BLACK PERFORMANCE THEORY

Thomas F. DeFrantz AND
Anita Gonzalez, EDITORS

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PERFORMANCE
BLACKNESS
NAVIGATIONS
ROLES
MASKS
RACE
STATUS
DIASPORAS
LANDINGS
JOURNEYS
THEORY
CODA
TRANSFORMATION
ARCHETYPES
MINSTREL
RITUAL
HISTORY
DIFFUSION

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Foreword by D. Soyini Madison

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FOREWORD

Black performance theory (BPT) helps us decipher the imperatives of blackness. Translating the meanings of blackness by excavating the enlivening enactments that sustain blackness, theory does the labor of translating the thick ontologies of what black imperatives are by locating them within the generative forces of performance. With each generation, perhaps with each turn of a phrase, we stake a new claim within a new world order for the nature and significance of blackness. Black performance theory complicates old claims of blackness, because life is change and the world keeps turning, demanding new vocabularies and new actions. Blackness is born and reborn as something uniquely itself, in stark difference against that which it is not, and in comforting familiarity with those things that are itself. To say something different and new about blackness, about it having a nature or a decipherable core, is serious work because it is head spinning in its contradictions and contingencies. Black performance theory shows us how each unfolding or iteration of what blackness is can be constituted by performance and revealed within unlimited performance frames.

This volume transforms black ontologies and imperatives into the lived realms of time, space, and action: bodies, machines, movement, sound, and creation now culminate within temporalities of struggle and renewal. Black performance theory shows us how subjects and subjectivities animate blackness across landscapes that are all spectacularly excessive in the cause and effects of African dislocation, imperialist trade, capital accumulation, human violence, and black abjection as well as circum-Atlantic expressions, black labor, Africanist retentions, black diaspora movements, the politics of black is beautiful, and more.

In deciphering the imperatives of blackness, BPT becomes an oppositional move within a matrix of disciplining powers reigning over the black body. Because it deepens the details of black expressivities and transgressions within the abiding contexts of disciplinary histories and circulations of inequality, BPT translates all of this within fluid rubrics of performance,

performativity, and the performative. If *performance* constitutes forms of cultural staging—conscious, heightened, reflexive, framed, contained—within a limited time span of action from plays to carnivals, from poetry to prose, from weddings to funerals, from jokes to storytelling and more; if *performativity* marks identity through the habitus of repetitive enactments, reiterations of stylized norms, and inherited gestural conventions from the way we sit, stand, speak, dress, dance, play, eat, hold a pencil and more; if the *performative* is the culmination of both in that it *does something* to make a material, physical, and situational difference—then BPT speaks to why all this matters to blackness and to contested identities. Black performance theory helps us realize performance. In this performance/theory coupling what is revealed to us is how performance performs *and* how theory performs *us* through its realizations, claims, and possibilities. It works to translate and inspire, to politically interrogate and sensually invoke, how realms of performance struggles and troubles illuminate black agency and subjectivity within reimagined spaces of being.

Black performance theory is high stakes because it excavates the coded nuances as well as the complex spectacles within everyday acts of resistance by once known a/objects that are now and have always been agents of their own humanity. Black performance theory is oppositional because it honors the subaltern, rhetorical roots of black symbolism that survive and break through the timeworn death wish cast against black expression. The theorist attends to performance histories, aesthetics, and orders of belonging governed by multifarious modes of un-freedom as well as the radical performances that violent constraint has invoked. But, as much as black performance theory is about politics, entangled within history and power, it is also an enterprise and labor of the senses. The gift of performance theory is its distinct attention and indebtedness to the sensory as the senses actualize temporality, enliven desire, and embrace beauty across the poetics of bodies and the aesthetics of their creations. Performance theory honors and heightens the gravitas of the senses as gateways to the symbol-making body, its sonics, and its existential truths wrapped in art and purpose.

If the genealogy of black performance extends like a rhizome to cross its dense continental roots and budding diasporic expressivities in the culmination and continuum of endless circum-Atlantic performances, then black performance theory inherits an ethics commanded by the performatives of Africanist multitudes. Because black performance is born through and sustained by circum-Atlantic epochs and its (dis)concordant expressivities, it follows that black performance *theory* is indebted to the truth of this Africanist inheritance that constitutes the fact of blackness. Africa/Africanisms/

Africanist symbols, meanings, and lives have been the prototype of abjection. Therefore, the political stakes and sensory affects of black performance theory require an intellectual rigor that elucidates and disentangles the complexities of these Africanisms and the haunting terrors of their degradation. Black performance theory also requires an ethics of engagement that begins with, but moves from, economies of dislocation and disciplinary power to futures of what black performatives *do* and its instructive elaborations on futurity. Black performance theory offers up something beyond what we already know, because it is an ethics that does not stand in iterations but intellectually thrives in thick performatives of kinesis and invention: for life's sake.

This volume is a palimpsest of black performance histories, practices, affects, and ideologies. In this contemporary moment, what surfaces and leaves its imprint upon BPT is the demand for new imperatives, expanded notions of black ontology, fresh meditations on black abjection, and renewed dialogues on how performance can generate it all. This claim goes further in enunciating that race is both a fundamental constant and a "resistant" factor in the infinite and boundless reaches of black performance, its sensibilities, and its analytics. I am reminded of Harry Belafonte's lament of how black artists have turned their backs on black social responsibility, adding, "Give me Bruce Springsteen, and now you're talking. I think he is black" (Zawia). Herein the notion that cultural politics trumps race. From Toni Morrison's noted comment about Bill Clinton being the first black president to the controversy over the meanings of post-black, the point is that race is a fact of blackness within racially boundless articulations and performatives that rise from this fact. This volume illuminates the constant of blackness *and* its abiding boundlessness.

Exceeding iterations of ready-made blackness and overcooked theories of performance, this volume honors the charge to theorize outside the expected and to say something new. It does this with each essay. Theorizing is a real commitment. It is hard, good, interventionist work. Blackness makes theorizing even more complicated, because it makes theory expand and reach into histories and economies that are layered by abjection and subjugated spaces. Black performance theory, with heartfelt commitment and sharp-tongued intellect, deepens the expanse and reach of this interventionist work to offer up black imperatives of politics, beauty, and the senses.

D. SOYINI MADISON

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FROM "NEGRO EXPRESSION" TO "BLACK PERFORMANCE"

Black Performance Theory reflects upon and extends twentieth-century intellectual labors to establish black expressive culture as an area of serious academic inquiry. Here, we bring forward a wealth of critical paradigms that illuminate the capacities of black performance and black sensibilities to enable critical discussions of performance histories, theories, and practices. Authors here are less concerned with errors of omission in a historical genealogy of performance studies than a project of revelation, one in which the capacity of black performance is revealed as a part of its own deployment without deference to overlapping historical trajectories or perceived differences in cultural capital from an elusive Europeanist norm. Black performance theory emerges now, as we are convinced of the endurance of black performance even in a world that daily realigns the implications of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, location, ability, age, and class. As we attempt to capture the field through definitions, dialogues, or performative writing, we discover two important truths: that black sensibilities emerge whether there are black bodies present or not; and that while black performance may certainly become manifest without black people, we might best recognize it as a circumstance enabled by black sensibilities, black expressive practices, and black people.

To uncover a history of black performance, we begin by considering naming—the mechanisms used to designate black presence. For example: African, Ethiop, Negro, colored, black, African American. These monikers demonstrate shifts in thinking about black identity and representation. Each label represents a context for packaging ideas about black people in particular places and during particular historical time periods. African or Ethiop suggests origi-

nary locations and routes of black migration—whether free or enslaved. Negro and colored were terms of patriarchal domination, popular in the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. Black and African American represent resistant, dissident self-namings that emerged in response to political activism of the latter part of the twentieth century. And by now, in the twenty-first century, black has stabilized an international identity of diasporan consciousness.

The naming of black people allowed authors in different historical eras to categorize black practices of performance according to the racialized beliefs of the time. Colonial and nineteenth-century authors often described "African" and "Ethiop" performances as demonstrations of foreign, or primitive, cultures.[1] In the early twentieth century of the United States, an undeniable growth in professional black performance by "Negro" and "colored" artists generated increased commentary. While some authors considered these performances as mere entertainments, theoretical writing concerned with black performance as artistry began to emerge at this time. Strikingly, the most powerful examples of this genre of writing came from African American artist enclaves.[2] In New York, authors of the Harlem Renaissance wondered at the efficacy and impact of black expression as they produced plays, visual arts works, dances, and musical compositions. Their early theorizing established that black performance styles and sensibilities were not merely verbal or aural, but also included visual symbolic codes that communicated and commented in-group. These authors and artists began to question how black expression translated to outsider audiences. Among these authors, Zora Neale Hurston emerged as an originary theorist concerned with aesthetic composition of black performance.

Negro Expression

Hurston wrote a prescient short article for the groundbreaking anthology *Negro*, published in 1934 (Hurston). She offered a taxonomy of African American performativity titled "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that referenced sites, modes, and practices of performance. The essay, and its placement alongside the creative writings of other artists and researchers of the Harlem Renaissance era, predicted a broad interest in understanding African diaspora performance. The implications of Hurston's short essay still stand: black performance derives from its own style and sensibilities that undergird its production. And black performance answers pressing aesthetic concerns of the communities that engage it.

Working from her fieldwork observations, Hurston theorizes Negro performance of the American South of the early twentieth century in pro-

vocative, unabashed style. She proclaims Negro talk to be "dramatic" and notes a characteristic willingness to use "action words"—words that paint pictures—as a stabilizing point of entry to understanding the expressive aesthetics of black language and gesture. Perhaps the most important quality that Hurston includes in her explicit taxonomy is the "will to adorn." Here, language pushes forward toward an unprecedented space of expressiveness. For example, the word "syndicating" to refer to "gossiping" demonstrates metaphor and simile; the double descriptives "low down" or "high tall" elaborate meaning; and verbal nouns such as "funeralize" or "jooking" capture action in language. Following Hurston, we can conclude that black expressive performance springs from the need to communicate beyond the limited events of words alone.

Hurston's essay also highlights dancing, dialect, folklore, culture heroes, imitation, and "the Jook"; each section confirms Negro Expression as its own source and subject of possibility. Perhaps this is Hurston's grand achievement: she allows black performance to be in dialogue simultaneously with itself, the world around it, and the lives of black people. Negro Expression is an act of confirmation that is aesthetically motivated and foundational to understanding the community that practices it.

In its first iterations, Negro Expression was routinely aligned with vernacular and folklore studies, areas that allowed for uncomplicated readings of fixed social practices without resource to aesthetic or literary theory. In time, editors and researchers, including activist Nancy Cunard, folklorist Alan Lomax, musicologist Eileen Southern, dance researcher Lynne Fauley Emery, anthropologist Lawrence Levine, literary theorist Houston A. Baker Jr., cultural theorist Kobena Mercer, and historians Shane White and Graham White, offered volumes that attested to the resiliency of black cultural expression.[3] Eventually, disciplinary affiliations including anthropology, musicology, dance, theater, and the literary and visual arts created mechanisms for the consideration of black performance that sought to account for its structural complexity and diversity.

Flash Forward Thirty Years: Africanist Aesthetics and Civil Rights

1966: Art historian Robert Farris Thompson publishes "Dance and Culture, an Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance" as prelude to his magisterial catalogue *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (1974), and LeRoi Jones publishes "The Revolutionary Theatre" in a collection of writings titled *Home: Social Essays*.

Thompson's work considers the aesthetic value of West African dance and song: "West African dances are key documents of aesthetic history;

they are nonverbal formulations of philosophies of beauty and ethics; and they furnish a means of comprehending a pervasive strand of contemporary American culture" (85). Thompson's theorization of performance includes a taxonomy of four shared traits of West African music and dance: "the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; and, finally the songs and dances of derision." These shared traits became the foundation for an aesthetic ideology surrounding Africanist performance as a family of practices.

From Thompson's essay, a possibility to theorize black performance in terms of its own ontologies emerges. Thompson's writings built upon fieldwork that he conducted on the continent; he was explicitly seeking out connections among performance modes and art practices in various groups. In taking this "long view," as Hurston had done in her tours of the American South a generation earlier, Thompson confirmed aesthetic commonalities, and *imperatives* that guided creative communications among black people.

The turn to West African values and aesthetics marked a general interest in Afrocentric thought that was a by-product of increasing interest in narratives of origins. Thompson's work coincided with black political activism in urban locations that generated art inspired by social change. Theater artists and activists including Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) described their performance priorities in terms of revolution. Baraka's essay "The Revolutionary Theatre" conceived of black performance as continuing, evolving, ritual and experimental work that could evoke the imagistic world of spirit and dreams.[4] His call for a "theatre of world spirit" opened possibilities for defining black performance as process rather than product.

While Hurston documented what she saw among the folk, and Thompson created terminology that could categorize Africanist aesthetics, Baraka called for a deployment of theatrical imagery that could connect an idea of blackness across time and space. He wrote, "The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as 'things.'" He encouraged revolutionary black performers to incorporate intangible aspects of black life in their art: rites of passage, guttural moans, ritual chants, and improvisational riffs. His insistence on an imaginary space of possibility created an intercultural and intertextual articulation of black performance, one that explored an essential *soul* of black folk.

Flash Forward Thirty Years and Counting: Working Together to Define Black Performance

1995: The Black Public Sphere Collective publishes *The Black Public Sphere* (University of Chicago Press), a coedited volume; 1998: Michele Wal-

lace and Gina Dent offer *Black Popular Culture* (New Press); and in 2005, Harry J. Elam Jr. and Kennell Jackson's volume *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (University of Michigan) appears.

Television and Internet replicate black acts. Media amplify and accelerate the distribution of performance, and an ever-widening global populace comes into contact with Africanist aesthetics in motion. Black performances are embodied by people of color and, importantly, others who have access to the constellation of gesture and word that had previously emerged in black communities. Academic definitions of performance broaden, to recognize affinities and differences among the location and experience of "black life" in a fragmented, postmodern world. Concepts of hybridity, public spheres, the postcolonial, queer black sexualities, and de-essentialized identities enter discussions of black performance, emphasizing complexities of theoretical analysis.

Collectively, the three volumes above established community dialogues of academics working on black performance. These curated projects brought together scholars who consistently considered a "public" for performance more broad than the audience in any room. Their discussions situated performance not only as folklore or political identity, but within the interdisciplinary spheres of global popular culture and mediated expression. Taken together, they confirmed an institutional legitimacy for advanced, nuanced discussion of black performance as artifact and artistry.

Post 9/11, a proliferation of perspectives exploring black performance theory decentralizes academic inquiry. Feedback and talkback loops among artists, authors, and audiences explode boundaries between making and writing about work. New literary formats confirm playful, and serious, modes of engagement with theory. In this moment, the present volume proceeds, and we parse the terms "black," "performance," and "theory."

Parsing Black

DeFrantz: For me, black is the manifestation of Africanist aesthetics. The willingness to back-phrase, to move with a percussive attack, to sing against the grain of the other instruments, and to include the voices of those gathered in the fabric of the event—these are the elements of black that endure and confirm. Yes, it can be the grain of the voice or the sway of the hip; a stutter call that sounds like an engine starting or an unanticipated reference to political circumstances: these elements mark the emergence of black in time and space. This black is action: action engaged to enlarge capacity, confirm presence, to dare.

Gonzalez: By way of contrast, I understand black as a response to histories that extend beyond Africa and its aesthetics. Black performance expands, synthesizes, comments, and responds to imaginations about black identity as much as to its own inherent expressions. If black identity is constructed and articulated by those outside of the "race" then performances of blackness are created in response to these imagined identities as well as to cultural retentions and Africanist histories. Cultural infusions from other parts of the world collect and mingle with the multitude of African performance genres to create a great diversity of styles. I view black as a dialogic imagination—an outsider response to the very existence of people from Africa who carry their own shifting cultural ideologies and metaphysical worldviews.

Parsing Performance

Anita: Performance for me involves enactment, re-creation, or storytelling. Performers present humans in relationship to the exceptional circumstances that surround them. Even as performance centers in living beings and concrete experiences, it is also a metaphoric, or symbolic, iteration of life. In performance, the vocal physical expressive body becomes a conduit, or cauldron, of expressive potential that recycles emotion, spirit, behavior. Performers use metaphoric or symbolic content to communicate perspectives about life.

TommyD: Performance, as I imagine it, involves the excitement of breath to create subject or subjectivity. In other words, performance emerges in its own conscious engagement, and it is created by living people. Of course, some will argue that "texts perform," or "music videos perform," which may be true, but for my sensibility, performance involves subjectivity occasioned by action born of breath. People make performances happen, whether they be in the nightclub, in church, in the classroom, on the job, or on a stage. Importantly, performers need to recognize their own performance in order for it to be valuable. It needs to be conscious action, conceived or created as performance.

Parsing Theory

Male-Identified Queer High Yellow Duke University: Theory, in this formation, is the mobilization of practice toward analysis. The taking stock, or noticing, of action to recognize its component parts and its implications, and the extension of that noticing to construct a way to understand, or interpret, what is happening there. Theory assumes action and practice already in motion; theory might be the realization of that noticing trans-

lated into text, or music and motion. Surely theory doesn't have to be written in order to become manifest, but just as surely theory has to be shared among people to be a valuable analytic.

Afro Southern Caribeña now in Ann Arbor: Theory is not limited to academic or intellectual inquiries. Theories develop through evaluative processes initiated by artists in the moment in which they assess what "works" about a performance. Performance theory can be delivered through a hand gesture or sketch, embedded in a lecture, or disseminated within the pauses of a sound score. Artists articulate thoughtful analyses in a multiplicity of ways. Post-performance discussions easily take the form of active breath or performed actions that comment and expand upon originating concepts, relocating the performance practices within new theoretical contexts. This is theory manifest: an articulate response to a performance. All theory, and certainly the best theory, is subjective—a unique and personal response to the performance act that helps the reader or viewer to perceive in a new or unexpected manner.

Black Sensibilities

From Madison, WI: I remember defending my dissertation with Sally Banes, the prolific and innovative dance scholar, at the University of Wisconsin in 1997. After a lengthy oral defense in which I argued passionately about the "relative construction of blackness" and the need to recognize variable types of blackness based upon historical and social circumstances, Sally turned to me with a deadpan face. "Well then, Anita," she said, "What are you going to teach?" Her point was that if black is relative and variable, then how do we talk about it / theorize it? In an attempt to diversify blackness, I had removed blackness from the equation. My desires to articulate blackness within paradigms of postmodernism were realized through participation in the Black Performance Theory working group.

Black performance theory came into being as a "think tank" about black performance at a moment when blackness had been successfully deconstructed as a social and literary category without fixed contents. And yet black performance remained a palpable aspect of being in the world. Many of the scholars involved in early meetings of the group were the first of their families to attend primarily white educational institutions and to immerse themselves in theorizing black performance within integrated academic institutional contexts. In these circumstances, we were forced to describe, articulate, and validate our blackness. Many of us wondered, "Are we black enough?"

From Cambridge, MA: I began my first tenure-track job at the Massachu-

setts Institute of Technology in the late 1990s, and immediately felt the isolation of professional academic work. Each institution is encouraged to have "one" of everything, so of course I arrived as the only scholar-practitioner working in dance and African American studies, as well as media and popular culture studies. We launched BPT *at* MIT *and Duke to create community that could nurture the working-through of concepts and performance ideologies in a group model that resonated with our sense of Africanist structures of communal labors.*

Unlike their progenitors, the authors of BPT emerged from environments that wondered at an ontology of blackness that extended beyond race. We wondered, if blackness was no longer stable, what are its performative markers? How can black performances be theorized toward their own ends, even as those ends are dispersed across geographies and historical eras? The writers and artists of BPT embraced the notion of "black sensibilities" as a way to capture ideas of black performativity. Black sensibilities—the enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable black familiar—demonstrate the microeconomics of gesture that cohere in black performance.

Few will argue that black sensibilities do not permeate contemporary life, arising in fragmentary moments of personal relationship or in sustained performance practices. For example, hip-hop, conceived as a flexible platform incontrovertibly black at its root, has become an engine for expressive discovery and marketplace situatedness embraced globally. Gospel music has become a defining mechanism for the circulations of Christian ministries of several denominations. Black strategies of "talking back" to ever-widening hegemonic mainstreams of sexualities, religion, class consciousnesses, and even race are engaged regularly in terms of fashion, language, physical stance, and the expansive mutabilities of "being black." Questions about the impossibilities of purity within always-shifting black identities were recounted nearly daily during the early presidency of Barack Obama. In all of these maneuvers, black sensibilities—stylized ways of being in relation to each other and our environments—become wellsprings of creative tactics employed consciously and subconsciously as resources of strength, resistance, and unexpected pleasure.

In a remarkable essay published in 2006 that provides an overview of black performance studies, E. Patrick Johnson cogently explains the fraught terrain of blackness as a manifestation of the epistemological moment of race, one that "manifests itself in and through performance in that performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity—a knowing made manifest by a 'doing'" (Johnson, "Black Performance Studies," 446). In the essay, Johnson argues many modalities in which blackness "offers a way to rethink perfor-

mance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society." Wondering that the two categories are already in opposition—black and performance—Johnson wryly notes that in this context, "black performance has the potential of simultaneously forestalling and enabling social change" (Johnson, "Black Performance Studies," 446). Forestalling, within a larger context of white performance; and enabling, as a seemingly endless capacity for all people to emerge into presence through performance.

Johnson also notes that while black performance "has been a sustaining and galvanizing force of black culture and a contributor to world culture at large, it has not always been recognized as a site of theorization in the academy" (Johnson, "Black Performance Studies," 447). *Black Performance Theory* seeks to offer examples of how that theorization happens and to predict where we may go from here.

Some may wish to define what black performance is by reflecting upon what it is not.

Black performance is not static, contained, or geographically specific. There is no locale that designates the origin of "black" sensibilities because skin colors have always been global and relative. The very notion of black is conceived within political/social economies of power defined by historical circumstances. And yet the circumstances multiply or diffuse the instant that they create a distinct entity that we want to delineate as "black." Authors in the volume theorize the web, the spirit, the ecstasy, the ethnosphere, and the thermodynamics of decidedly undetermined modes of expression that communicate within black realms or across political or aesthetic or social boundaries. Race is both a defining paradigm for blackness and a resistant frame for understanding the unbound nature of the field. Clearly black performance is not ending, but rather transforming in response to technology, and ever-changing transnational settings.

Black performance contains history and racism, but it is not about either of those things. Black performance injects itself into pertinent political discussions like those surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin, a teenager shot in 2012 while walking and wearing a hoodie within a predominantly white Florida neighborhood. The Martin tragedy demonstrates how markings associated with black performance—such as a hoodie—can be deadly. Clearly, theorizing black performance is imperative in the present moment.

While deployment of feminist theory might point toward the resistant capacities of black performance as a site of opposition, the authors in this volume explore performance largely as an ever-present feature of human exchange. In this formation, performance may be resistant, affirmative, or

several states in-between and simultaneously; it may underscore oppositional aesthetics or collude with creative practices far removed from the lives of black people. Here, the terms of performance are expansively imagined to allow for subversive and normative simultaneity: cross-rhythms of rupture and coherence amid shifting landscapes of intervention and virtuosity. In this way, narratives of domination and oppression that often circumscribe depictions of black performance arrive alongside considerations of presence and activity as their own means and ends.

Rather than constrain performance as public or private, live or mediated, historical or contemporary, theorists in this volume allow slippage between these areas to go unedited. Recurrently, queering the capacities of theoretical intervention arrive as an urgency in this work: the authors here wonder, repeatedly, at the productive work of disidentification that produces the synchronous singularities of black performance.[5]

On Performative Writing

Some postmodern performance theorists describe intertextuality as a post-1960s phenomenon.[6] However, we find its roots in earlier renditions of black aesthetic writing. Performative writing might be the writing that Hurston refers to at the beginning of her essay, when she writes of the black performer that "his very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another" (Hurston). Hurston's writing demonstrated "black talking back"—rich portrayals of nuances of Negro form. Her willingness to be playful in her writing also predicated the performative scholarship offered here. Talking back playfully confirms a black mode of intertextual and interstitial writings that enliven analyses of black performance.[7]

Black Performance Theory includes chapters that demonstrate how experimentation with form and ingenuity are part of what has been called "the black aesthetic." When authors use words to create unexpected interpretative spaces, they replicate the open structures of jazz, speech, and motion. Four overlapping terrains suggest routes of exploration: Transporting Black, Black-en-Scène, the Black Imaginary, and Hi-Fidelity Black. Arching over all of these imaginary regions is a meta-discourse of diaspora, the homeward-tilting, impossible concept that continuously binds concepts of blackness, performance, and theory. In constructing the volume, we deliberately include writings that move across the page as they communicate. To introduce the concepts of the chapters included here, as well as the organization of the volume, we offer riffs on the concepts that undergird the volume.

Riffing Diaspora

Diaspora is continual; it is the unfolding of experience into a visual, aural, kinesthetic culture of performance. Like skin, it is porous and permeable, flexible and self-repairing, finely spun and fragile. And like skin on a body, diaspora palpably protects us. We wrap ourselves in its possibilities, and they remind us of impossible connectivities. In this reminding—this bringing into consciousness of the intangible experience of a mythic past—we wear memory on our bodies; we see each other in skins that go together or sometimes belong apart. The connective skin of diaspora offers us protection from the coldness of individual isolation.

Maybe this is a way to think of the damage that the individualistic push of Eurocentric cultures does to communal, Earth-based cultures of an African diaspora. Surely black people can live each alone in the world. But we thrive in concert and call-and-response, in vibrant communication through a relationship to diaspora. In this way, diaspora becomes a very real process, one that can be experienced in the interplay of ideas that performance cultures bring forth.

Diaspora also serves as a process of unification. It brings together collective experiences around particular issues, forces, or social movements. Like all alliances, it is strategic. Most fascinating in current diaspora studies are the shifting points of origin for groups of folk designated as black. Does the journey begin in Africa, or the Americas, or the Caribbean? Does it end where you, the artist-scholar, has landed? Even as we define an African diaspora as expressed through the skin that may be marked black—through its gestures—the texture and color of these skins keep shifting through new alliances, new ways of codifying our collective experiences. Performance becomes a dialogue between ourselves and others as we "make sense" of diasporic journeys.

The volume begins with Transporting Black, where authors write about diasporic notions of black identity that travel across continental borders, even into intergalactic terrains. Anita Gonzalez and Nadine George-Graves use metaphors of navigation and spidering to unravel matrixes of thoughts and ideas that supersede geographic boundaries. Gonzalez situates black identities as a call-and-response of images within a grid of circulating international representations. By exploring traffic in minstrel tropes from Liverpool to North American Afro-Mexican settlements, Gonzalez documents diasporic circulations of performance and its representational capacities across cultural groups, geographies, and historical eras.

George-Graves investigates the trickster character of Anansi as an embodiment of the fluidity of African agency across unstable narratives. Hershini Bhana Young discards the imaginary of location and instead utilizes theoretical writings by Alexander Weheliye, Fred Moten, and Kodwo Eshun to reconsider the imagistic manipulation of alienness in the work of the Afro-futurist graphic artist John Jennings. Explorations of "see-jaying" and transport by alien spacecraft demonstrate black strategies of making impossible space tangible.

Finally, Melissa Blanco Borelli writes across the pages of personal and theoretical journeys as she examines the impact of the hip on *mulata* performance and reception in Cuba and New Orleans. Her elegiac rendering of the mulaticized *rumbera* as a commodity linked to exports of a Cuban imaginary conveys the melancholia that out-of-body transmissions of black performance routinely evoke. She aligns the phenomenological hauntings, always present in black representation, with a new historiography of mulata dance worship.

Black-en-Scène

Theater lies in the word, they say. However, in black performance, where the vernacular and the non-textual carry pertinent meanings, "text" is danced, mediated, literary, or contained within the enactment of sexuality. Uncovering these meanings within black performance—at times half-conscious, double-conscious, or fully conscious—is the task of authors in this volume. Lynching dramas and modern dance provide fuel for musings about how artists communicate multiple meanings through performance texts.

Plays are templates for performance, therefore play scripts deliberately allow many possibilities of interpretation. Dramas about black life reveal the potentials of inclusion and omission in theatrical circumstances. Plays about lynching enact and imply the terrorizing mob action too readily summoned in the United States. Koritha Mitchell argues that the emergence of this genre of dramatic literature confirmed complex negotiations of literacy, performance, and corporeal presence that resisted prevalent conceptions of African American capacity onstage and off. Her reading of early twentieth-century lynching plays offers a challenge to smooth recitations of American theater history, suggesting the broad reach of performance/texts as evidence of performance ideologies constantly in revision.

Queer texts of black performance arrive in implicit abundance, often as gestures or subtext of omission.[8] Carl Paris mines the enactment of "spirit" as a conduit for sexual and communal presence in work by choreographers

Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson. For Paris, the performance of spirit grounds complex choreographic texts so that they might convey *ashé*, or the power to make things happen. In each of these chapters, the authors assume a broad theoretical reach in performative operation at the level of textual, or semiotic, analysis.

Rickerby Hinds offers evidence of an unexpected extension of black popular culture representations in the re-performance of seminal hip-hop artist album covers. For the emerging black performance artists who populated these gallery presentations of *Uncovered: A Pageant of Hip Hop Masters*, "performing the representation" surely acquired a frisson that exceeds the limits of these photographs.

Black Imaginary

Metaphorical spaces fragment presence across geographical and temporal sites. And yet where black performance may be mobilized, we find confirmation of black presence. Authors discover spaces of possibility in science fiction flying, or walking through devastated urban terrains. Soyica Diggs Colbert's spaceships allow Africans to fly where they have never—and have always—been, suggesting possibilities of diaspora beyond measure. Her exploration of work by Toni Morrison, George Clinton, and Kanye West attests to aural, visual, and conceptual affiliations within black performance across genre.

Evocation, provocation, mediation. Wendy S. Walters draws us a map of black persistence that is as journalistic as it is conceptual. Evocatively, she siphons off moments of geographical space and political events, always leaving it to the reader to map their placement and impact. In elegant performative writing, Walters renders an impossible complexity of black performance by its cartographical dimensionality. But what, and where, do we remember about black performance? Anna B. Scott's meditation pursues the geography of a cityscape that contains the rhythms, sounds, and pulses of black movements. For Scott, when we revisit terrains of familiarity, we are inevitably disappointed that the return is made strange in old steps done new. And yet we have to walk that walk again.

Hi-Fidelity Black

Sounds permeate skins, as rhythmic impulses careen the body. Keens and rumbles erupt to demonstrate the emotional states of the performer. Guttural languages click off tongues encountering foreign dialects. Black performance is reinvented within the cacophony. Writing about sound challenges

equations of skin color with cultural knowledge even as it reinforces that there can be—must be—some connection between the adversity of living black and the possibilities of ecstasy.

Collectively the writings here press against the brain's inner ear to reconfigure notions of aurality. When we read about sound, multidisciplinarity takes control of the experience. When we know the sounds being referenced by a literary text—"know" the sound, in the deep way of having lived with it and its progenitors—we experience the text at hand in unexpected arousal. Black performance theorists write about black sound with a velocity of affect and expectation. We expect our best music to speak to its own history and the histories of its sonic families. These families of affect are indeed of the skin and sinew, even as they are of the inner ear, the intellect, and the dance.

Tavia Nyong'o begins his scrutiny of Little Richard's sound with an autobiographical account of the singer's physical disability and its queering capacities. Within Little Richard's family, queer physical presence predicts the queer performance affect that became his hallmark. Jason King wonders at the fantastical aura surrounding Michael Jackson's final film performance. Citing a performative presence that surpasses Jackson's oversized celebrity, King interrogates the sensuality of an entirely mediated black performance, at once fragile, spontaneous, and magical. For Daphne A. Brooks, feminist praxis suggests a familial of sound to align a stellar array of performers whose "new black feminist noise" pursues nothing less than a new world order. Framing her close exploration of Nina Simone and Adrienne Kennedy's sonic futurism with discussions of celebrities Moms Mabley and Butterfly McQueen, Brooks imagines the outrageous impact and presence of things not heard. Thomas F. DeFrantz queries the relationships of "cool" to an emergent global hip-hop habitus that ties black performance to adolescent physicalities across geography. He asserts that contemporary corporealities become more and more recognizably black in their physical manifestations, as a global cohort of youth mature via the sonic imperatives of popular hip-hop musics.

The chapters in this book confirm the expanding presence of creative labor expended in theorizing black performance. Building on a varied literature in motion, we hope to contribute to the library of writings that offer varied and unexpected elaborations of performance and its urgencies, capacities, and the terms of its recognition. Surely there might be dozens of texts theorizing aspects of black performance rather than only a handful.[9] If theory encompasses unexpected ways to organize information and mobilize tools of anal-

ysis, the present volume demonstrates that black performance theory has only begun to uncover its resources to inspire creative intellectual practice.

Notes

1. Among many publications concerned with black performance in this era, see Bean, Hatch, and McNamara; Chude-Sokei; Elam and Krasner; and Lindfors.

2. Critical writing by artists and authors emerged in magazines and journals, including the *Crisis* (magazine) and the *Liberator* (magazine); and in the black press, such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*.

3. See Baker; Cunard; Emery; Levine; Lomax; Mercer; Southern, *Music of Black Americans*; White and White.

4. Written in 1964, the essay was republished in 1966. Jones, "Revolutionary Theatre."

5. Jose Esteban Muñoz effectively defines and parses the concept of disidentification in his book *Disidentifications*.

6. Theorist Julia Kristeva inspired engagement with the concept of intertextuality. See *Desire in Language*.

7. See especially Madison, "Performing Theory/Embodied Writing"; and Pollock.

8. See especially Johnson and Henderson.

9. Among recent offerings that explore black performance theory, see Batiste; Brody, *Punctuation*; Brown; Catanese; Chatterjea; Jackson, *Real Black*; Jones, Moore, and Bridgforth; Moten, *In the Break*; and Young, *Embodying Black Experience*.