

Black Ontology Now

Dark Matters and Meeting the Lady Gaga Challenge

by GREG TATE

So we're gathered here today to talk about life, liberty, justice, the knowledgeable performance of Negritudes and the knowledge of how Negritudes became a performance commodity in the scheme of things as well as a set of liberatory schemata devised by what Amiri Baraka has called 'a race of madmen and giants'.

In *The Five Percent Nation* they speak of Doing The Knowledge and Knowing The Ledge — doing the thing and knowing the thing as an action, not just a theory. Doing the knowledge means making imaginative leaps in space or falling on one's ass. Black identity in America is almost inseparable from black performance. Black Americans are in fact Black Performance vessels — whether full or empty is besides the point as the world has come to cast and project upon the Black American body the expectation of high performance engineering.

Now we are also here to address what I like to call Meeting The Lady Gaga Challenge — that question looming before all female pop singers of How Low Must I Video Ho To Get Ova Post-Gaga? So we're also going to discuss the Performing Black Body as spectacle and as motion picture spectacular. Looking at how certain Black bodies embrace or confuse the speculum of spectacularity, this will lead us in turn to address Alex Weheliye's notion of Phonographies of Black Music as embodied sonic spectacle, as the real Black Cinema of a nation of deferred dreamers. We speak now of a viscosity that is musical, a musicality that has remapped the synapses' ordering of visual pleasure. Or at least did so until hip-hop music videos killed the negroes' tonal investment in widescreen Black Operatic Pleasure. These options were all perfectly epitomized in that trio of Stevie Wonder albums — *MUSIC OF MY MIND*, *TALKING BOOK* and *INNER VISIONS*. So today, we're also going to talk about this whole question of Black Visions versus Black Visuality when it comes to The Performance of Negritudes, commodified or not.

I am one of those folk with the fundamental belief that the only accurate intellectual and emotional history of Black America is the history embedded in Black American Music. This is because that history is the only one that is the history of self-determined subjects, not underconceived objects, victors and not victims, highly fictional persons, not dysfunctional statistics. If I want to know what ideas about the world lived inside the mind of a Young Black Man in Macon, Georgia, in the 1950s, I can't go to a novel, play or study. I have to go to the music of Little Richard, James Brown and Otis Redding. If I want to know what sorts of beautiful minds were being incubated in Detroit's Housing Projects in the 50s and 60s, I can't go to the NAACP files, I have to listen to the work of the composers Holland Dozier Holland, Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, The Tempting Temptations, Diana Ross and The Supremes.

In his novel about schizophrenia and black urban consciousness, Samuel Delany writes that his protagonist Kid,

so howled out for the world to give him a name
The in-dark answered with Wind.
So howled out for the world to give him a name...
'The in-dark answered with Wind.

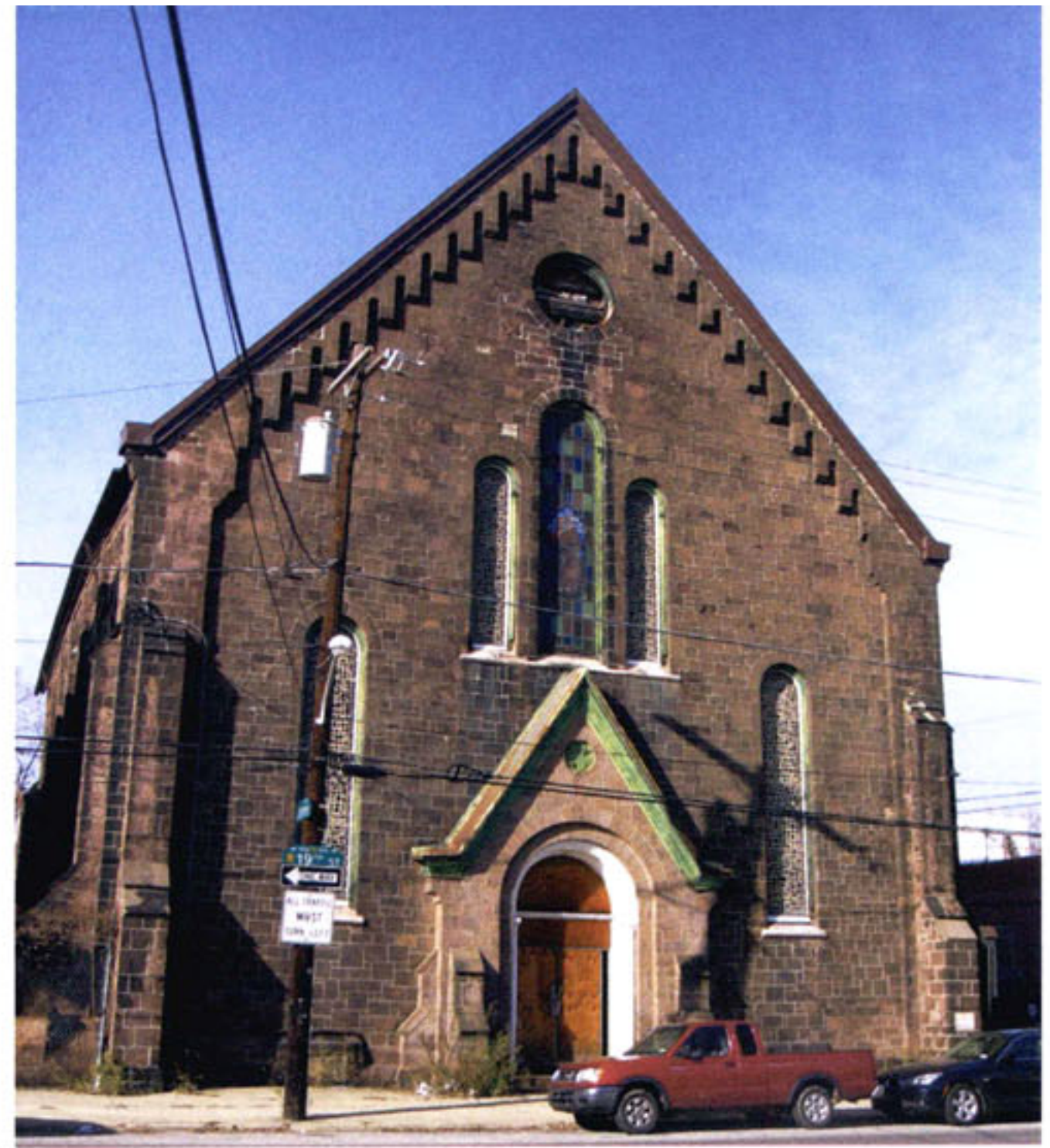
(Delany, *Dhalgren*, 1975)

A slave has
no name.
He is wearing
the name of
his master.

The darkness within
answered the Kid's howl for
self-identifying knowledge
with a mighty Wind. I think
Delany heard that wind as
no kind of answer at all.
He may also have believed,
as I once heard Broderick

Peters utter in some misbegotten race documentary, that
"A slave has no name. He is wearing the name of his master."

AME Zion Church,
Francisville, Philadelphia



PHOTOGRAPH BY ELI POUSSON

That thing Aretha Franklin once identified as the spirit in the dark. That thing she'll describe and insinuate, as only she can, in the same-named song as a thang whose procreative sexual potency binds black (w)hole souls in God-fearing fellowship.

Some time before Delany wrote *Dhalgren*, the Mississippi Delta Bluesman Robert Pete Williams already spoke of that music's inspiration as a thing carried on the wind to 20th century plantation laboring musicians like himself. And Sun Ra already composed MY BROTHER THE WIND. And MC Biz Markie spoke of charismatic influence as a consequence to the gullible 'catching the vapors'.

Consciousness considered as a call and response between Being and Nothingness and Being and Somethingness is also on our table today.

'So howled out for the world to give him a name/ The in-dark answered with Wind.'

The answer Nat Turner got from the wind in 1831 was the chant upon the wind, which inspired his coldblooded and bloody insurrection. It comes to us via the strangest Confession ever in the history of a brother-man catching the Holy Ghost. It is also, I believe, one of the great unacknowledged über-sources of African-American literature, liberation theology and prophetic political thought.

At one time during his interrogation, Nat's interlocutor Thomas Gray asked him, "What do you mean by the Spirit?" Nat replied:

"The {same} Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days — which fully confirmed my impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty."

"And we went down into the water together, in the sight of many who reviled Us, and were baptized by the Spirit."

What do you mean by Spirit?

"So howled out for the world to give him a name/The in-dark answered with Wind."

The first organized African-American church, Richard Allen's AME Zion in Philadelphia, was founded by a group of Black people in a time and place where white brothers were not comfortable with kneeling next to Negroes in the eyes of the Lord.

Richard Allen, a Methodist preacher, wanted to continue with the Methodist tradition. He built a congregation and founded the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). By July 29, 1794, they also had a building ready for worship. The church adopted the slogan "To Seek for Ourselves." In recognition of his leadership and preaching, the AME Church was active in antislavery campaigns, fought racism in the North and promoted education by starting schools for black children. Finding that other black congregations in the region were also seeking independence from white control, Allen organized a new denomination in 1816 — the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first fully independent black denomination. He was elected its first bishop in 1816. While he and Jones led different denominations, they continued to work closely together and with the black community in Philadelphia.

Besides building their own church, Allen and his congregation created a book of hymnals in the spirit and style of their particular musical worship. From musicologist Eileen Southern we know that the run-up to celebrating modern black music's *viva le difference* was evident in reports by somewhat shocked 19th century observers, who fretted aloud over how Philadelphia's free blacks sang when they were 'gettin' religion':

"We have too a growing evil in the practice of singing, in our places of public and society worship, merry airs, adapted from old songs, to hymns of our composing, often as miserable as poetry and senseless as matter...most frequently {these hymns} are composed and first sung by the illiterate blacks of the society," whined Methodist leader John Fanning Watson in 1819.

This means that long before bebop and hip-hop, 19th century black folk spewed audacious new melodies over vintage chord changes. Long before hip-hop and sampling technology, they blasphemously and radically grafted snatches of familiar pop ditties all over their most fervent messages to God. James Brown may have propagated the cult of the breakbeat, but as a cultural practice, the musical gambit of sonic gumbo stew precedes him by centuries.

From Eileen Southern's epic study *The Music of Black Americans* we also learn that Public Performance of Negritude is the way Black Consciousness emerges in America to articulate and escalate the social status of the enslaved, and also to announce nascent notions of a Black juke-joint supremacy — a supremacy built on doing the knowledge with sound. Southern tells of a visitor to a Virginia plantation in 1784, who observed with amazement that after a day of hard labor, an enslaved African walked to a dance where he would perform with “astonishing ability and the most vigorous exertions, keeping time and cadence most exactly with the music...until he exhausts himself”. At times, the visitor noted, the enslaved willfully drove their presumptive masters from the dancefloor with competitive gusto. “Masters and slaves had become more and more intoxicated with the spirit of the dancing, they played faster and ‘wilder’ until the whites could keep up no longer and withdrew from the dancing. This was exactly what the slave dancers desired. They sang out ‘Now show de white man what we can do!’ and threw themselves with wild abandon into their frolic.”

Now we know that the marching of captive Africans from the docks to the auction blocks was often accompanied by marching bands, playing merry brass airs, modeled after Stephen Foster, so that even before African-Americans knew their entertainment value, Black people in the utmost misery were being fashioned into a form of American entertainment. This certainly goes a long way toward us understanding what precedent compelled some paler Americans to attend lynchings as if they were all age-appropriate family picnic outings. This would also explain the popularity of so-called Gangsta rap and why it became a major subset of a multi-billion dollar entertainment enterprise — the spectacle of black misery, suffering and inhuman or superhuman endurance as a performance commodity in and of itself. Git low git low git low
How low must you go to git Ova?
John Akomfrah has suggested we investigate the culture of vulgarity in forming a new critical Black aesthetic consciousness.
This is what we call meeting the Lady Gaga challenge.
This is what we call Aim high but git low git low git low
Aim high Get low get low get low get low
Like your girl Erykah and the grassy knoll.

What you nickels know about the Dirty South?
What you ninjas know about the Dirty South?

I come here tonight to talk about yr girl.
It really didn't have to be no thang but Miss Thang made it a
thang so now it's a thang.
Git lo lo git low
She knows what this is.
Now there's a dance that the people do, I don't know how it
started, but you got yours and i got mine.
In The Monkey Time.
What you knickerbockers know about the Dirty South?
Aim high but Git low.
We all know what this is.
You know your girl knows what this is.
Same as it ever was.
You put the money and the dope on the table and everybody
gits to go home
happy.
I said:
You put the money and the dope on the table and everybody
gets to
go home happy.
Except now the dope is viral and the money is the money
shot.
Must I holla, must I shake 'em on down.
I said must I holla, must I shake 'em on down.
Sit your ass down.
Split four ways to the Sun
Git low git low git low
Like yr girl Erykah committing public nudity for commodity
purposes at Daley Plaza and the grassy knoll.
So can't nobody act like they don't know what this is:
You put the money and the dope on the table and everybody
gits to go home happy.
Nobody move, nobody gets hurt.
Nobody move, nobody gits hurt.
Fair enough, but then there's also the opposite to consider:
Nobody hurt, nobody gets moved.
Who was it who said, show me someone who claims an
unhappy childhood and I'll show you an artist?
Now it's not the early experience with misery that makes the
artist lack so much fear over a life spent chasing rejection
letters, unreturned emails and ignored phone calls.

Nobody hurt, nobody gets moved to do it again, Jack.
 Trauma is a muscle and if you want to be an Aristocrat you
 gotta work it out routinely.
 Aim high, Git low git low git low.
 Work out the kinks. Konk 'em, tease 'em. But never leave 'em
 you got to got got got got to try a little.....
 Trauma is your girl and I'm here to talk about your girl.
 She knows what this is.
 She knows the new rules.
 She met the Lady Gaga challenge head-first, feet forward,
 bottoms up.
 Nobody move nobody get low
 Nobody hurt, nobody gits lower than Lady Gaga.
 You put the money and the dope on the table and everybody
 gets to go home happy.
 Home to Gloria (spelled G L O R I A) if not to Jesus.
 Inducing that state of uh what the people in the church used
 to like ta call getting happy, catching the spirit.
 Check Don Cherry on Albert Ayler:

Like Aguilera doing a man's world at the Grammys and
 me saying, "Damn I can't think of one young black
 dude her age who coulda woulda rocked that shit half as
 hard as Christina did."
 Maybe that's a got-damn shame.
 Lil' auto tuned bee-swatches.
 Or maybe not — maybe James Brown doesn't get to define
 the 21st century's swagger for negroes, maybe it's Kanye or
 Kid Cudi, Toro Y Moi, Gordon Voidwell, Guillermo Brown,
 like for real Yo.
 Because while the women are getting low, the brothers are
 still going to jail, but in songs they are getting more and
 more spooky, more and more ephemeral, more and more
 sounding like ghosts in machines. T-Pain is technology meets
 misery with a mighty whine of Joy.

"Come on baby talk to me/ I know how I can make you
 skareem/Say my name/Say it Loud I want to hear you bring
 your Jesus down."

This is what rhythm and blues hard bop and free jazz used to
 be all about.
 Bringing your Jesus down.
 Now you go, put the viral and the money shot on the table
 before anybody gits to go home happy.
 You get to get low get low get low
 Like Erykah invoked Isis at Daley Plaza and the grassy knoll.
 "Some lie about that spoonful, some people cry about that
 spoonful, some die over a little piece of that spoonful. Every
 body wants a little piece of that spoon that spoon that spoonful,"
 like Baduizm on the grassy knoll.
 Many physicists don't believe in Isis, Set or Osiris, or even
 g.o.d. but most scientists do believe in Dark Energy, the most
 powerful and most procreative force in the universe.
 So powerful that it can counteract all the gravity in the
 universe and accelerate the creation of galaxies and the
 expansion of the universe at unmeasurable rates.
 And yet there is scant observable evidence that dark energy
 is really even out there, other than that if it wasn't out there,
 most of the universe wouldn't really exist.
 Dark Energy is thought to constitute 75% of the mass and
 energy in the universe though it possesses neither mass
 nor energy and is invisible, undetectable and unobservable.
 It doesn't interact with any of the masses or energies in
 the universe that we can see, detect or observe. For these
 reasons, I have come to surmise that Dark Energy is
 Black Thought, Black Consciousness, or really just another
 Black and invisible manifestation of God's mind — the
 one Einstein spent his career seeking evidence for. As George
 Clinton likes to say, "With the rhythm it takes to dance
 through what we have to live through/ you can dance
 underwater and not get wet."



The pioneering video artist and sculptor Nam June Paik believed that the only kulcha which will exist in the future is the one that can exist in peoples' heads. My people been provin' him right since the slave ships. Just as we know now that Dark Matter is how the Kosmos kicks bass out the trunk. The Nigerian playwright, novelist and activist Wole Soyinka once observed that Rhythm is the most felt and the most immaterial force in the world. Rhythm is the quintessence of what we mean by Dark Energy. The ability to accelerate and expand the size of the known universe with nothing more than a James Brown breakbeat, DJ Kool Herc on the mic (70s version of Ras The Exhorter) and The Nigger Twins out on the floor. Dark Energy is the ripple effect of That Body Rock. Dark Matter can be found anywhere in the ATL where you find a pole dancing booty clapper. Buffie the Body is all the scientific proof for Dark Matter's existence that the universe has ever felt a need to provide. Dark Matter is all about the butt cold doing the knowledge. Whole empires and industries are held together by the myth and gravitational effect of Buffie's GA dunk a dunk. What Frank Zappa called Cosmic Debris, we now know to really be Cosmic Ga Dunk a Dunk. Dark Matter knows how to aim high and git low too. Too hot to handle, too cold to hold because Dark Matter stands for Ass Control. "A Cosmic fog horn warning of the dangers of coming too close." Are we really talking about a Cosmic fog horn warning surrounding material of the dangers of coming too close or are we talking about Cosmological Booty Claps, Singularities of Black Joy going down way way down low in a Black Hole Clusterfuck?

After observing the Perseus galaxy cluster for 53 hours in August 2002, the Chandra X-ray Observatory revealed ripples in the hot gas that fills the cluster. These ripples appear to be sound waves that would register as a B flat if we could hear the deep tone.

The team that discovered the waves determined the frequency by calculating the speed of sound in that environment and measuring the distance between wave crests. The frequency is about one cycle (or wave) per 9.5 million years or so — corresponding to a B-flat note about 57 octaves below middle C on a piano.

It's the deepest note ever detected and the first sound waves identified from a black hole.

Dark Matter kicks Bass on the down low.

Git low git low git low

"We have observed the prodigious amounts of light and heat created by black holes, now we have detected the sound," said team leader Andrew Fabian of the Institute of Astronomy in England. The ripples extend hundreds of thousands of light-years from the supermassive black hole at the center of Perseus A (a.k.a. NGC 1275), the dominant member of the galaxy cluster. Fabian's group suspects that they are created when two 50,000-light-year-wide cavities, excavated by jets from the black hole, push against the surrounding gas. These cavities also appear in Chandra's observations. The sound waves could explain why the x-ray-emitting gas in the Perseus cluster has remained hot instead of cooling off (as astronomers would expect). When sound waves move through the gas, they're eventually absorbed by it and transfer their energy to the gas. To provide the energy necessary to keep the gas heated, the sound must have been continuous for roughly 2.5 billion years.

There's a dance that the people do, I don't know how it started. Can't stop, won't stop.

Git low git low.

So my friend Torkwase Dyson asked me the most blunt and brutal question the other day.

She said, "why haven't Black visual artists achieved what Black musicians have?"

I soon discovered that for her it wasn't really a question, but actually a declaration of War on the massive hole missing from the center of contemporary Black Art practice.

Torkwase's on a mission now to make Black Visual Art practice more Massive than Black music in the dark energy realm. I gave her several wildly contradictory and inflammatory answers, which I'll share with you. First, a little about Torkwase Dyson. She herself is a Black Visual Artist in her late 30s from Chicago, whose work is concerned with oceanography, Black community and green energy. Her recent work engages the prospect of solar panels being used to power urban acropolises. She has also decided to take on Black musical culture as a Black visual artist with a competitive zeal that may be boundless. She has even built a grassy knoll with an underground club space where folk can git low and git green at the same time.

Now to answer Torkwase, we first have to accept and entertain her premise that Black Visual artists haven't achieved what Black musicians have, which means we have to ask ourselves, well, just what have Black musicians achieved besides giving the world Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Billie Holiday, Howling Wolf, Chuck Berry, Miles Davis, BB King, Nina Simone, John Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Tina Turner, Chaka Khan, Bob Marley, Prince, Public Enemy and The Wu Tang Clan? Okay, so we accept Torkwase's fundamental premise without equivocation — hard to think of any Black Visual Artists who could sell out the Disney for four nights within minutes after an appearance is announced?

Being a Libra, however, and one who loves playing devil's advocate, I will weigh any proposition no matter how preposterous. So I told Torkwase that I disagreed with her premise, especially given the work of Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter, Bessie Harvey, The Quilters of Gees Bend and other examples of Southern Black Visual Art. Because what if Black Visual Artists... (and please understand I tend to use Black and African American interchangeably here because Us American Negroes here are the only people of African descent in the world whose racial identity isn't metonymimically connected to the name of a post-colonial land-mass).

So what if, I pondered, Black Visual Artists had in fact created a body of work that rivaled that of all those musical figures even if only few folks had ever laid eyes on it? Just imagine if most of that aforementioned musical booty by all those stellar superstar figures named above was indeed locked in a warehouse in Atlanta and could only be heard by invitation of two white dudes? This is largely the condition that the best work of the Southern Black Visual tradition is in for a host of art-world political reasons that would require far too much time, nuance and rage for me to get into here.

Another answer I gave Torkwase was that music has the benefit of not having to bypass the brain to move the human heart. Music is the quintessence of a Dark Energy force. Black American Visual Art tends to lack the Dark Energy properties of Black music — not African art though (!) and not the art of Thornton Dial — Art, which even on security lock down in a warehouse in Atlanta scares the sheeeet outta Museum curators from the Guggenheim to the Getty. But this lack of propulsive dark energy properties is why you will frequently hear tales of folk who decided not to commit suicide because a certain song came on, but have hardly ever heard of anyone sparing themselves because they remembered how much they loved the Mona Lisa or Donald Judd or Romare Bearden's Odyssey series. Black music is also incredibly mobile, transportable and global in penetration; it does not require any explanation once it arrives somewhere to have immediate impact.



Monastic Residency:
Torkwase Dyson in Theaster Gates'
Cosmology of Yard
April 7 – April 18, 2010.

Torkwase asked me her question at a Whitney Biennial exhibit of her installation work — an exhibition where many of her own friends asked me what the hell was going on here. Even Black musicians as given to abstraction and dissonance as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and Butch Morris tend to have no problem being understood by unknowledgeable audiences when they're encountered in life. This forces us to consider that Black Music is also a form of Black Visual art in performance and that what Torkwase will have to compete against is not only the music of, say, Miles Davis, but Miles' face, fashion sense and body language too. As we talked, I also asked Torkwase to consider that the number one problem Black Visual Artists faced in this esthetic footrace of hers was that the validation of their productivity and careers largely depended on being exhibited in places like The Whitney Museum. Several generations of the most obscure Black music ever made — the Mississippi Delta blues, Chicago House, Detroit Techno — have changed the sound of the world several times over without ever leaving the dirt they were born on, some without ever becoming popular fare among their next door neighbors, let alone say chosen for a program by the The Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra.

There is also the fact that game changing revolutions in music can happen anywhere and often by accident or providence. A guy named Berry Duck walks with a guitar across a stage in St Louis, another guy walks into a one room studio in Memphis to record a birthday song for Mom by Elvis, another guy comes to New York from Seattle and nearly starves to death on the chitlin' circuit, but then gets taken to England where Jimmy James becomes Jimi Hendrix, and so on.

There is also the risk-taking factor to consider — musicians give themselves the right to fail horribly in public in pursuit of the next note, visual artists like Torkwase agreed to hate to fail in public, and given the stakes in today's art world can't afford to put failure on display. The music we call Black, though, has also largely been an enterprise where people have risked and spilled blood to play it — the people taking their best shots at musicians have not only been art critics, but club patrons, cops, Klan members, Black Panthers, fellow bandmembers, mobsters, managers, drug dealers, angry husbands, wives and girlfriends, hotel managers, hot microphones, lightning storms, sleeping pills, heroin, cocaine crashing cars, planes, buses, trains, helicopters, motorcycles, mental asylums, lynch mobs, and ski slopes. All the great male rhythm and blues singers have especially been the victims of tragedies so freakish as to be worthy of the Greeks. Hot grits, Lake Tahoe, Russian roulette? By comparison, most visual artists of any ethnicity seem to be able to make the trip from the studio to the gallery and back again without attracting the hounds of Hades, the grim reaper or the wrath of their preacher daddys. A musician's job is to go around inflaming passions, a vocation which often enough can spill off the stage into a motel parking lot or even their hospital death bed as Billie Holiday's story shows.

All this being the case, I would caution Torkwase to be careful of what she asks for. Perhaps her art-making brethren and sistren are better off not achieving what Black musicians have come to at such great cost over the past three hundred years or so. Of course it has also proven difficult for Visual Artists since the guilds of the Renaissance to come together and do great things collectively or even as individuals to speak to massive clusters of booty clapping dark energy.

Jazz was once identified as the sound of surprise and if you want to be surprised by anything going on today in Black American culture, I would tell you to go to the museum and galleries because that's where the hard questions about modern Black consciousness and identity are being posed, performed, brokered and illuminated.

For this reason there is not much church or juke joint ambiance going on in most Black visual art — Ernie Barnes and Romare Bearden are exceptions. The work of Romare Bearden, Thornton Dial, David Hammons or Jean Michel Basquiat also aspired to be the voice(s) of those multitudes, spirits known, unknown, dead, alive, barely human and even non-human. Like August Wilson, they took up the task of giving all those invisible jets of dark energy zooming around outside their studios a permanent residence in their art. There are many younger Black artists who, to my mind, are striving to do the same thing — Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Sanford Biggers, Noah Davis, Chanel Abney and our warrior woman of the hour, Torkwase Dyson. If you were to ask me where all the intellectual and critical action is in Black culture today, I would say that the Visual Artists ironically have the floor more so than the musicians. That's ironic because who would ever think the most fertile hotbed of black artistic energy would occur invisibly among the wine and cheese set?

Yet, Black popular music, (certainly that with the darkest energy quotient), suffers from such a level of success today that it exists in a more rarefied atmosphere than even the art world. It is therefore subject to more entropic evisceration at the moment of conception. Not to mention jail time. At the point at which bling and prison become the definition of soulfulness in your culture, you may come to expect a certain spiritual deficit to emerge in the sonics of the thing. Jazz was once identified as the sound of surprise and if you want to be surprised by anything going on today in Black American culture, I would tell you to go to the museum and galleries because that's where the hard questions about modern Black consciousness and identity are being posed, performed, brokered and illuminated.

There is also the proposition that the history of Black music is a history of a people rendered invisible or subliminal in America by Hollywood.

A people who used the exclusions of their visual humanity and denial and displacement of the same as a ferocious incentive to occupy the realm of sound with all the human presence and complexity they knew was simply not represented elsewhere.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun or does it explode like Nina singing 'Mississippi Goddamn' and 'The Pirate Jenny'? Or does it just git low?

The music tradition accomplished the creation of an expanded universe for dark energies with such ferocity, in fact, that one might as well ask, Why hasn't Hollywood achieved what Black musicians have achieved in the dark? Because Hollywood was never big enough for Nina Simone or Miles Davis or Parliament-Funkadelic or the culture that produced them. Neither one, of course, is the viral and vial media landscape of Black popular culture today, youtube notwithstanding or Erykah Badu when she decided to meet the Isis and Lady Gaga challenge with her 'Window Seat' video.

The kulcha we call black is always a self-perpetuating occasion for celebration, introspection and extrospection as well. Black performance is therefore its own talking cure — a self-medication of action and improvised acting out, always moving towards a reharmonizing of the most complex dimensions of one's inner life with a group ethos and eros.

The notion of crisis and blackness and blackness in crisis is never far from our consideration as people engaged in the playful construction of engineering expressive vehicles for the performative exegeses of dark matters, dark energies and the dark times and spaces they inhabit.

Once you've done your homework and your social work you know that there are no observable limits to what has often been maligned as a black essentialism. You know that the kulcha we call black has allowed for the most racist conceptions of race — namely, that one drop of black blood is enough to deny you a right to love, live and work where you desire — we know that black kulcha has taken one drop as an opportunity to bleed and draw blood and spread dark energy all over the globe.

For this reason, I can say that we, as a group, are a spectacularly philosophical bunch. Anyone who's ever spent more than 5 minutes in Harlem knows it's more like the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, Wall Street than any other hood in the known universe.

Harlem is defined by The Hustle, The Grind and the getting on of your hustle in your own Name.

By this I do not mean art-forms propagated by Van McCoy's orchestral maneuvers in The Clubhouse DARK. Neither do I mean my Harlem people's capacity to turn the pursuit of profit into both poetic forms and forms of aggression.

“If Aliens came down to earth, the first thing they would say is that we don't know what else is going on on this planet, but they sure do have some baaad Music.”

As Black Atlantic scholar and professorial balboa Robert Farris Thompson likes to say, “If Aliens came down to earth, the first thing they would say is that we don't know what else is going on on this planet, but they sure do have some baaad Music.”

The kulcha we call black has presumed that it does not exist at the margins of anything. Instead, it looks at every boundary as an invitation for a beheading and a beheading. We chop heads, begging for our inclusion.

So that in the final analysis the only definition of the kulcha we call black that sticks is the one that treats it as Shakespeare treated the stage and Freud treated Dora — a way to build ciphers out of the chaos of our very human impulse for self-dramatization. Because I live in New York City, and Harlem in particular, I get to do field work every day on my own people.

Anyone who has spent time in Brooklyn, by comparison, knows that the kulcha there is more stable and pragmatic — no one is ever really seen on the grind in Brooklyn as they are in Harlem because Brooklyn is a Caribbean community and the ethos is such that in the Caribbean no one can see you break a sweat, no matter how fast you're dancing or how many layers of satin you're moving under.

Brooklyn is a cool medium for black kulchural expression while Harlem is a hotter than hot, superheated super-entropic one.

In musicological terms, Brooklyn is calypso and Harlem is the blues.

In ethnographic terms, Brooklyn is Trini and Harlem is South Carolina.

One celebrates Winin' and the other celebrates Grindin.

Call it the absurdity of pathos vs. the pathos of absurdity.

Brooklyn annually presents a parade of pageantry, industry and pleasure known as The West Indian Day Parade with elaborate and expensive sound-trucks leading the charge.

Harlem puts on an African-American day parade whose floats include a caravan of Prison buses.

Like his contemporaries Duke Ellington and Romare Bearden, Césaire was obsessed with how much dark energy was observable and how much could be revealed through re-imaging and re-imagination.

Ellington, Césaire and Bearden were all streetwise Aristocrats — they all specialized in manipulating the most vernacular formulations of the kulcha into reforms that bore the stamp of their indelible artistic personae and signatures.

“You get the full essence of Harlem in an air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great loudspeaker, you hear people praying, fighting and snoring.”

Harlem, then, is the epitome and the epicenter of what we, in black kulcha, like to refer to as Keeping it Real. For some folk, in fact, Harlem is on a daily basis all too real.

This led Duke Ellington to create his composition ‘Harlem Air Shaft.’ Regarding the title, he explained, “You get the full essence of Harlem in an air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great loudspeaker, you hear people praying, fighting and snoring.”

Harlem, then, is a community in full recognition and acceptance of its negritude and negrocity, of blackness as a gestalt response to ante-bellum and post-bellum group oppression and resistance, and of the ferocity necessary to impress upon the world how little tolerance the group has for being fucked with as a group since the firestorm of uprisings, rebellions and riots that swarmed on 100 American cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Negritude is, of course, associated with an essentializing literary movement that sought to identify the characteristics of an African versus a European way of performing the self, but if we read the poetry of Aimé Césaire, we know that his notion of negritude was grounded in dark interior monologues.

The kulcha we call black would have never come into being were it not for its negating corollary racism or white supremacy. Or as the jazz saxophonist and Hollywood film composer Oliver Nelson once said in an extraordinary burst of politically incorrect exuberance, “Thank god for slavery because without it there’d have been no Jazz.” One might also argue, Thank God for Jazz because without it there’d have been no end to slavery.

Saying this requires us to delve into why, I believe, the first jazz artist in the world was Toussaint L’Overture, leader of the San Domingo revolution, which freed Haiti from the oppression of global empires, not only in mind and body, but as a body-politic.

Toussaint not only rallied his people to defeat various external and internal brigades — black, white and mulatto — with designs for keeping the status quo, but also, like the Vietcong, 260 years later, made statecraft and negotiation part of his counterattack arsenal, arguably more so than the blood shed on the battlefield. Moreover, he conceived of Haiti as a self-governing Black nation among nations nearly 200 years before the postcolonial leaders of various African, Asian and Caribbean countries capitulated their sovereignty to the World Bank and the IMF.

Toussaint knew how to aim high and how to hit em lowdown too. ■