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The Circle – Notes Towards a Topography of Afro-diasporic Time: By Way of Introduction

1.

The future is not waiting to be created. It is ancestral intimacies. It is fugitive practices – forms of otherwise living and imagining which have already existed.[1] They have been enacted in the past, are now being enacted, are waiting to be embodied. This is the 'futurism' we foreground in this conversation, a future that has been already. The futurism we discuss here is not a hope or a utopia; it is a counter-reality that already exists.

Re-membering ancestral histories of the body, and unpacking the vitalising aspects of traditional spiritualities, to the extent that these are emancipatory, is not about going back to what was, as Karen Barad might explain to us, 'but rather about the material reconfiguring of spacetimemattering in ways that attempt to […] produce openings, new possible histories'[2] of how Black time-beings have not only endured, producing the aesthetics that defy death, but have created, producing the aesthetics of being-more.[3]

The production of new openings, or the possibilities of openings, for Black living, its politics and aesthetics, in ways that underline the quantum entanglements of Black history, is a concern lying at the heart of every contribution in this Special Issue.

2.

Kamau Brathwaite tells a story about watching the annual Governor's Parade in Bridgetown, Barbados, as a boy. He speaks of his fascination in observing something which, for him, proved key to understanding time and rhythm among his Afro-Caribbean people. This became decisive for his craft of poetry. Brathwaite recounts that:

> The governor [was] on his horse. Englishman. Plumes, white helmet. Behind him the trombones, the tubas, the big brass bands, the drums – *boom boom boom boom boom boom boom* [*he imitates the beating*]. Everybody [was] marching […] you have the rifles, you have the glitter of the instruments, and you have the wonderful precision of the soldiers, and you have *left-right, left-right, left-right*. Pentameter. This is what won the Battle of Waterloo. This is what made us colonial […][4]

One year, his aunts and sisters decided to join in the parade. 'Normally, I would have watched the soldiers only', says Brathwaite, but:

> after a mile of marching, the music is no longer heard at the back and people begin to straggle—lesser people, people not in such beautiful uniforms—begin to straggle […] But my aunts were there in this thing and I was watching for them and for the first time I saw something I had never seen before […] There they were with their baskets and so on. The first set of them were trying to catch up with the pentameter, although they could barely hear the *boom boom boom* of the band. They were doing a strange movement—trying to go *left-right*, but ended up doing a little *chip-chap* [he imitates a shuffle] thing. But even more alarming, in a way more amazing, is that the women at the very back […] were not bothering to march to this music at all. They were beginning to form circles: a completely different cosmology. Instead of going along

> *left-right-left-right*, they would go *left-right*, then they would be dancing as they doubled back on themselves.[5]

The rhythm one associates with parades is, typically, one of progression, of forward movement. But in this case, Brathwaite noticed that the women would take a few steps, marching with the people who were parading, then they would *wheel and tun* right on the beat and move forward again. Forward, then circle – broadening, widening space, widening time. From a certain point of view, they were regressing. But Brathwaite describes in this a diasporic formation which I have always known, seen, and felt. I have always been familiar with the *wheel and tun* – at the Zion Pukkumina Church in Porus, at the Church of God in Coffee Grove. It's lodged in my earliest memories. It evokes to me the *cut and clear*, in that, with every forward movement, there is also a circular movement in space. Every forward rhythm is accompanied by a looping.

James A. Snead describes the phenomenon in the following terms:

> If there is a goal (*Zweck*) in [Black culture], it is always deferred; it continually "cuts" back to the start, in the musical meaning of "cut" as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental *da capo*) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series.
> A culture based on the idea of the "cut" will always suffer in a society whose dominant idea is material progress […] In European culture, the "goal" is always clear: that which always is being worked towards […] Moreover, European culture does not allow "a succession of accidents and surprises" but instead maintains the illusions of progression and control at all costs. Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself.[6]

Where it does, Black life thrives, articulates its politics of love, because of and through that 'cut', that idea of return, of repetition, which Saidiya Hartman describes as 'the circle'. A 'deep diasporic formation that travels with us'– Afroic people in the diaspora – the 'circle' is the figure – meaning consciousness – and idea of repetition, of return, which is also the figure and idea of gathering, of ceremony, of ritual.[7] This 'diasporic formation' characterises the gestic imaginary which Brathwaite describes above.

I think of the circle today as I stand in the Black Church in Chapeltown, Leeds, and the prayer is happening. There are prayers that rise and ebb in a choreographic flow, a flow that moves in no apparent direction. The service itself follows a penned order, and at the same time, the movement is unscripted, the move of the Spirit. To the ear not familiar with this atmosphere, these prayers may seem digressive, interruptive, but prayers give birth to a groan, to a holler and to a shout, to a choral, communal movement that is simultaneously lament and celebration. A big part of this is the taking of time. In my grandmother's church, they used the phrase 'carry on': *we a carry on; church wen a carry on* – meaning we had some business to settle; somebody needed to get their release, so we had to pray through; or, something was in the air, in the atmosphere, something that needed to be broken. *We a carry on*. This is the circle.

The circle is also testimony service, a way to share by saying *brethren, brethren…are you hearing me, brethren? Can somebody say 'amen'?* That *brethren* is also woman *and* man *and* child. It's also *my brothers and sisters*. Every story of goodness can be told, and most importantly, *everybody* can speak. This is where everybody is listened to. This ritual is an act of care, a moment of tenderness; of intense visibility. The vulnerability of this space is what many non-initiates might find surprising – how so much can be broached here; how people can be bare. It's a space of belief, a space for insiders. The circle.

The service in the Black Church in Chapeltown is not moving in a straight line; it's shaped by lateral and radial expansions, by *nap kanpe*, a testimony moment, a *let's praise the Lord* moment. It strikes me now that this remains a rare space in the city that is not regulated by clock time. The time of the clock is not entirely absent, but, here, a different conception of time co-exists and competes.

3.

In a time of systemic, state-sponsored anti-Black racism, living outside of aggression might simply entail taking time. The entire intricate apparatus by which we reclaim stolen time, or indeed, prevent its theft – rituals, slowness, gatherings, community, care – becomes a reference point for the body, a strategic claim on visibility. Black ritual space is cultivated around the idea of *presence*.

In the interview included in this collection, Marvin George underlines the enduring significance of recreation that is ritual and social, rather than public and commercial, in the African diaspora, e.g. the dancehall and the fête. In the story of the young white American man who experiences Carnival in Trinidad for the first time, he provides an excellent illustration of this notion of presence – the idea of occupying one's space and one's moment; of time being *unobligated*, belonging first and foremost to the body. Presence is about joy, the annulment of which is the very purpose of racism.

4.

The temporality of Blackness is often spoken of in terms of repetition, the constant nearness of the past – of the past that's not past. This is *that other* sense of repetition, a sense of the stubborn nearness of history – where the wounds of slavery and the unredressed pains of our ancestors are felt in the body and the material world that surrounds us; where the malignant legacy of European colonialism, the persistence of the plantation as social structure, and the scars of neo-liberalism, engender cycles of criminal and state-sponsored violence.

The temporality of 'nearness' and that of the circle make sense in the light of each other. The circle, which is a space of rituals, becomes important in the light of loss, separation, and trauma. If not a *way out* of History, the circle provides a way of living *through* its rot.

5.

What does it mean to produce a collection of essays titled *Performing Black futures* in this peculiar season of the Plantationocene?

To be in this stuck time/stuck-in-time of plagues – the plague of 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' and of the COVID pandemic – is also to be in a particular relationship not just with life, but also with death.[8] The cycle of life continues while we are stuck indoors; while people and things are dying, we remain in a sort of standstill. We are not present, we bear no witness, no ceremony to the dead. Performing ceremony to the dead is part of how we affirm our own life, how we perform our act of being alive; part of how we say *I, too, am here*. We cannot attend funerals; our fathers, mothers, siblings, friends, go from the world without our being able to have final conversations, to share a last moment—to share breath—for the last time. They go and we cannot visit the emptiness which they have left. How do we measure the space, how do we maintain a hold on our own bodies in light of this? How do my people live without the rituals through which we make community? Paying homage to our dead is part of what makes us *us* and defines our place in the world. We share breath in such ways, through the ceremonies that perform and conjure death—carnival, the dancehall, the sound system, the fête, the ni-nite. Our funerals are more than burials, they are ceremonies for and on behalf of the community.

What will this staying-in-place mean for us? When people go from life and we cannot see their bodies before they disappear, this also produces a different kind of stuck-ness. In such moments, we perceive the vital significance of rituals of the body: their purpose is to connect us to the idea and the affirmation of life, to the breath, to our eternal *you*. Those who are of the diaspora know the importance of *seeing the body*.

What does it mean to be removed, like this, from a cycle of rituals, without our being able to share the space of those who go, vanishing? To be sure, this is a question that concerns every group of people affected by the regulations brought about as a result of the pandemic. However, it places particular emphasis on the significance of gatherings to the sense of vitality of racialised groups, including those of the African-diaspora.

6.

One main thing coming out of the articles included here is the idea that the continued presence of the dead in African diaspora performance art not only emphasises the haunting of slavery's injustices, but provides the basis for creative and political action, since, while trauma registers the harm inflicted or the losses sustained by past or present racial violence, the conjuring of the dead produces *something to be done*.

Indeed, ritual, by calling up cryptic presences, not only emphasises that which is unfinished, but serves as a rebuttal to the category of History, by embodying, at once, the *recurrence* of History and an other-world outside of History: the acting power of the dead is a challenge to History as such. Therefore, in Black ritual performances, we may uncover an alternative to progressive, teleological narratives of history's nature and arc that speaks instead to the way that performances capture and re-present colonialism's injustices by turning History into an every-present arena, by indicting the law itself (past and present) and forcing critical reflection on the epistemic and political conditions in which it operates.

But things aren't always straightforward; clear formulas seldom exist. Performance as *poiesis* – meaning, as participation in the existence of the other – transforms energy,

which, ultimately is reality – but the question of course is *how*. We may ask, *to what end*, and *what, actually, do we mean by reality*? The work here is already dwelling in the complications of those questions.

In her article 'Afronautic Memory and the Archive', Camille Turner explains that sacred rituals afford a re-fabulation of History but also, crucially, highlight the body's status as an archive, which expands the possibilities of testimony. Significantly, the imagined futuristic beings, or 'Afronauts', which form the basis of the performance that she describes in her essay, are descendants of the Dogon people of Norther Mali, whose 'extraordinary knowledge of star systems, encoded in [their] stories and rituals, predates western science'. What may be described as 'past' or 'ancient' is produced here as more than History — at least in the Western metaphysics of the term — and rather as *ancestry*, an invoked intimacy with deep time. A sense of coexistence that transcends History becomes a space of thinking and, thereby, of dwelling, an active mode of reparation which evokes again the circle of care, or, in the words of Ford-Smith, 'an act of strategy that produces knowledge that triggers affective understanding and possibility, when informed by a symbolic language that recalls and contains previous scenarios of memory'. Therefore, Turner, like Ford-Smith, invites a widening of our notion of justice from the punitive framework of state systems in which Afroic bodies and being are in question, to restorative circles of caring labour.

Honor Ford-Smith's essay, 'Enduring as Stones', asks us to imagine justice through the care of remembrance, in a way similar to that in which Jamaican cultural activists Dennis Scott and Erna Brodber have led us to think about justice, that is, in terms of 'care for the wounds inflicted on spirit in ceremonies of embodied acts of memory'.

Care is a manifestation of 'the circle'. A politics of care, Ford-Smith notes, 'is as much a reminder of the stony histories Caribbean peoples have been through, as it is a connection to the future.' Care invokes an 'us', a strength through mutual vulnerability, a politics that underlines the 'intimate and the interpersonal' rather than 'the individualist, atomistic ontology, the liberal-impartial view of persons as "generalized" rather than "concrete"'.[9] 'Care and justice are entangled together', she concludes.

Faced with the sensational forms of both internecine and state-sponsored violence to which Kingston's inner-city communities are exposed, and with the less visible forms of cumulative violence underlying them, care, and more largely, love – not as wishy-washy sentimentalism, but love as the ultimate work of art – is the foundation for a politics of reparation. As Ford-Smith shows us in her essay on *Letters from the Dead*, a cycle of collaborative performances that mourns and remembers 'those who have died in the Caribbean and its diaspora as a result of state violence, gendered violence and the violence of armed strongmen', this is what is enacted by the performance, intimate and public, of so many forms of the circle.

Adam Sitze's concept of the 'subjunctive' also seems to illuminate something about the potentials and possible limits of performance as a means of transformation. For Sitze, in the essay 'The Future in Critical Race Theory', included in this collection, the subjunctive is a way of imagining freedom, imagining here being an active and acting mode of dwelling. It is a way of understanding what sacred rituals might do, their emergence out of a vital impulse of maintaining balance in the cosmos, or of correcting what is out of balance. Rituals *seek* to correct, to realign, and as Francis Fukuyama enables us to see, the rituals of religion are the originary context in which our notion of legal authority emerges.[10]

What Sitze's essay, which so powerfully reflects on the work of Derek Bell, also beckons us to think about, is the coincidence of the subjunctive and the legislative. If legislation is at its heart a subjunctive mode, then what happens when it is to be carried out in the name of (ontologically) invisible bodies? What becomes of legislation when the Black body cannot be imagined as such, as *a body*, as *Für-sich-Sein*? How might we view the future of the law, and Black futures within the law, when, as Sitze puts it, referring to 'America', 'the legal rules regarding racial discrimination have become not only reified […] but deified'? It is in response to these questions that the author reflects on what Derek Bell referred to as 'racial realism', that is, racism's status as a constitutive feature of the United States. He proposes that Bell saw acceptance of the permanence of racial inequality as bringing with it 'an ability to imagine new and different forms of meaning, fidelity, struggle, and survival'.

Sitze's essay, a revised version of the keynote he delivered at the 2018 conference ('Memory and Performance in African-Atlantic Futures') out of which this collection of essays and its roundtable conversation were born, shines a particular gaze on the issue of time in the African diaspora in our current moment, by bringing an interdisciplinary apparatus to bear on the pressing issue of the gag orders now being enforced against Critical Race Theory. 'What exactly is being censored when Critical Race Theory is being censored?', he asks. Pursuing this question, he continues, 'What if the answer is—a novel understanding of the fullness of time?' On the one hand, the idea of the 'fullness of time' beckons us to think about a politics of human living that challenges the racialisation of time, which, as Charles Mills shows, imposes controls over the body's relationship to space.[11] On the other hand, 'the fullness of time' has inescapable eschatological resonances. These, while evoking the Protestant roots of 'America', including its legal frameworks and its racism, also call to mind the Apocalypse, and, therefore, the end of human time. If the future is one of Apocalypse — for the Bible-thumping right as well as for the radical left — then Critical Race Theory concretises the future's most profound anxieties. Moreover, to the extent that Critical Race Theory is prophecy, constructed upon a Protestant tradition of truth-telling, as Sitze argues, to that very extent it is likely 'to be excluded, banished, and punished—in short, scapegoated—by that same America' which it seeks to hold to the highest moral ideals.

If the temporality on which Critical Race Theory is based, that is, the temporal regime of white Protestant America, is one of doom — if this temporality bears no true possibility of existential deliverance for African Americans — then, where can African Americans find the non-racialised time that they so eagerly desire? Can non-racialised time maps (and time maps of non-racialisation) only be found outside of white American timespace? If racism is permanent no matter what we do, must we re-enact the aesthetics of the maroon, of the enslaved African that subtracts herself from the mapped geographies of power?

Engaging these very questions, Dénétem Touam Bona writes that,

> The art of fugitivity, of which the experience of marronage represents only one modality, is the 'subversion' of an 'inside' (whether it be the colony or our control-based society), however closed and hopeless it may seem. Fugitivity is not an illusory transgression towards some transcendent outside, but the secretion of an underground version – clandestine and heretical – of reality […] being chameleon, scrambling procedures of identification and profiling.[12]

In 'Afrolantica Legacies', Bell was evidently concerned with the possibility of 'sliding away', of inhabiting an alternative timespace to the temporality of 'America'. If not

marronage, there is certainly some idea of fugitive escape rippling under Bell's thinking about liberation. After all, as Sitze points out, Bell's utopian island of Afrolantica suggests that, for African Americans, a certain kind of breathing – unimpeded, unchallenged – may only be realisable outside of the current world, certainly the world of America. The legal domain looms up as a primary space from which Black social futures must be thought.

Significantly, two of the performances and interventions discussed in the 2018 conference seem to exist within the legislative space and beckon questions about the need for, and use of, Black sacred rituals as legislative practice: *The Trial of Governor Eyre* by the Jamaica National Commission on Reparations, and NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!,* 'a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present'. In these works, the past comes into direct contact with the present to create spaces of testimony and of re-imagination of History.

The attempt to cultivate and preserve temporalities that defy the determinism of secular, colonial time is the concern of my article on the neglected Jamaican poet Anthony McNeill, whose work entails a theory of embodied performance. McNeill's sound poetics are a rejoinder, I argue, to the colonial effort at harnessing time as a totalising system.

In an exchange with Honor Ford-Smith and myself, Camille Quamina and Marvin George speak of the necessary complications of the term Black. Quamina and George argue that Blackness can be enacted in different ways, and that different enactments of Blackness may serve varied forms of emancipation, including and beyond that of Afro-diasporic peoples themselves.

7.

Underneath so many of the lines in these pages is the question of what it has meant and continues to mean for us to live in a body that is deemed 'transgressive' *ipso facto*, of what it means, particularly in a situation of extreme anti-Black violence, including within a Black state (Ford-Smith focuses on the case of Jamaica), for the things that most orient us in the world, namely art, aesthetics, and thought. Among the things it may mean, perhaps one of them is being able to pull the ancestors into the future. If the arts are anything to go by, then human futures for Afrodiasporic people involves a place for the ancestor, and more particularly, for the temporalities of the sacred which have enabled, in many cases, the perpetuation or cultivation of an inner vitality and of presence – a feeling of existence not directed or ordered from the outside. Even if such temporalities of the sacred, scaffolding embodied acts of care, do not cancel or erase the harsh realities of violence, they become acts of Anancyism, trickster-like ways of inhabiting physical space, both in the white majoritarian nations of the north, and in the postcolonial societies of the Caribbean, since both are institutionally marked by the politics of the disposability of Black bodies.

We cannot afford to romanticise the sacred, for all that. It has *also* been used against emancipation. But pulling the ancestor into the future is a means of conceiving and expressing deviating forms of sociality, physical and emotional spaces of care, modes of repairing the body (meaning also, the mind). Modes of dreaming, of otherwise-dwelling, of otherwise-imagining.

The conference 'Memory and Performance in African Atlantic Futures' brought together artists, curators, academics and activists to discuss current trends in performance practices in the African diaspora, including Britain. The three days of discussions focused on the ways in which contemporary performance practices in the diaspora at large are generating and reflecting new ideas about social, political, and artistic futures for Black communities in the contemporary moment. The conference's axes were multiple and what appears on these pages represents only a fragment of the rich and intellectually stimulating conversations which took place at that gathering. It is hoped, however, that together, these contributions around 'time/ritual/ceremony' will represent a significant response to the question of how we might think the issue of 'Afrofutures' today.

Notes

[1] Ashon Crawley, *BlackPentecostal Breath*, 2.
[2] Barad, 'Troubling Time/s', 63.
[3] See Teilhard de Chardin, *Être-Plus.*
[4] Brathwaite, 'My Poetry'
[5] Ibid.
[6] Snead, 'Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture', 30.
[7] Saidiya Hartman, 'Interview with Victoria Adukwei Bulley'.
[8] hooks, *outlaw culture*, 248.
[9] Thompson 'Towards an Aesthetics of Care', 432.
[10] Fukuyama, *Political order*, 11.
[11] Mills, 'White Time', 28.
[12] Touam Bona, *Sagesse des lianes*, 139-140.

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Bio

Jason Allen-Paisant is an academic, poet and essayist whose interdisciplinary work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro-diasporic politics and worldbuilding. His most recent works reflect on how to make sense of time, particularly in relation to the body, and in the light of African/diasporic history. He is Associate Professor of Aesthetic Theory and Decolonial Thought in the School of English at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Thinking with Trees* (Carcanet Press), of *Thinking with Spirits: Engaging Art and the Political through Aimé Césaire* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press), and of *Théâtre dialectique postcolonial: Aimé Césaire et Derek Walcott* (Classiques Garnier). He's also developing a nonfiction book entitled *Primitive Child: On Blackness, Landscape, and Reclaiming Time.*

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