

Dionne Brand: "I am the clerk, overwhelmed by the left-hand pages."¹

A black woman on Twitter declares:

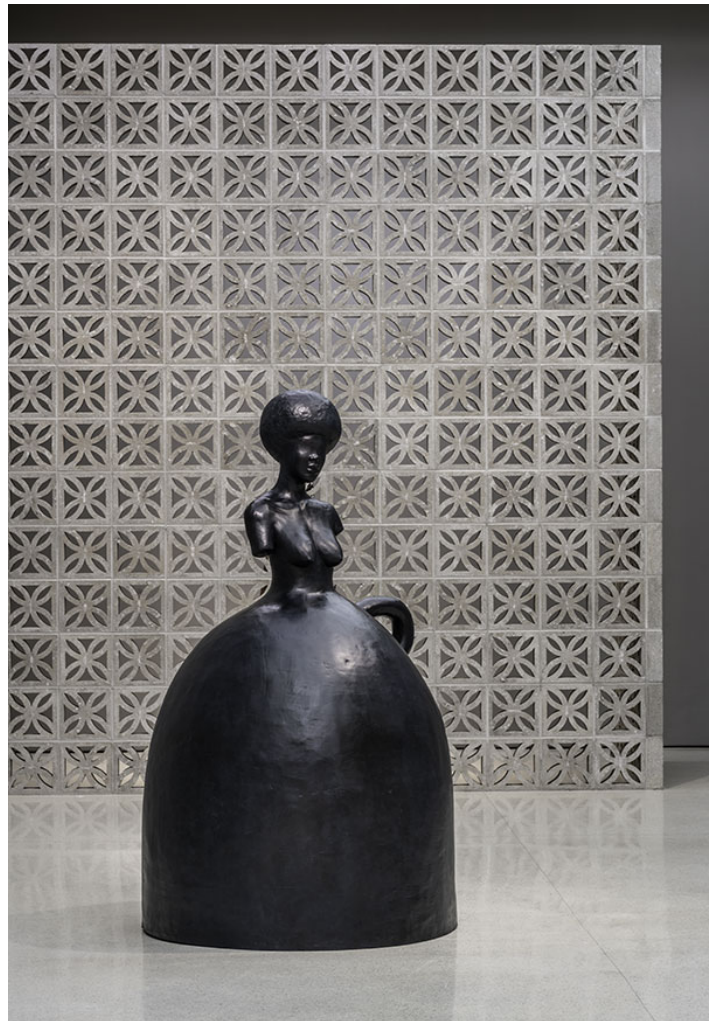
I have a deep respect for Anita Hill and her choice to say 'I don't forgive you.' There's something subversively powerful to me about that.

A white woman with the handle "DevilDawg" tweets:

I don't give two shits about Anita Hill.

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Rizvana Bradley
**A Gathering of
Aporetic Form**



Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2019. Bronze. 83 1/4 x 51 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches (800 lbs). Copyright: Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Toni Morrison, in her essay "Friday on the Potomac," writes of

a black [Supreme Court] candidate already stained by the figurations of blackness as sexual aggressiveness, or rapaciousness or impotence ... The "dirt" that clung to him following those allegations, "dirt" he spoke of repeatedly, must be shown to have

originated elsewhere. In this case the search for the racial stain turned on Anita Hill. Her character. Her motives. Not his.²

The selection process “whitened” Thomas and the testimony of Hill “restained” him ... Reading Morrison, it is clear that the racial disavowal Clarence Thomas enjoyed was itself the effect of a curious displacement. This displacement of race onto the black woman constitutes the black woman as such. Black femininity becomes the bearer of the burden of the racial mark, of blackness.³

The black woman’s consummate failure to qualify both blackness and femininity has been historically haunted by a violence meant to limit her to a normative sexuality. Angela Davis’s essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” reflects this claim:⁴

[The black woman is] annulled [from the category of woman and] released from the chains of the myth of femininity.⁵

At the same time, however, the enslaved woman is called forth and held to the same gendered ideology from which she is interdicted, in order that she might be forced to fulfill her laboring function.⁶ Black femininity has circulated as both discursively empty and materially full, and this has direct implications for the way in which, historically, the black woman has been biopolitically constructed, pathologized, and held captive by slavery and capital, and excluded from the realm of symbolic power.⁷ She prefigures a representational aporia, a mode of blackness, that challenges the prescribed limits of personhood, identity, and humanity on the one hand, and labor, resistance, and anti-humanity on the other.⁸

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Simone Leigh, *Dunham II*, 2017. Terracotta, graphite, and steel. 105.4 x 55.9 x 58.4 cm. Copyright: Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

This is what Anita Hill cannot forgive. It’s fucked up for *her*, not for him, too.⁹

For black women, can there be an ethics of unforgiveness?

The media’s recent alternation between Anita Hill and Joe Biden betrays liberal political consciousness as fundamentally contoured by debt and forgiveness. Insofar as the obligational parameters of forgiveness are premised on an ethics of relationality, we might join the political philosopher Axelle Karera in querying:

What would an ethics based on the radically non-relational look like?¹⁰

Explaining that anti-blackness becomes a structural necessity for relational ethics, Karera posits:

Relationality is inherently not only a position that the black cannot afford or even claim. The structure of relationality is essentially the condition of the possibility of their enslavement.¹¹

Blackness ruptures the space of ethics then, throwing foundational concepts like relationality

into crisis. Such reckonings ought to compel us to consider whether there can be a *black feminist ethics of nonrelationality*. How might such an ethics alter our orientation to *sociality*? To *friendship*? Are the mechanics of friendship inevitably recuperative, reproductive? How are these forms of sociality and relationality given in and by the maternal? How are such social-relational bonds structurally different in the context of black maternal life? Alexis Pauline Gumbs points us toward Audre Lorde's provocative assertion:

We can learn to mother ourselves.¹²

M/othering ourselves: a form of intersubjective (non)relationality that queerly threatens the reproduction of the present.¹³

What is the drama of the mother? What is the drama of the mother without reproduction – the drama of reproduction without the mother? *An impossible chiasmus*. If there cannot be friendship, can there be critical – (even sensuous) – proximity without recourse to relationality?

Simone White's gesture concerns the problem with intellectual sociality only expressed in

the long quotation as verbal-visual bridge that ... implies a wish to throw down with the previous by virtue of being fully given over to and in its presence ... This ocular and intellectual stress ... induced by ... thick citation, big block, frequent repetition of the name of one's antecedent interlocutors. [This is] the order that constitutes the history of ideas ... the masculine order of black writing, whose compositional assertion that the texts must be read together means something.¹⁴

What would it mean to break from the frisson of gendered citation?

James Baldwin exclaims in 1984:

One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean "schizophrenic" in the most literal sense. To be a Black American is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It's a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person ... Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. That's why we're sitting here.¹⁵

Audre Lorde responds:

I don't, honey. I'm sorry, I just can't let that

go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out.¹⁶

Jacques Rancière understands political disagreement as

a determined kind of situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying.¹⁷

The affective distance between Baldwin and Lorde measures an expressive dissonance, a generative discontent that bypasses the general structure of disagreement, which always presents itself as an irresolvable dilemma within existing democratic political discourse.

Lorde remains attuned to what Baldwin takes for granted – precisely the animating questions put forth by Simone White:

What is power? What is intimacy? How do we know this at all? ... The intimacy of power suggests the sheer difficulty of difference, the trouble endemic to determining where the white imagination ends and the black imagination begins.¹⁸



Simone Leigh, *The Village Series #1*, 2018. Stoneware. 16 x 16 x 16 inches (40.6 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm). Copyright: Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and Luring Augustine, New York.

Denise Ferreira da Silva unearths the

transparent subject's relationship to aesthetic experience:

The transparent I, when judging an artwork beautiful, presumes that it enjoys universality and necessity not because it has reference to a concept but to a feeling (of the beautiful) which is presumed ("as if it were") universal, because it is grounded on common sense (or the assumption that every human being shares in the cognitive structures and their capacities).¹⁹

To weld. The practice of welding as making the sculptural come into being. Welding as an act of tending, of sending, inducing us to sense a dimensionality of that which is beyond universal perception. For the poet Aracelis Girmay, the work of art is realized in and through the work of

A Tending²⁰

Extending Girmay: Welding as a tending to form that is taking care with great or deep attention in an active way in which the artist's body is involved. The welded structure expands our dimensionality of the object. A poetical thinking about art involves the spatiotemporal revaluation of ideas of length, width, surface, and depth.

The haptic dimensionality of the sculptural. Heavily decorated objects adorned with ceramic roses, and glazed clusters of flowers covering the head or face. These figures circulate in the time of an unknown past that extends through a politically unhinged present. A ceramic sculptural practice that is itself an exercise in fabulation – the busts, embellished maquettes, summon a suspended time, occasion a speculative leap into black life forms. They register a sensuousness often excluded from modernity's visual apparatus and its representational regimes. The haptic shifts us outside vision's domain, outside the occularcentric desire for transparency, towards other practices – touching, folding, and fingering, or tracing the texture of an object.²¹

The hapticity of the object opens a series of questions: What does form have to do with longing? What congeals to form? The works are themselves experiments in form that bring us into tactile proximity with the polymorphous afterlife of matter. But how to conceptualize the afterlife of matter?

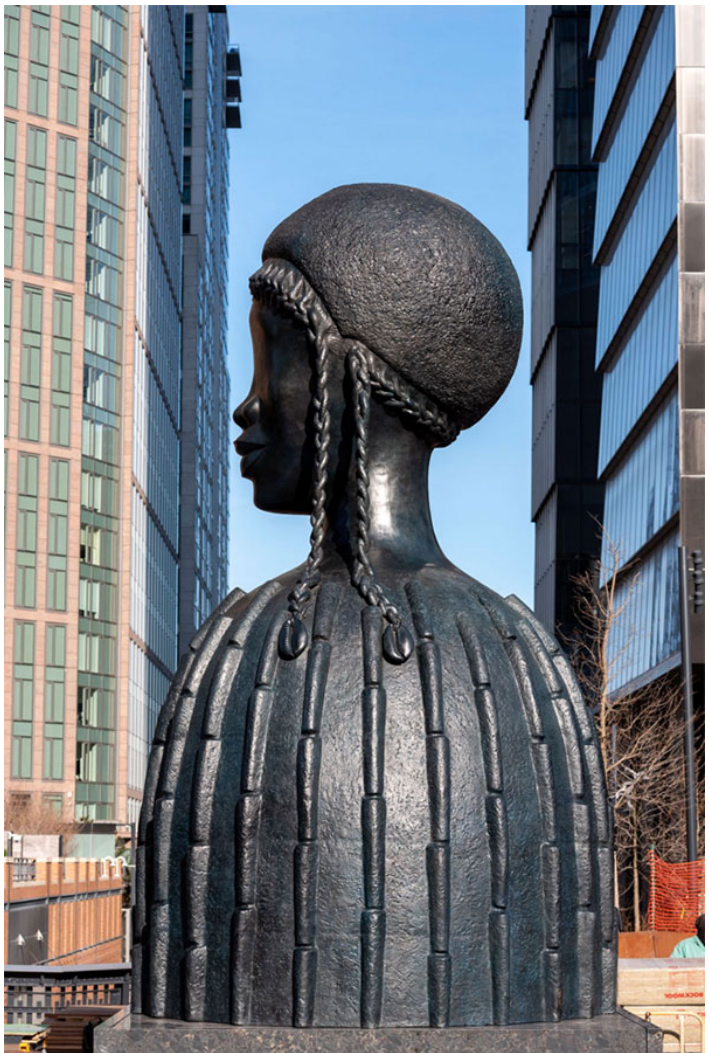
*Saidiya Hartman: "All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands."*²²

The anti-monumentality of the monumental recovery of black female desire. This is what is at stake in the artist Simone Leigh's work.

Dionne Brand asserts:

Desire, too, is the discovery of beauty as miraculous. Desire in the face of ruin. How in these lines there is such wreckage and that too is beauty, how in those lines there is such clear-eyed dread, such deeply mocking knowledge, and that too is desire ... On any given night, even with history against you in any hardscrabble place, beauty walks in. The ruin of history visited on a people does not wipe out the steadfastness of beauty.²³

Art critics fetishize the purity of form. When art critics emphasize pure form, do they realize pure form is the consequence of perfect black death?²⁴ Perhaps we need a thorough renovation of the aesthetic. Where can we locate black aesthetic praxis in the violent reduction of both pure matter and pure form? After Dionne Brand, what would it mean to call for the death of an aesthetic of imperialism?



Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019. Bronze. 497.8 x 289.6 cm. A High Line Plinth commission. On view June 2019 – September 2020. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy the High Line

The black woman is the figure that

crystallizes the arrangement between capital and the event of captivity. Occupying the position of the laborer, the cost-free caregiver, the sexual object, historically the black woman has been the interstitial figure that capital polices ... Evelyn Hammonds directs us to the black feminine both as an ordinary site for the capitalist exploitation and expropriation of the black body, and as a site of irreducible corporeal difference.²⁵

The black woman is on display, once again. The black woman's figure stands; she fleshes out perverse forms of political economy. Casting a shadow over the contemporary cityscape, illuminating the residual trace of the marketplace and coffer as paradigmatic settings for the exchange of black bodies. For Saidiya Hartman,

this theater of the marketplace wed festivity and the exchange of captive bodies ... the to-and-fro of half-naked bodies on display all acted to incite the flow of capital.²⁶

The anonymous black woman's ache/her unnamed grief. Alicia Hall Moran begins to sing, her song moving through a series of broken phrases:

Oh my God ... I'm so sorry ... Please. Strike that. Please don't. Please don't ... Please don't look. Erase. Erase. Erase ... It's just everything ... It's just too much ... How am I going to go to the ballgame? ... I don't want to go! ... I've always done it. I've always done it. And I've been performing my whole life. Performing my whole life.²⁷

Doing the work. Doing the work of spilling over. Here, where the singular virtuosity of the performer is bound up with the drama of heartbreak. How do we attune to this melancholic structure of feeling that lies at the interplay between heartbreak and breakdown? Heartbreak, as the subject of black performance, shifts through affective registers, often masquerading as uncontrollable agony, suffering, distress, even sheer misery. Heartbreak is about both the violent interdiction of black enjoyment, and the erotics of self-encounter.

Christina Sharpe spoke recently of Sheila Hines-Brim, who threw the ashes of her niece at Charlie Beck, the head of the LAPD. Sheila Hines-Brim's niece, Wakiesha Wilson, died in LAPD custody in 2016. Sharpe intones:

I am trying to hear ... Hines-Brim's actions,

her political act and demand. Her ethics of dust.²⁸

Reconjugating the present against the grain of linear time, Erica Hunt invokes poetry as the practice of getting free:

(the *as if*, art's impulse)²⁹

As if. The restless temporality of the future anterior.

Maurice Blanchot calls the writer the "Daytime Insomniac." Poets brush up against an oblique desire: to commune with the "fugitive gods," to no longer be able to sleep, to constantly dream of another place, to rub one's eyes to no avail.³⁰

*"I've lost a lot of sleep to dreams."*³¹

x

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1
Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (Duke University Press, 2018), 6.

2
Toni Morrison, "Friday on the Potomac," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (Pantheon Books, 1992), xviii–xix.

3
Excerpted from Rizvana Bradley, "Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness," in "Black Holes: Afro-Pessimism, Blackness and the Discourses of Modernity," ed. Dalton Anthony Jones, M. Shadee Malaklou, and Sara-Maria Sorentino, special issue, *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016) <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue/e29/bradley/index.html>.

4
Excerpted from Rizvana Bradley, "Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus and the Cinematic Limits of *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 162–78, 166.

5
Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2–15, 5.

6
Excerpted from Bradley, "Reinventing Capacity," 166.

7
Excerpted from Bradley, "Living in the Absence of a Body."

8
Excerpted from Bradley, "Reinventing Capacity," 162.

9
In oppositional dis/agreement with my friend, Fred Moten, whose formulation continues to guide me: "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us." Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 140.

10
Axelle Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 47–48.

11
Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," 48.

12
Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Cross Press, 1984), 173.

13
Alexis Gumbs, "m/other

ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering," in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (PM Press, 2016), 19–20.

14
Simone White, *Dear Angel of Death* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), 79.

15
From James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde," *Essence Magazine*, 1984. Available at MoCADA Online <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>.

16
Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."

17
Jacques Rancière, quoted in Davide Panagia, *The Poetics of Political Thinking* (Duke University Press, 2006), 89.

18
White, *Dear Angel of Death*, 121.

19
Denise Ferreira da Silva, "In the Raw," *e-flux journal*, no. 93 (September 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>.

20
Aracelis Girmay, "A Tending," *ArtsBlog*, November 18, 2014 <https://blog.americansforthearts.org/2019/05/15/a-tending-g>.

21
Some phrases from this paragraph are excerpted from Rizvana Bradley, "Introduction: Other Sensualities," on "The Haptic: Textures of Performance," special issue, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 2–3 (2014): 129–33, 130. See the essays collected in this issue of *Women and Performance* for various perspectives on the haptic.

22
Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 171.

23
Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Vintage Canada, 2002), 193.

24
My insights here offer a modification of a formulation from Calvin Warren, whose paper "Anti-Formalism and Black Destruction: A Pessimistic Meditation" was delivered at Amherst College as part of a conference I also participated in, titled "Rethinking the Black Intellectual Tradition: Pessimism as an Interpretive Frame," March

30, 2019.

25
Excerpted from Bradley, "Living in the Absence of a Body." See also: Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2–3 (1994): 126–45.

26
Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 37, 38.

27
Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (NYU Press, 2015), 215–16.

28
Lecture by Christina Sharpe, "Soil," presented during a panel on "The Theoretical Turn," hosted by the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University on April 26, 2019.

29
Erica Hunt, "Introduction: Angle, Defy Gravity, Land Unpredictably," in *Letters to the Future: Black Women / Radical Writing*, ed. Erica Hunt and Dawn Lundy Martin (KORE Press, 2018), 15.

30
Excerpted from Rizvana Bradley and Damian-Adia Marassa, "Awakening to the World: Relation, Totality, and Writing from Below," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2014), 112–131, 125.

31
The Roots, "Sleep," *Undun*, Def Jam, 2011.

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