

On Cauleen Smith & Black Quantum Futurism

“*On Cauleen Smith & Black Quantum Futurism*” was originally written and presented by Languid Hands as an introduction to a screening organised in the frame of Black Quantum Futurism’s residency. The residency took place at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London in August 2019 under the name Temporal Deprogramming. Languid Hands, a London-based curatorial duo comprised of Imani Robinson & Rabz Lansiquot, presented two films by Chicago-based filmmaker and multimedia artist Cauleen Smith, *The Fullness of Time* (2018) and *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), which both focus on post-Katrina New Orleans, ruminating on the markedly Black city as a site of both trauma and generative action.

Cauleen Smith’s work is aligned in so many ways. Of course there is the clear aesthetic link to legacies of Afrofuturism but there is also a deep and embodied commitment to Black people. To our lives, our spaces, our homes and our ability & inability to find them, to our safety, our history, our resistance and our futures. These films felt apt to programme in this context not just for this reason but also because of the recent history of our city. London is a space in which, just over 2 years ago, a disaster struck. Like Katrina, a ‘perfect storm’ of state neglect, capitalist greed, economic and racial segregation, gentrification, and deadly ineptitude transformed something dangerous into something profoundly and, some might say intentionally, deadly, with little or no recourse for justice or accountability. *The Fullness of Time* and *H-E-L-L-O* are ruminations on what is left in the wake of that kind of trauma; what parts of us are undone by the necessity to make a home in a place that doesn’t love us and what strategies we use to piece ourselves and our homes back together. On Notting Hill Carnival weekend, in the wake of Grenfell³ and accelerating hostile environment policies here, these questions are essential.

Cauleen Smith describes Afrofuturism as being “about speculating on the potentiality of what is known about technology and physics to create metaphors that allow me to explore an African diasporic past and generate possible narratives for the future... Afrofuturism is also a rumination on memories to which I have no access. My investment in it as a production strategy has run its course; Afrofuturism provides a way to investigate trauma very explicitly. But we only reenact traumas, don’t we? We don’t reenact prom night, or our favorite birthday party. This is a problem—it doesn’t seem to fix things; it amplifies them. There’s gotta be something else, the after-the-trauma.”¹

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We want to share an excerpt of a short text Imani wrote, as part of an ongoing project called

The Black Drift:

I had to say something about the recurring dreams I’ve been having and the ways that smoke and fire now make me think of flesh and of death and Blackness. I wanted to write about the sirens. And about the officials who told residents of Grenfell: ‘Stay in your homes. do not come out. No, stay inside. Don’t come out, ‘Someone is going to come and get you,’ stay exactly where you are.’”

I grew up in the top flat of a building in the same borough as the residents in Grenfell. Black & POC residents on every floor. The fire regulations are immensely bureaucratic, bordering on intrusive and unnecessary. Either side of the flat I grew up in, and throughout the rest of my street, are mainly white and wealthy homeowners. Homes are sold for upwards of a million pounds on my street. A fire that began in flats owned by the council and spread to engulf my street would be too great a scandal, too awful a disaster, too horrific a waste of life and of property and I’d have no doubt the council would be held accountable, the inquiry would be ruthless and “justice” served. But here we are, reckoning with the deep, embodied knowledge that the residents of Grenfell who have survived aren’t able to stop the fight for their lives. The knowledge that they have been fighting for their lives since before and before; before the cladding caught alight, before the sprinklers didn’t turn on, before the fire extinguishers weren’t put to use, because they didn’t exist. The residents of Grenfell couldn’t breath before and before the thick black smoke filled their lungs.

In 2015, I began thinking and writing about a framework called *The Black Drift*, seeking to investigate the architecture and geography in the surround of Black life and examining the aesthetic, material, psychological and philosophical contours that shape the non/presence of the African Diaspora across the globe and the navigation that such experiences require. I follow Katherine Mckittrick in referring to geography as “space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations” and believe, as she does, that “Black matters are spatial matters”.⁴

The Black Drift could be described as a kind of call and response to Situationist notions of *derive* and *flâneur*, thinking through the non/ability of Black people to “drift” or “loiter” and linking it to philosophical understandings of anti-Blackness, violence, fungibility, captivity, surveillance, and notions of human non/being. The flâneur is the loiterer. The context is one of a supposed being-in-the-world, a psychogeographical being, assuming whiteness and heteronormativity, assuming the universality of human being. Who permits the Black subject to loiter? Hear now the names of the dead, the named criminals, the sex workers, the working mothers, the Black working class and the Black non-workers. *The Black Drift* is not meant merely to add or locate the Black subject to an otherwise lacking discourse, but rather to think through and with the Black subject and Black subjectivity in the wake⁵ of transatlantic slavery and in located spaces as it moves through space and through time, in the both already fated and in the spontaneous. Christina Sharpe’s work invokes multiple meanings of the term “wake”, the path behind a ship, keeping watch with the dead, coming to consciousness... her work details how Black lives are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery, formulating the wake and “wake work” as sites of artistic production, resistance, consciousness, and possibility for living in diaspora. *The Black Drift* is such “wake work”.

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Slavery, migration and Black being in the world are characterised by movement and immovability, and these modes are not at odds with each other. I am interested in the usability of the Black drift as a framework for thinking with Black non/presence and non/being. I am theorising the depth of and the extent to which Black people have drifted and might continue to drift in and into the diaspora, and the ways in which this Black drifting signifies im/possibilities and modes of non/knowning. Speaking and drifting and movement, being in movement; is it possible to manifest the drift into revolution? How do we organise for the end of the world? Does the Black drift make movement in the direction of Black liberation im/possible? Can the Black drift be witnessed as a social change? Is the flâneur of Black people a desirable goal?

What if liberation were a spatial practice?

Have you been to Liverpool’s Slavery Museum? Who among you have ever been to the Middle Passage? Who has been confronted with the water? Have you heard the retching? Sharpe says “How does one account for surviving the ship when the ship and the un/survival repeat?”⁶ How do we reckon with this re/membering? Think now of Justice, think now of Darren Cumberbatch, and Edson De Costa, and Shane Bryant and Rashan Charles. Think of Sarah Reed.⁷ Think of the pigs. Fuck the pigs. Plantation memories speak contours into the afterlives of slavery. Where are these afterlives located? How do these memories speak? What does Blackness speak? Think now of the hold. Think of the ship. Queer the contours. Do it now.

Rumi says: “Take an axe to the prison wall Escape Walk out like somebody suddenly born into colour”

Think of Black and think Blackness now.

How do we make art in a country that is trying to kill us?

While the first Caribbean Carnivals in the UK were started by Black woman communist, writer and activist Claudia Jones⁸ and took place indoors, after the racist murder of Kelso Cochrane, the carnivals migrated onto the streets upon which Kelso lost his life. The roots of carnival in the UK are roots of resistance, carnival is resistance with our bodies, with our joy, with our sweat, with our life. Carnival is Blackness taking up space. Carnival is a mourning, a transformation, and a radical protest. “A People’s Art is the Genesis of their Freedom”, Claudia said.

Some news headlines:

Grenfell Tower to be Covered Up Before Carnival

Met police to use facial recognition software at Notting Hill Carnival

Young black people nine times more likely to be jailed than young white people

Armed soldiers to go undercover in crowds at Notting Hill Carnival

A People’s Art is the Genesis of their Freedom

On the Films

Some of you may recognise the musical sequence played by the musicians in Cauleen Smith’s *H-E-L-L-O* as the iconic refrain from Steven Spielberg’s 1977 sci-fi epic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a film which continues to influence science fiction lore and aesthetics. In Spielberg’s film, the gregarious aliens use light and sound patterns to teach humans how to communicate with them. Composer John Williams devised the five note sequence, g (minor) - a (minor) - f (minor) - F (major) - G (major), that repeats throughout the film. When the Mothership lands on top of the Devil’s Tower in Wyoming the melody g-a-f-f-g becomes legible as a greeting (h-e-l-l-o) and a foundation for decoding alien language. Smith writes: “G-A-F-F-C < > H-E-L-L-O. A simple greeting dispensed as an exchange, a furtive gesture of recognition, good-will, and curiosity.”

H-E-L-L-O

“An indomitable spirit has been a New Orleans constant throughout its grand and convoluted history. As a “new” New Orleans emerges and the community-based practices of cultural traditions move to the outer rings of the city, rather than nestled within the Mississippi River’s disinherited crescent remains, there may be some elements granted as “everyday New Orleans” to which its inhabitants must say good-bye. But with an ear pressed to the ground, one might hear a resonant eternal love song for and from the city’s low end: deep funky electric baselines, crawling river sediment deposits, thundering sousaphones, a plaintive lion’s roar, a riverboat salutation, the sub-Saharan foot stomp of a captive elephant, or the long slow slide of the trombone. Trombonist Michael Watson showed up for our river levy recording session wearing a T-shirt he disclosed to be his favourite that read: “Listen To Your City.” Listen indeed. And say Hello.”⁹

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

The Fullness of Time is a science fiction rumination of post-Katrina New Orleans: space, place and post traumatic stress, it explores the psychological fabric of Hurricane Katrina’s survivors who live in New Orleans in the aftermath of one of the deadliest Hurricanes in US history. We drift with the protagonist Gigi, a survivor, or an alien, or both, who finds herself at the bottom of the waters, sheltering herself in a hurricane-shattered swimming atrium. But she wanders and walks and constantly returns to the site of her loss until she is found, until she finds herself again through three different spiritual/secular/social practices rooted in Black New Orleans. “The first sonic-psychic healing encounter is with the Uptown Mardi Gras Indians. They are terrestrial phantoms, grounded and real while accessing sounds and rhythms so old as to now only be known through our bodies. They gently rock her, console her, and then leave her with her grief, reshaped into something that she can now carry. Next, Gigi pulls herself together, and goes home; to church, where she is welcomed and comforted. The choir is full of joy, the pastor embodies an earthbound kind of ecstasy. “Be Blessed!” Gigi raises her hand to the heavens and receives herself. Finally she can mourn and her final guides, the legendary [Hot 8 Brass Band](#) lead her from the world of the dead to the world of the living.”¹⁰

Smith wrote the script for the film by listening. The majority of the dialogue “is out of the mouths of friends and strangers. People just attempting to describe the experience of the cognitive estrangement one feels when you return to a place to find it there-but-not-there, familiar and yet totally alien. The disorientation is itself a wound.”¹¹

We’d like to end with a quote from June Jordan, from her 1969 essay *Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person*.

“Black Studies. The engineer, the chemist, the teacher, the lawyer, the architect, if they are Black, cannot honourably engage career except as Black engineer, Black architect. Of course, *they must master the competence, the perspectives of physics, chemistry, economics, and so forth*. But they cannot honourably, or realistically, forsake the origins of their possible person. Nor can they escape the tyranny of ignorance except as they displace ignorance with study: study of the impersonal, the amorality of the sciences *anchored by Black Studies*. The urgency of their heart, their breath, demands the knowing of the truth about themselves: the truth of Black experience. And so, Black students, looking for the truth, demand teachers least likely to lie, least likely to perpetuate the traditions of lying: lies that deface the father from the memory of the child. We request Black teachers of Black Studies. It is not that we believe only Black people can understand the Black experience. It is, rather, that we acknowledge the difference between reality and criticism as the difference between the Host and the Parasite.”

Rasheedah, Camae, Cauleen, Claudia, Christina, Katherine & June have been our teachers. We have been teachers for and with each other. And we have collectively become students of ourselves, our communities, and our cities - from Philadelphia, to New Orleans, to London and beyond.

Without further ado, we invite you to be students with us - to look for truth, with the urgency of your heart, the urgency of your breath. Listen in, and say hello.

- 1 “Cauleen Smith by Leslie Hewitt”, *Bomb Magazine*, 1. July 2011, <https://bombgazine.org/articles/cauleen-smith/a>
- 2 “Black Quantum Futurism is a new approach to living and experiencing reality by way of the manipulation of space-time in order to see into possible futures, and/or collapse space-time into a desired future in order to bring about that future’s reality. This vision and practice derives its facets, tenets, and qualities from quantum physics and Black/African cultural traditions of consciousness, time, and space. It’s proposed by the BQF Collective, a multidisciplinary collaboration between Camae Ayewa and Rasheedah Phillips.” See: <https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/about>
- 3 Grenfell Tower was a residential tower block in North Kensington in London, the remains of which are still standing following a severe fire. On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out, causing 72 deaths. More than 70 others were injured and 223 people escaped. It was the deadliest structural fire in the United Kingdom since the 1988 Piper Alpha disaster and the worst UK residential fire since the Second World War. The fire is currently being investigated by the police, a public inquiry, and coroner’s inquests. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grenfell_Tower_fire
- 4 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 2006
- 5 Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 2016
- 6 Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*
- 7 Darren, Edson, Shane and Rashan are some of the Black men who were murdered by the police in the UK between 2017 and 2019, See: <https://uffcampaign.org>
- 8 See: <http://abhimanyumanchandaremembered.weebly.com/manu-and-claudia.html> and <https://www.dukeupress.edu/left-of-karl-marx>
- 9 Kelly Gabron, Chicago, 2014, see: <https://vimeo.com/121442981>
- 10 Steve Locke, *ONE QUESTION - Cauleen Smith*, 12 November 2015, <https://www.stevlocke.com/blog/one-question-cauleen-smith>
- 11 Locke, *ONE QUESTION - Cauleen Smith*