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Black Geospatial Inquiry and Aesthetic Praxis: Toward a Theory and Method

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A growing and influential cohort of Black scholar–creatives are choosing to think, theorize, aesthetically practice, and articulate blackness (Black being and living) in excess of a settled Western racial logic (nonbeing) that produced it. I set forth to advance a paradigm of Black study for thinking and theorizing the intersections of Black livingness and its inherent fugitivity within and beyond chattel enslavement. By expanding on the concepts of Black compositional thought and wake work, I illuminate an assembly of metaphors and materialities, working collectively to articulate the overall, ongoing condition and circumstance of Black life as a predictable and constitutive aspect of existing in the shadows of antiblack violence. Juxtaposing Torkwase Dyson’s aesthetic practice in concert with Christina Sharpe’s theorization of reading metaphors of Black life in diaspora (the wake, the ship, the hold, the weather), I expose how creative production and Black consciousness serve as tools for refusing “death” and offer possibilities for living.

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For as long as social scientists have had their gaze on Black people, Black theorists have pointed out the disconnect between research findings and the complexity, fullness, and otherwise of Black life.

—Tichavakunda (2021, p. 6)

A review of the literature in the art education field reveals a paucity of research expressly devoted to Black studies frameworks, whereby blackness is operationalized from the positioning of radical corporeal ancestorship, specifically Black-centered theoretical and methodological perspectives. This centeredness refuses a Eurocentric and Euro-adjacent panopticism (voyeurism), which situates blackness as simply an object to be observed and studied. In the past decade, however, several strands of scholarship in art education by Black thought leaders have devoted attention to theories and pedagogy of Black study, including Afrocentrism, Afrofemcentrism, Black feminism, and Afrofuturism (Acuff, 2018, 2020; Bey, 2011; Coleman, 2020; G. Wilson, 2014). These approaches, while not new, are instrumental contributions by Black art educators to the field of art education and offer an intervention to myopic entanglements with and understandings of racialized and historically subjugated human diasporic conditions.

Scholars and activists in the arts in education have recently called out the art education field for its complacency and complicitness, specifically in matters of antiblack racism, and have invoked creative resistance and alternate pathways, harnessing improvisational approaches and modalities rooted in Black culture (Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts

and Education [crea+e],¹ 2020). Traditions rooted in improvisation (Moten, 2003) “have been counterposed to elite or high culture” (Hall, 2006, p. 472) and foreclosed to widescale legitimization yet have served as sites of insurgency, fugitivity, and liberation (Brand, 2011; Gumbs, 2020; Hartman, 2019; Philip, 2011; Sharpe, 2016). Here, Hall (2006) also made a point about hegemony advancing that minoritized ways of being and knowing (onto-epistemologies) are always sites of/for contestation and that “the ordering of... aesthetic morals, social aesthetics [are] the orderings of culture” (p. 472), which are also the circumstance of power dynamics. Put differently, historically marginalized onto-epistemologies suffer the precarity and negotiation of exclusion or commodification² and consumption by dominant discourses in service of supremacist (neoliberal) capitalist gains that are constitutive of ongoing systemic antiblack racism. Rooted in longer traditions of Black study, this article elaborates aesthetical approaches of radical ancestorship for care-fully tending to blackness, geospatiality, and liberatory praxes. The creative works of abstractionist painter Torkwase Dyson and English literature and Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe are meant to serve as my introduction of an aesthetic approach to Black study, offering a path forward through their grammar of abstraction and metaphor.

Tending to (Anti)Blackness: A Critical Human Geo-Logic

I’ve culled a geometric shape language
from histories of Black liberation

strategies to develop a system/structure/scaffolding of self-expression.

—Torkwase Dyson, *Art Daily*

Prevailing approaches of attending to ways in which (anti)blackness can be understood in and through creative modalities have emerged in North America and Canada since the 1980s (Hartman, 2019; McKittrick, 2006, 2021; Sharpe, 2016). These approaches take notice of the genocidal, ecocidal, and biocentric logics of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism and breach them by invoking that blackness is an analytics of hegemonic invention that can be disrupted (McKittrick, 2021; Wynter, 1989). Black feminist creatives and writers who advance these approaches firmly lodge themselves within a contemporary Black diasporic frame and have disrupted these logics by insisting on otherwise world-making and aesthetic distillations through radical ancestorship (Goffe, 2021; Hartman, 2019; Philip, 2011; Sharpe, 2016).

This article attends to Rolling's charge (2020) that arts and creative problem solving serve as generators of new and better paradigms for living and inspire these questions: How might we engage radical ancestorship, critical human geography, and environmental humanities to understand blackness and self-liberation within an overall climate of antiblackness? How might one articulate and conjure an aesthetic praxis and pedagogy of self-liberation through engagement with radical ancestorship?

It has been the work of scholars in the humanities, critical human geography, and the (visual) arts who have most inspired the way I currently think about how "various systemic prejudicial practices and the deeply embedded power structures that sustain them" (Rolling, 2022, para. 4) refuse legitimacy to blackness. I am suggesting that this trifecta—environmental humanities, geography, and the arts—when thought

together are generative sites of inquiry, theorization, and profound grappling with an "industry of objecthood" (McKittrick, 2021, p. 12). Each contributes to this project in different ways, but when assembled together they open up a world of meaning, critical thought, radical theory making, and aesthetic insurrection. I agree with McKittrick (2021) in claiming that "black creatives illuminate in their scientifically creative and creatively scientific artworlds [a humanizing set of aesthetic gestures] while also drawing attention to the disruptive work that black feminists and black scholars do" (p. 2).

Through the slow reading of Christina Sharpe's ovaric³ text, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*⁴ alongside the aesthetic practices of abstractionist painter Torkwase Dyson, I seek to illuminate a praxis that centralizes an "imperative of a 'perspective of struggle'" (Wynter, 1989, p. 640)—a Black diasporic theory-method/method-theory practice. I argue that Sharpe (2016) and Dyson (The Cooper Union, 2019⁵; Graham Foundation, 2018; SXSW, 2021; M. Wilson, 2019), situated within a tradition of Black study,⁶ serve as interlocutors in pursuit of exploring liberated modalities of Black life in the wake of the enduring afterlife of enslavement and coloniality (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). When figured together centrally, the work of these creatives offers new paradigms for thinking about notions of diasporic and environmental antiblackness and what actions might constitute liberatory forms of praxis in excess of quotidian, extraordinary and mundane, acts of violence.

I foreground this work by distilling elements of a positioning that does not attempt to explain or resolve questions of Black exclusion and terror, per se. Instead, I suggest that Black life is "the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence, but is the rich remainder" (Williamson, 2016, p. 9). Through radical ancestorship work, both Sharpe and Dyson

offer care-full and complex analytics of Black life and agency expressed in otherwise Black ways of thinking, being, knowing, and doing.

I introduce, through their work, a specific grammar,⁷ theory, and analytic of contemporary Black study for the field of art education. Essential to the success of Black study for art education is the demand to dislodge Eurocentric logics of surveillance of legibility in and of aesthetic form (crea+e, 2020). Regarding freedom and Black joy, education scholar Bettina Love (2019) offered “composing, spittin’ rhymes, and/or dancing is ... joy and resistance” (p. 98). The success of Black study for art education compels a rearticulation of authority, power, agency, and knowledge production and representation to grapple with the indefinable range of blackness (from where and whom we know) and the weightiness of its circumstance. I argue that radical ancestorship can be traced back to roots of Black radical tradition freedom struggle and assert that Black people of the diaspora have always needed to think, negotiate, and insist life in excess of ontological negation and terror (Quashie, 2012; Warren, 2018). Sharpe’s and Dyson’s works allow a way to think about how to mobilize analytics of Black study (i.e., Black consciousness) to invent, curate, compose, build, and protect spaces of and for Black joy, agency, and liberation.

A Black(ened) Consciousness and Grammar for Abstraction

com·po·si·tion \,kām-pə-’zi-shən\
noun

the way that people or things are arranged; a fugitive plan and/or strategy for liberation

Torkwase Dyson’s aesthetic practices are mobilized through radical ancestorship and are concerned with subverting notions that abstraction is nonnarrative (Long, 2019).

Trained by legendary artist David Driskell, she organizes her ideas around history, geography, environmental humanities, blackness, and Black resistance. With these concepts in mind, over time she has developed a grammar of abstraction (visual system and framework) that she refers to as Black compositional thought. Positioning herself from this grammar and logic has allowed her to explore a Black geospatial history⁸ through improvisation and composition of two- and three-dimensional aesthetic meditations. Broadly speaking, Black compositional thought conveys the liberation strategies Black people make for themselves through critical thought and spatial navigation of their environments. It allows one to think about the spaces in which one finds themselves, such as precarity and safety, and it compels inventing new aesthetic forms that are imbued with radical ancestorship, reclaiming historical knowledge and experience of space and structures, and insisting on liberated praxes (i.e., fugitivity) in the wake of quotidian environmental racisms.

Dyson’s practice activates concepts of environmentalism and the built environment alongside notions of social and political concern. From these grounds she conjures a system of shape and form as a way to think with and narrate stories of Black self-emancipation (Figure 1). In her own words, “the shapes that make the Black” (Graham Foundation, 2018, 00:09:40) result in a geometric equation of improvisatory action¹⁰ that she invokes to think toward what translates as an ancestral being/known (interiority). It would appear that Dyson’s work is also in conversation with the notion of *Blackness as abstraction* (the Black subject/object) that is made central in colonial ontology and antiblackness debates.¹¹

Curator, writer, and Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe is concerned with related logics. Through her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Sharpe, 2016), she provides a dense and capacious framework for thinking about and with the semiotics of



Figure 1. Torkwase Dyson, *Tuning (Hypershape, 200-410)*, 2018. Gouache, ink, and pen on paper, 210 parts, each 9 × 12; 25 × 7 ft. 6 in. overall.⁹

transatlantic enslavement through the lens of environmental humanities (land- and oceanic-based frameworks). Through these frameworks she asks, “How do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness of Black life, Black life insisted from death?” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 17). Sharpe’s work (2010, 2016) offers powerful meditations on visual and literary aesthetic forms that interrogate diasporic Black(ened) consciousness and locations of Black being—her metaphors of wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather are instrumental in this meditation. Sharpe’s incisive writing style and curatorial practice initiates and confronts quotidian visual representations of Black life that comprise what she refers to as an “orthography of the wake” (2016, pp. 20–21), resulting in a theory and praxis of being Black in diaspora.

I argue that, together, the works of Dyson and Sharpe highlight and form a composition of the possibilities of a praxis and intellectual project for understanding blackness, in excess

of capture and death. Out of their aesthetic praxes emerges a nexus of engagement with environmental humanities, geography, and Black study. This way of working, being, living, knowing, and analyzing results is what I call a Black geospatial aesthetic inquiry.

A geospatial aesthetic inquiry harnesses the disciplines of environmental humanities, critical human geography, and the arts to formulate an approach, framework, and means to examine and represent (a grammar), the ways in which the human is shaped by and shapes their environment. As such, a Black geospatial aesthetic praxes harnesses the logics of race, in *longue durée*, as a social and political construction (Omi & Winant, 2014), from which a contemporary aesthetic articulation of blackness can be advanced.

My methods for this project include close readings of Sharpe’s (2016) text alongside watching numerous talks and presentations given by Dyson, as well as listening to published podcasts and art journal interviews

with the artist, and closely reading scholarly articles. This proposed analytic (theory-method/method-theory) foregrounds emancipatory strategies reflected in Black radical traditions of the past and present (Givens, 2021; Love, 2019). This inquiry thinks across the relationships of blackness, geographical (environmental) space, and forms of aesthetic illegibility (abstraction) beyond, but not at the exclusion of, traditional forms of the figurative.¹² This inquiry builds on recent movements in Black studies that emphasize fugitivity as a tactic of reenvisioning freedom and reimagining empirics of Black life (Givens, 2021; Hartman, 2019), as well as interest in and engagement with aesthetic renderings of blackness (Camp, 2021; Hartman, 2019; Moten, 2003; Sharpe, 2016).

This practice of (attending to and being with) Black life (McKittrick, 2021)—a Black geospatial aesthetic inquiry—proposes a way of imagining Black life and otherwise world-making (King et al., 2020) as one that requires the audacity to narrate a history-present of Black life from the position of abstraction and in excess of preoccupation with social and physical death. Moving beyond being the carrier of terror's embodiment (blackness) I proclaim (boldly!) is a radical act. What follows serves as a brief introduction to and an application of Sharpe's (2016) wake work and Dyson's Black compositional thought as examples of geospatial arts praxes. By placing in conversation Torkwase Dyson's visual system and Christina Sharpe's orthography and curation of "registers of the wake," I illuminate how these scholars care-fully, slowly, and ancestrally attend to and compose Black life through abstraction and metaphor as "narration" and disruption of an antiblackness framing.

Composing Through Registers of the Wake: Theory-Method, Method-Theory

If ... we think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness) ... we might continue to imagine new ways to live in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

In this section, I bring Sharpe's (2016) theorization of wake work and Dyson's concept of Black compositional thought into sharper focus. By applying what Sharpe (2016) referred to as "registers" (p. 20) of the wake—the wake, the ship, the hold, the weather—I introduce aspects of Black(ened) consciousness and creative production, which offer possibilities for attending to Black living (in) diaspora, offering a way forward. Specifically, I isolate three sets of narratives of enslavement and self-emancipation as represented in Dyson's works: the narratives of Harriet Jacobs,¹³ Henry "Box" Brown,¹⁴ and Eugene Williams,¹⁵ each of whom had been enslaved but were able to imagine life through fugitive and liberatory acts, which are visualized by Dyson's shape-system. The following sections elaborate four separate and distinct framings of what I see as Black geospatial arts praxes.

Wakes: A Slow "Being With" and Relation to Ancestralship

To be in the wake ... is to recognize that [Black people] are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only*

known to ourselves and to each other *by* that force.

—Sharpe (2016, p. 16)

In her conceptualization of “wakes,” Sharpe (2016) offered four instantiations. She first describes the close succession and “deathly repetition” (2016, p. 2) of her own family members and what it means to sit with someone as they die. In doing this, she demonstrates the important carework of sitting together in the pain and sorrow of Black death as a way of marking, remembering, and celebrating a life—a homegoing.¹⁶ Her second capacious presentation of wakes as a state of wakefulness/consciousness unfolds as she describes an ongoing migration and search for opportunities and strivings for humanization among peoples of a Black diaspora. Both instantiations refer to this third example and conceptualization of wake as an aftermath of “racism, the engine that drives the ship of state’s national and imperial projects” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 3). In this instance, she alludes to the trace left on the water’s surface following the path of a ship in transit. Her final conceptualization of wake refers back to this engine, which propels liberty and enslavement and leaves traces of precarious life and death circumstances, “in the wake of its purposeful flow” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 3). When thought together, these instantiations position blackness in the overallness, the everywhere, the anywhere of antiblackness: *the wake*.

To be positioned *in* the wake, by Sharpe’s (2016) theorization, means that “while [Black people] are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to [these] overwhelming force[s], we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by [those] force[s]” (p. 134). Here, I see an opportunity to ask these ontological questions: What does it mean to be and know in the wake, in excess of predicted antiblack violence? As an artist? Researcher?

Torkwase Dyson’s practice may help to illuminate this.

Her self-described improvisational practice and shape-system pushes beyond superficial abstraction. Dyson’s abstract drawings, paintings, and sculptures direct us to the political potential of shape and surface to imagine and build new worlds. In a conversation with Sharpe, Dyson explains the “shapes that make the Black” (Graham Foundation, 2018, 00:09:40) are decidedly an equation and result of her deep thinking with narratives of enslavement and captivity (racism), fugitivity, and self-liberation.

She insists on a slow process¹⁷ of thinking with relation to ancestorship, imagining and imaging liberation, and forming new stories related to spatiality and materiality in ways that challenge existing frameworks for thinking blackness. She offers, “How do I... get close to these histories [of capture] and the forming of spatial strategies [of the enslaved]... and connecting [those] to spatial strategies that we will need in the future?” (Graham Foundation, 2018, 00:11:32).

I channel Sharpe’s (2016) conception of wake work that “Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing” (p. 11). It is from this existence that I argue alongside Dyson’s deep contemplation of Black fugitive acts and question what is at stake for Black liberation from environments rooted in antiblackness and guided by a “racial calculus and political arithmetic entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). Dyson’s abstractions radically imagine Black life beyond figural representation and are described by Sharpe (Graham Foundation, 2018) as a “profound grappling with blackness... and are filled with so much air” (00:07:31, 00:07:57).

From the positions of history, geography, space, blackness, and Black resistance, doing wake work reflects what Black people are often called on to do—imagine liberation (self and others) from quotidian and gratuitous

conditions of ontological and epistemological negation. How might art education reckon with conditions of ontological and epistemological negation that show up in classrooms, studios, and conferences? I return to this question later.

Trans* Atlantic: Precious Cargo

Precious cargo. Shipped. Held in the hold. ... What does it mean to be held there?

—g. wilson (2022, p. 38)

In popular culture “precious cargo” often signifies the value of life; a reference to infant humans, more specifically. This assembly of words conjures peel-and-stick logos and signage intended for automobile windows and T-shirts worn by those whose bodies carry human life. In doing wake work, it may also evoke a consciousness of propertied trade arrangements within a global capitalist economy. Sharpe (2016) implored us to think

about the containerization of humans in the hold of ships during trans* Atlantic sea voyages.¹⁸ The onset of insurance trade economies (Armstrong, 2010) also allows us to think with Spillers (2003), who wrote that Africans packed into the hold of the ship were marked according to Eurocentric definitions—not as male and female, but as differently sized and weighted property. Dyson’s work responds to this history, however, and exceeds this notion of containerization to advance narratives of liberation. Although Dyson’s approach draws connections to bitter histories, it does not centralize the grief that accompanies it.

In her Water Table Series (Figure 2) exhibit (Maxwell Davidson Gallery, 2018), Dyson’s work serves as a letter to Henry “Box” Brown. Brown’s infamous escape from enslavement by mailing himself in a crate from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1849 is the understructure for Dyson’s homage. Cervenak (2018)

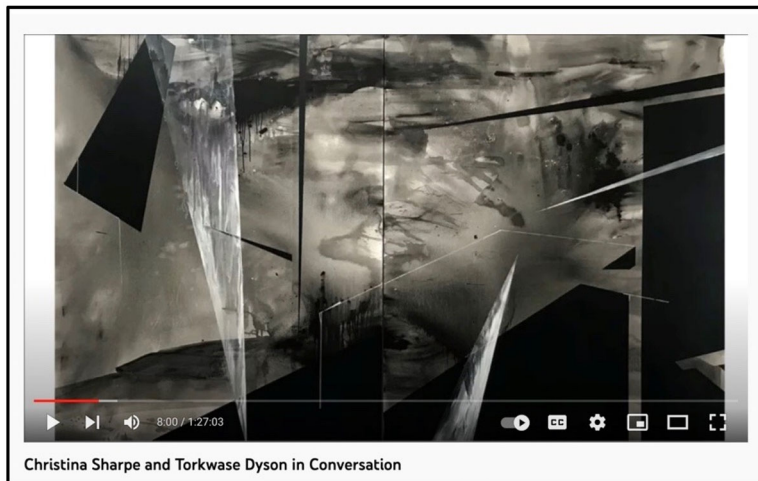


Figure 2. Torkwase Dyson, *Otherwise (Water Table Series)*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 96 × 144 in.¹⁹

extended the exhibit curator's sentiments by sharing that perhaps Dyson's painted letter is "a proposition that perhaps fugitively moves from a salutation into some undecoded wayward lines, drips, watercolored blossoms, and matte black trapezoids donning each of Dyson's canvases" (p. 287). The artist's website states:

Dyson looks to spatial liberation strategies from historical and contemporary perspectives, seeking to uncover new understandings of the potential for more livable geographies.... Through abstract paintings, Dyson grapples with ways space is perceived and negotiated. Explorations of how the body unifies, balances, and arranges itself to move through natural and built environments become both expressive and discursive structures within the work. (Dyson, n.d., paras. 1–3)

In this sense, Dyson's work exposes the tensions between past and present histories but refuses simple abstracted versions of knowledge as storied by those untethered by the logics of propertied containment. Brown's escape represented much more than just an individual accomplishment; it was an act that may have inspired others to seek their own freedom. Dyson's work uses architectural elements situated in the context of line, shape, and surface, and yet these elements are never exhaustive and never fully resolved into an image.

This easily aligns with McKittrick's (2021) articulation, "What is meaningful, then, are the ways in which black people... [are] continually entangling and disentangling varying narratives and tempos and hues that, together, invent and reinvent knowledge" (p. 5). Dyson's abstracted geo-aesthetic narratives conceptualize and compose the interplay of a people and place—a conversation between

the land, sea, space, and humankind through which we discover ourselves as always snared within the social, political, and ecological; that perhaps, human knowledge (perspectives of Black struggle for liberation) is internalized and conditioned by the environment of both symbolic and actual materialities. Such material dimensions become the interior spaces from which Black life resides.

Hold: The Shapes That Make the Black

Depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity.

—Sharpe (2016, p. 14)

Sharpe (2016) insisted that to do wake work, "we must think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways that the manifold representations of blackness become symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death" (p. 21). In this quote she elaborates a semiotics of the slave ship hold.²⁰ Her examples point toward the containerization of subjugated bodies and include the prison, the womb,²¹ and the school. What is at stake is recognizing the forced movements, regulation, and precarity of Black life in North American everyday living (neighborhoods, sidewalks, cars). To exist in the hold is to exist unprotected everywhere and nowhere all at once.

In reference to maritime law, blackness is thus constituted from and constitutes Middle Passage—propertied significations at the hands of the keepers of the hold (Brand, 2011; McKittrick, 2006; Philip, 2011; Sharpe, 2016) in all of its significations (precious cargo). Thus, and simultaneously, Black life must always insist on imagining new ways of living an unimaginable life. In doing wake

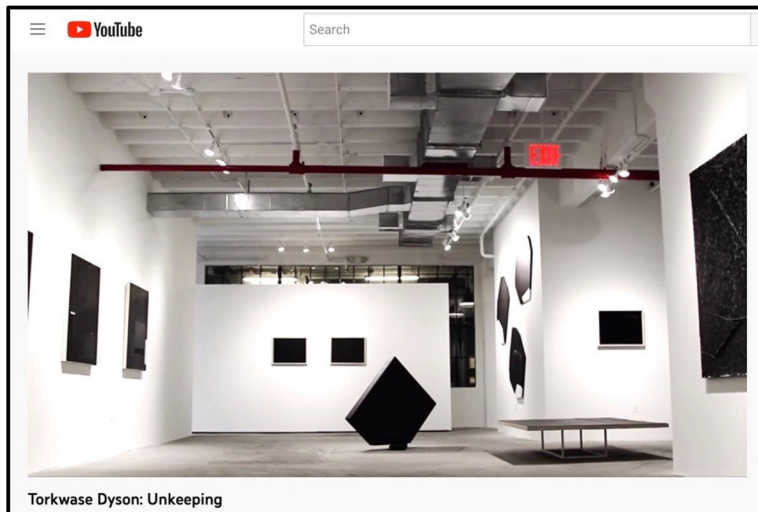


Figure 3. Torkwase Dyson, *Unkeeping (Garrett Series)*, 2016. Media/installation: drawings, paintings, and sculpture.²²

work, one might ask: What might thinking oneself out of containment look like?

Dyson's *Garrett Between* series provides possible answers (Figure 3). In her *Unkeeping* exhibit, Dyson depicts Harriet Jacobs's 1861 narrative of her escape from enslavement in the nook of a roof using rectangular surfaces painted matte-black. Jacobs (1861/1987) wrote that she hid in a slanted-roof garret for the better part of a decade. The highest part was 3 feet high and sloped down abruptly. Dyson describes Jacobs's self-emancipation as an example and practice of Black compositional thought. For Dyson the low light and shallow perspective of the painted surfaces is "intended to speak to Jacobs's sensory conditions" (as cited in Fowle, 2016, para. 4), or lack thereof. This is representative of her aims to transform modes of representing fugitivity and the clandestine (Long, 2019), or what Quashie (2012) might say is "conceptualizing an aesthetic imaginary

founded on black worldness" (p. 9). Dyson represents Black resistance and escape throughout history and describes her initial inspiration for the *Garrett Between* series as connected to deep study of Ida B. Wells²³ (1895). This series explores "how black women have used architecture for liberation" (Dyson, as cited in Meier, 2016, para. 5); the angles in the monochromatic paintings interpret Harriet Jacobs's garret where she hid from a predatory slaver.

The Overall Condition: Blackness and Spatiality

We revolt simply because... we can no longer breathe.

—Franz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*

The climate is antiblack. What atmospheric traces does it leave? How is the environment altered in this atmosphere? How does the

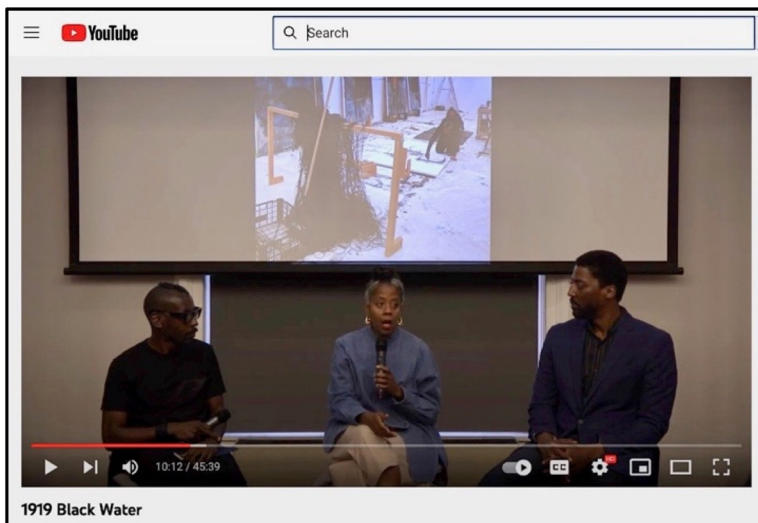


Figure 4. GSAPP Conversations: Torkwase Dyson, 1919 Black Water, 2019. Exhibition.

environment alter the bodies subjected to this atmosphere? What happens before subjection? These are inquiries that Black compositional thought might tend to in concert with wake work as it relates to Sharpe's register of the weather. Sharpe (2016) asserted that blackness and the weather is the condition of the overall, everywhere and everything. It is the "totality of our environments" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 104). A singularity. An asterisked life (Sharpe, 2016; g. wilson, 2022; g. wilson et al., 2021). Ongoing nonindictments remind us of the wake of state murders of Black people²⁴ *simply walking, simply driving, simply shopping, simply sleeping, simply jogging, simply being*. The social life of antiblackness presents and addresses an embodied location and positioning specific to witnessing and experiencing gratuitous state-sanctioned death.

Dyson's work also questions what things happen in lives "before subjection," by

thinking about deep intimacy, love, care, play, breath, "air" (D'Aguiar, 1997, p. 3), and what it might mean to live, otherwise. These sentiments are articulated by the artist in the narrative that accompanies her solo show titled 1919: Black Water²⁵ (Columbia GSAPP, 2019; Miller, 2019). In this third and final fugitive tale, Dyson reflects (Figure 4) on the murder of a Black teenager named Eugene Williams in Chicago on July 27, 1919. She discusses that while playing on a homemade raft in Lake Michigan, Eugene and his friends unknowingly crossed the border of the lake prohibited to Black people. Dyson explains that a White man then assaulted them with rocks and killed Eugene. The incident sparked 5 days of Black protest and White terrorism throughout the city and became an integral part of a wave of racial violence spreading across the United States, which came to be known as the Red Summer. Dyson's exhibit

and homage to Eugene Williams, 1919: Black Water, permits us to return to this inquiry: What happens before subjection? Additionally, how might we understand self-liberation within a climate of antiblackness? Dyson's fidelity to Black compositional thought affords us to think about the moments prior to Williams's murder when he and friends were able to use their ingenuity to explore, improvise, and engineer a raft as a materialization of the desire to play and experience joy (M. Wilson, 2019). They experienced a moment of errantry, perhaps (Hartman, 2019). According to Dyson, the materiality of Black self-emancipation is constant (Graham Foundation, 2018).

To these ends, the practices of both Sharpe (2016) and Dyson (Graham Foundation, 2018) can be accessed and analyzed in relation to the *longue durée* (Walcott, 2021) of geography, history, materiality, composed and inhabited by blackness and spatiality—the overall environment, condition, and circumstance (the weather). It is needing to also think with the fact that one's DNA and kinetic energy is connected to the soil, because *strange fruit*²⁶ has been violated there and everywhere. In my mind, it is this positioning where one develops a Blackened knowledge (Brand, 2011). This knowledge is necessarily constituted by noticing and sensing the various registers of the wake: the everywhere and the all at once (Sharpe, 2016) and activated as a strategy for survival.

Considerations for Black Study

How might Black liberatory strategies be examined and understood within a climate of antiblackness? I would argue that the aesthetic praxes of both Sharpe (2016) and Dyson offer ways to take up this inquiry and enter a conversation with the broader discipline and early traditions of Black study. Over a century ago, Carter G. Woodson,

founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, set the trajectory in North America for what has become a capacious intellectual tradition.²⁷ This tradition solidified Black life as a legitimate area of study and since its official institutionalization in American higher education in the late 1960s,²⁸ a wide range of debates have shaped its current formations (Alkalimat, 2021; Rojas, 2010). Black studies is understood as the first academic field and discipline “created out of the masses-oriented protest and struggle tradition” (Carr, 2011, p. 190) for Black liberation. It has paved roads for the advancement of urgent social, political, and pedagogical interventions within a hegemonic White supremacist society and its many apparatuses. Its rigor is located in its commitment to the long struggle for global liberation from all forms of antiblack racism.²⁹

Institutionalization of Black studies in higher education set a path and precedent for multidimensional and intertransdisciplinary approaches to research, and as a discipline, engages a wide range of intellectual ecologies, such as philosophy, history, literature, politics, culture, the arts, and education. These intertransdisciplinary orientations allow a vast range of entry points into theoretical, methodological, and analytic framings of Black worlds and radical ancestorship that are ripe for art education to take up. Considering environmental humanisms, geography, and the arts justifies a call for such a response in the name of the epoch we have inhabited and continue to.

Art Education and Black Study

The knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world.

—Sharpe (2016, p. 22)

At this point I would like to suggest that a Black geospatial aesthetic inquiry as a theory-method considers how we, as scholars, educators, and researchers in the field of art education might think together blackness and spatial conditions (as Black consciousness), and how Black people in diaspora have always navigated, negotiated, and negated existing environmental systems of subjugation in education (Love, 2019) and in and through the arts in education (Wilson, 2018). How then might we activate a consciousness of diaspora—a “blackened consciousness” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22) in and through research, teaching, and expressive tendency? Or, as in Toni Morrison’s (1998) desire in writing *Paradise*, reconfigure blackness from the position of embodiment and radical ancestorship? These questions might be paired with deep study with and beyond the cases of self-liberation, as inspired by the geospatial conditions of Henry “Box” Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and Edward Williams. It requires sitting in the room with history (Brand, 2011), defending the dead (Sharpe, 2016), and refusing legibility. In this case, a Black geospatial aesthetic inquiry and praxis demands that we explore the notion of blackness as abstracted, and as an abstraction and a process of thought and methodological potential for aesthetically grappling with questions regarding liberation and the otherwise. M. NourbeSe Philip’s (2011), Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s (2020), and Dionne Brand’s (2011) writings are a wonderful example of this.

On the nature of the invention of blackness, its circumstance, and its attendant aesthetic textures, McKittrick (2021) explained, “Black worlds and black ways of being breach the heavy weight of dispossession ... because (songs, poems ... arts) are embedded with all sorts of liberatory cues” (p. 7). I argue that what is necessary for Black study in the arts in education is an invocation of what McKittrick (2021) referred to as “Black method” (p. 5),

which involves the rigorous, slow, and challenging practice of questioning the “work of capture, and the desire to capture something or someone” (p. 4). Black method is not satisfied with questions that result in prescriptive data-induced answers. Black method resides in the *longue durée* and results in bringing together capacious multiple texts across a range of temporalities that build on existing liberatory practices. In other words, a Black method is necessarily communal because it honors the ancestors.

In the context of research and pedagogy in and through (art) education, when an outsider attempts to engage with the inner life of the “black subject” as Quashie (2012) saw it, it engenders a lack of “access to ... selfhood beyond the public discourse of race” (p. 14). In this case, my elaboration of pairing the work of Dyson and Sharpe on which to meditate provides an orientation of Black study analytics that begins from the premise that at the hands of Black peoples, “liberation is [and has been] an already existing and ... ongoing collaborative expression of black humanity and black livingness” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 13). By briefly contextualizing this theorization within a longer tradition of the study of Black life, I illuminate how the field of art education has or has not grappled with Black-centered theorizations and methodologies, thus indicating how the field may derive benefit from not gatekeeping notions of legibility (crea + e, 2020) or resistance/liberation orientations. For art education, the need for new vocabularies as a way to think about articulating from the position of Black life can be provided through a legacy of Black intellectual tradition. This is a start.

How then might Black compositional thought and wake work inform our research, teaching, learning? Engagement with environmental humanities, geography, and racial ideologies (Omi & Winant, 2014) is central to a number of fields—and art

education should be no exception. In fact, it only seems fitting that an interdisciplinary field such as art education would benefit to regard humanities and geologic discourses in concert with blackness and aesthetic-based research practices. To be clear, I am not suggesting that humanities and geography be taught as stand-alone disciplines, but rather they provide useful frameworks for critically conceptualizing human interactions within any given environment, impacted by power structures that center Whiteness (Kraehe et al., 2018). I suggest these frameworks because in spaces imbued with radical ancestorship blackness is understood as not simply being situated within, but also co-constituting the environments that produced it and that which it inhabits.

This Work Is Felt, Lived, and Communal

Rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*.

—Sharpe (2016, p. 14)

Radical ancestry cannot be gleaned by writing an academic article, nor can it be learned by delivering a research paper presentation. It must be heartfelt, lived, and communal.

The research for and writing of this article took several years of sitting with and tending to podcast episodes, streaming video lectures, talks and presentations, online news articles, art journal interviews, and more. I was afforded the luxury of technology access to streaming video, due in part to the conveniences of virtual connectivity during COVID-19 restrictions. I believe this method of "sitting with and tending to" speaks to the slow practices and processes of wake work

and Black compositional thought. I see how Dyson's slow process of working, over time, is connected to the meditative and monastic, and how Sharpe's slow process of providing a provocative narrative of Black life in the wake of imminent death reflects the slowing down, caring for, and understanding that the climate has been consistently antiblack.

This article sought to introduce a paradigm of Black study for aesthetically thinking and theorizing the intersections of Black life and its inherent fugitivity within and beyond chattel enslavement, and imagining the afterlife of enslavement. By expanding on the concepts of Black compositional thought and wake work, I illuminated an assembly of metaphors and materialities, working collectively to articulate the overall ongoing condition and circumstance of Black life as a predictable and constitutive aspect of existing in the shadows of antiblack violence. Juxtaposing Torkwase Dyson's aesthetic practice in concert with Christina Sharpe's theorization of reading metaphors (*the wake, the ship, the hold, the weather*), I aimed to illuminate how creative production and Black consciousness may serve as tools for refusing "death" and offer possibilities for living in diaspora. These practices exemplify a refusal of the (outsider) voyeuristic gaze and consumption of Black life and blackness as a fungible commodity. Regarding her writing strategy, Toni Morrison (2017) noted, "I wanted to reconfigure blackness" (p. 65). It seems that a theorization and method for such livingness in excess of quotidian, extraordinary, and mundane acts of violence begin with refusal to be governed by logics of capture (Quashie, 2012). It is from this position that we share with one another how we translate what we inherit, invent, and add to the conversation³⁰ to imagine a more livable present.³¹

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Beloved; Ruha Benjamin; *Black revelry: In honor of the sugar shack*; Dionne Brand; Tina Campt; Derrais Carter; Amber C. Coleman; *The Dark Laboratory*; Julie Dash; *Daughters of the Dust*; *Dear Science: And Other Stories*; *The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey Into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred*; Torkwase Dyson; Ruth Wilson Gilmore; Tao Leigh Goffe; Alexis Pauline Gumbs; Saidiya Hartman; *I Can Drink the Distance*; *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*; *Listening to Images*; Tiffany Lethabo-King; *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade*; *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*; *A Map to the Door of No Return*; *M Archive: After the End of the World*; Katherine McKittrick; Toni Morrison; *Origin of Others*; M. NourbeSe Philip; Chanda Prescod-Weinstein; *Scenes of Subjection*; Christina Sharpe; *Spill*; Hortense Spillers; *Theory*; *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*; Sylvia Wynter; *ZONG!*

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Combahee River Collective.

² See also the concept “appropriation.”

- ³ Adjective: (of a work, event, moment, or figure) strongly influencing later developments; of or relating to a reproductive organ.
- ⁴ I am currently on my sixth reading of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.
- ⁵ The following citations reference various talks and conversations, from which I culled Torkwase Dyson's theories and methods of her named practice, *Black compositional thought*. GSAPP Conversations: Torkwase Dyson in conversation with Mabel Wilson, hosted by the Graduate School of Architecture and Preservation (GSAPP) at Columbia University; Graham Foundation: Torkwase Dyson in conversation with Christina Sharpe; SXSW: Torkwase Dyson in conversation with Mario Gooden (architect) and Andrés Jaque (curator).
- ⁶ Although a growing and influential cohort of Black studies scholars are choosing to think, theorize, aesthetically practice, and articulate blackness beyond "harming predilections of antiblackness" (Quashie, 2012, p. 1), to address their work comprehensively is beyond the scope of this article.
- ⁷ Including, but not limited to: fugitivity, care, liberation, Black geospatial history, ontological terror (see Wilderson [2010], Sexton [2015], Moten [2013]) otherwise world-making, Black method (McKittrick, 2021).
- ⁸ The stories of Black people liberating themselves, across time; tries to understand the condition of inventing under duress, inventing with materials around oneself, inventing while a systemic order of degradation is always happening; the simultaneity of knowing infrastructure, one's body weight, material. Systems that exist in relation to navigating those systems; abstraction as a way (vehicle) to understanding to knowing an experience and ecosystems.
- ⁹ Screenshot from a Graham Foundation-sponsored YouTube conversation with Christina Sharpe.
- ¹⁰ Improvisation as a way of working (the artist, herself) as well as a way of self-emancipation of enslaved Africans.
- ¹¹ See Afropessimism (Wilderson, 2020).
- ¹² There's long been a question of Black artists and abstraction and how one might form a language of abstraction while simultaneously imbuing it with radicality beyond the representational figure (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2021).
- ¹³ Harriet Jacobs was an African American writer whose autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, is now considered an American classic. Born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, she was sexually harassed by her enslaver. When he threatened to sell her children if she did not submit to his desire, she hid in a tiny crawl space under the roof of her grandmother's house that was so low she could not stand up in it. After staying there for 7 years, she finally managed to escape to the free North, where she was reunited with her children.
- ¹⁴ Henry "Box" Brown was a 19th-century Virginia slave who escaped to freedom at the age of 33 by arranging to have himself mailed in a wooden crate in 1849 to abolitionists in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For a short time, Brown became a noted abolitionist speaker in the northeast United States.
- ¹⁵ Reflects on the murder of a Black teenager named Eugene Williams in Chicago on July 27, 1919; also referenced as the "Red Summer."
- ¹⁶ Also, home "coming" celebrations at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are also known as occasions for celebrating Black life, revelry, and joy through various expressive tendencies (see, for instance, Jackson State University's *Sonic Boom of the South*). This also poses questions regarding the circulation of and profit from images of Black life/death and joy/pain (see conversation with Christina Sharpe, "What Does It Mean to be Black and Look at This? A Scholar Reflects on the Dana Schutz Controversy"; Mitter, 2017).
- ¹⁷ She refers to the monastic when describing this work (The Graham Foundation, 2018, 00:13:45)
- ¹⁸ The asterisk speaks to a range of configurations of Black being that take the form of translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transmogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation (by which process we might understand the making of bodies into

flesh and then into fungible commodities while retaining the appearance of flesh and blood), transmigration, and more (Sharpe, 2016, p. 30).

¹⁹ Screenshot from the Graham Foundation–sponsored YouTube conversation with Christina Sharpe (2018).

²⁰ The hold of a ship is an area beneath the deck that is used for storing cargo.

²¹ *Partus sequitur ventrem* (Latin—that which follows the womb) was a legal doctrine passed in colonial Virginia in 1662 and other English crown colonies in the Americas that defined the legal status of children born there. The doctrine mandated that all children would inherit the legal status (enslavement) of their mothers (enslaved Black women).

²² Eyebeam (2016). Unkeeping surveys 2 years of Dyson’s research into minimal geometric abstraction as a system used to deepen our understanding of the built and natural environment. This ambitious work spans modular architecture, data visualization, and Black spatial matters under the rubric of environmentalism. For this exhibition she presents drawings, paintings, and sculpture that deconstruct sites such as auction blocks, garrets, lynchings, and sidewalks to reconstruct humanist narratives in their place.

²³ See Wells (1895): http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=3&psid=3620.

²⁴ This is not a comprehensive list: Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Sandra Bland, Miriam Carey, Atatiana Jefferson, Ma’Khia Bryant, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and infinitely more.

²⁵ This exhibit took place at Columbia University’s GSAPP’s Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery in 2019.

²⁶ Here, Billie Holiday sings about the lynchings of Black bodies (1939); Dyson also has a series named after this song.

²⁷ This tradition is also recognized as Africana Studies and African American Studies.

²⁸ Soon after the civil rights and anticolonial movements in North America, Africa, the Caribbean; the field’s origins in the U.S. academy must be traced to insurgent activity among African-descended academics at HBCUs and likewise in universities in California, specifically San Francisco State in 1968.

²⁹ This includes sexism, classism, nativism, homophobia, and transphobia.

³⁰ A nod to McKittrick’s (2021) *Black method*: Thank you, Vanessa L., Amy K., K. Lynn R., and Michael S. for your care in reading previous versions of this article.

³¹ Note: The recent organizing of a conference for art educators of the Global Majority (AddingVoices, 2022) may serve as indication of a field in crisis (crea + e, 2020) and may signify a long-overdue reckoning. Black peoples and other racially and ethnically minoritized peoples in the field of art education have experienced unquantifiable instances of performative allyship, exclusion, and tokenism and are responding by invoking forms of radical ancestorship by creating spaces where they feel safe. Beverly Tatum’s text (1997/2003), “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*,” comes to mind here. An overwhelming atmosphere of normative whitestream art/education ideologies (Kraehe et al., 2018) uphold durable and enduring legacies of harm. Peoples of the Global Majority are writing, singing, dancing their own stories, affirming one another in the process—imagining otherwise livable futures.