



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE SHAPE OF HUMIDITY: PERFORMING BLACK ATLANTIC THEORY MAKING

GENEVIEVE HYACINTHE PARSONS SCHOOL OF DESIGN AND SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

I saw in theory then a location for healing.
(hooks 2017, 59)

A Black Atlantic Body amidst the Thermodynamics of a Storm

Kara Walker disrupts the historical master narratives around paintings of black life in *After the Deluge* (2006) as part of her interrogation of the matrix of black Atlantic arts and cultural practices and water. Exhibiting offerings from the New York Metropolitan Museum's collections depicting US American black life of the nineteenth century by artists such as Winslow Homer and Joshua Shaw, and including her own art formats that have appropriated or responded to these artists' works, Walker's premise was,

not simply about the American South or Hurricane Katrina, although it was inspired by the effect of the chaotic storytelling that erupted in the media during the long, ugly aftermath. [...] I pieced this show together as an attempt to think about visual representations of Black life, in particular, but not exclusively, as it is shaped and transformed by external forces such as the sea, the slave trade, and the failure of retaining walls. (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2006)

A representative work might be Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899), an oil painting based upon sketches he made while traveling in the Bahamas (Spassky 1982, 35), which offers viewers the opportunity to rethink how the black body performs with water within the space of the painting, with evolving cultural implications. Homer's rendering of the black Atlantic body in water has myriad possible reception-based readings sparked by close visual analyses and reflections upon the history and visual culture of the time in which these works were created. This article begins with a short consideration of these readings that places focus on how Homer's depictions resonate with notions of black corporeal collapse. Using this notion as a point of departure, the discussion recasts the predicament as one of black Atlantic corporeal endurance made possible through mastery of the liminal nature of water and breath. With the spirit of healing that bell hooks asserts that theory making can be, the reflection then turns to poetries of black Atlantic rituals circulating around floral remedy, and artistic and therapeutic treatments such as those performed by Lygia Clark and Wangechi Mutu. Ultimately, I suggest that artistic and theoretical practices of endurance and healing include humidity and breath as integral elements. Following hooks's lead, the writing takes risks by privileging musings on affective embodiment (hooks 2017, 62) and "expansive perspectives on the theorizing process" (63).



Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899. Oil on canvas. 28 1/8 x 49 1/8 in. (71.4 x 124.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Catherine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1906.

In the center of *The Gulf Stream* drama, a black man turns his head to his left, looking beyond the picture's plane. Shirtless, appearing only in rough-hewn khaki pants, he reclines with his weight mostly on his elbows upon the deck of a modest fishing boat. The vessel is battered by tumultuous waves, has lost its mast, and is pitching forward on its port side, tilting the body of the man toward the ocean and the mouths of circling sharks. A large colonial-style ship sails on the far-left horizon, almost invisible in the clouds; popular readings submit that the man does not see it, but, alternatively, we may conjecture that he is trying to elude it. A black freeman in the waters of the British West Indies might choose to negotiate shark-infested waters rather than seek refuge on a carrack for many reasons, including competition and fear of indenture. Despite the man's precarious state, Homer paints him with a softness of light and color that positions him in harmony with the sublime waves of charcoal blues and steely whites that dominate the horizontal picture plane, capped by billows of clouds that roll across it at a distance. The sharks are rendered in the same colors but with darker tonalities, signifying their threat. It might be said that the poetry of color and drama of brushstroke rival the story of the painting, suggesting that for Homer, the energy of the medium is perhaps more important than the humanity of the man. A *New York Times* review from 1908 supports this argument. It states that the painting reflected Homer's dramatic and free "natural"—rather than academic—style, characterized by his impactful handling of monotone color schemes, while giving little mention to the black man's position except to comment that "the figure of the negro is by no means faultless in draughtsmanship" ("Art Here and Abroad" 1908, X10).

Reflecting upon my own reception of the painting, I've always first connected with the young man's afro-coolness—the idea that in the face of various emotionally fraught situations, particularly those of unimaginable challenge, the maintenance of equanimity is characteristic of "black response" and is reflected in the man's bearing, his appearance as a figure in "control... [and] having the value of composure..." (Thompson 1973, 41). The gray drama and poetry of Homer's painterly approach set the tone for me to see the man in this way. Christopher Reed similarly points to the remarkable vibrancy of Homer's brushstrokes as a contributor to the emotive quality of his black images, submitting that the artist often rendered "enigmatic" and "stoic" black figures within scenes of imposing nature from "sea[s] of cotton" to dynamic oceans formed by the "painterly gesture of Homer's waves" (Reed 1989, 73). Reed goes on to suggest that Homer identified with the "Others" that he illustrated and at the same time sought to establish a similar sense of identification on the part of his viewers for his painted subjects (76–78). Reed's optimistic point of view is perhaps at odds with the fact that *The Gulf Stream* was created during the era in the US South when the imprint of slavery still glowed from the scalding edges of the institution's hot brand, an American visual culture out of which racially charged films like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) would emerge a decade later, Homer's past as a master in renderings of black caricature, and perhaps most poignantly, Homer's addition of the ship on the distant horizon of the scene as a sign that the man might be rescued rather than face certain doom, only after the painting was on display at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries and viewers made "persistent" inquiries "about the man's fate" (Smith, 2006, E27).

Despite Homer's addition of a far-removed glimmer of hope in the form of the distant boat to the original composition, one may still view the man of *The Gulf Stream* as yet another black body disregarded. My imagined ending is more positive than what Homer first suggests: left to his own situationally limited but ever-improvisational and fortitudinous devices, I imagine the man's survival. Maybe I do this because the man in *The Gulf Stream* is in an ineffable situation: I cannot really go there nor put words to the terror I think he must feel—terror Homer has rendered in romantic paint and ocean surf.

Why paint this situation? While Homer never commented on the subject, Paul Staiti (2001) considers *The Gulf Stream* in relation to the turn-of-the-century US interest in thermodynamics. Other artists, authors, and philosophers of Homer's time took up the topic of thermodynamics, broadening it from physics into contemporary social theory. In short, the scientific theory posited said that 1.) matter cannot be either created or destroyed and added that 2.) thermodynamic systems necessarily move from a state of higher energy to a state of lower energy. At the cultural level, this theory translated into the idea that all systems move toward collapse.

So popular were the laws of thermodynamics that they were provocatively invoked and applied in turn-of-the-century America as the logical explanation of or justification for the activities of industrial production, laissez-faire economics, imperialistic expansion, human consumption, female sexuality, racial degeneracy, and nature itself. (Staiti 2001, 12)

Historian and social thermodynamics theorist Henry Adams—and his audiences—saw nature as “just another system of energies engaged in incessant transference and conversion. [...] Man is a thermodynamic mechanism” (cited in Staiti 2001, 13), and thus body, soul, culture, and humanity were not immune to the system and its outcomes.

Life degrades in many of Homer's turn-of-the-century paintings, including *The Gulf Stream*, where the black man on the fragile boat will, as is presumed by many, end up as matter from a depleted thermodynamic system. He will become a heap lying on a Bahamian beach with vestiges of a boat by his side, as depicted in Homer's *After the Hurricane, Bahamas* (1899), a piece that foreshadows *The Gulf Stream* (23).



Winslow Homer, *After the Hurricane, Bahamas*. 1899. Transparent watercolor, with touches of opaque watercolor, rewetting, blotting and scraping, over graphite, on moderately thick, moderately textured (twill texture on verso), ivory wove paper. 380 x 543 mm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1235

While some have read Homer's genre paintings of black home life as indicative of his sympathies for the African American experience, many of these works—which the painter referred to as “darkey pictures”—show black characters as entertainers for white onlookers (26), suggesting Homer's belief in racial hierarchy. Moreover, in the range of sea paintings that Homer created during the turn-of-the-century, white seamen are imaged in the heroic romantic tradition of Théodore Géricault, while black men, as in *The Gulf Stream* and *After the Hurricane, Bahamas*, are imaged as “mere bod[ies], matter, or ingestible thing[s] about to be consumed by the thermodynamic machine of nature” (Ibid.). Given this circumstance, it is perhaps clear why Kara Walker included *The Gulf Stream* in her exhibition in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when, as Jamelle Bouie (2015) puts it, the “nation's amazing tolerance for black pain” was exposed.

Unable to register the ineffable, I don't imagine an outcome of life-taking collapse, and I recast the narrative to these ends: The man in *The Gulf Stream* will find a way to shore, and if he is the man heaped on the beach in *After the Hurricane, Bahamas*, he is recovering after his ordeal, re-gathering his strength. bell hooks has suggested that love is the opposite of estrangement (hooks and Yancy 2015, unpaginated); seeing a part of myself in this man—his humanity, blackness, and Caribbean-ness—I do not feel separate, and my loving eyes cannot allow his “degradation” to happen. The black man presumably sustains himself with the stalks of sugarcane that lay beside his right calf, partially under the shade of the boat's hold and sloping down toward the menacing sharks in a manner suggesting they might serve as improvisational harpoons.

Sugarcane historically co-evolved with the man's ancestors as one of the primary crops cultivated by slaves in the British West Indies and, as such, might be viewed as a symbol of subjugation; however, an alternative view might hold that the fortitude that actualized sugarcane invests the man with hope and endurance.



Cane Cutters in Jamaica, 1880. Wikipedia Commons.

While British slaving (the transport of slaves from Africa to the West Indies) was banned in 1807, slavery was not legislatively abolished until 1834; thus, the presence of sugarcane in this painting

of 1899 may suggest that the man himself may harvest sugarcane as an entrepreneur or indentured servant, endeavors that require complicated survival skills and reflect his varying levels of agency, economic and otherwise. The trio imaged in the photograph of sugarcane workers from the British West Indies fuels my imagination of who the man on the failing boat might be. At the same time, they may stand as those presences—those contemporaneous with him and those who have gone before—buoying him with hope.

Sugarcane also provides corporeal nourishment for those who know how to access it, and we see the three sugarcane workers sucking on the stalks in a manner knowable to them due to their intimate knowledge of the crop they've nurtured through their devoted harvesting. Though the man in *The Gulf Stream* is bare-breasted, clothing cues further support the idea that he is one of these skilled laborers: Close visual attention to his mottled pants, heavy from humidity and salt water, reveals their semblance to those worn by the man of the sugarcane trio. Further evidence can be gleaned from another work by Homer, a watercolor study also called *The Gulf Stream* (1899), where the man rendered wears the complete ensemble of the male sugarcane worker from the photograph, from hat to shirt and pants. I return to the notion that the man whom Homer is attempting to degrade into matter by the water's thermodynamic relentlessness may actually be resisting entropic erasure through the strength of his cultural lineage and DNA.



Winslow Homer, The Gulf Stream, 1899, though dated by the artist as 1889. Transparent watercolor, with touches of opaque watercolor and traces of blotting, over graphite, on moderately thick, moderately textured, ivory wove paper (lower edge trimmed). 288 x 509 mm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1241

In disclosing the “graceful brutality” of Homer’s registration of the black body within a painted representation of nature’s thermodynamic destruction and then writing an alternative I want to see, I attempt to do the work of healing by transforming my feelings of the ineffable, and concomitant anger, into “energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good” (hooks and Yancy 2015, unpaginated). Another beholder of Homer’s oil painting, Daniel Reiss, notes that what he similarly viewed as the endurance of the man at sea helped him find gentleness with and transformation of his own uncontrollable temper, writing:

This fight in me and so many men is resolved in *The Gulf Stream*. Look at the relation between the open mouth of the shark and its teeth and the dark opening of the boat’s hold from which sweet sugar cane extends. The cane represents a world giving the man sustenance. The fierce and the sweet do not jump from one to the other, as they once did in me. (Reiss 2000, 4)

Though he may not explicitly call it as such, Reiss sees black perseverance in the black Atlantic tempest and holds fast to it for his emotional survival, as the black man in *The Gulf Stream* wills himself through the storm.

Cultivating Humidity as Life Force

Black Performance is a liminal concept, a confluence of “time, space, and action: bodies, machines, movement, sound, and creation [...] culminat[ing] within temporalities of struggle and renewal” (Madison 2014, vii) relevant to the way in which the man from *The Gulf Stream* is contextualized in this consideration. Following Kara Walker, for instance, I am offering a recasting of the manner in which the black man was crafted to perform by Homer within the painting to bring our attention to his endurance—black endurance—in the face of art and cultural objectification and disempowerment more generally. Work must be done to transform the performance of the black man in *The Gulf Stream* from passive matter taken up by the thermodynamics of water into one of an active agent intent on survival, and this may be in part the point of Walker’s *After the Deluge*: It may be our work as artists, writers, and viewers to disrupt the oft-rendered collapse of the black body in art and visual culture in water contexts and otherwise. Doing so aligns with Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez’s black performance theory imperative where they argue for new critical inquiries “for packaging ideas about black people in particular places during shifting historical time periods” (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, 1) like the shifting American land and seascape of Homer’s era. In a widely discussed current pop cultural context, Beyoncé does this palpably in her own way in the video *Formation* (2016), where in place of black bodies, a police car is swallowed by New Orleans waters (more recent memories suggest these could also be the waters of the Gulf Stream around Puerto Rico or the Virgin Islands stirred by Hurricane Maria). As Hilton Als poignantly notes: “She sits on a New Orleans police car that slowly sinks underwater as images flash past, powerful evocations of blackness: bodies, hair, quiet faces measuring how others have discounted their lives and moved on” (2016, 66).

With a bit of an historical foundation in place concerning representations of the black body in engagement with water, this article now turns to my work of black Atlantic theory-making, specifically concerning the black body in conditions of humidity as a metaphor for collective and personal limitlessness as life force.

I imagine that the man in *The Gulf Stream* was fortified by sugar cane, and the cane's relative viability may have been aided by the humidity of the ocean environment, since the crop flourishes in regions of high tropical humidity (Netafim, no date, unpaginated). Similarly, the orange hibiscus flowers, like this one right outside the door of my house, connect to notions of black Atlantic vitality and survival in relation to the negotiation of water, not in its liquid state, but in the more abstract yet ever-expansive form of humidity and heat. This flowering plant provides me with a sense of the level of humidity for the day and, in so doing, prompts the actions I will take to navigate it. Scientific studies say that heat and humidity can cause rage in people (Raj 2014), and flower alchemists in the black Atlantic ritual tradition of Santería have long identified hibiscus-type plants like mine as "widely used in the spiritual field" to calm "an angry person" (Diaz 2018, 107), once activated through ritual processes catalyzed by the plant's decoction—or the making of matter and mist of its petals and leaves. Hibiscus Sinensis are the flowers of the Orichá (Santería deity) of feminine comeliness and the sea, Yemayá, who makes sure that men and women adrift in the Atlantic, like the man in *The Gulf Stream*, have safe passage (Diaz 2018, 107); thus, the plant outside my door not only portends the level of humidity I may expect that day, but also exists as part of my personal pantheon of spiritual guardians.



Genevieve Hyacinthe, Hibiscus Flower, three digital color photographs from a series of twelve, August 2018

Daily observation of the hibiscus in front of my door suggests that the flower's vitality and concomitant powers of spiritual and physical healing for those that use it for ritual practices may be connected to the interaction of the flower with aerated water. The series of photos shows the flower growing blooms and opening its petals after a few days of not being watered; however, the sun was hidden by cloud cover that day, and the air was heavy with humidity, due to days of rolling August storms. This suggested to me that hibiscus are hygroscopic and that humidity might be more integral in causing it to blossom than sunlight. Once the bloom is open, one can clearly see the elegant configuration of its sexual components flourishing. In the dark rose cavern, out of which the orange petals emerge, one can see the vase-like bulge of the ovule and embryonic sac from which the style reaches upward, capped by the yellow cluster of miniscule bursts forming the anther and crowned by the five fuchsia caps forming the stigma. The black Atlantic flower's hygroscopic existence that causes its physical proliferation, and its spiritual power to soothe anger—and hence, perhaps extend life by assuaging rage—is imperceptible to the eye.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provide a theoretical framework relating to black life and humidity that conjures notions of vitality rather than the decline associated with the degradation of the black body in water associated with the rhetoric of Henry Adams' thermodynamics raised by the imperiled seafarer in Homer's painting. They propose that art is a form of "sensory becoming [...] the action [...] of] ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are), sunflower or Ahab [...]; sensory becoming is [...] otherness caught in a matter of expression [...]" Art "incorporates or embodies" this becoming, giving it "a body, a life, a universe [...]" These universes are neither virtual nor actual; they are *possibles* [author emphasis], the possible as aesthetic category" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 177).

My act of theory making considers the hibiscus flower, as an artform—a *possible*—illuminating for me the prospect of black endurance through connection to humidity. Like black Atlantic hibiscus flowers, people of these environments may similarly thrive as a result of "the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed" (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Hroch 2015, 75). Black Atlantic people as *possible* beings are "a contraction of earth and humidity" (76–78):

What organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed? [...] [All] is contemplation, even rocks and woods, animals and men, even Actaeon and the stag, Narcissus and the flower, even our actions and our needs. (Ibid.)

I am struck by the specification that water in its gaseous form—as humidity—is part of the balance comprising the contraction of the earth, providing a theoretical contrast to the way the black body is more commonly spoken of in art history and visual culture in relation to water in its liquid state, as elucidated in the discussion of Walker's *After the Deluge* and one of its representative works, *The Gulf Stream*. In the latter's discourse, the black Atlantic body and its associations with water are often tied to notions of enslavement and its aftermaths (even in Flint, Michigan, for example). Tainted water handled by the bureaucracy hurts black people and those others living in the area disenfranchised by class and other factors.

Humidity, by contrast, is a state that is freer, and at the same time it is tied to the universal in the sense of corporeal existence and potential flourishing (like the hibiscus)—we all breathe air and water and thrive off of it. To cast the black Atlantic body in relation to humidity is to simply offer another *possible*, another opportunity to “excavate and enlive[n] [...] enactments that sustain blackness,” (Madison, 2014, vii) after acknowledging and reflecting upon the histories and contemporary realities of violence associated with water from the Atlantic slave trade to the precarious nature of living in the lowlands and upon islands vulnerable to being overrun by water: Katrina in New Orleans, Maria in Puerto Rico and The Virgin Islands, and Florence’s water surges upon the low income and black “defenseless zones of the Carolina floodplains in North Carolina” and areas home to vulnerable animal and coal-ash waste stations come to mind (Mock, 2018). Unlike water, humidity is more difficult to metaphorically or critically contain. In this way, it is a marker of freedom on a sensate or archetypal level applicable to “being.” Thinking back to Homer’s thermodynamic water system evokes for me the idea of what Deleuze and Guattari might call the range of “habits”; perhaps “generative” for Deleuze and Guattari, where Homer might refer to it as “degradation”—a term that is not inherently negative, but when human beings are inserted into the equation as was the case in the painter’s time, “degradation” has harrowing implications. That said, both “systems” include manifold actions concerned with the on-goingness of nature: respiration as enlivening the cells and cell cast-off; the growth of embryo to form and the loss of matter to nurture it; the watering or observing of a breathing and blooming hibiscus by the door and its loss of oxygen. My reading places focus on a sense of endurance in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari, where all things go through cycles of transformation and continuance. I recast the thermodynamics illustrated in *The Gulf Stream* as the cycling of water to life-giving humidity and breath rather than ceding the black body to nature’s violence, death, and eventual rebirth into some other uncertain form. The “contraction of earth and humidity” are dynamics of the biosphere where all matter and forms are interdependent and respire together in their respective nuanced ways.

Petra Hroch performs a poetic reading of this passage of Deleuze and Guattari, stating: “For Deleuze, the subject is a contradiction, contemplation, or composition of nested agencies, agential materialities, actions, responses, and witnesses that interact with no origin, no centre, no ‘I’, only a cooperation among many little so-called ‘selves’” (Hroch 2015, 61). The “many little so-called ‘selves,’” like the breathing cells of my skin that act in continuity with those of the hibiscus flower’s petals, open to humidity for well-being as an expression of living hygroscopically. Similarly, hibiscus flowers are ritualized in Santería to quiet asthmatic symptoms and smooth “angry” or disturbed respiration so that humidity moves across the lung membranes with the ease of its movement across the lamina of hibiscus petals (Diaz 2018, 107). Pantanjali tells us that smooth breath fosters smooth states of being and more acuity of insight:

The fourth step in Yoga practice is the expansion of individual *prāṇa* into cosmic *prāṇa* (*prāṇāyāma*). Here there is cessation of the uncontrolled movement of inhalation and exhalation.

Breath control is a byproduct of prāṇāyāma. [...] Breath control is accomplished by either holding the breath after inhalation or exhalation or by stopping the breath naturally anywhere in the cycle. One begins practice of prāṇāyāma with breathing exercises and breath control and one ends with the experience of cosmic expansion, cosmic energy, cosmic prāṇa. (Patanjali 2010, Sutra 2.49, 57)

From prāṇāyāma comes the dispersion of the covering that hides the light I-Am or the Self. (Patanjali 2010, Sutra 2.52, 59)

Patanjali, Deleuze and Guattari, and the hibiscus flower encourage us to bring awareness to the breath that informs all things, the steady flow of energy, the contraction of earth and humidity, the subtle opening of the pores of petals. When our biosphere becomes inflamed in the face of socio-political drama of or nature's sublime within *The Gulf Stream*, a metaphor for black Atlantic identity as part of the *Undercommons* that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney define as the systemic mechanisms designed to inflict and perpetuate brokenness upon "black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people" (Halberstam 2013, 6), we may get to the state of coolness, afro-coolness, by refining our awareness of our breath, particularly when it is heavy with humidity's vitalness, while we in the undercommons figure out how to continue to cultivate both alliances among ourselves and our visions for a world beyond the limits of our current existence as "broken" (6).

I ruminate upon the possibility that we increase our capacity for resistance and imagining through fostering the connection between black Atlantic being and salutary humidity, as an alternative to ill-boding water. The water metaphor bespeaks a connection that may be more representative of our history of existence within an irreparable system of economic and social exploitation. I offer, however, that the metaphorical intersection of the black Atlantic body and humidity represents a union with the interiority of being, the nurturing of feeling within a body that has perhaps had to numb and limit itself as protective means. My perspective resonates in part with Sarah Jane Cervenak's ingenious musing on the poetics of air and black breathing as a signifier of the complexities of a pneumatic commons: "To live within air is to be in common. A postaquatic commons. A pneumatic commons. Respiration is a choral practice; the interplay between oxygen, trees, flesh, and cells together. We might say breathing is reproduction's ur-text" (Cervenak 2018, 167). Cervenak's black pneumatic commons—black breathing and continuance—is as a "fugitive choreography" in an ongoing dynamic of eluding white attempts at containment and control (168).

"Closeness," as a term for high levels of humidity, is a *possible* for the collective nature of Cervenak's fugitive choreography as a collective and intimate coming together in the black pneumatic commons. My perspective is informed, in part, by my reading of Sasha Engelmann's (2015) discussion where she submits that humidity is among the qualities that comprise air's poetics: In artistic form, air evokes the sensation of "atmospheric experiences":

Air's poetics involves the deliberate cultivation of receptiveness to the cosmic force of air and atmosphere as they fold and shape forms of life. It manifests in the courage to allow air to permeate the lines of an essay, article, poem or those of a

drawing, so that a relation between the body and air is presented rather than re-presented. (Engleman 2015, 433)

Engelmann refers us to the poetry of Gilliam Wigmore, who states: “The skin and air intermingle/ each so near to the other/ there is no space/ between through and water/ regret and growth,” and surmises, “The movement here is towards a conception of air as creatively, emotionally and affectively generative of ways of inhabiting atmospheric space” (Engelmann 2015, 433). Humidity may be taken as a factor within this “creative, emotional, and affective,” location of the body in self-reflective engagement with air. Humidity adds to this intersection where, “The sense of thickness [...is] necessary for perceiving the way matter is conveyed in and through air in felt exchanges and dissipations rather than frictionless passage [...]” (Ibid.). When one says, “It’s thick,” in relation to the humidity of the moment that gives life to hibiscus petals, one may at the same time also infer one’s own being “outside” in the midst of communal social activist engagement, and/or being “inside” in the process of aligning with “prāṇāyāma [and] the dispersion of the covering that hides the light I-Am or the Self” (Pantanjali 2010, Sutra 2.52, 59), among the possibilities of black Atlantic existence and healing within the pneumonic commons of being.

The Shape of Humidity

Black Atlantic co-presencing of breath and humidity can be read into the work of black Atlantic modern and contemporary artists (the focus of this section) perhaps adding further traction to the dynamic’s appropriateness as theory. DeFrantz and Gonzalez write that African Diaspora [which includes the black Atlantic] is “the unfolding of experience into a visual, aural, kinesthetic culture of performance.” Akin to the surface of a human body, plant, or flower, “[...] Like skin, it is porous and permeable, flexible and self-repairing, finely spun and fragile. And like skin on a body, diaspora palpably protects us. We wrap ourselves in its possibilities, and they remind us of impossible connectivities [...] The connective skin of diaspora offers us protection from the coldness of individual isolation” (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, 11). To counter isolation is to heal. Through ritual practice and formal poetry, the black Atlantic artists Lygia Clark and Wangechi Mutu engage in healing practices motored by allusions to humidity and breath.

The Brazilian artist Lygia Clark uses *relational objects* in treatment practices that she terms *Estruturação do Self (Structuring of the Self)* (Wiebe 2014, 111). Clients regularly visit Clark in her Rio studio and healing space, where the artist balances their bodies according to her belief that a body in spiritual and material alignment is one that recognizes its “unfolding totality” (Ibid.). This recognition and accompanying healing can be actualized through Clark’s therapeutic deployment of “massive maternalization” (Macel 2017, unpaginated). In the video *Memória do corpo* (Carneiro 1984), we encounter Clark at work. Close-ups, as she soliloquizes before the camera, reveal that her skin is glistening, indicating the humidity of the environment.

One client, a man stripped down to his underwear, reclines on a mattress “filled with Styrofoam balls” (Macel 2017, unpaginated), his skin exposed to receive Clark’s treatments. Among the healing objects she employs is a plastic bag full of air, gathered from the humid atmosphere and the

humidity of her own breath, which she glides and tumbles across the man's skin, following the folds and terrains of his body. Seashells humming with the residue of sea mist and tides are placed over his ears. Clark blankets his body in accumulations of various therapeutic devices that she has found and transformed through her artistic and ritual touch. We see another, larger, clear plastic bag of encased humidity topping the arrangement of accoutrements on the solar plexus and heat center regions of the patient's torso, like a life vest or protective shield. As Christine Macel recounts, the client describes his experience of being treated by Clark in the following way:

Each time [things] moved over me, I was above all skin, above all a surface [...and the surface] is the place where we are with the world. [...] I did not exist inside. [...] And suddenly, honey, filled me inside. (Ibid.)

The honey that Clark's patient experiences through therapeutic protocols, imbibed with humidity, is *sukha*, the pleasure principle in the construction of Atman, or consciousness or thought (Srivastava 2010, 79), the opening of the hibiscus flower and what my dance teacher, Youssouf Koumbassa, might mean when he encourages his students to relax and feel sweet while dancing in Conakry under humidity averaging 77 percent. This level of humidity falls within the range of *Undercommons* healing (*pace* Halberstam 2013, 6): It is only slightly below the average of 79 percent in Clark's Rio de Janeiro, the Gulf Stream-stirred regions around the Bahamas that average 78 percent, or the 82 percent humidity levels outside my door in New York that opens hibiscus petals in August. These are among the conditions wherein, through consciousness of *prāṇāyāma*, black pneumatic commons can harness vitality and flourishing (Cervenak 2018, 167). As one black Atlantic female cultivator of *prāṇāyāma* remarked:

Yoga is the process of connecting the mind and body and spirit to operate as one with a centralized focus on the breath because the breath is life sustaining and without the breath none of us would be sitting here right now [...] at times they say you can hear your own heart beat or focus on a white light and an energy that allows the [...] I like to use the term, creator energy or universal force [...] to come within to help you to calm yourself, to begin the process of being able to meditate. (Tenfelde, Hatchett, and Seban 2017, 3)

The A-U-M of *prāṇāyāma* is replete with the humidity of the practitioner's breath and continuous with what Cervenak (2018) calls "enfleshed breath," respiratory inflections—"vocables [...] such as 'hah' and 'tuh'"—emitted at the ends of words discharged during black Pentecostal practice (Cervenak 2018, 167), and perhaps in the "*jóia*" of Brazilian Portuguese breath that gives healing shape to humidity in Clark's therapies.

"Enfleshed breath" was the ether permeating Wangechi Mutu's exhibition *Ndoro Na Miti*—"the Gikuyu Words for Mud and Trees" (*Wangechi Mutu: Ndoro Na Miti*, 2017)—at the Gladstone Gallery in Manhattan (January–March 2017). Mutu's arrangement of an outsized garland of *mālā* beads on the floor, in resonance with the other forms in the space, is a materialization of the incantational energies of black Atlantic humidity.



Wangechi Mutu, Ngoro Na Miti Installation View, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo Credit David Regen.

While the atmosphere felt thick, close, and heavy with humidity, the gallery did not make any special adjustments to accommodate Mutu's sculptures (email exchange between author and Isaac Alpert, Gladstone Gallery, July 16, 2018), some of which were formed through the compression of earth from her Kenyan home, which she, in turn, shaped around a paper core (conversation between author and gallery assistant, March 22, 2017), while others were forged through bronze casting processes (Mutu 2017). I deduced that factors undetectable by scientific measure may have created the sensation of closeness, like the Atlantic breeze of Orichá Yemayá that opens hibiscus flowers in resonance with the breath of Tulasi, the Hindi humidity goddess who exhales Mutu's Kenyan earth westward across continents and oceans:

Tulasi loves humidity. If you live in a dry, arid climate, you may need to find creative ways to increase Tulasi's moisture intake through Her leaves. Dry air can cause Her leaves to curl and turn brown at the edges. In such conditions, She may also look thirsty, even if you have been giving her adequate water. Misting water on the leaves with a spray bottle increases humidity. Placing two or more pots of Tulasi together can help, as the plants will enjoy sharing the moisture they transpire. (Amritanandamayi, 2015, 87)

In my imagination, I saw the yellow clusters and fuchsia blooms of my hibiscus, fostered by humidity's kindness, transformed by Mutu in *Ngoro Na Miti* into hyperbolized scale and finessed from Caribbean floral polychromes into the tonalities of beach grays and earth browns. The surface

interplays of my hibiscus, with its smooth petals, fuzzy stalks, and grainy projections, found resonance in the sleek, rough, and spiky skins of Mutu's sculptural forms that inhabited the gallery space. She conjures the idea of water with the sculpture included within the installation, *Nguva* (Mutu 2017), an East African sister to *Mami Wata* of the black Atlantic.



Wangechi Mutu, Ndoro Na Miti Installation View (Detail), Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo Credit David Regen.

Nguva has the steely gray skin of deep-water fish or serpents (*sans* scales), webbed hands, an impressive yet uncanny-looking tail that is impossibly elongated, and cornrows peaked to resemble fins, who lounges upon a pedestal as if beached on the shore. As in my reading of the beached man of *The Gulf Stream*, her situation has a liminal sensibility; yet, hers is a story that we may not be able to conjecture through anticipated scenarios. She is an art form in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari, a figure of “universes [that] are neither virtual nor actual; they are possibles [...]” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 177); she is a metaphor evoking the *Undercommons* envisioning of a possible world beyond our known experience (Halberstam 2013, 6).

In *Ndoro Na Miti*, humidity takes the shape of Engelmann's airy poetics (2015, 433), as the invisible mist that likely halos the body of Mutu's *Nguva* water goddess. At the same time, the airy poetics' “sense of thickness,” in the form of a palpable presence devoid of “frictionless passage” (Engelmann 2015, 433), is brought to mind by the *mālā* beads and their dispersal around the exhibition space as orbs of accumulated brown earth detailed with Makonde-inflected cosmograms (Mutu 2017) and spikes, and/or as *gunas* (three “essential energies of the mind and individual's personality” (Jayasheela and Salagame 2018, 33), molecules exhaled through *prāṇāyāma* or virus (Mutu) with or without consequence. The airy poetics of Mutu's *Ndoro Na Miti* operate on the level of possibles,

rather than limits. “Mutu’s sculpture acts as a corrective to a violent cultural consciousness, while offering an alternative narrative of embodiment and being in the world” (Mutu).

The shape of black Atlantic humidity—“enfleshed breath”—is the boundlessness of *being*. Fierceness’s sustaining force is *prāṇāyāma*. I exhale together with Cervenak in the close of her “Black Night Is Falling” consideration, ending this musing with her words and letting go of this moment of theory-making as healing (hooks 2017, 59). *Kumbhaka* (कुम्भक) the space between. The inhalation, will come again without effort:

Hydrogen. Oxygen. Carbon dioxide. The aquatic-pneumatic reach of black song becomes a floral blossom uprooting the fence. Air’s reproductivity is the ur-text of the earth. Its blackness forged through the damp air of undisclosed performers, unlocatable respiration forming the possible and impossible themselves. (Cervenak, 169)

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Biography

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