The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930 by Autumn Womack (review)

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averred the incompatibility of those concepts. Yet at its best moments, Kemal's piece becomes less of a broadside and more of an inquiry into the history of cross-cultural theory: if Renan denied the originality of Islamic philosophy, pointing out its debts to the Greeks and Sassanians, Kemal reminds us that Greek philosophy was itself a heady font of intercultural influence (86). Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani's rebuttal of Renan is also of interest on this topic.

Surprisingly, *Europe Knows Nothing about the Orient* features an even more pointed critique of another individual: the French writer Pierre Loti. In fact, there is an entire section (five chapters) devoted to excoriating his work. Yet perhaps history has already done its job: Loti has not endured, with the exception of a hill that bears his name, near Istanbul's Golden Horn. Still remembered is Ahmed Haşim, this collection's most endearingly blunt writer. "Are Our Movie Theaters Tools of French Imperialism?" asks why Turkish theaters provide French subtitles for Turkish audiences (99). Another of Haşim's gems, "The Library," extends the critique into literature, questioning the value of "all these worthless books they have been translating into Turkish lately, books whose sole merit is that they were written in one of the European languages" (97). In Haşim's view, the translations should have flowed in the reverse direction, from Turkish into English. His essay "Muslim Time" ("Müslüman Saati") does not appear in this collection, but it would have fit nicely. Much like the other chapters of Çelik's volume, it documents the clash of Ottoman and European epistemologies—in this case, with respect to temporality.

Şevket Süreyya's "Bankruptcy of Europacentrisme" is arguably the volume's most important text and certainly its most scholarly. It will be of special interest to global modernists and comparatists. Written in 1932, the essay long predates contemporary critiques of European periodization or Eurochronology. "The periodization of human history into several eras such as the Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern Age, and contemporaneity, is actually quite recent," he writes (105). "The history which starts with Europe and ends with Europe is both a narrow perspective and an incorrect framework, and it has thus far either exiled us outside history or left us outside civilization" (109). In five pages, Süreyya presages the critique of historicism that Dipesh Chakrabarty made famous in *Provincializing Europe* (2000).

Images of Ottoman newspapers, Islamic art and architecture, and even families beautifully illustrate *Europe Knows Nothing about the Orient*. The volume provides a perfect introduction for those interested in modern Turkish literature beyond the likes of Orhan Pamuk, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, or Sabahattin Ali as well as important context for understanding those writers. Likewise, its newspaper articles offer invaluable primary sources for those who wish to deepen their study of orientalism beyond Said. Çelik's volume deserves its place on many syllabi, and any scholar of global modernism or modernity should own it.

***The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930*. Autumn Womack. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. 228.**

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In the final chapter of *The Matter of Black Living*, Autumn Womack unfolds a stunning analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's experimental film practices as a gestural theory of black social life. Restoring Hurston to her rightful place in the history of early filmmaking, Womack reads Hurston's ethnographic films as deeply attentive to the gestural repertoires of black sociality as they shape and reshape the aesthetic and epistemological work of documentation. From Hurston's finger on the lens in her 1928 film *Kossula*—a technical glitch that nevertheless disrupts the camera's technological will to capture—to her 1934 account of gestural language in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston engenders what Womack describes as a "radical gestural grammar of blackness, one that cannot be apprehended or codified into the terms of social control" because it is constantly on the move, in process, or in Hurston's terms, "still in the making" (211).

Throughout *The Matter of Black Living,* the radical gestures of black aesthetic and technological innovation open onto a searching refrain: "how to document the living?" (102). And, in particular, how to document the living amidst a turn-of-the-century data revolution which—in its normative forms—served at once to identify, pathologize, and ostensibly solve the "problem" of (free) black life. In one version of this story, a set of Progressive-era cultural workers marshaled the tools of nascent social scientific disciplines toward regimes of racial governance, working to construct black life as knowable, nameable, and containable. Against this more familiar story of racial knowledge-as-capture, *The Matter of Black Living* recovers an expansive counter-genealogy of black data visualization and theorization, a set of deliberately undisciplined efforts to represent the irreducible complexity and dynamism of black social life. Through Womack's remarkable archival recoveries and animations, what emerges is an eminently more vital picture of black knowledge practice as aesthetic practice, always on the move, an "always already experimental" approach to the rendering of black life beyond capture (20).

Working with and from a multimedia archive of aesthetic experiments that were (and continue to be) disruptive to disciplinary regimes, Womack reads across emergent fields of social knowledge while refusing the equation of data with the surveillance, classification, and regulation of black life. In doing so, she recovers the necessarily incomplete and creative practices of registering what Kevin Quashie calls "black aliveness" in the very midst of Jim Crow's deadly objectifications.[1] As Womack demonstrates with great care, "for every disciplinary structure that sought to organize and control modernity's unpredictability, there were just as many cracks, loopholes, and pockets of opacity that at once exceeded disciplinary registers and demanded new structures of knowledge production" (26). Building in important ways on recent recoveries of nineteenth-century black empiricisms while offering important new sites of scientific inquiry and possibility, Womack's readings traverse a wide range of spaces in which the work and meaning of data was contested, from the courtroom, to the photography studio, to the novel, to the speaker's podium, to the reform stage, to the documentary field. In each of these spaces, Womack suggests, data constituted a methodological terrain characterized by "constant searching and research," a field of experimentation and aesthetic practice where black life refused to cohere into authorized modes of instrumental knowledge or to perform the arresting labor of (self-)evidence.[2]

This approach is necessarily and, as Womack notes, "organically interdisciplinary," as *The Matter of Black Living* assembles an archive of dynamic practice in contradistinction to the turn-of-the-century's endless production of "lifeless data," constantly marshaled to coalesce normative classificatory regimes of racial knowledge (26, 105). In this sense, *The Matter of Black Living* extends the work of interdisciplinary black studies scholars such as Katherine McKittrick, Alexander Weheliye, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, in part by rooting Sharpe's resonant call—"we must become undisciplined"—in the ante-disciplinary methodologies of the late nineteenth century.[3] In chapters that center three experimental forms—the social survey, the photograph, and the cinema—while radiating outward from them, Womack unfolds a ceaseless search for technologies through which to document black life "as an object of knowledge that always exceeds the very containers that would seek to delimit it" (100). Recovering the social survey as a crucial but overlooked form of knowledge practice for black data practitioners, for example, Womack's analysis moves across a dazzling range of texts, from Du Bois's Atlanta University Studies, to Ida B. Wells's statistical aesthetics, to Sutton Griggs's 1899 novel *Imperium in Imperio*, to Alain Locke's iconic 1925 *Survey Graphic* special issue on Harlem. If this movement signals both the depth and range of Womack's archive, it is also critical to her method, mirroring her subjects' efforts to render the capacious vitality of black life by "mak[ing] data move" (49).

Like the data practices she analyzes, in this sense, Womack's readings offer a series of profoundly generative interpretive postures and possibilities that themselves "move and breathe" and "pulse and vibrate" (23). This enables enormously rich accounts of how (for example) the social survey's imagining of black life as dynamic interaction imbued the generically hybrid social document fiction of Griggs, or how the multimedia archive of Lavinia Baker's family—who survived the 1898 lynching that took the lives of postmaster Frazier Baker and two-year-old Julia Baker–produced a crisis in lynching's visual terrain, enacting new choreographies and epistemologies of survival.

The Matter of Black Living offers an especially timely intervention in visual culture studies. Reading the pulsing, vibrational work of the visual, Womack theorizes experimental practices she terms "looking out" and "overexposure," practices which upended the static visual grammars of documentation to enact alternative and irruptive modes of looking. As *The Matter of Black Living* suggests, such visual practices were distinctly embodied, and more specifically they were gestural, even where such gestures are elided by archival stillness. This is particularly evident in Womack's extraordinary reconstruction of the Baker family archive, one that centers black survival as it destabilizes the temporal and evidentiary frames of lynching as a singular (and singularly reproducible) event, captured and stilled by the photographic image. Reading across court testimonies, press illustrations, studio photography, and staged performances, Womack limns the haptic and gestural work of the visual, inviting us to understand (for example) Rosa Baker's photographic smirk as an "embodied posture" of looking out, a way "to train one's attention on black living as the catalyst for political transformation, on the everyday practices and small gestures that making living in . . . the 'wake' of white supremacy not only bearable, but also beautifully disruptive" (146). Similarly, by tracing an aesthetics of overexposure across Hurston's literary and cinematic experiments, Womack demonstrates how these experiments theorized "an impossible gestural subject, one whose constantly evolving embodied language is at odds with modern technology's temporality," exceeding the static narrative and visual tropes of black life under surveillance (206). In such readings, gesture becomes a way of recovering the otherwise unrecoverable specificity of embodied experience, as well as the unreproducible lives abstracted and reified by white supremacist violence and its coordinating data sets.

In its commitment to the uncodified and the still in the making, *The Matter of Black Living* models a critical historiographic method in which the past and present are not continuous, but yoked in the unresolved matter of their own (often violent) knowledge practices. At the heart of *The Matter of Black Living* lives a resonant and necessarily open question about the unsettled relationship between visual evidence and justice, extending from the late nineteenth-century—when, for example, lynching photography was mobilized both to circulate racial terror *and* to catalyze anti-lynching movements—to our own moment of body camera footage and endlessly (re)circulated cell phone videos of black death. In the book's coda, Womack links nineteenth-century investments in racial data to various iterations of twenty-first century racial data projects, reading contemporary efforts such as the Equal Justice Initiative's visual and narrative collation of lynching data in the service of reparation(s). Rather than trace a direct and progressive line between these moments of data revolution, Womack urges us toward a practice of attending to the ruptures and incongruencies, and to the forms of life that continue to fall out of our received frames of visualization, where "white supremacy is never captured at the same level of intricacy as anti-black violence" (221).

Through its stunning archival recoveries, its enlivening of turn-of-the-century black aesthetic and epistemological experiments, and its radical un-disciplining of visual and literary studies, *The Matter of Black Living* offers an urgent reconsideration of how and why we continue to reach for data to index ongoing realities of white supremacy, antiblack violence, and racialized genocide. Looking back to look forward, and giving us new and critically important ways to read the forms and practices of the reform era, Womack offers an approach to racial data that is fundamentally ambivalent, unsettled, and searching—in other words, full of life. If the indisputable self-evidence of the still-necessary refrain "Black Lives Matter" echoes in *The Matter of Black Living*, Womack enacts the same re-imagining of data's evidentiary grammars that she finds in the archive, clearing a needful space for the practices of *living* that have always exceeded even our most violent orders of capture.

Notes

1. Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

2. Fred Moten, "'Nowhere, Everywhere," *Black and Blur (consent not to be a single being)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 158; cited in Womack, *The Matter of Black Living*, 39.

3. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.