



FIGURE 1. Terence Nance, *Swimming in Your Skin Again* (2015). Frame grab.

Grief Aesthetics

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Artist Statement

This essay is from a series, *no way where we were was there*, on intimacy. Taken from lines in Nathaniel Mackey's forty-year-old double long song, *no way where we were was there* considers intimacy as process, refusal, sensory deprivation, sensory overwhelm, ecstasy, loss, inertia, time out of time, disorientation, blur, repetition, loop, a disavowal of sex and romance as the quintessence of love. The essay plays with the pronouns *you* and *we* to create a collective sentence, to practice thinking as a common poetics, to create a communal dance among the changing same: the unseen/unknown reader and the seen/known reader, or the ones who are already friends among other readers who may or may not become friends.

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When our black ship comes in it is summer. A *mu* night. You, in your black jeans, me, in my black shirt, two black stones adrift in cosmic slip. Us, the inebriated we. You pass me the *j* and I make it canoe. Alice Coltrane's "Om Shanti" and John Coltrane's "India (Live at the Village Vanguard, New York 1961)" on loop beside us. Sensual music, prolonged deep, carries up and out our little red convertible, carries up and out into the night air. Snaking among the streets of your birth, I forget how to breathe, make the *j a*

canoe and we sail off in it in laughter. Like two dead signs, blurred in the slur of our insinuation, a feeling of sound as it emerges from air, touches us, moves us, with only a sense of what holds us in common—a *kind of longing that has no remedy*.

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A kind of longing in black art, liquid sense, without meaning, without value, without property. *What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, founds things?* Finds and founds things in nothingness. As in the case of blackness, love, affiliation, our common gathering. You say black is a signifier for trouble, a problem, a thing to move away from, or grief: black as gone as gone, wrapped in slowness, slump, solitude. Or, stillness—move so deep inside we move everywhere. Across time, into simultaneous occurrence, into our rhythmic commune. Long for companionship without remedy. Fall in love and keep on longing. You say our commonness, our commonsense, is made of grief, the mourning of our dead. We keep saying it, perhaps believing it, as we find things with our dead. Like love. How can I love you Black, black as I am, when what we hold in common is grief? A long run in ambience, what is and was jazz, what is and was electronica, what is and was air music, ongoing still. Our longing in want of something ineffable, *sin remedio*. There is no touch, no feeling, no reparation to ease the want in longing still. Waiting, a type of openness for something as it emerges from nothing.

A feeling made not of sexuality as much as sensuality, not queerness, not pronouns, as much as blackness. A longing for an object that is not an object—porous as our people's people—not perceived, prior to theory, criticism, popular culture, gender, unnamed on purpose.

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You say: *we are to make a music of our being here*. A music of our people, their people's people, who love in distance. Distance as in when I listen to Alice Coltrane pluck a single track for twenty or twenty-five years, for twenty or twenty-five years I grieve my people's passing, for twenty or twenty-five years I avoid people, for twenty or twenty-five years I fall so far outside time a part of me is still loss. Loss as in our grandparents who are our parents, leave us here, orphan us, orphic opening, bristle us in their passage. Distance, as your grandfather, your grandfather who walks from day to night to see his mother then walks back in the opposite direction. Distance, the path west my grandfather makes to get away from his mother. The path west he makes to get away from Texas, get away from the memory of his childhood friend who is taken, memory of my grandmother who as a child is given to a man twice her age until my grandfather is old enough to rescue her, move her out of Texas, move her to New Mexico, move her across the country to California. A part of me is still loss. Music of slippage. Not rhythm and blues formation, not passive entertainment, a music of what we make of

HOW CAN I LOVE YOU BLACK, BLACK AS I AM, WHEN WHAT WE HOLD IN COMMON IS GRIEF?

time together. Our transmutation, quiet musculature. Grief music, what moves us, touches us, senses us in the evening. Our wander before we meet in person, sensing more than we know what.

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Music, movement, music to move to, music to gather us. Music to release us when it's time to let go. On all sides, in all directions, our people have a hard time letting shit go. Like the time spent inside a body, waiting for something that is nothing. You wait for the first and fourth summoning to make music, to make a movie, to make a letter. You wait for the ninth and eleventh summoning to make a sentence, a syntax, a way out of criticism. And we are friends because we practice in common, as friends and with our friends we touch our sensual grief, our commonness, with our friends and as our friends, we touch each other as night wind //

I began to think with you, Terence Nance, because of your grind. Because I admire how you work, how you make an aesthetic out of grief, out of grief as it emerges in intimacy. I began to think with you, think of you as my friend in the night shed. I began to think of you and your brother Norvis Junior as my friends because we work in common. As you work your way through love, work out the friendliness in love, I work

my way through language. I began to think with you after losing myself in your film *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty*. You let us sit with you in your grief, on loop a series of lovers, looped down until distortion, made obliquity of your grief, let us slant with you in the woods, in the bent architecture of your failed bed, in the incessant wooden rocking of your loneliness. I sat there with you in the loop of wanting to touch where it went wrong, wanting to touch it all over, in the loop of reparation. And I watched it on repeat, for years, as I catalogued my sprawl, the mess I made of intimacy. Series of lovers, series of breaks, as I made my way back to friendship. Watched it on repeat for years as I fell out and into love, and out again, with the ones who are my friends now.

You loop as I loop, echo the sentiment. Love that never gets off the ground. Love that puts you on the ground, in the ground, grounded in wait. You pass on a way of waiting, pass it on to me, and in wait I listen, watch, feel myself in your sequence. Lose myself in your sequence. Lose all matter of making words, sentences, in your sequence. Lose my momentum in your sequence. Make nothing of inertia by telling your story. Tell your story as signifier for my story // Like *Swimming in Your Skin Again*, the short film you made with your brother. I sit there with your brother's grief: waiting as a lover waits, as I wait, loving as a waiter loves, waiting to feel what it



FIGURE 2. Terence Nance, *Swimming in Your Skin Again* (2015). Frame grab.

sounds like in the case of feeling, suspension in sound and color and movement, suspension as it means nothing. Suspended in the hold of love, lover of love, suspended in the hold of romance. Waiting for a feeling that cannot come. Suspended in the hold of skin, a feeling as it holds us in the morning. Ritual of love, ritual of day, feeling as it holds us in the wait. Waiting for love to drift back in as it floats out, as we swim in it in the morning. Tell your story to soften my story. Like *Swimming in Your Skin Again*, in the beginning, Norvis Junior, as a

lone person in yellow, sits at a yellow typewriter, types four lines (fig. 2):

SWIMMING IN YOUR SKIN AGAIN
 BLINDED BY YOUR ELEGANCE
 IT SEEMS THAT I NEVER WIN
 EVEN WHEN YOU MEET DEFEAT

Subjunctive mood, submissive lament. Four lines emerge and then nothing. Blinded by elegance such as out, an elegance worn on the exterior. Elegance



FIGURE 3. Terence Nance, *Swimming in Your Skin Again* (2015). Frame grab.

as it lives over there, out there, not inside, as it lives inside. The resonance in the nothing, where there is nothing, the time when four lines emerge and the arrival of a full song, a music of distance. Lone person in yellow smokes, walks, writes, and floats. Slumps beside a pool, inside a church. Shouts inside the myth

inside a congregation. Moves with a congregation. Moves without. Black is playing again, slow, trying to make nothing of our being here, trying to make it all mean nothing. Incessant movement, swimming, watering. The dead and mythic lover who lives in the water. In and near an audience, the one addressed, you,

plural, in general. Tell your story to signify my story. *Your*, as in you, as in lover. *Your*, as in you, as in ancestor, as in black sentence among the trees.

Tell your story until the line summons me again.

As Norvis Junior sits, smokes, walks, and floats, Black also drifts, joins the inebriated we, body high, moves into an opening made of music. Beside a pool, beside Norvis, a Black girl summons him, or summons them, or summons us. As Norvis sits, as Norvis walks, Norvis drifts into a church. In a pulpit a Black woman speaks, plays drums. In a clearing a Black woman touches the backs of Black boys, a chorus now adorned in yellow, we listen to them chant. In a clearing, a Black woman bends her flesh, becomes tree, unbecomes tree, becomes porous. Tell your story until the line touches me again. *Your*, as in you, as in mother, our Black mother who passes on her way of being here, passes it on to us, keeps us afloat. Four lines emerge and then stillness. The mundane day, the changing same, the evenness of night. For time nothing other than a fragment. Four lines until Norvis walks, until Norvis walks away from the pool, walks toward the pull, walks into a woodshed, a public house whose door is unlocked (fig. 3). He moves inside the house, the house becomes a studio. Not unlike the angelic studios of dust and death, a matter of music. Tell your story to escape my story. Inside the woodshed we hear news of water, a news announcement on the condition of our planet—imminent ruin, immi-

OUR LONGING IN WANT OF SOMETHING INEFFABLE, SIN REMEDIO

nent flooding. Then the rest of it, the song, the ritual, the composition, the movement slips, floods Norvis, summons the woman who lives in the water, who lives in the trees, as it summons him. Or, love summons him as it lives here among us, our dead who give it to us, who give it to us again and again, our dead who feel us as we commit to feeling fucked up together. On earth or in earth, feel fucked up together, feel fucked up as possessive love leaves us, let love go until it moves us again. Ritual of day, ritual of nothing, ritual of wait, ritual of moving slow together. Lose myself in your story. Tell your story until the sentence troubles me again. Nothing is said of the actual music.

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There are many holds held up in the afterlives of the wake we hold in common. Romantic love, not possessive as much as obsessive. Grief as obsessive love, a common story held in the music. Not a *ship*, ship, a relationship. Not another love song, romance shit, not another slow groove fuck lament. Not in the mood for flesh on flesh, not in love.

You say Black people need another frame of ref-

A PART OF ME IS STILL LOSS. MUSIC OF SLIPPAGE.

erence for the erotic, other than a Greek god, to write our way of coming together. Little trickster minion, Eros never did anything other than wound. What is the word for the way I love you in common, not possessive, not propertied, not mine? Fluid, apolitical, sonic, a feeling as it refuses the idea of women and men, refuses biological sex, romance, refuses hedonism, or marriage. The air of the pleasure that escapes enframing. An aesthetic that grieves, touches us by way of grief.

Fuck music unless it has enough air in it to alleviate our desperation for fuck. Air music (fugitive movement) an ongoing rehearsal in ecstasy. Terrible beauty, some weird shit that don't move white, some weird shit that feels black as we open it. An aro-mantic lilt in the screech of Moses Sumney (performer, poor person) grieves as black is gone in the music. A higher register, questions its sense of worth, in relation to its inherent multitude, sense of worthiness in relation to the other, tries to get somewhere other than eros. And in the feeling of the others who make air, wordless music, voiceless music, bodiless music made of instrumentation, synth. Less fuck in it, more wraith in it. Klein, what it sounds like inside static inside a lifetime. Jlin, what steel toe make of earth.

Flying Lotus, what mourn he makes of fire, makes us mourn the loss of his auntie's fingers, drips, her harp, mourn the loss of his mother.

Not romantic, not erotic, grief music. A music of our poor-ass inheritance, porousness, porosity. Wind our lingering dead, our uncrossed-over dead, our supplicant-in-the-air-beside-us dead.

{ taisha paggett: alone, slumps in a gradient, accompanied by air, among the living and the not }

Music to move to, get off the ground.

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Under a tree, you look at me say: *pleasure is black*. We speak a music made of gravel, gravel from years of smoke. Our intonation it fluctuates, with the cadence of our people and their people's people held in the wet distance between us. We struggle to find a way to say we love you in common, in a public way, open, not possessive, not mine. In commonsense, as affect, as affective as in all of us, as in our love opens portals of sensual closeness, as in mutual pleasure, as in closeness that makes sense, as in language that makes sense, sensual speech, a way of touching without touching.

A music that grieves the circumstance of not fucking. Not romantic for the time it takes to grieve our dead. Not known, not named, not taught. Make music of experimentation, adoration, ambience. Make music of our love, on all sides, make a poetic commune, or



FIGURE 4. Terence Nance, *Swimming in Your Skin Again* (2015). Frame grab.

commonsense. A smoke out, public woodshedding, shedding in public, smoking in public. Grief music for all our ancestors, on all sides, in all directions, call them here, let them hold us, let them go.

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We are old and young and you pass me the j. We quiver the air between us, quiver it raw, quiver it slant. Your secret, your scent, your way with words. Your

hands and the fields they make. Your moves, your way of walking, your intonation. I adore your mouth. Your flesh, your wool, your eyes, your music.

Were we dead I might ask you to meet me here again, on Earth, try again. Make music, find a way together in elegiac blackness—*Skin transparent, Face speckled, Not man, not woman, not marriage, something else*. Then loop it as we make our way back to the farm. Loop it as our pasts meld, mettles us in common. Loop it with no intention to name it.

Insofar as we are studied, we assimilate. Rough the air beneath us, our swollen lungs. Not possessive, not contractual, not propertied.

Sensual as the time it takes to clear out our inherited loss, as the patience it takes to love another black. Love you like the feeling in our common grievance. Let it all go so we can be real black alive together.

Insofar as we have the capacity to name the capacity as it moves us, as in when our body leaves, we meditate, wait, do nothing, practice.

Grief aesthetics finds things in the beginning, finds things by way of subduction. Interdimensionality. When our black ship comes in, we join up in common study. Love one another in common insofar as we continue in our independent study. A distant time signature, time apart (fig. 4). ■

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Bent Annotation

The following “works cited” is a bent annotation—in place of traditional notes, these books, films, albums, dances, and talks accompanied me in the composition of the essay—bent in the sense that all the works referenced throughout this essay demonstrate a way of speaking in communion, fluidly, and uninterrupted, as more than one, a many-tongued chorus, a procession, *semi-sung/semi-wept*, semi-danced:

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