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Force

Syrus Marcus Ware
Martine Syms
Amy Kazymierchyk
Anna Martine Whitehead
Lucca Fraser
Esmé Hogeveen
Trevia C. Ellison
Joan Jonas
Barbara Clausen
Simone Forti
Tanya Lukin Linklater
taisha paggett
laub and Jennifer Moon
Wanda Nanibush
Yaniya Lee
Jessica Karuhanga
Aisha Sasha John
Merray Gerges

guest edited by
taisha paggett and Erin Silver

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Flex, Conjure, Crack.
Flexibility and the
Uncertainty of Blackness

by Treva C. Ellison

“today, i passed a mirror and did not see a body, instead a suggestion, a debate, a blank post-it note there looking back. I haven’t enough room to both rage and weep.”
Donte Collins – from “what the dead know by heart”

What is to be done with the Black body in this time of crisis? When the circulation of imagery of Black people killed, tortured, maimed and left to drown constitutes a deathly hallows to be pursued by the various houses of white supremacists, authoritarian populists, carceral feminists and talking heads, what is to be done with the unacknowledged buildup of anti-Blackness and the existential questions it raises, the unruly and unsightly forms it takes on? The body is a construction that appears through modern modes of knowing and being, the systems of sight, the scripted routes of neuro-normativity that political theorist Cedric Robinson called Western civilization. The Black body flits in and out of sight via highly choreographed routines of forgetting and abstraction. Kettled by the long arms of the law, and corralled by the invisible hand of racial capitalism, the so-called Black body takes the form of appearance of a constant question, a “thing” whose thing-ification is the productive process that animates the Human, the primary subject of Western civilization. The present absence of gendered Black embodiment vis-à-vis Western culture greases the wheels of extraction, enclosure and expropriation that we have given the name racial capitalism. The “Black body” in Western culture is a form with no content, one that can be disavowed and/or enlivened with agency to tell someone else’s story.¹ Literary critic Hortense Spillers suggests that the buildup of all the unseen dances required to materialize the body as the ostensible basic unit of social being be called “flesh.” She writes: “I would make a distinction between the body and the flesh and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero-degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse of the reflexes of iconography.”² It is the abstraction and concealment of the flesh that allows the body to function as a way of knowing and being; a template for disciplines like anatomy, physiology, sociology, art and dance. Spillers reminds us that captive flesh and its violation are the fertile (and furtive) grounds for the reproduction of social categories that depend on the body as a basic unit of analysis – categories like race, class, gender and sexuality.

Given that for Black people and other racialized peoples, the body, and the very idea of being and subjectivity that a body connotes in Western civilization, is a vexed and vexing thing – I ask again, what is to be done with the Black body? There are discussions happening across this compression of time-space called “the globe” about Black ontology. What is the nature of Black existence when Black people can be killed by police officers and vigilantes with impunity? What is the structural position of Blackness in the representational and sign systems of Western civilization? Are Black people even Human? Can Black people depend on frameworks like law, civil rights, human rights, the democratic process, legislative activism, etc., that require a positive assertion and the recognition of the legibility of one’s self as a self? Scholars and activists have advanced a range of protocols to diagnose and deal with the condition of Blackness: Black ops, Afro-pessimism, Black feminism, Black queer studies, Black geographies and the Black radical tradition, to name a few. Critical theorist Fred Moten, for example, has emphasized Blackness as a range of operations, an improvi-

sational force that thwarts or cracks the lurching shadow of Man (as white, rational, propertied and able-bodied) as “the singular genre of the Human” through an assemblage of invention-as-survival-as-invention.³ Scholars writing under the banner of Afro-pessimism have emphasized the incapacity of Western radical and feminist concepts like being, consent, exploitation and labour to apprehend or explain the structural position of Blackness in Western society. Afro-pessimism focuses on Blackness as a relation of social death and a fungible site of accumulation and argues that anti-Blackness is the primary structuring foundation of the world as we know it.

I offer flexibility as a way through these questions that brings together past and present episodes and epistemes of production of Black social life emanating from Black culture and politics. Flexing takes us through the work of Black artists and dancers like taisha paggett, Reginald “Regg Roc” Gray and Storyboard P, linking together the aesthetics and practices of Black artists working through the consequences of flexible accumulation as a mode of racial capitalism. Like anthropologist Aihwa Ong, I am concerned with the *reciprocity* and *rupture* between categories of difference and processes of capital accumulation,⁴ and how Black artists render flexibility as heuristic to Blackness, a method of approach and performance that generates power in its exercise. Flexibility eschews ontology as an organizing trope and focuses on process, practice, conjuring, tarrying, cracking and hacking as ways of approaching Blackness and Black embodiment. Flexibility, as rendered through the work of these Black artists, uses the strategies of *conjure* – a counter-temporal temporal displacement and *crack* – a spatial rupture via staged reunion of flesh [unknown, multiple] and body [overseen, singular]; these approaches to Blackness call our attention to the longer arc and wider range of approaches to Blackness that constitute what Cedric Robinson refers to as the ontological totality.

Flexibility appears as a Black aesthetic and praxis that operates parallel to and through flexible accumulation as a strategy of racial capitalism. Flexible accumulation refers to the 1970s shift from a Fordist model of production and Keynesian model of political economy to a post-Fordist, post-Keynesian modality of capital accumulation that is characterized by the de-construction and fragmentation of productive processes and the incorporation of a variety of labour types, which may have been (or which appeared to be) more informal and less organized in the past, into corporate production networks. Flexible accumulation also refers to the creation of new productive sectors, markets and financial instruments. Leftist geographers and economists may argue over the narrative and terminology of flexible accumulation, globalization and neoliberalism, but they all concur that post-1970s racial capitalism relied on spatial displacement, extraction, enclosure and labour discipline to create so-called “new” markets.⁵ Geographer David Harvey argues that flexible accumulation as a mode of capitalism re-compresses time and space via temporal displacement: “a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us.”⁶ Considering flexibility as a Black performative praxis that operates co- and contra- to flexible accumulation reminds us that racial capitalism’s flexibility is cohered not through a flexible accumulation that merely homogenizes via the territorialization, securitization and corporatization of everything; but, that the extraction that must occur to create new pathways for capital hinges on racial difference as a mode of coming to know and orga-

nize the globe/global, and gender and sexual difference, as the staging grounds of racialized fungibility. Flexible accumulation produces queer commodities. Critical race theorist Jodi Melamed underscores this, arguing that multiculturalism evolves as a cultural logic of flexible accumulation for the neoliberal US racial state that allows the US racial state to disavow its own complicity in racist, classist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic violence, while simultaneously positioning itself as the arbiter and protector of difference.

What are the fleshly archives that carry spatial barriers, state power and political boundaries to their horizon of (seeming) actualization? Los Angeles-based dancer, choreographer and artist taisha paggett addresses this question in two of her most recent collaborative works: *evereachmore* (with WXPT), and *The School for the Movement of the Technicolor People*. In each of these works, paggett uses conjure and crack as strategies to perform counter-temporal temporal displacements. In *evereachmore* (2015), paggett and a dance company she formed of trained and untrained dancers called WXPT (We are the paper, we are the trees), crack the singular and fetishized dance body and insist on bodies in motion and connection. In *evereachmore*, dancers performed in globules: pairs and sometimes trios, almost constantly stuck to each other, flowing, flexing and ambling through the remains of the Los Angeles River. Dancers practiced different ways of moving through time and space together in a landscape where improvised survival of racial capitalism's creative destruction signaled possibility in the pain that the movement connotes. Attendees were driven to the performance location in batches in a van that was playing radio noise to give a sense of temporal dislocation. The dancers reinforced this temporal displacement by bearing each other's weight, and in so doing took up the collective weight of the Black body and the fleshly archives its appearance attempts to suppress. In bearing each other's weight, and bringing to bear the collective weight of the racialized body, the dancers created moments of weightlessness, re-compressions of space-time that thwart the smooth operation and submerged logic of flexible accumulation by creating the possibility for dancers and audience members to feel and think otherwise.

paggett's work often takes up the weight of the sign of Blackness and Black resistance; in both *evereachmore*, dancers held signs that spelled out: "ever each more," but moved in such a way as to scramble the message the signs were communicating. At the inaugural performance that opened *The School for the Movement of the Technicolor People*, dancers used heavier signs of various shapes made of opaque black enamel with no text. Afterwards, audience members could interact with the signs; they were heavy and their bizarre shapes made them unwieldy. The evolving shape and weight of the signs express paggett's use of crack and conjure as strategies of temporal and spatial displacement. paggett asks performers and audience members to sit with the unwieldiness and uncertainty of embodiment and the body as a modality of political and social categorization and to play with the body as a tool of performing and accessing surplus as a resource of power and a motive force of social life in the face of socialized Black death.

The School for the Movement of the Technicolor People extended the work of WXPT in *evereachmore* and engaged Black queer people in the company as well in the larger community to create curriculum and programming for a dance freedom school. The School included an installation, through which paggett, Ashley Hunt and Kim Zumpfe transformed LACE's gallery space into a dance

freedom un-school. The inaugural performance was the convening of a six-week freedom school modelled after a school for youth of colour started by paggett's family in east Texas.⁷ They converted the art space into the art space undone, overlaying the floors with archipelagos of fuzzy brown carpet and upending the floorboards of the gallery, exposing the ground beneath to make a school undone. During the opening performance of *The School*, paggett ended the performance by destroying the white drywall of the gallery, staging the school as an un-school, a site of deconstruction of the schooled body and the institutions that have arisen to manage it. paggett's work with WXPT emphasizes practice, performance, connection and sociality as methods of creating temporal and spatial displacement and models for how those rendered "surplus" enact flexibility as a heuristic of Blackness and Black embodiment. This strategy can be seen in the work of other Black artists and performers responding to the violent and violative iterations of flexible accumulation that have shaped US urban geopolitics.

Flex (or flexing) is a migratory and experimental Black dance practice. It is rooted in Jamaican dancehall that evolved from Bruk Up, a dance style pioneered by George Adams, and Bogle (or body grooving), a style attributed to Gerald Levy, and the migration of these styles to 1990s Brooklyn and their confrontation with hip hop. Flex came into being as a dance form in an attempt to create venues for Black social life under the tremendous weight of the violent economic and political policies of flexible accumulation, which both cut back and re-territorialized of the social safety net. Flexing thrived in locally organized competitions, gatherings and through a public access show created by Sandra and Rocky Cummings called *Flex N Brooklyn* on BCAT '68. *Flex N Brooklyn* gave dancers a venue to showcase their talent and created a vehicle for the articulation and dissemination of the form.

Flex is an improvisational style of dance that hinges on rigorous training of the body and intentional connection to hidden emotional, psychical and social scripts in order to tell stories and create illusions with the body. Flex stages a spectacular reunion between body and flesh that makes plain, if even for a fleeting moment, one of the primary spatial abstractions that animates racial capitalism: the submerged, hidden and papered-over violations of captive flesh that subtend the social production of the body, and the genre of the Human. Dancers describe flexing as conjure work. For example, Storyboard P, a flex dancer and innovator of the sub-style of mutation, describes what he does as energy work: "There are moves where you're just dancing. Then there's a point when you hear music and you snap. A moment that brings anger or rage out of you and turns it into possession...I'm just revealing what's really there. Revealing unseen forces – that's what illusion is. Utilizing them unseen forces to manipulate a moment."⁸ Flexing is noted for its combinations of locks, pops, pauses, glides and contortionist poses and has gained attention for the ways that dancers seemingly defy the limits of physics and anatomy with moves described as "bone-breaking."⁹ A magazine profile of Storyboard P ascribes to him the label of "the Impossible Body." The author frames Storyboard P's "impossibility" via a nearly pornographic rendering of him as bi-polar: highlighting the fact that Storyboard P has performed with the likes of Jay-Z but is also intermittently homeless and "difficult" to work with because of his bipolar diagnosis. The piece frames Storyboard P's flexibility, his queer flux between Black excellence and Black vulnerability, as impossibility, and in doing so misses the point of his embodied intervention. If Storyboard P's so-called



taisha paggett and WXPT, *evereachmore*, 2015
PHOTO: GINA CLYNE



Members of *FLEXN* performance at Jacob's *Pillow Dance Festival*, 2016
PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN; IMAGE COURTESY OF JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE

gravity- and physics-defying moves signal anything, it is the impossibility of the body and the categories of social organization and valuation that flow from it to ever completely contain those who it seeks to represent and destroy. It is this impulse, this limit on racial capitalism's ability to extract and expropriate, that Robinson terms the ontological totality.

Robinson describes the ontological totality as "the renunciation of actual being for historical being; the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses."¹⁰ The ontological totality is the wild seed of Black experiments at social life under the conditions of racial capitalism, which are assuredly deadly and death-dealing. When political and institutionalized attempts to displace and deform racial capitalism are frustrated, the ontological totality takes flight. Robinson writes: "When its actualization was frustrated, it became *obeah*, *voodoo*, *myalism*, *pocomania* – the religions of the oppressed...When it was realized, it could become the Palmares, the Bush Negro settlements, and at its heights, Haiti. But always its focus was on the structures of mind. Its epistemology granted supremacy to metaphysics not the material." I want to suggest that flexing, as theorized by its practitioners, is another iteration of flexibility that seeks to preserve a system of being that renounces ownership and the strokes of enclosure and primitive accumulation that such a relation requires. It is one religion of the oppressed, one "ceremony that must be found."¹¹

Flexing is used by some of its originators and innovators as an approach to/for understanding and processing the traumatic buildup of anti-Black racism, focusing on rigorous training of the physical body as a method of connecting to the metaphysical. Flex dancer and pioneer Reggie "Regg Roc" Gray recently collaborated with director Peter Sellars and a dance company of 16 dancers, primarily young Black men and women from Brooklyn, to produce a show called *FLEXN*. Gray and the company members use *FLEXN* as a vehicle to both critique anti-Black racism and grapple with the emotional, psychic, embodied and communal effects of racial capitalism and flexible accumulation. Company member Dwight "Scorp" Waugh, for example, arranged and performed a piece about working for FedEx, while Calvin "Cal" Hunt arranged and performed a piece about being in the military. The almost two-hour performance, which included both pieces, is entirely improvised. During the after-performance discussion, both Hunt and Waugh described how they prepare for their pieces, noting that in practice they work to connect to their own submerged emotions and experiences as well as the collective story of anti-Black violence so that they can readily access them on stage during their improvised performances.

Flex as a dance style grounded in the transit and transformation of African culture is one example of how the frustrated politicization and institutionalization of the renunciation of ownership takes flight. *FLEXN* company members and Gray also underscored how what audience members were seeing was not a "game" or a gimmick, and how for them, the act of expression and the relationships established through the process of production constituted a scale of social life that for them was an antidote to social death, an active force they all observed. Flex as a method of creating community offers no easy answers. One contradiction that haunts the performance and the performers' articulation of flex as a modality of communal healing is its gendered politics. On the one hand, dancers use their bodies in ways that thwart gendered

ideals of embodiment, but that meets its limit as the capacity to do so is routed through ideals of authenticity and mastery. For example, Shelby "Shellz" Fulton, one of two Black women in the *FLEXN* company, remarked in the program notes: "It's hard being a female in the flex community. Even from the start, they just don't respect you. They think that you're weak, that you can't hang. It's hard and it's intimidating, but I'm determined. This is really important to me. I need to show I'm not going to fail like other females. I'm not going to be like that."¹² Also, as flex as a form gets routed through the political economy of the art and theatre production process, there is a will to canonize imposed on the form that thwarts the very potential of the form to function as a "religion of the oppressed." I had the opportunity to see *FLEXN* at the affluent liberal arts college where I work, which is primarily white. As such, the performance was prefixed with multiple advisories: "This performance might contain crude language and / or loud music." Patrons were handed earplugs at the inception of the performance so that they could somehow enjoy Black bodies in motion without being frontally assaulted by the loudness of Black music. These acts and logics of translation, which make the performance viable in the performance market, also attempt to impose norms of ownership and authenticity on the form to ally it with the cultural logics and infrastructure of flexible accumulation. However, it is the economic viability of the form in the "art world" that sustains a container for social life and livelihood for the performers. Truly, "the commodity is a queer thing,"¹³ and flexibility eschews the binary of revolutionary-or-not and instead gestures towards the queerness of commodification, the uncertain outcomes of its gambit and the contradictions of survival under flexible accumulation.

The frameworks of Afro-pessimism, necropolitics and Black ops, refracted through the urgent questions of the moment, that are themselves punctuated by the expanding roster of young Black people murdered by police officers, have encouraged a patriarchal binary in approaches to Black life and Black subjectivity: social life versus social death, ontological invention versus ontological negation, optimism versus pessimism. While both of these frameworks rely on the poetic mode of expression, they both fail to take into account the multiple ways that contemporary Black artists are performing and articulating the cultural politics of contemporary Black and Black queer social movements. Black women and women of colour scholars, however, remind us that the embodiment, labour, politics and expressive practices of Black women work and move between, through and around these seeming polarities. Scholars Grace Hong, Kara Keeling and Rod Ferguson remind us that Black women and queer people have long crafted modes of connection and ways of being that point to the instability of the normative categories of embodiment operationalized by the state and by oppositional social movements organized around racial and gendered justice.¹⁴ Flexibility as a Black performance praxis punctuates this reminder by underlining the uncertainty of Blackness: Black is AND Black ain't. Feminist theorist Katherine McKittrick reminds us that project of ontology is itself a territorializing one and that Black women have used the body as a scale of disturbance and deformation that gestures to the internal instability of both racial capitalism as well as the subjects and social relations that support its movement.¹⁵ Contemporary Black artists are echoing, reflecting and performing these reminders, offering flexibility as an aesthetic and performative praxis that highlights how Blackness in particular, and race in general, is fluid in that it can be discursively

disavowed and materially instrumentalized at the same time. It is the flux between these two poles that can be used as a method of building power by those rendered existentially surplus, and also that flux can be instrumentalized to re-present the body via the concealment of the flesh.

Considering flexibility as an approach to questions of Black subjectivity emanating from Black culture and politics, as well as a mode of accumulation of racial capitalism, emphasizes that Blackness and the arsenal of race that buttresses the territorialization of everything, even in its most terrifying manifestations, are uncertain and that uncertainty best describes the ontology of Blackness rather than the life-death binary. The current state of things, the racism of so-called peace officers and the seeming disposition of the climate itself towards the decimation of Black people and Black places makes it necessary if not urgent to take a measure of Blackness, to know and say what it is. Flexing and its attendant strategies of crack and conjure suggest that while the measure of what is lost can never be fully taken, it can be felt, practised and performed.

I want to end with a provocation from Daniel Widener who, in *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (2009), argues that the multiplication of art collectives and community arts programs in the wake of the 1965 Watts uprising was not auxiliary to the Black Power movement, but rather constituted a movement in and of itself. In a similar vein, this essay is both an attempt and provocation to think through how contemporary Black artists are conceptualizing and articulating Blackness, not just as the “cultural front” of contemporary forms and modes of Black organizing, like the Black Lives Matter network, or as an auxiliary to theories of Blackness emanating from the academy, but as a movement in itself that moves through and with social movements and capital.

Treva C. Ellison is a Black queer unicorn residing in the forests of New Hampshire. Treva works as an Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Geography at Dartmouth College.

Endnotes

- 1 Sharon P. Holland, “When Characters Lack Character: A Biomythography,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1494-1502.
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- 3 Fred Moten, “black optimism/black operation.” Unpublished paper on file with the author (2007).
- 4 Aihwa Ong, *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality* (Duke University Press, 1999), 5.
- 5 David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (PM Press, 2011), and David Harvey, “Time-space compression and the postmodern condition,” *Modernity: Critical Concepts* 4 (1999): 98-118.
- 6 David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the conditions of cultural change*. (1990), 240.
- 7 Schoolforthemovement.com
- 8 Jonah Weiner, “The Impossible Body: Storyboard P, the Basquiat of Street Dancing,” *The New Yorker*, January 16, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/06/the-impossible-body>
- 9 The programme for the Thursday September 14, 2016 performance of *FLEXN* at the Hopkins Center for the Arts in Hanover, NH includes a list of the name of company members, quotations from company members as well as a “Flexapedia,” a two page glossary of terms intended to educate the audience about flexing.
- 10 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 168.
- 11 Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism.” *Boundary 2* (1984): 19-70.
- 12 *FLEXN* program notes, 7.
- 13 Michael Ralph, “Commodity.” *Social Text* 27, no. 3 100 (2009): 78-8, 83.
- 14 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007), Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (U of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 15 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).



Members of *FLEXN* performance at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, 2016
PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN; IMAGE COURTESY OF JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE