



FIGURE 1. From Fred Moten, Suné Woods, James Gordon Williams, *You are mine. I see now, I'm a have to let you go*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, August 23, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

This article includes video content that may be accessed at doi.org/10.1215/26923874-8932605.

A Conversation with Erin Christovale about *You are mine*. *I see now, I'm a have to let you go*

**Introduced and Interviewed by
ALESSANDRA RAENGO and
LAUREN MCLEOD CRAMER**

This issue of *liquid blackness* brings together contributions from visual artist Suné Woods, scholar/poet Fred Moten, and curator Erin Christovale for a special section that explores liquidity as form and practice. In 2018, along with musician/scholar James Gordon Williams, Woods and Moten performed *You are mine. I see now, I'm a have to let you go*, a multimedia event curated by Christovale and Anne Ellegood for the Hammer museum's biennial event, "Made in L.A." The live performance combined images from Wood's larger body of work that she mixed live on two channels, Moten's poetry, and Williams's improvised music, in a program that explored the healing qualities of water and, in the chaotic tangle of bodies and sound, the ecological disaster of the transatlantic slave trade. Together again, Woods, Moten, and Christovale share their work as a way to think about liquid imagery and a liquid art practice that flows and returns.

The editors of *liquid blackness* spoke to Christovale about the current state of atmospheric and elemental antiblackness and the significance of collectivity in her curatorial practice, which constitutes a critique of the isolating forces of Western humanism and is a way of intimately experiencing the history of black activism and the Black Radical Tradition. Two years later, her reflections on the show and the Hammer performance are particularly focused on liquid spaces and times that manage to connect the transatlantic slave trade, the Haitian Revolution, and present-day Los Angeles while remaining faithful to the site-specificity of blackness. She sees this work as fundamentally

shaped by black sonic rhythms that are key to Black liberation and express the generosity of black art as it is re/made and re/played again and again. For Christovale, a radical imagination extends beyond questions of form; it is a continuous practice of finding and making what Moten calls “air pockets” where Black people can possibly breathe below and above water. What follow are her remarks in an interview conducted on July 22, 2020, lightly edited for clarity.

■

I want to start with Fred’s response to a question about an ecological framework, the project of the transatlantic slave trade as a[n ecological] disaster. I’ve been prepping for a show that I’m working on next year that is centered around Sylvia Wynter’s 1994 essay “No Humans Involved,” and I bring her up because I feel like both Fred and Suné are students of Wynter. She was a student of Fanon, and she borrows the idea of “sociogeny” from *Black Skins, White Masks* and develops the concept of the “sociogenic principle.” She offers a potential solution to the current project of Man and the Western subject and how we can break out of this project—or breach it even. She offers this principle that asks *what if we considered other modes of being, beyond our biological form? What if we did away with species-specific ideas of organic life?* I think this is such a liberatory idea. I think there are still questions about how we enact this new mode of being, but it is liberatory and it ties back to Fred’s idea of the slave trade as a disaster. Through the project of Man, the Enlightenment, and its role in

**WE ARE OTHERWORLDLY,
BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH
WE CAN’T BREATHE
IN THE OCEAN OR ON
LAND, WE ARE STILL
HERE. STILL ALIVE.
STILL FUNCTIONING.
WE SURVIVE.**

shaping the concept of the New World in the Americas, *how do we reposition our relationship as human beings with the Earth?* Within this current project we are so individualized, and the ego is so prioritized, that we’ve stepped away from a more collective or symbiotic relationship with nature. This is a possibility or a means of coming back to a mode of living that disables the Western project.

Suné’s visuals of beings in the water, breathing and not breathing, are so compelling because the motions and the gestures the performers are enacting feel very intuitive or organic. To me, they signal possibilities of this sociogenic principle—the fact that we can shape-shift into other modes of organic living. To do that as black subjects in a Westernized context is a radical act and a potentiality for this new version of humanism. The notion of both not being able to breathe under

water and not being able to breathe above water is really interesting to me because one of the most compelling stories that stems from the transatlantic slave trade is the Igbo Landing and this myth of enslaved Africans walking on water or flying over the Atlantic in order to return to Nigeria—reimagining a life outside violent death. I think Suné is playing or referencing some of those stories. Obviously, there is a very direct implication of “I can’t breathe” and what that means now and how that plays out in our cultural landscape. This notion of not being able to breathe on both ends is a straightforward telling of the ongoing struggle, and it also potentially suggests that we are otherworldly, because even though we can’t breathe in the ocean or on land, we are still here. Still alive. Still functioning. We survive.



Fred, James, and Suné produced this performance, which would not have worked without their collective offerings: James in his musicality, Fred in his poetry, Suné and her visuals, creating this landscape that the audience was subsumed by. Collectivity was felt in the performance. Yet there is also something about the physical darkness of the space—that you could be with everyone collectively, but there was also room for solace or solitude. Something that really hit me on a spiritual level witnessing this performance was the keyboard, the chords, the intonation, and the way this brought me back into the church. I felt like I was receiving the Word. That felt really powerful because, specifically with Black American history, there is a sa-

credness to the space and the site of church that extends beyond religious efforts and is rooted in the collective: a space where we can gather, a safe space where we can communicate, and, historically, a space where civil rights leaders and other political forces have come together. I feel like enacting the collective is something very powerful and something that oppressed groups of people have been doing as an act of solidarity, activism, social justice, and uprising (as in the Haitian Revolution). The collective is also naturally in opposition to the individual. It is a refusal of the Western project, which is powerful within itself. It is something that we thrive in.

My curatorial practice stems out of wanting to amplify a black radical tradition. I did an experimental film and video program for many years called “Black Radical Imagination,” and the title was a direct reference to *Freedom Dreams: Black Radical Imagination*, by Robin D. G. Kelly; I recently did a collection show at the Hammer called “belonging,” and it was a direct reference to bell hooks’s collection of essays called *Belonging: A Place of Culture*; and next year I’ll be working on an exhibition titled “No Humans Involved,” which is a direct reference to Wynter’s seminal essay. There is an intellectual collective of Black radicals who have deeply inspired me. I want to think of their influence as a praxis for me in which I can give back to them, or I can reimagine some of their general frameworks through the practice of curating.

I attempt to use those readings and texts as frameworks for my exhibitions. As a curator who grew up in LA County and who works at an LA museum,

IT IS AN IMPULSE ROOTED IN SURVIVAL: YOU CAN MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING, OR YOU CAN MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF SOMETHING THAT IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE YOURS, AND YOU CAN MAKE IT YOUR OWN— A CONSTANT EXERCISE OF REMAKING AND RECRAFTING

which is free and accessible to various publics, it's important for me to think about the diversity of this city that truly exemplifies the notion of multiculturalism. Including other artists of color amplifies the idea that black cultural production is the epicenter of culture, and its influence is global.

■

The images in *You are mine. I see now, I'm a have to let you go* are particularly special because they have been replayed time and time again. The visuals in the performance combine footage from Woods's prior works, primarily *Aragonite Stars* (2018) and *the escapists* (2015), combined with new footage shot at El Sol beach in Malibu and clips from YouTube. Suné has been able to migrate these visuals through various mediums time and time again, which speaks to her virtuosity as a media maker. It also speaks to a particular black impulse, which to me is rooted in collage, assemblage, improvisation, and the slippages and the fluidity of making. It is an impulse rooted in

survival: you can make something out of nothing, or you can make something out of something that is not supposed to be yours, and you can make it your own. This is a constant exercise of remaking and recrafting.

Song was a form of survival for enslaved Africans across the Americas, and I often think about an interview in which Arthur Jafa makes the claim that African American music is Western music—which is wholeheartedly the truth. He also explains that our first “go” at creative production stems from the sonic realm. Both Suné and Fred, within their forms of making, have a sonic quality. They have a musicality that stems from this origin. That is also how the work is able to transcend into these different spaces, because regardless of which way it is presented, there is a cadence to it.

These are songs. ■

ERIN CRISTOVALE is the associate curator at the Hammer Museum and the cofounder of Black Radical Imagination.