



FIGURE 1. Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014, oil on canvas, 59 × 34 × 7 inches. Collection of Guillermo Nicolas and Jim Foster. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Aesthetics of (Black) Breathing

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Introduction and Notes on Method

This essay is a practice of breathing.¹ Sit with breathing and hear the aesthetic and ethical claims that emerge through considering the possibility of Black breathing. Sheets of paper become holographic media for writing experiences as breathing animates the promise of a place to begin.

We wanted to explore the musicality of (Black) breathing in an effort to listen to what happens to breathing when we see how it has been colored. We spoke to each other through sound and text, yet messages reverberated through composition and cooking. The page offered us a space to explore breathing as a practice of escape where the “exit” is iteratively differed in soaked words. (When soaking something, like raisins in rum—a beautifully dreadful imbibing of an object with other qualities—something goes in, something comes out. The contours of an exterior are stretched and pores overwhelmed. The alchemy of our senses uses states of matter to bring out—or, more accurately, transmutate—what was hidden inside as outside/nothingness.) The working space around us, as Black authors, seemed impossible in our moment where “the present” is manifestly undifferentiated from “the past.” Herewith we are not only attempting to point out the racism, gendering, and socioeconomics of/in breathing; we are also endeavoring to open our ears to hear what might be found in the cracks of breathing—to rehear breathing as (Black) musical breathing, which allows for another way of relating to what breathing can mean and mat-

ter (without being a matter at all). Breathing, in everyday Black life, is a spectacular event.

In what follows, we deploy parentheses as a way to focus on the musicality of phrasing that cuts, as an insistence on thinking alongside all black matters—solid, liquid, and gas—and in such a way that, at the same time, blackness is of no matter (i.e., irreducible to its component parts of (il)legible materiality). It is a methodology that pours over the edges of forms, and at the same time changes its color. In “Venus in Two Acts” Saidiya Hartman offered us a way to think alongside those who have been stripped of their names, but what of their breath?² The breathing of lives whose futures had been taken apart, those who desired beyond this world, cannot be named, yet we live in their wake as capacitors of breath. The space within and outside the parentheses considers the act and experience of writing alongside a chorus of silenced voices nevertheless sounded in alternative universes. We engage the parenthetical as a practice of vibrating in and outside an escape of the page. The bracket or parenthesis, as a kind of play, allows us to get around the impossibility of our position. If a desired effect of our writing is aimed at undoing the system that erases blackened life, an erasure we consider *foundational*, we choose to sit with those experiences, embodied and otherwise, that are erased and, uncomfortably so, also with moments of erasing. We choose to sit with what lies in demarcated space as parentheses.

By bracketing we are questioning and, at the same time, are calling in the black that holds the possibility of our methodology. The use of *Black* engages

BREATHING, IN EVERYDAY BLACK LIFE, IS A SPECTACULAR EVENT

Black people, and *black* engages the chromatic and sonorous qualifier (a dichotomy that, however, *breaks* in this essay too). This possibility of rethinking through the (Black) that is at once cast to the hole and the horizon of our episteme’s whole allows us to similarly approach breathing—the entangled superposition, the nonplace where we have to improvisationally make mattering anew—not from nothing, but from colored “nothingness,” colored by . . . : well, what is not colored by this breathing?

In this essay, we start with a reflection on the aesthetics and perception of blackness and breathing as motile (un)representable practices. Part of how Black subjects are able to resist the carceral dimensions of the symbolic (e.g., the rendering of amorphous material into discernable legible forms) is by breathing: expansion and contraction. Artist and canvas sculptor Titus Kaphar crafts an aesthetic practice that bends the extent to which portraiture can depict hegemonic forms by exposing who lies beneath them and how they breathe. *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* (2014) toys with the screenlike quality of the canvas such that when the curtain is pulled back, the gaze of the sitter portrayed looks beyond the enclosure of a concealed life.

Breathing fills the spaces between different sections of this essay as we move from breathing outside the symbolic to the transmutative dimensions of liveness. That is, motion and mutation, outside the poles of “start” and “finish,” are part of breathing as an experience and liberatory practice of changing the authorized grammar of “a life lived/breathed.” Our reflection on the musicality of breathing centers the composition of various Black aesthetes including but not limited to Julius Eastman, George Bridgetower, and Pamela Z. Breathing demands that we question how bodies and instruments ensemblically aspirate: expand and contract through the liquid fascia of time, intimacy, and flesh. Our text plays with punctuation and writing style throughout, as we draw on the expanse of upper- and lowercase writing, alongside parenthetical formulations, to think about how breathing might offer its own analytic for liveness to be heard otherwise.

(Black) breathing is an activity experienced together(-a-part); for each other.³ To support (Black) breathing, to be breathing with (Black), is to make an ethical choice. (Black) breathing is the point where all laws collapse. Black, itself being managed, or *captivated* by law, is let loose at the point of singularity—breakdown of all laws, and space-times. (Black in parentheses).⁴

Aesthetics of (Black) Breathing

“The regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant’s critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing

and regulating human diversity.”⁵ Sense, or the symbolic order, requires a regulation that is tied up with the *regulation* of blackness. Thus, our inquiry moves along that space of regulation in the registers formed by blackness itself. Breathing and blackness regulate motion, compulsion, and flight. “The value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit, a certain value given not from the outside.”⁶

The speech act is shrouded in a hushed veil of breath. What becomes said is at once destroyed and made possible with breath(ing). The ability to make sound requires the motion of airwaves: in the case of the body, sound’s motion is propelled by breathing. Breathing is active and practiced involuntarily; its potential to be silent may provide cover from violence, yet the state has made claims on its futures. The existence of the living commodity is contingent on intervals of breath in- and out-side authorized life. Frantz Fanon writes, “To speak is to exist absolutely for the other.”⁷ Where does breathing lie on this relational register(ing), in the tethering of speaking-subject to opaquely known other? What happens to the value of a commodity when it is breathing? The oddity of the commodity emerges in the interstices between language and breathing. The utterance “I can’t breathe” when the body is choked into this phrase by state violence and a collapse of its (immediately) material biological conditions—experiences and potential futures of life—not only invokes the possibility of barely heard matter but also ushers forth the unbelievable

abyss of breathing. Black breathing is in abundance of, and despite of form, of the dead/alive dyad, of the symbolic. As that which cannot be included into the symbolic order, breathing haunts it all the same.⁸

Numerous Black composers have theorized the ground of racialized production and death. The composer and performer Julius Eastman, for example, crafts the sound of a “field nigger” at what he calls “the base” of the United States’ dependence on hearing black death. His infamous performance of troublingly titled works for piano unsettles the putative silence of a labored breath.⁹ These pieces lack words, but their insistence and repetitive sounds call for an inner reception of their music. That is, to survive while under subjection, as part of modernity’s push to squash black life felt in the chest and neck, requires breath to be drawn deep within subjectivities grooving beyond power’s clutch. The composer turns us to the vibration of abject blackness that oscillates at the foundation of the present, still aspirative in its torn status (away from the human and the state). Eastman’s theory of the base or foundational position of blackness is crafted not in a written treatise or published tome of writing, but in free-form preconcert remarks and musical performances. His sharp words, partying with the play of decomposition and the fertile ground on which any composition may stand, aerate the soil underneath the stage.¹⁰ To kill Black life in the process of uttering “I can’t breathe” is to cut off *the* “phantasmic possibility” of the symbolic: cuts resist symbolic representation, yet breath animates language’s possibility by affording its presence. The

WE CHOOSE TO SIT WITH WHAT LIES IN DEMARCATED SPACE AS PARENTHESES

already-given symbolic order, which attempts to represent beyond the physical closure of breath (e.g., police cutting off the possibility of speaking a claim to a breath), is antithetical to (Black) breath.

spectral fundaments

Breathing demands a fluid matrix in the chest, but also fluidity and motion in exchange, community, and an enclosure bound by tissue and historicized scenes that hold (or destroy) the body. The liquidity of this matrix speaks to its inability to remain still. The sound of this motion haunts the life (and death) that is forced to stay still.¹¹ Breath haunts language and the symbolic and (Black) breathing haunts haunting—when breathing is ongoing as opposed to cut off, then its “I’ve seen this practice before” quality is one of hauntology and queered temporality. Simply put, what analytic might we engage to disentangle the repetitive nature of antiblackness that chokes Black peoples as part of the modern production of the state? Hauntology, a study of ghostly repetitions whereby time no longer can ex/subsist as a linear form, demands that we think through the palimpsestic qualities of breathing—hidden beneath the surface of

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that violence, though very much present in the world, are orchestrations for breath that allow us to endure. An aesthetics of breathing, gathering deeply with spirits and ancestors stripped of their breath but *not* of their breathing, demands that we hold our chests and ears close to this *aspiration*. As Jacques Derrida describes hauntology: “The logic of the ghost . . . points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence).”¹² Or, to put it in other words, *différance* marks the present itself with an absence that cannot secure the past presentness of an origin.¹³ In this same sense Blackness haunts the symbolic: as abject foundation of the symbolic order, breathing and Blackness offer a *possibility for spec-*

trality itself. We hear breathing with Black in parenthesis, we listen to it as (Black) breathing. What spectrality describes here is that that which haunts is also that which affords the haunted: an absent origin continually informs the texture of the present. This in turn also means that that which haunts is also enforced by the haunted. Hence, (Black) breathing is situated, but the coordinates of its dwelling remain unheard. The spectral quality of breathing dispels any attempt at grasping its origin not only because (Black) breathing’s range is plural (e.g., internal capacity, society’s ability to give a person room to move and exchange air, an institution’s claim to a composer’s aspirative vision), but also because it is absent presentness. Like a ghost, the fullness of breathing’s range stretches beyond scenes of manifest and latent legibility.

(Black) breathing is Cecil Taylor’s haunting repetitions, which ask for an outside that also makes something come in. He mentions: “Sound, once it begins, goes out. There is something else that happens . . . it’s gravitation. So, there are two forces . . . : what goes out, [and] another force that opposes it. It is connected, of course, to the earth . . . movement.”¹⁴ Taylor’s practice is marked by this entanglement between inside and outside, by a conception of wholeness that is at the same time open and made in relations, one that radically refuses a reduction to a dichotomy between fundament and difference: despite Eastman’s greatest efforts, and our deep recognition of blackness as fundamental to modernity’s terrorizing impulse, (Black) breathing cannot be fixed to the ground. Rather, it moves alongside the ensem-

ble, the whole, and the relational, all at once, as a multidimensional (w)holeness—a whole that is always already marked by being holed, by being incomplete, and a conception of such that sits with, after Glissant, an openness of totality.¹⁵ Breathing offers an aesthetics of sound that sings to a (w)holeness, where, alongside Cecil Taylor, sound is pulsating rhythm. This sound defies locality by being relational and opaque like complex waves that cannot be pinned down, where each wave has other waves always already in it—as opaque improvising ensemble, sound breathes musically.¹⁶

Breathing (musically) is liveness. Black liveness matters, so Black breathing matters.¹⁷ What happens to the sound of blackness when Black breathing enters the picture? What happens to breathing when we listen to it through the technology of Black listening?¹⁸ What does it mean for Marshall Allen, for example, to breathe in his unique (alien?) way into the saxophone (a site of memory in/with presence) and such breathing changes the values and meaning of that which was touched by it?¹⁹ What happens to breathing when it can be Black—when it can be what it is not supposed to be?

Julius Eastman's *Colors* (1973), for "fourteen women's voices and tape," demonstrates the edges of black breathing in the wide expanse that he, as composer, calls on the voice to perform.²⁰ The piece contains shouts, moans, laughter, and shuffling of the feet, yet not even the echoes of those sonic markers can capture the breath required to produce them. As a vocalist himself, Eastman understood the depths and contours of the neck, chest, and throat required

to play with such a haunting refrain. In music, color and spectrality are matters of timbral quality, timbral perception, and timbral manipulation. But in this composition, timbre's spectrality moves beyond a thinking of sound-color as a matter of frequencies alone—spectrality becomes a space to think alongside that which makes the music possible, including the people who performed and lived near Eastman, and those that stand near him under erasure. The colors of Eastman's practice of breathing move in excess of his and his music/sound's current forms: as interpretative moves within his open, or intentionally opaque musical direction, scores allow the performer to breathe *after* his musical writing. Such spectral breathing is not interested in the limitations of the coroner's report, death certificate, or birth certificate, but it is in the soil, in the air, it is the impossible (anti) drive, a nameless dread(lock).²¹ If liquid blackness is the fluid matrix that allows the (symbolic) order, then such (tone) colors of breathing may offer an escape from, and a possible transmutation of, its suffocating presence. The musical score, for example, may be a desired text in the instruction of a particular piece of music yet it is precisely through the score that we see the lattice through which breathing escapes. Thus, we ask: What is the musicality of a breathy escape from (symbolic) orders of enclosure?

musicality of breathing

The question of breathing and B/blackness articulates a musicality of range and practices of escaping power's mark on the flesh. Black breathing moves

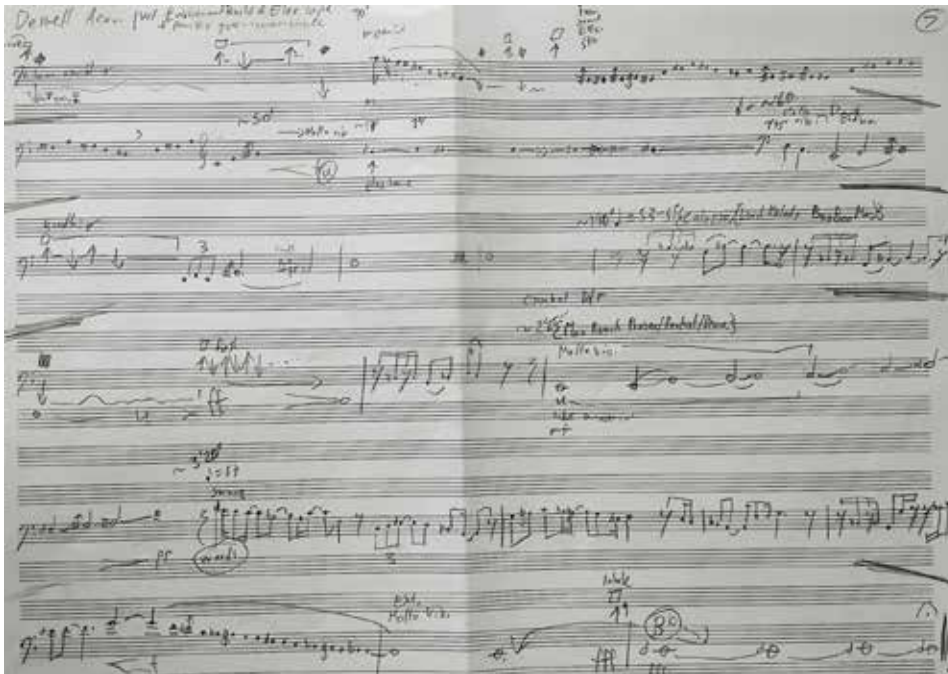


FIGURE 2. The musical score of Jessie Cox's "Breathing," written for Derrell Acon, which was commissioned by Sally Kurnick and Long Beach Opera. © Jessie Cox, September 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

through polyrhythmia—a poly arrhythmia where, after Milford Graves, arrhythmia is not the loss of rhythm but is rhythm itself.²² Graves's drumming, where each limb, and even each joint, moves by its own arrhythmic melody in relation to each other, is polyrhythmia. Muhal Richard Abrams aptly theorizes alongside a certain polyrhythmia when he offers: "When we confront the whole idea of movement or rhythm, all these different sections or areas [in a composition] have rhythm in common, you know. And human beings have rhythm and breathing in common."²³ Breathing is a rhythmic and, more specifically, musical place of

possibility that can afford a particular apprehension of place, and evaporation from/of such place.

In this article we want to sit with breathing, listen to it and the stories it might touch (here, in the space in and outside of text, breathing becomes sonority, a [re]sounding, and touch becomes hyperintimate, since breathing happens inside of us, in exchange with the outside).²⁴ The act and experience of writing/reading this text is an exercise in breathing. (Breathing through text and sounds encoded as words and musical notation like Jessie Cox's composition "Breathing" [2020; fig. 2], which, written alongside

this essay, is also an exploration of [Black] breathing and its relation to the symbolic.) The Blackness experienced by writing in community, as an improvisatory duet mediated by digital spaces and sonic exchanges (e.g., the voice, keys clicking, street noise outside), draws exhalations into the frame: in exhaling is mo'nin', shoutin', and screamin'. These are breathing sounds colored by Blackness: chromatic experiences too spectral to be caught under the notion of the human.²⁵ Breathing channeled through an instrument and space of exhalation; exaltation sets off a cascade of color in which the chromatics of blackness coalesce into another kind of sound, something that we haven't heard yet.²⁶ Simply put, the drawing in of breath cannot be separated from the history of its being stolen: the labor of breathing is historicized. The space between inhalation and exhalation is fraught with scenes of subjection and otherwise possibilities of Blackness—what we could call, after Sun Ra, the possibility of "alter destiny."²⁷ The tension between the two is a breathing musically, where breathing becomes rhythm, call and response, and phrasing. If phrasing cuts and breaks down meaning and form, then this musicality of breathing allows for the possibility of both listening and sounding.²⁸ We are breathing out and hope, alongside a deep resentful pause and ongoing experience of waiting and longing, for a response to the call—breathe in. Breathing musically is entangled in desires: for meaning, for togetherness, for being—a constantly re-produced entanglement that draws on logics of the flesh (prior to *our* body), but also calls on experimental grammars

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE VALUE OF A COMMODITY WHEN IT IS BREATHING?

of aesthetics.²⁹ Simply put, the groove we resound in life, on the brink of stolen breath, is (un)bound in the reflexive potentiality of breathing. It is this musicality of breathing in and out—expansion and drawing in—that allows for the transmutation of what is through listening.

listening to Black breathing

Listening to this Black breathing is to listen to the fear that it might be stopped, at any time, by the police, pollution, stress, and so forth. It is a listening to something that is not supposed to be. Thus, Black breathing is, after Tony Cokes, a hack: "It's about taking up a technology or structure (usually at some cultural or geographic distance from its normative use or tradition) and trying to produce differential originary meaning with it. I'm arguing that blackness is not an essence, but a hack (or series thereof), a method, a technological intervention under construction (and also under often dire social pressures) being coded, or played into existence daily."³⁰ Blackness alters what is by imbuing the world with itself: inseparable intimacies of breathing and worlding. In this sense we can listen to Eastman's crafting of "fugitive sounds and bodies that escape right before the blast in the

archive” as not only something that gets lost but as something that haunts the archives and the spaces from which it escapes and from which it is also, at the same time, being erased.³¹ Breathing articulates the interstitial space of fluid and tissue that unpacks the problematic between lower- and uppercase blackness. In other words, what (Black) seems to wrestle with is the question of how Black liveness and blackness—the latter being the abstract chromatic quality for things to be black—intersect: How does breathing index the move between a spectral consideration of blackness and the bodies and lives that flow forth in the midst of such marks as a collective breath?

cases of breathing

Contemporary fascination with the nineteenth-century composer and violinist George Bridgetower attempts to ameliorate the violence enacted when Ludwig van Beethoven removes Bridgetower’s labor and presence from the title of the violin sonata that was dedicated to Bridgetower, the one now titled “Kreutzer Sonata.”³² Beethoven’s attempt to wipe the archive clean from Black (musical and compositional) breathing is up against a revisitation of blackness, not just in the reinclusion of Bridgetower’s name in the citational effects but also in contemporary fascination with the work. This fascination cannot be separated from the breathing that made, and continues to make, the work possible. Breathing draws together sounds heard today with sounds made hundreds of years ago. A new hegemony of the revision—to right

a wrong—may fall into the trap of silencing a muffled breath: the breathing Bridgetower may have practiced in the space where his name was not at the top of the score. Here the question arises: does Bridgetower’s Black breathing haunt our ongoing perception and hearing/imagining of Beethoven’s music?³³ Is the sound of Ma Rainey’s “Slow Driving Moan,” or the sound of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet, extricable from Black breathing? Or, to put it another way, is the sound of Black breathing extricable from the aesthetic *object* it may help move along?

In “Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity” Gustavus Stadler examines the relationship between the consumption of early phonographic recordings and the sound of blackness in scenes of lynching in the 1890s in the United States. Stadler’s analysis focuses on autobiographical accounts and newspapers describing lynching scenes reenacted in a studio because the technology at the time could not have recorded such an event at the scene; in fact, these recordings can be considered as part of that time period’s preoccupation with documentary realism—a genre called “descriptive speciality.”³⁴ The public spectacle of the murder of Black folk was reperformed in the solicitation of postcards and sonic ephemera (e.g., onlookers copying the sounds of the person who was killed): Where is Black breathing there? Is there a sediment of Black liveness in the caricature and pastiche of stolen life? Is this a breathing that is extracted, or is it blackness that does not exist in (Black) breathing musically? Stadler examined many accounts by listeners assuming that the grue-

BREATHING CHanneled THROUGH AN INSTRUMENT AND SPACE OF EXHALATION AND EXALTATION SETS OFF A CASCADE OF COLOR IN WHICH THE CHROMATICS OF BLACKNESS COALESCE INTO ANOTHER KIND OF SOUND

some sound recordings they listened to were real, and some were ambiguous as to whether they were more shocked by the degree of phonographic realism or by the scenes of lynching being portrayed.³⁵ This ambiguity partially drew on conceptions of the Black voice as being more “corporeal, inarticulate, pre-linguistic,” and thus as more suitable to the phonographic recording, since the materiality of the record itself would create a lot of noise during playback and hence was more befitting to recording screams, animal noises, and the Black voice itself.³⁶ On the other hand, when, as Stadler points out, the listener is not assumed to be “universalized, and hence white,” but rather African American, then these traumatic scenes can become inspirations for political action.³⁷ Thus, one should not hear the listener of such recordings as a stable category: the ongoing precarity of black life, a condition of this encounter, breathes into the flesh.

This essay itself has partially been generated, and surrounded by, recordings of modern forms of lynching of Black lives, in the form of viral social media content portraying the police murdering Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and many others,

which ultimately spurred global political demonstrations in 2020. We wrote to each other in an embodied response to our inability to breathe and rest easily, knowing the precariousness of Black aspirative acts. Of course, one difference between 1890 and today is the range of technological accuracy and aesthetics of the genres that vibrates in modes of transmission: the 1890 recordings were imitations produced by record companies, whereas many of today’s videos and sound recordings are shot on smartphones by bystanders, security cameras, or police bodycams. Yet this problematic is not only one of technological advancement but also one of how to figure Black and black, and how breathing (de)sediments their hauntological relation. (The hauntological also begs the dizzying question “Have we not been here, as if breath was a place, before?”) The ambiguity between the upper- and the lowercase of blackness is one that is further complicated and amplified, in the space of breathing, by the parenthesis. Simply put, placing Blackness in brackets attends to the violence of suppressing Black breathing, an erasure that continues to be a condition of the present.

At the same time these documentary-style audio recordings were distributed, the same record companies also sold recordings of minstrel shows, which were thereby entangled in the suffocating structures of meaning-making and aesthetic production that rendered the Black voice without a breath of life behind it.³⁸ Matthew D. Morrison develops the term *Blacksound* as a way to attend to liveness in excess of the minstrel performance, a term firmly placed with an uppercase *B* to mark a resistance to the lowercase: denigration rendered impotent. Morrison remarks the close entanglement between the lower- and the uppercase not only in its originary setting in blackface practices but also in its definition as foundational to Americanness in general—a relation that draws us to Julius Eastman’s attention to the ground under our feet.³⁹ In hauntological terms, the myth of *Blacksound*’s origin in the 1890s cannot be thought as a “past in the present” but must instead be listened to as an iteratively present absence. In other words, it is impossible to conceive of *Blacksound* without blacksound. There is an entanglement between black states of matters: liquid blackness—blackness as a source of imitation—and gaseous Blackness—the aspiration of an enforced fantasy solidified onto “breathing” subjects. The latter could be understood in opposition to our framing in this essay, where the solidifying impulse does not remake the subject anew but finds liveness in the practice of breathing. Here we can only listen to the evaporative quality of fundamentals, this desedimentation that leads nowhere, heard and unfolded as (Black) breathing—where the

revision moves alongside the reperformance, where the erasure moves with the marking. This (Black) breathing allows to escape the hold of such violence against the grain—as polyrhythmic improvisation—of the terms of the scene. Black breathing becomes (Black) breathing, an identifier that does not collapse the aspirative escape from the mark of blackness onto death. Can the Black-ness of breathing be heard?

Morrison’s use of the uppercase is, hence, haunted by the lowercase. His use of the uppercase sounds aspirative, an aspiration to move out of the scene of blackfacing, to listen to the silenced voices of Black minstrel performers, those who themselves practiced an aspirative transmutation of that by which they are marked (and marketed). If liquid blackness functions on the one hand as a place where life and presence (in the form of value) is extracted in order to provide the fundament of humanism and modernity; on the other hand, as Alessandra Raengo mentions after Toni Morrison, liquid blackness affords improvisatory and motile freedom.⁴⁰ That is, liquid blackness marks both the proneness for transmutation of liquid states into solids but also into gas.⁴¹ Titus Kaphar’s *Billy Lee: Portrait in Tar* (2016; fig. 3) and *Ona Judge: Portrait in Tar* (2016; fig. 4) raise questions about blackness’s complex relation between lower- and uppercase b/Black. Though the two scenes are related only by their formal qualities (e.g., thick use of black paint and orange garb), each represents a different figure at the cross between portraiture and dense black petrification. Aspirative liquid blackness transmuting into gaseous states of matter bends this



FIGURE 3. Titus Kaphar, *Billy Lee: Portrait in Tar*, 2016, oil on canvas. 60 × 48 inches. Collection of Bill and Christy Gautreaux, Kansas City, Missouri. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



FIGURE 4. Titus Kaphar, *Ona Judge: Portrait in Tar*, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches. Collection of Ellen and Steve Susman. © Titus Kaphar. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

scene, imbuing in turn all the states (of matter) with (Black)—if blackness has breath, then we mark it with an uppercase, but by marking it we solidify and materialize it. One can recognize the boundaries and form of the body, yet a representation of Lee and Judge’s personhood, as sought after by the technology of portraiture, is refused. Breathing cannot simply be reduced to its material limits, thus in the shifts between cases we explore the necessary processes of transmutation: how (Black) breathing shifts its own ground and the states of matter queered in its chromatic expanse. In other words, an exploration of the liberatory practice of perceiving and registering (Black) breathing, opaquely manifest despite modernity’s clutch (e.g., breathing with and against polluted air), affords a space for breathing, itself, to break with the known order of livability. This is the radical ethics of (Black) breathing: no air or inner cavity can be captured and its future iteratively unfolds. A practice of improvisation engages with blackness’s choreographic expanse: shifting bodies and breathings between minor and major keys (lower- and uppercase).

improvising resuscitations

(Black) breathing is an improvisational act, in that it is an openness to the unknown, an affirmation of the impossible,⁴² it is a Glissantian poetics, which is marked by porousness of form so as to “encourage us to envisage a future in which new genres will arise.”⁴³ We can listen to improvisation with impossibilities alongside Sun Ra: “The possible has been tried and failed. Now it’s time to try the impossible.”⁴⁴ This impossibility is a

trying time where one goes ahead and tries to breathe in a world that renders that breath impossible. Impossibility, as a figure of Afro-diasporic improvisational practices, is an openness to the unforeseeable, to that which can’t be predicted.⁴⁵ Plural narratives, as in the histories embedded in an aesthetics (e.g., sensing and perception) of breathing, exist within Black breathing: the sound of Black breathing, the support needed for Black breathing by (other) (Black) breathing, the call-and-response in breathing itself.⁴⁶

If to speak is to exist for the other, then when we breathe, we liquify any fantasy of individuated contours. Breathing draws us into a fundamental confrontation with an ongoing breathing between us through (Black) breathing.⁴⁷ When breathing musically (Black), there is improvisational becoming/cutting/breathing “together-apart.”⁴⁸ This improvisational aspiration falls back on itself and others, since (Black) breathing is itself not one. This practice is a matter of relation in intra-active becoming: a coconstituted aeration of the historicized ground on which we stand.⁴⁹ Matter and breathing are both involved in this call and response; resuscitation of Black matter(s) requires us to think alongside the technologies, or channels, and spaces entangled in their making.

breathing spaces

When (Black) breathing is channeled into/through a musical instrument, an archive is sounded and possible futures are opened.⁵⁰ As such, breathings play with memories in the fascia between present, past, and future. Any instrument is, after Bernard Stiegler,

memory *with-in* the present. It can relate to individuation, or the making of selves, while dynamically attending to the collective possible within society.⁵¹ When breathing musically into an instrument, or into music—a collective sounding of instruments—the present is in improvisational (re)making with the past, others, environment, and possible futures. What was encoded in the musical instrument as tertiary retention; what *is* sounded through the instruments' intra-active existence with what is probed and the subject who expects a certain probe; *what could be in the opacity, the noisiness or inaccuracies, of the instrument*. It is through breathing that these memories come to exist, fade and change their shape. (Black) breathing into an instrument changes its coordinates of meaning, it alters its mattering via the intimate touch of a living Black (body and breath[ing]).

Breathing into/as a technology is the resuscitation of the breathing commodity that does not speak yet makes sound, of the machine meant to not be human, or, more accurately, not meant to possess any liveness. Our insistence on Blackness's aspirative escape from the hold of naming and genre pulls at the aesthetic lining between noise and music: in varied contexts the texture of each sonic encounter can shift the apprehension of sound. Pamela Z's *Breathing* (2014) incorporates technology, gesture, flesh, and repetition to repeat the claim to a breathy liveness.⁵² Z developed an apparatus that, when attached to Z's arm and hand, senses the shift in bodily figuration. A twitch of the wrist signals a skip in an active ongoing recording of her voice. Her body, along with the

IS THE SOUND OF BLACK BREATHING EXTRICABLE FROM THE AESTHETIC OBJECT IT MAY HELP MOVE ALONG?

technology of recorded sound, plays with the phrase "I am breathing." When the machine can be breathing (and here Z melds the human form into the figure of the cyborg), then life is liquidly transferable: breathing is reduced to a phrase that slides in sonic texture by the gesture of one's hand.⁵³ Z's pull at the arm, or flick of the hand, demands the transference (psychoanalytically and materially) of breath between body and computer: animating the audience in the spectrality conjured in breath. This performance turns the human into part instrument: the (Black) human body is a technology. But listening to (Black) breathing, shifting between the surface of the known order and receding into the depth of the hold, is also a listening technology.⁵⁴ (Black) breathing both makes us conceive of this fleshly body and, at the same time, demonstrates its radical openness to the unknown. When reading or studying the body of the archive as well as any text in general, we can hear what escapes, or bends, the symbolic realm entirely.⁵⁵ (Black) musical breathing is the *negative surplus* created when commodity becomes alive, or when subjects are seen as

IF TO SPEAK IS TO EXIST FOR THE OTHER, THEN WHEN WE BREATHE, WE LIQUIFY ANY FANTASY OF INDIVIDUATED CONTOURS

commodity, when *flesh and body clash*⁵⁶—when the Negros sing while they should not speak, and when their singing is the sounding of their breathing, and it escapes the shackles, and it escapes the slave ships, and it escapes the economy that should be managing Black breath. This is because (Black) musical breathing, even when attempting to copyright or record it, cannot be held or contained, for any attempt to touch it is in vain. (Black) musical breathing dissipates after/(in) an attempt to capture it.

Instrumentation is the ideology, discipline, and tool of the ensemble. The body of performer, listener, and instrument (un)alike are assembled in pieces. Through breathing they form an “open totality” that is made possible through the noise or the accidental inherent within the instruments’ sounding possibilities.⁵⁷ Here we can listen to the breathing of the instrument, breathings’ effects on the instrument, the way that breathing *carries* along with it time and space and people and places—(Black) breathing and instruments are entangled in their making and,

at the same time, distort each other. Note that we listen to this breathing as (Black) musical breathing, where (Black) is a colored breathing—breathing colored. Not only colored by *black* but colored by the breathing or liveness of Black. (Remember the elders insisting that you gotta find your own sound.) Aspirated liquid blackness through sounding within sound destroys or (re)makes such sound—the noisiness of breathing (*shhh hhhh shhhhh hhhffhfhf*) is a sounding that *demand*s a listening that sculpts sound, whereby breathing becomes the backdrop of legible sonorities. The noisiness of silently stale breath vibrating in the archive shakes us, *a collective chorus of Black folx* in the wake, to listen. At the convergence of listener and silent soundmaker music (de)materializes. The musicality of breath cannot be trapped within the confines of the ongoing disastrous unveiling of the fiction of modernity (that is, that some are able to breathe and others not), but there is an urgent *aspirative* liquidity that sonically persists. Christina Sharpe comments on the temporality of the ever-expanding aspiration of Black life: “Even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only live in* subjection and as the subjected.”⁵⁸ It is the music of transmutating matters through (Black) breathing that suspends the urgency of survival and affords a capacity to breathe life otherwise.

Conclusion

Our elaboration of (Black) breathing moves through an improvised performance: our ears are close to how we both breathe with and against each other in the

composition of this piece. (Black) breathing, as an analytic, cuts into the known order of motile things and names an unsteady relation to entities that seem to be constrained by modernity's disturbingly large pool of Black suffocated flesh. We refuse to see life lynched by the state as the end of (Black) breathing. Breathing flows before and beyond the spoken, while also allowing the spoken to be returned to, annotated, and aspirated anew. (Black) breathing offers "a possibility of augmentation, abounding, or of a dynamic whole that operates in a complex relation with loss or lack or incompleteness or static hole."⁵⁹ In conclusion, a sitting with, a supporting of, (Black) breathing inhales regulation (of aesthetics and the human, tangled up with blackness and sense) and exhales as an act of improvisation. (Black) breathing is the improvisational attempt at *movin' on* its sound shifts in color through listening iteratively in community. ■

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Notes

- 1 The authors hear the echo of Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
- 2 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."
- 3 Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction."
- 4 Moten elaborates on the complex relationship between law and blackness: "The question of breaking the law is immediately disrupted by an incapacity for law, an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an out2law" (*Stolen Life*, 15). For another crucial study of this relationship, see Jackson, "Beyond the Limit."
- 5 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 2.
- 6 Moten, *In the Break*, 13.
- 7 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.
- 8 Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 23.
- 9 Eastman, "Crazy Nigger," "Evil Nigger," and "Gay Guerilla," Northwestern University, 1980.
- 10 Eastman, "Introduction to the Northwestern University Concert."
- 11 See, for example, "Still Water (Love)" by the Four Tops. The phrase "still water runs deep" is part of the interior life of liquid fantasized to be still, though it still claims a depth of motion.
- 12 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 78.
- 13 "This différance—being the structure (a structure never quite there, never by us perceived, itself deferred and different) of our psyche—is also the structure of 'presence,' a term itself under erasure" (Spivak in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, xliii).
- 14 Cecil Taylor in Felver, *Cecil Taylor*, 10:00–10:46.
- 15 Cox, "Cecil Taylor's Posthumanistic Musical Score."
- 16 Drawing from Cox, "Cecil Taylor's Posthumanistic Musical Score," 4, where the waves are expressed in Taylor's term

"Rhythm-Sound," from the liner notes "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath / Naked Fire Gesture," accompanying the record *Unit Structures*.

17 Lewis, "Black Liveness Matters."

18 Cokes, "Filmmaker's Journal," 223.

19 See Stiegler's term "tertiary retentions" in *Technics and Time*. See also Cox, "Marshall Allen."

20 For a performance of *Colors* (1973), see TRA I TEMP I's 2017 performance in Kunststation St. Peter, Cologne, youtu.be/V5G2TA3UqF8. For the score, see www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/58004/Colors—Julius-Eastman/.

21 See Bion, "Attacks on Linking." We are trying to attend to the tight relation between "nameless dread" and "lock." Bion engages the phrase "nameless dread" to talk about trauma and terror. The namelessness of the Black people who have been murdered coupled with the spectral container (lock), the pressures to enclose or steal breath, pushes us to both specificity (a particular color, range of sound, etc.) and abstraction (e.g., an entire light spectrum that resists distillation to one hue or color).

22 Moten hears arrhythmia as "the cut between rhythms, [and] between syntagmic order and eventual break" (*In the Break*, 127). See also Cox, "Cecil Taylor's Posthumanistic Musical Score," 4. Further, as Milford Graves describes in Hall, "Episode 246," a healthy heart rhythm has to have a variable rhythm; it cannot be metronomic, as this can lead to a heart attack. Graves practices using the heart rhythms as a guide for his own drumming practice, and his drumming practice, in turn, is a way for him to heal his heart. See, e.g., Kilgannon, "Jazz Drummer's Fight."

23 Muhal Richard Abrams in Oteri, "Muhal Richard Abrams."

24 On "touch," see Barad, "On Touching." Barad writes, "What is really at issue is not touching oneself per se but rather the possibility of *touch touching itself*" (212).

25 See Morrison, "Race, Blacksound."

26 The reference to exaltation is one of happiness and joy that exudes past the strictures of constantly interdicted life. This ref-

erence is in clear conversation with Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*—although the authors wish to move away from the theological implications of this work to imagine a breath that, continuing after Crawley, insists on otherwise becomings of black flesh and intimacy.

27 Sun Ra's concept of alter destiny has a myriad of meanings centered around the possibility for another kind of future and world than the one he found himself. "Sun Ra and his 'band from outer space' have set out to design an 'alter destiny' for the inhabitants of this planet by means of a re-vision of the roots from which we spring. Their lever is joy" (Thomas, "Mathemagic of Sun Ra").

28 Moten, "Not in Between," 10.

29 On the prior nature of black flesh see Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

30 Cokes, "Filmmaker's Journal," 221.

31 Jean-François, "Julius Eastman," 16.

32 Thirlwall, "Kreutzer Sonata," 771.

33 De Souza, *Music at Hand*, notes that the composer's vocabulary is directly tied to the instruments that he knows, so the question arises: Is there also an entanglement with the bodies of the performers in the imagining of the sound of a musical composition?

34 Stadler, "Lynching and Phonographic Modernity," 92, 94.

35 Stadler, "Lynching and Phonographic Modernity," 89.

36 Stadler, "Lynching and Phonographic Modernity," 98.

37 Stadler, "Lynching and Phonographic Modernity," 99.

38 See Stadler, "Lynching and Phonographic Modernity."

39 Morrison, "Race, Blacksound," 816–17.

40 Raengo, "Black Study @ GSU," 9.

41 Farred ("Daseinstufe," 41) points to how through halting liquidity we can see transparently, or solidify, what was hidden

behind the liquid. This possibility itself has to be heard via our elaboration of hauntology as not some truth behind a veil, but as a transmutative act that also always fails to grasp the matters at hand. It is this insistence on the entanglement of states of matters that leads Farred to state: "Let us go one step further and suggest that liquidity, or that which falls under the heading *dasein stufe*, is that form of abstraction that demands its own materialization" ("*Daseinstufe*," 50). Black breathing, as its own practice of liveness, perhaps near to Quashie's *Black Aliveness*, demands that we reflect on its own set of (im)materializing processes.

42 Ramshaw, "Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation," 8–9.

43 Leupin, Édouard Glissant, *Philosopher*, 27.

44 Sun Ra in Szwed, *Space Is the Place*, 192.

45 We take the notion of the openness to the unforeseeable from Glissant, who sees it as fundamental to creolization in the French Caribbean. Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 8.

46 hooks, "Eating the Other."

47 One could hear this via Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being."

48 Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction."

49 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Barad develops the term *intra-action* as a departure from interaction. "In contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of *intra-action* recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather remerge through, their *intra-action*. . . . *The notion of intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality*" (33). The grammar of weaving, entanglement, and *intra-action* draws heavily from Barad's distinct formulation, and Jessie Cox and Sam Yulsman's duo Transsonus's *Weaving Music*.

50 Breathing always engages situated spaces and places. See Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

51 After Stiegler, *Technics and Time*.

52 Pamela Z, "Pamela Z Breathing."

53 As Chude-Sokei ("Caribbean Pre-posthumanism," 179) points out the history of breaching the boundaries between the inhuman and the human can be traced back to the slave trade and the colonial period.

54 Cokes, "Filmmaker's Journal," 223.

55 Referencing Moten's concept of bent dialecticism proposed in reference to C. L. R. James's work in "Not in Between," what could be thought of as a methodology of Black radical thought.

56 The clash, where opposing sound systems would battle, is a significant part of dancehall music. The dub plate's materiality when producing sound is itself a question of hieroglyphics, of a clash between the body of the recording and the flesh that becomes marked during the music's sounding. Lee "Scratch" Perry hears the clashing of stones—which he heard while working to build the first road to Negril, as tourism became more important for Jamaica—as a root for his music: stones clashing become a musical instrument—the solid stone that is the foundation of a body is chirped by sound, as its fleshliness is drawn into music. See Higbee and Lough, *Upsetter*, 6:15–7:26.

57 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 171.

58 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 4.

59 Moten, *In the Break*, 177.

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