Harvey Young
Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010

Brian Norman & Piper Kendrix Williams, Eds.
Representing Segregation: Toward an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division
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Warren Crichlow

It was not a story to pass on. So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep... They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do.
—Toni Morison, Beloved

The full story of white and black in this country is more vast and shattering than we would like to believe and, like an unhindered infection in the body, it has the power to make our whole organism sick.
—James Baldwin, January 1949

What does it mean to recount unbearable incidents of past racial injustice that remain painfully present in matrices of memory and sociopolitical relations? How do artists and writers employ aesthetic forms to critically engage histories of epistemic and corporeal violence that tenaciously haunt our present racial formation? Beyond signifying relations between past and present conjoined in contemporary contexts of identity politics, how might art not only illuminate conditions of persistent everyday and institutional racism, but also provoke the imaginative vision necessary to build alternative futures? Two prescient books by Harvey Young and editors Brian Norman and Piper Kendrix Williams respond to these questions. Both address enduring issues in African-American history: "the black body" as a recursive register of shared memory; and the role of literary representation as both witness and aesthetic challenge to racial segregation, both *de jure* and *de facto*.

African-American culture's specific investment in history and memory has a long-standing scholarly lineage that includes Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally's edited *History & Memory in African-American Culture* (1994); V. P. Franklin's *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (1995); Robert Reid-Pharr's *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House and the Black American* (1999); and James and Lois Horton's *Slavery and Public Memory: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (2006), to name but a few. No less significant, however, are autobiographies, both fledgling and honed, that range from nineteenth century testimonials and slave narratives authored by, for example, Olaudah Equiano (aka Gustavo Vassa) to Harriet Jacob (aka Linda Bent) and Frederick Douglass. In the twentieth century Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry and Toni Morrison, among many others, approximated the specific African-American history/memory relation in poetic, representational, or even abstract terms.

These two current books under discussion continue this rich tradition of African-American letters. Departing from their predecessors they shift focus from the vicissitudes of slavery to a more theoretical engagement with Jim Crow segregation in post-reconstruction America. Also evident, perhaps, is that a new generation of writer/researchers weighs in here; and this entrée of innovative scholars is consequential. Indeed, these books invigorate approaches to reading and theorizing our archive of historical memory and its representation. They explore what we might still learn from the work of writers who lived and created within circumstances of extraordinary social terror. In their reassessment, the authors offer new optics from which to read the aesthetic and performative project of critical memory work. Not only do they bring into focus strategies that earlier individuals-activists-writers consciously deployed to represent themselves and speak back to the horrors of particular historical contexts, they also insist that these texts remain highly relevant for engaging conditions of political trauma, violence and social injustice still with us. Both books explore the purpose and style

(pedagogical or otherwise) of how images, artifacts, creative fiction and biographies collectively served to not merely communicate political lessons or expose injustice, but also to influence social change.

The past/present conjuncture offers the critical, overlapping impulse that both unites and differentiates these two books. Young, a theatre and performance studies scholar, builds an argument for continuity between the past and the present, reactivating "passed/past" sites of black embodied experience—however complex, variegated and multilayered—as constitutive grounds of shared trans-historical black group experience. The more discipline-roving anthology by Norman and Williams collectively (but unevenly) interweaves literary and political interventions of such diverse writers as Ida B. Wells and Charles W. Chestnut to Chester Himes and Hisaye Yamamota, while conjugating this past/present relation across post-Reconstruction, post-Brown v. Board of Education historical periods. Despite genre differences, both inquiries are linked by the urgency to bear witness to the changing-same processes of racialization in North America.

Together, they challenge optimistic (or perhaps cynical) rhetoric of a "post-black" pluralism, while illuminating the heuristic potential of critical memory work, and its role as public pedagogical investment. This project is especially resonant today, when coercive politics of racial resentment still affect the material conditions of black peoples throughout the globe.

Harvey Young's wide-ranging study, *Embodying the Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, insists that experience of the black body bears striking resemblance across historical time and geographic space. Arguing for this experiential continuity, five chapters are organized by genre: photography, boxing history, theatre and museology. Each chapter profiles "spectacular events" located between 1850 and the present in which the black body is figured as subject and object. Case study analysis, as well as diverse methodologies that include biography, phenomenology, critical reading, historiography and cultural studies, provide multiple perspectives on the black body that are intertextual and mutually informing. Yet "stillness" is the theoretical through-line that explains the "fixing" of the black body in the gaze (recall Fanon's oft quoted anecdote, "Look, Maman, a Negro"), ranging from mechanisms of physical restraint and incarceration, to the freeze-frame of the photograph, to class-ceilings and limited opportunity structures.

Utilizing Fanon's cadences of epidermalization, "the inscription of meaning onto skin color," Young argues that black people embody shared history and memory that does not derive from inherent group homogeneity. Rather, socially constructed ideas of the black body, that is, racialized myths and assumptions, instantiate an abstract or epithetic understanding of "blackness," independent of individual difference. According to Young, nineteenth-century racial logics—fantasies, stereotypes, biological concepts, misrecognitions—and their corresponding forms of physical and psychic violence—have remained remarkably ingrained in the twenty-first century societal imaginary, structuring "embodied black experience with each subsequent generation." This ongoing "experience of the body," Young contends, "informs black critical memory, shapes social behavior and everyday black performance [black *habitus*, drawing on Bourdieu], and determines the ways in which black folk view the society in which they live and the people, including themselves, who populate it."

Sustaining his argument of embodied experience, Young relies on a variety of biographical accounts, archival materials and numerous secondary resources, as well as personal observation in the case of theatre studies. To a greater or lesser degree, many of "spectacular events" analyzed are well documented in historical literature and photographs, as well as approximated in theatrical reengagement and museological display. Here stories of familiar black figures are rehearsed to include Saartjie Baartman (*Hottentot Venus*), Muhammad Ali and 1930s lynching survivor James Cameron. Young's provocative treatment

of his choice subjects offer sharp insights for the unfamiliar, and may challenge readers well-versed in the protagonists' histories. For example, the early nineteenth century exploitation of Baartman's body is reencountered with the latter-day muse of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' 1996 play, *Venus*. Parks' dramaturgy, winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 2002, is further contextualized in comparison to her contemporaries, such as African-American feminist black playwright-actors-performance artists Robbie McCauley (*Sally's Rape*, 1992) and Dael Overlander (*Yellowman*, 2001), for instance. Young rigorously interrogates the way each playwright translates memory, be it ancestral dreams or psychic reconstruction, to project memories of their protagonists' experience, as well as other black women's, onto actor and viewer—whereby their bodies serve as screens "on which the drama of racism and abuse gets (re) played." His synthetic analysis of the scripts, performances, criticism and audience responses to the trio's plays provide perceptive insights into the conundrums each successfully and unsuccessfully negotiated to "activate black memory and [give] voice to embodied black experiences" through kinetic dramatic narrative.

Themes of shared black bodily experience are explored further in still photography's role in "bridging differently placed (temporarily) and spaced bodies and enabling the transmission or sharing of embodied experiences." Spanning a seventy-year period in a South Carolina region, Young analyses daguerreotypes of black slaves commissioned in 1850 by natural scientist Louis Agassiz, and photographed by pioneering daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy. He also scrutinizes Richard Roberts's semi-pro-professional portraits of African-American individuals and couples in their best Sunday dress, taken in his 1920s studio during the height of Jim Crow violence. Finally, Walker Evans's iconographic depression era Resettlement Administration photographs are critically read for how they "pause" everyday black life in the rural southeastern United States of the 1930s. For Young, however, the historiographic significance of this photographic record is less important than the way these images illustrate what he terms the phenomenal experience of "stillness": a performance of motionlessness, identified as a characteristic demand that is compelled upon the black body—from the Middle Passage to the ubiquitous instances of racial profiling so common today.

The photographic enactments Young painstakingly scrutinizes invite comparative probing of how forms and affects of enforced stillness are repeated across lived experiences of black bodies in different sociopolitical and environmental contexts. This line of inquiry is pursued in a heavily documented chapter that reiterates biographies of slave plantation boxer Tom Molineaux, and the latter-day professional prizefighters Jack Johnson, Joe Lewis and Muhammad Ali. Young's detailed readings of the three earlier champion fighters illustrate how they variously endured, resisted and eventually succumbed to societal projections of racist stereotypes and caricatures that undermined attempts each made to sustain control over his body and self-representation. Well aware of his predecessors' tragedies, Ali's defiant, motionless stance, his very public refusal of military induction in 1963, according to Young, changes history. In his bold and calculated refusal, Young argues, Ali "reclaims the stillness of the black body and transforms it into a position of power." As is well known, Ali becomes and remains a hero of the black, and, indeed, a global community. More interesting, however, is that this interpretation leads to a conclusion that counters the central over-determined thrust of the book: "[Ali] demonstrated that the repeated, similar conditions and expectations of the black body do not automatically lead to the creation of the same experience of the body" (118).

In the final chapter Young focuses on the horrific 1901 lynching of George Ward, whose dismembered body parts circulated as souvenirs and fetish items by the white collector-participant observers of the event. He then chronicles the experience of James Cameron, survivor of a

1930 lynching in which two of his friends perished. Consequently, Cameron founded the American Black Holocaust Museum in 1988. Asking whether this or any other museum can remember the history of American lynching, Young implores, through what ethics or pedagogy of display might such an exhibition be realized? His ultimate answer is negative. Lynchings are not, in Young's view, available for *museumization* because (1) they are "flash spectacles," they have a "generic nature," they are specifically "localized and individualized." In a surprising move, given his overriding tendency towards continuity, Young argues, "lynchings themselves were [not] conducted as part of a single grand narrative." Despite historical and juridical evidence to the contrary, Young subscribes to the view that "[a]ny notion of a typical 'lynching' is at best regarded as a convenient fiction."

According to Young, repeated traumatic experiences inform an embodied black critical memory that plays out in forms of everyday behavior and social performance that black men and women employ in society-making relations, including those with each other. Such a position could provoke a knee-jerk charge of essentialism: it asserts the view of over-determined sameness. Similarly, it suggests a socially constructed essence of the black experience, one so unmercifully objectified by the assumptions of racialism's logic that contingency and conjunctural difference—if not individual or collective resistance—are unimaginable. Nevertheless, the complexities buried in Young's project may be worth reading for others willing to continue the conversation. Young argues that black bodies possess similar experience across time and space, while simultaneously gesturing toward individuality and a complex *situatedness* within specific social contexts across cultural/class/sexual positions. Unfortunately, the later impetus gets short shrift.

Norman and William's collection of essays, *Representing Segregation: Toward an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division*, originated as a 2008 special issue of *African American Review*.

Various scholars limn the different aesthetic sensibilities nineteenth and twentieth century writers mobilized to address the literary predicament of their time: the social system of Jim Cow segregation coined by W. E. B. DuBois as "the problem of the colour line." Sampling exemplary published texts that both precede and follow Richard Wright's 1937 seminal essay, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," the studies contribute, through a variety of contours, initial critical features of a "segregation narrative tradition." Eschewing the easier aim of canon-formation, a resounding question informs all of the contributions: What might be gained today, given that Jim Crow's legacy remains not merely memorable but active, from considering how past writers represented racial segregation in the literary venues of their moment?

Several superb chapters address these questions from the optics of African-American and American Literary and Cultural Studies. When most successful, the chapters pry open new avenues for consideration of theory and critical practice. Elizabeth Abel's "American Graffiti," for example, offers a refreshingly unorthodox approach to the cutting force semiotics of segregation. With resolute clarity this exemplary contribution pushes the separation between visual culture and politics, offering a theoretically erudite (and resounding political) critique of Jim Crow iconography well beyond safely settled history. Of most import is that Abel contemporizes these signs of American apartheid that for three-quarters of a century explicitly demarcated "Coloured" from "White" water-fountains, whorehouses, railway, and other human accommodations. Significantly, she traces and evaluates how, at the end of the post-civil rights era, these denigrating signs of race separation are re-appropriated as black memorabilia and re-circulated in the cultural market among collectors, and then extended to consumers through mass produced decorative (and copy-righted) replicas. Following de Certeau rather than Foucault, Abel insightfully interprets "segregation's changing textual body," reminding us that consumption functions as

"another production," and that these sedimented "tools of domination acquire both regressive and progressive functions vis-à-vis the racial politics of postmodernity." Abel insists that segregation was, in large measure, staged through visual representation. Racial "Americana" is intricately invested in artifactual relations, refashioned in the market through means of exchange that evacuate historical significance. For Abel, important tasks for critical study remain: first, to re-read the new "script" in which segregation's history is neutralized as *pastiche*; second, to recognize the aesthetic challenges raised by the cultural afterlife of these signs, particularly where post-race roll-backs of social programs continue segregation by other means.

Cutting edge studies of the nineteenth and twentieth century African-American writer Charles W. Chestnut (1858-1932) occupy the book's second section. Addressing his key post-reconstruction works, particularly *The Conjure Tales* (1899) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), contributors tease out the aesthetic tightrope Chestnut walked to embed imaginative fiction with a radical critique of both fixed racial meanings in Jim Crow ideologies, and as indictment of anti-black violence. For example, Bridget Brander Rasmussen's analysis illuminates how *The Marrow of Tradition* operates as Chestnut's most overtly political novel on the extant dynamics of class privilege, white supremacy and contradictions of inter-racial sexual relations. Chestnut's narrative strategy of "literary ventriloquism," a rhetorical and analytical mode of diegesis that speaks through white characters, demonstrates his creative ingenuity to maneuver subversive writing through publication censorship and the racial terror faced by black authors and activists, such as the anti-lynching protester Ida B. Wells. Chestnut is compelling, Rasmussen argues, because he keenly understood that there is no safety for whites in anti-black violence and disenfranchisement, anticipating, perhaps, the twenty-first century in which his prescient insight would remain salient: "[s]ins, like chickens, come home to roost."

The book's third section raises significant questions about how writers addressed *de jure* and *de facto* segregation in the south and urban north. Here, the work of mourning and memory is encapsulated in the published and unpublished versions of Angelina Weld Grimke's 1920 short story "Goldie." *De facto* housing segregation in Chicago is narrated in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maude Martha* (1953) and Frank London Brown's *Turmball Park* (1959). Both Brooks and London, it is argued, responding to particularly insidious race-based restrictive housing covenants, reveal not mere struggles of black interiority in claustrophobic domestic space, but they also expose the socio-juridical imperative to maintain the rigid racial borders of American urban geography. On the other hand, Anne Petry's classic *The Street* (1946) is less framed by a naturalist aesthetic than by the structural and social preoccupations of American Gothic, wherein scenarios of un-homeliness, familial horror and sexual transgression in Harlem's tenements inure. Rounding out this section, Michelle Y. Gordon's, "'Somewhat Like War': The Aesthetics of Segregation, Black Liberation and *A Raisin in the Sun*," stands out, demonstrating that the radical politics (and poetics) of Lorraine Hansberry's famed drama functions as an enduring model of public testimony. Not only did Hansberry stage an incisive cultural intervention into mid-twentieth century black urban ghet-toization, but also she enlivened a prophetic framework for anti-colonial/capitalist critique that reverberates today.

This book also reminds us that many nineteenth and twentieth century writers engaged in frequent transatlantic travel, developing radical cross-ethnic cultural imaginaries, servicing international struggles for social justice. Essays in the final two sections, for example, reveal how the aesthetic and performative practices of protest built anti-racist solidarity beyond the borders of the nation.

Ida Wells and Frederick Douglass are, of course, well-known examples. In vocalization and physical stature, they consciously provoked

international alliance building through their staunch global anti-lynching electrifying public declarations. Similarly a figure like Richard Wright, though not unproblematically, is credited with expanding the critique of American Jim Crow segregation to encompass "third-world" anti-colonial politics at the cusp of the *Negritude* movement and throughout post-war Pan-Africanist debates. Transnational border crossing also produced complexly ambiguous if not flawed literary representations of what it meant to negotiate the psychic toll of Jim Crow.

In a particularly astute analysis, Ruth Blandon's chapter prevents any easy reading of how migration might affect the writer's perceptions of fluid but ultimately socially constructed race identity. In her study, Blandon finds that James Weldon Johnson, author of *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) and a 1933 memoir, *Along This Way*, exemplifies this slippery experience. Johnson's race imagination was fueled by Cuban friendships in Florida and diplomatic stints in the U. S. Consular Service in Venezuela and Nicaragua. While Johnson insightfully and humorously observed how his misidentification as "Latin" enacted "the porosity of race and [the fiction of] race categories," Blandon shows how this acute vision nevertheless remained mediated by an internalized "segregating and a segregated eye." In this way she demonstrates Johnson's writing as occupying a contradictory third space, as an example of utopic cultural criticism that simultaneously straddled the ideological position of segregation so despised. If Johnson seemingly endorsed "passing" as a viable survival option, then it was with the most pragmatic view of Jim Grow that, as he wrote nearly a century ago, "any kind of Negro will do; provided he is not one who is an American citizen."

In the final essay aptly titled "Into a Burning House: Representing Segregation's Death," Vince Schleitwiler evocatively reads Hisaye Yamamoto's 1985 short-story qua memoir, "A Fire in Fontana." Yamamoto's text hinges on a memory of a black family—a man, a woman and two children—burned to death in their home in the 1940s shortly after "integrating" into a white Los Angeles neighbourhood. Haunted by her complicity in the tragedy, the Japanese-American narrator contemplates a similar incendiary moment during the rebellion of 1965 in a still segregated Los Angeles. Her stumbling memory-work opens a portal to recollect not only the past failure to act, whether an intervention might have prevented the family's death or not, but also her own cowering experience of the dominant racial regime—anti-black American and anti-Japanese ideology—from World War II to the mid 1960s. Establishing a complex intertextuality among "writers of colour," Schleitwiler compares Yamamoto's account with Chester Himes's pre-war Los Angeles located novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945)—a work that narrated new forms of racial coercion and terror even as desegregation was a glint in the rhetoric of mid-century American liberalism. With analytical skill, Schleitwiler draws our attention to the paradox of "segregation's death" in post-civil rights/post-race thought: "Its passing as ideology is reconciled with its *de facto* material presence through rituals of commemoration that train the nation to perceive segregation's death as the negative image of it cherished freedom." Now, as before, "darkness" threatens "freedom" and, reminiscent of the highly manipulated logic our post-9/11 present, "Terror of darkness keeps the nation's subjects in their separate and unequal places...marking unfreedom as vulnerability to violence and envisioning the privileges secured by violence as freedom's only possible form."

Contributors to the Norman and Williams volume emphasize how various writers not only negotiated the representation of segregation through literary means, but also how the rhetorical techniques they staged confronted its heinous logic. Of necessity, as Cheryl Wall sums up in her "Afterward," segregation acted on the literary imagination, firing the fighting spirit of African Americans, as well as many writers across ethnic experience: their joint collective poetry and public intellectual work representing Jim Crow

created space, both subjective and political, for resistance (even though its pervasive social systems often appeared impenetrable to change). Analyses brought together here illuminate racial injustice and violence accepted in both custom and jurisprudence, yet, like Young's study, they gesture toward much more. Both books begin with the premise that past representations of racialization, be it lynching, apartheid, sexual abuse, or state sponsored inequality, offer, decades later, fecund resources to reconsider and reformulate assumptions about what literary intervention is capable of in confronting post-modern racism.

Both texts contend that our impulse to represent still intertwines with aesthetics and political engagement, especially given the rapid transformations in the exercise of power as it reproduces racial hierarchies. These cultural negotiations—from conscious and unconscious everyday performance to civil rights photography; from segregation signs to literary inscription—are rife with embedded knowledge that political communities can access to imagine strategies that might enable change towards a still possible future. These texts and contexts, across diverse methodologies and mediums, expand the African-American cultural archive's rigor beyond ritualistic commemorative forms of memory that entrap the mourner in the past.

But what is this "beyond" the past? What can we reasonably demand from cultural objects—textual, performative, or photographic? Schleitwiler suggests that the creative and political end-point of fashioning representational forms is not transformative action itself; rather, representation offers a beginning whose potentiality coheres in its capacity "to project a call [out to others], seeking to gather and bind a collectivity in the act of response." He reminds us that the task of the author/creator is "to meditate and amplify this call [to others] under conditions that threaten to render it inaudible." Hence, representation is not static: it is transformed, co-opted, altered (if not captured) by seismic technological changes that increase surveillance in the public sphere. Here, we encounter the "inadequacy of representation" that now "marks the deferral of justice" with a significant difference. And yet, as the best essays from these texts confirm, the work of representation, past and present, entails continuous creative diligence to break free of the shackles—iron or velvet—that the dominant always constructs—to compose a "terribly beautiful music" whose dissonance turns the soul toward what remains humanly possible in contemporary life. Above all, it is the futuristic gaze that distinguishes these books: an insistence that because historical conditions of racialized horror resound in the present, "[r]esponse, and responsibility still awaits."

ART

Curated by Jeff Koons

Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection

New Museum, New York, March 3–June 20, 2010

Jenny Florence

If only Jeff Koons had approached his debut curatorial duties as he does his art. "Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection," the New Museum's spring 2010 offering, could have functioned like his best pieces: over-the-top gestures ripe with meaning, but kept in check by refined execution. After all, aren't the wittiest one-liners by definition the most sparing? Unfortunately, Skin Fruit was more an exercise in aimless abundance than pointed economy and, in the end, the sprawling exhibition amounted to not much more than spoiled opportunity.

Skin Fruit brought together works selected from the collection of Cypriot industrialist and New Museum trustee Dakis Joannou. Officially, the title of the exhibition alludes to man's genesis