

The Mothership is Not a Metaphor

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Abstract

A text transcript of a performance lecture in which an audience is put into an intimate relation with their racialisation. Guided by the rubrics of philosophical, psychoanalytics and Afrofuturistic Black Studies, and held in a relationship to a “good enough” black father, they journey into the luminous darkness of their inner space.



Introduction

A black/brown body speaking or moving in -centric public/institutional space is often un/consciously censored. FutureBrownSpace (FBS) is a research project at Stockholm University of the Arts that holds space for artistic researchers of colour to create and generate on their own terms.

We prototype moments of creative, strategically essentialist separatism—however you want to tactically employ black essentialism as a thought experiment, i.e. what *could* blackness be outside the purview of the colonial mindset that brought it into being—how can we be black without the “ ” gaze making us “black”? Because that is for us as BIPOC to decide by exploring our own individual and intimate relationship with our blackness, within and outside scare quotes. How do we leave *ness* outside? *ness* is not the same thing as *people*. Just as feminism does not account for all feminists who happen to be assigned *ness*. For FBS, *ness* is a colonial fiction that we will not be bringing with us into the future.

Those assigned the marker “ ” need to work with what that means to them, what it has meant historically, how attached they are to it and the sort of grieving that accompanies moving beyond its implications. By virtue of having been assigned black or brown as racial rather than ethnic identifiers, BIPOC have been doing this grief work from the very moment they looked into the mirror and realised that they were not made in the supposedly ideal image of the human. Grief has been a ghost in our reflections for quite some time now.

Mirror, mirror we are not the fairest of them all.

Our starting point is to accept that we have no idea what this independent blackness, free to articulate itself might be. It is a desire, a not-yet, so our easiest way to approach it is through imagination—art, the informal politics of

culture—“the negotiation, representation, and reimagination of black interests through cultural symbols.” The process of experimenting with what might, oxymoronicly, be called *black freedom* takes form through psychoanalytically informed creative writing practices, influenced by Franz Fanon and tempered and updated with an array of radical black feminist/queer studies.

Black Skin, White Masks

Richard Ito, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*

On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

Taking our cue from Sara Ahmed, we do feminism if it's black, phenomenology if it's black, psychoanalysis if it's black, queer if it's black, momentarily re-dressing something out of balance. We know that when we leave the space of FutureBrown we are back to our philosophers, feminisms and social sciences. And, no shade, we love us a bit of Judith Butler who gave the master's tools a run for their money. But we gotta legitimately arks ourselves “Why the curriculum gotta be so ?”

Gender Trouble; The Psychic Life of Power; Undoing Gender; Precarious Life; Bodies that Matter

Because you know what they say—“Once you go black...”

We fabulate a black unconscious that holds this future, fantastic black desire. A platform for producing black artistic thinking following the idea that “aesthetic judgements should not be confined to the artistic realm and cannot be detached from political considerations.” Simply put, a black aesthetics arising from black consciousness cannot *not* be political because it is “the ongoing labour of aesthetically refusing unfreedom”, it is “the laborious and heretical aesthetics of

freedom-making.” If race has been removed from the table in Sweden—out of sight and therefore out of mind—then, for want of politics, culture is our best bet. (We may not need a table anyway; we may just be needing a Mothership.)

Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*

In Search of the Black Fantastic

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*

To be in the minor key of black desire for a few hours, in a space/time where/when that desire is not othered or minoritised, develops our stamina to be in majority spaces and our capacity for confronting with tenderness the awkwardness that interracial dialogue can summon.

The Mothership is Not a Metaphor

Dear passengers, we welcome you to the FutureBrown Airlines flight on the AfroStar Galactica for our round trip to the Mothership. As we are operating a fully booked flight today, we kindly ask you to listen to the following safety guidelines before we start boarding. FutureBrown Airlines is a subsidiary of FutureBrownSpace, or FBS, a research initiative of Afro-Diasporic practitioners, based in Black Studies, dedicated to creating nourishing spaces for people of the global majority to develop their projects—of art, of being, of activism or community.

We call the spaces that we offer weaves. The strands these spaces are woven with vary depending on the affects and experiences we want to nurture or mitigate. Literature has been our main device for softening the censorial walls that keep us from owning and loving and knowing our black being with full authenticity, for producing unrestrained black thought. We can tell you nothing of your intimate relationship and construction with and in the world through the fiction of race, so

we offer this device so you may sit with that relationship in soft space spun with Black Studies—which is, at base, nothing short of a critique of Western civilisation and its construction through the privileging of whiteness as a superior form of knowledge and being.

FBS is an ongoing tapestry of the stories and experiences and techniques and knowledges that its 700 brown and black bodies, so far, have brought to it, as they have passed through our literary weaves and added their strands to them.

How can bodies do Black Studies? It's not an abstract thing. It's the expertise of being in a black or blackened body. It's the critique of Western civilisation from those who must study it in order to survive, and the critical fabulation needed to think the future.

On the AfroStar Galactica, allow yourself to work with your thoughts, or let your thoughts do their work with you. Settle, sit with, sink into contemplation without the static of whiteness noise.

Whatever implications the signifier “whiteness” has for us, it is this we are trying to work without, or reconcile ourselves with, or unlearn. Whiteness, which is not the same thing as white people, is for FBS a colonial device that we will not be bringing with us into the future. Whiteness is something done.

Rest with us into the stars of your future speculations. Take a Black power nap and settle back into the weave. We got you. The weave has your back.

We can fall into its tapestry of techniques and knowledges, hold onto it, or let it hold us. Give your stories to it, and if you are in plenty give it your resilience or allyship so it can be fortified for another who may not be having such a good day on the outside, which here in Sweden could be something like what Black Studies calls an “enclosure”. This “outside” as “enclosure”, these “outsides” as “enclosures” (work place, institution, public space) are what we leave behind, here in this soft space for our black thoughts which feel unsafe.

Your in-flight “entertainment” on your trip comes from the original meaning of the word—to hold, support, maintain an idea—we're going to let you entertain a thought. And within that old meaning of the word entertainment is the idea of hospitality. We are the hosts of the AfroStar Galactica, offering a vessel, a hold for

thought.

The Mothership is our “what if?”, here. Call it a device for thinking, or a lifting off into a future beyond the atmosphere of racism—that’s what we give ourselves permission to contemplate in FutureBrownSpace. Whether or not we can actually imagine that is beside the point—giving ourselves the opportunity for our imaginations to fail expands the parameters of black desire.

The core of our practice is study—or you could say the core of our study is practice. The daily practice of being black or blackened. Because our study is the groove, the taste, the prayer, our moves, our lineage, our perfume, our roots, our looking fine, or fly, our laughter—our practice is black, black study, black consciousness, blackity black story and myth and historiography. It’s an “is this black enuff for you?” ontology, distinct from science’s dodgy divisive methodologies, for anyone, anyone who wishes to appreciate, and join in its significance for a more coalitional, less neo-colonial future. Whether your access to it is through the brown, the decolonial, the neurodivergent, whether you find black affinities with your class struggle, gender battles or variously abled superpowers, if you can move with it, tremble with it, let it break you out of abstraction and shake some non-censored sense into you, then you can be with us in Black Studies.

The Mothership is not a metaphor. We are not flying into outer space. Our mission is to boldly and blackly go into the sparkling blackness of our own inner space. The AfroStar Galactica is also not a metaphor. It is built from duct tape, string, junk, kitchen and garden appliances. It’s mainly glued together with black chill and hope and the collective groove of the cabin crew who have assembled this ramshackle, bootleg boogie box to the stars. Its engines are fuelled by love, grace and lack of distress, and so as we go on our direct flight to the cosmic darkness of inner space, it’s important that we keep it light.

And by blackness, for those unused to the concept, we mean, via Achille Mmembe in *Critique of Black Reason*, “the luminous sign of the possibility that the world might be redeemed and transfigured.”^[1]

The Mothership is not a metaphor. She is inside. Waiting for her time.

So, check in your **ness**, take a black chill pill for those of you who are nervous flyers, and enjoy the flight.

Cabin crew will shortly be passing through the boarding lounge with copies of your in-flight entertainment guide: it is a notebook designed for your black and brown thoughts, with writing prompts to hold you through our journey today.

You will see our logo on the front cover, which is comprised of six *Nguni* symbols—hope, place of justice, home, greatness, us, future. These are the constellations we will pass through on our journey to the Mothership. Neon signs will illuminate in the cabin as we enter each of them and will correspond with a writing prompt in your notebook. Feel free to write your own black or brown thoughts, ideas, plans and discoveries as your in-flight entertainment unfolds. Please remember that each entertainment of the thought of blackness is a prompt for you to explore your own luminous inner space.

Senegal, Botswana, the Congo, Jamaica, Nigeria, Haiti, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Côte D'Ivoire, Brazil—the cabin crew and the consultants with whom they built the AfroStar Galactica have knowledges. Trust that with these we can support thoughts that have no safe space to be thought elsewhere—when did a black thought ever happen in a quiet space, not interrupted by the static? Swedish, Swiss, British, Scottish, Belgian, Dutch, French—the cabin crew have been trained in diasporic being and understand the allures, the promises, and seductions of **ness**. We are here for your safety in our exit from its gravitational pull.

As we look around the boarding lounge, we can already notice a different sound than we are used to in Swedish public space. This concentration of melanin, regardless of how you rate the service today, may already have justified the price of your ticket. What we attempt to present on board today is a blackness not predicated on race, but a blackness framed as an experimentalisation on being—withdrawing blackness from (the) race (rigged) also removes us from the **laboratory** (university, art gallery, the commons) where we are observed and where that tainted prejudicial “objectivity” or scientific gaze, which already knows the results it wants to find (and those it wants to redact by “accident”) is absent.

We are, each of us; you are, each of you—the theory, the proof, the enactment, the knowledge. Together we form a weave of every traveller’s narratives, concerns, locations, exploring the map of the black unconscious as we coax it from its

repression/suppression. And that map is at the very least four-dimensional since it accounts for genealogies, geographies, geologies, extractions, immigrations, thefts by adoption and multiple temporalities that are activated when we come together. And we ask ourselves, what are we producing, in this epiphenomenal experience of blackness that is no longer a performance of race scripted by coloniality, or hegemony or majority, if not a way of knowing?

And what we can notice on re-entry into those majority atmospheres is that the weave has our back. It backs the future, that future space, that resides, inside us.

Working in the future perfect tense we try to think historiographically—“we will have had *to have written* history from a position of becoming-black.”^[2] Afrofuturism is a technique of hope, hope being the final platform in the seven stages of grief, before we leap into a future no longer conditioned by melancholic attachments to the past. But, since we cycle back to earlier stages of shock and despair at every premature death, or at moments when the micro-aggressions accumulate and our cups floodeth over, we need spaces that give us the permission to imagine something else.

Space. Psychic space. That will be the final frontier.

Our journey is to that inner space, that final frontier, the horizon that is inside, that limit that is black, so deeply interior that it cannot hear those supervisors, cannot be captured and named by those beloved, internalised, colonial pathologists with whom we've become codependent. And that's not love. That's addiction. We need to withdraw from it.

And yearn instead for the dramaturgical guidance of the black gaze.

To work within the Afro-diasporic condition, as a complete position, not a split one, to create under its undivided attention, so that its gaze can activate the work, catalyses the work into being into uncensored un-silence. Seal it (with approval), and protect us, as bodies with skins capable of and susceptible to absorption, the absorption of the others' fantasies, of the other's anxieties; the grey pallor of a shyness, and if you're black you know what I'm talking about—is not just dry skin, it's death making itself visible. Our skins are an interface with a gaze that does not comprehend the violence it can perform, and often in the sheep's clothing of love.

To put folk in close proximity to black bodies not performing for the gaze, fantasy, fear, guilt or envy requires, as Tina Campt says, a certain kind of ethical work.^[3] We stage a close encounter of the black kind. One might even say black kindness, which, in the light of our history would be a very specific form of kindness.

Because if anyone was expecting a slap or was hoping to get their guilt activated, or to get us to co-sign a masochistic contract, or passively enjoy the various black pornographies performed within the frame of fantasy—all that jouissance—were bound to be disappointed with our love. For ourselves.

Those expecting to be found guilty are already in the place of being ready to be forgiven. Offering forgiveness is a form of self-love, there can be no peace without forgiveness, and not being at peace is exhausting. Being in pieces. It's exhausting to be made responsible for someone else's super-ego, so a forgiveness is like a resigning from a punitive remit and handing it back. It's yours. To have and to hold. I can't be the source of your jouissance anymore.

Because it's all that jouissance that's keeping our codependency in play. Jacques Lacan says that “only love will make jouissance condescend to desire”.^[4]

Only love will lower jouissance's standards, for everything, to have everything, once and for all. It must sound counter-intuitive that at the heart of masochism is the inability to admit to and one's deep shame regarding one's sadism. And it is that, that you hand over for someone else to deal with in an act of projective identification.

So, giving it back, is, ultimately, an act of generosity performed through the qualities that shape our kindness: the soft, the fluid, the restful, the erotic, the tender transmitted through an aesthetic of minimalism, deadpan and abstraction.

This may well deliver a bigger, and more surprising slap than guilt.

Our withdrawal is a key strategy in this. Withdrawal from being the diversity, from being over-mined —because when blackness is a resource, it can be drained—WE can be depleted by the demand for more and more inclusion, access or broadening recruitment workshops. I am not your diversity. It is a withdrawal from a space, within which I stand in for an inclusion. I am not your metaphor.

Our imaginary round trip out of the atmosphere of anti-blackness is, yes, a metaphor for withdrawing our blackness as resource or asset from being deployed in the place we are employed.

If we steal away, will what has been lost been noticed, that which has been relied upon? Or, will it provide relief? So, as an experimental black pedagogy, our withdrawals seek to set in motion other processes of withdrawal for those addicted to the privileges that race can confer: one of those privileges being the feeling that one should have access to everything. And that's *jouissance*.

Dear passengers, we are almost ready for take-off. If you have travelled on other space crafts, please be aware that the AfroStar Galactica has some special features and protocols. We will be flying at a negritude of 3,000 kilometres, at a negrocity faster than the speed of _____, so please listen carefully to ensure a safe and pleasant trip.

As we are boarding on Swedish territory, we follow national protocols of leaving our shoes at the door before we board. However, as we will be entering black inner space, we will need to be in obedience of the appropriate Afro-galactic procedures, so, please also check in your _____ness before you board the space craft. You are allowed a maximum of 100ml, to be placed in a zip-locked bag. Any more will be considered a terrorist threat. Cabin crew will be on hand to help.

_____ness and its legacy are in fact too heavy to bring with us on our journey to the future. We simply do not have the fuel anymore. If the cabin should experience an outbreak of _____ness during the flight, we are prepared. In the event of a loss of cabin blackness, we will stop at the nearest outpost, to explain, contain and re-fuel. Please bear in mind that the interruption will cause delays in our arrival time in the future and that cabin crew may need a (black) power nap before we resume the flight. So, for the sake of fellow passengers, if you cannot leave your _____ness at check-in please put it on flight mode so that it does not interfere with our instruments of orientation, which here are Black Studies. You can connect with it again once we have landed in the future, but we offer no guarantee that you'll find a signal.

Welcome on board.

Cabin Crew: Lucie Maisha N'Duhirahe. Anna Adeniji. Toubab Holmes. John-Paul Zaccarini

Langa Pagard, Gloria Manzeyi

Ground Crew: Camilla Wellton. Andrea Kronlund-Davis, Ana Sanchez-Colberg, Marco Motta, Hanna Wallensten, Maipelo Gabang, Andrea Davis-Kronlund, Nonto Tshabalala and Osmund Tshuma at Mamgobozi Design, Josette Bushell-Mingo

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Footnotes

1. Mmembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2017.
2. Womack, Ytasha, L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books. 2013.
3. Campt, Tina. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2021.
4. Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*. New York: W.W. Norton. 1992.