

Black Otherwise Worlds: The Art of Contemporary Blackness
Professor Christina Knight
Art History GR8498

Learning From Black Art Practice:
Forming embodied, multi-sensory engagements with online violence
to facilitate more ethical media consumption and responsiveness

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Introduction

In the early spring, while the resident Madison Square Park trees began to grow leaves, I visited Hugh Hayden's desolate *Brier Patch*. The soon to bloom trees surrounding the sculpture served as a taunting reminder that Hayden's branches, drilled into standardized school desks, would never transform with the seasons. They were stagnant, frozen in time and development. While the trees in the park were planted to grow, Hayden's branches were planted as graves.





Set up in gridded rows, *Brier Patch* displays one hundred elementary school desks that erupt with branches all tangled together above the seats. The intertwining branches may be understood as students forming connections with one another; a look at how human interaction can overcome the physical separation of uniformed desks, or a pandemic. Yet, there is something even more disturbing going on, something unsettling, evident by the barren branches and mounds of dirt under each chair. Speaking of the school as a site of potential burst or stunt in development, the brier patch, described by Hayden, is a “protective place as well as a site of danger.” It serves as a “metaphoric refuge or prison,” a dualistic place of respite or entrapment. As the neighboring NYC midtown buildings created striking shadows on the gridded chairs, only allowing some rows to be in the sun at a given time, Hayden’s work reckons with the promised, yet inaccessible American Dream for Black youth and its exasperation during the pandemic.

The public installation was guarded by a two-foot tall fence, maintaining about twenty feet of distance from the art and the public walkway. I stood behind the fence, watching birds and squirrels play with the work while I had to engage from a far. Using my eyes and my ears, I considered the work from a distance, reading the first part of the placard, and taking an initial photograph. But this still observation didn't last very long. I was too tempted, the fence was too small, and I soon stepped over to shoot some pictures from closer up. After a few moments a park security officer saw me taking images and called me to return. As I stepped back over the fence, a young girl in a pink hat about the age of two was facing the installation, her hands gripped on the fence. With her back to me and the *Brier Patch* in front of her, I quickly asked her mother if I could capture the moment. I attempted to click my camera, but to my dismay, it died. The child moved, taking the image with her, but I can still see it in my head. The physical separation between her and the work, the coming years where she'd likely find herself trapped inside a similarly designed right-handed only desk that secures able bodies into rigid wooden seats for hours on end. I thought about her lifespan mirroring the pandemic's, and with it the uncertainty of in-person education. Maybe she'd never have the opportunity to be subjected to these desks. Is that worse? At least these desks allow for some physical interaction, some sensorial contact with peers and learning outside of a screen.

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Education in America is often a bodily-passive endeavor, emphasizing that the proper way to learn is through sight and sound only. Hayden's drilled down desks, which are set up for some mental wandering, but total physical obedience, highlight the practice of learning through sitting and listening, a practice we've seen become unfortunately more necessary as teachers try to maintain control in over-enrolled classrooms. And yet, it cannot go without mention that this control is especially enforced for students of color, whose conduct is particularly policed and surveyed. However, outside of the still classroom, outside of the fenced in sculpture, is a park for play and more embodied, sensory expression: the smells of P.E. locker rooms, the taste of cardboard milk cartons, the feeling of grazing your knee against your crush's under the lunch table.

How does learning and socialization regress without the smells, touches, and tastes of school that are naturally inaccessible through screens? What is lost when sight and sound are exacerbated as the primary senses used for learning? And alternatively, what is gained in an educational experience when all five senses are included? While I am curious about these questions in direct relation to the pandemic and wide-spread facilitated virtual schooling, I believe this type of stripped sensory relationship with education occurs for students on a regular basis when they interact with social media, which I see as presenting an ethical challenge for the consumption of online violence schools may have an obligation to address.

In light of our hyper-increased access to geographically widespread violent content caused by social media and the role of phone cameras in documentation, I am interested in exploring how students make sense of visual images and videos of violence. Given that we are taking in so much information at such a wide range and fast fluctuation of genre — war, climate crisis, and police brutality rotating on our feeds and trending in between self-empowerment posts

and brunch pictures — I am curious if there is an ethical implication to only experiencing the sights and sounds of violence. Focusing on American students' consumption of violence against Black bodies, for this project, I look to Black artists who intend for participatory engagement with their pieces as models for developing approaches to engaging with violence online in a more ethical way.

Influenced by the effects of the pandemic on schooling, I was compelled to think about how social media almost always privileges visual and auditory experiences, and how a more multi-sensory, embodied engagement with it could positively alter students' meaning-making of their consumption, developing more sympathetic responses. Specifically, I was encouraged by considering the reciprocal, aesthetic power of touch and how increasing it could positively affect students' learning experiences. The artists and thinkers whose work I consider ask the viewer to position themselves in relation to their work, calling for an embodied, physical engagement that goes beyond the visual and auditory.

Making an argument that a more embodied experience leads to a more ethical interaction, this paper will call for approaches to education that incorporate and attempt a multi-sensorial method, postulating how this practice may positively influence students' responses to violence encountered on social media. Aiming to slow down the process of viewership to increase awareness of affect and discomfort, an argument for embodiment hopes to enact movement that opens up the aesthetic and educative experience visualizations can offer through an added interaction with other senses. With the intention of supporting students' media consumption, image literacy, and anti-racist education practices, this claim aims to explore if the inclusion of more senses could increase students' willingness to participate in fighting against the violence they see and hear online.

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As I began to make my way out of the park, I was frustrated that this piece, which spoke to the reality of virtual education, was publicly installed, yet was private to physical touch. I wanted the little girl to be able to play and engage like the squirrels and birds. I wanted to do that myself. To my surprise and joy, as I walked further, exiting the park from a different entrance I entered from, I noticed that I jumped to conclusions before crediting Hayden's holistic and thoughtful approach. There were some of his chairs, albeit sans branches, displayed in a separate section open for sitting and engagement. Hayden's effort and consciousness to enhance the sensorial experience of his sculpture was a testament to his message, the value of touch and learning through bodily action. I was disappointed in my own doubt.

Later that afternoon, when I looked back over the picture of the placard I took, I realized that Hayden did mention the non-fenced chairs in his description, calling for, "individuals and groups to interact with the piece for contemplation or convening." There was more to be understood and offered than what I was patient enough for in my first reading, more outside of the words on the placard I didn't see at first, and more outside of the frame I created in my camera lens that only looked at what was directly in front of me. Hayden asked me to use my body, to walk through the park and through his sculpture, and I almost missed it. Almost.



The Power and Limitations of Images

Despite having not yet cried since being aware of her death, when photographer Teju Cole got sent an image of his Mama wrapped in a shroud in the hospital, he recalls bursting into ‘sudden hot tears.’ In *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, Cole explains that this photo, like all photos, robs us of the decorum of imagination. Photographs “insist on raw fact and confronts us with what we were perhaps avoiding” (Cole, 41). Seeing and visualizing the reality of a situation as opposed to just reading or hearing about it can prompt a different kind of response, like Cole’s sudden tears.

The power of photography and videography is evidenced throughout history; the reactive response prompted by visuals can move people to action in comparison to written or audio stories. During the Vietnam war, which is considered the first time war was broadcasted on

television, American youth across the country gathered in opposition to America's involvement, sparking a massive anti-war movement. Since the advancement of cell phone cameras, police brutality streams through our hands alongside the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Cole says that when our loved ones pass, we collect images of them to try to feel close to them still. And yet, he writes, none of the photographs from his grandmother's last years 'wholly satisfy' him. There is something physical missing that cannot be replicated through looking at these images alone. He only really likes the ones of her hands (Cole, 43).

When Cole would visit his grandmother in Nigeria before she passed, she would ask to hold his hands. "Be close to me. I want your skin touching mine," she'd say to him (Cole, 39). And after this contact he would take photos of her, capturing her in images only after having a physical experience first. Perhaps when reflecting on these pictures, the ones of her hands, he could remember what it felt like to have his hands held by hers because of that initial touch before the image. He was the one capturing those photographs and could recall the sensory experience of touching her. He craved this contact to feel close to her again, which is what made those photographs of her hands feel the most real. And yet, even with what the photographs could provide him, they were still limited. For him to feel close to her, he had to recall the environment and times he was with her. We are often not able to do this with violence we see online.

This concept of considering what images can feel real to us becomes tricky for my argument because I do not intend to imply that we have to take photographs ourselves or experience violence ourselves to have sympathetic responses to them. The response to the Vietnam war and white allyship to the Black Lives Matter movement serve as examples that people do not have to experience the violence taking place themselves, or violence in general, to

respond to it with care and protest. However, with today's oversaturation of violent images in the media, I am interested in considering how our relationship to images has changed since 'the first televised war.' I am curious about the limitations of photography from a sensory perspective, and how we could decrease these limitations through an increase of intentional sensory experiences.

Social Media and The Glance

From a social media perspective I am curious about what is missing when we view violence on our screens, what is under the surface or out of the viewfinder that we cannot access or are intentionally prevented from seeing online, and how does this affect the ethics of viewership and responses to violence? Cole remarks on this phenomenon:

On any given day, an alert might flash across your phone. Something terrible has happened far away, a flood, an airstrike. Soon, there's footage of people picking through the wreckage of what used to be their homes. It is easy to pity them, but difficult to imagine that this could be you, that you are the one suddenly bereft of a solid place in the world (Cole, 93).

It seems to me the ability to glance at violence and then keep scrolling, avoiding, watching it disappear from the screen, and potentially, from our consciousness altogether, must change our relationship with images, our responses to the violence we see. Cole says that images of violence have multiplied in an excessive, almost dominating way and also 'mutated,' which demands new forms of image literacy (Cole, 103). He writes: "the raw pathos inherent in such moments is now dulled; seen once too often, the situations are not as moving as they ought to

be” (Cole, 94). Forced desensitization to the whiplashing content of a claustrophobic, and yet endlessly expansive Instagram feed, explains and justifies the need to create an emotional distance to the content. But, at what cost to fighting against the injustice we witness for a split second? And what is our obligation to stay informed when the information feels endless? Online, we are so close to the violence we watch visually, we hold it two-dimensionally in our hands, but physically, we are so separated. A distance only further emphasized after closing the screen and looking around at the baby shower or coffee shop we are attending. It’s genuinely confusing to navigate our relationship to this phenomenon — what is the appropriate way to continue the day? These glances at violent visuals can be debilitating for some, but they can also be fleeting for others, helping the viewer ignore the content, consciously or not. The speed of the content may change the response, or create the conception that no response is appropriate.

In his article, “The Body is Never Given,” Joshua Chambers-Letson describes art historian Fred Moten’s categorization of the glance as “a labored effort not to see.” Moten claims that the glance is a tool used to forget what is directly in front of you.

What if the beholder glances, Moten writes, glances away, driven by aversion as much as desire? This is to ask not only, what if beholding were glancing; it is also—or maybe even rather—to ask, what if glancing is the aversion of the gaze, a physical act of repression, the active forgetting of an object whose resistance is now not the avoidance but the extortion of the gaze (Chamberson-Letson, 283).

This conception of the glance makes me curious about my own engagement, my own avoidance. In attempts to create a distance between myself and social media, considering the

oversaturation, I often wonder if I am avoiding too much? Do I justify my glancing by blaming the speed of the news cycle rather than my own impatience? Do I call my own inaction a protective measure against consuming what is uncomfortable? What is my obligation to stay informed, and does staying informed require taking in violence? How can I grapple with these questions myself so that I can support my students in doing the same?

Descriptions of Failures to Watch

- When I was in the fifth grade, growing up in Mid-City Los Angeles, the internet was still in the Web 1.0 era. It was the late 2000's. I was really good about doing my homework then. I knew I wanted to finish all my tasks right away so I could have the undisturbed treat of playing on my DS or watching TV. My older brother would always play before doing his work and then get frustrated when it was late, he was tired, and still had to finish. I picked up on that, younger sibling perks. Electronic use was something I earned and chose to engage with on my own terms.
- When I was a teen I never had a Vine. I've always felt like I missed a part of what it meant to be a teenager in the 2010's, the humor of copying comedic bits that others put on the internet, and pretending that you made the line up until someone who had also seen the vine called you out. I did have Tumblr though, which I liked because I felt like the creator. It was my more controlled view into subculture, aesthetics, and trying to relate to other young strangers online. I remember the first picture I reposted on my feed was this image of white girl with golden blonde dreads sitting in a sunny patch of grass. I found the visual mesmerizing. I didn't know what appropriation was.
- When I was in high school, an older girl I went to temple with asked me if I wanted to be the advertising manager for our high school's newspaper. She told me it's a two-year position and I'll have to send a few emails every once in a while, but it's a 'guaranteed A.' Somewhere in between the end of middle school and the beginning of high school, after switching schools a few times, I learned how to move through the motions of school success. This opportunity sounded great for doing just that, something to slap on my college application. One year after I took the position, I ran for editor-in-chief. I lost, but I kept writing. I thought I found my calling.
- When Trump won the 2016 election, I was asleep on the couch. Watching the news carelessly beforehand, I drifted off before the blue wave crashed unexpectedly far away

from shore. Safe from the initial visualization of the called election, I woke up to his first speech on that stage. The shock pushed me right off the couch and straight into bed to continue sleeping, intentionally this time. I always hated watching the news anyway.

- When I was a freshman in college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I took a school and society course taught by a graduate student, Ashley Smith-Purviance. She was studying police violence on Black girls in K-12 schools. We discussed the role of media in class. I thought that media was positive, a tool for change. The conspiracy that the news was fake was the real conspiracy. I thought sharing images and videos of violence had value. We should watch them and share them to understand what happened and make changes. I thought it was creating awareness. She asked me why I thought people had to see Black death to believe it.
- When I was a sophomore in college I was elected State News Editor of my student paper. I was grateful for the opportunity to write and share stories, to gain teaching experience from working directly with others. To be in charge and control of the news. Well the local student news. My old internal motivation was off the charts. Like many who are trapped with daily deadlines in windowless basements doing unpaid labor they believe in, I became obsessed. But, becoming increasingly pessimistic with each piece that included the word 'bipartisanship' in the headline, when my time in the position was over, it was over. I was burnt out and discouraged. I still wanted to teach though. I always loved to teach.
- When I was living in my childhood bedroom at age 21, slowly regressing back into my teenage temper during the summer of the 2020 pandemic, I got sent a text to 'leave Santa Monica and drive home immediately without stopping.' My parents were home watching my car, filled with myself and my two best friends, create a barricade between about a hundred lined-up SWAT officers and thousands of protestors on the news. They didn't want us out, and they said it was the pandemic, but they just didn't want us out. The news didn't want us out either, that was obvious by the coverage, or at least my parents' regurgitation of the coverage. I didn't watch much news anymore.
- When we kept going out we knew where to go because of Instagram. We'd find information about gathering in between images and videos of violence. Sometimes the information was within those, but I tried to avoid them. Sometimes the information was after the occasional bikini photo. How could people be so out of touch? I'd unfollow, associating the entire person's morality to a single image.
- When I woke up to a feed of black squares posted by my mostly white following, I didn't know whether or not I should post one myself. And then, like streaks of light shining

through a feed drowned in black, I came across a few stories from Black activists calling for the squares to be taken down. They were a tactic planted by the police to clog feeds, to stop the spread of organizing information. They were ineffective, distracting, not making actual change. With the exception of Black peers, I told everyone I knew to take them down. I got blocked by a non-white friend who told me never to tell him how to post. I was doing what I thought was the appropriate response to the visuals I found. I was never actually sure of my role. I was trying to learn. I was trying to take my time before acting. I'm not sure I could ever be sure.

- When I cleaned out the house and found my parents' old camcorders and point-and-shoot film cameras, I thought about how many wasted images I took without thinking about what I was shooting on my iPhone. How many doubles, hell quadruples, I had of the same view in the same position taking up the space in the elusive iCloud. Trying to capture everything and it was often just nothing. Taking iPhone photos felt like a thoughtless, unconscious reaction to something of interest. The constant stream of capture, looking at the view through only through the phone's view, posting images and deleting them instantaneously in insecurity. And yet this pointlessness holds so much power.
- I never watched the video of George Floyd's murder. I couldn't bring myself to and really didn't want to, but I felt that I didn't need to watch it to be moved to act, and I think that was what Professor Smith-Purviance meant.
- When Instagram made private stories during the pandemic, we could post about the social events we attended and vacations we went on without fear that anyone who wasn't doing the same thing would see it. A privately public visual trail of disrespect for community guidelines. Less opportunity to judge an entire morality on a single image. Soon enough it would become socially acceptable to use your 'real' story for that content anyway.
- When a seventeen-year-old was driven to Wisconsin from Illinois a group of students from Madison drove to Kenosha along with many others to gather in protest of Jacob Blake's murder. Joseph Rosenbaum. Anthony Huber. Cries of 'do not stand idly by' from my holocaust surviving and perished ancestors sound in my ears. Images of Rittenhouse with AR-15's, with police, with water, with care, with life, flood the internet. I couldn't watch. I felt fragile. Too sensitive to stay updated. Preoccupied with my own well-being. I deserved to be preoccupied with my well-being. But, I'm not sure if that's true. I used to think it was radical not to watch, but now I was becoming nervous of possible negligence. Of using that radical lesson as a cop-out to protect my own comfort.

- When someone I had never met in real life appeared in one of my dreams I realized I was addicted to Instagram. I never followed influencers until the pandemic and it didn't seem strange at first. I was drawn to follow accounts for their style, for photography, for beautiful bodies. But after that dream, I realized how much information I knew about these strangers, and even though the information was 'public' that felt wrong somehow. I knew their partners, their zodiac signs, their eating habits, the cities they lived in, without any physical evidence of their existence outside of my screen. There was no mutuality to this perception, this relationship. And even if they did follow me back, would that be enough to signify a mutual interest or a mutual connection or even enough for a mutual acknowledgment of existence? Spiraling. I delete Instagram. Well just the application, I can still access it on Safari. But, still, I miss information, communication. I always redownload Instagram. It feels necessary to avoid that feeling of negligence.
- When ten people died at Astroworld, crushed, stampeded, suffocated, I could not watch the videos. I read about it, and that consumption felt safer, more controlled. But even reading about it in the capacities I did, I found myself wrecked. I had been in those crowds before, seen people lifted out, felt like something terrible was happening. I didn't need to learn about it. I think that's how I felt with Rittenhouse. I had been there, in that protest environment, felt the unsafety of the scene. Do we have to experience violence to understand it, to feel it? Does experiencing something similar mean we don't have to watch? What obligation do we have to watch when we can feel it? What mistake is made by assuming you understand?
- By the time I tried to find an answer to those questions my feed was different again. Rotating between whatever our conception of normalcy looks like and then rapidly transforming during crisis — which happened with seemingly more frequency according to the memes of young people who are 'tired of living through historical events' while Putin wreaks horror in Ukraine. Vegas trips. Terror. Climate crisis. Brunch dates. Depression spirals. Selfie dump. *Love is the message, the message is Death* [Film 2016].
- When I taught my first day of class to a group of fifth graders for a fellowship with the Media and Social Change Lab at Teachers College, I tried to gauge what they thought about media. I tried to think about how much media has changed since I was in the fifth grade. Which obviously wasn't that long ago. They shared how they equated media with social media. They shared that media is something that makes you dumb. That Instagram and Twitter are bad, but their dad says but Facebook is okay. Well it depends on what you're reading, they add. I learned that they think media is something that people only do for money. That media is something to be afraid of because it's distracting. But, later, that media is a place where you can make others happy by making comments that aren't hating. That media is a place where you can share what you think about. That media is a

place where if you aren't feeling awesome, you might find someone else who doesn't feel awesome either, and that's good. That there's a community. It's 2022. We are entering web3.

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In thinking about how I've made sense of the violence I've tried to navigate on my phone, and this paper's call for embodiment, I am compelled to think about my own white body and its relation to the type of violence I am analyzing. I want to avoid the notion that one must experience violence in order to respond to it, but acknowledge that many viewers, specifically non-white viewers, have experienced a similar violence beforehand, which can greatly alter their perceptions and remove their ability to merely 'glance.' In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick writes that Black people can feel the history of slavery and violent oppression without knowing it. In the absence of an unknowable history that cannot be captured 'we feel through the ghost,' she describes. Embodiment is already present for Black people, perhaps requiring a different level of care within this methodology. In this way, my call for a multisensory engagement is not simulative or mimicry, I do not want to impose any violence. However, through my reflections and research, I've come to believe our viewership and awareness of violence does require work, a labor of positioning and repositioning I find obligatory for both personal understanding and showing relational respect. There is a need for an active participation of embodied discomfort that acknowledges our discomfort and disapproval toward the violence we've witnessed online.

The Effect of Discomfort, Lavery

Interested in understanding more about the role of discomfort in education, especially through embodied practices, I spoke to Professor Megan Lavery of Teachers College, Columbia University about her inclusion of weekly ‘exercises’ alongside her coursework for graduate students. I hoped to understand how her intention to push students out of their comfort zones through these exercises could support an argument for the value of physical repositioning toward online viewership in education. Lavery regularly teaches the course Ethics and Education as well as Education and the Aesthetic Experience.

Lavery’s activities require mindfully attending to one’s senses and experiences over the course of the week, coupled with specific intentions and directions related to the week’s course readings. These sensory, embodied exercises range from a focus on listening and sounds, to observing children at play, going on walks, practicing a virtue, engaging in an act of care, paying attention to smells, and so on. Students can post their thoughts, experiences, and ideas about their involvement in the exercise on a discussion board, which is available for the entire class to read. The discussion boards are relatively casual, and create an opportunity for students to engage with the coursework and the activity in multimodal approaches — posting pictures, videos, poems, bullet points, etc. Sometimes, the postings are quite poetic and moving, revealing a side of students that is not usually seen in academic settings or in classroom dialogue.

What is particularly intriguing about these activities is that each one, despite their differences, comes with encouragement to participate ‘to the point of discomfort.’ For example, when the activity asks to go on a walk, Lavery asked the class to, ‘go on a walk for longer than is comfortable.’ This is the constant refrain accompanying these weekly exercises.

I wanted to understand what Lavery believes discomfort can add to learning, and she agreed to share her ideas with me, expressing how the weekly exercises have evolved over the years and continue to be something of an experiment for her. What follows is paraphrased from our conversation on March 22nd, 2022 (Megan Lavery, personal communication, 03/22/22).

In my conversation with Lavery, she acknowledged that compared to countries like Japan, many Americans are opposed to the idea of discomfort in education. Rather, American schooling seeks to promote confidence and self-esteem in students — an aim she believes is also reinforced by the role of student evaluations in the tenure and promotion of teachers. Concerned about this cultural and social phenomenon, Lavery uses these exercises as a relatively safe way for students to test whether there is anything to be learned from doing something for a period of time that is longer than is comfortable. While she is mindful to keep the exercises optional so that students do not feel obligated to push themselves, she is curious if students can discover for themselves whether discomfort can advance or heighten their awareness and self-cultivation.

Lavery finds support for her thinking about the value of sustained discomfort from John Dewey's concept of equilibrium, balance, and rhythm from his text, Art as Experience. In this text, Dewey suggests there is a need to leave a place of balance and 'detour' from comfort momentarily in order to return to the equilibrium more whole, with a greater purpose and center. This is because he believes too much comfort can deter growth by limiting interaction with new ideas.

Dewey is interested in habit, she explained, and much of graduate school is dedicated to creating good scholarly habits. But, as with all habits, even scholarly habits can become reified and this can prevent us from having new experiences that cause vulnerable or uncomfortable feelings that create opportunities for growth. Following this, a purpose of the weekly exercises is

to help students become aware of their habits in order to break out of them, to be more alert, conscious, and awake to the changed world around them. It is in that consciousness, after the instance of discomfort, that she believes the possibility of new habits arise — the possibility of education.

Laverty's learned that students find these activities to be the most memorable aspect of the class based on feedback describing them as meaningful and imagination stirring. She believes this creativity and openness may be because moments of discomfort allow students to notice things that they wouldn't otherwise in comfortable situations. Pushing through extra moments, past the point of pleasure, when doing something like observing art or children, can create a sweet spot for observation that creates a deeper connection with the activity. She says it is a true discipline that requires practice, but it is worth it because it allows you to discover what you might not otherwise discover about yourself and the world around you.

Applying these concepts to students' social media consumption, creating a repositioning of the body could look like Dewey's concept of moving into a point of tension and therefore out of the habitual scrolling that has dulled scenes of violence online. In this way, slowing down their consumption to allow students to notice what they wouldn't have otherwise. The practice of discomfort could counteract this desensitization, by requiring a mindfulness that goes beyond the glance, potentially taking viewership back to a time before this over-saturation. It calls for students to reposition themselves once more, taking a sense of their surroundings in relation to what they view in a unifying way, and returning to their environment with a greater purpose.

Would I have noticed that Hayden wrote about the branchless chairs had I had the patience to read past the point of comfort? What does this slowing down open up, and how does

it speak to the speed at which we view images? I will now turn to consider practices of this repositioning in action through Black artists and thinkers.

The Obligation of Discomfort, Campt

I found support for the role of discomfort in education from Black feminist scholar Tina Campt, who calls her kinetic text, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, a series of choreographed verses. Campt writes on the Black gaze and how to shift ways of thinking that historically subordinate Black people through interaction with artists who invoke this gaze. In her book, she describes a contemporary class of Black visual artists who are gaining unprecedented attention for work that ‘forces viewers to engage blackness from a different and discomfoting vantage point’ (Campt, 8). Discussing the shift in technology, media, and art practice, she accounts for a shift from still image or analog to one of videography — acknowledging also videography’s increased use outside of explicit art practice to document everyday life and Black death. She critiques that although there is greater visibility of the Black community today, social media creators mostly add only a ‘Black perspective,’ not the Black gaze she is interested in, which does not remove the distance a white viewer perceives through. One can see more of Black life, but still cannot feel Black life because there is an isolation of sight without the inclusion of the body that maintains a two-dimensional perception. Instead, Campt’s artists, namely, filmmakers, Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, and Jenn Nkiru; photographers Dawoud Bey and Deana Lawson; and multimedia artists Okwui Okpokwasili, Simone Leigh, and Luke Willis Thompson, radically ask what it would change if the view saw *themselves* through Black positionality, working through these implications “on and for oneself” (Campt, 20).

Campt says this type of viewership, through the Black gaze, is possible because viewing these artists' haptic works mandates a responsiveness — an obligation to act or be complicit. She continues in her description:

Their artistic practices mobilize Black precarity as a creative force of affirmation that cannot simply be seen or viewed. It is a Black gaze that shifts the optics of “looking at” to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside one another. It is a gaze that requires effort and exertion (Campt, 8).

Through this practice, even the precarity becomes affirmation, and this enforces a shift for the viewer. Campt's artists call for a multi-sensory engagement with their work that extends beyond the visual, to create and build a relationship that involves a more embodied labor of participation. Campt argues this work refuses to create ‘spectators,’ calling for the viewer to position and reposition themselves in relation to the work — taking account of their identity, their role, and their ability to create change and to learn beyond what's historically taught from that isolating distance.

Contrasting Moten's concerns with the glance, Campt believes this requires a labor, a labor of “discomfort, feeling, positioning, and repositioning” (Campt, 17). These obligations to active participation require a physicality that generates a relationship between the art, the artist, and the viewer, with the intention of creating an action. It's grounding in embodiment creates a feeling that makes us closer to the art and what it depicts. Like we are with it, like we are holding those hands rather than looking at them between a far distance off a screen. And then, in that responsiveness, we act. With those hands in ours.

The Need for Sympathetic Touch and Close Contact, DuBois & Cooper

Historically complimenting Campt, post-Reconstruction-era philosophers and educators W.E.B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper shared concerns about distanced viewership and isolation, discussing ways to build ‘sympathetic touch’ between racial groups and developing theory for what touch can achieve.

In the opening speech of The Education of Black People, 1910’s “The College Bred Community,” DuBois writes that, “knowledge of the methods of the worlds’ work is the training which comes primarily and essentially from human contact” (DuBois, 53). Arguing that learning is a process of ‘transmission’ between groups of people, DuBois emphasizes the importance of activity and community in order for education to occur. The necessity of close contact.

However, acknowledging that white people cannot teach Black people about Black life, or learn about it without them, there is a specific type of contact necessary for education. Namely, for the Black college community, there is a need for this educational contact to be transmitted by learning from other Black people. For the white community, DuBois says that Southern segregation is a voluntary deterrent to their own education, separating ‘those who most need to learn by race contact’ (DuBois, 53). To this end, DuBois calls the white community into action, specifically calling for a physical action through the use of their hands to a reciprocally beneficial end. He says: “Nevertheless, this race is not stopping to await justice in this matter...but it is asking you, here and now, to place *in its hands* the indispensable facilities for teaching itself those things which it must know if it is going to share modern civilization” (DuBois, 56). Like Campt’s haptic argument, this emphasis on hands speaks to the role of touch and closeness in generating this shared civilization, and its necessity for transmitting education between groups.

Cooper's compilation of speeches in A Voice From the South calls for the need to "know those around at their true weight," highlighting a knowledge of physicality necessary for understanding others in a genuine way (Cooper, 110). However, much of Cooper's essays are spent describing failures of achieving this, pointing to Christian groups who meet to discuss the best methods for promoting the welfare of Black people without ever inviting Black people to the conversation, and didactic writers who observe Black people from a distance and write descriptive pieces on what they perceive as their life experiences.

For example, Cooper details the violent writings of white literary author, Mr. Howell, who she claims only intended to "press the button and give one picture from American life involving racial complications" (Cooper, 97). Writing from his 'long-ranged' point of view, out of direct contact with Black people, his stories flattened the weight of his subjects entirely — making them two-dimensional like a photograph, taking the physicality out of Black life through the distanced white gaze. Cooper writes that this "gratuitous sizing up the Negro" is an "insult to humanity and a sin against God" (Cooper, 98). In his thinking that sight was the only necessary sense for sufficient education, Mr. Howell obtained a false education, and induced harm to the community for his lack of care. To this end, Cooper writes:

The art of 'thinking one's self imaginatively into the experiences of others' is not given to all, and it is impossible to acquire it without a background and substratum of *sympathetic knowledge*. Without this power our portraits are but death's heads or caricatures and no amount of cudgeling can put into them the movement and reality of life (Cooper, 89)

Cooper explains that in order to avoid caricaturing, one must build knowledge. But she calls for a specific type of knowledge, a sympathetic knowledge, which requires touch and contact, an effort and labor of learning through the Black Gaze he was not willing to endure. In this way, by maintaining his distance, Mr. Howell harmed his own understanding and the understanding of others who took his words as truth. Like how DuBois states that white people cannot teach about Black life, and like what Campit says about the limitation of merely seeing Black life online, Mr. Howells cannot imagine himself as understanding nor portraying Black life because he has not repositioned himself out of his environment. He has not committed to the labor of discomfort.

But this is not an impossible labor. When one does invoke their body, creating an embodied encounter of genuine contact, then, Cooper concludes, one can see with “clear eye weight” and “paint what is true” (Cooper, 110). I will now present an example I believe enforces, models, and summarizes this labor before applying it to educational practices related to supporting students' social media consumption.

Repositioning in Practice, Aranke

Interested in the possibility of negotiating personal identity through interaction with non-representational forms, Sampada Aranke investigates artists whose work “obscure the picture plane,” and in doing, so move the viewer to embody their own relationship to the different ways Blackness presents itself. Aiming to break against categorization and against the ‘subject/object divide’ Aranke’s article “Blackouts and Other Visual Escapes,” offers a descriptive analysis of three works that she claims blur the ‘logics of visibility through abstraction.

Exploring anthropologist Arthur Gell's term, distributed personhood, Aranke claims that interaction with these works instigates a "sensual activity in which the person who is distributed also encounters the fleshly qualities of the self within, through, and even as the art object" (Aranke, 65). This process is what allows the art to do the work it aims to achieve — to generate the type of responsiveness Camppt describes. One piece Aranke presents is Melvin Edward's 1966 piece "Cotton Hangup," a sculpture of welded steel installed above eye-height typically in the corner of a gallery space, to support the effect and affect of her claim.

Despite its distortion and fragmentation, 'undeniably,' writes Aranke, the piece points to the physical proximity of lynching. Without equalizing the act of lynching with the act of viewing this artwork, Edwards' piece does require an uncomfortable positioning of the body, a straining of the neck, which Aranke says activates "feeling as a function of sight."

To see the work, she must consider her bodily relation to it — if she is under the sculpture, the neck's bend will be more dramatic than if she stands in the corner for a more distanced view. The position the viewer takes in relation to the work — and therefore, the degree of her neck's extension — is a kind of embodied relational distribution. Her placement of self, through a positioning and then a repositioning, creates a muscular comportment that strains, reaches, or tilts and thus marks a relational ground. The viewing subject's body is understood through a distribution of self that maps the contours of relation (Aranke, 71).



Image from Hammer Museum Website, Los Angeles (2011)

The piece requires a discomfort, a shifting distance from oneself and the work. One where when you get closer, it actually requires more labor, but perhaps this is where genuine understanding or connection is most formed. Perhaps this is where feeling through sight is activated. When what you're viewing with your eyes enters your body, and you receive the feeling of being touched without any actual contact. I believe this visceral reaction is the sympathetic touch Cooper and DuBois were after. The responsiveness that compels action. It's the multisensory engagement with violence my project aims to apply to viewing the ever-evolving, sublimely indefinite screen.

Future Application

Given our obligation to act or be complicit, I propose the inclusion of multisensory educational practices grounded by the Black gaze that support students' ability to create distributed relationships with the violence they witness online. With aims of invoking a

responsiveness through acknowledgement of discomfort often lost to desensitization and glancing, these practices hope to help students slow down their scrolling to develop greater ‘image literacy’ and meaning-making.

Although I do not intend to propose an explicit pedagogical practice within the constraints of this paper, I will attempt to put forward the types of practices I believe may reap the desired benefits and mention a few reasons for their effectiveness. Considering the role and potential of discomfort in education, I want to discuss again the current nature of learning that only privileges sight and sound, and therefore, explore how a more embodied educational practice, which is rarely experienced, may create a heightened student engagement valuable for transforming online viewership. In the same way McKittrick argues against the absolutism of disciplines, claiming that interdisciplinary work disrupts racism because it challenges narratives by ‘discrediting ethnic absolutism,’ I think a multisensory experience could disrupt complacency. How can these practices create sympathetic touch and close contact with social media by disrupting sensory isolation?

The Aesthetic Power of Touch

It seems to me at least part of the effect of close contact and sympathetic touch, is its literal connection to the aesthetic quality of touch. Touch is the only reflexive sense. When we touch something, it is necessarily touching us back. This is not the case for our other senses, which do not yield this highly reciprocal experience. We value touch for its vulnerable, pleasurable qualities, yet, at the same time, we are protective of touch when possible, acknowledging its ability to harm. However, touch is not a sensory experience reserved for only physical interactions. In the English language, when we feel emotionally moved or supported, we

say that we “feel touched,” as if someone's good action was powerful enough to create the sensation of being held. This is the power and potential I believe is important to explore for this project, turning sight and sound into feeling, in opposition to the two-dimensional effects of images and video.

Pedagogical Examples

I propose that an educational practice like “mirroring” in which students have to move their bodies to match the changing shapes and forms of another student’s, could create this discomfoting awareness that removes the student from their stable environment and into a larger, more collective one. Not only does this activity create a freedom of individual expression, but it could also help students grapple with what it feels like to take up space as if they are someone else, positioning their bodies in relation to one another. In my small experience testing this project with a group of 5th graders in a New York City public school, I received comments that the activity was “painful,” which I believe marks its success through evidence of instigating discomfort.

Visual Studies Professor, Christina Knight, at Haverford College discussed with me a potential way for deepening this activity. Speaking about a time she participated in this, Knight presented a form or adaptation of mirroring that is more explicitly personal. Instead of having students follow their partner simultaneously for extended periods of time, she was asked to make one movement to represent herself that her partner would repeat only after observing her closely. In doing so, the students had direct space and attention to create themselves through a physical formation, followed by a more careful repetition of their representations from their partner. This could be a second, scaffolded phase of the activity.

Another experience I believe facilitated the type of practice modeled in my analysis occurred during the Teachers College Philosophy and Education graduate program's spring party of May 2022. Student Eroll Spencer volunteered to read a poem he wrote out loud to the group. But, before beginning, he requested that all present look up at the trees during his reading. He said he resonated with images of trees, which helped ground his piece, and encouraged us to enter that space with him. Spencer, creating a physical engagement, asked everyone to position themselves in relation to him, his Blackness in a predominantly non-Black space, the poem, and the environment we all shared as a program. We were not to just passively listen or watch him. We were to participate so that we could not only hear, but also feel the touch of his words as our eyes and bodies moved about the park's trees. This simple, but highly impactful direction created a collective unity. It created sympathetic touch between the community.

Conclusion

Throughout my research and reflection on the topic of this paper, I believe my greatest takeaway is the possibility of creating a collective responsibility for those close and far to us through embodied practices that generate distributed personhood. The multisensory aspects of these practices build a level of accessibility, which opens the activities to a range of interests, abilities, and opportunities for individual meaning-making based on experience. Yet, the result is an opening of a perspective, relationality, or gaze greater than oneself. Circling back to *Black Paper*, to this end, Cole writes:

The bitterest truth might be to show that the crime was committed by the viewers of the photograph, that this is not news from some remote and unconnected reality, but rather,

something you have done, not you personally, but you as a member of the larger collective (Cole, 113).

Learning through art practice as a model, specifically Black artistry with consideration of history, identity, and political implications, amplified the possibility of interpretation and otherwise forms of expression, greatly supporting my capacity to understand and explore approaches to the concerns of this paper. While there are many things I am uncertain of, and hope to continue to be uncertain of such that I will never-not continue to be in pursuit of challenging my academic work, at this moment, I do believe in the potential here. If nothing else but to begin a process of grappling and coping with all that we consume online consciously and unconsciously, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic and most recent uprising in support of Black life. I hope these practices can help educators support an understanding of one's obligation to witness in a humanizing way that increases students' willingness, knowledge, and power to participate in fighting against the violence they see and hear online because they have been moved to feel with it.

Final Considerations

It is not without mentioning the implications of, or accessibility toward, creating the type of educational contact necessary for supporting this type of practice in the context of a pandemic. The body language required for understanding one another in this way is often lost or concealed through a fragmented screen, and the accountability of students' engagement in activity is altered. As mentioned in the introduction, it seems to me the stripping of senses enforced through virtual schooling creates a great hindrance on education from the perspective of the student and

the teacher. Part of this entire project is trying to tackle the barrier of screens, so of course the inclusion of them within schools presents a challenge. While I am proposing these educational practices with the idea of ‘normal’ circumstances in mind, it doesn’t seem unlikely that they could not be translated to support online education. In fact, perhaps this is where these types of pedagogies are most needed because it is where contact is further reduced and isolation further emphasized.

It is also important to note that I have not spoken on the context or necessity of diversity required in the classroom for these practices to be effective, nor a targeted age range.

Acknowledging that racial isolation exists across America inside and outside of schools, it seems the type of lessons created may need particular consideration depending on the enrollment of the class. It also seems important to mention how these lessons could be misconstrued by a teacher who has not themselves experienced the type of contact necessary for facilitating activities that lead to sympathetic touch. These are not problems I ignore, but will not explore further here, leaving it open for discussion and future research.

With gratitude.

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