

BLACK THOUGHT'S MISE EN ABYME

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Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 388pp, £25.99 paperback, £116 hardcover.

'*Anteaesthetics*,' Rizvana Bradley promises early in this new monograph, her first, 'radically diverges from the axiomatic presumption of black art's ontological inhabitancy, aesthetic coherence, and political instrumentality' (p1). Across the nearly 400 formidable pages that follow, Bradley is steadfast in her commitment to nonredemptive aesthetic inquiry. The aesthetic is for her neither a space 'separate from and ancillary to the political' nor 'a curative political space of unfettered imagination and even emancipatory potential' (p8). No grievance is to be intuited here; *Anteaesthetics* never suggests, for instance, that the work of Black artists could, but has so far failed to, transcend and transform an anti-Black world. A celebrated scholar and curator, Bradley thinks with Black art precisely because it magnifies, or aggravates, the defining inability of the aesthetic to incept alternative worlds more hospitable to Black life. 'Black art,' she intones, 'cries out, from the brink, for a thought of negativity without recuperation or redress, a negativity whose movement establishes ... illimitable descent' (pp1-2).

The modern world, to secure its metaphysics and reproduce its 'brutality and depredation' (p8), needs the aesthetic; and the aesthetic, Blackness. Modernity's 'regime of aesthetics' (p9) – a phrase inspired by, among others, David Lloyd and Sylvia Wynter¹ – cannot represent Blackness but demands the latter's availability and labour. Jacques Rancière's 'aisthesis'² names a singular event inaugurating a new thinking within the aesthetic regime; what was unthinkable, or unthought, is now thinkable, or thought. The possibility of emergence and transformation, proposes Bradley, relies on the unassimilability and inadmissibility of 'black aesthesis' (p30). This 'irreducibly material' (p31) aesthesis, a product of 'the abyssal cut between black existence and black nonbeing' (p30), lays the nonevental foundation – 'a dehiscence, a deformation, an irruption' (p31) – for Rancière's singular event and its renewal of the sensorium. Aisthesis, as I would condense it, marks the predatory positivisation of Black aesthesis's negativity.

Bradley opens an early case study with an account of Arthur Jafa's *Dreams are Colder than Death* (2014). The film belongs to her archive insofar as it 'deconstruct[s]' the 'dissimulations' that grant Rancière's aisthesis its illusion of coherence (p59). One such dissimulation pertains to the historical and phenomenological emergence of 'the body' (p74) as form. This emergence, Bradley, following Hortense Spillers³, equates with the disciplining of flesh.

1. David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, Fordham University Press, 2019; Sylvia Wynter, 'Rethinking "Aesthetics": Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice', in Mbye B. Cham (ed.), *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, Africa World Press, 1992, pp237-79.

2. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Zakir Paul (trans.), Verso, 2013.

3. Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 2023, pp203-29. (Hereafter *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*.)

Black femininity's fleshy affectivity and reproductivity indeed subtend the apparatus of the body. Bradley diagrams this condition in one of the book's many shows of metanarrative bravura: 'If the ontology of the antiblack world emerges through the constitutive negation of the black, whose incarnation of metaphysical nothingness under the signs of absolute affectability, primitivity, and dereliction furnishes the coherence of modernity's spatiotemporal coordinations, then black femininity bears this terrible emergence in and through the flesh' (p64). Bradley employs a method she calls 'appositional', 'transversal' and 'errant' (p37) to read against modernity's inscription of the body onto the flesh. She reads for the 'vertiginous corporeality' (p74) of a flesh concealed by 'pornotroping' – Spillers's term for the forcible burdening of Black femininity with contradictory meanings (*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, p206).

Yet Bradley's study is not an exercise in purification, or disambiguation. She does not seek to relieve matter of figuration. Such a project would be better fitted to a book titled 'Antiaesthetics' than to one titled *Anteaesthetics* – more on the neologism shortly. I understand both the object and the structure of Bradley's thinking as an endless regression, a fall into the abyss. For David Marriott, who helms Stanford University Press's 'Inventions: Black Philosophy, Politics, Aesthetics' series, of which *Anteaesthetics* constitutes the inaugural title, 'the abyssal' refers to 'what gathers the universal and particular precisely by pulling them apart, by assigning each the limited transcendental coordinate of the other, coordinates that can only be misrecognized from outside the void by which each remains unseen by, or at the furthest reach from, the other'.⁴ Bradley, who cites the Afropessimists – Marriot, Calvin Warren, Frank B. Wilderson III – as often and favourably as she does the Black feminists, models Black thought as, I would offer, a *mise en abyme*. The abyssally named formal technique consists in placing a copy of an image within itself to suggest infinite recursion. If we were to take a step back, we would presumably notice that the frame-image is itself a prop in yet a larger one.

This process is suggested by the prefix *ante-*, whose presence in the book's title I ought not to delay addressing any further. Bradley situates her investigation before history, and before philosophy. *Before*, here, means both *anterior to* and *subject to*. *Anteaesthetics* does not so much supply new origin myths for modernity as accentuate the negations that make possible the appearance of such myths and their protagonists (the body, the human, Man). Black aesthesis, as a shorthand for these negations, is necessarily excluded from spatiotemporality: 'The black provides the anoriginary vestibule for the spacetime of the (proper) body and its others – as the constitutive negation of historicity and the geographical limit of the social – while being everywhere subject to their corporal expropriations, enclosures and displacements (p105). Bradley articulates her turn to the visual, cinematic and literary arts – including works by Mickalene Thomas, Sondra Perry and Glenn Ligon – as a turn backward: an impossible search for the anoriginary. She thereby

4. David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*, Stanford University Press, 2018, p315.

trades the familiarity of a surface-depth model for the dizziness of infinity.

Throughout *Anteaesthetics*, Bradley's prose acquires a similarly recursive quality. New chapters on ruination, the nude, the residuum and the world resemble mises en abyme of prior chapters. The violence of modernity that somewhere appears total is elsewhere framed by and confined to a larger copy of itself. Bradley is a confident rhetorician; she frequently pauses to recapitulate her argument, or to clarify that she means *x*, not *y*, that her interest lies in *a*, not *b*. As the book progresses, or by its own logic regresses, these clarifying statements appear to lengthen. My diagnosis is admittedly more affective than linguistic; it indicates a shift in my reading experience, rather than some empirical evidence of a ballooning word count. Clauses do, however, seem to combine into ever-complexifying sentences. Terms, too, acquire a modular quality, with such deconstructive parentheticals as '(im)mediation' (p97) and 'rend(er)ing' (p281) recovering the destruction that haunts claims to productivity and generativity. The gesture transposes, onto a single-word scale, the book's project of making tangible the cuts and separations whose dissimulation would otherwise allow the aesthetic to accommodate fantasies of repair and communion. Parentheses return us, as does the entire concluding chapter of *Anteaesthetics*, 'to the ulterior force of unworlding, which ... comes before every worlding' (p283).

I permit myself to quote Bradley's writing more abundantly than I normally would in a review, in part to relay its unmistakable poetics, and in part because of the unique challenge of paraphrasing a prose so tirelessly and meticulously disarticulated and rearticulated. I can think of few scholarly works that do not tout their own experimentalism, and yet cultivate such a noticeable intimacy between the content of their argument and its style. *Anteaesthetics* is a feat of cross-media interpretation and analysis, a work of great citational richness and explicative patience. It is, if I may be forgiven for the decidedly not Bradley-esque turn of phrase, singular. An event in contemporary aesthetic theory.

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