

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.

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