



The Beauty Trap

Artist Ebony G. Patterson immerses the Nasher in her haunting, tragic moonlit garden

BY JAMEELA F. DALLIS arts@indyweek.com

On February 27, the Nasher Museum of Art will open the exhibit . . . *while the dew is still on the roses* . . . , a major solo show by Ebony G. Patterson, who was born in Kingston in 1981 and now splits her time between Jamaica and Chicago.

The exhibit, which was organized by Pérez Art Museum Miami, immerses Patterson’s distinctly embellished drawings, tapestries, videos, and sculptures in an installation environment. It’s a moonlit garden of both haunting beauty and tragic resonance.

Filled with ersatz flowers, Patterson’s exhibit invokes the functions and forms of memorials and funerary arts and the pleasure, danger, death, and revelation associated with gardens in art and literature. Think of the Biblical Eden, Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights,” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” or Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.

Patterson’s growing body of work, which is held in public collections from the National Gallery of Jamaica to 21c Museum Hotels and the Nasher, “investigates forms of embellishment as they relate to youth culture within disenfranchised communities,” according to the Nasher.

Patterson’s work is in a lineage with Miriam Schapiro’s “femimages” of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the ‘70s and ‘80s and self-taught Jamaican artist Leonard Daley’s abstract yet representational work on found boards and dwelling walls. In a recent interview with the *INDY*, Patterson said she loves and is inspired by both artists, also mentioning the influence of Kerry James Marshall and Trenton Doyle Hancock.

Patterson draws, paints, works with video, incorporates performance, and creates elaborate tapestries laden with multicolored glitter, beads, sequins, fabric, and her signature artificial flowers. Her works exude beauty, excess, and an essential polyvalence.

Patterson conjures the faces, shapes, and experiences of people who are black, brown, average, poor, queer, beautiful, complicated—and their relationship to beauty, land, and place.

Patterson says that the exhibit’s title comes from Charles Austin Miles’s 1912 hymn “In the Garden,” which was inspired by Miles’s vision of Mary Magdalene with Jesus in the garden. In the Gospel of John, Mary goes to visit Jesus’s tomb in the garden and is devastated upon

Ebony G. Patterson

PHOTO BY DANIEL MOODY/COURTESY OF MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

finding it empty, and then temporarily mistakes the resurrected Jesus for the gardener.

“The garden is where all of this happens,” Patterson says. “It is a site where beauty is unfolding and, at the same time, as it is in the song, it’s a place of death. Dew references wetness—the tears and the ooze of the body—and while the rose is a funerary flower, it’s also a flower of love.”

Patterson also emphasizes the title’s focus on transformation; the adverb “still” suggests potential and opportunity for change. Patterson has often been quoted as saying that in her work, beauty functions as a trap to lure us in. Its lush, ornate, glittering, and excessive permutations draw in viewers, who must reckon with the work’s complex entanglements of oppression, violence, and death.

The exhibit incorporates work from many series over the past decade, along with work created specifically for this show. “Untitled Species VIII (Ruff)” is a drawing on paper embellished with rhinestones and glitter from a series that explores Jamaican dancehall culture and its fluid relationship to gender and identity. Patterson understands beauty and pageantry as acts of cultivation, and she’s especially concerned with the ways working-class people cultivate beauty.

For Patterson, everyday dress is a form of memorialization, a concept that takes on multilayered meaning in “Entourage.” In this photograph, she explores Jamaican gang culture through subjects in floral, colorful clothing on a floral-patterned background to complicate conventional structures of masculinity and family. The piece also refers to Jamaica’s 2010 Tivoli incursion, a two-day standoff between police and the Shower Posse drug cartel that left more than 70 people dead. This violence was initiated by the United States calling to extradite the cartel’s leader.

The works “... moments we cannot bury ...” and “Where We Found Them – Dead Treez” are especially arresting large-scale tapestries. The first is positioned so that half of the viewer’s body, as curator Tobias Ostrander says, is “positioned below what would represent ground level;” silk flowers—birds of paradise, hyacinths, and lilies of the valley, all poisonous varieties—partially conceal objects and body parts cast in glass. The piece also includes a “cloud” of hundreds of women’s shoes covered



“Dead Tree in a Forest . . .” by Ebony G. Patterson

PHOTO BY ORIOL TARRIDAS/COURTESY OF MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

in black glitter, hanging from the ceiling, which recalls the shoes hanging from power lines that mark gang territories.

Meanwhile, the second tapestry hovers just above the floor, covered in lush plant life, beads, gold thread, lace, and found objects such as women’s shoes and fans. It refers to the “anonymous wild grasses and flowered fields in which dead bodies are often found,” says Ostrander, and from above, viewers eventually discern two sets of legs wearing the same shoes positioned on the plane.

Both works reference photos of slain bodies of black and brown people that are circulated on social media in ways that trouble Patterson. She wants viewers to confront the presence and absence of these bodies and consider their humanity.

Patterson notes that she’s been misquoted many times saying that she used the actual images in her work.

“I have never, ever done any such thing!” she says. “I worked with models,

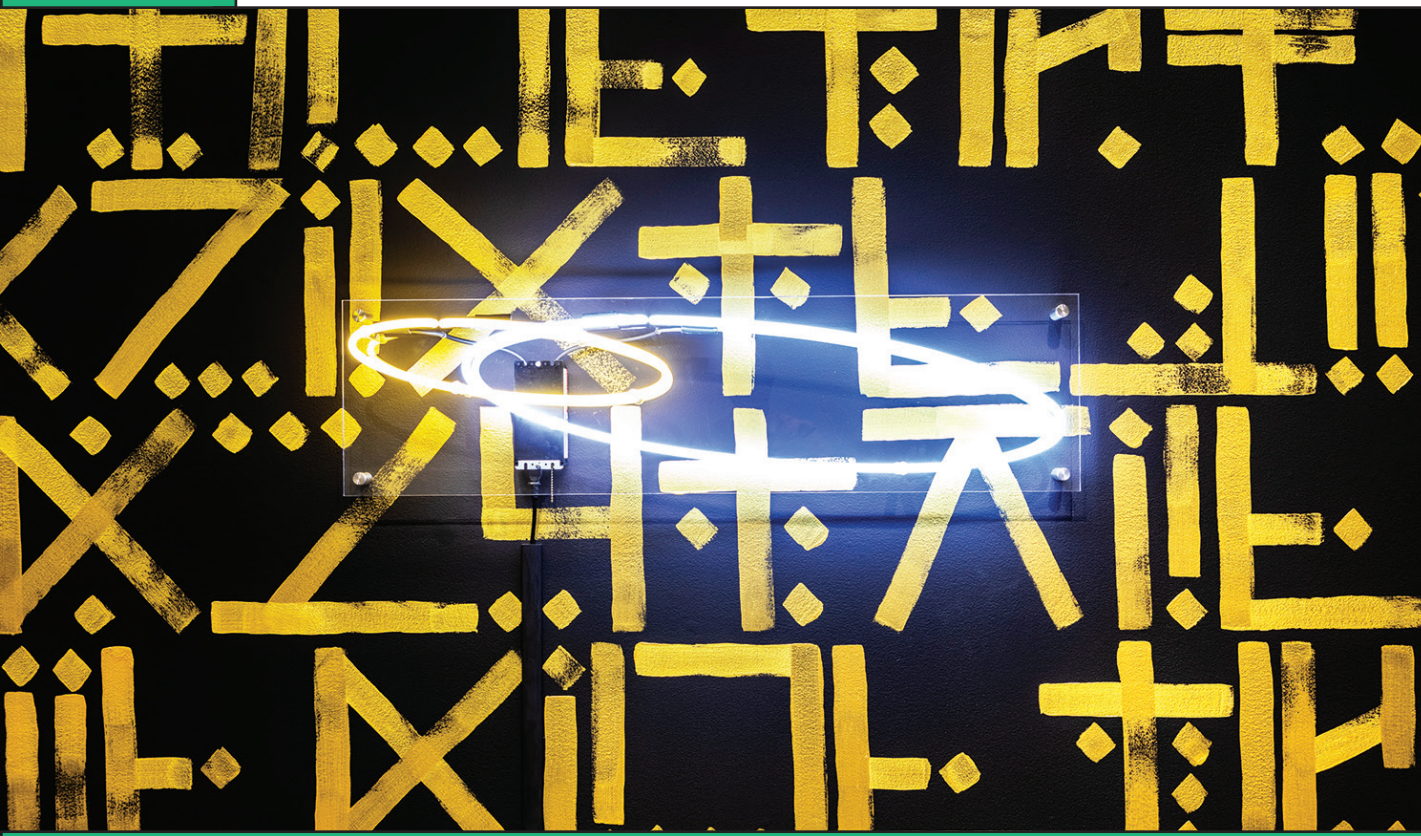
and I was using these images as points of reference. It’s not even that I staged the models based on the photos, either.”

Instead, she photographed models from above and, during editing, erased anything that revealed skin, because she was also “interested in the question or the opportunity for the audience to kind of fill in who it is ... and ideas around visibility and invisibility.”

While her work is rooted in place and nation, Patterson also recognizes that many of the themes she examines are much broader, because recontextualizing gender norms and bearing witness to racism and violence transcends national borders.

“From the very entry of the show, its title, I want to shift the way the viewer thinks about my work if they already know my work,” Patterson says.

While this exhibit acknowledges the inherent beauty of the garden, it also suggests that “its beauty, like all beauty, is fleeting. And time may run out in the garden because the weeds come for everyone.” ●



The Immortal Henrietta Lacks

An Afrofuturist art collective invents a new language for a true story of science, consent, and survival

BY JAMEELA F. DALLIS arts@indyweek.com

Henrietta Lacks died nearly seventy years ago, but some people say that she lives to this day.

No, this isn't a ghost story, but it is a story about a kind of immortality. It's also the subject of *Project LHAXX*, a polyglot exhibit at the Ackland Art Museum.

Lacks, a 31-year-old mother of five, was treated at The Johns Hopkins Hospital for cervical cancer, which took her life in 1951. For years, George Gey, a cancer and virus researcher, had been collecting cells from biopsies of cervical cancer patients. Lacks was the first person whose cells did not die in the lab. Instead, they doubled every twenty to twenty-four hours.

Her name survives in her "immortal cell line," which is called HeLa. It played a significant part in the development of the polio vaccine and is still used to study the effects of new treatments on cancer cells without experimenting on humans.

But Lacks's story is inseparable from issues of consent, ownership, and the troubling history of medical experimentation on black bodies. Gey took her cells without her or her family's knowledge, which was standard procedure. Lacks's family didn't know her cells had been critically important to medical research until the mid-1970s. The cells have created a billion-dollar industry; at least 11,000 patents contain them. But her children have not, and likely will never, benefit financially from their mother's genetic material.

Lacks's story is part of the inspiration behind *Project LHAXX*, a site-specific installation in the Ackland's ART& community space. It was created by Charlotte visual artists Marcus Kiser and Jason Woodberry and Durham performance artist Quentin Talley, collaborating as Intergalactic Soul. They approached Lacks's story through an Afrofuturist lens

"Afrofuturism is about preserving Black spaces in the future," Kiser says. "It's the idea of preserving the culture and making sure that we still have a voice—that we're still heard, and we're controlling our own narrative."

The mixed-media installation fills an entire gallery wall. Indecipherable gold glyphs are striking against a black background with elliptical, sculptural neon lights at the center. The lights represent stars Sirius A and B and the Dogon people of Mali, who knew about the white dwarf Sirius B centuries before it was recognized by nineteenth-century astronomers. A "cosmic message," accessible via the free augmented reality app Artivive, accompanies the installation.

Woodberry calls the mysterious markings "hieroglyphs from future ancestors"—evidence of survival. He says he was compelled to develop them because he realized

PROJECT LHAXX installation view

PHOTO COURTESY
OF THE ACKLAND

that "African Americans are the only people in this country without a native language."

The glyphs are inspired by languages from the regions of Woodberry's ancestry, including Nyo, from West Africa, and early forms of Irish. Kiser, Woodberry, and Talley were also inspired by Alisha Wormsley's evolving project *There Are Black People in the Future*, an exhibition they saw years ago in Charlotte.

Lacks's influence for the installation is evident in more than one way. Woodberry explains that two years ago, many of the glyphs didn't exist, and some meant something totally different. Like Lacks's cells, the characters of the language continue to mutate and change over time.

Woodberry learned about Lacks in 2016 during the collective's residency at the McColl Center in Charlotte, when he happened to meet someone involved with George C. Wolfe's 2017 film, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, based on Rebecca Skloot's 2010 book of the same name.

Woodberry was frustrated, both by Lacks's story and by the fact that he hadn't heard of her until his thirties. From enslavement to forced sterilization to the Tuskegee syphilis study, bodily consent has been stolen from African Americans in devastating, generation-altering ways.

But the collaborators of Intergalactic Soul also gleaned something extraordinary in Lacks's story. Her clinical immortality aligns with Afrofuturism and survival against overwhelming odds. Through her cells, Woodberry says, Lacks is "preserving a space for Black people in the future"—the same thing that these artists are committed to doing through art and performance.

Project LHAXX asks us to think about the power of narrative, who tells our stories, adaptation, and extraordinary survival. I asked the artists to consider the significance of the passage of four centuries since the effectual beginning of chattel slavery in the Americas, and only about 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation.

"We still here," Talley says.

"Every Black person you see," Woodberry adds, "is the offspring of a survivor."

A YEAR IN SUPERLATIVES

SCREEN

The *INDY*'s Top 15 Films of 2018

ANNIHILATION → → →

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK → → →

BLACK PANTHER

BLACKKKLANSMAN → → →

EIGHTH GRADE

THE FAVOURITE

FIRST MAN

FIRST REFORMED → → →

HEREDITARY

MANDY → → →

MINDING THE GAP → → →

A QUIET PLACE

ROMA → → →

SORRY TO BOTHER YOU

A STAR IS BORN → → →

First Reformed There are two main characters in writer-director Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*. The first is the eponymous Dutch Reformed church in upstate New York, a remote two-hundred-fifty-year-old chapel with few parishioners and an organ that doesn't work—more like a stately museum than a functioning parish. By contrast, the cannibalistic megachurch nearby, which owns the historical landmark, has many more worshippers flocking through its doors but compromises its precepts for the sake of corporate donors who keep those doors open. The second protagonist is fallen Calvinist clergyman Ernst Toller, played by Ethan Hawke in an aching, penetrating performance. Toller is grappling with despair and an existential crisis of faith on multiple fronts. When he fails to save a radical environmentalist who comes to him for counsel, Toller inherits his unused suicide vest and the friendship of his widow (Amanda Seyfried), which both become fulcrums in Toller's inner struggle between Old Testament damnation and New Testament atonement. The untidy ending doesn't resolve this conflict—there are not-so-faint echoes of Schrader's *Taxi Driver* script. But, upon reflection, two thousand years of Christian theology hasn't resolved it, either. Schrader's best film in years skewers politics, organized religion, and even anti-environmentalism, all under the umbrella of stewardship. "Will God forgive us?" is the film's refrain, but it offers no easy answers to this provocative question. —Neil Morris



Annihilation A very good adaptation of an even better book, *Annihilation* is a thrilling alchemy of science fiction, psychological horror, and ecological parable. Natalie Portman leads a team of scientists into Area X, a patch of quarantined Florida coastline where a sudden transformation has occurred. The government's official story concerns a vague industrial disaster, but Area X is actually Something Else Entirely. Director Alex Garland folds in all kinds of kinky, thinky weirdness: optical physics, de-evolution, fungal intelligence, that sort of thing. The film departs significantly from Jeff Vandermeer's book, but both cross apocalyptic sci-fi with the old literary tradition known as weird fiction. Each plays to the strengths of its medium. The book gets into your head via language, while the movie takes a brutal shortcut through your eyeballs. The images evoke a specific variety of terror-tinged awe, the kind you feel contemplating the destructive power of a hurricane, the terrible beauty of a decaying swamp, or the vast darkness of the night sky. Weird fiction specializes in these sensations, and *Annihilation* points them at our environmental worries about climate change, genetic engineering, and ecological collapse. If movies are like dreams—and they are—then this is a collective anxiety nightmare. We're trying to tell ourselves something. —Glenn McDonald



If Beale Street Could Talk *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins's latest (finally getting a local release next week) is visually appealing, intimate, and heartbreaking. Based on James Baldwin's 1974 novel, the film foregrounds the beauty and resilience of black people, black love, and black families against the despair of racism and systemic oppression. Set in 1970s Harlem, *Beale Street* opens with two gorgeous brown-skinned people. A young woman with natural hair (KiKi Layne) and a young man with full lips (Stephan James) are holding hands. The scene conveys optimism that their love will have space to flourish. We learn that Tish and Fonny, who have been friends since childhood, are engaged to be married. But then, with a baby on the way, Fonny is incarcerated.

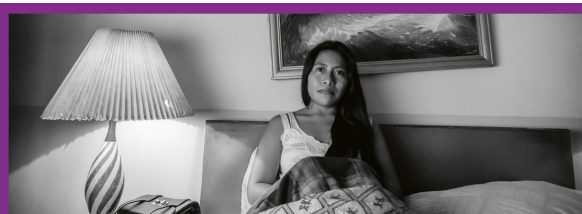
Baldwin's characters are always complex. They don't just destabilize stereotypes about blackness; they actively reflect the range of black experience. Fonny is an artist, and Tish's family celebrates her pregnancy and devotion to Fonny—though Tish's father, Joseph (Colman Domingo), asks if she's sure she wants to keep the baby.

Still, it's clear from the start of the film that the odds are stacked against them. From those Edenic opening frames, we hear Tish's voice over the darkness: "Of course, I must say I don't think America is God's gift to anybody ... If it is, God's days have got to be numbered." These are Baldwin's words, appearing dozens of pages into the novel, and it is significant that Jenkins begins with them. It's hard to hear them and not think of our current moment, when America's apparent greatness is tangled up with its return to a misguided false morality.

In Baldwin's world, which Jenkins recreates with vivacity and tragedy, a just, benevolent God is absent, replaced by racist police and a corrupt justice system. Fonny is incarcerated for a brutal rape he did not commit, and his Puerto Rican accuser, who was indeed raped by someone, becomes the tool of a white police officer's vendetta against the black man who dared to defend his bride-to-be after she was sexually harassed at a bodega. Jenkins's complex, awe-inspiring film challenges us to imagine and fight for a society in which black love, black families, and black lives matter.

—Jameela F. Dallis

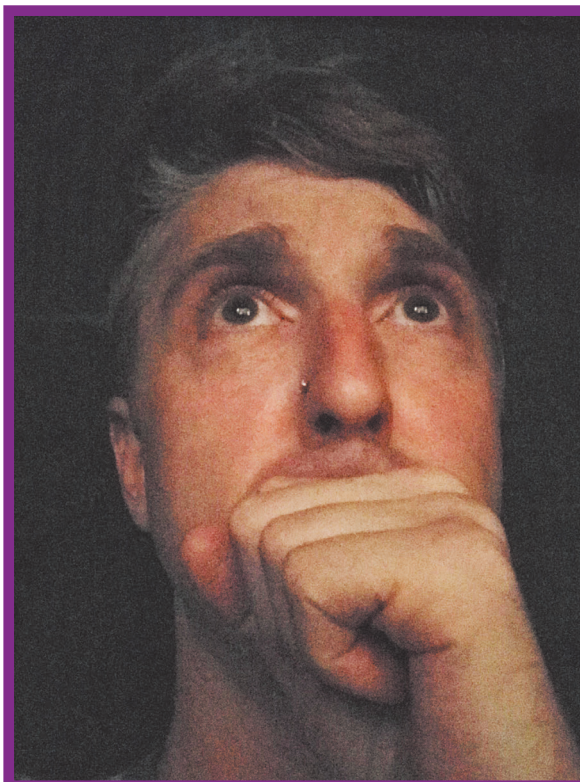
Minding the Gap Bing Liu's documentary *Minding the Gap*, about three amateur skateboarders (including the filmmaker) in Rockford, Illinois, is empathetic and expansive. It encompasses so much more than skating. It's as much about the heartbreak of growing up as it is about the endowment of domestic violence, the premonitions bred by race, and post-recession American malaise. The film played to a full house at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival this year. Documentary filmmakers often discuss who should be making documentaries for whom, a question always underpinning doc festivals. This debate isn't new and is never settled, but I share in others' frustrations about the proliferation of documentaries targeted towards the NPR-donor variety: white, educated, liberal enough. In fact, many of the documentaries that crossed over into the mainstream this year seemed designed to assuage the anxieties of this demographic, like *RBG* and *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* *Minding the Gap* was a rare, necessary exception. Liu's film moves with both the fluidity and jolts of skateboarding: in graceful, single shots of lanky bodies gliding through the streets, the camera skates with the skaters. But the camera stumbles, crashes, and lingers with them, too. To watch is to come away with skinned knees. —Katie Jane Fernelius



Roma The word "cinematic" often functions as an antonym of "intimate," suggesting a layer between art and life. But that's not so in Alfonso Cuarón's sweeping panorama of family life, which centers on Cleo, a young housekeeper who is at once deeply involved with and held at arm's length by the family she works for. Shot in black and white, 1970s Mexico City is beautifully recreated, with the changes happening in the outside world—a jet reflected in soap suds, astronauts suspended on a dark movie screen, a student riot-turned-bloodbath—mirroring those happening within the family. "Who are these kids?" wayward father Antonio jokes as he greets his children, foreshadowing the distance to come. Near the end, the mother, Sofia, takes her kids to the beach so Antonio can clear his belongings from the house. By then, Cleo, now pregnant, has also been abandoned by a man. Despite the emotional scope of these changes, interiority is not emphasized. In this way, Cuarón's priorities—visual texture over narrative contours—often resemble Terrence Malick's. But while a Malick film often feels austere and painterly, Cuarón deftly translates the visual poetry of everyday life with an intimacy that makes it almost hard to breathe. If the film has a personal feel, it's because it's Cuarón's semi-autobiographical tribute to the women that raised him, his perspective now complicated by adult understandings of class, race, gender, and the lonely distance between intense emotions and a world unready to receive them. —Sarah Edwards



Mandy A lysergic vision of astonishing and delirious beauty, Panos Cosmatos's second feature contains multitudes, including an LSD cult of *Easy Rider* caricatures and a biker gang seemingly sprung from the puzzle box of *Hellraiser*. In a year when theaters were still dominated by a predictable empire of superheroes, *Mandy* gave new meaning to the action film without skimping on epic chainsaw duels and other gems of ultra-violence. A genre flick, a poetic exploration of intimacy and loss, and a cautionary tale about the havoc caused by the fragility of the male ego, *Mandy* revived the revenge-film narrative by infusing it with emotional depth, centered on the tender relationship between two lovers: Mandy (Andrea Riseborough) and Red (Nicolas Cage). In scenes that accurately represent the process of trauma, Cage takes his characteristic performance of excess and exaggeration to a whole new level of intensity, while the proliferation of hallucinated landscapes and the dreamy synth score Jóhann Jóhannsson wrote before his untimely death accompany us through this splendid nightmare. —Marta Nuñez Pouzols



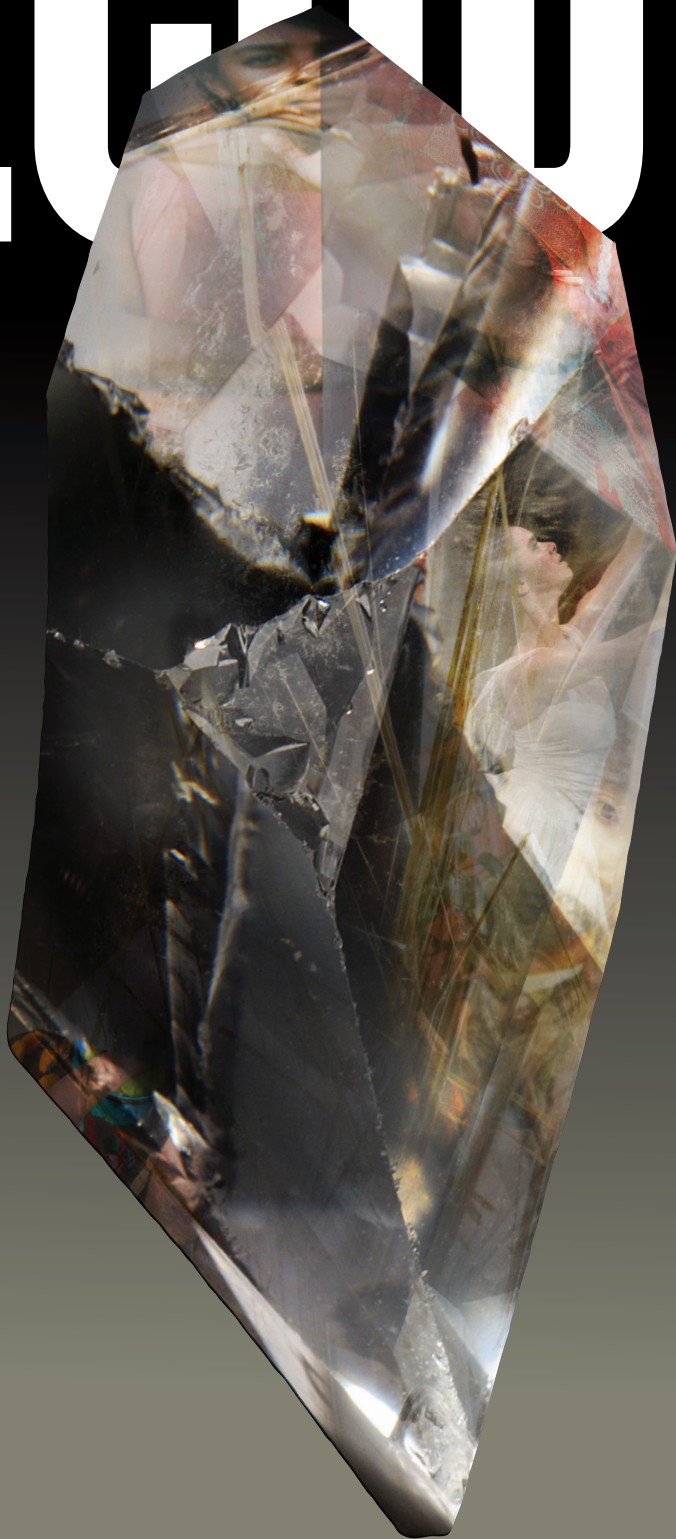
Hereditary This is what my face looked like the entire time during this riveting horror film, in which mundane family life is so much scarier than supernatural death. —Brian Howe

BlacKkKlansman It's no coincidence that *BlacKkKlansman* was released a day before the first anniversary of the infamous Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville. With implacable lucidity and excellent humor, Spike Lee's latest feature highlights how white supremacy, far from being a marginal phenomenon, is ingrained in the social fabric of this country. Paying skillful and pertinent homage to Blaxploitation movies through its cinematography and referencing the heroes of its genre (Pam Grier, Richard Roundtree, Ron O'Neal), the film is a carefully crafted reflection on the representation of blackness in cinema history. This reflection, mixed with a pointed bit of social commentary, culminates in a harrowing scene that should end the critical reverence for D.W. Griffith's ode to racism, *Birth of a Nation*. Other crucial moments are the exhilarating phone conversations in which black detective Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) successfully passes as white and tricks a clueless, wimpy David Duke (Topher Grace). Poignant, engaging, and hilarious, *BlacKkKlansman* is also a relevant critique of the futility of attempting social change without subverting the racist status quo. —Marta Nuñez Pouzols



A Star Is Born I watched *A Star Is Born* on the last day of a trip to New York, forswearing all other cultural activities to sit alone in an overpriced theater and have an experience I could have literally anywhere in America. I think that's what I enjoyed about the movie, though—how unifying the experience felt. I can't remember the last time a big-budget Hollywood movie felt as thrillingly encompassing: Even before the film was released, the trailer racked up a staggering number of views, and the internet swam with memes. The anticipation, taste, and aftertaste of the movie all felt equitable. As for the movie itself, Lady Gaga's Ally is genuine and focused, the music is phenomenal, and Bradley Cooper's throaty, washed-up musician is appropriately wrenching (although the biggest fairy tale might be that an alt-country singer could be a megastar of the stature depicted). Afterward, I found myself singing the soundtrack, compulsively telling people that I just wanted to take another look at them, and re-watching the trailer—which, after all, includes the capital-M Moment, the one we're all somehow collectively nostalgic for even though we'll never experience it quite this way: watching from the sidelines, being recognized, called up, and reborn. —Sarah Edwards

DECEMBER



**A DUKE PERFORMANCES
JOURNAL**

Spring 2020

Jameela F. Dallis
Michaela Dwyer
Bill Fick
Laura S. Lieber
Nathaniel Mackey
Mountain Man
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SPRING 2020**



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with photography by Sarah Danzinger,
Rosalie O'Connor, Vincent Oshin.*

THE BLACK ATLANTIC

By **Jameela F. Dallis**

In 2020, Duke Performances will present its third annual *Black Atlantic* festival welcoming distinct musicians from the Congo to Colombia. The voices, sounds, influences, and instruments hold history, invoke memory, sustain tradition, and illuminate the threads that connect us all. We are reminded of the resilience and genius of the African diaspora, and the people impacted by transatlantic routes past and present.

What is the Black Atlantic?

Published in 1993, scholar Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* significantly impacted cultural studies and how we think about the African diaspora, hybridity, and the relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. He proposed a culture simultaneously African, European, American, Caribbean, and Latin American that transcends racial, ethnic, and national categories.

Gilroy, the 2019 recipient of Norway's Holberg Prize, writes that the history of the Black Atlantic "yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade."¹

The Black Atlantic is as dynamic and expansive as the ocean that connects Africa, the Americas, and Europe. The Black Atlantic is theoretical, physical, and generative. It is a site where new diasporic identities are born and evolve.

This generative nature extends to the realm of music. Gilroy explains that "the history and practice of black music point to other possibilities and generate other plausible models."² The music of the Black Atlantic transmits and riffs on centuries-old sonic traditions and gives performers space to imagine all that is possible. Genre explodes and bleeds into new spaces. New sounds emerge that tie us to a reality where black people — black philosophy, black art, black innovation — have always been a part of modernism, shaping what came before and what will come after.

Black Atlantic Music: Hybridity and Journeys through Sound and Spaces

Music with origins in the Black Atlantic tells a story of hybridity and the resilience, ingenuity, and influence of the black diaspora. Take *danzónes*, Cuba's national dance. Its history is a Black Atlantic narrative. Many Haitians and French colonists fled to Cuba after the Haitian revolution and brought the *contradanza* — a popular, European dance music. *Contradanza* led to *danza*, and from *danza*, *danzón* was born. *Danzón* continues to evolve, but much of its original form — informed by both West African and European styles, instruments, and rhythms — remains.

Then there is *Joropo* — a genre birthed in the Orinoco River plains of eastern Colombia and western Venezuela — which blends Andalusian, Indigenous American, and African music styles. The *Joropo*-playing Colombian band Cimarrón incorporates maracas, a harp, a *cuatro* guitar, an Afro-Colombian *tamboro*, an Orinoco *ocarina*, and its stomp dancing speaks to what Gilroy terms the "inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas" that informs the Black Atlantic.³

Congolese *rumba*, an unexpected combination of words, tells the story of movement and musical influence from the Caribbean to the African continent. By way of Cuba, *rumba* came to the Congolese basin in the 1930s and '40s and blossomed in the 1950s and continues to evolve to this day. Another Americas-infused genre is *benga*. Born on the shores of Kenya's Lake Victoria in the 1950s, *benga* is the result of Luo musicians adapting traditional dance rhythms and instruments like the lyre (*nyatiti*) and fiddle (*orutu*) for the acoustic guitar.

Feminism and the Black Atlantic

Music is connective tissue. It supports innovation while protecting history, memory, and heritage. With its rhizomatic roots, the music of the Black Atlantic knits together disparate bodies into an amalgam of potential and inspiration. The late, great Toni Morrison knew that “you can range all over the world and [music’s] still black.”⁴ In an interview with Gilroy, Morrison declared:

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional... My parallel is always the music because all of the strategies of the art are there. All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you’ve never touched it. Music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and embraces, it slaps and embraces.

This movement — this “rang[ing] all over the world” — is essential to conceptions of the Black Atlantic, and throughout history, it has been easier and more acceptable for men to travel, roam, and move freely throughout the world while women are often still expected to inhabit and manage the domestic realm.

Many scholars have pointed out the lack of female and feminist representation in Gilroy’s text. Yet, the role of women and feminism in the realm of the Black Atlantic is important to consider because of the movement Black Atlantic suggests.

In *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (2013), Samantha Pinto introduces Trixie Smith’s 1924 blues hit, “Freight Train Blues.” Smith’s lines, “When a woman gets the blues, she goes to her room and hides / But when a man gets the blues, he catch a freight train and rides.”⁵ Pinto reminds us that while many working-class black women were constrained to “domestic and private spheres, the blues as a commodified skill set gave black women performers the ability to literally travel, to break the very dichotomy that the song’s lyrics suggest.”⁶ Thus, music has the potential to open doors and collapse boundaries for women in ways that other professions may not.

An artist such as Sona Jobarteh embodies the spirit of Smith’s boundary-crossing lyrics. Born in London to a prominent Gambian griot family, Jobarteh bears the distinction of being the first female virtuoso of West Africa’s twenty-one stringed harp, the kora. In West African tradition, only the offspring of griot families are permitted to play the kora professionally, and then it is only the men, as the craft has passed from father to son for seven hundred years.

Jobarteh broke tradition and at four years old began learning the kora from her brother. She later attended London’s Royal College of Music where she studied Western classical music and orchestral composition. Now, internationally renowned for her ethereal voice, graceful playing, and compelling compositions, Jobarteh, who sings in Mandingo, honors both her ancestral homeland and breaks gendered barriers. She infuses revolutionary, feminist energy into an age-old tradition.

The Black Atlantic continues to evolve. It is a space of iteration where known categories are disrupted and new possibilities are created. When Duke Performances presents its third annual *Black Atlantic* festival in April, it presents the possibilities of a culture rooted and mobile, specified and infinite.

Jameela F. Dallis is a writer, artist, and educator with a Ph.D. in English. Her publications range from dance reviews to book chapters on Gothic literature.

BLACK ATLANTIC

Sona Jobarteh | The Gambia/UK
Monday, April 6 | Motorco Music Hall

David Virelles | Cuba/USA
Tuesday, April 7 | Motorco Music Hall

Cha Wa | USA
Wednesday, April 8 | Motorco Music Hall

Etienne Charles Creole Soul | Trinidad/USA
Thursday, April 9 | Motorco Music Hall

Cimarrón | Colombia
Friday, April 10 | Motorco Music Hall

Orchestre Les Mangelepa | Kenya/Congo
Saturday, April 11 | Motorco Music Hall