writes:

> For those whose terms of existence are tethered to structural loss—to forms of civil and social death and to the persistent likelihood of their own untimely demise—*narrative fails* in its usual procedure. The appeals, interests, and injuries of these subjects cannot be articulated or recuperated within the ordinary sites and schemas of historical, epistemic, and political rationality.[11]

The failure of narrative to articulate anti-Black horror calls for approaches that refrain from mending this silence/impossibility. It remains to be determined whether Black grotesquerie's explanatory power can fully account for a certain impasse where even Black artists working in abstraction get entrapped in unavoidable double-binds of reinforcing what they critique. Further, representational monstrosity alone cannot end anti-Black regimes of knowing and sensing. Black grotesquerie, however, does underscore violence as a ubiquitous force that restricts the chances of unfettered Black articulation or performing oneself to personhood.

I am fascinated by narrations of experimental dance that do not address Africa, even as African experimental choreographers continue to shape contemporary movement lexicons in cities around the world (i.e., Paris, New York, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo). This is not a call for the inclusion of African nontraditional performances into metanarratives of contemporary experimental performance. Rather, it is about marking how in these accounts, Africans exist outside of time as well as subsidize contemporary dance's temporal and material integrity with their accumulated labor that goes unacknowledged. Black dance in the post-1990 era is characterized by increased transnational and multicultural collaborations and residences for Black dancers. This represents the mobility of

those who dance fluidly within and beyond national and disciplinary borders, exploding those borders, but also being racialized in the midst of that mobility. While it is important to celebrate this mobility and the possibilities it promises for the evolution of Black dance, what if critics paused to contemplate how terms such as "transnational collaboration" often obscure the class and racial anti-Black power dynamics at play in these transnational collaborative encounters? The language of "collaboration" obscures the entanglement between these gatherings and presentations of Africans as ethnographic attractions in the early twentieth century and before.[12] The language of transnational collaboration conceals the fact that these collaborations operate under similar (but more sophisticated and suppressed) representational logics of "past" ethnographic attractions. Black performers are invited to rehabilitate European legacies of slavery and colonialism under the guise of "self-reflexive" transnational collaboration. Such collaborations sometimes coax Black artists to collude in practices drafted against their advantage. African (diasporic) intellectual labor in dance is predominantly acknowledged merely as raw affect and energy. These examples illuminate how the global flow of anti-Blackness happens alongside and *through* performance. This means that collaborative transnational performance is also a medium or a maneuver through which anti-Blackness congeals and proliferates globally. When these collaborations are initiated by Black choreographers from the African continent and Black artists from the Americas and Europe (usually funded by US, German, British, French, and Swiss governments "to promote culture"), there is usually an underlying promise and nostalgic expectation that a suturing of what poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey calls "wounded kinship" between Africa and African America will materialize.[13]

Afro-pessimism allows me to ponder these problems of Black (diasporic) collaboration through a dance performance titled *minor matter*, created in 2016 by Berlin-based Dominican American choreographer Ligia Lewis. I first experienced the piece in 2017 in New York City. Lewis shares the stage with other Black dancers from the US and South Africa, who move between various countries (the Dominican Republic, Germany, Belgium, France). These dancers include Jonathan Gonzalez and Hector Thami Manekehla, and later Tiran Willemse. The performers create a space for vibrant Black (anti-)sociality in dance without resorting to elements of performance that desire a "nostalgic and impossible suturing of wounded kinship."[14] The piece takes seriously the materiality of the black box theater as a generative site for working out the gendered and racialized affect of rage. Rage is a presumed disposition for Black people, and it is institutionally managed, silenced, and regulated. By asserting Black rage, *minor matter* intentionally forecloses the possibility of presumed relational dialogue, insisting upon a practice of being-with Black rage outside of pathology and moralist judgment.[15]

**Figure 2.**
*Tiran Willemse, Jonathan Gonzalez, and Ligia Lewis in* minor matter *(2017). Photographer: Martha Glenn. Image courtesy of Ligia Lewis.*

The piece also probes the challenges of Black collectivity and political formation. Created against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the piece betrays expectations to aesthetically portray Black death.[16] This refusal is ingrained in the performance description, which states that *minor matter* "resists the tyranny of transparency and representationalism" and limits explanation of the unsayable.[17] Rather than choreographing a stage version of BLM activism that fully succumbs to contemporary art institutions' penchant for Black "activist art" to fulfill diversity quotas and other related reasons, Lewis approaches Blackness, abstraction, and matter(ing) through formal problems associated with the materiality of the black box, darkness, line, exhaustion, and what Fred Moten calls "phonic substance."[18] *Minor matter's* embrace of the movement for Black lives eschews a parasitic appropriation of Black activists' labor and incorporating BLM within the performance's logic. That is to say, the piece is in conversation with BLM politics and additionally poses particular questions about representation and sensation within the black box theater, specifically what can be seen and sensed in total darkness, as well as what a nonvisual orientation toward Blackness might potentialize.[19] Further, if as artist-critic

Hannah Black has observed in her review of the piece, "in Black collective being, apocalyptic hurt and utopian community are folded together," then it would be overdetermined to label *minor matter* as an Afro-pessimist dance. My interest in the piece, much like in Abdur-Rahman's "Black grotesquerie," lies in its palpable exploration of "grammar and ghosts" that haunt Black gesture and gathering, as articulated in the epigraph from Wilderson.

*Minor matter*, as a Black transnational collaboration, is susceptible to expectations to represent transcendental precolonial relationality. Lewis is less interested in that romance as it silences the historical ruptures that established wounded kinship between Africans globally. The vibrant *sociality* enacted on stage is attentive to the *position* of Blackness globally as "living on in outmoded shapes," recognizing the reality of nation while not celebrating its limitations.[20] *Minor matter* exhausts the theater's various apparatuses to problematize intercorporeal contact and relationality by foregrounding minor gestures and unprestigious affects.[21] Form in *minor matter* is achieved by the "dissolution [and] *annulment* of form."[22] The dancers wrestle to form multiple "huddles" toward the final section of the piece (Fig. 1).[23] The huddle appears as a tight protective embrace, but it is also a slippery and consequence of uncomfortable collisions. The dancers squeeze, grip, and use each other's limbs to climb and form knotted *tableaux vivants* that repeatedly crash and fall apart. Rather than a resolution, the piece ends with an abrupt blackout cued by Lewis shouting, "Black!" We are invited to confront a series of questions. Through the huddle, does contact signal a "community of experience" endowed with political plentitude and democratic aspirations?[24] Does the huddle direct attention to a more frictive Afro-diasporic formation that choreographer Ralph Lemon once described (referring to his *Geography Trilogy*) as "a limited, contrived community in a context of empirical performance formalism"?[25] By remaining ambivalent to the "tyranny of positivity" that drives the *majority* of contemporary Black performance and its theorization, *minor matter* punctures and punctuates a space for questioning the agential and relational gravitas often bestowed upon contact and/as improvisation.[26]

The kind of sociality contained in *minor matter*'s embrace of negative affect and negative philosophy can be thought of as *negative kin-aesthesia*. Negative kin-aesthesia alludes to the deliberate anticathartic performance strategies that prevent idiopathic identification between the audience and the performance/performers.[27] Firstly, while the dance's virtuosic elements might allow for "kinesthetic empathy" to happen, for the audience to feel moved by the performance, it is precisely this feeling of being moved that risks establishing false identification with the dancers.[28] Secondly, the dance acknowledges the global position of Blackness while troubling the romantic presumption of "kin" in the context of African and African-diaspora aesthetic collaboration. Negative kin-aesthesia is less about regathering precolonial wholeness and

more about the praxis and consciousness of using fleshly collisions that tend to Blackness's fractal condition. *Minor matter* is where Black people can gather but the event cannot be a Black gathering. The organized gathering cannot be a refuge or a protected site for Black sociality. Like Black performance in general, the piece is emblematic of Blackness as ongoing resistance subsumed within a framework of institutional coercion, the risk of incorporation into neoliberal identity politics, and civil societal surveillance. These racial-capitalist machinations operate despite Lewis's highly critical, counterhegemonic, and "minoritarian" authorial intentions. This tension reveals where nonrepresentational Black aesthetics arrives at an impasse.

What would emerge if Black studies, and by extension Black performance theory and visual studies, delved more within the "aporetic crisis" presented by *minor matter* alongside concepts that already animate the field such as "fugitivity," "afro-alienation," "Afro-fabulation," "kinaesthetic contagion," and "corporeal orature," etc.?[29] This would entail revising a collective investment in endowing Black suffering with narrative closure and reconsidering the hypervaluation of the liberatory properties of survival. Survival is the *afterlife of slavery*, and not its resolution or its transcendence.[30] Acknowledging this detail, as drama theorist Jaye Austin Williams puts it, may steer us away from celebrating the "in spite of"/"anyway" condition of Black survival. This revised consciousness about Black survival would acknowledge "the empirically supportable fact that when Blacks survive at all, they must do so with a resolve to resist and protest" in perpetuity.[31]

Ultimately, Afro-pessimism enables me to pose the question: how would fields of study and artistic practices that engage with Blackness be strengthened if they resisted the impulse to resuture the status of Blackness as "crushed object"?[32] My research project, "Unmournable Void," is about learning from aesthetic meditations such as Lewis's that are reckoning with black matter and the status of "crushed objecthood." These projects draw attention to the limits of refurbishing the project of humanism. Engaging Lewis's and other Black dancemakers' work (such as Nelisiwe Xaba, Will Rawls, Faustin Linyekula, mayfield brooks, Keyon Gaskin, and others) demonstrates that Blackness needs not move toward wholeness in order to speculate about what is possible as an effective response to the world. Black objecthood, or the unmournable void, in these aesthetic-theoretical practices is not covered up or overcome. This reminds me of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, where Eva, whose left leg was amputated, did not "wear overlong dresses to disguise the empty place on her left side."[33] Why does Morrison present the "empty place" of Eva's left leg as something not to be overcome, hidden, or something to be apologetic for? She does not romanticize it either.[34] What would it mean for Black studies and aesthetics to address this "empty place" in a manner that does not hide, compensate for, or relegate "the empty place" to metaphor? Moments in *minor matter* move toward this

nonrepresentational revelation, which does not abandon figural articulation completely. This is when aesthetics does not cover up the irreparable chasm launched by anti-Black violence that ruptures relation. For certain Black aesthetic practitioners, the "empty place" has a message for and against the world.[35] Refusal to conceal the "empty place" and the pain that persists despite the absence of visible evidence of the severing is how I aspire to *tend-toward* the void of Black subjectivity.[36]

## Notes

[1] Frank B. Wilderson, "Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom," in "African and Afro-Caribbean Performance," ed. Catherine M. Cole and Leo Cabranes-Grant, special issue, *Theatre Survey* 50, no. 1 (May 2009): 119.

[2] Saidiya V. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 4.

[3] See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2

[4] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hortense J. Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14; emphasis in original.

[7] Ibid., 21; emphasis in original.

[8] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 45.

[9] Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman quotes Wilderson's call for "a new language of abstraction with explanatory powers emphatic enough to embrace the Black." See Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 2, quoted in Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "Black Grotesquerie." *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 700.

[10] Abdur-Rahman, "Black Grotesquerie," 683.

[11] Ibid., 688; emphasis added.

[12] See Bernth Lindfors, *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[13] Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232, quoted in Fred Moten, *In the Break.: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

[14] Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

[15] See Tyrone S. Palmer, "'What Feels More Than Feeling?': Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 31.

[16] Lewis discusses the connection with BLM in "Ligia Lewis in conversation with Erin Manning and Rizvana Bradley," YouTube video, 46:00, posted by "Studium Generale Rietveld Academie," June 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGr5wkfjr5I.

[17] For the performance's program description, see "minor matter," *Performance Space New York*, https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/minor-matter/.

[18] Moten, *In the Break*.

[19] This nonvisual orientation toward darkness and blackness opens up space to consider the promises and failures of a haptic engagement with blackness. Moten, in discussing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, states that "invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable." Moten, *In the Break*, 68. The blackness of the

black box theater, the blacked-out and dimmed lights, and the black dancing *body* are collapsed in *minor matter* as a mode of bringing attention to how black matter is overrepresented as both absence and hypervisibility.

[20] Abdur-Rahman, "Black Grotesquerie," 683.

[21] See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). For a discussion of "minor aesthetics," see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16. Also see Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture: (Thought in the Act)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[22] Hortense J. Spillers, "Art Talk and the Uses of History," *small axe* 19, no. 3 (November 2015): 184; emphasis in original.

[23] In US postmodern dance, "the huddle" is associated with Simone Forti's dance construction first performed in 1961. I had an opportunity to perform in "the huddle" when Forti visited Northwestern University and directed a performance program titled *Thinking with the Body* in February 2016. Lewis also participated in a workshop where Forti taught "the huddle" in early 2014 at Pieter Space, Los Angeles. Forti's huddle differs from Lewis's in the sense that it privileges notions of working together, harmony, and democracy. It is highly participatory and suggests the way that notions of community were being rethought during the 1960s.

[24] A community of experience where ideas of democracy are practiced in the studio is what Cynthia Novack observes about contact improvisation. See Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). Another dance scholar, Erin Manning, theorizes dance's potential for democracy when she describes a politics of touch in dance as "a fleshy," "flexible and unpredictable" "democracy-to-come." See Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxi.

[25] Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art / Race / Exile* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 7.

[26] See Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams, "Staging (Within) Violence: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016).

[27] Kaja Silverman describes idiopathic identification as "the annihilatory relation to the other," and Max Scheler characterizes it as "the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own." Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23; and Max Scheler, quoted in Ibid. Also see Saidiya Hartman's discussion of "narcissistic identification" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[28] I am building on Susan Foster's work, which challenges direct psychophysical connection between the dancer's body and the observer's body. "Kinesthetic empathy," the performer-observer connection sensed through movement, is not "natural." It is highly mediated and choreographed to affirm and instill either already-existing or desired social values. See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[29] "Aporetic crisis" is discussed in Frank B. Wilderson III, "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 135. For "fugitivity," see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013). "Afro-alienation" is discussed in Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2006). "Afro-fabulation" is discussed in Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). For "kinaesthetic contagion," see Rizvana Bradley, "Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 14–30. Finally, for a discussion of "corporeal orature," see Thomas DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power." in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by Andre Lepecki. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 64–81.

[30] See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

[31] Jaye Austin Williams, "Radical Black Drama-as-Theory: The Black Feminist Dramatic on the Protracted Event-Horizon," *Theory & Event*, 21, no. 1 (2018): 196.

[32] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

[33] Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 31.

[34] My colleague, Dr. Cecilio Cooper (whose research deals more rigorously with the topic), helped me approach *Sula* with closer attentiveness to Eva's "empty place," particularly the knowledge it carries for Black study.

[35] This is a riff on W. E. B. Du Bois's statement that "Negro blood has a message for the world." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Vintage/Library of America, 1990), 9. For a discussion of "the end of the world" in Black feminist aesthetics, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," in "States of Black Studies," ed. Alexander G. Weheliye, special issue, *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

[36] See Huey Copeland, "Tending-toward-Blackness," *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 141–44.

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# TO SIT WITH REFUSAL: A ROUNDTABLE

**HUEY COPELAND, SAMPADA ARANKE, ATHI JOJA, MLONDI ZONDI, AND FRANK WILDERSON**

In this text—edited from the November 17, 2017 transcript recording the closing conversation of the "Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics" symposium held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—scholars Sampada Aranke, Huey Copeland, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Frank B. Wilderson III, and Mlondolozi Zondi compare and discuss the ways in which Black radical thought puts pressure on both aesthetic theory and practice, regardless of medium or discipline. Building on and referring back to the other pieces included in this