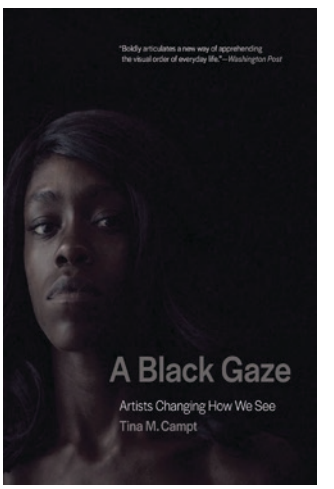
Beyond Trauma and Joy

New Works in Black Studies

Ariel Nereson



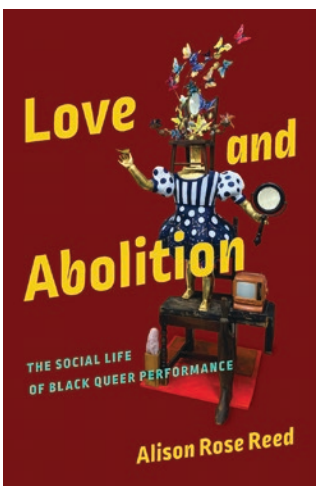
Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago. By Kemi Adeyemi. Duke University Press, 2022; 177 pp. $94.95 cloth, $24.95 paper, e-book available.



A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See. By Tina M. Campt. The MIT Press, 2023; 219 pp.; illustrations. $29.95 cloth, $24.95 paper, e-book available.



Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration. By Nicole R. Fleetwood. Harvard University Press, 2020; 323 pp.; illustrations. $39.95 cloth, e-book available.



Love and Abolition: The Social Life of Black Queer Performance. By Alison Rose Reed. The Ohio State University Press, 2022; 260 pp.; illustrations. $129.95 cloth, $39.95 paper, e-book available.

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Recent works in Black aesthetic and cultural production build on legacies of Black feminisms as they seek to ever-expand scholarly theories and accounts of multifaceted Black life. The four books considered here assemble sites and model methods that bring new dimensions to how performance studies might understand historical and ongoing freedom dreams. These dreams, or futures-lived-now, encompass material advocacy and action towards a world without caging, as in the case of Nicole R. Fleetwood's and Alison Rose Reed's abolitionist analyses, as well as freedoms of expression and experience for Black people that include those of ambivalence and ambiguity in addition to now-standard narratives of trauma and/or joy, as in the books of Kemi Adeyemi and Tina M. Campt. Each of the four texts attends to broad concerns of time, space, attention, spectatorship, energy, mobility, and affect—central concerns of performance studies that are expanded in reach and significance through their intersections with visual studies, ethnography and urban studies, and literary studies. Moreover, each author expresses their incisive readings of Black expressive cultures via a unique scholarly voice that integrates personal experiences of and with the works and practices in question. These choices in mode of address center accountability, collaboration, and relationship as ethical orientations in research practice. Focusing on shared concerns and threads of connectivity among these books clarifies the contributions that this suite of texts makes to interdisciplinary quests for freedom and to performance studies' longstanding—but recently reenergized—commitment to understanding aesthetic and cultural production as world-making.

Nicole Fleetwood's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* has been widely recognized as a paradigm-shifting text for many fields invested in understanding practices of mass incarceration and theories of carcerality—or, the carceral turn. Fleetwood's opening "Note on Method" locates the beginnings of this project in her own family's "prison archives": the letters, photographs, and affective structures resulting from the effects of hyperincarceration (xxi). From the beginning, Fleetwood inverts hierarchical flows of power as she endeavors to "present prison art as central to the contemporary art world" rather than re-center the often Eurocentric values of the contemporary art world as proffering liberatory experiences to incarcerated people (xxiii). Based in prison artists' practices, Fleetwood develops a theory of carceral aesthetics, perhaps the most immediately applicable dimension of the book for performance studies scholars. Carceral aesthetics "describes forms of art-making and cultural engagement that take place across various states of un/freedom produced in the era of mass incarceration" and that are generated from intersections of class, race, and gender in captivity (25). Fleetwood unfolds new aspects of carceral aesthetics throughout chapters that consider nonincarcerated photographers' practices of capture; prison art collectives and the "procurement" of the materials of art-making; portraiture by incarcerated artists; collaborative art practices between incarcerated individuals and nonprofit professionals; art in solitary confinement; and family portraits taken in the makeshift "studios" of prisons on visiting days.

In *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, Tina M. Campt also takes up "the image-making practices of Black communities" with a focus on still and moving image works by professional artists (4). Campt's critical practice offers thoughtful, deep readings of several artists' works, from Arthur Jafa to Simone Leigh to Okwui Okpokwasili, Dawoud Bey, Deana Lawson, and more, all towards the articulation of what she claims is the question these artists' oeuvres pose to the viewer: "rather than looking *at* Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to *see oneself through* the complex positionality that is blackness—and work through its implications on and for oneself?" (7). The works in this study, Campt contends, prompt modes of responsiveness in the viewer that attend to precarity, complicity, and the stakes of

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action. The introduction, "Prelude to a Black Gaze," stands on its own as a theory of visuality that is clearly defined without sacrificing complexity, positioning "a Black gaze" (crucially, not *the* Black gaze) as "a critical framework, a reading apparatus, a term that describes an artist's practice, and a spectatorial meditation that demands particularly active modes of watching, listening, and witnessing" (21). The capaciousness of a Black gaze (influencing artist, viewer, and the infrastructures that condition their encounters) supports Campt's readings of the creativity artists employ in order to acknowledge the violent constraints of precarious life without "capitulating to *only* be known by these same forces" (23). Compellingly structured as "verses" that intentionally activate connotations of sound, lyric, and poetry, the chapters flow through Campt's encounters with artworks and artists as they circulate through the transnational contemporary art world.

Kemi Adeyemi's *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* moves deliberately through varying degrees of ease and challenge across Chicago's Black queer dance floors, providing a sustained analysis of understudied communities that also models new ways of doing performance ethnography. Adeyemi, as one of the coeditors of the 2021 volume *Queer Nightlife*, frames her own research in the opening preface as invested in marking how pleasure and labor coproduce one another and in documenting "the many kinds of work that it takes to get to and on the dance floor" (ix). Labor and affect partner one another, with pleasure glimmering among fatigue, disappointment, pessimism, and other "bad feelings" generated by neoliberal urban infrastructures of surveillance and enclosure as well as interpersonal misses and disconnections. While each chapter offers compelling insights to the reader, some of the most significant work Adeyemi does is in charting the affective, ethical, and practical registers of her research methods in "a kind of plea for a more rigorous, complex rendering of black queer women's practices of living" (25). As Adeyemi moves through the cyphers of the Black queer parties Slo 'Mo, Party Noire, and E N E R G Y, she moves through the city of Chicago and its grids of gentrification, accounting for "the racialized territorialization of feeling" that circumscribes her (and others') motion (86).

Alison Rose Reed is also focused on queer communities and modalities of art-making as she develops a theorization of queer as a keyword for abolitionism. *Love and Abolition: The Social Life of Black Queer Performance* brings performance studies methodologies and ethical commitments to literary studies, viewing several kinds of literature as "performance texts" that "seek *transformation*—not transcendence—of individual, interpersonal, and institutional relationships" (12). In a series of readings of James Baldwin, Laurie Carlos, the Combahee River Collective, Ntozake Shange, Sharon Bridgforth, Josefina Baez, vanessa german, Stephanie Leigh Batiste, and the author's own organization Humanities Behind Bars, Reed iterates her central concepts of tough love and tender love as Black queer feminist abolitionist practices. In chapter 3's analysis of Bridgforth's and Baez's "animation of spirit" in their performance praxes (118), Reed crystallizes tough love as "the development of a critical social consciousness" that requires accountability and action and tender love. These are "fostering spaces [...] that enable healing from harm and finding joy in community," paired practices that "present an organized threat to antirelational carcerality" (157). Reed's attention to how tough and tender love present differently for and make distinct claims on incarcerated, femme, queer, Black, and/or allied people is a particular strength of the book whose foundations in Reed's own abolition organizing are beautifully described in the final chapter.

There are many paths of inquiry that wend through these books. As one starting point, several are concerned with watching/looking/visuality, often building upon Campt's interventions in *Listening to Images* (2017). For Fleetwood's subjects, visuality is "a tool of state authority that structures who sees and what can be seen" that produces "carceral visuality" (15). In the chapter "Captured by the Frame: Photographic Studies of Prisoners," Fleetwood tracks how the state "deploy[s] the tools of photographic representation against certain populations" in prison identification photography, and articulates the fraught dynamics carcerality produces for social justice photography in and beyond prison walls, as in the work of Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, Deborah Luster, and others (87). In Campt's work, these dynamics also encompass visuality beyond carceral space, creating "the fundamental disparity that defines the dominant viewing practice: the fact that blackness is the

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elsewhere (or nowhere) of whiteness" (7). Adeyemi's brilliant methodological work in her third chapter, "Ordinary E N E R G Y," resists transparency (a property of visuality) as the outcome of fieldwork, championing the work of description over the work of explanation in her account of the dance party E N E R G Y while remaining ever wary of neoliberalism's conscriptive force (109). The locations from which we see are of overriding concern to Adeyemi, and her "attempts to capture E N E R G Y's ordinariness subsequently and directly prompt you, dear reader, to reflect upon the networks of interest, desire, and proximity (and lack thereof) that govern your practice of critical inquiry" (111). For Fleetwood, Campt, Adeyemi, and also Reed, the power dynamics inherent in looking (across practices of witnessing and across modes of academic analysis) begin from the scholar's own position.

For Fleetwood, carceral visuality is one aspect of carceral aesthetics, which she rounds out in her first chapter with a discussion of penal space, or "the architecture of punishment" (23), penal time, and penal matter. Adeyemi's analysis similarly integrates time/space/energy as elemental concerns of mobility, and her attention to geography is specific and material to the "racialized spatiality" of Chicago and its gentrifying neighborhoods (4). In a stunning chapter, Reed examines "landscapes of confinement and constraint" as what we could consider racialized spatiality that form a carceral landscape outside of prisons (158), framing Stephanie Leigh Batiste's and vanessa german's home-making performances as "imaginatively intervening in this carceral terrain of state-sanctioned violence" (159). These performances and the communities they call in participate in Fleetwood's carceral aesthetics, refracting homeplace through a queer lens that generates "the collective creation of new emotional attachments rooted in abolition and resisting carceral logics" (189). Across each of these texts theories of spatiality and of how experiences of space are coconstituted through temporal, energetic, and affective registers bear clear promise for performance studies and its central questions.

In their profoundly interdisciplinary orientations, these four books push performance studies beyond frameworks of understanding Black (and occasionally all minoritarian) performance as responding to trauma with either resistance or joy. (Koritha Mitchell's 2020 *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture* would join this conversation from the perspective of literary studies.) These books hold scholars and audiences accountable for the frames they bring to understanding the aesthetic and cultural production of Black artists, activists, families, and partygoers, providing a timely check to the field of performance studies for its desires for performance to function as liberatory. Adeyemi, Campt, Fleetwood, and Reed provide models that counteract this perhaps well-intentioned impulse of much Black performance studies scholarship not through chastisement but through careful attention to the building blocks of performances, both aesthetic and everyday: time, space, and energy.

Both Campt and Adeyemi attend to time and temporality in vivid analyses of slowness as Black artistic and vernacular practice. In verse four's tour-de-force reading of choreographer Okwui Okpokwasili's *Sitting on a Man's Head* (2018), Campt reveals how Okpokwasili "slow[s] down our encounters with blackness [...] in ways that solicit our participation in an alternative ethics of care" (112). Written from Campt's perspective as a participant in this installation at the Berlin Biennale, Campt recounts her experiences of the installation, including conversations with artists and fellow attendees about the installation's invitation to "slow walking." Okpokwasili's choreographies of slow walking without contact activate new modes of relation, allowing Campt and others to become members of a chorus. Within this chorus of experience, "slow walking intensified and distilled what it felt like to physically inhabit an anticipatory state of Black being" (120). Campt's verse five brings a full-throated articulation of the concept of the chorus as expressed through "Black feminist insurgency" in contemporary visual arts (164). In Adeyemi's chapter "Slo 'Mo and the Pace of Black Queer Life," slowness is also primarily relational, "a key framework through which black queer women understand their relationships in and to a party, neighborhood, and city that are increasingly entangled with the imperatives of accumulation and acceleration" (41). Adeyemi's analysis here of the Slo 'Mo party and its internal and external movements is characteristic of the book as a whole, in her attention to the ways that slowness is not a full stop, and practices of slowness are strategies of survival rather than revolution (with regular reminders to the reader to interrogate their desires for Black queer women to represent revolution).

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The authors' respective relationships to the people about whom they write, and the clarity and elegance with which the authors describe these relationships and their varying power dynamics, are a major strength of each of these texts and perhaps indicative of the reach of performance studies approaches, particularly ethnographic ones. Fleetwood introduces readers to formerly incarcerated artist Dean Gillespie and his miniatures, composed of materials both contraband and permitted inside prison, by way of her own first meeting with Gillespie when both were present at a parole hearing for Fleetwood's cousin. One of the most powerful chapters in *Marking Time* documents family portrait photography in prisons—as Fleetwood asserts, "in terms of sheer volume [...] one of the largest practices of vernacular photography in the contemporary era"—and includes several images from her own family's archives (233). Both incisive and deeply personal, Fleetwood's remarkable work in this chapter emphasizes the intimate labor and emotional investment, often on the part of women, to "engage the photographic practice as evidence of relations that are shaped by but not bound by the power of the state" (241). Similarly, in *Love and Abolition* Reed concludes with perhaps the most personal chapter, an examination of the abolition pedagogy she has undertaken as a codirector of Humanities Behind Bars, "an abolitionist network of radical group-based study and mutual aid" (193). Grounded in the Black radical tradition of study, Reed's work as a teacher of abolition literature is theorized through the language of "contraband love," referencing the poetry of Assata Shakur, which also titles the zine produced in captivity by her students. As a whole, *Love and Abolition* benefits from Reed's participation in social justice organizing, which both grounds literary readings and gives Reed the tools to see the materialisms at work in, for example, Shange's poetry. Reed also provides an extensive appendix of organizations that serves as a resource for readers looking to become active in abolitionist organizing.

Campt also takes readers into her personal experiences from the very beginning of *A Black Gaze* where, in verse one, "The Intimacy of Strangers," she opens with a first-person account of visiting the studio of photographer Deana Lawson. This account beautifully describes Campt's critical practice, one where "Rather than writing *about* artworks, I spend most of my time at exhibitions and galleries sitting with and writing *to* them" (27). Both Campt and Adeyemi pay particular attention to their choreographies of observation; Campt emphasizes her spatial relationship to the gallery space and her preference for (and the perspectival gains that result from) sitting on the floor. Campt's personal relationship to gravity in verse one leads into her readings of filmmaker Kahlil Joseph and her formulation of Black countergravity in verse two, a practice that "defies the physics of anti-blackness that has historically exerted a negating force aimed at expunging Black life" (47). For Adeyemi, her presence as a participant, interlocutor, and observer never fades into the background; productively, her own energetic experiences of Black queer nightlife locate her as a sensorial witness in the city. As she recounts participants' experiences of the queer dance floor, she also notes when she "head[s] for the exit," fatigued from an evening of close observation and participation (40). Yet, Adeyemi manages to also hold the foreground space for her interlocutors. The book's conclusion is primarily composed of an oral history that brings together several voices introduced in earlier chapters. Their conversation produces "sensoria of community" (131) as members share stories of "work[ing] through the basic algorithm of black queer (night)life—calculating the relations among energy, intention, endurance, and outcome" (120).

Infrastructural critique also links several of these texts, with authors attending carefully to flows of resources and the structures they produce. Fleetwood introduces the useful term "fraught imaginaries" in her analysis of the nonprofit funding that often partners with the state to provide art education in prisons, naming the tensions "between nonincarcerated professional artists, nonprofit arts organizations, and incarcerated artists, students, and participants" (158). Fleetwood's chapter analyzes the differential stakes of collaboration across these groups through a healthy skepticism of the alleged liberatory possibilities of the term, stakes that are fully illustrated through first-person experience in Reed's final chapter on the outreach program Humanities Behind Bars. In her introduction, Fleetwood pays close attention to how the carceral archipelago builds or impedes structures for incarcerated art-making and systemic impacts on incarcerated artists' experiences of time, space, and energy. These elemental capacities for art-making and community-building

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are also the focus of Adeyemi's infrastructural critiques in her chapter "Where's the Joy in Accountability? Black Joy at Its Limits." Adeyemi documents the development of Party Noire, a Black queer dance party advertised through the language of "Black Joy." Adeyemi demonstrates a compelling willingness to stay with the bad feelings that emerge as Party Noire evolves and its attendant "Black Joy was feeling less like a practice of collectivizing and more like a marketable brand without a political force" (63). In detailed readings of the urban planning and resource allocation that shape the Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park, where Party Noire is located, Adeyemi shows how these territorializations generate affective structures for Party Noire participants and, crucially, organizers. Adeyemi's attention to the time, space, and energy demands of administrative and organizational labor is a notable contribution of the book.

This attention to infrastructure maps onto increased treatment of resource allocation and distribution in performance studies scholarship. "Institutional critique," more widely known in art historical and visual studies, has recently found an aligned term via Olive Demar's invocation of what Sally Banes characterized as "critical institutional studies" (2002:95) to describe recent works in dance studies that focus on the material and political conditions of production that make performance possible (in Demar 2022:1). Performance studies' theoretical priorities of embodiment and lived experience make clear invitations to the kinds of work found in the texts by Adeyemi, Campt, Fleetwood, and Reed.

Adeyemi's and Campt's analyses of choreography (both of themselves as witnesses and participants and of the people and artworks they study) are buttressed by choreographies of the page, the disruption of readerly space and time. The title page of Adeyemi's third chapter offers plenty of blank space that surrounds provocative text; the bottom of the page directly addresses the reader: "What do you think when you read that?" (97). This sharp invitation to self-reflection repeats throughout the chapter, often in bolded section headers such as the following on page 111:

A Question to Ask Yourself: Why Am I Reading This?

(For Real. Ask Yourself.)

Adeyemi's direct address of the reader emphasizes the composition and reception of her text as an exchange; while she can (and does) reflect on her own desires in pursuing this fieldwork, she can't know what every reader brings to their encounter with the text. Yet, these readerly desires are important to Adeyemi, and she alters the page to make space and slow pace for them to be voiced, even if only inside the reader's head. Campt's unique structure of "verses" rather than chapters encourages a creative curation of the spatial forms that text may take on the page, and definitions of what Campt describes as keywords often bubble across the margins and body text and influence the reader's experience of the temporal as well as spatial dimensions of reading. A discussion of Christina Sharpe's concept of "the weather" is buoyed on the page by a dictionary definition of the term. In verse three's analysis of Arthur Jafa's work, three definitions of "frequency" appear one after another, across a bubble of white space taking up margin and body. The reader is inundated with textual frequency as words spill out of multiple, closely spaced definitions.

Finally, Black feminist thought gets taken up in distinct ways throughout these four texts, though is most explicitly rehearsed in Reed's, through reference to Fannie Lou Hamer's call to action, "until I am free, you are not free either" (76), and to the Combahee River Collective's pathbreaking proposition, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (104). Indeed, Reed's book provides a useful counterpoint to contemporary dismissals of some concepts from Black feminist thought, arguing instead that "the radical roots of intersectionality as well as identity politics should not be dismissed simply because they've been co-opted by liberal interests" (102–03). Thus, while some of these texts are focused more tightly on Black femmes as subjects, each author applies principles and methods of Black feminisms in their analyses of how intersectionalities are deployed towards freedom (including towards practices of freedom uncoupled from a liberal humanism wherein Black experience toggles between terror and joy).

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Reed and Campt activate Black feminist ideas about love as a radical practice (as distinct from hope and from Black feminism's buzzword of intersectionality, as in the work of Jennifer Nash [2019]). Campt's third verse, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life," returns to some of her earlier thinking on haptic visuality to brilliantly elaborate hapticity as, in one of her keyword definition bubbles, "the labor of feeling across difference and precarity; the work of feeling implicated or affected in ways that create restorative intimacy" (104). Detangling this mode of labor and sense of the haptic from empathy, Campt characterizes them instead as labors of love that require exertion to produce and to witness. Throughout *Love and Abolition*, Reed continues to peel the onion of love, emphasizing the significance of love "*in struggle*, as a form of communal care and spiritual sustenance" (220). Framing love and creativity as linked activisms toward abolition also connects Reed's and Campt's analyses. Campt's reading of Simone Leigh's works in verse five is framed by Harriet Jacobs's "registers of fugitive creativity" and their orientation towards freedom (146), a move that locates Leigh in a network of Black femme abolitionism. For Reed, "creative solidarity" names both the potentialities and materialisms of Black queer performance, invoked to examine the networks of personal and professional care that exist among her subjects, and their shared affects, aesthetics, and geographies (161). Campt's fugitive creativity and Reed's creative solidarity name the inextricability of aesthetic, cultural, social, and political production that is a foundational assumption of each of these four texts.

In *Marking Time*, Fleetwood implicitly activates identity politics by showing how the violences of the prison industrial complex are both all-encompassing and differentially activated, with Black, Indigenous, and Latine communities in the United States receiving disproportionately harsh surveilling, policing, and sentencing. Incarceration's impact on the familial and communal labors of Black women is a particular focus for Fleetwood and the site of some of her most powerful critiques, while Black feminisms inform readings throughout the book. In her framing of Luke Willis Thompson's film of Diamond Reynolds, *autoportrait* (2017), Campt characterizes Thompson as "adjacent" to anti-Black violence via the routes of circulation and vulnerability that link "indigenous and diasporic peoples" (171). For Campt, understanding this adjacency is critical to understanding the operations of a Black gaze not as a description of "the viewpoint of Black people [...]. It is a viewing practice and structure of witnessing that reckons with the precarious state of Black life in the twenty-first century" (172). Finally, while Adeyemi's book might seem to most obviously address Black feminisms in its focus on communities of Black, often femme, people, it's in her methods that Black feminisms most strongly resonate. In *Feels Right*,

> scholarly citations serve primarily as supplements that flesh out black queer women's experiences and add deeper context and complexity rather than the other way around: using black queer women's lives as "evidence" that simply bolsters conversations by, among, and for academics. (27)

Adeyemi's characterization of her methods is reminiscent of Barbara Christian's foundational calls in "The Race for Theory" ([1987] 2007), namely Christian's questioning of who academic writing is for, and her insistence on theorizing as a cultural practice beyond the academy.[1] Adeyemi extends these lines of thought into the practice of performance ethnography.

Adeyemi, Campt, Fleetwood, and Reed offer different maps for navigating the surpluses of historical and contemporary violence—racist, misogynist, transphobic, and homophobic—that people face across a range of mundane and spectacular contexts. Fleetwood's question, "How do we collectively imagine and create in ways that do not rely on the violence of caging and carcerality?" (189), finds a possible answer in Reed's description of Black queer abolition as "to love (or build relationships of care), study (or convene communities of consciousness), and struggle (or mobilize for collective liberation)" (221). Love, study, and struggle are apt keywords that link these texts despite their distinct voices and priorities. While many of the analytic sites featured are of

1. Christian writes of what she calls academic hegemony, wherein "some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, third world) have been influenced, even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation" ([1987] 2007:41).

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clear relevance to performance studies scholars, I find it is the attention to scholarly, artistic, and participant processes and practices that is of greatest promise to the field. A set of interdisciplinary methods emerges among these four texts that prioritizes accountability, generosity, and complexity. (Importantly, complexity here is generated through artworks and community practices themselves, rather than found in the theory brought to bear upon those subjects.) The rigor of self-reflection upon their own process that each author undertakes is refracted in their analyses of Black aesthetic and cultural production in readings of exceptional nuance, clarity, and force that describe the worlds we do have and might make, together.

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