

## Steffani Jemison: *Promise Machine* A Movement in Five Parts

by Martha Joseph and Thomas J. Lax

On June 25, just after 1:00 p.m., Darius Jones stood on the fifth floor of The Museum of Modern Art, in front of Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting *Glenn* (1985), and let out a long, high-pitched tone from his saxophone. Nearby visitors flinched in surprise and some covered their ears as the long, loud, discordant sounds filled the space outside the gallery, extending to the atrium and lobby below. The atonal screeches morphed into high and low alternating octaves of a single note, and two vocalists—Russell Taylor and Jade Hicks—pushed through the throng of onlookers, singing: *you, you, you*. The sweetness of their vocal lines was punctuated by the warm, mellow sax ringing through the galleries. After finishing their first song, they parted the crowd and moved on to Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Grey* (1921), and from there they led a procession through the galleries, contending with unsuspecting Museum visitors and growing in number along the way. Here, migration became form.

Commissioned on the occasion of the exhibition *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North*—the first display of all 60 panels of Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series in its entirety at MoMA since 1995—Steffani Jemison's *Promise Machine* (2015) takes ideas of motion explored in Lawrence's iconic work as a prompt for reconsidering social aspiration, progress narratives, and artistic process. Building upon Jemison's previous engagement with contemporary and historical African American communities, *Promise Machine* is a multifaceted project consisting of workshops with Harlem-based community organizations; reading

groups with artists, scholars, and activists held at MoMA; and roving performances in MoMA's galleries. The performances—structured as a song cycle, with each song responding to works in MoMA's collection (the majority of which were abstract paintings from across the 20th century)—began in the upstairs collection galleries and terminated in the Lawrence exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Composed collaboratively between Jemison and Courtney Bryan, with the sustained input of arranger Justin Hicks, the music was created through both systematic and aleatoric principles, relying on specific citations of riffs from gospel, jazz, and R&B tunes. Using migration as a reference point, *Promise Machine* moves both literally, as a procession through the galleries, and conceptually across history, both forward and backward in time. Situating Lawrence within the history of modernist abstraction, Jemison proposes a narrative not often associated with the earlier artist's work. Her reinterpretation thus constructs a new chronology that often moves in retrograde; along the way, this strategy entangles the present with the past, emphasizing that how we narrate history shapes a sense of both our present and what the future might hold. Likewise, her process of artistic research, which lasted several months and was itself part of *Promise Machine*, created an attenuated and provisional interpretive community, brought together by the multiple roles she inhabited as an artist.

### Researcher

The June performances were the public culmination of a six-month period of research and workshops. Jemison's process began in Harlem, where Jacob Lawrence moved as a teenager and began to develop his career as a painter. Much like Lawrence's time spent studying in the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, Jemison's process is similarly research-based, pedagogical, and dialogic. Indeed, she responded to the social context in which Lawrence lived and worked, taking her inspiration from the Utopia Neighborhood Club, a Harlem-based women's social service organization that offered many family-oriented community services. These services included art classes at the offshoot Utopia Children's House, in which a young Lawrence enrolled. There, he would meet his teacher and mentor, artist Charles Alston, and with his encouragement, would begin studying more seriously at the Harlem Art Workshop.<sup>2</sup>

Jemison bracketed the Utopia Neighborhood Club for a number of reasons. Its name holds what seems to be a contradiction between the imminence and urgency of providing everyday social services, held under the umbrella of "neighborhood," with the sense of distance and hope described by the future-oriented



Steffani Jemison. *Promise Machine*. 2015. Performers: Russell Taylor, Jade Hicks, and Darius Jones. Shown: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Glenn*. 1985. Acrylic, oilstick, and Xerox collage on canvas, 100 x 114" (254 x 289 cm). Private Collection. Photograph © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

idea of “utopia.” This process of navigating the actual and the ideal fuels political imagination in ways that are historically specific to the goals and desires of the group of African American women who founded the club, but also connects that past to our present. Isolated and reanimated in this way, their utopia propels us forward, like an engine; as a promise, it exists in words before it is actualized in the world.

Beginning in January 2015, Jemison visited several community-based organizations in Harlem—including the Laundromat Project, the Harlem Center for Education, and Countee Cullen Library—to hold workshops on utopia.<sup>3</sup> Meeting with both teenagers and adults, Jemison introduced her artistic interests and then engaged the groups in conversation about their visions of an ideal society. The artist asked participants to fill out surveys on utopia, which produced a wide range of responses and guided further conversation. This range of responses is evident in the following quotations from various students at Brotherhood SisterSol, a locally rooted organization with national reach that provides holistic support services to young people:<sup>4</sup>

*Africa, before slavery, I was once told, was a utopia where everyone lived in peace and there were no wars.*

*We’ve progressed too far to go back to find utopia.*

*I think the Brownstone is like utopia.*<sup>5</sup>

Like utopia itself, these responses reveal a sense of contradiction and impossibility. Coined in the 16th century in Thomas More’s eponymous book, the term combines the Greek word for “good” (*eu*) with “no” (*u*) and “place” (*topia*); “utopia” thus simultaneously means “good place” and “no place,” etymologically indicating that while it may hold a promise for a better world, it can never be fully reconciled with reality.

### **Reader**

In addition to research, reading as a social and collective action was a fundamental part of Jemison’s process. For the second part of *Promise Machine*, she convened a reading group for two weeks in April 2015 at the MoMA Library that included a small group of artists, architects, educators, scholars, and activists, many of whom had participated in or otherwise contributed to her outreach sessions in Harlem. Continuing a communal style of learning, the group read texts aloud, each person in turn, enforcing a deliberate slowness. The amalgam of written sources—from sociological to historical to literary to advertising—provided a constellation of methods and viewpoints on utopia that emphasized the aspirational and collective. Ranging from Sutton E. Griggs’s fictional late-19th-century Texas community in *Imperium in Imperio* to advertisements



FROM TOP

Installation view of *Paintings by Jacob Lawrence*, The Museum of Modern Art, October 10, 1944–November 5, 1944. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Installation view of *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, The Museum of Modern Art, January 12–April 11, 1995. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Mali Olatunji

Installation view of *One Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North*, The Museum of Modern Art, April 3–September 7, 2015. Photograph © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar



Photograph of members of The Utopia Neighborhood Club, New York City.  
As published in *The Crisis*, March 1923. Reference image for Steffani  
Jemison's *Promise Machine*, 2014–15

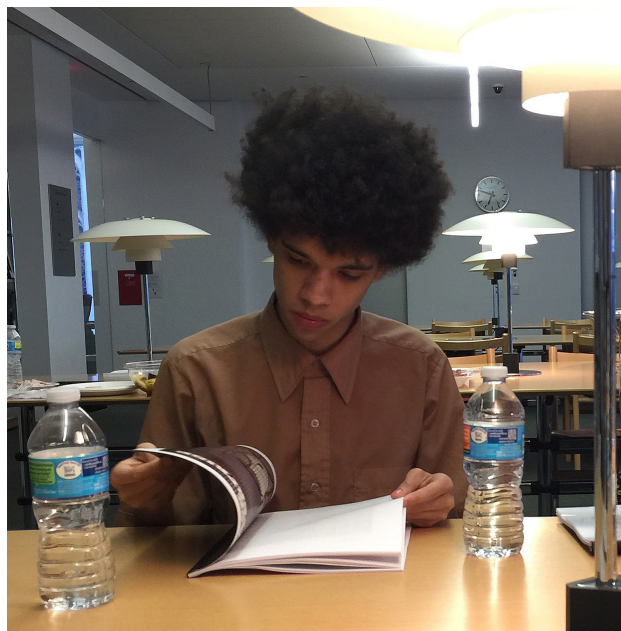
and journalistic descriptions of the Civil Rights-era planned community of Soul City, North Carolina, these views of the future from the past in fact described moments of regress when utopic experiments transformed into dystopic states, often as a result of the hubris or messianic impulses of a charismatic leader.<sup>6</sup> The proximity of utopia and dystopia created an ambivalent relationship, with a wry layer of irony. This tension would continue to characterize Jemison's work throughout the process.

### **Writer**

Jemison's research and reading formed the basis of the libretto for the performance, which drew on texts from the workshops, surveys the artist conducted with activists, students, and leaders, and research files for the paintings in MoMA's collection. She organized fragments from the questionnaires and notes from her conversations in alphabetical order. Much of the culled text was idiomatic, with many similes using "like" and "as" to provide a link between the known and the unknown. Looking for commonalities, Jemison found chains of types, including synesthetic language that used one affective experience to describe another, such as color or smell; Biblical metaphors, like "milk and honey" or blessings and references to place, including specific cities (*Aleppo, Atlantis, and Athens*), historical locations both grand and personal (*New Harmony and Jazz club in San Francisco*), and the cardinal directions (*West North/South East*). These phrases, through simile and metaphor, provide a lexicon of descriptive tropes of utopia, culled from the collective formulation of a world of ideals.

Jemison often uses appropriated text to write poetic language. Her fugue poem "You Completes Me," for example, repurposes material describing women, cars, and guns in overwrought language from street fiction, pairing found text with a silent, black-and-white

melodramatic film. In the process, the poem gives not only new meaning but new feeling to two genres so replete with emotion that they have been drained of their ability to convey it beyond cliché. In both works, Jemison remixes and redeploys preexisting content in a new context. This approach of repetition and re-inflection coincides with developments in post-Internet poetry<sup>7</sup> and painting,<sup>8</sup> in which the surfeit of textual and visual information available through search engines has allowed for new textual content to be produced with near limitless range and, often, little reverence for exact citation. While Jemison's text is not culled from



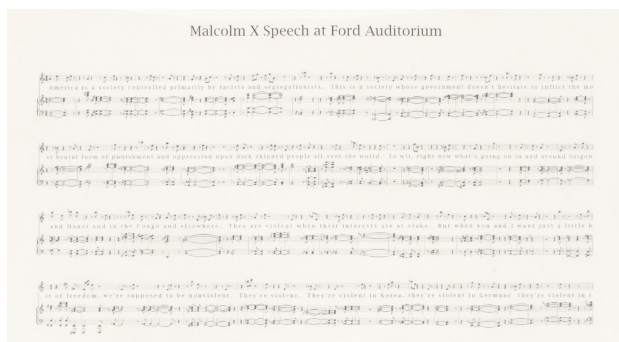
Ciaran Finlayson at Steffani Jemison's Utopia Reading Club, The Museum of Modern Art Library, April 15, 2015. Photo: Stuart Comer



online sources, her treatment of found material nevertheless casts her as the maker of text that has been generated by vastly different authors across a variety of social worlds and writing platforms.

### **Composer**

Jemison worked closely with composer Courtney Bryan to score the libretto, preparing a list of tracks that were organized into three musical lineages: 1970s R&B by Minnie Ripperton and Al Green; contemporary neo-soul and hip-hop by Maxwell and R. Kelly; and contemporary classical music by Caroline Shaw and Gavin Bryars. From that initial group, Bryan sampled excerpts in which the music treats text and language indeterminately. She then transcribed the excerpts to make a set of charts, which she assembled into sequences that shared a mood, forming the foundation for the work's various melodies. The beginning, for example, uses a call and response structure and the instruction to always end a phrase in G. Each sequence was mapped according to a section of the libretto and then given a key and a dynamic, while leaving tempo and pacing open to interpretation.<sup>9</sup>



Charles Gaines. *Malcom X Speech at Ford Auditorium* (detail). 1965. Graphite drawing on Rising Barrier Paper, 80 3/4 x 55" (205.1 x 139.7 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Jill and Peter Kraus, Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, and The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art

The system-based structure of the composition relates to the lineage of such conceptual artists as Charles Gaines, who similarly creates musical compositions based on arbitrary decision-making techniques. Gaines's *Manifestos 2* (2013) transposed text from influential political speeches or manifestos, such as a speech by Malcom X given at Detroit's Ford Auditorium in 1965, into the notation for the musical score. Linking arbitrary structures of language and musical notation, Gaines substituted the letters C, D, E, F, G, A, and B in the texts with the corresponding note in a musical scale. A musical rest replaced every other letter. Los Angeles composer and director Sean Griffin then arranged this score for an ensemble of

nine instruments. The resulting composition combines an objective conceptual system with social content, presenting us with an emotive and socially inflected conceptualism.

Both Gaines and Jemison confound the assumed objectivity of systems-based approaches by introducing affective content. Both works about data with lyricism, emphasizing the space of emotion or self-representation within the discourse of conceptualism, which is often presumed to be affectless and lacking a subject who makes selections based on taste or preference. This reinsertion of feeling and social subjects is fundamental to both artists, who tether a highly structured operation to referents drawn from the world, which are articulated through a body that communicates physical sensations like the experience of heat that might indicate excitement or sorrow. As they remix multiple texts, both *Promise Machine* and *Manifestos 2* are radically untethered from a single voice or subject. And yet, despite the lack of reference to an individual maker, the sociopolitical ethos of the texts bleeds through, reintroducing both the communicative capacity of feeling as a political tool, and the listener's personal response.

Jemison extends Gaines's conceit by both engaging with and maintaining the melodies and virtuosity of popular music—R&B and soul, in particular—canibalizing the affective responses associated with those genres. In Jemison's appropriative system, the listeners are faced with a re-presentation of socially inflected content through a form that recalls the emotive potential of popular genres. In addition to the melodies themselves, the rhyme scheme highlights the communicative power of pop. Taylor and Hicks sing to each other, "Your phony faces/your heady praises/your tasty figure/your figure pigment," using a rhyme scheme and structure a form of intimate direct address.

### **Organizer**

Jemison's performance not only borrows its migratory form from Jacob Lawrence's iconic series, but also extends a longstanding interest in processional culture and mass mobilization in Harlem throughout the 20th century. Curator and writer Claire Tancons has argued that "African diasporic aesthetic and political practices epitomize the notion of the collective, which is nowhere more visible and audible than in mass displays, sometimes leading to mass action in the tradition of public ceremonial culture and in the current reemergence of these forms as modes of public address."<sup>10</sup> Tancons cites 20th-century Harlem as one of the points of cathexis of black public ceremonial culture, pointing specifically to the 1917 NAACP-organized Silent Protest March against the East St. Louis riots; the Harlem Hellfighters victory parade in 1919, when they returned home from World War I; the 1927 funeral procession of entertainer Florence Mills, the Blackbird, which drew up to 150,000 people; and of course the elaborate pageants organized by Marcus Garvey and the



Universal Negro Improvement Association—and captured on film by James Van Der Zee and Klytus Smith—throughout the 1920s. Tancons likewise references contemporary art's entanglement with performance in Harlem, including Lorraine O'Grady's *Art Is...* (1983) and the performance of iconic African American antislavery figures in *We Promote Love and Knowledge* (2011) by Shani Peters (a participant in Jemison's reading group), both of which took place during the African American Day Parade. In her analysis of the influence of Caribbean, Latin American, and American Southern culture on Harlem's procession culture, Tancons emphasizes the syncretic emergence of performance in the black Atlantic across geopolitical boundaries, suggesting that the history of performance art might not begin with the 20th-century European avant-garde, but in the cultural experimentation that was part and parcel of independence and civil rights movements, as expressed through a wide range of practices including political demonstrations, military marches, funeral processions, and carnival parades.

While Jemison's performance borrows the structure of mass movement from this local history, she nevertheless changes its meaning by re-situating performance from the street into the Museum galleries. Performing in front of, beside, and directly to works in MoMA's collection, the musicians bring the words from the libretto's text to bear on the paintings, challenging the listener to reconcile the meaning of the artwork with the sung evocation. The piece begins in front of Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Glenn* with the lines, "You/You/You/You/Wooly electricity/electric piano/teeth toothy/blue bones/your phony faces/your heady praises/your tasty figure/you figure pigment/your scratch and scribble." Is the "wooly electricity" in the song meant to describe Basquiat's jet-black figure with sprouting hairs? Is the "scratch and scribble" a reference to the artist's



Steffani Jemison. *Promise Machine*. 2015. Performer: Darius Jones.  
Shown: Sam Gilliam. *10/27/69*. 1969. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 140 x 185" (355.6 x 469.9 cm). Sam A. Lewisohn Bequest (by exchange). Photograph © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Photo: Julieta Cervantes

application of crayon? The call and response continues: "your yellow ochre/your umber raw/you, you." Are the performers describing one another, or the audience as it gathers? Their text at once lays out the picture and the players, yet does not fully name them, articulating instead the indeterminable space between the picture's frame and the building's container.

The relationship between each of the paintings in the procession is left similarly contiguous; suggestive, yet open-ended. Bracketed by Basquiat's and Lawrence's explicit figuration on either side, the intermediate paintings, by Piet Mondrian, Sam Gilliam, Jo Baer, and Barnett Newman, initially appear concerned with a fundamentally different discourse of abstraction. And yet, at every moment in the piece, the impulse to associate these works with an abstraction divorced from the representational and affective world around us is confounded. Rather than treating these canonical works of abstraction as participating in a specific legacy of artistic purity, Jemison forces us to reckon with their display, reception, and life in the world.<sup>11</sup> Jo Baer's three square paintings are each nearly monochrome white, with a different colored band at their perimeter. Vocalists Taylor and Hicks coyly sing "not content/not content," as if first describing the work's effort to remove any representation from the picture plane and then describing an affective response. The washes of yellows, pinks, and dark purples in Gilliam's *10/27/69*—a dramatic drape of unstretched canvas that hangs off the wall, emphasizing the fabric's material weight—are given the name of the date when the work was finished, creating a formal means to do what the artist would insist, in an interview that same year, would be "ways art—or Black art—can be developed within a community."<sup>12</sup> Jemison's song succinctly alludes to this: "We're talking 'bout uplifting." While it has historically been argued that abstraction purified



Lorraine O'Grady. *Art Is...* (Troupe with Mile Bourgeoise Noire). 1983/2009. C-print, 16 x 20" (40.64 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates

painting of its need to picture objects drawn from life, Jemison emphasizes the contingent relationship of these paintings to the world from which they are drawn and to which they return. In this way, she acts as a curator of sorts—juxtaposing works not usually considered in relationship with one another, taking them out of chronological sequence, and transferring their resonance from the historical time of art history's march into the durational time of the spectator's contemplation before them and the performers.

Additionally, this approach coincides with reconsiderations of modernism with respect to temporality. Through the procession Jemison knits together historical moments, asking the viewer to reconsider the artistic propositions of these eras in the current moment. This reconsideration of a network of abstraction across time challenges a narrative of chronological linearity. This questioning of linear art history becomes more meaningful as a gesture specifically within the Museum's fourth- and fifth-floor Painting and Sculpture Galleries, as they tell MoMA's particular story of the development of modernism. The performance's chronologically backward motion in the fifth-floor galleries is notable as this is the site of the Museum's painting masterworks, which are displayed beginning with Cézanne and Van Gogh, moving into Picasso, then Mondrian, and so on, implying a specific art-historical development of abstract painting. Confounding the traditional art-historical logic linked to chronology and stylistic progression, Jemison's performance plots an alternate route, exploring similar artistic modes to different ends.

### **Looks like majesty**

Just as the paintings in the performance become untethered from a traditional chronology, so too does Jemison work to tease apart text and image. It is perhaps her take on Lawrence's approach to language that is most significant in understanding the Migration Series through the discourse of abstraction. Tapping into the overdetermined relationship between abstraction and description, image and text, both Lawrence and Jemison annotate paintings with writing and yet allow each to stand on their own. In Jemison's libretto and score, text and artwork are inextricably linked yet also held apart—a distance she holds open for Lawrence, too. Jemison's poetic descriptions suggest that Lawrence's narrative ambitions might be unmoored from his pictured images. As Jemison's musicians enter the gallery containing the Migration Series, they sing:

*Strange yellow, green blue  
Blues tribe, fruit flame  
Root cause, no shame*

Their lyrics echo Billie Holiday's words in "Strange Fruit," drifting in from an adjacent gallery, twisting and refocusing its message: yellow is made "strange";



Steffani Jemison. *Promise Machine*. 2015. Performers: Darius Jones, Jade Hicks, and Russell Taylor. Photograph © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

"fruit" is enflamed. Jemison's words also pull directly from Lawrence's language and logic; in his paintings' captions, "causes"—the World War, great floods, injustice, the boll weevil—recur as protagonists themselves, providing a girding structure for the paintings. Lawrence—researcher, historian, maker of moving images—was formed in a time of sociological possibility, when identifying causes might clarify answers. Jemison wrests pathos from the Migration Series's need for resolution, at once squarely searching to name the violent "root," while situating her narration of sociological cause within a language concerned instead with allusion, analogy, and approximation.

For those who ventured North, the description or promise of what lay ahead might not be what was seen upon arrival; nevertheless, it might be close enough to envision a reason to keep moving. Lawrence's Migration Series text speaks to an open-ended futurity, with its dramatization of an accumulating narrative and insistence on the continuation of this story with the dramatic final line "and the migrants kept coming." Jemison's treatment of text enacts this propositional continuity through its relentless repetition. In *Promise Machine*, repetition borrows gospel music and R&B's use of repetition, and simultaneously takes on a political function, reinforcing with every repetition a form of critique so subtle that it exists only *between* works in MoMA's collection—in the space held open by the viewers in procession. The performers prepare to exit the galleries, singing the same refrain again and again—"Looks like majesty. Looks like majesty. Looks like majesty"—each one a simple yet insistent re-inflection of a prior moment. Of encountering this work in reproduction or in a previous exhibition at the Museum. Of hearing a story about the Great Migration, perhaps on the same personal, small scale as Lawrence's paintings. Of refusing to name, and in the process periodize, "black struggle" as belonging to a

historical narrative beyond our time—or of being able to picture struggle at all. Of waiting for the performers' song to return as you leave the Museum on a Sunday afternoon with your friends, or alone, or with someone you bumped into along the route.

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*Edited by Stuart Comer, Ana Janevski, and Jason Persse*

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- 1 In addition to Basquiat's *Glenn* (1985), Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Grey* (1921), and Lawrence's *Migration Series* (1941), these works included Sam Gilliam's *10/27/69* (1969); Jo Baer's *Primary Light Group: Red, Green, Blue* (1964–65); and Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51).
- 2 Founded in 1911 by Daisy C. Reed, the Utopia Neighborhood Club provided child daycare for working mothers, served lunches, offered art classes, and even ran a dental clinic. By 1930, the organization had purchased a building on 135th Street. With funding from John Rockefeller, it partnered with the Children's Aid Society to create an organization that would administer the programs at a new community center called Utopia Children's House. A report from 1937 describes its substantial impact on the community: it provided daily preschool for 9,000 children, after-school care for 16,500 children, lunches for 85,000 children, and art and music classes for 1,000 children. *Utopia Children's House: A Report* (New York: 1937)
- 3 The location of Harlem is crucial to Jemison's project, due not only to the concrete relationship to Lawrence's upbringing, but also to Harlem's status in the early 20th century as an ideal society for African Americans in both the North and the South. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts writes eloquently of Harlem's place in the political imaginary in *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011).
- 4 "The Brotherhood SisterSol Mission," accessed July 26, 2015, <http://brotherhood-sistersol.org/about/mission>
- 5 Quoted in correspondence with the artist, February 24, 2015. These descriptions of utopia were shared with Jemison by students at Brotherhood SisterSol. The Brownstone described here refers specifically to the building that houses the organization.
- 6 Texts read during the reading group include: *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* by William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease; *Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission* by S. G. Howe; newspaper clippings on Nicodemus, Kansas; *Light Ahead for the Negro* by E. A. Johnson; newspaper and magazine clippings as well as a comptroller's report on Soul City, North Carolina; and advertisements from *Jet* and *Black Enterprise*.
- 7 Kenneth Goldsmith addresses post-Internet poetry in more detail in "Post-Internet Poetry Comes of Age," *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2015, accessed March 10, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/post-internet-poetry-comes-of-age>.
- 8 Laura Hoptman addresses post-Internet painting in more detail in *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).
- 9 The score was further shaped by a back-and-forth process with the musical director Justin Hicks, who arranged the score according to the performers' particular capacities and strengths, even reworking ideas with the performers themselves throughout the process.
- 10 "Taking it to the Streets: African Diaspora Public Ceremonial Culture Then and Now," NKA. *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 34 (2014): 61–65
- 11 This social or networked view of a history of abstract painting coincides with art-historical reconsiderations of narratives of modernism. Leah Dickerman's recent arguments about the invention of abstraction in the early 20th century in several cities across Europe and the United States are an example of such reconsiderations. Dickerman has argued for the crucial role of "network thinking" in abstraction's multiple origins, emphasizing the social dimension of its emergence over the narrative of the lone and solitary genius. Abstraction, she argues, emerged in a transnational context in which artworks, their reproductions, and their makers could move and migrate more quickly because of social and technological innovations, including the dawn of international loan shows, the distribution of images through print media, and the development of travel via train and car, among other forces. Leah Dickerman, "Inventing Abstraction," in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 20
- 12 "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27 (January 1969): 254