



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE
Contemporaneity

Vol 10, No 1 (2025) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2025.349
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

Questionnaire
Response

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About the Author

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Huey Copeland
with Kale Serrato Doyen

My current scholarship, which interrogates modern and contemporary African diasporic, American, and European artistic practices, focuses on the intersections of race and gender, subject and object, and the aesthetic and its others from a black feminist perspective that reveals the biases and elisions of the discipline. Rather than assume the redemptive power of art, I have increasingly turned away from art history and toward black studies in order to explore the constitutive (yet often unthought) relationship between the capture of

black life and the production of cultural property in the transatlantic world. Cast in this light, my work can be broadly understood as what early modern theatre historian Noémie Ndiaye would call *reparanoid*, which is to say, “grounded simultaneously in a reparative desire to account for Afro-diasporic life that exceeds the painful heinousness of racial formations, and in a paranoid distrust of the comfort and complacency that accounts of black life can easily elicit among twenty-first-century readers prepared for any number of reasons to minimize the transhistorical reality of antiblackness.”¹

My third monograph, *Thinking the Unthought: From Continental Theory to Black Radical Study*, extends and complicates this methodological orientation. The book traces how black radical study as developed at the University of California, Berkeley—particularly during my formative years there as a graduate student at the turn of the last millennium—at once extends, revises, and ultimately undoes the theoretical frameworks and ethical horizons of Frankfurt School and French poststructuralist theory, with far-reaching implications for longstanding art-historical protocols as well as for the means and methods of the humanities writ large. The volume is thus conceived as an intellectual autobiography, critical primer, historiographic corrective, and polemical claim for the indispensability of African/ Diasporic thought in light of the transnational hierarchy of race that relentlessly situates black(ened) fem(me) beings at the bottom of a given heap.

Each chapter is organized around one of six contemporary thinkers, all of whom attended or taught at UC Berkeley: Rizvana Bradley, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Jackson, Fred Moten, and Frank B. Wilderson III. In each instance, I begin with my own personal, political, and intellectual engagements with them on the ground and build toward an exploration of their theoretical interventions and how they matter for both art-historical study and our understanding of “criticality” as such. Since the 1980s, black feminist approaches, most influentially legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theorization of intersectionality, have proved transformative for interrogating how humanistic and social scientific disciplines overlook race and gender as formative vectors of power. Art history in the United States has, as is often the case, been much slower on the uptick, especially when it comes to the black radical hermeneutics that emerged with, alongside, and in tension with Crenshaw’s attempts to renegotiate the terms and boundaries of the law in light of the irreducible specificity of black women’s experiences. I center these six scholars for their outsize impact on how the academic and art industries approach and conceptualize the aesthetic, the commodity, the subject, the social, and even the “world,” in light of the structuring import of anti-blackness for these and for all of Western culture’s ostensibly nonracialized formations.

In my writing on Bradley, for example, I explore the implications of the anteaesthetic—her contention that the black maternal flesh produced by transatlantic slavery provides the suppressed anterior of Western metaphysics—for our interpretation of one of the twentieth


¹ Ndiaye, Noémie. “Introduction: Performative Blackness in Early Modern Europe.” In *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

century's most canonical works. I argue that the dark womb haunts no less than Marcel Duchamp's most famous readymade of 1917: *Fountain* was literally blackened in American photographer Alfred Stieglitz's iconic photograph of it, reorienting the urinal as a feminized form that has called forth art-historical associations ranging from a silhouette of the Buddha to the human uterus flipped upside down. Now that it is darkened and sexuated, we can see, as if for the first time, how the readymade form replays the violence of ontological translation. The object is translated from commodity into art, rather than person into property, a "lazy" object whose seeming absence of artistic labor becomes a cipher for the black belly, that repressed matrix of modern capital.

A student of Moten and the junior member of Hartman's Practicing Refusal Collective, Bradley now teaches in Berkeley's Department of Film and Media, where she has played a foundational role in introducing black thought into the curriculum. In one sense, her work and her appointment serve to underline the radical transformation of knowledge in the United States since the late 1990s, emblemizing those vistas of insight that can only come into focus when the fate of the captive is countenanced. In a word, yesterday's "critical theory" *is* today's black radical study. For, in taking seriously the history of slavery and its afterlives—and in underscoring the positionality of the enslaved as, in Hartman's words, the "unthought" of Western philosophy—these scholars variously unmask the universalist presumptions of critical theory, which depend upon and effectively demand the negation of black being to maintain their coherence and to enable the ongoing production of whiteness as normative and unmarked. At the same time, their writing looks back to and recenters the work of intellectual forebears such as Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter, all of whom were both contemporaneous with and deeply critical of the likes of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and any number of post-Marxist theoreticians.

In line with *Contemporaneity's* framing of ruin and reparation, Moten and his peers endlessly complicate the question of "what is to be done," whether in the terms of revolution, reform, or redress. What or who, precisely, is worthy of repair and why? Whose ends does such tending serve, enable, obfuscate, or suppress in our neofascist present? Does the rhetoric of repair necessarily reproduce an antiblack metaphysics? How might attempts to repair hamper or foreclose the necessary—and necessarily abyssal—work of understanding the antiblack violence that continues to be inflicted in the name of art, culture, and the human? What would repair look like if it centered and sat with all that is fundamentally irreparable? Or is repair ultimately aimed at sustaining that which should, in fact, be dismantled or destroyed?

These questions have already had important implications for my pedagogy at Pitt. In spring 2025 I taught an undergraduate special topics course, "Black Modernisms in the Transatlantic World," which aimed to challenge hegemonic accounts of the modern that center white, male, European fine artists. By instead starting from the idea that modernity itself would be unthinkable without the cultures, labors, and flesh of enslaved, black(ened), fem(me) beings, our seminar was able to home in on the unique challenges faced by women artists of African descent. It was also able to freshly illuminate how modern cultural practitioners, variously positioned along the color line, worked with and against the visual production of blackness in grounding their aesthetic interventions. The class eventually realized that the reparative histories we were reading, and the questions they occasioned, ought to be at the center of *any* art-historical attempt to narrate the modern; this is precisely the tack I will take this fall in teaching my undergraduate survey "Introduction to Modern Art" as a truly intersectional art history for the first time.

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