

The Body Is Never Given, nor Do We Actually See It

Black woman lying on a Chicago sidewalk. State Street. The Loop. Slack. No tension in her muscles. The calves and legs rest. Top of her feet touching the ground at the bridge where the toes emerge from her foot. Her face facing right, left cheek pressed into the concrete sustaining the weight of her head. Arms stretched at her side, top of the hands pressed to the ground, the skin from wrist to shoulder touching the ground. Body exposed to the November chill. A tension. Between a light, white dress and the cold. Between an artist's body lying slack, not seen, and the people in jackets and coats passing by not seeing. Between blackness and being, being seen and *being not seen*.

A black woman in a tan overcoat walks from south to north. It's possible that at first she doesn't see the body of the woman on the ground. But then she glances. A few steps forward, before being pushed off course by a cluster of bodies moving south, she resumes her walk then stalls, pausing, and looking back at the body on the ground. She hesitates for a moment, then she walks back to the woman on the ground and leans forward to say something

to her. Perhaps: “Are you ok? What’s happened to you? What do you need? What can I do for you now?” And though we cannot hear what they say to each other, whatever the woman on the ground says, it must have been enough, because the woman in the tan coat seems satisfied. She continues on her way.

In the piece *11/10/10* Alexandria Eregbu placed her body in different public places around Chicago: beneath benches, in parks, and on a busy sidewalk on State Street in the city’s downtown Loop. The performance was photographed and the State Street segment was documented with a digital camera mounted on a tripod and tended by Eregbu’s associate and fellow artist, Han Service-Rodriguez. In a thirteen-minute video hosted on the artist’s website until the summer of 2017, the footage was edited at seemingly random intervals to feature a series of scenarios, including the exchange between the woman in the tan coat and the woman on the ground. In this footage, there are other people who stop and offer some measure of care for, to, or toward Eregbu. But the spectator mostly witnesses a stream of people who walk past and over Eregbu’s body, only sometimes offering a passing glance at a black woman lying slack on the sidewalk. During the performance, Eregbu’s body is simultaneously and dangerously hypervisible and invisible. We watch her, watch her body, which is also to watch and see her not being seen by the large number of the people moving past her, which could also be a way of describing the way that blackness is produced, and a blackened body may be held in the tension between blackness and being, being seen and *being not seen*.

Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in the United States and the footage captures a segregated response to Eregbu’s punctuating (non)being and (non)presence. The white people walk on by. It is only apparently black people who break, pause, stop, turn, and *speak* with the woman on the ground, speech being emphasized because, although she is lying on the ground, her eyes are open and she will willingly speak to anyone willing to speak with her. But with the exception of a police officer, none of the people who express active attention toward Eregbu’s presence, let alone speak with her, appear to be white, brown, or otherwise marked by race. There are plenty of white people who glance at the body for a moment, even hesitate. A small number of white women pause, but with the slightest assurance that Eregbu is okay (eye contact with Service-Rodriguez, a nervous glance at a black man handing out unrelated pamphlets to the side of the artist’s body), or at least that someone else is handling the problem, these women move on. Surely the great number of people of color do just the same. But there is a relatively steady host of black

people (at least the edited footage gives us this impression) who pause and hesitate to express concern or care for the woman on the ground.

A break, pause, stop, turn, speak: actions that interrupt the unspoken collective agreement dominating the surround to force a temporal and spatial rupture in which a visibly invisible body becomes acutely visible. Here, the passerby's interaction with (or in response to) Eregbu undoes the repertoire of actions through which the people of the city have silently agreed to not see or recognize the presence of her punctuating presence.¹ But this is also to say that the black people who break, pause, stop, turn and *speak* with Eregbu do what the rest of the people in the camera's frame do not or will not: they recognize her presence *within* the present. Speech again is emphasized because when these people stop to attend to and care for Eregbu, something else happens. They begin to talk to each other, to the man with the pamphlets, to Service-Rodriguez, to Eregbu herself. This is a practice of relation (of being with and in relation to each other) that can only happen within the time and space of a given present.

It is not that the break in the temporal and social routine of the surround pulls Eregbu's body back into a (white) present from which it has been banished. Instead, those who break, pause, stop, turn, or speak enter into the blackened time and space of (non)being and (non)presence emanating from Eregbu's body. This present, though forged through and against myriad histories of black life's negation, is still rich with the possibility for intraracial sociality, care, and self-recognition among and between black people. In other words, the present emanating from Eregbu's seemingly abject presence is itself a blackened time and space that fosters and facilitates performances of black care and as black power.

This chapter tells a story about blackness and being, black durational performance, black power and the powers that cohere in a blackened Now. Eregbu's performance, which grounds my analysis, embodies and articulates a body as that which is held and produced in the tense space between blackness and being, being seen and *being not seen*. In what follows, I ask how performance might be used to navigate the fraught and potentially foreclosed corporeal, spatial, visual, and above all temporal terrain through which blackness as (non)being and (non)presence emerges within the social by being banished from the presence of the present. Thus, to reiterate C. Riley Snorton's restatement of a famous statement by Fanon, "The problem considered here is one of time."²

In Eregbu's performance, the quite visibly present presence of a black woman is largely apprehended as if she were not there at all: she is in place by being no-place. The performance illustrates the way blackness and a black

woman's body are always "out of place." Katherine McKittrick describes the out-of-place-ness of blackness as the result of sociogenic process through which the management of black female presence, itself overdetermined by a history of spatial displacement and bodily dispossession, "effectively, but not completely, displaces black geographic knowledge by assuming that black femininity is altogether knowable, unknowing, and expendable: she is seemingly in place by being out of place."³ What Eregbu's performance reveals is that this despatialization of blackness and of the racialized body requires a concurrent process of differential temporalization. That is, the blackened may be out of space but it is also out of time.

When a body—spectacularly present in any range of corporeal forms, including race, gender, sex, sexuality, or ability—is both seen and not seen, it is phenomenally banished from both the space *and* time of the present. It is banished *from* the present. So while it has been often remarked that one of the major operations of racism, in the wake of slavery and colonization, has been to erase black pasts and continually foreclose black futures (and then legitimize both erasure and foreclosure), we are also facing the devastating effects of a social sphere in which black people (and blackness) are routinely denied access to the present. The denial of the present may be the most vicious of all temporal crimes against blackness. To live with a past that is under stubborn and willful erasure is to lose where you came from. To be denied the future through routine and systematic foreclosure is to lose the horizon of possibility. But to be denied the present is to be denied the grounds from which the future can be altered and the past reconstituted for better use. It is to lose all three as they collapse in upon a negated Now.

The project I describe here is not about recovering or recuperating blackness or the racialized body for a dominant, normative, or universal sense of time and space. Instead, I'm interested in how black performance generates its own spatial, temporal, and social material from the blackened grounds of (non)being and (non)presence. Eregbu's performance stages a practice of living in, lying in, yet somehow still *being* in a present that is denied and under erasure. With every person who passes her by, the overall effect of the performance is not the recovery of her presence, but more nearly a participation and confirmation of her body's tenuous (non)being and (non)presence as it lingers in the tension between blackness and being, being seen and *being not seen*. But this practice of living, lying, and being in the presence of (non)presence also generates a spatial and temporal field into which the other black people who break, pause, stop, turn, and speak can emerge and enter, giving way to

new black powers that emerge from the type of blackened Now generated by Eregbu's performing presence.

I do not mean to suggest that the black powers I'm describing occur between and among black people in a fashion that is exclusive of relations with other minoritarian subjects who may be browned, racialized, (de)colonized, queer, and/or trans in their own stead. Service-Rodriguez's very presence in this performance suggests that the black powers referred to here are often relational to any range of minoritarian subjects living-in-difference. This essay's emphasis on intraracial acts of care between black people, underscored by Eregbu's edit of the filmic documentation of the performance, is simply meant to highlight an oft-elided truth: that black people have always been caring for each other from within the site of negation and that such acts of care (by, for, and between black people) consistently refuse the foreclosure of black life by performing black sociality as the negation of the negation.

The type of black power I'm describing thus owes a debt to Darieck Scott's theorization of a power counterintuitively emerging in and as a response to prevailing social conditions that produce blackness in and as abjection. In this form of black power, it is "the willed enactment of powerlessness that encodes a power of its own, in which pain or discomfort are put to multifarious uses."⁴ Confronting oncoming foot traffic with the abject sight of a black woman's body lying slack on the sidewalk, Eregbu engages the sociogenic process through which a body is blackened, becoming a site of (non)being and (non)presence within a given social scenario. For Scott, following Fanon, sociogeny describes "the cultural construction of blackness": the social, cultural, and historical processes and practices through which blackness is made and, in the aftermath of colonization and slavery, is made as abject and powerless. To be blackened, in the Fanonian scheme, is to exist in the time after defeat, whether we are referring to the defeat wrought by colonization, slavery, and/or white supremacy's ongoing domination of, claim to, and hold over blackness and the blackened body in any range of local and global contexts.⁵ In theorizing a mode of black power in and as abjection, Scott queries "whether it is also possible that even within Fanon's own account of a blackness-as-subjugation that must be abjured or surpassed, even within the lived experience of subjugation perceived to be at its worst, there are potential powers in blackness, uses that undermine or act against racist domination."⁶

Though performance studies has not always called upon the Fanonian vocabulary of "sociogeny" the field has produced a great deal of knowledge

about the sociogenic process (i.e., the process through which subjects are made by, in, and for the social) and the powers inherent within it. Theorists of minoritarian performance and black performance (for example, Saidiya Hartman, José Muñoz, Karen Shimakawa, Daphne Brooks, or Tavia Nyong'o) have developed nuanced accounts of racial, sexual, and gender subject formation within and beyond the US context.⁷ Such thinkers have produced a theoretical apparatus with a genealogy that may more accurately be traced to the work of black, feminist, and queer figures like Fanon, Du Bois, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, or Hortense Spillers, than it is to the traditions of the mythical white fathers of the field (Schechner, Turner, Bacon, or Conquergood). This is a way of saying that the minoritarian branch of performance studies, genealogically rooted in the likes of Fanon, Du Bois, Spillers, Sedgwick, or Butler, has always already been producing a theory of the sociogenic process.

The theories of subject formation that commonly emerge within performance studies scholarship routinely emphasize the entanglements between embodiment, performance, and performativity, which has in turn generated a significant amount of thought about repetition, reproduction, and temporality. This emphasis produced a body of performance theory concerned with the iterative practices, embodied rituals, and “twice-behaved behaviors” that contribute to and reproduce the constitution of social reality along corporeal and social axes that include, but are not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. It has concurrently provided a conceptual toolbox with which intellectuals and artists of color have theorized the myriad ways minoritarian subjects navigate and remake reality by fostering and forging conditions of possibility where they are otherwise absent, while generating power from within spaces seemingly characterized by powerlessness.

In the work of thinkers like Shimakawa and Muñoz, who follow Butler and Shoshana Felman (and also Jacques Derrida and J. L. Austin), performativity and the iterative are theorized as embodied practices that produce social reality by drawing upon an accumulating and legitimating archive of repeated acts and utterances—iterations that are temporally marked by having recurred repeatedly in the past.⁸ At the same time, and following Butler and Derrida's assertion that a performative utterance will necessarily issue a break with the context from which it draws its authority (or, per Felman and Austin, that every performative is predicated on its potential failure), performance theorists have shown performance to be a fecund site for minoritarian subjects to engage in the art of sociogeny by using performance to make and remake the self and others within a threatening and unsteady landscape that

is overwhelmingly constrained by the limits of the here and now. This strand of thinking has often been conceived of as a discourse on futurity, in which the present is largely condemned for being a prime progenitor of minoritarian negation. But there are multiple valences to the present in minoritarian performance theory. It may be true that the pleasures of the moment are not all we have, but in the final instance, whether it is pleasurable or otherwise, the here and now are still the primary grounds of (and the most readily available grounds for) praxis and action.

Muñoz's work, and its reception, epitomize this fact. For Muñoz, the past (which plays a determinative role in constructing the limits defining and diminishing the minoritarian subject's present and presently available life chances) is both negotiated and disidentified with in the effort to survive a present that is both precarious and under erasure. At the same time, Muñoz insists that in performance (which has a unique relationship to the present and to presence) the minoritarian subject can work with the reconstructed material of the past in an attempt to construct a different and more livable future. The future-oriented horizon of utopia was, for Muñoz, less a destination than a temporal matter. That is, Muñozian utopia is not a place that one gets to, but a critical imaginary through which one critiques and survives the *damaging sociogenic forces of the past* and the *seemingly insurmountable insufficiencies of the present*. But this is only possible when utopia activates the powerful and creative sociogenic powers of the Now.

It is here that Muñoz's conception of "utopia" reveals its unavowed debt to Fanon, insofar as Fanon's project also describes a queer and nonlinear, even "counterlinear" temporality, characterized thus by Scott: "For Fanon, the present is *like* the past in its capacity to determine the future. In this sense, there is not only one past, forever lost to us but nevertheless enslaving present and future, but also the past being made (and ever receding) in the now, which, as future anterior, has the capacity retroactively to refigure even the more remote, traumatic past that we have no access to."⁹ For Scott's Fanon, as for Muñoz, the present is the grounds on which the work of black and minoritarian survival and social transformation is carried out. For both, the body is a primary locus through which these acts can be achieved. It is curious, then, that much of the response to Muñoz's work has emphasized the futurity of "utopia" while dropping "cruising" from the equation altogether.

Cruising is, of course, a form of queer sexual performance that makes use of a corporeally charged Now to generate sexual futures from within an intensely fleshy present. As such, a consideration of the future-bound (utopia)

without its anchor in present praxis (cruising) runs the risk of unmooring Muñoz's framing of utopia from his material concerns with the urgencies effecting, dulling, and diminishing queer of color lifeworlds in the here and now. That is, it steals from Muñoz's theory its politics and its critical goal of reconfiguring the past and mobilizing the future to survive, persist within, and transform the present.

To know that it is from the radical site of the Now that the alteration, determination, and remaking of possibility for both the past and future occur is to get a sense of the absolute dangers that inhere in the persistent and ongoing denial of the present for and to blackness, black people, black life, and the black body. It is also to gain a sense of the radical potentials (and responsibilities) for a performance theory that concerns itself with the temporality of the active and creative Now. By engaging performance's unique claim upon the present (a claim that I assert without affirming nor denying the Phelanian aphorism that performance's *only* life is in the present), Eregbu's durational performance documents the sociogenic process through which blackness coheres in the tension between blackness and being, being seen and *being not seen*.¹⁰ It also affirms the sociogenic powers of black performance to generate conditions of possibility for and in the blackened present and from the grounds of a corporeal (non)presence and (non)being.

The sphere of performative behavior that reproduces the world anew each day coheres through routines and rituals that accumulate into performative reality, whereby a social fiction (that a body lying right in front of you is not, in fact, there) becomes a material fact. Eregbu's performance isn't merely critical of this process; it *participates* in it. The aesthetically heightened presence of her body on the sidewalk casts light on a disavowed but daily social ritual in most major US cities, whereby the routine act of walking by human beings (often racialized, poor, homeless, mentally ill, and/or impaired) in varying states of distress on the way to and from work and home is a part of the fabric of daily life that conditions people *to not see* that which is around them everywhere and every day. Indeed, these rituals train us to know what forms of life (often nonwhite and poor) are to be apprehended as disposable (non)presence, rather than beings worthy of care, which is to say, worthy of their presence within the present. But if Eregbu's performance participates in this process, she also interrupts it, staging temporal and social hiccups that open up altogether different and blackened possibilities for the time and space as they emanate from the (non)being and (non)presence of her performing body.

I borrow the language of the “hiccup” from Misty De Berry, whose thinking introduced me to Eregbu’s work. De Berry argues that Eregbu’s performance is predicated on a manipulation of the performative or sociogenic sphere of habituated, reiterated behaviors and affects that produce racialized and gendered realities. Eregbu’s performance is thus conceived as a critical intervention in time: on the one hand, there is the work’s repetitive staging of the routines and bodily rituals through which racism is reproduced as social reality and by which people do “not pause to make contact with a body, specifically a Black woman’s body, lying in the middle of the sidewalk.”¹¹ De Berry argues that in the temporal loop of the repetitive, embodied acts of passing by and over Eregbu, a social reality is affirmed and constituted in which “black women’s bodies do not signal an ability to be grieved or recognized as worthy life in the general public imaginary.”¹² But it is also by way of her punctuating presence, De Berry argues, that Eregbu also provokes a disruption in the temporal routines of daily life (minor hiccups in the social where, as is the case with the woman in the tan coat, hesitation and a glance give way to locution and communication between two black women). These temporal hiccups open up other possibilities of care and collectivity, giving way to new ways of being black and being together.

If Eregbu confronts the spectator with her body as (non)being and (non) presence with the potential to generate other times and spaces, the cumulative effect of watching people routinely and repeatedly refusing to see her illustrates Hortense Spillers’s contention that (in “Western Culture”)

the “body” is neither *given* as an uncomplicated empirical rupture on the landscape of the human, nor do we ever actually “see” it. In a very real sense, the “body,” insofar as it is an analytical construct, 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, in its layered build-up of mortal complexities, with an idea on paper, only made vivid because we invest it with living dimensionality, mimicked, in turn, across the play of significations.¹³

Eregbu’s performance does not so much confirm the presence of the body by placing it before the spectator, so much as we are given to witness the way that a particular type of body is apprehended *as if it were not* there. Presenting the body thus, the performance seems to confirm the theoretical paradox described by Spillers in which the blackened body (as a *being not seen*) can nei-

ther be “given” nor “seen” in its apparent presence, shuttling as it does between visibility and invisibility, subjecthood and objecthood, fixity and fugitivity, but somehow always just outside the time and space of the Now.

Eregbu’s performance recalls Audre Lorde’s description of the tense space black women in the United States occupy between hypervisibility and invisibility: “Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.”¹⁴ This depersonalization occurs through forms of detemporalization and despatialization that structure the (in)visibility of Eregbu’s blackened body. Now, the realm of visibility is something that black people (and other racial, social, and sexual minorities) cannot not want insofar as representation is commonly the grounds of political subjectivity, social recognition, and enfranchisement within the liberal order of the United States. Representation can be a prime means for making a claim to being in the present, which can be of vital necessity when this claim is under violent erasure. In very material ways, to be visible is to be a subject worthy of sustained attention and care—an assumption that undergirds the many and fraught debates over the stakes, necessity, power, and effects of political and aesthetic representation for/of raced, sexed, and gendered subjects. The assertion of visibility and the demand to be seen may be tied to the minoritarian subject’s desire or need for sustained attention that confirms the presence of the seen as *more than* an object for apprehension rather than for flashing recognition, a quest to be confirmed as a subject with interiority, difference, and relational standing.

Durational performance often calls upon a spectator to sustain attention to the presence of the artist’s body as it shares space and time with the spectator. Performance involves sharing a temporal and spatial present, so this presencing of the body through performance can be indicative of a certain desire to be beheld as a subject that is nonetheless rich with interior difference. In other words, to being a being of, for, and in the present. Following Fred Moten, “What one is after, by way of a certain sustenance of attention, is the presentness of the object in all of its internal difference, in all of its interiority and internal space.”¹⁵ As such a being claims time and place within a present generated by a performance, both spectator and artist may experience the forms of interiority and interior difference that characterize any being’s experience of the present. As Kevin Quashie teaches us, this interior domain, defined as “quiet,” has radical implications for black life insofar as quiet

describes “a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears”—a range that is often foreclosed and denied through the denial of black presence within and for the present.¹⁶ But, importantly, the sustenance of attention, which might lead to the recognition of the subject’s complex internal difference, or “quiet,” is not necessarily the same thing as visibility, which can also lead to the subject’s entrapment and foreclosure.

For the minoritarian subject, visibility is often achieved through what Rey Chow describes as coercive mimeticism, or what Hartman, Butler, and Louis Althusser separately theorize as the process of subjection.¹⁷ By taking on and performing a recognizable subject position—by becoming subjects *for* the dominant ideology—the racialized subject may gain recognition within the realm of legal and social visibility. However, this often occurs by taking on a scripted or performatively produced role or identity that overwrites, displaces, flattens, or erases the complexity, richness, or quiet of the racialized subject’s interior *and* exterior (social/relational) existence. Obscured behind the sign of socially recognizable identity she may be “rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism,” and cast outside of the ineffable space and time of her actually existing corporeal present.

The spaces between hypervisibility and invisibility, being and nonbeing, *being not seen* and presence without a present are the treacherous straits that black people have to navigate in order to survive, evade, go beyond, and make fugitive from the conditions assured by white supremacy in the United States. “For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America,” wrote Lorde, “we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.”¹⁸ Lying on the ground, unworthy of sustained attention, Eregbu’s body becomes a stage on which the people passing by may play out the sociogenic dynamics through which a visible subject becomes an invisible object with claim to neither the space nor time of the Now. When the body becomes visible as an object, the piece suggests, it may be seen, but not necessarily seen as a subject in space, of time, and *for* care. Indeed, the stillness and unmoving nature of Eregbu’s pose suggest that if her body is seen, in this instance, it is often apprehended less as a subject than as object. Lying on the street, *she* becomes a *thing*.

Under these circumstances, the body may paradoxically become visible by occupying the recognizable (non)beingness of the thing, object, or commodity. Her visibility may thus be the grounds on which she is “rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism,” which is why, for Lorde, “Even

within the women's movement, [black women] have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness."¹⁹ Working through this contradiction, Lorde insists that "that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."²⁰ It is as the subject navigates this paradox from the place and time of the present that this strength can become a kind of black power.

Eregbu's presence on the sidewalk, her generation of the present from the site of (non)being and (non)presence, unmasks the "distortion of vision" that continues to render the abject black femme body spectacularly visible (recognizable, even, as an object or *thing* to be had) and simultaneously invisible (unrecognizable as a subject for or worthy of care). The radicality of Eregbu's performance lies not merely in the success of its documentation of the socio-genic process through which blackness is produced in and as abjection with a claim to neither the space nor time of the present. The work's power also lies in both its confirmation of the "interiority and internal space" of the artist and its staging of a conversation with the other people who enter into the Now the performance is generating.

If Eregbu looks inanimate, or looks dead, she is very much alive, thinking, agential being: indeed, she is the subject who has arranged this entire scenario. At one point during the performance a young black man in a white T-shirt approaches Eregbu's accomplice, Service-Rodriguez, to ask about the performance. "She's acting like she's dead," the man notes, before Service-Rodriguez responds, "She's not acting like she's dead. If people ask her what's going on, she answers them." Though, as the artist lies on the ground, she may *seem* unconscious or living in living-death, she is in fact quite conscious, quite present, and able to speak with anyone (the woman in the tan coat, for example) who approaches to speak with her. Within the presence of Eregbu's blackened present, there can be no real question about the fact of her interiority or interior difference.

This opening to ethical relationality comes by way of Eregbu's paradoxical performance of objecthood, and my argument thus far owes a significant debt to Uri McMillan's theorization of the performance of objecthood in his genealogy of black feminist performance. For McMillan, performing objecthood becomes a condition for articulating and proliferating a range of possibilities for black life.²¹ Indeed, we might locate Eregbu's performance in a genealogical relation with conceptual artist Adrian Piper, who also occupies a central place in McMillan's study.

In Piper's written accounts of her experience of the *Catalysis* works, she offers a direct means of speculating further on the contention that the radicality of a performance such as Eregbu's rests, in part, on the presentation of the black body both as an object in relation to other objects and as simultaneously a site of "interiority and internal space" that is not anathema to, but generated from within a blackened Now of (non)presence and (non)being. By drawing Piper into my discussion of Eregbu, I mean to gesture to a formal resemblance between their practice, which engages (in different ways) with the question of black (non)being as it surfaces within the time and space of a blackened present through performance. In the 1970s Piper undertook a transition from making discrete art objects to performances in which she became an art object. She undertook this transition in an attempt to amplify what she described as the catalytic powers of the art object, its ability to, as she wrote in 1970 "induce a reaction or change in the viewer. . . . The work is a catalytic agent, in that it promotes a change in another entity (the viewer) without undergoing any permanent change itself."²² Throughout the 1960s, Piper became increasingly dissatisfied with the distance produced between the viewer's reaction and the discrete art object's catalytic potency. "The characteristics of any discrete form that occupies its own time and/or space apart from the artist limit the viewer's reaction to the work," she concluded, before turning to performance to close this gap: "The strongest, most complex, and most aesthetically interesting catalysis is the one that occurs in uncategorized, nonpragmatic human confrontation."²³ Her body thus became her medium and since, for Piper, museums and galleries further removed the art object from the world, containing and diminishing its catalytic affect, her actions could not occur within institutional art settings. They had to move out into the streets, which is to say that the works required the coterminous encounter between artist and spectator within the simultaneous space and time of the present.

Moten opens a reading of Piper's work by describing her as confronting the spectator's *unwillingness* to pay attention, as characterized in the act of the fleeting "glance." As with Eregbu, Piper's performance draws us to a critical set of questions: "What if the beholder glances," Moten writes, "glances away, driven by aversion as much as desire? This is to ask not only, what if beholding were glancing; it is also—or maybe even rather—to ask, what if glancing is the aversion of the gaze, a physical act of repression, the active forgetting of an object whose resistance is now not the avoidance but the extortion of the gaze?"²⁴ The glance, in this sense, is not *to see*, but the result of a labored effort *not* to see. The glance is to *avoid* seeing, to quickly forget how to see *what or who is right*

in front of you demanding to be seen. Like Piper, Eregbu places her body in your path knowing, or maybe sensing, or perhaps worrying that you will pass by with little more than a glance. But unlike Eregbu, Piper gives us a window into the interior process undertaken by the artist in her navigation of Now.

In *Catalysis III* Piper walked through public space with a “Wet Paint” sign hung around her neck, and in *Catalysis IV*: “I dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large white bath towel into the sides of my mouth.”²⁵ In these and other works, “my own aesthetic concerns remain unspoken: they are totally superseded by the audience’s interpretation of my presence.”²⁶ In other words, the work became itself as Piper became an object *for* the viewer, but also a *presence* within a shared present. As McMillan writes, for Piper and others: “Becoming objects [and] performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places.”²⁷ But as McMillan would likely agree, and as the unfolding scenario of 11/10/10 suggests, given the history of black objectification, the process of black performers becoming objects is not without its risks. Nor is it only a problem of place. It is also a problem of and for time.

The afterlife of slavery and colonization is such that the assumption of black objecthood, though a potential path beyond the “prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere,” may also reproduce and reinscribe social logics that characterize the racialized body as an object to be *held* by (white) power. As Christina Sharpe describes it, “Living in/the wake of slavery is living ‘the afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non-status, the non-being of the mother. That inheritance of a non-status is everywhere apparent *now* in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children.”²⁸ And, indeed, this “ongoing criminalization” surfaces throughout 11/10/10 as the threat of police interference encroaches upon the body of the woman on the sidewalk.

For De Berry, the glances and various points of hesitation embodied by different spectators who encounter Eregbu might suggest “breaks in the habitual body—a possible opening for alternative ways of being with one another, if only within the durational encounter of a hiccup” or of the performance.²⁹ But the performance also frames the limited range of options one may have at one’s disposal by asking, quite plainly: What would *you* do if you encountered the unconscious body of a black woman lying on a public street? As the woman in the tan coat’s conversation makes clear, there is a range of possible

responses. One of these includes what is perhaps the most common choice: to alert the “proper” authorities.

At one point a black couple in black leather coats walk past Eregbu’s body, pause, turn, and speak, stopping just past her body to make a telephone call. The man is looking around, as if he is trying to identify his location for the person on the other end of the line, before he approaches and disappears behind the stationary camera to speak with Service-Rodriguez:

MAN WITH CELLPHONE: You all filming this or something?

SERVICE-RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

MAN WITH CELLPHONE: [*into phone*] Ok. Nevermind, police. Nevermind. Yeah, it’s a film. I thought something was wrong. Ok. Alright. Bye-bye. [*to Service-Rodriguez*] What are you all doing? Tell me?

SERVICE-RODRIGUEZ: It’s art.

MAN WITH CELLPHONE: It’s art? Ok. ‘Cause I looked and like, what’s the matter now, it’s shame [*inaudible*] let her lay in the streets and we’ll call the police and get her some help.

SERVICE-RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, There’s actually been a few people who tried to call the police. So there is some citizenry here.

Among other things, this exchange reveals the ease with which black life is placed on a trajectory toward the body being held in the hold of police power.

As De Berry notes, Service-Rodriguez’s presence near the camera might relieve the potential discomfort caused by the disruptive punctum of Eregbu’s body, contributing to the majority of people’s choice to walk right past her. That is, Service-Rodriguez’s presence might allow the spectator passing by to assume that there is some degree of “authority over a controlled environment.”³⁰ At the level of speech, the man with the cellphone slightly displaces this assumption, ascribing collective authority to the work in a fashion that seems to encompass Eregbu (“*you all* filming this or something”). And though the work’s status as “art” seemingly relieves the man of the ethical responsibility to intervene in the circumstances that have placed Eregbu’s body in front of him, he implies that were it not “art,” the readiest response was to “call the police and get her some help.” Service-Rodriguez confirms this assumption, by describing the will to call the police as a performance of “citizenry,” a chill-

ing conception of citizenship given the violent history of police interaction with the black body in a place like Chicago.

In a 2016 US Department of Justice investigation of the Chicago Police Department, investigators described the routine means through which the Chicago police apprehend and engage with black and brown people as suffused with a “pattern or practice of misconduct and systemic deficiencies [that] has indeed resulted in routinely abusive behavior within CPD, especially towards black and Latino residents of Chicago’s most challenged neighborhoods. Black youth told us that they are routinely called ‘nigger,’ ‘animal,’ or ‘pieces of shit’ by CPD officers. . . . One officer we interviewed told us that he personally has heard co-workers and supervisors refer to black individuals as monkeys, animals, savages, and ‘pieces of shit.’”³¹ Imagine, for a moment, that the body on the ground was not the body of an artist or that no cameras were present. Imagine she was passed out due to incapacitation, that she was unwell or nonresponsive. What could have happened to her? The CPD’s record should give one pause regarding the wisdom of calling the police. Again, the Justice Department report is telling: “Consequently, all we know are the broad contours of terribly sad events—that officers used force against people in crisis who needed help.”³² This is one of the fundamental risks of Eregbu’s performance of objecthood, (non)presence and (non)being, insofar as the performance might contribute to the desubjectification of her body and to her dehumanization to a status beneath “savage” or animal: not a living being to sense and to see, but a thing to have or hold in police custody.

At the conclusion of the thirteen-minute film documenting Eregbu’s performance, Service-Rodriguez and the young man who asked if Eregbu was “acting like she’s dead” are interrupted by the arrival of the police:

MAN IN WHITE SHIRT: She’s acting like she’s dead?

SERVICE-RODRIGUEZ: She’s not acting like she’s dead. If people ask her what’s going on, she answers them. . . . [*seeing the police*] We’re about to get busted up.

MAN IN WHITE SHIRT: Aw, get your ass up.

The gentleman’s admonitions are detached and playful enough, but one can locate in this warning (“Aw, get your ass up”) an expression of the kind of temporally reflective blackened consciousness that comes from the collective knowledge that “we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.” Indeed, black survival has long depended upon powers of anticipatory reflexivity,

preparing for the imminent dangers posed by the future by way of a consciousness which is firmly rooted in the accumulation of the traumatic experiences of any host of antiblack pasts. As Scott emphasizes, Fanon describes this process by way of attention to the muscular spasms and tensions betrayed by the colonized subject. Where Fanon understands this muscular tension as the sedimented result of histories of abuse, it is also a means through which the colonized subject resists and thwarts that violence which is yet to come. Following Scott: "Muscle tension in Fanon is a state of death-in-life and life-in-death; it describes the paradox of a being who experiences utter defeat but who is nonetheless not fully defeated."³³ If calling the CPD may inadvertently become the means through which a body (still alive, though "acting like she's dead") accelerates a trajectory toward actual death, the call to stand in the present (to literally "get your ass up") might thus be reflective of a form of black power rooted in the recognition that defeat may be imminent, but that it may also be resisted from the radical space and time of a collective blackened present. His (perhaps hardened) expression of care for Eregbu's well-being is itself indicative of the forms of black power that surface as black people stand in the presence of the present to take care of each other and keep each other alive. But I am just as interested in the powers that we can locate in Eregbu's act of lying prone within, and generative of, this blackened Now.

Remember that even if the performer *seems* to be an object, or to be dead, "She's not acting like she's dead. If people ask her what's going on, she answers them." Eregbu is doubled many times over throughout the performance: she is both a performer acting as if she were immobile and a woman who is very much alive; she is in and out of space and time, a body suspended between object and subject, hypervisibility and invisibility, presence and absence, life-in-death and death-in-life. This doubling, and self-awareness of it, can be constitutive of a form of the uniquely black (double) consciousness described by Du Bois, Fanon, Spillers, and many others besides. For Fanon, such consciousness (the ego-splitting experience of seeing oneself as the white world sees you) is an experience of negation. "And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes," he writes. "Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" in part, because in meeting "the white man's eyes" the black subject may experience the negation of self by apprehending oneself (through the external subject's white eyes) as an object that is denied presence within the space and time of the white Other's present.³⁴ Performance, as Piper and Eregbu both demonstrate, can be a fruitful means for working through, with, and against negation, while generating forms of self- and collective conscious-

ness that surface as the expression of the black powers inherent to a blackened present.

Reflecting on her catalytic performances, Piper, like Fanon, comes to experience a form of double consciousness. But unlike Fanon's it is a mode of consciousness that reveals the complex interaction between her interior world and apprehension by the exterior world, rather than the obliteration of the former by the latter. In other words, and through performance, Piper enters into a complex ("indexical") present in which her interior world enters into a congress with the time and space of her present surroundings, undoing the oppositions between self and other, object and subject, or even interior and exterior to open out onto a new plane of relational existence. This is the domain of being together and being with.

In one work, she performed a monologue on the street while attending to and indexing others' observations of her eccentric behavior. In another, she attempted to elicit as much information from her interlocutors on the street as possible, while giving away very little about herself. As the artist described these works, "I became aware of the extreme disparity between my inner self-image and the one they had of me. In [the first] it seems that I have pushed this disparity further; in [the latter] . . . I have done the opposite, attempting to assimilate as much of the consciousness of another into my own as possible."³⁵ This assimilation of the other does not negate Piper's experience of her internal life; however, it amplifies it, as occurred in another performance through which she introjected another's perception of her: "By assimilating an 'other' in my sense of self to the extent I did, I became increasingly reflective or self-conscious about my actions as object by myself."³⁶ In other words, Piper entered into a relationship with herself (and others) within the time and space of the present generated through her performance.

Here, Piper seems to be working through a problem that is at the heart of Spillers's inquiry regarding the relationship between "psychoanalysis" and "race." Spillers asks what might be learned by thinking "psychoanalysis" and "race" beside each other, a question that continues to remain a point of critical friction.³⁷ If black life is routinely apprehended through the body's reduction to a state of objecthood that lacks interiority and subjectivity, psychoanalytic theory (occupied as it is with the subject's shuttling between the interior and exterior worlds) poses unique possibilities and challenges for working through the social realities of race and racism. In Spillers's hands, psychoanalytic theory provides a vocabulary to describe self-interrogation and self-thought. This helps us to approach the critical question of how to open up the

complex inner lives of black people to the realm of self-signification, language, and common relationality as they occur within the present. This is, as Spillers describes it, a “strategy for gaining agency”: “I have chosen to call this strategy the *interior intersubjectivity*, which I would, in turn, designate as the locus at which *self-interrogation* takes place.”³⁸ Black self-interrogation and intramural didacticism, as she notes, are the powerfully insurgent grounds of self-making. However, she insists that this practice of self-making need not be realized in the scene of (psycho)analytic encounter: “My interest in this ethical self-knowing wants to unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework and try to recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one.”³⁹ Spillers concludes by reminding us that such powers and practices are already everywhere present in the commons of black language play and sociality. They are present, as well, in the blackened presents generated in and by Eregbu’s and Piper’s performances of objecthood, blackness, and (non)being.

Psychoanalysis’s will to disclosure and its centralizing of a source of authority (“the knowing one,” in which the analyst mirrors the overseer) may threaten the black subject with epistemological capture or, worse, a curative protocol that approaches blackness as pathology. But performance (as it was for Piper and as it is in *11/10/10*) offers a terrain on which we can produce and proliferate moments within the present where the enactment of black *interior intersubjectivity* can occur. Performance, in other words, allows for an experience of interior intersubjectivity that doesn’t subject a black being to collection (or possession) by “the knowing one.” Through Piper or Eregbu’s performance, once more drawing upon Spillers, the artists “substitute an *agent* for a spoken-for, [becoming] a ‘see-er,’ as well as a ‘seen.’”⁴⁰

Performance can be the grounds for an ethical congress *between* black people and the world, constituted within the blackened present we see flickering into being throughout Eregbu’s and Piper’s performances. In Piper’s account of her work, the present generated in and by performance is the grounds for an encounter with the self. That is, Piper came *to see herself* as if she were outside herself: “When I do a work in private, I perceive myself . . . through the eyes of the general audience, that is, the world in general, for whom an art object—myself—exists.”⁴¹ What’s critical is not just the confirmation of Piper’s existence, but also the recognition that this existence is bound up in the sphere of social relations *with other people*. By becoming an object for others’ appraisal, she appraises herself as an object within a world of other objects.

Fanon describes this as the experience of “crushing objecthood” in which “I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”⁴² But for both Spillers and Piper, this realization can be the foundation for ethical relationality, even insurrectionary and emancipatory black collective consciousness. “At the very least,” writes Spillers, “I am suggesting that an aspect of the emancipatory project hinges on what would appear to be simple-self-attention, except that reaching the articulation requires a process, that of making one’s subjectness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness.”⁴³ Through the generation and proliferation of a blackened present, black performance creates a time and space on which the staging of a “disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness” to the self (and to others) becomes possible, opening up the possibility for the care of self and other from within its zone of instantiation. As Piper wrote, “The more I assimilate [the external world into myself], the more easily I am able to see myself as ‘an object in the world among others.’”⁴⁴

In the wake of what Moten describes as “the historical reality of commodities who spoke,” for a black person to experience oneself as an “object in the midst of other objects” can certainly function as the experience of shattering negation (as it does for Fanon). But it might also be the most immediate grounds available on which one can stand and perform the work of affirming the intellectual and interior life of both self and other. It can be a means for opening up a present that is rich with the possibility for both self-interrogation *and* the generation of shared (blackened) consciousness on which the emancipatory project hinges.⁴⁵ This is less because Eregbu’s and Piper’s actions pursue a mythical future of recognition and restitution by grabbing for the attention of those who refuse, time and again, to see that which is right in front of them. Rather, such performances create sites for blackness to be and be within the Now, offering blackened objects in the midst of other objects the ability to interrogate both self and other.

This blackened Now is the grounds on which the subject can recognize in the interplay between self and other a vibrant, creative intersubjectivity rich with the powers of blackness. From within the Now generated within such performances, one “object” can and does indeed turn and speak to the other. Such a gesture marks the collective transition from, and refusal of, the silence of (non)being and (non)presence, giving way to common, uncontainable, and insurgent black speech, always at difference with itself from the inside out. It’s a bodily thing, a collective thing, a kind of gesture that black people have always known how to perform as they (we) lay collective claim to and activate

the long deferred Now from which all time and space is made, unmade, and remade *for* black life.

NOTES

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- 1 As I discuss later, this approach to Eregbu’s work is inspired by and in conversation with Misty De Berry, “Break, Flatten, Surge,” 3.
- 2 Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.
- 3 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.
- 4 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 164.
- 5 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 38.
- 6 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 39.
- 7 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Shimakawa, *National Abjection*; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Nyong’o, *Amalgamation Waltz*.
- 8 Felman, *Scandal of the Speaking Body*; Derrida, *Limited Inc.*; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
- 9 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 52.
- 10 Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- 11 De Berry, “Break, Flatten, Surge,” 3.
- 12 De Berry, “Break, Flatten, Surge,” 3.
- 13 Spillers, “Peter’s Pans,” 21
- 14 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.
- 15 Moten, *In the Break*, 239.
- 16 Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, 6.
- 17 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*; Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*; Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 95–127.
- 18 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.
- 19 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.
- 20 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.
- 21 McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*.

- 22 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 32.
- 23 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 42.
- 24 Moten, *In the Break*, 233.
- 25 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 42, 43.
- 26 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 47.
- 27 McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 7.
- 28 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.
- 29 De Berry, "Break, Flatten, Surge," 5.
- 30 De Berry, "Break, Flatten, Surge," 3.
- 31 US Department of Justice, *Investigation*, 146.
- 32 US Department of Justice, *Investigation*, 37.
- 33 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 72.
- 34 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.
- 35 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 47.
- 36 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 50.
- 37 "How might psychoanalytic theories speak about 'race' as a self-consciously assertive reflexivity, and how might 'race' expose the gaps that psychoanalytic theories awaken?" Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 376.
- 38 Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 383.
- 39 Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 427.
- 40 Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 397.
- 41 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 52.
- 42 Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, 109.
- 43 Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 400.
- 44 Piper, "Talking to Myself," 51. Here, it's worth noting that she not only echoes Fanon, but also Marx, when he writes that the "emancipation of the senses" through the abolition of private property would result in a social situation in which "the senses and minds of other men have become my *own* appropriation. . . . Thus, for instance, activity in direct association with others, etc., has become an organ for *expressing* my own *life*, and a mode of appropriating *human* life." Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 140.
- 45 Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

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