

The 2021 *Antipode* AAG Lecture

Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea

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Abstract: Exploring textual accumulation as a methodological practice, this paper (first presented as the 2021 *Antipode* American Association of Geographers Lecture on 8 April) works through how the aesthetics of black miscellanea, and the engagement with overlapping and conflicting texts that are affixed, uncovers moments of clarity that complicate typical conceptualisations of opacity. The moments of clarity unravel as lessons, with the aesthetics of black miscellanea signalling an experiment in, and the potential politics of, dynamic collaboration, diasporic literacy, and counsel. Krista Franklin's *Under the Knife* anchors the discussion.

Keywords: black studies, methodologies, aesthetics, opacity

This paper attends to black methodologies, paying specific attention to the practice of textual accumulation: the gathering of various creative items and narratives. The conversation addresses how the aesthetics of black miscellanea, and the engagement with overlapping texts that are affixed, uncovers moments or slivers of clarity that complicate typical conceptualisations of opacity. The moments of clarity unravel as lessons, cautionary tales, and secrets, with the aesthetics of black miscellanea signalling an experiment in coming to know black livingness without producing and reproducing an intellectual economy that is oversaturated with racial violence. As I move through the paper, I navigate the tricky work of theorising harm without fully describing or rehearsing violence and racism. I do this by sharing stories, theories, and texts while also circumventing some narratives that might otherwise be positioned as sites of lucid extraction that can be culled, displayed, and situated as authentic evidence of abject-black-everything. A somewhat unsatisfactory experiment (I do not develop an authoritarian framework that is followed by in-depth answers), the paper both tells and untells and understands this contradictoriness as a useful methodology that signals how we might research black life differently. The contradictoriness allows us to observe that black life is not a static object of analysis (a black concept, a black body, a black

community, a black idea) that is poised to be assessed, but rather a site (or sites) of sustained and/or provisional worldmaking activities that are invested in liberation.¹

This paper has four sections that work through the tensions between black knowledge and black knowing as they are articulated, studied, and expressed within the context of white supremacy. I am interested how aesthetic representations of black life and black livingness oscillate between clarity and opacity, and how this oscillation illuminates a politics of liberation that rests on ambivalence. Ambivalence (unresolved contradictions) is an important feature of black Atlantic livingness because it signals the working through and toward liberation. In my thinking here, contradiction and ambivalence open a cascade of signals and prompts, distinct modes of diasporic literacy that give form to black life. The contradiction and ambivalence, that feeling and expression and thick representation of unresolved uneasiness, is where black aesthetics live. Here, to ground ourselves, we can revisit Sylvia Wynter's analysis of Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. DuBois, and her observation that they write and theorise blackness from locations that are laden with extremely painful contradictions—the monumental work of race, which is expressed by assembling and degrading black people as objects, forecloses their access to Eurocentric versions of humanity; yet it is precisely this positionality, gleaned in the ways they reject objecthood through an assertion of their black humanity, that produces their capacious anti-colonial and interhuman outlook.² In what follows I move through some features of black methodologies, keeping in mind how contradiction and ambivalence are central to black interdisciplinary thought. This is followed by an exploration of opacity and aesthetics. I then explore the aesthetics of black miscellanea to work out how the creative text uncovers moments or slivers of clarity that condition claims to opacity. The work of Krista Franklin, specifically her exuberant aesthetic chronicle, *Under the Knife* (2018), is my inspiration here.

¹Even still, with an introductory paragraph full of hope, my reviewer might be correct. Perhaps this is unstudious, just words and no analysis and useless descriptive repetition. I try again: I have drafted this paper to highlight black methodologies and accompanying curiosities about miscellanea and aesthetics and opacity. The black methodologies briefly explored in this piece draw on *Dear Science* (McKittrick 2021), a book that highlights how entangled anticolonial narratives, together, invite reading practices and analytical frames (methods) that destabilise colonial knowledges. The contradictions, the telling and untelling, the wariness of extraction-assessment paired with a loud plea to illuminate and notice and pay attention to struggle, the references (although too brief) to the work of Krista Franklin, Simone Browne, Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, Kandice Chuh, Vèvè Clarke (among others), are all compiled to signal textured and interlocking black ways of knowing; I employ these ways of knowing to work out my ideas. I also play with form here (repetition, storytelling, columns, a few evaluative footnotes, some images, prompts that are unexplained, simple language and flowery language, parenthetical thoughts/caveats, italics, song references) to expand and exalt and subvert the academic form (that confident authoritarian form with accompanying concrete answers). This piece, like *Dear Science*, is not a stable set of instructions, it does not explain the “why” of black studies, it does not seek to speculate what is redacted or lost or unspeakable; it is not inventing new or different forms of black knowledge. Rather it is an attempt to illuminate the promise of (already existing, future) black methodologies and draw attention to how black aesthetic texts are narratives of counsel. See also Prince, “Joy in Repetition”, from *Graffiti Bridge*, 1990.

²Wynter (2003).

Part One: Black Method

As noted, my methodology is a black methodology, indebted to both anti-colonial thought and black studies.³ My methodological premise, or assumption, is that black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies, and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives to challenge racism. Put differently, one of the many ways race and racism are manifested is through colonial and imperial knowledge systems that express and normalise discipline-based and place-based classifications that hierarchically organise (according to race, place) our epistemologies.⁴ Within black studies and anti-colonial studies, one can observe an ongoing method of gathering multifariously textured tales, narratives, fictions, whispers, songs, grooves; these narratives push up against and subvert prevailing colonial and imperial knowledge systems by centring and legitimising other (black) ways of knowing. What is meaningful, then, are the ways in which black people are interdisciplinary actors, continually entangling and disentangling varying narratives and tempos and hues that, together, invent and reinvent knowledge. This interdisciplinary innovation illuminates, as Mark V. Campbell argues, multiple skills and ways of knowing that privilege collaboration and bring into view unorthodox practices of belonging that discredit ethnic absolutism and its attendant geographic fictions.⁵ We see this method in the work of Frantz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, AbdouMaliq Simone, Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, Lisa Lowe, NourbeSe Philip, Simone Browne, and many others.⁶ These scholars show that this methodology has the capacity to shift our thinking away from a linear model that moves from data collection to data analysis (wherein the data are, for example, black); what we see, instead, is a method that moves with and through uneasy and uncomfortable temporalities, many entangled concepts and texts, and rigorous study. From there, we can also notice that black studies scholars are encouraging us to focus on and share *how* we know rather than incessantly listing what or who or why we know. Black knowledge is a method, which means it is an activity. Black knowledges are spirited, energetic and operational, rather than discursive flattened artefacts that we study.

For me, then, black methodologies signal both a way of living, and an enlivened analytical frame, that is curious and sustained by wonder (the desire to know). The method is rigorous. Wonder is study. Curiosity is attentive. The practice of bringing together multiple texts, stories, songs, and places involves the difficult work of thinking and learning across many sites, and thus coming to know, generously, varying and shifting worlds and ideas. This rigour is animated by diasporic literacy, Vèvè Clarke's useful reading practice that investigates and shows how we already do, or can, illuminate and connect existing and emerging

³This section draws on and slightly revises McKittrick (2021:1–6).

⁴Nagar (2014); Said (1978); Sandoval (2000).

⁵Campbell (2014). See also Gilroy (1993).

⁶Browne (2015); Gilroy (1993); Glissant (1997); Lowe (2015); Philip (2008); Simone (2019); Wynter (1995).

diasporic codes and tempos and stories and narratives and themes. Clarke shows how diasporic literacy is structured through “recognised references sharing a wealth of connotations”.⁷ Clarke theorises, Mahalia Jackson, food, furnishings, and laughter as grammars, figures, and practices that are written into creative-intellectual texts as prompts.⁸ These literacies function to expand the text outside itself (the prompt opens a door). Jackson and laughter are not endlessly explained and unpacked, but instead cue what does not need explanation but requires imagination and memory and study. Diasporic literacy signals ways of being and ways of living (memories, imaginations) that we share in order to collectively struggle against suffocating racial logics. Like sorrow songs. Like freedom dreams. Like flying cheek-bones.⁹

Part Two: Opacity as Prompt

Black methodologies do not follow a trajectory of seeking, finding, and making an analytical site knowable; black methodologies are articulations of wonder, curiosity, and sharing. For this reason, I observe that black methodologies are wavering knowledge processes that move in and out of clarity. If read with Vèvè Clarke’s diasporic literacy in mind, the moments of clarity can be theorised as pedagogical prompts: the prompts spiral and cascade and are expressed as ways of knowing; the prompts are knowledge sources (books, songs, ideas, people); the prompts encourage us to learn and teach; the prompts are shared ways of living through this world; the prompts move between intelligibility and unintelligibility. Black methodologies provide a lens to navigate and notice these epistemological twists, shifts, and moments while also signalling a politics of opacity that is not a badge of obscurity, one that hides blackness, but a process that generates, to follow AbdouMaliq Simone, a “care that comes from having endured nearly everything”.¹⁰ Put succinctly, opacity is structured through and brings all kinds of knowledge; it is a method and reading practice that enables lessons, clues, and prompts, about how we might collectively live through and resist white supremacy. It is notable that Édouard Glissant writes “we clamour for the right to opacity”, signalling quite boldly, that opacity is a screaming demand, not a full formed way of life.¹¹ What do we learn from that scream?¹² Is it counsel?

Édouard Glissant’s work on relationality and opacity are very useful, in that these concepts allow us to think about how the brutality of encounter—that is the colonial and plantation violences that undergird and forge the relationships between black, indigenous, and European peoples—offer complex forms of belonging. (*We are familiar with the ways that colonialism and plantation slavery produced fictive racial categories—whiteness, blackness, and so on. We are familiar*

⁷Clarke (1990:308–309).

⁸Ibid.

⁹DuBois (1990); Kelley (2002); Lorde (1984); Philip (1989:51–53).

¹⁰Simone (2019:58).

¹¹Glissant (1997:194).

¹²Read with Hartman (1997); Reed (2021).

with how these racist political economies validated and validate systems of oppression and position the figure of the black as object. We know this.) In his theorisation of opacity and relation, Glissant does not dwell on black objecthood; instead, he draws attention to how the living memory of colonialism and plantation slavery generated ways to hold on to and claim an unintelligibility that is conditioned by our interhuman intimacies and encounters. In both opacity and relation, Glissant provides us with a grammar to embrace one another without desiring to totally know and consume each other. (*I don't have to explain why this is important—we know how the figure of the objectified black functions in our world as transparently knowable and how black inner life is, for some, non-existent and how Glissant is explicitly unsettling these racist logics.*) What interests me in Glissant's writing is how he moves between and across opacity and clarity, and how he spends considerable time thinking about precision. I am also interested in why this precision disappears in many conversations about opacity. Why is clarity obscured and what kind of pressure does this put on the right to opacity? In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant explores making the world concrete, he writes of prevailing ideologies "blocking imagination", he writes of three centuries of constraint, he gives us death and accursed contradictions.¹³ There are, he shares, languages underneath opacity.¹⁴ He writes of the plantation, over and over. The plantation repeats. The precision of the plantation is everywhere.

I want to observe that *Poetics of Relation* elicits something else—something beyond a claim to unintelligibility—about what opacity can do. In my reading, Glissant's concept of opacity is paired with the demand that we must carefully work out what stories we can, in fact, bear to tell, as well as a plea to be cautious about how and when we tell stories about blackness. In this way, opacity is not simply about vagueness, or claiming unintelligibility, but about the politics of sharing ideas carefully. One of the risks of retreating to opacity, which often includes conceptualising it as a mode of total liberation, is that it provides an alibi that obscures the harm done to black communities. Opacity is, though, tethered to intimacies, encounters, and violence. Opacity is not freedom; it is a terrible working through of objecthood and the legible and quiet forms of racist violence. Opacity is not freedom; it is a terrible working through of racist visual economies that simultaneously accumulate and dispossess black people. We know that Glissant's work does not centre individualism: his writing relies heavily on relation and encounters and intimacies and connections that are joyful and painful and contradictory. This means that opacity cannot function as a stable category or designation; this means that we cannot grab opacity and retreat into a space of sustained obscurity. The worlds black people inhabit are not always designed to shelter them; the world we inhabit is fixated on seeing us as black. I think, at least in my reading, opacity might be a method of living—rather than a description or designation—that is conditioned by moments of clarity (diasporic literacies, to be specific) that animate black life. In this way, opacity is upheld by teachable texts, creative-intellectual prompts, that move in and out of clarity and provide

¹³Glissant (1997:108, 74, 194).

¹⁴Glissant (1997:114).

instructions about living blackness in a hostile world. The teachable texts encourage us to read and share ideas; they do not have to be publicly overexplained but instead function as a “care that comes from having endured nearly everything”.¹⁵

Why does this matter? It matters because it shifts how we enter into discussions about racial violence and the politics of telling and sharing our stories of black life. One of my preoccupations, which I won't spend much time on in this paper, is how racial violence is often used as academic currency, and how oppression is the jumping off point for how we attend to black life. Even when we are theorising resistance, violence is often the starting point. It is as though blackness can only ever be a site of violation. Like many scholars, I have been trying to think about how to work through racism and racial violence without repeating and profiting from what Saidiya Hartman calls “scenes of subjection”.¹⁶ My worry with opacity is that it is sometimes (not always) being mobilised as a stable answer to the question of racism. In this formulation, nothing changes, and the oppression/resistance paradigm stays in place. The violence stays in place. If we conceptualise opacity as wonder and curiosity, as diasporic literacy, as teachable prompt, or even as a mode of errantry to borrow directly from Glissant, it might be unlatched from stale oppression/resistance binaries that so often fail to adequately account for varying and shifting black resistances and rebellious activities. This is not a question of abandoning opacity, but noticing how opacity is a lesson, a way for black people to tell stories that move in and out of clarity, without participating in a narrative economy that functions to objectify them.

Part Three: Aesthetics

In her essay “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice”, Sylvia Wynter addresses how representations of blackness are expressed as a system of knowledge that denies black humanity.¹⁷ She teases out the layers of aesthetics—high, low, public, communicative, cultivated, impure, pure, coded—to identify how blackness comes to be negatively marked within these layers and, as well, how some criticism of black cultural production shores up this negativity. The problem, Wynter argues, is the way representations of black people (captive, ostracised, high-risk, gunman, drug dealer, poor, jobless) are read as verifying a truth. A much more textured way of life is enunciated within and through black aesthetics, of course, but it is not always visible and is often undermined by negativity. The problem is, too, that the process of verification is profitable and self-replicating and comes to represent how the world (already, normally, always) feels about black people and representations of blackness. Wynter focuses on

¹⁵Simone (2019:58).

¹⁶Hartman (1997).

¹⁷Wynter (1992).

what she calls the psycho-affective field; this field pushes us to think not only about the proliferation of negative representations and misrepresentations of blackness, but also how we become psychically attached to, and invest in, this already-normally-always system of knowledge that cannot comprehend black humanity. Indeed, this system and our attachments require the ongoing production of the less-than-human figure of the black because it functions to sustain race thinking.

What one learns from Wynter is that there is a tendency to describe and therefore come to affectively know blackness and representations of black people within the mathematisable terms of colonial and plantation violence; the tendency to describe, as I have suggested elsewhere, relies heavily on accounts of the subordinated and oppressed black body.¹⁸ Wynter thus draws attention to how describing black negativity affirms (affectively and empirically verifies) black subjugation and limits our imagination by foreclosing other ways of being. She develops what she calls “deciphering practice”—which is a reading practice that takes into account multiple social realities and differential psycho-affective fields while also exposing the intense weight of our governing system of knowledge. A deciphering practice recognises the intense weight and how it induces how we feel and know the world; this recognition, importantly, signals and has the capacity to honour other ways of feeling and knowing the world. A deciphering practice notices that the tendency to describe black (as less than human, defective, captive) is not a measure of black life. A deciphering practice imagines and enacts an aesthetics of black life outside the intense weight of racism. A deciphering practice is not a process of excavation and retrieval, it is not an absence followed by a presence, it is not a site to narrate and describe black oppression, but instead, is the work of creatively exploring and uncovering the ways black communities navigate but are not absolutely defined by racism and disavowal.

In *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, Kandice Chuh similarly observes how black literature overturns liberal humanism by creatively reimagining the contours of humanity. She moves away from a framework that seeks “difference” within the context of liberal humanism and illuminates, instead, how black literature exposes the violent limits of this system. It is important to notice that Chuh does not read black literatures as narratives of violence; she reads black literatures as narratives that expose violence. This nuance demonstrates how black aesthetics are freedom-making practices that are tethered to racist violence yet articulate a different mode of living, loving, and imagining the world. This creative and aesthetic work is, Chuh notes, a “terrible and terrifying” beauty.¹⁹ Chuh reads the work of Toni Morrison and Langston Hughes as “prompts” that encourage us to interrogate, rather than describe, racist visual economies.²⁰ She

¹⁸McKittrick (2016).

¹⁹Chuh (2019:54).

²⁰Chuh (2019:73).

holds hope that these aesthetic prompts are pedagogical; they teach us how to read. The weight Chuh ascribes to the practice of reading is, in my view, amazingly useful, precisely because racism is tightly bound up in a prodigious colonial educational system that teaches us to rejoice and consume and compulsively describe and normalise black pain.²¹ With this, we are also reminded of the revolutionary potential of aesthetics. Frantz Fanon writes that our encounter with some creative works “brings an urgent breath of excitement, arouses muscular tensions, and develops the imagination”.²² He writes that aesthetics reveals a dynamism, between the artist, the audience, and the art, that together inspire “concerted action”.²³ Related, Sylvia Wynter writes about how black music sparks “enthusiasm and exaltation” that indicate an uncolonised flow of desire that expresses liberation from existing normative knowledge systems.²⁴

Keeping in mind Wynter, Chuh, and Fanon, and recalling my earlier discussion of Vèvè Clarke and Édouard Glissant, we can therefore note that black aesthetics are not stable objects primed for extraction, they are locations of expansive learning, imagination, memory, and study. Black aesthetics oscillate between clarity and opacity and are underwritten by stories and ideas that are fleeting, flexible, new, and old; these stories and ideas teach us how to navigate infrastructures of harm, these stories and ideas reside within, across, and outside prevailing knowledge systems. Black aesthetics generate a deciphering practice and this deciphering practice contextualises black worlds as painfully contradictory and thick with meaning. The painful contradiction is not a site of representation that demands resolution but instead elicits the rebellious potential of black aesthetics—stories, music, poetry, visual art, the beautiful ways of being black that are unarchived yet tell us something about how we can and do and might live the world differently. The contradiction, the opacity and clarity of black aesthetics, signals a way of being black that subverts and rewrites the stakes of humanity by drawing attention to how the violence of the plantation and enslavement and the living memory of slavery did not produce what they think we are (the subordinated and oppressed black body; the captive, the ostracised, the high-risk, the gunman, the drug dealer, the poor-useless-jobless shard of data).

The contradiction, the opacity and clarity of black aesthetics, signals a way of being black: the breath of excitement that Fanon notices, the rebellious enthusiasm that Wynter writes of, these are expressions, tethered to black aesthetics, that subvert and rewrite the stakes of humanity by drawing attention to how the violence of the plantation and enslavement and the living memory of slavery did not produce cascades of black objecthood but instead provided the

²¹Read with Ferguson (2012); Kynard (2013).

²²Fanon (2004:174).

²³Fanon (2004:175).

²⁴Wynter (nd:549).

conditions for action, activity, organising, creating. What do I mean, where have I seen this before?

I was rereading *The Black Jacobins* and wondering how the text itself, the act of writing that history, is an act of liberation.²⁵ I remember rereading and I noticed that the style of the text, the tone of the writing, the format of the book, the chapter and section names, the use of numbers, the word placement, all of these components, express not a past that is over and done with, but this massive intellectual effort to tell that story outside of itself. David Scott writes that *The Black Jacobins* is not an informational source. It is, in his words, a theory problem, a problem space, it is a narrative strategy, it is poetics.²⁶ Maybe, then, *The Black Jacobins* is an aesthetic provocation. There is much clarity in this book. It is all right there, word after word, pages, pages, and pages of specifics and numbers and details, but there is something that James does, I think it is the gift of effort—but I am not sure—that cannot be told.

I was screening Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock* and I saw and heard this cascade of something—it wasn't joy because it was too laced with anxiety—and it was a familiar feeling but and I was unable to explain it even though I remember every single detail of the scene in the film.²⁷ Every detail is intelligible and plain. This is not a ruse, this is not a plea for opacity; I am not keeping a secret, I just can't explain myself. I cannot explain why I am unable to return to this film, even though my desire to feel that way again lives within me. Maybe I am unable to return because those details are so clear and inexplicable.

Kara Keeling writes that she looks after black poetry.²⁸ How do we look after our words and ideas? How do we look after black aesthetics? I want to tend to *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, forever.²⁹ Some of us are scrambling to hold on to terrible loss. The loss is tenacious.

"Dear April".³⁰

²⁵James (1989).

²⁶Scott (2017).

²⁷McQueen (2020).

²⁸Keeling (2019:xi).

²⁹DeCarava and Hughes (2018).

³⁰Frank Ocean, "Dear April", 2020 (see https://open.spotify.com/album/4XPULAWXqM3uWMTucltjd?si=-kus58O_T0qy1a6OMzoxCQ).

Part Four: Miscellanea. Or, Krista Franklin's *Under the Knife*

Krista Franklin is a visual artist and poet, whose creative work includes beautiful collages, poetry, installations, and artist books. In her work we encounter cyanotype barrettes and cassette tapes that are shadows saturated with cyan blue, ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide. In her "Heavy Rotation" series, scraps of worn-out album covers are placed on her homemade paper, revealing both the deterioration and possibility of vinyl and song. Franklin produces artist books and soundtracks that are textured reminders of black is beautiful, slave advertisements, Gwendolyn Brooks, Miles Davis, Cicely Tyson, Lucille Clifton. In her poetry we read of drone ecologies, the mark of Auschwitz, antebellum inertia, black bullets, being cut open like a cardboard box. She writes: "Listen to Minnie Ripperton on cassette tape".³¹ She writes: "I believe in water".³²

In December 2018 Candor Arts released Krista Franklin's artist book, *Under the Knife* (Figure 1).³³ The book is constructed by hand, which means that each edition is uniquely put together. *Under the Knife* is 8.5" x 11" x 2-1/8", 280 pages. It is printed on five different papers with Indigo 12000, RISO RZ 390U, and Letterpress. The book is heavy. It weighs about just over two kilograms (roughly four-and-a-half pounds). Upon the book's arrival, I stored it high and left it unopened for many months. For those who love books like I do, like we do, Franklin's *Under the Knife* expresses a brilliant contradiction: it is an object that should be opened and leafed through and read and it should sit quietly observed, unopen, and untouched. A beautiful book, high and unopened, spine out, *Under the Knife* conveys a trace of black studies; it is exemplary of ambivalence, opacity and clarity, because it demonstrates the heaviness of black aesthetics, detailed creative labour, without telling everything. Unopened, spine out, maybe that is all we need.

I opened the book in late-2020. The pages are sewn together with red thread; there are envelop pockets within the book containing library cards and other information. Vellum paper with text sits atop family portraits. On some pages, the text is so faded you cannot read it. Huge sections of other narratives are redacted; within some of the textual narratives there are pencil marks, corrections, and edits. There are medical forms and song lyrics, Polaroid photographs, family stories. I love this book. On its side, from a distance, it looks like an accordion file folder but when you move close and open the book the file folder aesthetic disappears. In this book, a secret I (we) have kept forever is divulged: "You should know that everything I say is a lie, a belief, an idea formed from a skewed mind-state, a miserable vantage point".³⁴

Franklin's decision to work across several creative genres, styles, and textures (photographs, collages, anamneses, quotations, family histories and song lyrics, handwriting, typed text, painting, huge narrative blocks, soft paper, thick paper, envelopes, stories) is reminiscent of other black feminist art practices. I am

³¹Franklin (2019:81).

³²Franklin (2019:15).

³³Franklin (2018). My pagination follows the PDF. The book itself is not paginated. Thank you, Krista Franklin, for sharing a PDF of the book.

³⁴Franklin (2018:41).



Figure 1: *Under the Knife* by Krista Franklin (reproduced by permission of Krista Franklin and Candor Arts; photo by Matt Austin)

reminded of Carrie Mae Weems, Sandra Brewster, Charmaine Lurch, Adrian Piper, Wangechi Mutu, Betye Saar, Renée Green, Lorna Simpson, and many others. Black feminist art practice critiques social systems that objectify black women specifically and black communities more broadly; the work does not function simply as a visual representation of blackness or black freedom or black victimhood but is connected to and generates a political struggle against what is considered profane, blasphemous, and ugly within the context of Western humanism.³⁵ This creative work as Kara Keeling notes, aesthetically “frustrates attempts to offer an authoritative ‘reading’” of blackness and black femininity.³⁶ Franklin’s *Under the Knife* works alongside black feminist aesthetics and black feminism: the book and narratives within talk back, return the gaze, rewrite, reimagine, centre black femininity, reorder knowledge, reclaim subjectivity, move from object to subject, assert human agency.³⁷ At the most explicit level, Franklin’s *Under the Knife* offers

³⁵Stallings (2015).

³⁶Keeling (2019:143).

³⁷For example, Brown (2015); Gopinath (2018); hooks (1994); McMillan (2015).

a visual and textual grammar that moves between her experiential knowledge and a system that renders her creative-intellectual-embodied knowledge unthinkable. In short, as black feminist aesthetic, within the context of white supremacy, *Under the Knife* incompletely disavows normative ways of knowing blackness by reordering how blackness comes to be. As black feminist aesthetic, perhaps *Under the Knife* is an impossible story, told and untold, again and again.³⁸ Here, the aesthetic is tasked to generate familiarity for some and opacity for others. Here the aesthetic is tasked to provide visual and textual clues that, following Tina Campt, offer “a grammar of possibility”.³⁹

In addition to black feminist aesthetic practice, in *Under the Knife*, Franklin gathers different ideas, textures, genres, geographies; I see library cards, newspaper columns, prescription pills, lightbulbs, letters, photographs. The book unfolds as aesthetic miscellanea, an array of items and feelings and stories that are steadied by the complexities of living through different kinds and types of injury. What is “under the knife” is loss and unrepair and affective-physiological pain; the miscellanea function to name and subvert the swaths of injury. It is important to keep this dynamism in mind—the movement between the unintelligible and the intelligible, the thread between subversion and naming—because this is not a murderous narrative, it is aesthetic activity; it is a longing for unmurderous futures. When I move through this book, I must come to terms with a restless gathering that never stops.

Franklin presents us with multifarious and miscellaneous texts that are anchored to the opening page, which is an image of a medical bracelet underneath vellum paper. The medical bracelet (from the angle of the photograph, it also looks like a flash drive) includes two barcodes, a name, handwritten and typed dates (Figure 2). The barcodes, if scanned, ostensibly contain “records, files, timesheets, and identity documents that together form a biography”.⁴⁰ The files, the medical bracelet, are nested within wider biomedical discourses that are saturated with race thinking and the living memory of slavery.⁴¹ Indeed, at the centre of Franklin’s art book is a massive biomedical system that, as Dorothy Roberts writes, is tied to white supremacy and reproductive injustice.⁴² Franklin does not reproduce her medical records in full, but the medical bracelet functions as an entry into the art book and hints at, but does not fully tell, how black life and black livingness are shaped by state-sanctioned racial violence. The bracelet prompts. The bracelet is diasporic literacy. With this, we must face what Franklin shares: “This carved

³⁸Read with Hartman (2008).

³⁹Campt (2017:17).

⁴⁰Browne (2015:5). The book *Barcodes for Mobile Devices* (Kato et al. 2010) provides a comprehensive overview of barcode history, data structures, scan patterns, compaction modes, symbol meanings, industry uses, and more. The barcode on the bracelet is laden with a history of computing, transportation, automated points of sale, photography, and more.

⁴¹Bailey and Peoples (2017); Cooper Owens (2017).

⁴²Roberts (1998).



Figure 2: *Under the Knife* by Krista Franklin (reproduced by permission of Krista Franklin and Candor Arts; photo by Matt Austin)

redacted body, overgrown garden, nest of the narcotic” and “Are you experiencing excessive bleeding”.⁴³

It is not necessary to fully repeat the connections between black life and data collection and numbers and biometrics and slave ledgers and IQ scores and scanning codes and reams and reams and files full of the harm done. (*We know the history of gynaecology requires cutting into, cutting up, black women. We know the words “population” and “reproduction” invoke, for black women, anxiety and loss that is paired with longstanding fights for liberation and justice at the scale of the body, for the community, for our well-being.*) We know this and I think Franklin is, in a small way, signalling how heaps of history, reams of racist sexism, can be captured by the image of a medical bracelet and accompanying barcodes, without fully unveiling its contents. We know, we don’t need evidence. (Even still, I stopped myself, I stopped writing, and reread *Corregidora*.)⁴⁴ The gathering that *Under the Knife* offers (the texts and redactions, the Polaroid photographs and the glimpses of medical documents, the heartbreak, the joy, the lyrics, the beautiful and onerous miscellanea) transform a medical bracelet into an image of unspeakable intensity.

⁴³Franklin (2018:7–8).

⁴⁴Jones (1975).



Figure 3: *Under the Knife* by Krista Franklin (reproduced by permission of Krista Franklin and Candor Arts; photo by Matt Austin)

I have come to recognise that this book is an exemplary black methodology. It is an aesthetic lesson. Franklin's redactions (Figure 3), for example, are reminiscent of Simone Browne's insights about black radical life—those figures who were and are documented and targeted and filed away and censored by the nation state as a way to manage and curtail and hide our struggles for freedom.⁴⁵ Of course, Franklin's decision to wilfully censor parts of her narrative can be read as an act of foreclosure and privacy, one that critiques state surveillance systems that find and digitise and harm and expurgate black radical life. Of course, her decision to redact portions of her story can be read as her right to opacity. I believe this is an assertion of opacity. But her aesthetics of the redaction, if we return to Browne, also signal that something "could still be put into operation".⁴⁶ Something could be put into operation: perhaps a rebellion, perhaps a new way of knowing, perhaps freedom dreams or flying cheekbones. These redactions, these edits, bring an unspeakable intensity that is animated by possibility.

Krista Franklin's *Under the Knife* is, above all, a brilliant lesson in how to read for and practice black livingness. The book, her archive, demonstrates how black people can and do tell stories that move in and out of clarity, without

⁴⁵Browne (2015:2–5).

⁴⁶Browne (2015:2–3).

participating in a narrative economy that functions to objectify them. This book is aesthetic instruction. As I sit with this book, I am reminded that I cannot absorb the fullness of the miscellanea, which leads me to think through the stakes of wanting to know and wanting to understand it all and wanting to tell you, the reader, what this book means. This is underwritten by anxiety and frustration; I am, we are, exhausted with overexplaining what every shred of blackness means in a world that continually frames blackness as a knowable vessel; we all witness the harm, we all know she was shot in her bed, why do I feel the need to document it for you, for myself? *Under the Knife* expresses the agonising contradictions I mentioned at the outset of this paper, this movement between objecthood and an anti-colonial way of life that is expressed through black methodology; it repeats these contradictions over and over, and then yields moments of mentorship and counsel: “what are the ramifications of not giving ourselves or those we love the permission to weep/what are the ramifications of not giving ourselves or those we love the permission to weep”.⁴⁷ The moments of counsel bring tremendous relief. The relief reminds me that something can and is already being put into operation.

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⁴⁷Franklin (2018:95, 109).

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