



OBSIDIAN

Literature & Arts
in the African Diaspora

Call & Response: Experiments in Joy
Furious Flower:
Seeding the Future of African American Poetry
Fall 2015
41.1 • 41.2



UTOPIA MAPPINGS

Performing Joy

Elizabeth Currans

Performance can reveal the hidden workings of the world around us and avenues for envisioning new ways of living. This temporal layering brings daily life into tension with tales of the past and visions of the future. Our visions for the future, like our experiences of the past and present, have affective resonances that performance must navigate in guiding us toward experiencing our world differently. In a society structured by interlocking hierarchies based on gender, race, class, and other social cleavages, our affective experiences often lean toward anxiety, frustration, pain, and anger. Performance can shift the affective connections we have to our past and present, moving us toward joy, contentment, and celebration despite ongoing struggles. Doing so is not apolitical or naïve. Joy, as Gina Dent explains, “is about the potential of our coexistence within another field of knowledge. Alluding to this potential forces us to question what the practices might be within that alternative space and to examine what current conflicts prevent us from entering that realm” (Dent 2). Joy provides a way of moving forward.

In July 2014, performance artists Gabrielle Civil, Duriel E. Harris, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, Rosamond S. King, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Miré Regulus, and Awilda Rodríguez Lora created an artistic call for themselves and others to respond to. The call included these seemingly simple directions for conducting experiments in joy:

1. Tell the truth
2. Make something new
3. Invite someone in

4. Document

5. Repeat

I was among those invited in. As part of documenting some of the performances I witnessed and in which I participated, I invite readers to think about the transformative potential of centering the lives and experiences of Black women. The enactments that took place as part of “Experiments in Joy” in August 2014 at Antioch College serve as guideposts, leading us toward less exploitative futures.

Entering the Performance Space

Civil invited me to join the artists for both parts of Call & Response. A few months earlier, I had contacted King after witnessing her performance “Sable International” at the Hemispheric Institute’s biannual Encuentro in Montréal in June 2014 (Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics). She generously responded to my query, letting me know that she would be in Ohio for Call & Response and put me in touch with Civil. I was unable to attend the first session, but on Friday, August 22, 2014, I drove from my home in southeast Michigan to the Dayton airport where I picked up Regulus and Hinkle and drove on to Yellow Springs, Ohio for the weekend. As we worked together to fit ourselves and our luggage, including a headdress Hinkle created for one of King’s performances, into the compact space of my Honda Civic, my entrance into this community of artists began. I was given a place to stay at the college and invited to meals, social gatherings, processing sessions, and, of course, performances. In common spaces throughout the campus, over cups of tea, vodka tonics, and coveted local kombucha, we discussed creative process, listened to personal histories, and shared laughter grounded in the realities of women differently positioned in relationship to racial and educational hierarchies.

As a white, queer, feminist scholar interested in how public performances can make public spaces more inclusive of marginalized people, to me these experiments in joy were also utopic mappings of social relations that center rather than marginalize Black women’s experiences. As the presence of various community members, students, and visitors like myself makes clear, this centering was not exclusive. Anyone who valued Black women was welcome to participate in the process of imagining different

futures. While the curator and performers guided this transformation, we all—artists, students, community members, and visitors alike—assisted in making the campus into a complexly layered, affirmative landscape.

Mapping Utopic Spaces

Space is always coded with gendered and racialized meanings. Through various social practices, including overlapping systems of oppression and privilege, spaces come to be associated with different groups of people and distinct interactional dynamics. As geographer Kath Browne argues, “gendered embodiments create the very spaces they occur in” (Browne 117). Similarly, sociologists Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura explain that “racial interactions and processes (e.g., identities, inequalities, conflicts, and so on) are... about how we collectively make and remake, over time and through ongoing contestation, the spaces we inhabit” (Neely and Samura 1934). Call & Response demonstrated these interlocking processes by transforming a college campus into a site for exploring Black women’s experiences. This reconfiguration was facilitated by Civil’s curation of the two-part event, the collective practice that created the call, and the resulting performances.

Some kind of utopian vision has inspired political and artistic movements across wide geographical and temporal expanses, providing hope in times of desperation and maps toward more affirming futures. Such practices help dislodge what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as “the psychic products [of domination] that fossilize deep in the interior, focusing us to genuflect at the altar of alterity and separation” (Alexander 5). In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz describes queerness as “a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present... [as] that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (Muñoz 1). Similarly, Call & Response demonstrated an impulse to create alternative realities and question restrictive cultural norms despite continued disenfranchisement. The gatherings and individual performances provide examples of realistic utopias to help imagine different futures. By utopias, I do not mean futures free from pain or struggle, but rather futures in which the sedimented legacies of oppression and privilege have begun to erode, allowing for new ways of being, individually and collectively.