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Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos

In November of 2014, the artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph and I flew to a state that neither of us lives in to talk about migration. Bamuthi told me that he had been invited to create an installation in Central Park as part of Creative Time's *Drifting in Daylight* project. When we met that day, we walked to the North Woods and looked out at the space that marks the difference between due north on a compass and the way the city's grid maps north, which faces slightly eastward. On a hill, watching the movement and sounds of Harlem, we thought about northward migration from both the South and the global South; we thought about what the "North" has meant and still means to people who look like us. The park itself holds a lot of memories for the artist, who was born in Queens, but made his name performing all over the city before getting (higher) educated in the South, and eventually settling in California. My own mapping of the U.S. is similarly triangulated: born in the South, educated in both California and New England, with a few New York years in between.

Why does this biographical cartography matter? We tend to think about black migration unidirectionally; that is, the customary language of diaspora suggests it moves outward from a central point, whether that origin is the west coast of Africa or the deep American South. Theoretical terms are always metaphors—powerfully suggestive, but often just as telling for what they leave out. Perhaps migration, and the notion of multi-directional movement it suggests, could offer us more precision than diaspora. Thinking about migration might lead us to ask, why is it that we move? What moves us? And perhaps implicit in the other two questions: who is this "us" we speak of? The simple answer is black folks in the New World, whether our ancestors sharecropped their way through North Carolina (like mine), emigrated from Haiti (like Bamuthi's) or just arrived from Senegal by way of Paris. Part of "what moves us" is coercive, of course. Global finance capital has been displacing black bodies since the 18th century.¹ Now, a mix of oppressive conditions, increased transnational mobility, and plain old striving for better things lands us here. But by asking "what moves us," I also want to engage with *what moves us to act*, to push for social justice and real inclusion. That is, once we brown and black folks find ourselves here, in what ways do we take this nation to task for failing to meet its own democratic ideals?

These are questions that Bamuthi and I have been in dialogue about for more than a decade, and so it is fitting that they find a home in this project, a site-specific work rooted in the spoken word, a parachute-turned revival tent, and a second-line style procession that envelops the audience in a reflection on the park's—and the city's—evolving meaning to people of color. Rather than write a standard curatorial note, below I share a few short passages that have been informed by and have helped to shape the artistic process. These thoughts are an invitation for you to think through, push back against and re-conceive issues not just of migration, but of revolution, social movement, blackness and, most of all, joy.

Notes on a revolution

I always wondered what it would be like to live in a time of revolution. Like when the streets of Memphis or Philly or Chicago were burning at the beginning of the 20th century. I always wondered what it was like to wake up every day, go to work, write an academic paper, look people in the eye on the train, dream of having children, buy groceries, write poems. Now I know. This isn't an exercise in

¹ Although Atlantic slavery is a much longer phenomenon, the 18th century marked the move away from mercantilism, or a trade based on national interests to a trade based on the interests of private companies that operated transnationally. See Ian Baucom's *Spectors of Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005) as well as Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007).

nostalgia or fantasy. It was surely hard to live then, as it is now in the midst of such terrifying asymmetries of power. And I'm surprised to find that uncertainty is the temporality of revolution. Veering toward displacement, a present without the comfort of teleological bookends. A rethinking that is shot through with both a heady hope and a deep, rational fear. And time, as we live it, isn't history; we aren't "actors" in some grand scheme. We remake the world each day in tiny, often forgettable actions. It might seem, in this schema, that there is no outside to ideology, no way to alter a system that is always reproducing itself through our quiet consent.

But we know who we are. And when we feel an impulse, despite all rational inclinations otherwise, to stand up with and for one another against the annihilation of life, we begin to see ourselves in a new context, one that looks far beyond the present into a future that does not yet have a name. Black lives matter. *Yes*. As they did during the desperate times of the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, Jim Crow and into the mass incarcerated present. The litany itself exhausts, and the protestors press on knowing that we are both "in no ways tired" and born into a collective racial exhaustion. Blues, after all, is a feeling. But blues is more than that, too! I believe in the sacred, yes *sacred* qualities of black art: I've seen it save lives and call a community into being. Further, I know that joy is a future-facing practice and one of underestimated political efficacy. As Jose Muñoz writes, "the present is not enough," a reminder that negotiating with a state premised on the systemic devaluation of our lives and communities can't mark our horizon of possibility if we want a real revolution.²

Thus, a proposal: let us do some consciousness raising around joy: how we make it and how we might document it. And as we move through these streets, in addition to taking over and shutting down (acts of supreme necessity), I hope we might also develop a new imaginative cartography. That is, as Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, in a revolution, we have to both take the time to dream and make the time to write those dreams down.³ Or paint them, dance them, and most importantly, share them with one another. What does a map to the future look like? How can we ensure that it is made in our image? How might we make sure that such a revolutionary cartography makes possible a sacred space for all that is to come?

Acts of surrender

Imagine a dance. Imagine two or more dancing, experimenting in weight shifts and lifts, calculated risks unfolding at an urgent pace. Bodies in time. You see, dance is instructive in thinking about social movements. For instance, like in activism, most of the work happens at the front end, unseen. And the more flexible you are, the more you can take risks; the more risks you can take, the more breathtaking the potential outcome. Danger and beauty are kissing cousins. But more importantly, dance teaches us about contingency, something that opens us up to both accident as well as the sublime. And dance is, above all, social. It requires synchronicity and a rapt audience, co-creators in a moment that cannot be repeated and cannot be unseen.

Why ponder the relationship between movement and social movement? Imagine that much meaning-making happens at the level of the representational. Imagine too that much world-making happens in art making, where the stakes are ostensibly lower (though artists today—most of whom subsist sans health insurance or safety net—would surely disagree). Artist and entrepreneur Theaster Gates once asked me why it is that we expect people with the least resources to bear the responsibility of political torch-bearing. And make no mistake, we should pay artists their worth. But the answer is this: ideas can't be bought. And further: the best ideas *shouldn't be*.

Another way to say this is that art making is both an act of world-making and an act of surrender. There is much to learn from the ways that artists risk being taken for fools, daring to resist

² See José Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (2008).

³ See Robin D. G. Kelly, "When History Sleeps: A Beginning" in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2009).

the conservative contours of common sense. There are even greater lessons to be learned from their need for an audience. In a world increasingly insistent on individual freedom and yet defining that freedom as ever-broadening and tailored consumer choices, we need people who *need people*. That is, we need people who unironically invite others into a community for the exchange of ideas and perspectives. We need subcultures that aren't centered on objects of desire. We need models of citizenship and democracy. We need art and *we need artists*.

Social Choreographies

Recently, I saw choreographer Kyle Abraham's *Pavement*, which begins with two men, one black and one white, engaged in a *pas de deux*. The dance plays with intimacy and how it manifests in masculinity—for instance, how quickly play can turn into violent one-upmanship. The duet ends with the white dancer laying his black counterpart on the floor, face-down with his hands behind his back. Abraham is an expert in telescoping like this—between movement as a graceful execution of form and gestures that collapse into the pedestrian, even prosaic experience of living in urban spaces.

But he gets at something more, still: how those gestures are ordered in a hierarchy of power that falls along racial lines. This is important because we can't think about the relationship between movement and social movement without also thinking about social choreographies. For example, how the carceral state proscribes the movement of black men, whether through Stop and Frisk-type strategies of terror or through a more subtle conditioning of the eye of fellow citizens to read ruin, a would-be fall from grace, onto the upright bodies of those men.

What does this have to do with a parachute? A revival tent? A second line? In using these objects and performance strategies, we acknowledge that people denied access to mainstream channels of legitimacy forge community in other ways. This is what director Melvin Van Peebles calls “Negro Make-Do.” To acknowledge this fact is not to ignore a long history of racialized exclusion. As hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris once reminded me, “African American music started on the slave ship—a tea kettle is not a djembe.” That is, loss was *productive of* the first strains of black American music, a fact that remains true in all the culture we have produced since.

In many ways, though, the objects we employ in *Black Joy* are less important than the people animating them: think one part 1960s protest theater,⁴ one part relational aesthetics,⁵ and one part site-specific installation practice.⁶ The protest element is important—Bamuthi envisions 41 people lifting the parachute after the 41 bullets that laid Amadou Diallo to rest. And we deal in social relations because with the bodies of our audience members, we mirror the body politic—social movements only happen in the living, breathing aggregate. But site-specificity is perhaps our best gift: we ponder the real migrations of people of color to New York City, and the global North more broadly, examining in our mourning and celebration, our claim to this sacred ground.

But *Black Joy*, like actual black joy, travels. We are an Exodus people, and our culture develops exactly when and where we do. For that reason, the parachute and all of the installation's artifacts can be folded up and carried by one person anywhere. Dark peoples, they say, *travel light*. So, back again to social choreography: it turns out anyone can do it. Any time, any place.

⁴ See Amiri Baraka, “The Revolutionary Theater” (*Liberator*, 1965).

⁵ See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998).

⁶ Site-specificity, rather than simply extending our focus to the role that the audience and physical context of the piece play in its interpretation, also calls our attention to the permeable relationship between art and the outside world that gives aesthetic objects their critical purchase. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004).