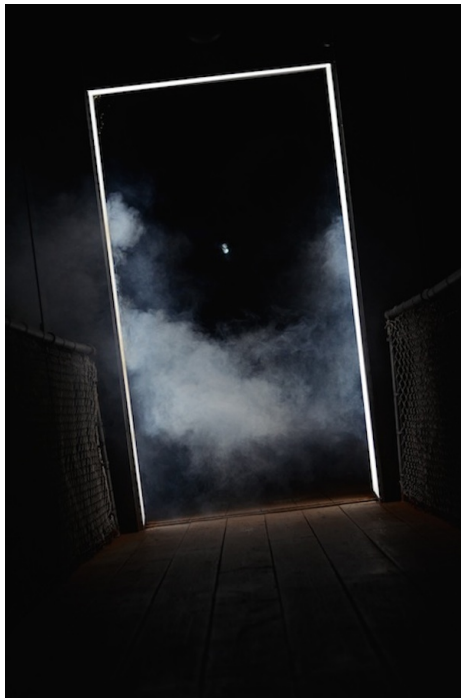


Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge

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An Introduction

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"Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast."^[1]

(Image by Dalton Anthony Jones.)

[1] I think it is fair to say that the collection of essays we have gathered together for this special issue of *Rhizomes* represents some of the most innovative and rigorous work being done on the subject of blackness and modernity. The contributing authors include a number of figures that, for well over a decade now, have trail-blazed the insurgent current of Afro-pessimism. Their work provides the ballast and inspiration for a number of exciting and fresh early to mid-career scholars who are confidently pushing black

thought to its outer limits with creative approaches to a set of very old problems. They do not merely wade into the troubled waters of modernity's impasse with history, specifically in regards to its irresolution and outright elision of the slave experience and its afterlife, they dive into them headfirst. Each of these writers challenges the substance and disciplinary boundaries of traditional academic fields as diverse as philosophy, performance studies, art, art history, political economy, and gender and sexuality, forcing them out of their comfort zones, and, sometimes gently, sometimes sternly, coaxing them into conversation with one another, forcing them to confront their blind spots and offering new directions for how they might proceed forward into the future.

[2] It has truly been a privilege working with the scholars and artists whose work appears in this collection. My main regret has to do with the slow pace of having their magnificent writing finally see the light of day. This is particularly true for those contributors who submitted pieces that were ready to go live virtually from the moment the call for papers was announced. To them, in particular, I offer a warm and

humble thank you. I hope that the quality of the company your work will keep can somehow offset the frustration of the wait.

[3] Having broken the ice on this topic, I think it might help to consider some of the reasons for the delay. The issue's call harnessed the concepts of the "black hole" and "white faciality" as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* as a suggested starting point for a larger meditation upon the impact of, and challenge posed by, the black experience in relation to the discourses that have governed modernity's understanding of itself. It seemed to me at the time, that their framing of faciality, the notion that the white face was a "non-universal," abstracted, libidinally invested facsimile, or diagram whose likeness was the "White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes," a face so valorized they state that, "The face is Christ," begged a bit more interrogation than even their fluid and highly adaptable theorization allowed for. In light of the most profound theoretical advancements in black thought over the past 36 years since *Plateaus* publication, what might a new generation of black scholars have to add to this poorly developed yet lucrative conceptual framework?

[4] Nothing prepared me, however, for the voluminous quantity of responses to the call. Working through the abstracts itself was infinitely more time consuming than I had dreamed it would be, a task made more difficult by my somewhat neurotic desire to give everyone a fair hearing and the loss of my co-editor soon after the project began. It did not take me very long to realize that a good two-thirds of the contributions actually had very little to do with the specific themes of the call itself. They consisted instead of proposals for essays that anyone who had something written on the subject of "race" tucked away in a computer file thought they could risk running through the gauntlet from abstract proposal to peer review. This was an object lesson par excellence in the pressure academics are under to publish or perish, but it also shone a very glaring spotlight on the new currency of race and ethnicity to the multi-cultural agendas of the corporate university complex. In short, let me just say that Blackness has value in excess of the black labor deployed in its production. The work that our intellectual labor produces is being used as a supplement to diversify the portfolios of academics that capitalize on it to enhance their institutional status. I am not the first one to note this, but it is, indeed, high time for those of us engaged in black knowledge production to figure out some effective ways to not just maximize our individual compensation for the work we do, but to democratize (radicalize) the internal structure of the neoliberal university in such a way that our labor can be shared with our brothers and sisters, creating more equitable, non-casualized opportunities for scholars of color that will strengthen our work, the communities we live in, and the institutional environment where we are employed.

[5] The lessons derived from the abstract proposal phase of this special issue were repeated in even more stark terms when the process of peer review kicked in. Whereas the call for papers received a virtual avalanche of responses, the opposite can be said for willing reviewers. Reaching out into the tentacles of the academy for scholars qualified to comment, first on black studies and second on the vibrant work being produced under the banner of Afro-pessimism proved to be a time killing exercise. Very, very few scholars, including those who listed race, ethnicity and African American fields of expertise, felt up to the task of rendering commentary on our submissions and they said so forthrightly. It was at this point that I recognized that I was, proverbially speaking, up ****'s creek with only one paddle,

my own.

[6] I cannot stress enough, therefore, that this issue would never have been possible without the assistance and tireless efforts of two remarkable people, Sara-Maria Sorentino and Shadee Malaklou. The title of "Associate Editor" does not do justice to their organizational prowess, steady commitment to the project and, most of all, intellectual brilliance. They provided timely bursts of energy and, on more than one occasion, swift kicks to my arse when it was time to "giddy up old chap!" They certainly deserve more credit than they will receive for the work they put into actualizing this project. Their devotion to black study and critical acumen are a tribute to the inspiring work being done at the University of California, Irvine and a promising indicator of the future of critical thought.

Thank you!

Notes

1. Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001) p 5.
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