A Black Gaze

Artists Changing How We See

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To AJ, who opened the door,

and Saidiya, who pushed me through . . .

Verse Two

Black (Counter)gravity

I must begin this verse with a confession that will quite possibly offend many people who are near and dear to me: I am no fan of LA. Although I spent five years living in and around the Bay Area, I'm an East Coast girl to the core of my being, and since returning to my native habitat about a decade ago, I find it difficult to make the long trip west to the southern quadrant of the left coast. Every visit makes me feel as if I'm in Neverland, and even as a passionate driver, navigating its special relationship to automobiles always makes my head spin. So when I state the fact that I made an overnight trip to LA from New York (a six-hour flight) only days after arriving in New York from Paris (an eight-hour flight), then hopped back onto a flight to New York the following day (another six-hour flight) for the sole purpose of viewing a single, remarkable installation, you can imagine it had to be for a very good reason.

This mind-numbing sequence of flights transpired in a year when I was living in Paris during a residency that birthed this book. Having endured weeks of the gray, sunless days that plague the City of Lights in winter, the only thing that made the idea of this journey to LA remotely palatable was the promise of warm and

sunny California weather. Much to my disappointment, I had the misfortune of arriving on the tail end of historic rainstorms and flooding in Southern California, and was greeted at LAX by a damp drizzle that only intensified over the course of my twenty-three-hour visit. So much for a change in the weather!

It was the work of a gifted artist, writer, director, and producer that propelled me into the grips of Southern California's worst impersonation of winter weather. Kahlil Joseph's name is widely recognized in connection with his Emmy-nominated directorial role in Beyoncé Knowles's 2016 feature-length video, *Lemonade*, in addition to his much-lauded earlier work creating densely layered video productions for musical artists such as Kendrick Lamar and commercial clients like Kenzo Designs or British telecom giant O2. Yet the LA-based artist is a subtle auteur of sound and image in his own right, and his talents exceed these more recent, high-profile commissions. Indeed, the *New Yorker*'s Hilton Als (who is not known to dish out compliments lightly) dubbed him "a master of sound" whose work "allows the dialogue and the music in his movies to drop out and then return at unexpected moments, creating a sometimes heart-stopping juxtaposition between what we hear and what we see."[1]

Before diving more deeply into the work of this talented artist, I need to interject a second confession, or better put, a belated recognition that adds both texture and context to the reflections that follow. In the midst of writing this verse, it dawned on me that I had begun it and many of the other verses with a reflection on the weather. The weather has, in one way or another, shaped many of my encounters with both the artworks I describe in these pages as well as

weather:
the state of the atmosphere with respect to wind, temperature, cloudiness, moisture, pressure, etc.
to undergo change, especially discoloration or disintegration, as the result of exposure to atmospheric conditions; to endure or resist exposure to the weather.
—Dictionary.com

the artists who created them. Rather than background, it served as the palpable foreground to many of these encounters. It is also an atmospheric framing that forces us to see these individuals and their respective work in a broader social context.

> [T]he weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black....
>
> it is not the specifics of any one event or set of events... but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather....
>
> The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies.[2]

For Christina Sharpe, the weather is a powerful metaphor for understanding the atmospheric relations that structure the lives of Black folks. It is an all-encompassing climate of anti-blackness. It is a pervasive environment and an atmospheric condition in relation to which Black folks persistently struggle. And it is our persistent struggle to survive and, more importantly, to thrive under these ever-changing conditions (*weathering* the persistent *weather* of anti-blackness) that Sharpe argues engenders the creation of "new ecologies"—that is, new relationships between the living, the dead, and their environments, and alternative organizing principles for living in relation to one another.

My references to the weather that frames my encounters with artists and their works are made in an effort to not let the social formations of weather that shape and surround our encounters, both literally and figuratively, go unnoticed. These are individuals making art at a moment in time when the weather of anti-blackness is both pervasive and unrelenting. They are making art that engages the precarity of Black life in ways that cast a different light on our communities and provide both devastating insights and inspiring revelations. In doing so, their artistic practice offers us a roadmap to navigating the weather.

I have chosen to make the weather part of this story in an attempt to compose a different account of Black creativity and possibility that focuses on a series of encounters between real people in unlikely places and challenging times. Rather than narrating them objectively or with detachment, I choose instead to enhance their messiness and embellish their complexity. I do this as my way of insisting on an account of these encounters that narrates my memories, responses, and reflections on them, as *fabulations* that mirror the forms of storytelling that lie at the heart of the creative practices of the artists themselves. They are artists and works that insist on fabulating alternative ecologies of Black life.

fabulation:
(definition #1)
The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. "Fabula" denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. . . . By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.
—Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

How do we envision Black futurity in the face of the *weather*? Put another way, how do we imagine Black life beyond the limits of current modes of representation, in the tense of the future real conditional, or *that which will have had to have happened* for Black folks to live unbounded lives? In a historical moment when premature Black death

is almost an everyday occurrence (in schools, at home, sitting in your car, being pulled over for a broken tail light, jogging, or simply living in a zip code with few resources and impoverished healthcare facilities) and we are constantly confronted with the disposability of Black life, I want to argue that fabulation offers an important path toward living blackness otherwise.

The central argument of this book is that Black contemporary artists are creating new ways of visualizing Black struggle and transcendence, and in doing so, they offer a different trajectory for Black sociality. While there are any number of examples of narrative fabulation that might serve as a guide, as a theorist of visual culture, I'm particularly inspired by the ways Black artists render Black sociality's improbable capacity to defy the deadly gravitational pull of white supremacy. The practice of fabulation I am describing is rendered not through narrative or narration, but through the Black body itself, and its extraordinary capacity to manifest something I call *Black countergravity*.[3] Black countergravity defies the physics of anti-blackness that has historically exerted a negating force aimed at expunging Black life.

. . .

Complex gradations of gray guide us through a haunting landscape of shadows and open spaces. Solitary walks, absent expressions, and distant looks render a pensive portrait of Black interiority. A clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning jolt us to attention. They signal the coming of bad weather on the horizon. Yet, as the weather shifts and the storm descends, no one seems to flinch or stir. On the contrary, the foreboding clouds and the drama of the weather energize this landscape, infusing anticipation and intensity into the quiet scenes of Black community it depicts.

Kahlil Joseph's 2013 film *Wildcat*, with its evocative score by electronic music producer Flying Lotus, renders a rural Midwestern town as a black-and-white rumination with sumptuous texture. The film captures confident, contemplative blackness set in a landscape that, to some, might signal precisely the opposite. It renders rural spaces that Black folks are schooled to avoid. They are spaces of foreboding that silently telegraph a history of white sheets and knotted rope, flight and frequent recapture. But Joseph's images refuse this narration of their landscape, repainting it instead in a markedly different tonality.

Grayson, Oklahoma

Cowboy hats crown Black and brown heads. They mount and master steers and stallions, and parade linearly or laterally in majestic formations. The rodeo is their ritual celebration. It is a celebration of a community structured by a relationship to land and livestock in a town formed as a means of protection. It is a community created with the intent to transform a landscape of oppression into a domicile of possibility.

Wildcat, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2013)

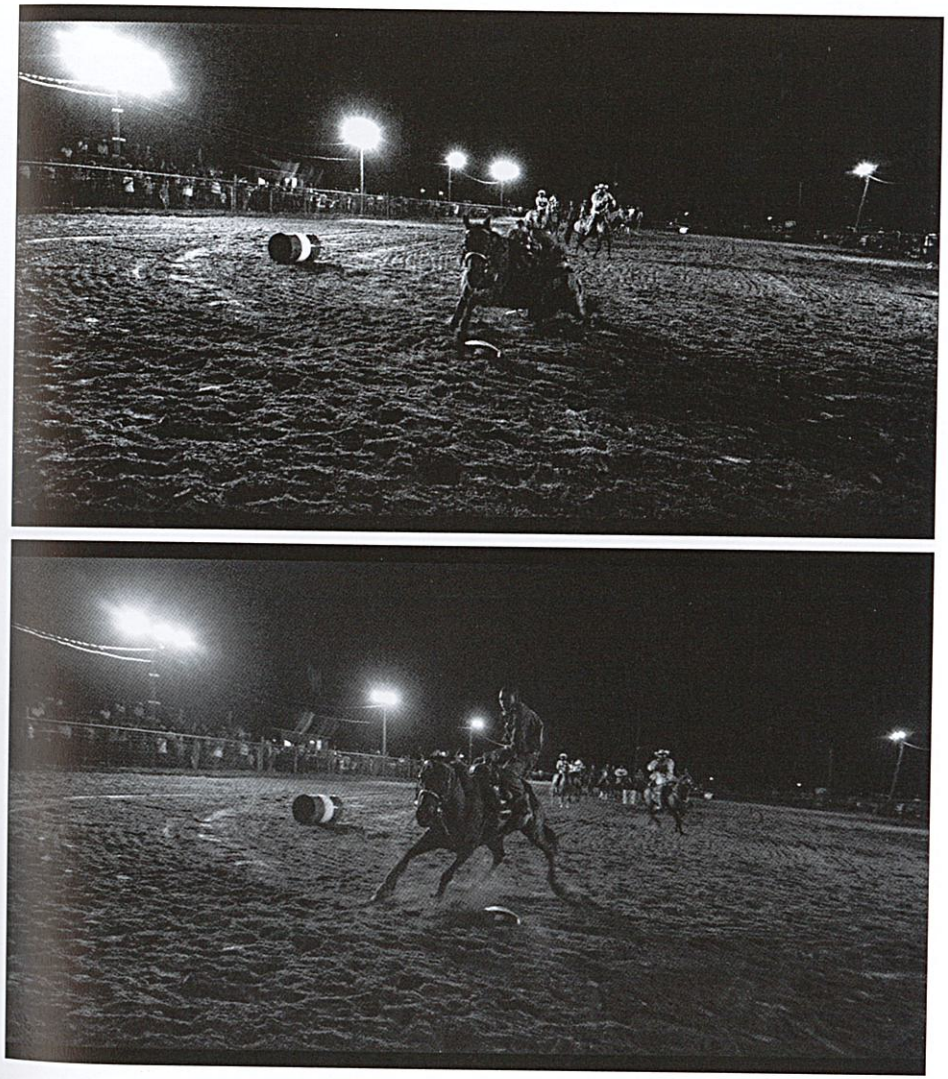
Between 1865 and 1915, at least sixty so-called All-Black Towns were settled in the United States, over twenty of which were located in Oklahoma. Freedmen from the South initially founded the All-Black Towns of Oklahoma on land provided by members of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, comprising Native American tribes of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole. At the end of the Civil War, former slaves of the Five Tribes settled together for mutual protection and economic security. Grayson, Oklahoma, formerly known as Wildcat, is one of thirteen such towns that survives to this day. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society:

> When the United States government forced American Indians to accept individual land allotments, most Indian "freedmen" chose land next to other African Americans. They created cohesive, prosperous farming communities that could support businesses, schools, and churches, eventually forming towns.... Many African Americans migrated to Oklahoma, considering it a kind of "promise [sic] land."
>
> When the Land Run of 1889 opened yet more "free" land to non-Indian settlement, African Americans from the Old South rushed to newly created Oklahoma....
>
> In those towns African Americans lived free from the prejudices and brutality found in other racially mixed communities of the Midwest and the South.[4]

Wildcat, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2013)

Black cowboys shuttle massive beasts through fenced mazes into tight corrals. They mount horses primed to accelerate. They circle and give chase. They ride horizontally and dismount dramatically. They tackle beasts and wrestle them to the ground; grab and tussle with horns and rope. They are pulled and pressed downward, and yet they rise and rise. They bounce improbably upward, dusting themselves off gracefully, to ride and tackle over and again. An accelerating Black cowboy leans into a tight corner turn. But the turn is too tight. Careening downward, the horse buckles and yields to gravity. But gravity does not capture its rider. Falling under the horse's full weight, a Black cowboy never dislodges. Cowboy and horse remount together to full stature, shrugging off the concern of another cowboy, who rushes to extend a hand of compassion and care.

gravity:
the force that attracts a body toward the center of the earth, or toward any other physical body having mass.
a force by which all things with mass or energy (including planets, stars, galaxies, and even light) are brought or "gravitate" toward one another.

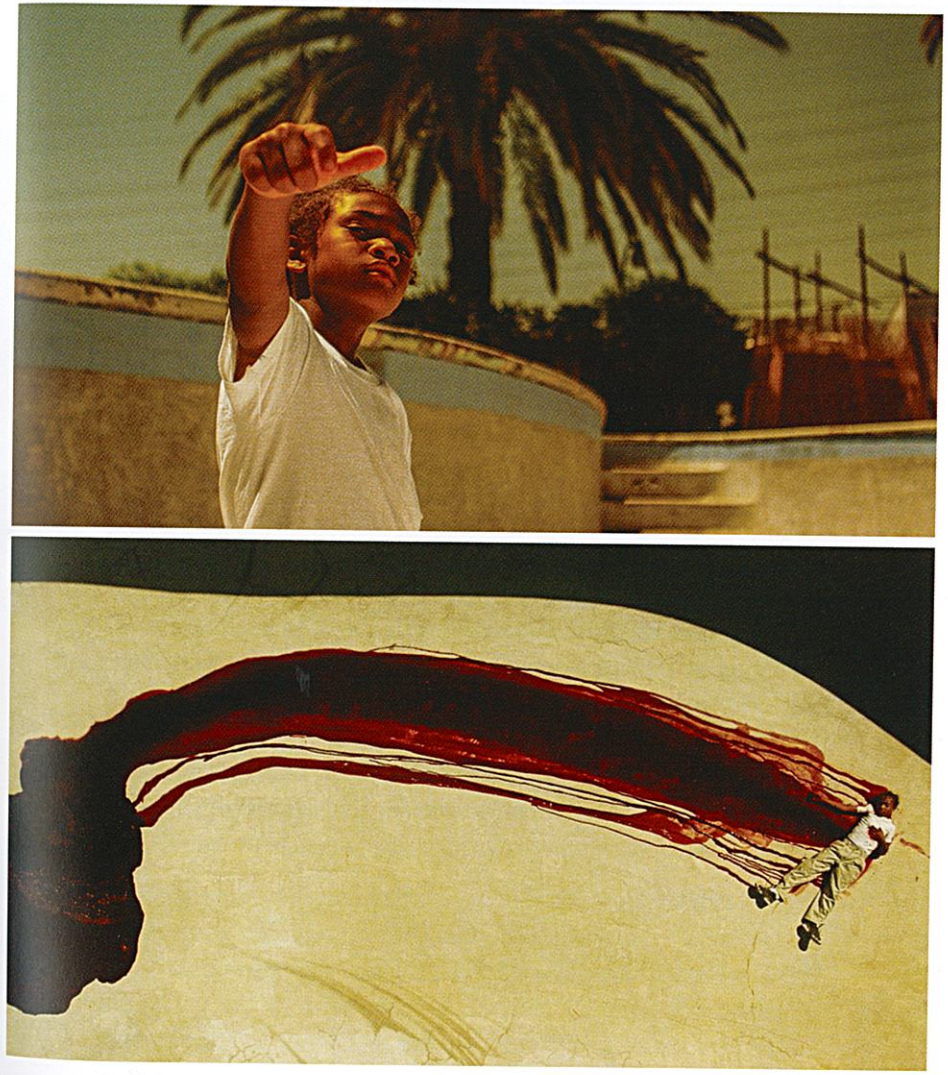


Wildcat, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2013)

Black community, Black celebration. *Wildcat* captures the pleasures and intimacies of the Black quotidian in a community created as an antidote to white supremacy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white Oklahomans sought to block African Americans from settling in All-Black Towns like Grayson. White farmers pledged never to rent, lease, or sell land to Black residents, while others refused to hire Black laborers. Mid-century droughts and the Great Depression dealt an unrecoverable blow to some All-Black Towns. Yet, while so many of them failed, Grayson lives on. *Wildcat* visualizes an impossible narrative of Black possibility made real. It is an impossible narrative of Black futurity told through a Black gaze. It is a future willed into being through the physical and affective labor of first people, freedmen, and former captives. It is a labor of love and community, of pleasure and pain, of affirmation and refusal.

. . .

A brown-skinned boy stands alone surrounded by concrete, a massive palm tree rising behind his unruly chestnut hair. Dressed in baggy khakis and a white tee shirt, his arm rises slowly as he squints, taking aim at a site where his eyes fix in the distance. Hand extended toward the horizon, his fingers grip an imaginary pistol as he pulls the trigger to the sound of a shot that ricochets thrice and boomerangs back onto and into its source. His white tee shirt now bathes in blood, as its excess flows forth like a tributary seeking an outlet. The thick crimson stream curves downward like the languid brushstroke of a master painter, collecting in a puddle just below his limp body.

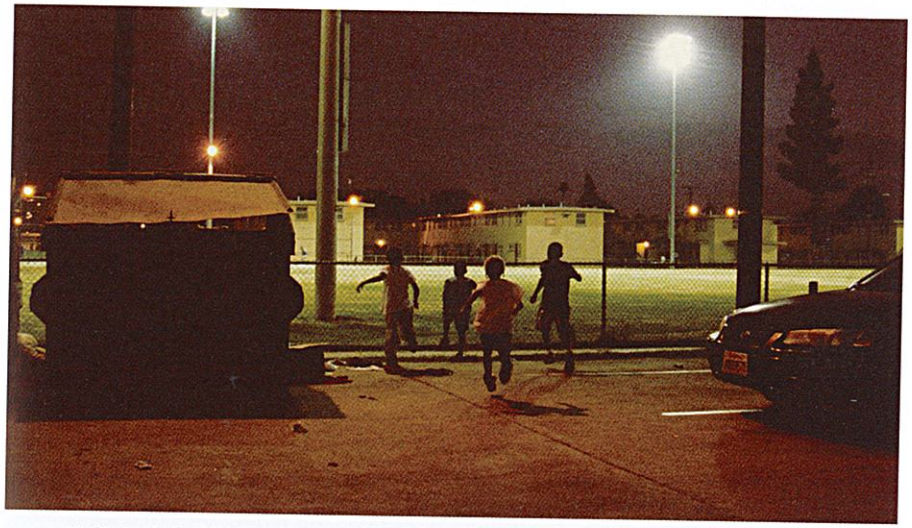


Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles

As in the previous film, its location is broadcast as a subtle caption hovering between moving frames. Constructed in 1955, Nickerson Gardens is a 1,066-unit public housing apartment complex in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Managed by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, Nickerson Gardens is the largest public housing development west of the Mississippi River. It is the birthplace of the Bounty Hunter Bloods gang, and in 2017 was ranked the seventh "most dangerous" housing project in LA.[5]

When we encounter him in the next scene, his mane is more contained, but his cornrows are far from fresh. He is lively and engaged, mimicking gestures of Black male swagger miniaturized to his tenish-year-old frame. Facing off with his lighter-skinned companion, their cornrows mirror each other as they wrestle on a browned green lawn surrounded by an inner-cityscape of two-story mustard-colored projects. The camera pans toward someone possibly observing the scene, lingering on the furtive looks of a baseball-capped Black man polishing a late-model sedan, gleaming with reflective chrome. It pans again and returns to the boy, this time seated next to and listening attentively to a lanky dark-skinned brother, joined moments later by his round-the-way-girl and a gaggle of three brown boys, who convene convivially on a courtyard bench.



Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

The boys coalesce as a band of brothers, running, frolicking, and making mischief, eventually returning our multi-shade companions to the browned green field as daylight transitions to a fuchsia-hued dusk. The dreamlike soundscape that guides our tour through Nickerson Gardens slowly fades as we accompany the silhouette of the boy as he glides along the chain-linked fence that surrounds the field. Chin held high, his walk is focused, familiar, and full of purpose.

Our gaze shifts abruptly to a trio of limp Black bodies that echo our opening encounter: a limp body on the ground; a limp body suspended in water; a final limp body on a sidewalk that captures the full attention of our posse of three brown boys, now frozen in stillness. The sound and sight of air bubbling upward through water toward a distant, undefined surface transitions us both sonically and visually back to a Black male body that is, suddenly, limp no more.

Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

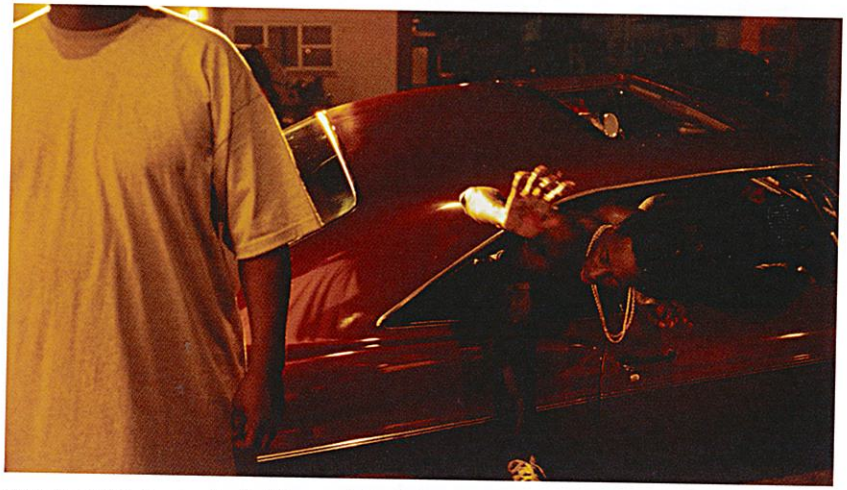
Hypnotic bells segue to the throb of an electronic drum pumping a slow deep bass line. Metallic, percussive beats shimmer and entangle with the throbbing pumps and a haunting tingle of bells. This sonic entanglement intertwines with the levitation of the blood-stained, limp-no-more, Black body. His body pulses with the throb of each beat. It twirls with the metallic percussive shimmer. It undulates and writhes to the sound of bells and the hiss of cymbals.

He ripples alive and resuscitates himself through an improbable self-animation that defies gravity. Bouncing from prone to fully upright, he untangles himself from a blood-soaked tee shirt, to reveal a magically healed bullet hole in his chest—a mortal wound amplified by blood that still lingers at the corner of his mouth. Ambulating with tiny steps on hyperpointed toes, he glides up and down, backward and forward; he bounces to the ground, rebounds upward, arches like an angel, then crouches like an angry cat. He moves neither vertically, nor horizontally; his body bounces repeatedly, then begins to flow like a fluid material that refuses to congeal fully into solid or liquid.

Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

His flow continues down a path lined with neighbors and bystanders, possibly family and friends, who, like the three boys frozen in stillness at the outset of our encounter with the limp-no-more Black man, also stand motionlessly suspended. His reanimated corpse flows past their stilled-in-time bodies, intently making its way toward the promise of a new celestial plane. As he grazes them closely, he touches some of them tenderly, and frames others intimately. As he approaches the gleaming late-model sedan that awaits him on the street, it bounces twice, seeming to nod in recognition. Its door lowered by the bounce to just below curb height, he extends a leg at an improbable angle. Rather than entering, he pours himself into the vehicle, oozing backward into and through a side window.



Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

To state the obvious: both here and above, I am narrating a film. Better put, I am attempting to narrate my encounter with Joseph's stunning four-minute video, *Until the Quiet Comes*—a work awarded the Special Jury Award for Short Film at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival.[6] But I am also fabulating an impossible story of possibility. I am fabulating a tale of Black resurrection and rebirth. It's a familiar story of premature Black death, albeit with a very different ending. It's a story visualized through a Black gaze.

fabulation:
(definition #2)
telling impossible stories to amplify the impossibility of their telling; speculative histories.

trespassing the borders of fact and fiction and recognizing their confluence in the creation of a "documentary" archive of the Black experience/blackness.

respecting the limits of the archive while remaking it in the process; a creative historiographical praxis of having it all.

—Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, and assorted public and private conversations

The impossible story *Until the Quiet Comes* re-visions is the story of precarious Black bodies figured in an urban setting where premature death is not the exception but the rule. Joseph and Flying Lotus's sublimely moving, sonovisual portrait of a community plagued by unemployment, poverty, and gang violence seems an impossibly fabulated retelling. But what if we refuse the inevitable reading of it as a rendering of melancholy, mourning, and loss in a community riven with violence? What if their retelling—a dreamlike retelling of resurrection in the face of violent negation—were in fact the rule rather than the exception?

Such a refusal would direct our focus toward the improbably stilled images on the sidelines of Storyboard P's arresting performance and connect them to the impossible future realized in Grayson, Oklahoma. It would require us to fabulate from their stilled but still-moving-images[7] and link their contemporary Black urban quotidian with that of a Black rural quotidian past and present. It would require us to see them through a Black gaze that renders them not passive victims but a community that insists on not just surviving but actually thriving, against all odds.

Until the Quiet Comes, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2012)

Somber faces lined up on a wall. Girl clutching boy; stoic boy next to equally stoic boy; mother embracing child; girl next to boy next to boy next to girl. Their faces range from mournful to implacable. Detachment or shock; opaque or impermeable; suppressed rage or disbelief—what range of emotions is commensurate to witnessing persistent encounters with premature death? The sepia-washed faces of Nickerson Gardens contrast, yet harmonize with those of their rural siblings depicted in the somber grainy tones of Joseph's black-and-white rendering of Grayson, Oklahoma.

The windswept young couple we watch motoring down an expansive rural roadway are generational inheritors of a town founded to make them free. Their expressions are calm, peaceful, satisfied. What stories might the young residents and heirs to the legacy of this town created as a shelter and a beacon of Black autonomy share with their kindred in Nickerson Gardens, who love so tenaciously and live so precariously in the face of years of Black

and brown gang violence? And what insights might their California cousins share with the youth of Grayson? What impossible stories of possibility might they fabulate together in that conversation?

I believe they would tell adjacent, unfinished stories of Black resurrection and rebirth—stories forged by communities that sustain them in the long history of Black precarity. Yes, they would tell stories of loss, but they would also tell stories of survival against all odds. Those stories would be connected by the common thread of a stubborn insistence on creating, keeping, and holding on to family, friendships, and alternate forms of kinship and affiliation that engender new possibilities for Black futurity.

Perhaps it is my own willful form of fabulation, but to me, Joseph's subtle, evocative visualization of these two very different communities requires us to see Storyboard P's Black flow in tandem with the rebounding flow of the Black cowboys at the Grayson rodeo. Each represents an embodied practice of defying the gravity of violence, social and premature death, structural impoverishment, organized abandonment, and engineered precarity. Each is a demonstration of a Black community's persistent refusal to capitulate to the gravitational forces of the weather, against overwhelming odds. They are visual fabulations of a *Black countergravitational flow* that requires us to do the work of revaluing impossible stories of our struggles with the weather.

Which, believe it or not, returns me to the place where I began this chapter: getting caught up (and caught out) in the weather. It returns me to my soggy trip to LA, and the remarkable installation that lured me onto a six-hour flight to a city that overwhelms me to immerse myself in a third, very special enactment of intergenerational Black countergravity.

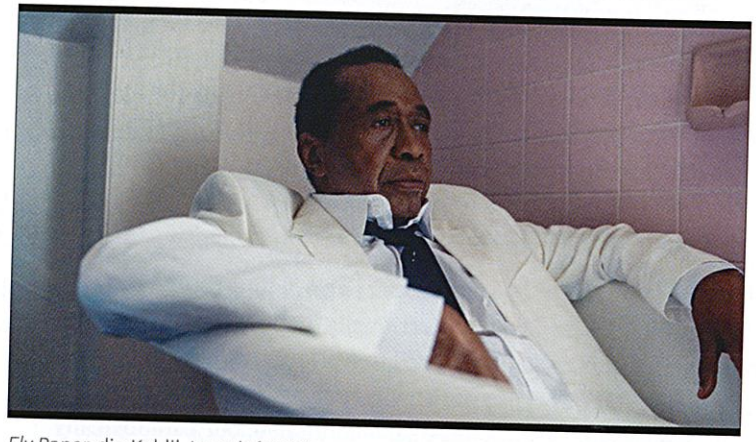
• • •

When I arrived at the galleries of the Pacific Design Center two hours after landing in LAX, I was drenched from the pouring rain and completely alone except for a guard who had to wear earplugs to inhabit the space for an extended period of time. It was a sonic environment that made my vocal chords vibrate as if I were uttering tones I was merely absorbing. I was told by the docent at the entrance that some visitors had complained, so the staff felt obliged to prepare people for what to expect before entering. Kind of like a trigger warning, I thought—a trigger warning for an encounter with the visual frequency of Black life.

Mundane scenes of an iconic Black enclave interrupted by somber glimpses of two generationally distinct figures: an older and a younger Black man attired in white shirts, black trousers, vests, and fedoras. They trade places, occupying an expansive loft, a tight hallway, and an equally contained, but paradoxically liberating staircase landing. The older figure sighs with boredom or exhaustion, while occupying a space he refuses to share with his younger twin: a porcelain clawfoot tub. Emerging from a jumble of unidentified voices that comingle with the ambient noise of city life and casual conversation, a voice breaks through to enunciate sentences that echo throughout the film with crystal clarity:

> ***He told me that this city out to be deciphered like a musical score.***
>
> ***One could get lost in the great orchestral masses and the accumulation of details.***
>
> ***Over crowded, megalomaniac, inhuman, he thought he saw more subtle cycles there.***

Rhythms, clusters of faces caught sight of him passing.
As different and precise as groups of instruments.
Sometimes the musical passages coincided with plain reality.[8]



Fly Paper, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2017)

House parties and roller rinks, walks in the park or on the avenue, a window overlooking a park, or a cell phone recap recounted while pacing the pavement outside an apartment building. Hailing a cab, riding the subway, waiting for a bus that never arrives on time, snuggling on a couch, or enjoying a conversation at a kitchen table—these scenes of everyday life are "as different and precise" as musical instruments.

Fly Paper, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2017)

Commissioned by The Vinyl Factory in 2017, Kahlil Joseph's sonovisual installation *Fly Paper* premiered in London and was greeted by an acclaim that has only multiplied through subsequent installations in the US at the New Museum in New York City and the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles—the destination of my weather-plagued, twenty-three-hour West Coast adventure. Inspired by the haunting, sonic photography of Roy DeCarava's soulful portraits of everyday life in Harlem published in the film's 1955 namesake, *Sweet Flypaper of Life*,[9] Joseph's *Fly Paper* plots a parallel journey through contemporary Harlem. Braiding multiple strands of Black family and community together in a complex fabrication of sound and image that pivots between love and loss, *Fly Paper* weaves viewers into simultaneously tender and tenuous relations of intergenerational intimacy.

The piece is a sublime tangle of the sounds and sights of filiation and loss. It gathers footage of everyday Harlem encounters—encounters between the famous and the nameless—overlaid with phrases and quotations spoken not to narrate but to aspirate and inspire contemplation of the beauty of the Black quotidian. It weaves these encounters through complex layering of family and legacy using footage of Joseph's family, including his father, the late Keven Davis, a renowned sports and entertainment attorney. A tireless advocate for Black artists, Davis was a resident of Harlem from late in his life through his death in 2012 of brain cancer. *Fly Paper* merges this paternal presence with footage of Joseph's late brother, artist and activist Noah Davis, founder of the Underground Museum in Los Angeles, who passed away two years after their father. Additional entanglements of filiation emerge through the inclusion of shots of Noah's wife, Karon Davis, daughter of legendary Fosse dancer Ben Vereen, who performs the role of the older Black man featured in the film.

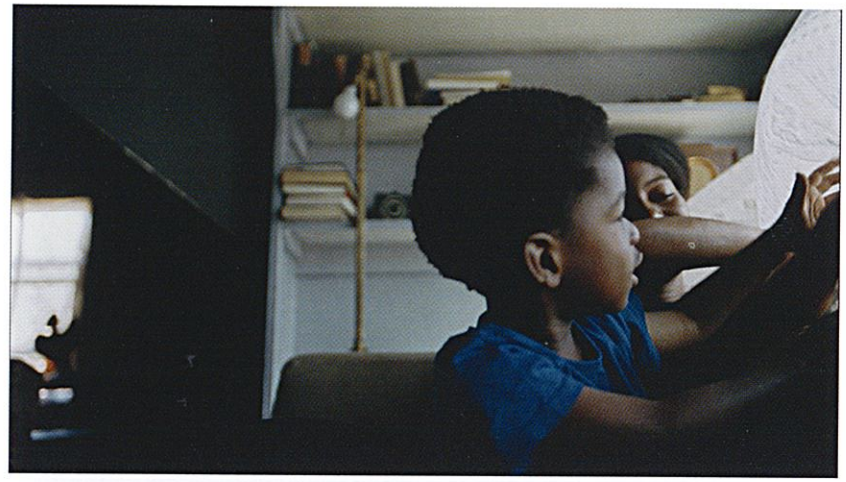
In *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava's legendary photographic chiaroscuro harmonizes with Langston Hughes's ventriloquized fabulation of the fictional matriarch Sister Mary Bradley, through whose eyes we view Harlem as an ever-expanding network of family, neighbors, and friends. Their conduit of connection is the streets, busses, and subways that transport them through the city and their neighborhood. Yet Hughes's narrative zooms in to focus our attention on the intimate connections imaged by DeCarava's photographs of the interior spaces Black extended families refashion into spaces of Black joy, intimacy, and care. Framed by the loving gaze of Sister Mary, the kitchen in particular unfolds as a multidimensional space not simply for the domestic labor of preparing family meals. It is a space where friends, neighbors, partners, and kin of all ages cycle into and out of each other's daily lives. It is a space where hair is braided and books are read; a space where drinks are made and music is played. It is the space for Friday night parties filled with slow drags and fast boogies, whoops and howls of laughter, gossip and trash talking and long embraces. It is a space of nurturing and care, a space of joy and affection, a space of rest and respite.

Joseph's *Fly Paper* reanimates the visual frequency of deep blackness that DeCarava captured so poetically in *Sweet Flypaper of Life* by creating a parallel journey of Black transcendence rendered not through sonic photography but through a filmic sound installation that connects the multiple temporalities of Harlem that resonate between these two lush works. In *Fly Paper* we linger on the subway or the playground and meander through parks. We greet and encounter friends and neighbors in hallways, on stairways, or ascending a brownstone stoop. Like the deep black intensities of DeCarava's photographic chiaroscuro, Joseph's camera reproduces deep blackness by filming in graceful shadows. Like DeCarava's close-up black-and-white portraits of laughing, beaming, peaceful,

pensive, reflective, or weary faces, Joseph's camera creates equally compelling portraits of its Harlem residents both as individuals but more significantly as neighbors and friends. Unlike DeCarava's book, *Fly Paper* sets these subjects into motion as moving images with a rumbling intensity that mimics the passing thunder that cuts across the Oklahoma landscape in *Wildcat.*

We follow a Black man in a white hat slowly walking on the block. His halting peregrination is mirrored by that of a similarly clad younger Black man who slows down a moonwalk to hover in place in an empty expansive loft. His slow moonwalk goes nowhere; he restively remains in the same place. Yet, while he lacks physical movement, his stay-in-place locomotion expands and extends time instead. It is a slow walk that connects him to his twin-clad elder in a generational doubling that returns with a vengeance later in the film.

Fly Paper guides us through the urban avenues and green spaces of Harlem by way of a gaze that allows us to encounter its inhabitants at eye level, walking behind and alongside them as neighbors. We see them through a sight line trained on the backs of heads and passing profiles, viewed through eyes of accompaniment as companions and fellow travelers. It is a gaze centered on rituals of movement and assembly that disappear from view in the ordinary routines of daily repetition. Small talk at a house party, watching football with an ailing parent, navigating public transit, quiet play with a child on a lazy afternoon—they are scenes that capture the fabric of Harlem's locally emplaced enactments of Black sociality.



Fly Paper, dir. Kahlil Joseph (2017)

But these are also images that demand heightened levels of sensory attention, for Joseph's masterful sound artistry does not allow us to engage them solely as visual representations. *Fly Paper* is an immersive three-dimensional installation that merges images into a tactile, sonic environment. It creates an image field that registers at decibel levels that rattle the ears and throttle the body. Its enveloping bass line penetrates as it rumbles gallery walls like a clock tower reverberating with the force of bells that toll within it. Its sonic registers transition us through public and private encounters in both open and intimate spaces of Harlem at a frequency we quite literally feel in the throat.

There must certainly be more precise words to describe it, but I can only call it a *boom*—a deep bass that erupts at the climax of the film. It arrives completely unexpected in the midst of our immersion in a soundscape of city noise, snippets of conversation, and brief but mesmerizing musical soliloquys by Lauryn Hill, Thundercat, and

pensive, reflective, or weary faces, Joseph's camera creates equally compelling portraits of its Harlem residents both as individuals but more significantly as neighbors and friends. Unlike DeCarava's book, *Fly Paper* sets these subjects into motion as moving images with a rumbling intensity that mimics the passing thunder that cuts across the Oklahoma landscape in *Wildcat.*

We follow a Black man in a white hat slowly walking on the block. His halting peregrination is mirrored by that of a similarly clad younger Black man who slows down a moonwalk to hover in place in an empty expansive loft. His slow moonwalk goes nowhere; he restively remains in the same place. Yet, while he lacks physical movement, his stay-in-place locomotion expands and extends time instead. It is a slow walk that connects him to his twin-clad elder in a generational doubling that returns with a vengeance later in the film.

Fly Paper guides us through the urban avenues and green spaces of Harlem by way of a gaze that allows us to encounter its inhabitants at eye level, walking behind and alongside them as neighbors. We see them through a sight line trained on the backs of heads and passing profiles, viewed through eyes of accompaniment as companions and fellow travelers. It is a gaze centered on rituals of movement and assembly that disappear from view in the ordinary routines of daily repetition. Small talk at a house party, watching football with an ailing parent, navigating public transit, quiet play with a child on a lazy afternoon—they are scenes that capture the fabric of Harlem's locally emplaced enactments of Black sociality.

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Alice Smith, cloaked in the shadows of a brownstone jam session. And then your heartbeat is momentarily halted by the boom. Watching the installation loop multiple times during my three-hour sojourn in the gallery, I reached a point where my body would anticipate it. I'd close my eyes to let it pass through me, then open them again to observe the scene into which it had transitioned me as if awaking each time anew.

What startled me at first was feeling the sound actually touched me, then finding myself confused trying to figure out where I actually felt it. Sitting on one of the beanbag seats that have become ubiquitous in galleries and museum exhibitions, I felt it pulsate beneath me. Moving to a chair at the back of the gallery, I swore I could feel the sound make contact as a wave of vibrating air. Regardless of where its contact initially landed, its impact was amplified by the remarkable scene that followed and the embodied, generational enactment of Black flow it so powerfully instantiated.

The older Black man makes his way, seemingly disoriented, into a dimly lit hallway. His faltering presence and his stumble in an earlier sequence intensify our sense of his aging frailty. Perhaps it is fatigue from climbing the stairs that slowly become visible at the back of the hallway, which we assume he mounted to access this space. And then comes the boom, and the sound transforms him. It brings him to life as the expressive dancer we recognize him to have been. His improvisations are energizing and enigmatic. He expands and unfolds with outstretched arms and lengthening legs. He seems to grow in height as his spine unfurls to billow like a flag in the wind. Behind him in the background, he is joined by a figure we recognize with whom he shares the space. And in doing so, he transforms it yet again.

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Storyboard P enters the frame from the stairway, creeping up slowly and emerging in the older man's shadow. His moves are unmistakable, yet they are different from those we have seen previously. It is a generational duet of an elder body shadowed by its younger incarnation. Rather than the time-altering, liquid flow of *Until the Quiet Comes* or the slow-motion flow of *4:44*, it is a fluctuating staccato flow that connects Storyboard to Vereen's halting corporeal limitations and, at the same time, highlights a striking form of *Black gravity*, embodied most dramatically when Storyboard seems primed to scale the wall of the space vertically, like a spider in pursuit.

Black gravity:

a form of directionality without a destination; the force that propels Black flow.

Joseph's sonically infused visualization of Black gravity in *Fly Paper* illuminates the dynamic relationship between blackness, place, and gravity, and the ways Black communities refuse the existing terms of these relations. Together with *Wildcat* and *Until the Quiet Comes*, *Fly Paper* offers an ensemble of performances that vividly enact the forces that press on, deform, and are resolutely resisted by Black bodies who refuse to capitulate to the weather of anti-blackness, choosing instead to tactically and creatively exploit gravity in their own favor. This sumptuous trio of films provides an inspired depiction of the unorthodox ways Black artists re-vision the precarity of individuals often seen as disposable—in this case, Black urban youth, Black rural youth, and fragile Black elders—through captivating performances of Black (counter)gravity that register both the weight and weightlessness of these groups, as well as their potential for reshaping the future.

Like Joseph's sublime visualizations of Black quotidian life in *Wildcat* and *Until the Quiet Comes*, *Fly Paper* instantiates an equally moving Black gaze. Neither a gaze of identity nor empathy, it is a gaze that focuses on distinctive frequencies of Black filiation. The discomforting labor produced by Joseph's Black gaze in these films resides in their capacity to position white spectators as neither subject nor recipient of their gaze. It is a gaze that centers the Black subject, and whiteness is fully outside of the frame. It thus inverts dominant definitions of the gaze that focus on white male desire as the privileged, if not exclusive, perspective of cinema. Joseph's Black gaze reconfigures this dominant gaze by exploiting white exclusion from and vulnerability to the opacity of blackness. In the process, it demands a very different kind of labor of its viewers.