Blackness, Sexuality, and Entertainment

Christina Sharpe*

Terror has a history.

Paul Youngquist, “The Mothership Connection”

It feels like an important thing to be part of a community of hundreds of thousands of people who are wrongfully stopped on their way to work, school, church or shopping, and are patted down or worse by the police though they carry no weapon; and searched for no reason other than the color of their skin.

Nicholas K. Peart, New York Times

The news was announced while I was completing this essay that Rodney King was dead. Dead at 47. Dead, in fact, after having come so close to death that both he and we marveled that he had, in some way, survived. It was March 1991 and TV news stations played on a loop those 81 seconds of video and audio of the four white Los Angeles police officers repeatedly tasering and beating a screaming Rodney King. Writing in the wake of that beating and countless others, Elizabeth Alexander makes clear in “‘Can you be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)” that black suffering and violence against black flesh (what Hortense Spillers identified as “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brushes of discourse” [206]) are invisible and inaudible to many eyes and ears. The taped beating as supposedly incontrovertible evidence of police brutality against Rodney King is thrown into question, the frames manipulated and slowed down, sound removed, and so on, and the brutality shifted from the police to

*Christina Sharpe is Associate Professor of English and Director of the American Studies program at Tufts University. She is the author of Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects (2010).
King himself. In Alexander’s text, these outrages are powerful instances of the ways that “[b]lack bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries” (78). In the face of that self-evident truth, Alexander looked “for the join,” sought a language that would carry the ways such historical and present violence positioned black people as witness and participant—constituted through and by vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to themselves and to each other by that force.2 “This history,” she writes, “moves from public rapes, beatings and lynchings, to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing” (78–79). King too sought a language; he too looked for the join. Speaking at the 1 May 1992 press conference organized to plead for an end to the violence that he will be come to be blamed for, King says: “We—we all can get along. We just gotta—we just gotta, you know—I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while”; “Can we—can we get along?”; “I’m not a—I’m not like they’re—picking me out—picking me out to be”; “Can we—can we all get along?”; “I love people of color, you know”; “Can we—can we get along?”; “We’ll get our justice; they’ve won the battle, but they haven’t won the war” (Brokaw n.p.). King’s words would become the raw materials of stand-up comedy and King’s body and its movements (his petty “troubles with the law” that registered to most as belonging solely to him and not to the law) would be tracked and become the raw material of tabloid news. And in a sleight and slight of hand and tongue that, like the slowed-down video staging the response to violence as the ontology of violence, the three-day uprising in response to the four white officers being found not guilty by that all-white jury in Simi Valley became known as the Rodney King riots.3 Put another way, the aggrieved not acknowledged to be aggrieved is staged as the aggressor. The beating of King was yet another powerful instance of the long and complex history of white enjoyment to be found in black suffering as an “American spectacle,” a national pastime.

Can “we” get along? The answer to King’s almost unaskable yet repeatedly asked question is surely connected to a history of terror; surely connected to the pronoun “we.” To assert “terror has a history” (Youngquist 7) is to attend to what Alexander, Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman, and now Frank Wilderson and Tavia Nyong’o, among others, have shown us about the ways that those terms are wrapped up and folded into each other. Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection begins with an examination of the quotidian enjoyments to be found “in relation to the sanctioned uses of slave property and the figurative capacities of blackness” “a problematic of enjoyment in which pleasure is inseparable from subjection, will indistinguishable from submission, and bodily integrity bound
to violence” (7, 33). In the time between the first and second trials of the officers for beating King, Sergeant Stacey Koon took to talking to anyone who would listen and projecting on his wall those 81 seconds of video with commentary that positioned King as both a monstrous inanimate “Bobo doll” and all-too-animate sexualized superhuman gorilla-like beast. Anticipating the second trial, Koon declared, “this is going to be fun” and “this is high comedy” (qtd. in Mydans n.p.). Terror has a history, and at least one branch of that history is constituted through the ocular and aural spectacle of violence against black flesh that is positioned by the gaze and the law as deviant and in need of disciplining. Blackness is always queered: heteronormativity, too, being produced along an axis of race.

In December of 2011, the New York Times ran an Op-Ed piece, “Why Is the N.Y.P.D. After Me?” by Nicholas K. Peart, who begins: “When I was 14, my mother told me not to panic if a police officer stopped me. And she cautioned me to carry ID and never run away from the police or I could be shot. In the nine years since my mother gave me this advice, I have had numerous occasions to consider her wisdom” (n.p.). A young black man, now 23 years old, Peart is writing about his and other black (and blackened) men’s experiences on the streets of New York City. For Peart and for other “young people in [his] neighborhood, getting stopped and frisked is a rite of passage.” Peart’s stuttered movements articulate blackness, sexuality, entertainment through the policing and narrowing of the spaces in and through which black men and women can live and move unimpeded: stopped and frisked at a rate of almost 700,000 in 2011. Stop-and-frisk is one rite of passage that marks the space/race/place of no rights and no citizenship (à la Dred Scott v. Sanford [1857]) in one direction and, in the other, the space through which the rights to free passage are secured for non-blacks. Peart continues: “Police are far more likely to use force when stopping blacks or Latinos than whites. In half the stops police cite the vague ‘furtive movements’ as the reason for the stop.” As another young black man reports, “When you’re young and you’re black, no matter how you look you fit the description.”

Maintaining that stop-and-frisk “saves lives,” New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg took that case on two consecutive Sundays in June (2012) to predominantly black churches where he told the congregants that “The city would not ‘deny reality’ in order to stop different groups according to their relative proportions in the population” (Taylor n.p.).

The “reality” that Bloomberg gestures toward, as well as the provenance of stop-and-frisk’s language of “furtive movements,” lies in the shadow of the overseer and the slavemaster/slaveowner’s
(and any white person’s) charge of impudence as “one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offenses usually laid to the charge of slaves” (Douglass 92). According to Frederick Douglass, “[W]hatever it is, or is not. . . . [t]his offense may be committed in various ways; in the tone of an answer; in answering at all; in not answering; in the expression of countenance; in the motion of the head; in the gait, manner and bearing of the slave” (92). Likewise, whatever furtive movements are or are not, any movements while black may be interpreted as furtive. Although the accounts of stop-and-frisk focus largely on the experiences of black men, the NYPD’s stop-and-frisk program known as “Operation Clean Halls” targets and polices women, children, and men and has effectively placed “hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, mostly black and Latino, under siege in their own homes” (“Operation” n.p.). As part of their mandate, such programs have surveilled and pathologized black women’s and men’s myriad expressions and performances of sexuality and desire. The police who patrol these streets and halls often imagine and describe the black people in them as sexualized beasts and their “enforcing the law” in the language of sport and fun. Stop-and-frisk policies lay bare what Hartman identifies as the “figurative capacities of blackness” that “enable white flights of fantasy while increasing the likelihood of the captive’s disappearance” (22).

So, too, the “vertical patrols” of “Operation Clean Halls,” a policy elaborating the political ontology through which home, mother, father, and child “safety” are secured in one direction and rendered meaningless in another.9 That those “figurative properties” begin in the womb is illustrated by the anti-abortion ads that announce (to, for, by whom?) “the most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb” and deny the reality of gratuitous violence in the making and positioning of black people in order to position black women’s wombs (tombs? factories?) in and of themselves as “the most dangerous place for an African American” without ever asking in whose womb and under what pressures an African American is made. Frank B. Wilderson III persuasively argues in his discussion of the eponymous character of the film Antwone Fisher (2002), in Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms (2010), that such representation positions “captivity as the highest form of freedom, and it dramatizes life with unambiguously Black women as the lowest form of bondage. . . . in which, we find not one White hand at the end of all of the literal and figurative whips” (101–2). Such performances are compelled and constituted by terror and violence and through them blackness emerges as “state of exception”: womb to tomb all over again.
Wilderson’s *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* and Nyong’o’s *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (2009) each engage the question of what constitutes “lives,” and black and hybrid life in particular. The questions that animate the first part of this essay (What does it mean to suffer? What is Black life? What does it mean to survive?) are at the center of Wilderson’s urgent study. For Wilderson, because “violence . . . precedes and exceeds Blacks” (76), Rodney King and stop-and-frisk are not examples of conflicts in civil society between, say, the police and the “Black” subjects whom “they are charged to protect”; instead, violence is the grammar articulating the “carceral continuum of black life” (248). Extending the work of Spillers, Hartman, Jared Sexton, Achille Mbembe, and other Afro-pessimists to his examination of self-identified politically engaged feature films, Wilderson limits his cinematic examples to the US but compellingly argues that the “argument itself is transnational” (95)—in the same ways that, for example, both Frantz Fanon’s and Jacques Lacan’s works travel as conceptual frameworks. The argument is, of course, not limited to cinema studies, but provides a way of reading structural antagonisms on and off screen. Uninterested in adjudicating conflicts, Wilderson instead takes up structural antagonisms among the political, not cultural, positions of the Human (White), the Savage (Red), and the Slave (Black). He argues that violence against the black, like the concerted violence of stop-and-frisk, is not contingent, not violence that occurs between subjects at the level of conflict, but gratuitous violence occurring at the level of a structure that constituted the black as the constitutive outside as whites were being consolidated as the master/human. And, like King’s and Alexander’s search for a language, Wilderson endeavors “to forge a language of abstraction with explanatory powers emphatic enough to embrace the Black, an accumulated and fungible object, in a human world of exploited and alienated subjects” (55–56). That effort leads him also to call for a profound rethinking of cinema and performance and Lacanian, Marxist, and feminist film analysis that would attempt to position the black in and of the world of subjects, the world of human conflicts and values (68). He does so because “Marxism and film theory operate like police actions: they police our ability to contemplate how the Slave is not a lesser valued entity on a pole of higher valued entities but is instead exiled from the drama of value” (249). At the heart of this study, then, is an account of power and the matrix of violence at the center of “the triangulated relation of modernity (Red, White, and Black)” (247). And in each section, as he reads politically engaged cinema by the settler/master (white), savage (red), and
slave (black), Wilderson reframes the argument from one of social conflict to one of structural antagonism, from the politics of culture to the culture of politics in which, for example, it makes sense for 700,000 police stops to yield 762 guns.

In the chapters on slave cinema (cinema directed by black directors that attempt to stage ethical dilemmas that involve blacks), Wilderson studies two films: Denzel Washington’s *Antwone Fisher* and Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1976). The former is based on the real-life drama of Fisher’s traumatic experiences largely through his encounters with various putatively unmiscegenated black women (a cinematic rehash of the Moynihan Report’s disciplining of black women) and positions the armed services (akin to the prison, Wilderson notes) as the institution that saves him. Praised by black audiences and by non-black audiences who declared it a universal story of triumph, the film’s diegesis and techniques, as Wilderson shows, exploit the ruse of analogy that the suffering of black people can be analogized. Wilderson maintains that it cannot be, for “we” are not all claimed by life in the same way; “we” do not experience suffering on the same plain of conflict since the black is characterized by gratuitous violence. Reading a cross-section of reviews of *Antwone Fisher*, Wilderson finds that white audiences routinely elide or erase Fisher’s race as they laud the film for its universality. This response is a prime example of the way that those “figurative capacities” make the white viewer (ally or potential ally) incapable of seeing the subjects of the film and their particular and noncontingent suffering. That Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* refuses analogy is, for Wilderson, part of what makes it “one of the more exemplary points of condensation between cinema and that special moment of Blackness on the move, the late 1960s to mid-1970s” (125). Indeed, Wilderson argues in “Cinematic Unrest,” part of what makes a film like *Bush Mama* possible, and Gerima (one of the LA Rebellion filmmakers) underscores this in his own interviews, are the political struggles and the political language available to the filmmaker and audience that in the current absence of such a language and politics make certain kinds of ethical questions and stances (largely) impossible. In Gerima’s film and Wilderson’s reading of it, the form and the diegesis (daughter’s rape in the home, husband’s incarceration, threat of forced sterilization, retributive justice, more incarceration, violently induced miscarriage on the floor of a prison cell, illiteracy, and so on) build up to the realization that, for these characters (for the black in a world of humans, for the occupants of “Operation Clean Halls” buildings), there is no difference between the prison and the home; indeed,
“Black home” is oxymoronic because it has no “structural analogy with a notion of White or non-Black domestic space” (127).

A similar argument animates Wilderson’s discussion of Monster’s Ball (2001; dir. Marc Forster) as an example of politically conscious Settler/Master/Human cinema (cinema in which the director is White and the “narrative strategies of the film must intend for the ethical dilemmas to be shouldered” by a white individual or ensemble cast, which could also be comprised of non-black “junior partners of civil society” [28]). Wilderson reads Marc Forster’s film (dir. Lee Daniels with a screenplay written by Milo Addica and Will Rokos) alongside Hardt and Negri’s “crisis in the commons”; both film and text posit a “we” who have been positioned similarly by capital. But, Wilderson rightly argues, the film “knows” otherwise in requiring the deaths of both Lawrence and Tyrell Musgrove as the condition, the ground, upon which the romance between Hank Grotowski and Leticia Musgrove can blossom. This parsing of Hardt and Negri’s crisis in the commons is particularly useful in the current sociopolitical climate in which, for example, the wearing of hoodies in “solidarity” with Trayvon Martin and t-shirts that declare “I am Troy Davis” are meant to highlight a common experience of crisis, despite the fact that “shared experiences in the realm of the social do not necessarily index shared positions in the realm of the structural” (269). But, as Wilderson points out, the three-point lighting in Monster’s Ball that bathes many of the white characters is absent for the black ones, and its absence positions them on the outside even as the film diegetically would seem to center them. The structural aspects of the film work against accepting the very “value of drama” that Wilderson argues one must resist since it is “underwritten by the inspiration of the personal pronoun we...[that] papers over any contemplation of violence as a structuring matrix—and weds us to the notion of violence as a contingent event” (249). Rather, it is the deaths of her black husband and son that are the conditions under which the figure of the “mulatta” Leticia (played by Halle Berry) can be, like Clinton in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead (1992), structurally adjusted and placed with the “human” fold. And, we might think, given the death of Hank’s son, the post-racial future may be secured through Hank and Leticia’s possible future hybrid child.

Writing on “Savage” cinema (the second section in the book and defined as cinema directed by a “North American Indian and where the film’s narrative strategies intend for its ethical dilemma (or dilemmas) to be shouldered by a central figure (or ensemble cast) that is Indian” [28]) and Chris Eyre’s Skins (2002) as well as the work of thinkers and writers like Vine Deloria, Ward
Churchill, and Leslie Marmon Silko, Wilderson identifies genocide as that antagonistic violence placing the savage’s irreplaceable suffering on the side of the black and locates how it is rejected in the works under discussion here in favor of a discourse of sovereignty or repair on the level of conflict. A reading of *Almanac of the Dead* and, in particular, Clinton, whom, Wilderson shows, must be “structurally adjusted” and thereby differentiated from other blacks (made safe for and from sovereignty), brings home his points that, while the novel and *Skins* make clear the suffering of Native Americans, both film and written text stutter when confronted with black suffering. They have no language for it. That is, despite acknowledging the gratuitous violence of their relation to the master/settler and therefore commonality with blacks, the Native American filmmakers, novelists, and theorists under discussion here nonetheless come to share with whites the “negrophobia” that posits blackness as a problem more dangerous than settler/master genocidal drives and as a “vicarious, disfiguring, joyful pleasure, passionately enabling as well as substitutively dead” (240). In particular, in Eyre’s *Skins*, Wilderson reads the film’s positioning of the characters Mr. Green Laces and Black Lodge Boy and their performances of empty but threatening and sexually promiscuous black style as the real threat to Native sovereignty. Finally, grounding us in this historical moment, Wilderson means for us to understand that all celebration or mourning or indifference of and to “post-blackness” aside, “The election of Barack Obama does not mitigate the claim that this is a taciturn historical moment. Neoliberalism with a Black face is neither the index of a revolutionary advance nor the end of anti-Blackness as a constituent element of U.S. antagonisms” (4).

Both Wilderson’s and Nyong’o’s works attend to the possibilities and risks of, and claims to, blackness as constitutive and as one of the terms that joins sexuality and entertainment (cinema, performance, visual art, violent subjection, law). But, whereas sexuality is often implicit in Wilderson’s analysis (as in, for example, the infamous “just make me feel good scene” sex scene with Hank and Leticia in *Monster’s Ball*), it is explicit in Nyong’o’s “re-open[ing of] the fraught relations between race and sexuality in the African American past” (100). What I have earlier called the queerness of blackness (lack of “proper” signifying power in terms of sex and gender, monstrosity, malleability, and possibility) that is implicit is Wilderson is made explicit in Nyong’o. Nyong’o’s *The Amalgamation Waltz: Performance and the Ruses of Memory* begins with our current political moment in which many make the claim that the election of a “black” or “mixed race” (by which one means immediate parentage) president signals
a watershed in US race relations and rewrites the color line. Nyong'o is concerned with the enabling “pleasures” of the fugitive/furtive capacities of blackness, with the “we,” and with what evidence the black body can bear, produced as it is within what he terms “the circum-Atlantic fold as the uncanny remainder of slavery and freedom” (22), “the hollow of a fold within which many of our conceptualizations of race, inheritance, and hybridity were formulated” (18). To foreground “mixed race” is to foreground sex and link to histories of slavery and lynching and, therefore, the histories of staging sex and violence as pleasure, punishment, and entertainment. With a focus on minstrelsy and other queered performances, along with the deployment of the hybrid child, Nyong’o explores the figurative and fugitive capacities of blackness (it is the “value,” or lack of value, of blackness that positions the hybrid to do this work). Following his circum-Atlantic fold, Nyong’o engages Foucault’s instrumentality, Bakthin’s carnivaleque, and Žižek’s “national Thing” and parallax view. In each chapter, we see how the “hybrid” is racialized and gendered, produced, performed, claimed, disciplined, delayed, and deployed, both a future, past, present, and absent specter.

The introduction begins with a discussion of Obama and the positioning of him as not really black by some of his black American conservative critics (in particular, Debra Dickerson—who wrote *The End of Blackness* [2004]—and Stanley Crouch). In their rejection of Obama’s ability to signify blackness as they argue it is “understood” in the US, as those black people descended from Africans captured and enslaved in West Africa, Nyong’o locates both a “usurpation of the word black for the US” and their (Crouch, Dickerson and others who espoused this view) attachment to Žižek’s “our national Thing” or “that force shaping the nation as the source of our enjoyment” via a peculiar embrace of the terror of slavery not as terror but as cultural heritage (4). That is, Crouch and Dickerson embrace slavery not as history and historical forces but as culture. Through reading a series of “historical flashpoints” that begin with the Boston Massacre and the problem of finding Crispus Attucks’s body both absent and present in visual and other representations of this revolutionary moment (and what that not-finding might augur), and ending with the 2007 ripped-from-the-headlines theater performance of Thomas Bradshaw’s *Strom Thurmond is Not a Racist: A Play (Satire)* (1985), Nyong’o identifies and investigates the anxiety along with the competing and contradictory investments in a prospective and retrospective embrace and rejection of “mixed race” as legacy and transcendent future as much longer, wider, and stranger than previously explored. This is what Nyong’o theorizes as “the
circum-Atlantic fold,” a temporal and visual metaphor for a collapse of time, space, and the means by which “[b]etween the potential and performance of black freedom,” a future perfect “we” is imagined in the form of the “hybrid child” who would secure a post-race future that has always been coming into existence (10). This imagining of the hybrid child though also entails a “structural adjustment” of unruly black bodies. Put another way, the historical flashpoints Nyong’o explores revolve around the policing of black bodies, the spaces through which they can and cannot pass, the postures and performances they can and cannot embody, and their absent presence.

Nyong’o introduces the first chapter with an investigation of the book housed by London’s Wellcome Library that claims to be made of human skin—the “tanned black skin” of the “Negro whose Execution caused the War of Independence” (33)—this (not) skin is (falsely) supposed to belong to Crispus Attucks. Present and absent, remembered and forgotten, Attucks’s death is enacted in performances both meant to secure the (soon-to-be birth of the) nation while contesting and restaging the place in it of those, like him, pushed to the margins and buried in the archive. Where and how does one locate the missing presence of blacks and black performances in the historical and visual (and historico-visual) representations of the making of the US? Nyong’o does so by way of “the iconography of the Boston Massacre” (41) and the contested life and death of Attucks, escaped slave, hiding in plain sight in multiple and competing representations, and by reading him, and by extension the slave and the black, in terms of Agamben’s “state of exception” (40). Attucks was both everywhere and nowhere, the constitutive outside against and through which the nation would constitute and reconstitute itself. For Nyong’o, “Attucks’s story is not only that of a circum-Atlantic body instated by revolutionary nationalism but also of a hybrid object between red and black moving fugitively across a landscape” (41). It is, indeed, the particular embodiedness (escaped slave, part Native American) of these movements that mark them as fugitive or furtive in the current lexicon of stop-and-frisk.

The terrible specters and spectacles of black sexuality and entertainments arise in multiple forms in Nyong’o’s text. In the second chapter, Nyong’o positions amalgamation as an “American keyword” as he studies the consequences of sexual speech and charts the relation “between moral panic and public culture,” reminding those who would conflate amalgamation and miscegenation in order to rescue the term for the present that amalgamation was not a benign descriptive practice but a “political
deployment of sexuality through which American subjects were
gendered and racialized” (71). He then details how shame circu-
lates in the circum-Atlantic and how both it and respectability are
deployed individually and through association in order to produce
and discipline dandies, abolitionists, minstrels, not to mention two
“confidence men” and one “painted lady,” the black antislavery
activist David Ruggles, and the black transvestite sex worker Peter
Sewally. This is one exemplary reopening of the relation between
sexuality and race that, as Nyong’o notes, has too often been
decided in favor of a unity and respectability that aim to rewrite
the sexual traumas of slavery as trauma and not black complicity
with and participation in white sexual exploitation and enjoyment.
Nyong’o “resituates” this historiography to make room for those
black actors, like Sewally, who refused to be disciplined and
shamed. In the end, Sewally, whose “excessive visibility,” “[l]ike
other queer subjects, . . . has ironically helped ensure his invisibil-
ity to a posterity that has considered him too strange to be true,”
again shares space with Ruggles as each performs versions of
respectability that unsettle the category itself (100). Like Attucks,
the evidence of Sewally’s body is accepted and not accepted,
convincing in its performance and monstrous, and simultaneously in
and out of the (black) archive. Nevertheless, Attucks’s recovery by
black abolitionists and activists like William Cooper Nell and his
place in black collective memory are contrasted with the disap-
pearance of the queer Nell and Sewally from many “respectable”
black archives. Nell emerges here as an important figure, and his
“axiom that a colored man never gets justice done him in the
United States, except by mistake” provides for Nyonggo’s text (and
our time) a potent “vernacular insight into the state of exception”
(59). So central to the enjoyment of our “national Thing,” the
black is constitutively outside of the protection of the law.
Next Nyong’o reads blackface minstrelsy’s dissemination of
a “recognizably American” “lingua franca” (108) and focuses both
on blackface minstrelsy’s “heisted image” of a blackness “that did
not exist prior to its theft but that was constituted through its theft”
and its surrogated whiteness (112). “The riches of black fun
accrued not only to the performer as culture hero but also to a
popular audience organized around what would come to be called
the possessive investment in whiteness” (109). In taking up amal-
gamation as historical momentum—as potent metaphor for trans-
gression as it operates within a “deployment of sexuality and a
project of racialized governmental” (103)—this chapter offers a
textured reading of minstrelsy, Frederick Douglass’s complex
engagement with it, and questions of performances of (black)
respectability in a circum-Atlantic public sphere. Douglass
recognized white supremacy, black subjection, theft, and money-making in minstrelsy’s black portrayals even as he recognized in white enjoyment of these performances an inclusion in the “national popular” and an attachment to blackness (in the performance of an affective connection) not lived out on the level of structure. Particularly useful here in thinking through past and present is Nyong’o’s re-situating of Douglass’s relation to Scotland as a kind of dis-identification that allows him to realign Scotland, so central to the symbols of the Confederacy, with the antislavery North and to make use of Robert Burns’s Scots English “as a hostile weapon against both abstract liberalism and racial particularism” (132). “At stake,” in this complicating of history and black responses to minstrelsy “is the image of black culture in historical perspective” (114).

Nyong’o then turns to “history-making as a cultural practice in the present” (135) and to the work of such contemporary visual, installation, and performance artists and playwrights as John Sims, Fred Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Sanford Biggers. Following Darby English (How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness [2007]), Nyong’o thinks through a “black representational space in memory” via something like an embodied “pedagogy of memory” (143) in which, in occupying and exploring how events are remembered, one risks becoming a “buffoon of the past” (136) (by, for example, either attempting to “correctly” embody that which cannot be embodied—to memorize memory—or by daring to be wrong like Sims’s bars and stars rendered in the red, black, and green). The works he discusses “pose blackness as exception, included in the repository from which it was nonetheless excluded” (147) and make their claims on memory in two directions: through sarcasm and by willing to be productively wrong in enacting, (over)writing, and (over)performing memory. Nyong’o’s joining of a reading of black representational space in memory and black collective memory meets up with both Alexander’s and Wilderson’s search for a language with explanatory power through his language of (practicing history) as a “negative heritage” that does not “abandon a hope of futurity, but that futurity is not the social democratic hope of gradual inclusion and improvement, but . . . cataclysmic irruption” (164).

Both Wilderson and Nyong’o powerfully attend to antiblackness and blackness as states of exception as they implicitly and explicitly mine the conjunctions of blackness, sexuality, and entertainment. Wilderson’s ruse of analogy and Nyong’o’s ruse of memory offer readers powerful ways of knowing, reading, and possibly rupturing the carceral continuum of black life made manifest in the proliferation of black subjection and white
heteronormative subjectification through the staging of suffering black life. The theoretical positions and stakes laid out in these books have shaped my understanding of recent examples of violence: from the murder of Trayvon Martin to the jailing of the transgender woman CeCe McDonald in a men’s prison after being found guilty of manslaughter in protecting herself from rape and now imprisoned in a way as to make her vulnerable to the very thing she fought back to avoid. The death of Martin spawned the meme “Travyoning,” which belies the “we” that the liberal chants of “I am Trayvon Martin” and the donning of hoodies would instantiate, insofar as some young white people posting pictures of themselves splayed in a posture of death, wearing hoodies and bearing skittles and iced tea, find his death “rich in black fun” and figurative possibility. The meme, though, may also point to a space, as Douglass found with minstrelsy, to disrupt a structural antiblackness (another “national Thing”) that the larger US culture refuses to acknowledge. Nyong’o’s theorizations of performances in the circum-Atlantic fold across a broad historical and cultural range, reminding readers that “efforts to ridicule the fictiveness of race—by showing it to be contingent rather than essential, constructed rather than a biological given—tend to run up against the obscene remainder of racial terror and enjoyment, that seems always to survive race’s theoretical demolishing” (173).

Notes

1. The recording of police brutality such as George Holliday’s recording of Rodney King’s beating is increasingly legislated against across the US.

2. This language of looking “for the join” comes from Toni Morrison’s Beloved. The character called Beloved repeatedly says that she is looking “to join” and “looking for the join.”

3. Lawrence Powell, Stacey Koon, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno were acquitted on all counts.

4. Seth Mydans reported in the New York Times that Koon said: “‘He’s like a bobo doll,’ he said, pointing to the blurry figure of Mr. King. ‘Ever hit one? Comes back and forth, back and forth. That’s exactly what he’s doing. Get him down on the ground. Prone is safe. Up is not. That is what we’re trying to do is keep him on the ground, because if he gets up it’s going to be a deadly-force situation.’” In the first trial, “King was described as a ‘buffed-out’ ‘probable ex-con,’ ‘bear-like,’ ‘like a wounded animal,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘Combative,’ and ‘equate[d] . . . with a monster.’ Closing defense statements continually named a ‘we,’ referring to the non-black racial composition of the Simi Valley Jury” (Alexander 80).
5. Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer, and Marlon Riggs, among others, have long made this point.

6. Though “blacks and Latinos were nine times more likely than whites to be stopped, [they were] no more likely to be actually arrested. The tactic yielded 762 guns, or about one-tenth of a percentage point of the total number of stops.” See Graham Rayman, “Watch Out for Those Furtive Movements,” The Village Voice 12 May 2010, 10 Aug. 2012. <http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2010/05/watch_out_for_t.php>.


10. Peterson begins the essay with the sentence: “Death seems to be the new black this year.” I would submit that there is nothing “new” about this.

11. Wilderson capitalizes and moves between each of these terms in order to indicate their status as structural positions.

Works Cited

Alexander, Elizabeth. “‘Can you be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video[s].” Public Culture 7.1 (1994): 77–94.


Nyong’o, Tavia. The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the


