



FIGURE 1. Cauleen Smith, *Crow Requiem* (2015). Video, 11 minutes, 8 seconds.
Still courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán.

Afro-Gothic

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The assembly of crows in the cover image for this issue is called a *murder* (fig. 1). While the vocabulary is antiquated, it is eerily apt, in that it organizes both the long association of these black birds with death and the ambient feeling of precarious and collective vulnerability to gratuitous violence that characterizes our everyday. In this still from her experimental film *Crow Requiem* (2015), Cauleen Smith's meditation on the haunted history of upstate New York bleeds into a portrait of its haunting landscape, which she describes as postapocalyptic. A tree at dead-of-winter dusk is alive with crows—the blue-black ensemble of tree and crow and sky perforated by the orange gold of freshly illuminated streetlights.

In dense and dreamlike vignettes, Smith centers the crows' migration between Syracuse and Auburn, New York, in order to draw together the history of the Underground Railroad, the first prison electrocution, and cinematic technology. Shot in 2015 during the heady days of protests in the wake of Michael Brown's death at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, *Crow Requiem* is Smith's sitting with and working through grief and anger.

One of the first things I noticed while I was grieving for the state of black lives in America—I noticed these crows every morning outside of my window at dawn. So loud! And so many. And I felt like I'd never had an encounter with wildlife in the city that was quite so intense. I started asking about the crows, and they were universally hated. People would say, "Oh my gosh, they're such a pain! They poop all over your car. . . .

You know, you are allowed to shoot them if there's too many in your yard." There was really a kind of casual disregard for this very interesting animal. In the dead of winter they would fill up a tree so densely that it looked like the tree had leaves. And the sound was like this incredible conversation they all were having. I did a little research on crows and found out about their intelligence. The fact that they have memory, language, storytelling. They give gifts. They mate for life. They're very playful, very curious. And I contrasted that with how they were discussed and described. It was almost too easy of an analogy to think about that in relationship to the way that young black men are so easily murdered or perceived as a threat—or, perceived as a threat and murdered.¹

For Smith the popular discourse on the disposability of crows leads to a speculative cross-species affinity; the work feels for and forwards her sense of crow relationality. "The fact that when people started talking about how it's totally ok to shoot a crow—I became that crow in that second," she explained. "In the second of the first time that was uttered, I knew that these were my relations. Like, I claim them and I feel like they were claiming me. And I know that sounds so New Age-y, but it's really more like a cognitive relationship; it's very much about understanding. This is not a metaphorical or spiritual connection. This is an actual structural way in which certain types of violences are completely ok to enact."² Smith's experiment in species confusion generates a number of questions for us. What might it mean, in this creative

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context, to be murdered? To be brought into spooky relation with crows? To be folded into the precarity of crow collectivity? How can we think with Smith—who divulges, "I'm just angry and just negotiating that. Like, I'm depending on these crows to help me figure out how to live"³—about the aesthetic and affective modes that attend black art making in a time of tremendous social upheaval?

Smith's elegiac art making speaks to us—via surrogate crows—about black life and the past, present, and futures of our relationships to history and to each other. Its solemn and ritual remembrance of the dead—the requiem—models an aesthetics of mourning befitting our times. The question of collective life in and after death haunts this issue, which has its genesis in a period marked by the clamor and confusion of pandemic, protest, political violence, and war. In the two years that it has taken to bring this work to fruition, we have all experienced considerable loss and uncertainty, anger and unrest, personal and collective grief—most of it still unprocessed. Is it any wonder, then, that the essays assembled herein think black life and death through our surrogate phantoms, zombies, ghosts, and revenants?

THE QUESTION OF COLLECTIVE LIFE IN AND AFTER DEATH HAUNTS THIS ISSUE, WHICH HAS ITS GENESIS IN A PERIOD MARKED BY THE CLAMOR AND CONFUSION OF PANDEMIC, PROTEST, POLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND WAR

To our delirious delight, Smith brings to the fore the myriad ways in which crows are kinda gothic.⁴ Her work, moving through crow sociality and crow relation as a means to understand something about black life, embodies par excellence a sensibility that Kobena Mercer calls *Afro-Gothic*. In “What Is Afro-Gothic?,” given as a keynote lecture for a Nottingham symposium on lace manufacture and the history of slavery, Mercer proposes that there can be no straightforward renderings of slavery, for “realism is simply incapacitated by the psychic reality of trauma.”⁵ Afro-Gothic is therefore offered as a “process” and “distinctive set of aesthetic strategies”⁶ that take a necessarily indirect or allegorical approach to reckoning with slavery—or, as in the present volume, its afterlives. In what follows we seek to extend Mercer’s initial thoughts toward the concept of Afro-Gothic, seeing in contemporary circumstances so many possibilities for its elaboration.

According to Mercer, two primary characteristics of the Gothic are that it “combines horror and romance as a structural principle” and expresses “a dark sensibility that was always wary about the con-

sequences of modernity [and] sceptical of Enlightenment values.”⁷ It is what Mercer has to say about the Gothic as it manifests in the diasporic imagination, however—its particular amalgam of “beauty and terror”—that is most crucial to our formulations for this issue. “I would observe that where the concept of the sublime in 18th century aesthetic theory entails the combined experience of beauty and terror, it overlaps significantly with a category of the Gothic, although the poetics of haunting—and the theory of ghosts—has a potentially wider field of relevance in the specific context of slavery and the African diaspora.”⁸ What unfurls in this issue is precisely the careful attention to the poetics of haunting and the theory of the ghost that Mercer describes, taken up with the full awareness that, as one of our contributors says, the monster in the dark is us. At least vis-à-vis the Enlightenment, the Gothic has long been something of a pejorative label—a way to name something unreasonable, horrible, mad, magic, and monstrous—often applied to people, places, objects, and emotions that exacerbate our fear of the dark.

A second principle that structures our understand-

ing of Afro-Gothic is that of unearthing, which we think akin to Mercer's reflection on "excavation." He writes, "Afro-Gothic may be understood as a kind of excavation process that works to dismantle some of the inner defences and psychic fortifications that have been built up around the subject of slavery as a foundational site of historical trauma in Western Modernity."⁹ The subsequent discussion unpacks Fred Wilson's 1992 installation at the Maryland Historical Society, *Mining the Museum*, wherein the artist brought archival objects up from the bowels of the institution and put them on public display.¹⁰ The technique is a way of evidencing what is hidden, rupturing the distinction between (high) art and artifact, and disrupting the institution's authority to tell certain (hi)stories about itself. While we forgo the term *excavation*, believing that what's working in these essays hews closer to what we might call an *unearthing*, this impulse to dismantle psychic defenses and disturb the grounds of modernity is a persistent theme in this issue. Our authors insistently call attention to what has been hidden or hastily buried, the black dead under the foundations of our "normal."¹¹ One tenet of the Afro-Gothic as it emerges here is that the dead don't always stay dead, and part of what generates the fear of the black body is our uncanny rise up.¹²

Third, we are especially attuned to Mercer's thinking about black diasporic aesthetic form in terms of its "cultivat[ing] a tolerance for the negative agency of absence," a notion that he articulates with reference to the structure of dub music.

Whereas diasporic desires to return to the homeland have produced cultural mythologies, such as Zionism or Pan-Africanism, that seek to redeem or make good such absence and loss by imagining independent nationhood as plenitude and fulfillment, the alternative is to cultivate a tolerance for the negative agency of absence. . . . In Caribbean music, dub is the most potent manifestation of this outlook: what is taken out of the original music track—the drop—is actually more important than what remains. In this way, dub cultivates an aesthetic space of contemplative commemoration.¹³

Here Mercer offers us a stunning example of how absence and loss are built into an aesthetic form. Thinking in the wake of this formulation, we emphasize the ways in which we commemorate—that is, collectively remember the dead—and sit with loss and grief in our art making.

In that it is "drawing attention to what's not there," Carrie Mae Weems's spare portraiture of ruined castles at Elmina, Cape Coast, and Île de Gorée in the *Slave Coast Series* (1993) also addresses itself to this principle of memory and mourning.¹⁴ Weems's work reminds us that a significant tenet of Mercer's Afro-Gothic is the liminality of space and time particular to diaspora. The portals in these castles are doors of no return. As Mercer suggests, this aesthetic strategy means to approach the traumatic experience of the history of slavery without recourse to the dream of recovery, redemption, or reparation. "There is no such thing as closure," he insists.¹⁵

These Afro-Gothic aesthetic principles convey us back to the image we chose for the cover; it is a still from a scene at the end of the film that calls to mind Smith's interest in the density of her images. *Crow Requiem* is indeed a kind of visual poetry. The closeness of the crows, their thick presence that foliates winter trees, establishes the intensity and atmosphere of the film. Then the birds suddenly take off without warning. There is, Smith says, "this explosion of crows all at once." Somehow they communicate to each other that it is time to depart Syracuse for the nearby town of Auburn where they nest. Smith marvels at this "instant flight." "We spent the rest of the six weeks I was there chasing crows around trying to capture that moment again, but they're too smart—they're, like, not doing it for me. It was the kind of thing where there was a definite signal amongst them, or it was like a kind of agreement—a consensus was made about when this would occur, and then they go."¹⁶ In Smith's image, then, we sense something akin to dub's drop and are wont to ponder the crows' sudden absence, the denuded tree, but also the signal to move. Like *Crow Requiem*, the works studied here enact the "contemplative commemoration" that foregrounds the experience of loss, uncertainty, grief, and exhaustion yet seek the forms of communication and communion that structure our collective flight.

In the contemporary moment, the Afro-Gothic provides us with a cogent frame through which to consider how black creators reckon with—and at times lean into—the ever-presence of death, unalleviated grief, and fear of the dark. The collective

expertise of our various contributors allows us to focus on specific affective states and aesthetic concerns in this inquiry: fear and fascination with the monstrous black feminine; spectral soundscapes; the aesthetics of ruin, rot, and decay; and otherworlds of the black watery fantastic are but a few of the persistent themes here. We are also alive to how certain geographies—Detroit, Dakar, Kingston, and Mississippi, for instance—recur within the imaginary of this project (as does "nowhere"). Ultimately, our work on Afro-Gothic endeavors to unmoor from the Gothic its trappings of universal aesthetics by explicitly tying it, in Leila Taylor's words, to the "horror and romance" of racial history.¹⁷

In our call for papers for this issue, we noted the surge in recent years of black artistic and cultural work—and most important, everyday experiences—that shifted collective imaginaries around horror (*Get Out*, Jordan Peele, 2017), the h(a)unted (Ahmaud Arbery), the "monstrous" (Michael Brown), the uncanny (Childish Gambino's "This Is America," Hiro Murai, 2018), and the fantastic (the television series *Lovecraft Country*, created by Misha Green, 2020). Recognizing these as tropes of the Gothic, we wanted to bring our study of blackness to bear on these genre conventions. Our theorization of the Afro-Gothic stems from the awareness that the Gothic genre was always already about the other—the queer, the "savage," and the strange(r). We simply seek to recenter the blackness at the heart of the formulation.

A guiding principle of this special issue is Leila Taylor's insistence that "Gothic is less of a genre and

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more of a mode, a way of thinking. More of a sensibility than a style.”¹⁸ To this end, we approach the Gothic as a mood and affect, an atmosphere and ambience. The emphasis on the psychic and sensory dimensions of horror and haunting that characterizes the Gothic is what makes it such a compelling tool for working through black affects and aesthetics. Here Gothic’s concern with sensorium lends itself to essays on phenomenology, haunting, the eerie and untimely, the dreamlike and the aquatic. These works expand upon and altogether explode generic definitions of the Gothic, highlighting the ways in which attention to the Afro-Gothic as a heuristic might serve to frame how we live through the everydayness of horror and the repetitive violence against black bodies. In what ways and by what means, we ask, does the Afro-Gothic help us make sense of the sublime beauty-and-terror of black life?

Brenton Boyd’s “A Queer Visitation: Black Unbelonging and the Gothic Phenomenology of Flesh” formulates black unbelonging as rooted in Gothic

realities and what he calls the haunting “impasse reached when attempting to wrest a phenomenological account or mimetic representation of the paroxysm of black living in and through perpetual black dying.”¹⁹ Boyd draws upon Hortense Spillers’s invocation of the flesh as the proper object of antiblack terror to demonstrate how it is central to transcendental phenomenology and rational humanism in modernity. He then goes on to engage the Gothic as a way to think about how the protagonists of Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight* (2016) allegorize black unbelonging. Ultimately, “A Queer Visitation” leads us to and through a Gothic phenomenology of flesh, detailing its intersections with queer theory and what Boyd calls black necromancy.

Tashima Thomas’s “An Ecocritical Look at Flint’s Water Crisis and Afro-Gothic Liquidity” takes up Pope.L’s *Flint Water Project* (2017), which was a pop-up marketplace that bottled the same noxious water supplied to Flint, Michigan, residents and sold

it to willing buyers. The artist donated the proceeds to organizations dedicated to alleviating the crisis. Installation, performance, and intervention, *Flint Water Project* becomes a watermark that opens up discussion around a long-standing relationship between blackness and waterways, especially those referencing perilous encounters. Thomas interrupts prescriptions of horror related to the transit of transatlantic slavery by reimagining a speculative cartography. She introduces a black aquatic framework for understanding an Afro-Gothic liquidity and underwater fugitivity.

Sheri-Marie Harrison's "Marlon James and the Metafiction of the New Black Gothic," a reprint from the *Journal of West Indian Literature's* 2018 special issue on Marlon James, sits with the author's early novels *John Crow's Devil* (2005) and *The Book of Night Women* (2009). Upending conventional readings of these works by positioning them within Gothic tropes such as coercion, doubling, the uncanny, and female abjection, Harrison identifies queerness as a site of disruption and regeneration. By focusing our attention on James's ending his novels with a woman as the proverbial "last man standing," Harrison subverts the notion of the feminine abject as the Gothic trope associated with primordial chaos and suggests James's engagement in a metafictional critique of the notion that nationalism can produce equitable sovereign subjectivity.

In "Revenant Motion: Danse Macabre in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter," Sybil Newton Cooksey draws

upon Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) and the performance of flex dancer Storyboard P to think about black dance as always already perimortem, caught up with the dead and dying. Working through Spillers's notion of the flesh, Jafa's theory of the abject sublime, and Wynter's rejection of universalist aesthetics, the essay argues for a more expansive approach to the possible meanings of danse macabre and the phenomenology of dancing with death. We are reminded here of the ways in which, in this era of #Black Lives Matter, danse macabre is more than a moral metaphor; it is a fleshy and corporeal practice of living with corpses and of collective being toward contorted movement.

Ryan Waller's playlist, "All That He Seen Burnt a Hole in His Brain," makes manifest the intersections between Gothic anxieties about losing one's mind and the everydayness of antiblack racism. The title is taken from Armand Hammer's "Rehearse with Ornette," wherein billy woods repeats, "All that he seen burnt a hole in his brain/only came back to tell 'em bout them fucking flames." Presenting these thirteen tracks as philosophical responses to unrelenting circumstances of black life, Waller takes up an exploration of Afro-Gothic aesthetics as it dovetails with music—with necessary shout-outs to Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, Sacramento, Brooklyn, and Staten Island.

Lea Anderson's "The Ontology of Open Mouths: The Scream and the Swallowing," a 2020 post on Shudder.com's blog *The Bite*, is reprinted here as an

introduction to the author's concept of the swallowing—"the occasion where the object of fear (the monster) appears as a form of devouring Other."²⁰ The concept is foundational to our thinking about a certain strand of the Afro-Gothic that seeks to surface the psychosexual affects of modernity. In Anderson's reading of the swallowing as tapping into fears of dissolution, we see some remarkable resonances with Mercer's notion of de-sublimation, a term he employs with respect to Kara Walker's art.²¹ Anderson constructs the mouth as a black hole that threatens and allures, a portal on whose other side lies not annihilation but possibility. Or maybe both. One of the qualities that we admire most about this work is the way it refuses the closure of happy (or even sad) endings embodied by other theories of black being, particularly Afro-pessimism.

A. J. Muhammad's "Does the Bronx Have a Taste for Monsters?" is an essay and interview with playwright Desi Moreno-Penson. As a dramaturg, the author offers special insight into Moreno-Penson's *Nuyorican Gothic* cycle, which she describes as "dark, stylized, fantastical plays set in the Bronx featuring Gothic themes, heightened and poetic language, and 'Nuyorican' characters (Puerto Ricans born and raised in New York City)." The interview focuses mostly on *Ominous Men* (2019), whose action occurs during the night of the citywide power outage in the summer of 1977. Moreno-Penson clearly demonstrates her ability to tap into the haunting power of ruined urban architecture, our own dark desires, and aggrieved souls who refuse to rest.

In the Afro-Gothic roundtable, "'Aestheticizing the Void,'" we host Leila Taylor, Lea Anderson, John Jennings, and Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky. The forum provides the group with an opportunity to delve into some of the theoretical and thematic issues raised by the Afro-Gothic and to discuss how the Afro-Gothic emerges in their own research and creative practices. In a wide-ranging conversation, contributors consider definitions and deployments of the Gothic as it manifests in black life. The roundtable presents a scaffolding for understanding the structural and aesthetic imperatives of Afro-Gothic and in doing so evidences why this formulation is so important in this moment.

As excited as we are about the present issue, we hasten to acknowledge that it is unavoidably, and perhaps necessarily, incomplete. Rather than argue for the originality or definitiveness of this work, we see it as a contribution to a growing body of exciting scholarship by authors such as Leila Taylor, Sheri-Marie Harrison, Diana Mafe, and Maisha Wester, among many others, in the burgeoning field of black Gothic studies. We also want to acknowledge the ways in which our engagements with Greg Tate, Arthur Jafa, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, Bettina Judd, Doreen Garner, Marlon James, Felandus Thames, Cameron Rowland, Rungano Nyoni, Wangechi Mutu, Christina Sharpe, Okwui Okpokwasili, and Steven Ellison (Flying Lotus) during this project have profoundly shaped our notion of Afro-Gothic aesthetics. Finally, very special thanks are owed to the anonymous reviewers for this

issue, who provided generous and valuable feedback as we were trying to work it all out. If anything, the publication of this issue is a formal invitation. We look forward to a time in the very near future when we can once again assemble and suffuse the dusky sky with the sound of this incredible conversation we're all having. ■

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TASHIMA THOMAS is an assistant professor at Southern Methodist University in the Meadows School of the Arts. Her book manuscript *Edible Extravagance: The Visual Art of Consumption in the Black Atlantic* is currently under contract with SUNY Press as part of its Afro-Latinx Futures series. She is also coeditor of the forthcoming *Flora Fantastic: From Orchidelirium to Ecocritical Contemporary Botanical Art*. She is the founder of the art and culture platform payarose.com, and her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, exhibition catalogs, and edited volumes.

Notes

- 1 Barnard Center for Research on Women, "'Pilgrim' and 'Crow Requiem.'"
- 2 Barnard Center for Research on Women, "'Pilgrim' and 'Crow Requiem.'"
- 3 Barnard Center for Research on Women, "'Pilgrim' and 'Crow Requiem.'"
- 4 For a discussion on our usage of *gothic* as opposed to *Gothic* at times, Cooksey et al., "'Aestheticizing the Void.'"
- 5 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 51.
- 6 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 43.
- 7 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 46.
- 8 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 47.
- 9 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 43.
- 10 On Wilson's show see, among others, Copeland, *Bound to Appear*.
- 11 See Leila Taylor's discussion on the African Burial Ground in New York City: "The new world was built up around and on top of the dead, and as a result these reminders become disruptions of normalcy—temporary blips of reckoning." Taylor, *Darkly*, 113.
- 12 This is what David Marriott describes as "negrophobogenesis" in Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 67.
- 13 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 51.
- 14 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 52.
- 15 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 47.
- 16 Barnard Center for Research on Women, "'Pilgrim' and 'Crow Requiem.'"
- 17 Taylor in Cooksey et al., "'Aestheticizing the Void,'" 178.

18 Taylor, *Darkly*, 35. See also Cooksey et al., "'Aestheticizing the Void.'"

19 Boyd, "Queer Visitation," 17.

20 Anderson, "Ontology of Open Mouths."

21 Mercer, "What Is Afro-Gothic?," 52.

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