

FORCES TO BE RECKONED WITH

Michelle M. Wright on the physics of Black art

LET US BEGIN with a dangerous story: In March 1997, I traveled to Crete to present my first academic paper. I arrived tired and cranky, and as I walked through the hotel lobby I passed a handful of guests, all white and middle-aged. In that moment, I had an experience common to people of the African diaspora. As I passed by, the onlookers' heads all turned to watch me, their expressions frozen in wonder and surprise. I was determined to ignore them. Nonetheless, an ungracious thought, conditioned by my awareness that I had just landed on European soil, occurred: *They must be fucking Germans.* And I was not thinking of that nation's association with Goethe and excellent beer.

At the desk, the clerk asked for my papers, and his expression transformed from cold and unfriendly to warm and conspiratorial when he saw the cover of my passport. "You're American?" he exclaimed. Leaning over the desk, using the palm of his hand to shield his mouth from the gull-straining folks in the lobby, he whispered dramatically, "I thought you were German!"—and I realized that he had indeed asked me for my *Assessors* rather than my passport.

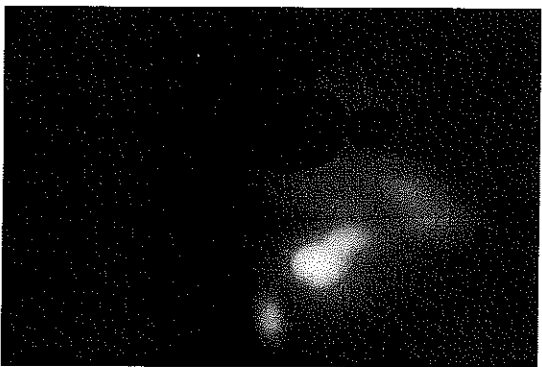
Like telling this anecdote me the unwilling object, my Black self attracting xenophobic and/or nepotistic stares, the Germanophobic hotel clerk, sick of the hordes of deep-pocketed, leotonic visitors crowding Mediterranean resorts, who believes he is washing yet another German head toward his desk with her luggage, and the German tourists themselves, for whom a Black body in their presence is an inexplicable wonder, I am Black or German, depending on which white spectator we are discussing, exotic spectacle or specter of socioeconomic oppression. For myself, I am a scholar and a traveler who has suddenly remembered she is Black—yet in a way that is different from the Blackness constructed by the assumptions operating in the lobby.

Interpreting Blackness has, since its invention, always been a complicated matter. In his landmark 2007 book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, art historian Darby English explores these interpretive complications within the context of contemporary art. As he explains in his reading of David Hammons's installation *Concerto in Black and Blue*, 2002, some artworks produce a "remarkably capacious blackness" that expands far beyond assumed racial borders, a "blackness falling outside and between bodies and peoples and cultures" that is "quite literally discolored, commingled with its contrasts, contradictorily populated." Though my dangerous story is hardly as impressive as Hammons's installation, English might view them similarly. In the lobby of that swanky resort hotel, there is a Blackness that must suffer as the primitive other under the aristocratic gaze of the tourists, and

there is a privileged Blackness—an American Blackness that, in Greece, distinguishes me from the vulgar Germans, even though (given a global economy that, today as ever, empowers certain national bodies over others) my interests might easily be seen as aligning more closely with the Northern Europeans than the Southern.

While English's eloquent characterization might seem to persuasively capture the complexity of racial identities, it is nonetheless iconoclastic, pushing against stubborn traditional definitions of Blackness and Black art alike. These traditional definitions—still used in many Black studies departments—are canonically glossed in Langston Hughes's 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Moanman." For Hughes, my bourgeois status, and therefore my anecdote, run against the grain of authentic Blackness. Throughout the essay, he

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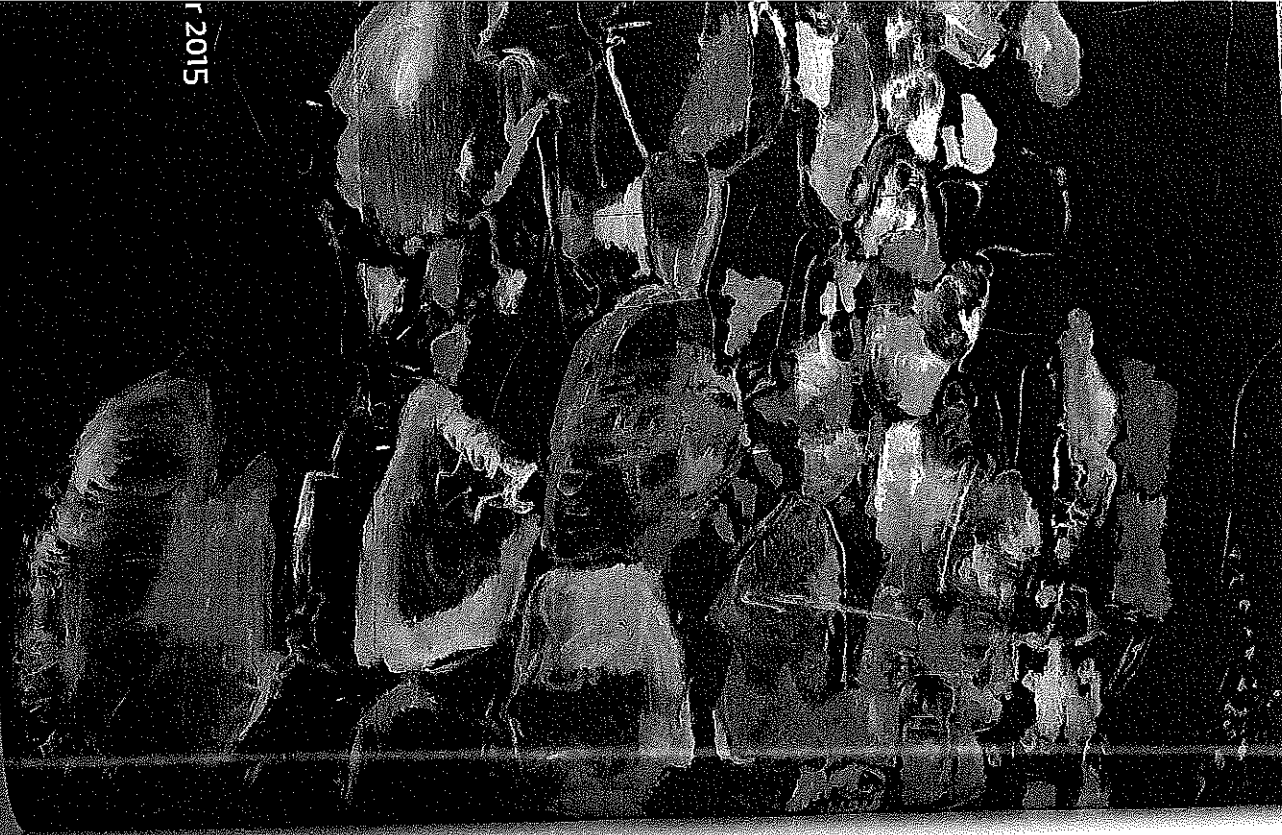
David Hammons, *Concerto in Black and Blue*, 2002. LCC installation view, see enr.com, 2002-2003.

expresses his disapproval of a "Nortendized Negro intelligencia" and "the better classes with their 'white culture,' changing these groups with failing to produce a true 'racial art.'" He argues that "there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art." The "restrictions" to which Hughes refers are generally understood to be the performance of "racial uplift" championed then and now by some members of the Black bourgeoisie. This unused material—the stuff of a "racial art"—includes, says Hughes, specifically Black subjects, to which "the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his inconspicuous humor."

For English, Blackness is the collective identity produced by the Atlantic slave trade, a history of constraint and construction that he no longer sees as a universal touchstone to which all Black artists must refer. Thus *How to See a Work of Art* protests the rigidity of historical teleologies, asking us to consider those moments in which Black artists do not make "Black art"—when they, in effect, step to the side of the historical time line. Hughes, by contrast, defines a Blackness that is being produced in the vivacious space-time of the *now* (on from which, he argues, the Black bourgeois shines itself off). The key difference between these two definitions lies in their conceptions of space and time. For English, space-time flows as a linear progress narrative, a Newtonian chain of causes and effects; in Hughes's essay, space-time is the *now*. And the *now* is not the same as the present—the latter is traditionally understood as the cumulative product of the past, while the former transcends the historical dimension altogether. It is a kind of singularity, an immanent immediacy.

Blackness is both a historical construct and a phenomenological experience. We often reference and define it through histories, but the majority of Black people cannot be found on that narrow-strip time line deployed in high school textbooks and implicitly invoked as English's governing metaphor. Think of African Americans and Black Britons who were deported with the First Fleet to Australia, Black East African merchants who sailed to the Indian subcontinent at the time of the Middle Passage, Black Germans who died in Nazi death camps or who fought in Hitler's armies—or Barack Obama, whose Blackness, if genealogists are correct, comes from two different histories, one bound up with Atlantic slavery, the other with the anticolonial history of Kenya.

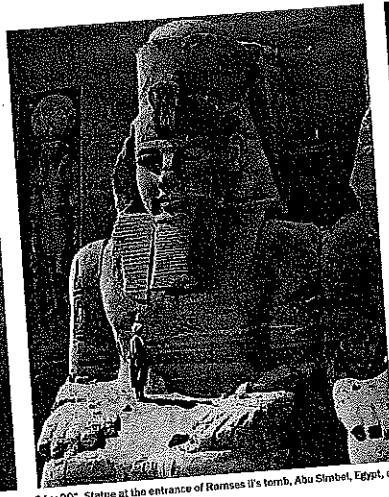
This is not to say that Blackness in the immediate moment is historyless, some sort of free-floating form



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From left: Jacques-Fernand Humbert, *Collette*, ca. 1896, oil on canvas, approx. 24 x 20". Statue at the entrance of Ramses II's tomb, Abu Simbel, Egypt, ca. 1858. Photo: Francis Frith/Library of Congress.



Vasily Tropinin, *Portrait of Aleksandr Pushkin*, 1827, oil on canvas, 26 7/8 x 22".

erased of context. It is to say that the history that operates in this moment is far more complicated—and more inclusive—than the conventionally linear history presumed (and seen as a virtual prison, with artists like Hammons just anomalous escapees) in *How to See a Work of Art*. We might call this the successivist view of history, to borrow Karen Barad's term for the Newtonian concept of space-time. Nor is it quite apt, of course, to embrace, as a historiographical model, the ultimately ahistorical notion of an absolute now that floats utterly free of the past. Yet there is something in Hughes's notion of a now that we might certainly wish to recuperate—its implicit accessing of a spatiotemporal register that is, in fact, spatial as well as temporal. The present is a point on a time line; *now* is a dispersed field of events. And we know, of course, that space-time does not move forward. If anything, it moves outward: The universe is expanding. Entropy is not just destruction and collapse; it is a tree growing, a woman aging, a piece of coal becoming a diamond, and the particles that comprise all matter growing less tightly bound, looser, more chaotic. And entropy may well be the best conceptual prism through which to understand time's passage.

This is the physics of Blackness: In any given moment, when the spectator engages a work of art, different valences of Blackness may formulate, expand, or multiply, qualitatively and quantitatively. What is Black art? That may very well depend on the time and the space of the moment. When it was created, the Sphinx wasn't considered Black art, but Afrocentrists certainly point to it now. Alexandre Dumas, Aleksandr Pushkin, and

Collette all proudly proclaimed themselves to be Black, but *The Three Musketeers*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Chéri*—or any of Beethoven's symphonies, for that matter—are rarely part of any course or curricula on Black art. However, in *this* moment, our *now*, they are Black art—a point made so memorably by Kellie Jones in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (2011). Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*, Hughes's "The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain," and, most certainly, *How to See a Work of Art* are all Black art.

If we limit ourselves to defining Blackness as the doughty product of a linear narrative, then we will often find ourselves faced with binary choices concerning works of art: Either they are on or they are off the time line; either they are Black art or they are not Black art. If we reject this linearity in favor of a view informed by the dynamics of entropy, then we can understand the collection of works invoked above as an accurate portrayal of the polyvalence of Blackness. This entropic polyvalence accommodates contradiction, overdetermination, irony: It accommodates the Blackness of Ramses II (pointed to by Afrocentrists as Black, though he lived long before Blackness had been invented) and the Blackness of Beethoven (whom Hitler lauded as a paragon of Aryan excellence, little imagining Beethoven's Black ancestry); it puts these contradictory forms of Blackness into proximity and ironic relation, and reveals new connections between the discourses of Afrocentrism and enlightenment. It accommodates Pushkin, whose Eritrean great-grandfather Gannibal

went from slave to Afro-Russian nobleman in the court of Peter the Great. In this moment we might also word-associate the far more famous Hannibal with Gannibal, creating conceptions of Blackness that only symbolically signify, Fred Moten-like, for the typical Black progress narrative, but that establish enormous resonance between the military and cultural histories of the Roman and Russian Empires. New valences for Blackness: Blackness that is more directly meaningful to white patrimonies than those of the African diaspora.

We need not imagine, as English does, Black artists stepping off the time line of history to create non-Black art: These are simply different registers of Blackness, still moving from our tightly ordered assumptions into yet more diverse and unpredictable forms. The task ahead is difficult and complicated but also freeing: to explore the entropy of Black art in any given moment, and to capture an endless, multiplying world in the process. ☐

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NOTES

1. A style note: I always capitalize *Blackness* to distinguish it from a pejorative connotation born of its etymological relationship to the color black: the five continents born of its etymological relationship to the color black; it and unenlightened peoples of African descent are inhumane (blackhearted) and unenlightened because they are dark. *Whiteness*: I keep it lowercase because its capitalization always strikes me as uncomfortably close to its own stereotype of superiority. This is a personal choice, rather than a logic I believe all would follow.
2. For explanations on the invention of Blackness, see Henry Louis Gates *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1997), Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), and *own Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004).