

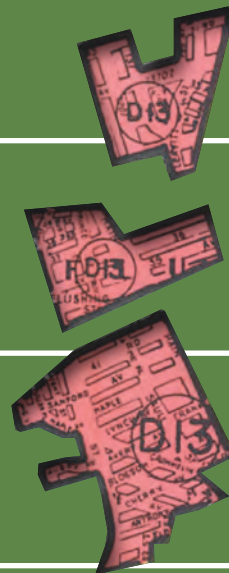
RECONSTRUCTIONS:

ARCHITECTURE

AND

BLACKNESS

**IN
AMERICA**



MoMA

THE GEORGIA NEGRO.

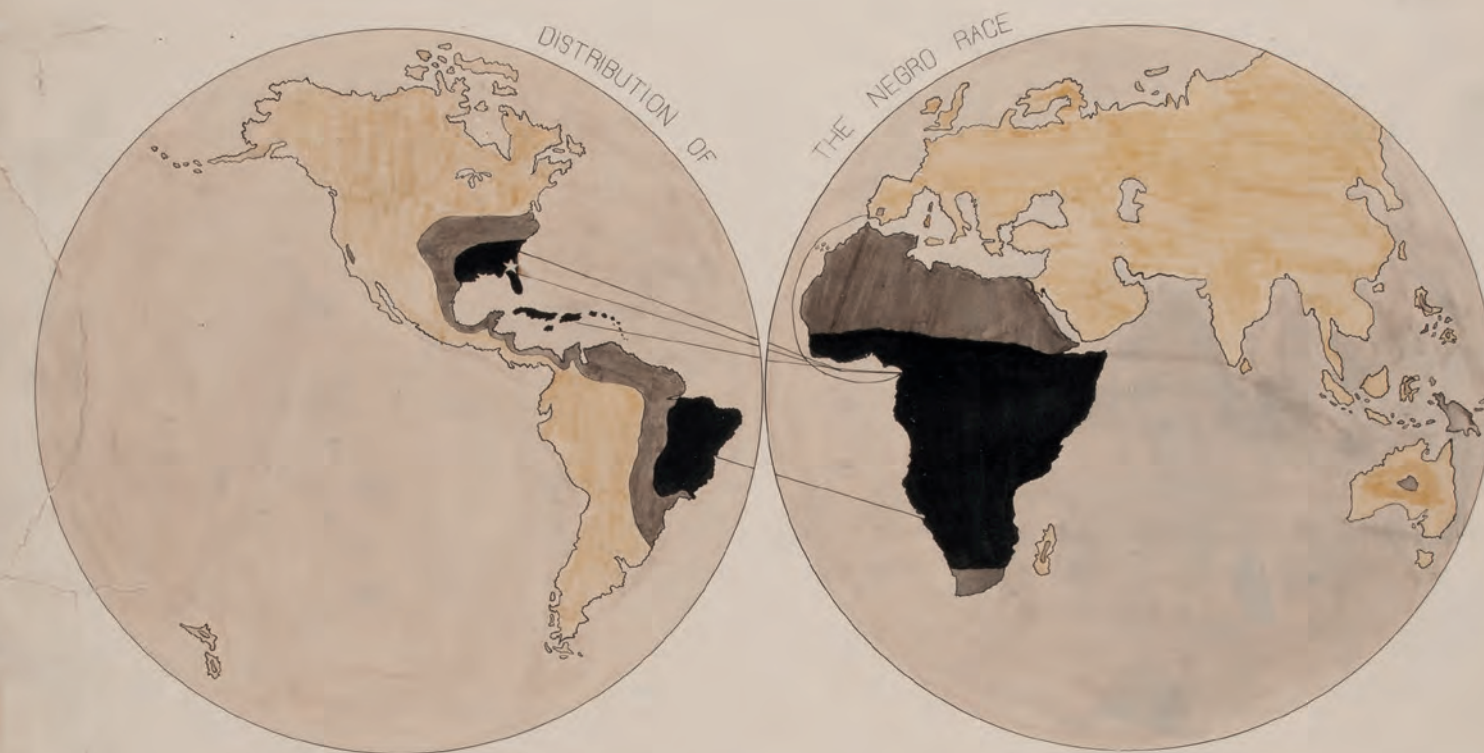
A SOCIAL STUDY

BY

W.E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS.

RECONSTRUCTIONS: ARCHITECTURE AND BLACKNESS IN AMERICA

Edited by Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson



≡ ROUTES OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE.

★ THE STATE OF GEORGIA.

THIS CASE IS DEVOTED TO A SERIES OF CHARTS, MAPS AND OTHER DEVICES DESIGNED TO ILLUSTRATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO IN A SINGLE TYPICAL STATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

" THE PROBLEM OF THE 20TH CENTURY IS THE PROBLEM OF THE COLOR-LINE."

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Allianz, MoMA's partner for design and innovation, is proud to sponsor *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* at The Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition explores the important ways in which hidden histories can be made visible and equity can be built into architecture, urbanism, and the landscape. The Museum's first sustained consideration of the relationship between architecture and African American and African Diaspora communities, *Reconstructions* features eleven newly commissioned works that examine the intersections of anti-Black racism and Blackness within cities, and how sites at multiple scales may be mobilized as spaces for resistance, renewal, and imagination.

At Allianz we strive every day to be an inclusive organization that embraces diversity to achieve a brighter, more innovative future. In that spirit we celebrate an exhibition that highlights the crucial work and innovation of architects, designers, and artists like Emanuel Admassu, Germane Barnes, Sekou Cooke, J. Yolande Daniels, Felecia Davis, Mario Gooden, Walter J. Hood, Olalekan Jeyifous, V. Mitch McEwen, Amanda Williams, and David Hartt, whom we are proud to support.

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FOREWORD



In recent months, if not years, escalating demands for a reconciliation of the social, economic, and political implications of architecture and urbanism have challenged the paradigms of modernism’s promise. Broader recognition of absences in the historiography of modern architecture and in the representation of geographies, communities, and architects of color has led to a reconsideration not only of how we, as a society and as individuals, understand the limits of architecture in all of its guises, but also of *who* determines and ultimately designs and builds the environments in which we live. Taking this as its impetus, *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* sets forth intertwining narratives and histories of anti-Black racism that simultaneously look back to the past and forward to the future. Referencing the time period immediately following the abolition of slavery in the United States, the exhibition’s title also evokes metaphors and processes of building, amplifying how architecture defines conceptions of both ourselves and our world.

Blackness, framed in terms of racial identity but also encompassing all aspects of Black social life, is a concept essential to visualizing African American collectivity. The long shadow of slavery and anti-Black racism stretches across the United States in segregated cities and communities with inadequate access to housing, education, and infrastructure. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, efforts to “fix” these communities—exemplified by programs of “urban renewal”—exacerbated these inadequacies, further sundering cities and people. Rejecting ill-defined “solutions” to ever-present American injustices, *Reconstructions* rethinks the scales through which architecture is rendered—and the means by which repair can flourish.

In extrapolating the conditions of the American built environment, the exhibition also, in part, underscores the ways in which American government and industry were made by design to delimit and ultimately diminish the role and presence of African American and African Diasporic communities. Through commissioned works by Black architects, artists, and designers as well as in this Field Guide of critical texts by writers and scholars, *Reconstructions* argues that American racial injustice is fundamentally spatial. Those stakes are all the higher in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others throughout the United States. The exhibition and this book provide critical platforms from which speculative architecture can aid in forms of redress, sown as it is by division but also by collaboration, community, and protest.

To facilitate the significant research and revaluations embodied in *Reconstructions*, the curatorial team—deftly led by Mabel O. Wilson, Nancy and George E. Rupp Professor of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and Professor in African American

and African Diaspora Studies at Columbia University, and Sean Anderson, Associate Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, with Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, Curatorial Assistant— assembled an extraordinary advisory committee of scholars, writers, planners, lawyers, educators, activists, and architects who were essential not only in formulating the contexts and questions of the exhibition but also in determining the show’s eleven commissioned architects, artists, and designers. We are extremely grateful to Kevin Young, Executive Director of New York’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, for his contributions to these discussions. The Practicing Refusal Collective (Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, and Christina Sharpe, among others) likewise provided an essential touchstone from which the curatorial and architectural teams elucidated narratives of agency in an increasingly diffuse world.

To extend the ambitions of the exhibition and its projects, public panel discussions and community workshops were planned in Atlanta and Los Angeles, and in New York at MoMA PS1 in Queens. Students and members of local design communities were invited to join the exhibition contributors in open discourse on the stakes of devising a people’s architecture through the lens of Blackness today. (Unfortunately, those programs had to be canceled due to the pandemic.) We are grateful to the administrations and students of Georgia Tech, the consortium of Clark Atlanta University and Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, the University of Southern California, Woodbury University, and City College of New York, as well as to MoMA PS1, for their hopeful collaborations.

On behalf of the staff and trustees of the Museum, I would like to sincerely thank Allianz, MoMA’s lead partner for design and innovation, for making *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* possible. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Jon Stryker Endowment for its major support, and to the Leontine S. and Cornell G. Ebers Endowment for its generous support. Additional support is provided by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. This publication is made possible by the Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Publications Endowment Fund.

Finally, we remain grateful to the commitment of every individual listed here, as well as to MoMA’s staff and those individuals, past and present, whose voices and images continue to imagine building a world founded on integrity, equality, and respect.

Glenn D. Lowry
The David Rockefeller Director
The Museum of Modern Art

Dawoud Bey. *Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, from the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. 2017. Gelatin silver print, printed 2019, 48 x 59" (122 x 150 cm)

PREFACE

Robin D. G. Kelley



Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America is a timely and ambitious meditation on why dismantling racism depends on transforming the built environment. It conjures iconic daguerreotypes of cities and towns reduced to rubble and refugees, reminders that the period of Reconstruction was very much about (re)building. Men and women once held as property were determined to reconstruct the nation under new democratic principles, new land tenure, a new racial order based on equality and access to power, and a built environment worthy of the new nation.

The “freedpeople” knew they weren’t truly free. Freedom was not handed down to them by the state or seized on their behalf by Radical Republicans. Freedom was aspirational. It had to be built slowly, deliberately, and defended at all costs. We know this from their dwellings. Black people built churches and schools, not just for worship and education but as gathering spaces for political organizing, as safe havens, and as barricades. And they defended these dwellings with their lives. Armed men and women took turns standing vigil, always prepared to deal with the persistent threat of racial violence. Knowing that freedom without justice was impossible, Black men overwhelmingly sought elected or appointed office administering the criminal justice system. Black men whose bodies still carried the marks of slavery held positions as constables, judges, jury commissioners, justices of the peace, sheriffs, county magistrates, and even as jailers and prison wardens. They could have been the architects of a very different criminal justice system, but Jim Crow ensured their removal and installed a system of convict leasing, torture, lynching, and ever more jails.

Reconstructions, in other words, reflects on what it means for a people determined to be free to build for freedom, to retrofit a hostile and deadly built environment for the protection and reproduction of Black life, and to create the conditions of possibility for genuine democracy for the whole nation, only to face the wrecking ball of racial capitalism. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* is often misread as the story of a Black family in Chicago attaining the American dream, but it is actually about the struggle to democratize the United States by reconstructing the system governing entitlement to decent housing. The Younger family, Hansberry reminded her critics, did not leave the ghetto because of status anxiety; it was a matter

of survival. Life in a South Side tenement was dangerous and unhealthy, not just for the Youngers and other Black families trapped in the slums, but for the entire nation. Hansberry drives home the point that the nation pays a dear price for exclusion. Peace and prosperity cannot thrive in a country with second-class citizens. The price of tearing down the walls of exclusion is equally dear, and throughout the play she celebrates Lena Younger, the family matriarch whose courage is unflappable. In response to one critic who dismissed the play’s conclusion as a conventional soap opera ending, Hansberry argued, “If he thinks that’s a happy ending, I invite him to live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going!”¹ We know what comes next: a welcoming committee bearing bricks, bombs, and burning crosses, followed by white flight, home devaluation, and catastrophic loss of equity and tax revenue needed to pay for public schools and services—all incentivized by federal housing policies and real estate interests. The Youngers’ move marked not the end but the *beginning* of a new reconstruction—one that is still far from complete.

Of course, as *Reconstructions* makes clear, the work of “unbuilding” racism in the US was never about living next door to white folks. The most poignant experiments in a people’s architecture were conceived and built in the ghettos of America. The urban rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s sparked one of the greatest reconstruction movements in modern US history. Just two months after the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles in 1965, activists converted an abandoned furniture store on 103rd Street into the Watts Happening Coffee House, which later housed a Black cultural academy called the Mafundi Institute. On the same street, Black activists turned a burned-out Safeway supermarket into a 350-seat theater, which brought live, politically insurgent plays to the community until a Black FBI informant named Darthard Perry burned it to the ground in 1973. In Newark, following the 1967 rebellion, poet and activist Amiri Baraka and his organization, the Congress of Afrikan People, envisioned an ambitious urban redevelopment plan that included Kawaida Towers, a low- and middle-income apartment complex that would have not only provided safe, comfortable, and affordable housing to Black families but fostered a political culture committed to economic cooperation, education, and exposure to non-European art and culture. Kawaida Towers was to be equipped with a state-of-the-art 300-seat

Dedication of the Watts Cultural Center,
Los Angeles, 1968

theater, a lounge, a woodshop, exhibition spaces, a day care center, and a public kitchen. The architects tasked with realizing Baraka’s (ultimately unrealized) vision were also responsible for transforming an abandoned Masonic temple in Newark into Hekalu Mwalimu (Swahili for “Temple of the Teacher”), which housed the Congress of Afrikan People’s various educational programs for children and adults, a community center, and a publishing house. Although CAP’s plan to reconstruct the city was backed by a multiracial coalition that included Puerto Ricans and whites, the organization’s plans were derailed by intense opposition from white residents, unions, the Housing Authority, and city officials.²

What would South Los Angeles or Newark look like if Black reconstruction had not been defeated? Or other cities where urban renewal, gentrification, and the subprime mortgage hustle have kept vulnerable Black communities in a constant state of precarity? What would post-Katrina New Orleans look like if Black reconstruction had prevailed? Would privatized charter schools still have replaced public education? Would we still have seen 4,500 units of public housing demolished, rents increased, and tens of thousands of displaced Black families unable to return home?³ Or the bulldozing of Faubourg Tremé, one of the oldest Black urban neighborhoods in the country, to create Interstate 10?⁴ Would earlier Black reconstruction efforts have permitted oil and chemical plants to operate alongside poor African American and Indigenous communities? Or the construction of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), an artificial channel created to shorten the navigation route for oil tankers that has destroyed most of New Orleans’s wetlands (its natural storm buffer) and, in effect, acted as a storm funnel aimed at the predominantly Black and poor Lower Ninth Ward?⁵

In the end, the defeat of Black reconstructions has imperiled not just Black communities but the entire planet. After all, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities have been subject to environmental hazards created by racial capitalism since long before anyone declared a climate catastrophe. Racism explains why these communities have long lived near toxic waste dumps, freeways, bus barns, and oil and gas production facilities, with the attending injustices of industrial pollution, poverty, state-sanctioned and criminal violence, and lack of access to healthy food, clean drinking water, and safe affordable housing, among other things. This is why contemporary reconstruction movements—from Indigenous land protectors to the Movement for Black Lives, from Sankofa City to the Right to the City Alliance, from Detroit’s Feedom Freedom farm

to Mississippi’s Cooperation Jackson—are building for an ecologically sustainable future: planting community gardens, creating an empowered workforce, offering access to affordable childcare, turning vacant lots and abandoned homes into energy-efficient low-income housing, and investing in community and conservation land trusts. Black and Indigenous movements have tried for five centuries to make this a free and democratic land, to “unbuild” racism and restore balance to the planet. We’re running out of time. Our future depends on our ability to reconstruct this world. Fortunately, the architects and planners we’ve been waiting for are here. They’ve always been here. And this is their Field Guide.

1. Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in “Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry,” *American Theatre*, November 1984. Hansberry knows what she’s talking about. In 1937, her father, Carl Hansberry, a prominent businessman and activist, purchased a home in a white neighborhood in Chicago. The Hansberrys faced daily harassment and violence from neighbors, forcing Lorraine’s mother to walk around with a loaded German luger by her side. The house had a restrictive covenant—an attachment to a deed forbidding the sale of the house to a nonwhite family—and Carl spent years challenging its legality in court but ultimately lost, which forced his family to vacate their home.

2. See Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 219–54.

3. Dani McClain, “Former Residents of New Orleans’s Demolished Housing Projects Tell Their Stories,” *The Nation*, August 28, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/former-residents-of-new-orleans-demolished-housing-projects-tell-their-stories>. Based on a report for the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “Get to the Bricks: The Experience of Black Women from New Orleans Public Housing After Hurricane Katrina,” by Jane Henrici, Chandra Childers, and Elyse Shaw, August 25, 2015.

4. See Clyde Woods, *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 202–3.

5. Woods, 181–82.



Still from the 1961 film adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*

INTRODUCTION

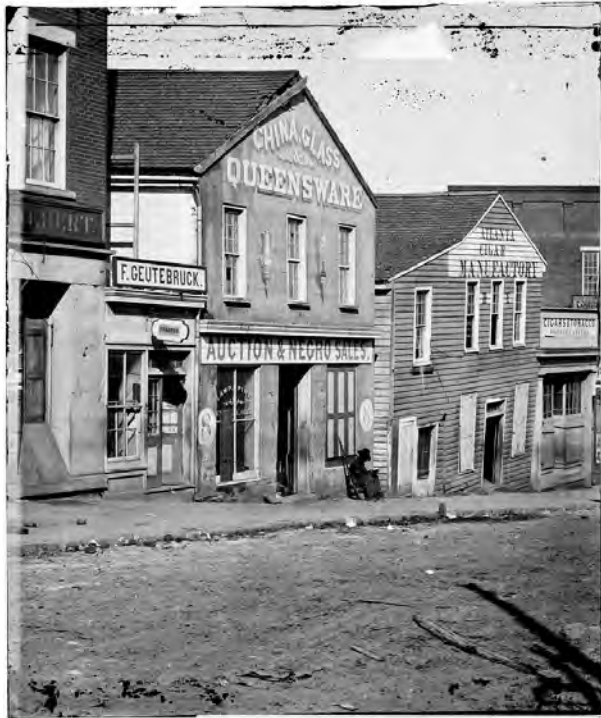
Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson



The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it's through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence.
—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*¹

I seemed to see a line, and on the other side of that line were green fields, and lovely flowers, and beautiful white ladies, who stretched out their arms to me over the line, but I couldn't reach them no-how. I always fell before I got to the line.
—Harriet Tubman²

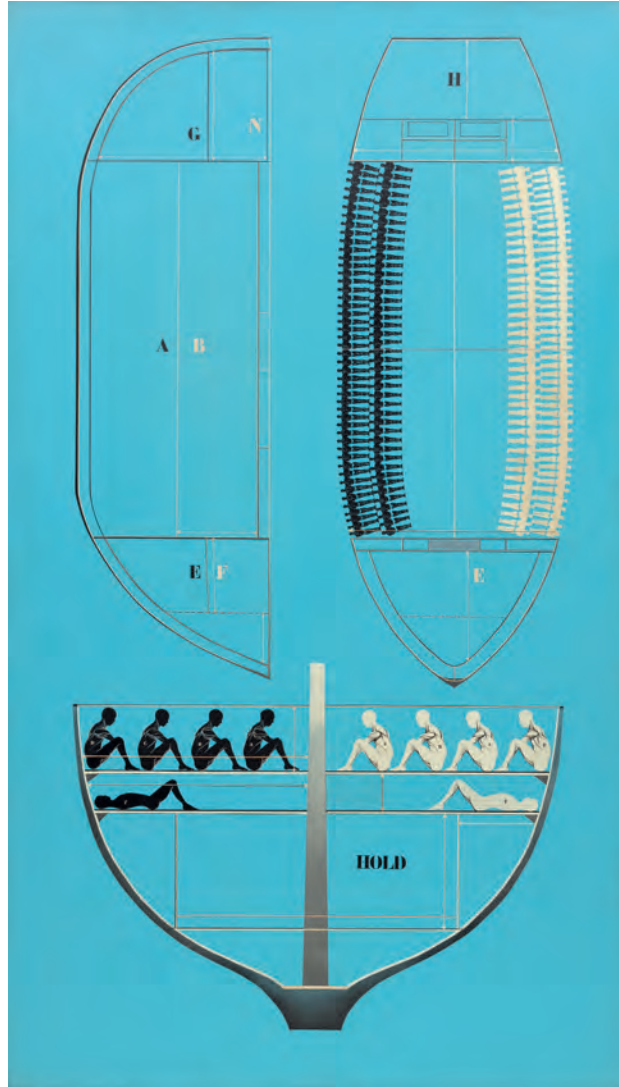
Forged in the *longue durée* of the transatlantic slave trade, the architecture and planning of cities in the United States have been intimately linked to the dehumanizing commodification of African peoples as a labor force that cultivated the raw materials for industries to revolutionize and from which nations were born. Slavery promulgated concepts of “race” and racial difference that positioned white Europeans and Americans as far superior to other peoples and cultures around the world. Race as an aesthetic category shaped architectural design and history from its conceptualization in the Enlightenment to the present. But the continued presence and pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in the American built environment signals that the promise of modernist codes for a “well-tempered society” and postmodernism’s appeal by means of “ordinary” pluralist forms have largely been rhetorical in nature.³ These spatial and social injustices—for example, historical failures in the design, construction, and management of housing and the violence prevalent in (revitalized) urban centers—also press upon questions of who constitutes the American “public” and who is afforded rights while others’ rights are diminished. Striking disparities in these rights—even basic access to water and shelter—have long existed, and the all-too-common sight of public housing and school buildings in disrepair exist as lasting reminders of racial determinants that were embedded in the early crafting of policies and the building of infrastructures that still determine where, how, why—and for whom—architecture is envisaged. The built environment, of which architecture is only a part, is a proving ground for how the lives of individuals and communities that for so long have been excluded can now be brought forth.



Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America awakens us to the many ways architecture, urbanism, and landscapes can promote collective justice for African Americans and African Diasporic communities throughout the US in the face of continual displacement and dispossession—from slavery through the period of Reconstruction to Jim Crow segregation, from the federally sanctioned “redlining” of neighborhoods beginning in the 1930s to the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–9. Architecture cannot disavow its multiple grounds: of property, memory, and collective action. For Robin D. G. Kelley, “land is space, territory on which people can reconstruct their lives,” and may be understood as complementary to the quest for reparations, revitalizing movements for social justice.⁴ This Field Guide is both a companion to the exhibition and a bellwether for a movement in which the agency of architecture is used to amend the ways division has long been designed. *Reconstructions* asks, What does an architecture of redress and recovery look like for sites of racial disjunction—not only housing projects, partitioned schools, and prisons but America’s streets and playgrounds? Lateral to these sites of disinvestment and deprivation exist spaces of Black social life—kitchens, porches, street corners, gardens, and places of worship—

Opposite: Margaret Bourke-White.
At the Time of the Louisville Flood, 1937.
Gelatin silver print, 9 3/4 × 13 1/8"
(24.7 × 33.4 cm)

Above: Storefront signage on
Whitehall Street, Atlanta, 1864



roundings.⁵ We cannot avoid the built environment—for too long it has been the mechanism by which the agency of communities has been denied. Questions of how infrastructure, housing, disciplinary structures (schools and prisons), and community might be “repaired” by renewed attention to the multiplicity of inequalities that exist in contemporary society are a central concern of the projects and essays in this book. For *Reconstructions*, the fourth iteration of The Museum of Modern Art’s Issues in Contemporary Architecture series, the participating architects, artists, designers, and writers were asked, How might processes of “unbuilding” structural racism within our built environment expose an uncertain but promising equity and revaluation of Black life?

Homeplaces and Place-Names

Definitions of territory are often maintained by those who claim it. After the short duration of Reconstruction (1863–77), the equality that citizenship promised to formerly enslaved persons in the post–Civil War years was stolen by the Jim Crow era’s reentrenchment of white supremacy. Nevertheless, at the turn of the twentieth century, Black Americans built and settled the towns of Kinloch, Blackdom, Geechee, Africatown, Mitchelville, and Boley—transitory place-names that might be construed as placeholders. These names embody narratives indexical to the successive crafting of prohibitions meant to contain persons. They also convey an alternative present in which Black communities flourish without being excised from the map or the visual field. In these towns, Black families built “homeplaces”—for safety, affirmation, refuge, and resistance.⁶ These spaces, too, were ultimately beset by acts of racial violence that unsettled the everyday lives of Black communities—the East Saint Louis Riots (May 28 and July 1–3, 1917), Tulsa’s Greenwood Massacre (May 31–June 1, 1921), the Rosewood Massacre in Levy County, Florida (January 1923), and contemporary equivalents like the Ferguson unrest (August 9–25, 2014) and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, which sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the globe beginning May 26, 2020. For some, place-names suggest only distant signs that exist beyond memory and language, a fragile physical presence to remind one of what may have come before. They point to a nascent reckoning: for in their naming is the redress yet to come.

In the lineaments of African American architecture, forms and images are mobile, carried in the knapsacks of those traveling through the safe houses and way stations of the Underground Railroad or perhaps even earlier, in the

that are often unseen (or at least unquestioned) by designers and architects, yet they are resonant within literary works and popular culture. The house, the kitchen, the porch—while all emblematic of individual freedoms, of identities hard-won, of the intermingling of cultures and genders—can also quickly become suppressed in light of “improvement.”

Black spaces may be conceptualized as responsive to historical narratives of incomparable brutality while also being foundational to empowerment. Since, as scholar Katherine McKittrick has written, “Black matters are spatial matters,” architecture has the capacity to define the ways people in the US see themselves in and of the buildings and landscapes that serve as their everyday sur-



memories of those who survived the Atlantic crossing. Such imprints were conveyed when the nation’s “Founding Fathers,” among others, produced an architecture built by the labor of enslaved persons. In the face of this history, the all-Black towns of Oklahoma and freedmen and women’s towns established throughout the Midwest during the 1900s represent a revolution in an architecture of self-reliance confronting government constraints, but they have rarely been articulated as such.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Black families forged corridors by rail and road out of the American South to escape the scourge of the Ku Klux Klan, whose terrorism kept them impoverished in an exploitative system of sharecropping. Along these routes of the Great

Migration—to Pittsburgh’s Hill District, Syracuse’s 15th Ward, Watts in Los Angeles, West Oakland, and elsewhere—people followed family, friends, and neighbors to construct vibrant new communities that echoed the old ones left behind. They met and mingled in the diasporic crossroads of Miami and Brooklyn, where the tastes of cultures and tonalities of music created through lines across the centuries to the African continent and back again.

Place-names also speak of contradiction: the emergence of cruel economies and unsung resistance, of mandated dispossession and hopeful stability. Despite, or perhaps because of, the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934, overcrowded blocks on Chicago’s South Side or in Harlem came to exemplify concerted efforts to hem in families through redlining loan practices and restrictive covenants purposefully deployed to quash the dream of homeownership for Black Americans. During the 1950s, freeways of white flight in concert with the bulldozers

Opposite: Malcolm Bailey. *Hold, Separate, but Equal*. 1969. Acrylic, press type, watercolor, and enamel on board. 7 × 4' (213.2 × 121.9 cm), THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF BARBARA JACOBSON AND JOHN R. JACOBSON

Above: Vertner Tandy. *Villa Lewaro*, Irvington, New York. 1918. National Madam Walker Beauty Culturists Convention of 1924



of urban renewal tore through Black neighborhoods, dispersing residents far and wide. Meanwhile, the unprecedented design and construction of a vast network of prisons for the profligate incarceration of Black men and women became the extension of yesterday's ghettos and the legacy of antebellum plantations. Place-names unfold temporalities—foreclosing the ways in which entire communities are redrawn or erased as a means to remake national cartographies. The import of *Reconstructions* exceeds the exhibition and this guide. Yet both examine how architecture accounts for the perpetuation of multiple absences. What are the protocols of repair?

Practices of redlining and other government-mandated discriminatory practices, degraded transportation and infrastructural services, limited access to financial and educational institutions, and proximity to the dangers of environmental poisons are but some of the spatial symptoms of more than a century of segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence based on race. New mandates ignore the “disparate impact” of federal housing regulations that obdurately affect low-income communities.⁷ The inevitability of cycles of exclusion and poverty rooted in discriminatory architectures contributes to the continued erosion of individual and collective rights. That each of these violences is conceived through the design of built and unbuilt worlds suggests that alternative tools within architecture may be found to counter historical practices that continue to undermine the agency of Black communities.

Reconstructions exposes these understudied narratives to foster critical questions on how notions of Blackness per



vade the contemporary American built environment. Writing about how social relationality diverges from identity, cultural historian Saidiya Hartman argues that “Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle.”⁸ The ambition of the exhibition is not to provide monolithic “solutions.” Rather, the participants were encouraged to envision strategies concerning language, structures, and visibility through proposed interventions sited in public, semi-public, and private contexts and expressed through valences of Blackness.

Articulating Blackness in Architecture

If the US government failed in the wake of slavery to successfully account for and address the historical injustices to Black communities—communities that it actively sought to push to the margins—then *Reconstructions* seeks to recenter discourses of architecture in America around histories of Blackness. In its framing, the exhibition attempts a spatial articulation of what W. E. B. Du Bois decried as Black America’s “two-ness.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes,



It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.⁹

Given such apposite constructions of a United States, a sense of disjuncture and loss—of thwarted attempts to locate oneself in an America not necessarily made for you but nonetheless built by you and your ancestors—pervades, from the first words of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, “We the people,” to the last words of a 1926 poem by Langston Hughes, “I, too, am America,” and beyond. Slavery barbarically rendered Blackness, Saidiya Hartman has written, “as the mark of object status and whiteness licensing the proprietorship of self.”¹⁰ For in between these histories are a succession of events and problematics that fundamentally root segregationist policies and thought within the making of the built environment. Race, the construct that underwrites white supremacy and propagates the subordination of the other, was spatialized from the beginnings of the US, and, as a consequence, its forms are continually renewed and strengthened by, and often complementary to, inescapable cycles of false assimilation and impoverishment. Through eminent domain, redlining, and urban renewal, divisions by race and class were created with intent and by design. The so-called “inner city” was but a refraction of wide-

Opposite, left: Living room in an apartment in Riverton Houses, Harlem, New York, c. 1947

Opposite, right: Riverton Houses, Harlem, New York, 1949

Above, left: Temple of Beauty, National Emancipation Exposition, New York, 1913. Published in *The Crisis*, December 1913

Above, right: Hilyard Robinson. Langston Terrace Dwellings, Washington, DC. 1935–38



spread social ills and the condensation of racial tensions found outside of cities. Ghettoization was not a place but a deliberative process. The two-ness of Black American life is embedded within an architecture positioned as an articulation of shared values and identities.

Blackness, in all of its complexity, captured the imagination of modern artists, as well as architects like the Swiss-born Le Corbusier, who held a sublime reverence for Harlem Lindy Hoppers as a primal machine-like “energy” akin to the vertiginous modern skyscraper.¹¹ Yet, while Blackness proved foundational to modernism’s imaginary, in MoMA’s ninety-two-year history, Black architects and designers—like the exceptional talents of Vertner Tandy, Paul R. Williams, Amaza Lee Meredith, and J. Max Bond Jr.—have had little to no purchase in its exhibitions or presence within its unparalleled collection of modernism.¹² Among broader architectural histories, the scope of discussion on race as a component of the design and representation of the built environment has remained limited.¹³ The history of Black architects and designers was superseded in the academic imagination by a dominant formalist and stylistic concern for an “International Style” of modernism that favored those who design and pay to build, with little interest taken in those for whom building was an extension of their own labor.

This absence is not uncommon when surveying the historiographic contours of architectural or museological discourses writ broadly. Indeed, in discussions about reparations as a response to the afterlives of slavery—the effects of which are still reverberating in the expansion of American cities and towns—the concept of redress is fundamental to a questioning of the nation. As journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, “To celebrate freedom and democracy while forgetting America’s origins in a slavery economy is patriotism à la carte.”¹⁴



Building a Field Guide

Contemporary anti-Black racism has as much to do with the writing of laws that disenfranchise millions as it does with the production of spaces that actively seek to further the momentum of Jim Crow segregation and one of its successors, mass incarceration. The project of *Reconstructions* reconceives the ways that architecture and the built environment might resist perpetuating division sown by slavery and its inheritance. Each of the contributors to the exhibition and to this guide, and each member of the advisory committee, was enjoined to contend with the vestiges of the slave ship’s hold and its economic, visual, and spatial legacies. Collectively, they have interrogated and reimagined parallel architectures, urbanism, and landscapes that are responsive to and respectful of these histories but not solely reliant upon them.

The exhibition commenced as a series of provocative discussions guided by an advisory committee, with whom the curatorial team identified methods and questions to pose. Ten architects, artists, and designers were invited to participate in the commissioning of unique projects focused on an American city of their choosing. As a departure from previous Issues in Contemporary Architecture exhibitions, the premise is not to press for solution-based designs. Rather than commencing with typologies and specific sites, as is conventional for both architectural practice

and pedagogy, each participant was challenged to engage a specific set of “scales” through which interrogations of language, temporalities, and contexts might be addressed via the design of a proposed intervention. By coalescing design thinking in and around these ten American cities, it becomes possible to contemplate how architecture might “repair” historical and contemporary manifestations of racial difference and the material excesses of racism. Observed together, the proposed interventions make visible the scope of work necessary to respond to and adequately consider equitable access through holistic approaches to reckoning with the past (and present).

Each of the architects, artists, and designers advanced processes that allowed for thinking through spaces that embody remembrance, beauty, cultivation, knowledge, belief, refusal, family, liberation, truth, violence, ritual, play, performance, grief, imagination, and desire. In parallel, they explored forms at the scale of the body, kitchen, room, house, porch, neighborhood, community, street, corner, school, workshop, market, courthouse, prison/precinct, monument, museum, library/bookstore, dance club, bus, automobile, cemetery, and dump. This matrix of scales, spaces, and forms became the basis for each project. Community-based panel discussions and workshops were planned in concert with the exhibition participants to reflect on their research while also sharing individual design initiatives with students studying architecture and complementary fields. The discussions and workshops were to serve as mediums through which the contributors could test and rethink opportunities for expanding their initial propositions. The pandemic made it impossible to realize these plans.

Blackness materializes spatial narratives inasmuch as it catalyzes an assertion of identities. This Field Guide is conceived as a collection of essays that—when enmeshed with David Hartt’s suite of photographs *On Exactitude in Science* (Watts), which is extended in the exhibition by the artist’s 2020 filmic portrait of Watts—reinforces the historical, discursive, and descriptive contexts of the architectural projects. The American city, for the exhibition and this guide, has been apprehended as both an archive and an ever-changing constellation of visualities, sounds, and experiences. In the narratives of Mario Gooden, Felecia Davis, and Walter J. Hood, histories are drawn through an architecture and urbanism that seek to refine social truths. Unsettling the boundaries of that which defines home and state, Germane Barnes and Sekou Cooke consider the limits of both the domestic and the urban in

which infrastructures of the everyday are contemplated. For J. Yolande Daniels, Amanda Williams, and V. Mitch McEwen, the contours of communities, both emergent and at a distance, execute maps of elsewhere through which a lexicon for living in the American city is established. Locating one’s future (and failure) in and among the remnants of a not-so-distant past is possible through the stratified immersive environments of Olalekan Jeyifous and Emanuel Admassu. Blackness emerges as both an origin for and embodied within spatial languages that haunt the architectural forms of the present.

A conjoining of scales, historical research, and projective interventions transcends the limits of architecture to assert one’s contribution toward a shared history of belonging and a recuperation of humanity. In 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic further reified the boundaries inscribed on redlining maps between those who live and those who die, underscoring the precarity of America’s social contract. Returning to Du Bois, who writes that the most significant problem of the twentieth century was the “color line,” what might be said of those traces of the self-governing Black communities of Mound Bayou in Mississippi, Nicodemus in Kansas, Eatonville in Florida, Allensworth in California, and Seneca Village in New York City? We read these place-names and conjure the lives that inhabited the porches and kitchenettes, juke joints and schoolrooms, law offices and churches beyond



the line, not because of it. And through these names we are able to retrace histories that speak to human cruelty, unspeakable depredation, and imperial misadventure, while also securing—with unlimited promise—the prospect to think about, design, and build spaces of resistance and refusal, imagination and liberation.

1. Epigraphs: Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 24–25.
2. Harriet Tubman, quoted in Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY, 1869), 16.
3. See Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
4. Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Day of Reckoning”: Dreams for Reparations,” in *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: On Reparations for Slavery, Jim*

- Crow, and Their Legacies*, ed. Martin T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 215–18.
5. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xii.
6. bell hooks, “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance),” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 384.
7. 2018 marked fifty years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, otherwise known as the Fair Housing Act. While the bill initially prohibited long-standing unconstitutional practices discriminating against indi-

- viduals based on race in their pursuit of housing, landlords, local jurisdictions, and the federal government circumvented the ruling through various measures to ensure that discriminatory practices continued in every state.
8. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56–57.
9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1994), 2–3.
10. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 119.
11. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, trans. Francis Hyslop Jr. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1947), 3–4. See

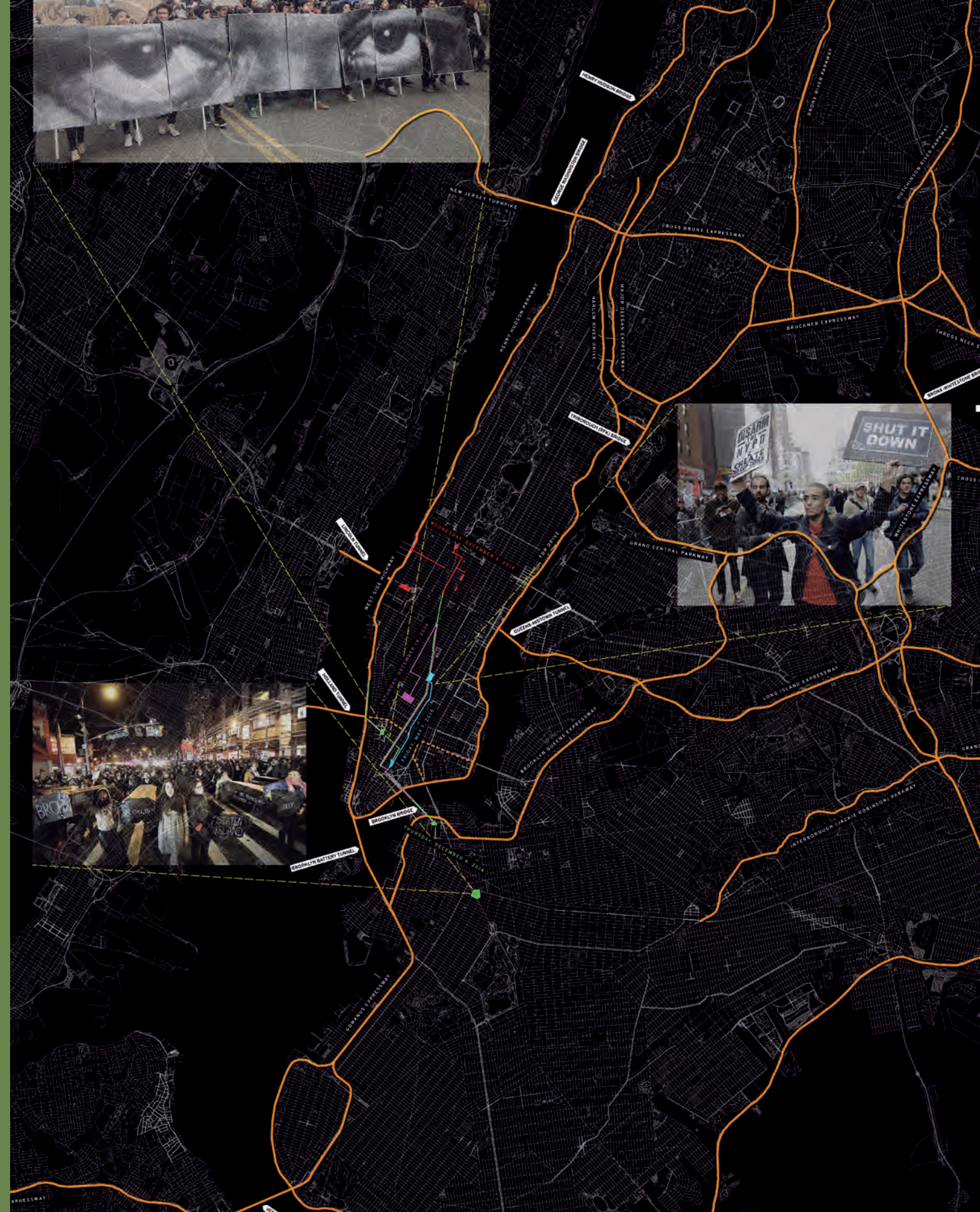
- also Mabel O. Wilson, “Black Bodies/ White Cities: Le Corbusier in Harlem,” *ANY: Architecture New York*, no. 16 (1996): 35–39.
12. See Mabel O. Wilson, “White by Design,” in *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*, ed. Darby English and Charlotte Barat (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 100–109.
13. Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson, *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).
14. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014.

Opposite: Carrie Mae Weems. *Untitled* (Man smoking). 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27 3/16 x 27 1/16" (69 x 68.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. THE FAMILY OF MAN FUND

Above: Sheila Pree Bright. *National March on Ferguson protesting police violence and the murder of Michael Brown, March 20–21, 2015*. Archival inkjet print, 30 x 30" (76.2 x 76.2 cm)

REFUSAL

Global Africa Lab. Im-mobility +
Afro-Imaginary: map of Black Lives
Matter protest sites and urban renewal
in New York City, 2018. Large-scale
wall graphic



BLACK GATHERING: AN ASSEMBLY IN THREE PARTS

Christina Sharpe



Part I: The Shape Makes . . .

I begin with Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* and the sermon given by Baby Suggs (holy) in the Black gathering space known as the Clearing. In that “wide-open space cut deep in the woods,” Baby Suggs gathers together the community of Black women, men, and children—the formerly enslaved and the nominally free—and tells them they must love their flesh and love it hard because yonder they do not love it. “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory-bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. . . . That if they could not see it, they would not have it,” and with that, a liberatory imagination and its bodily architecture are summoned in the Clearing.¹ Morrison lands her readers squarely in the power of the imagination. How else did the abducted Africans and their enslaved and then nominally free generations make freedom out of absolute unfreedom? How else did they—how else do *we*—navigate the spaces of “the long emancipation”?² How else do we usher something other than the current deathly order into being?

In her sculptural work and abstract paintings, contemporary artist Torkwase Dyson, like Baby Suggs before her, activates that Black liberatory imagination, summoning its bodily architectures using a series of forms—models, drawings, maquettes—as she theorizes and visualizes ways of moving through geographies of unfreedom. Dyson calls this movement Black Compositional Thought, “a working term that considers how paths, throughways, waterways, architecture, objects, and geographies are composed by black bodies, and then how additional properties of energy, space, scale, and sound all work together in networks of liberation.”³ Thinking through geographies of capture, segregation, and resistance, Dyson says that “if we are to understand the Middle Passage, we are to also understand the ocean as geography. If we are to understand water as a geographic site, then we can also understand the ships that were built to enslave and transport people as a kind of architecture . . . [that] evolved over the years specifically to house black bodies.”⁴ When Dyson says “the shape makes the Black,” she means that “Blackness” is made and remade in location, in the line of the coffle, in the

circle of the shackle, in the curve of the hull, in the plane of the rough board, in the porthole of the ship.⁵ If a shape makes, it can also unmake—if a shape can confine, it can also liberate. Dyson’s work pushes us to think how and what architectures make, to think through how forms and shapes function, how we construct and are constructed by them. Her work pushes us further to engage abstraction as, say, the violences of the ledger and its brutal calculations *and also* as a set of ifs, of possibility, as breath and breadth, as dimension and room.

Part II: If

If—supposition, hypothesis, possibility, requirement, stipulation
—a location, to live in if, to live as if
—To live (as if) in a future time
—as if . . . Black living was not interdicted,
as if the streets were not militarized and organized
against Black life, Black gathering, Black being, Black
breath, Black habitation.

To live as if there is enough.

Black Compositional Thought is one means by which to understand and unmake the violently anti-Black world in which Black people encounter, transform, shape, and are shaped by a series of ifs—noun and conjunction. We move in the wake and the weather—of the ship, the plantation, the coffle, the penitentiary, the kitchenette, the tenement, the slum, the ghetto, the refugee camp, the skyscraper.⁶ Shaped by the spaces and places arrayed, constructed, and organized against Black life, we seek out and make new geographies (temporary and provisional) that are able to hold (as in cradle, as in catch) but not enclose that life. If we are persistent, if we are cunning, if we are organized, if we are idle, if we are recalcitrant, undisciplined, and joyous, and even if we do not survive, we encounter and perhaps move through spaces of enclosure using the navigational tools fashioned out of duress, stricture, memory, beauty, cooperation, and the desire for and knowledge of freedom. What spaces might be available to meet Black life with care, to join Black life with the habitable, to facilitate all our wide and beautiful ambitions? Where might the building be other or more than just *the place where [I] stay*?⁷ What shape might it take? Where might the coordinates be

View of Torkwase Dyson and the Wyter-Wells
School. Graham Foundation for Advanced
Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, 2018



housed for the sustenance and extension of a Black interior’s various and myriad productions? Where might the simultaneously carceral, freeing, and durational tensions of *the latitude and the longitude of this place* shift, transform, break open, become unnecessary?⁸

In “Towards the Horizon of Abolition,” John Duda interviews educator, curator, and prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba about the difficulty, the stakes, and the necessity of the collective work to end mass criminalization and of activating a different, more just present and future. They speak about what kind of imagination must be summoned in order to arrive at alternatives to reforming policing and the punishment system. Kaba reminds us that the current shape of the prison is a product of reform and that reform, while necessary in the meantime, should not be confused with liberation. What, then, is the shape of liberation? What, then, is the shape of abolition? Kaba replies:

Sometimes our questions answer themselves, if we look right at the thing that is happening in front of our nose. People ask me all the time [what abolition looks like] and I’m always like, you know, there are groups of people who are living a type of abolition now. . . . [Affluent, white] neighborhoods . . . where there are no cops to be found. . . . They’re not posted outside anything. Their kids’ schools? No cops, no metal detectors. They have what they need. They have resources they need. The people are working. Talk about full employment! People have houses that are worth millions, they’re not struggling for healthcare. . . . They’ve got housing, healthcare, jobs: all the things that we say we want in a society that would be transformed enough to make it so people won’t feel we need needing

police, prisons, and surveillance. There are some communities already living that today.⁹

Kaba’s *if we look right at the thing that is happening in front of our nose* directs us to a particular line of vision, to an alignment of site and sight, to the ways that we might and should understand the *if*—and stay with that *if* as we think our way through and to what “repair” or “unbuilding” or “reconstructing” the racist, anti-Black, white settler colonial city would look and sound like *if* one was attuned to sustaining, really sustaining, Black life. It is not a remediating *if* or a disciplining *if*. It is an *if* that insists that the answers are right before us and that everything needed to live abolition is already being lived. To live as *if*: in a city without policing, a city without prisons, a city without zones of despair, a city with free and good public transportation for all, with free and good public education, with plenty of green spaces, with drinkable water, a city in which everyone has health care and access to fresh food and air, a city in which housing is a right. Kaba reminds us that our imagining otherwise of these spaces and ways of being together must not submit to the brutal and ecocidal imaginations of the parceled-out present.

A vital refusal to submit to these cruel logics emerged in 2019, when several Black women, “homeless and marginally housed,” formed a collective they called Moms4Housing and began organizing against the rapacious claims of private property and real estate speculation manifest in the hoarding of empty properties in West Oakland, California, by the company Wedgewood. On November 19, the women and their children—determined to live in the *if* of plenitude,

in the truth that housing is a human right and in fact abundant—reclaimed a three-bedroom house at 2928 Magnolia Street, a foreclosed home that had been vacant for months. The women were supported by a wide group of activists, some of whom gathered in the yard and attempted to provide round-the-clock protection.

Through their acts of resistance and reclaiming, the women activated an alternative present, insisting that: “We won’t stop until everyone is housed.” And also that: “We’re not going anywhere. We deserve to be here.” But at great cost. The city responded with force and might, sending in militarized police to evict them brutally, disposing their possessions on the street in the rain—and made them unhoused again. But the women also summoned a possible future. Wedgewood has since agreed that a community land trust will have right of first refusal to purchase the company’s properties in Oakland—now and into the future. In this holy Clearing, the flesh is loved, and justice is humane.

Part III: Monument. Memorial.

*. . . before any of us even break
into the work of our absence in the memorial,*

*we have been conquered,
fingers still jagged
from battle,
and we go on
and we age
into nocturne.*
—Canisia Lubrin, “Final Prayer in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception II”¹⁰

Dedicated to more than 4,400 victims of spectacle lynching in twelve states, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, was born of a proliferation of building within twenty-first-century America of monuments and memorials imagined as key to a kind of national repair—as pathways to reparation (if *x*, then *y*) or as repair’s (hoped for) culmination (“never again”).

That equation—monument/memorial = repair or its horizon—is particularly significant in the face of unrelenting anti-Blackness and the planned disrepair and infrastruc-

tural failure evidenced by deteriorating living conditions, environmental degradation, resource extraction, the dislocation and decimation of Black communities through Black land and property theft, the absolute and criminal failure to ensure clean water, the refusal of safe shelter despite abundant housing, the marginalization of Black political demand on its own and against ongoing and resurgent white supremacy, and so on. These dire conditions risk being made illegible by the celebratory narrativization of monuments and memorials to a terrible past that is not yet past—a past that we know continues to materially and psychically structure our present. In the face of Black people’s continued eviction from the category of the human, we should not mistake the erection of the monument or memorial for repair, or for the end horizon of something like justice or the fulfillment of something like liberation.

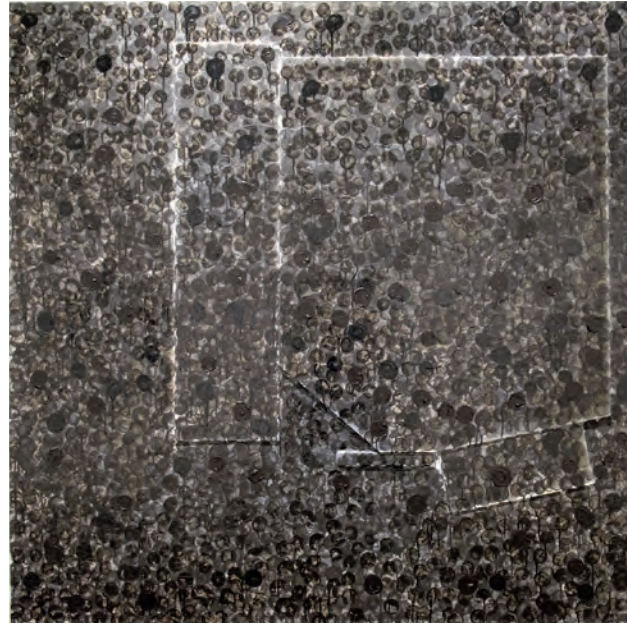
No matter the intention, every monument or memorial to atrocities against Black people already contains its failure. Because they are projects of reform and not radical projects, they do not imagine new worlds. They stage encounter. But for whom? Who is the subject seen to be coming to terms with an ongoing brutality imagined as past and then reimagined as an aesthetic project? Who are the subjects imagined as witness and participant in the encounter, and who is imagined as being moved by the encounter and to what end? How is such movement facilitated or inhibited by its architectures? The monument or memorial is a staged encounter in which the terrible grammars of the past, though disrupted, still remain.

The *I*, the *we*, the *us*, the *our* that monuments and memorials employ as narrative devices often require a certain innocence about the violence of nation—or a belief in nation, a commitment to reforming nation. One is asked to assume a particular position upon entering the space; asked to embrace memorial *narratives* that offer Black suffering as a pathway to knowledge, national and “racial” healing, reparation, and reconciliation; asked to embrace narratives that acknowledge violence but present that violence as anomalous and intermittent and not foundational and ever-present.

The architecture of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, with its weathering steel monoliths seeming to bleed, hanging above the heads of those who enter the pavilion, refuses to materially account for the contemporary experiences of subjugation in the lives of many Black people. While it is aesthetically beautiful and in many ways profoundly moving, to enter the pavilion is to submit

Opposite, left: Moms 4 Housing activists reclaim a vacant investor-owned house in Oakland, November 2019. Front row: Sharena Thomas; back row, from left: Sameerah Karim, Tolani King, and Dominique Walker

Opposite, right: Demonstrators protest the eviction of two Moms 4 Housing activists, Oakland, January 2020



to an exercise in terror—to participate in an exercise in bodily vulnerability.

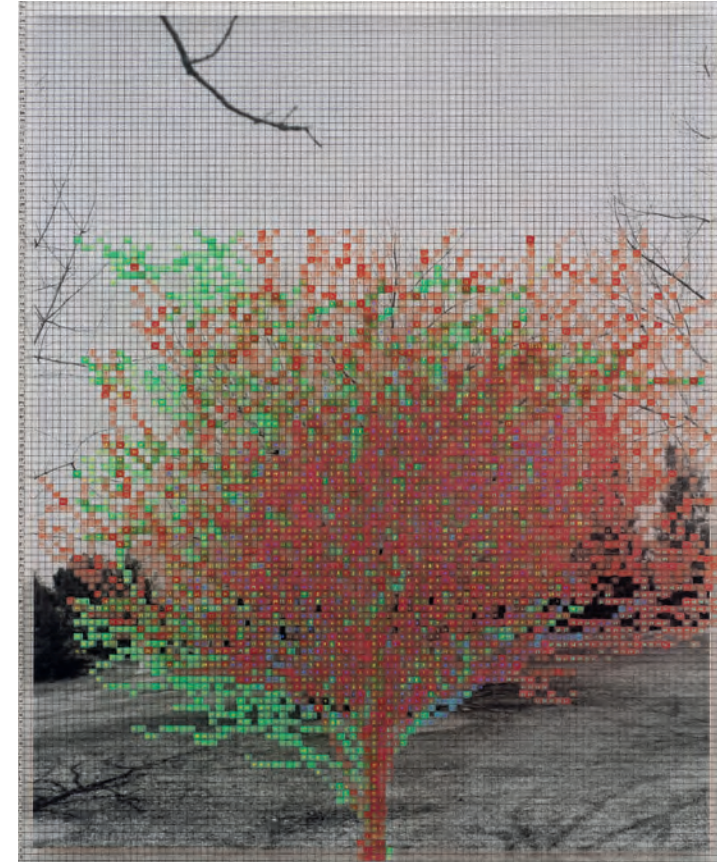
In contradistinction, Torkwase Dyson’s works resist this terror toward a critical fabulation and close narration in which the languages of architecture (line, space, shape, grid) abstract the forms of what can be measured, what cannot be measured, and an imagining from within a circle (as figure, as community). For Dyson, abstraction is a rubric and not a destination—she is rearticulating a history and a past not yet past. She is “unkeeping history” by moving into the if—if we work from the memorialization that is not monumental; *if* we take as subject that which we know to be true; *if* . . .

Two paintings from Dyson’s Strange Fruit series, *He She* and *She He* (2015), have been built up over time, layer upon layer—a painterly process that points to how lives are built up and that also works to both see and make Blackness in space and in relation. Dyson’s paintings offer a space of grace and imagine a place—like that Clearing cut deep in the woods—in which we, the unhoused, the nominally free, the Black and undisciplined, might gather. The perspective of *He She* and *She He* is a bird’s-eye view in which we see hundreds (or thousands) of black circles,

grids, lines, and other architectural elements. These works have depth and density and offer a different angle on and engagement with the history of lynchings.

Like those monoliths of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Dyson’s paintings are representational and nonfigurative. But unlike the National Memorial, they imagine an *if* of space and no-space. Using a representational mode borrowed from the language of landscape architecture in plan, Dyson paints circles to indicate the trees from which a man and a woman—invoking thousands of Black people—were hung. But the circles also map a more psychological landscape: the trees they stood under for relief from the heat, to rest and talk, to think or have a moment of solitude or togetherness. The paintings are, I think, a kind of geographical heat map in which the circle is also an exchange of energy, a space of intramural regard, a space of the couple’s co-imagining.

Dyson is interested in what can be known and what cannot be known, in breath and lips. The places in the paintings where the paint runs and the circles overlap are moments where multiple lynchings occurred at the same time and over time, but they are also where that man and that woman touched, embraced, and kissed; spaces where



they worked the land and rested and moved. The two paintings offer us different points of view of their time together in geographic space.

Dyson, Kaba, Moms 4 Housing, and each of the architects, artists, and designers of *Reconstructions* open us to the multiple urgencies facing Black people and then invite us to inhabit *if*’s possible and expansive and otherworldly architectures. Even as the cities and towns in which we live are increasingly financialized—and aligned more and more with capital and its reductive logics—Black aesthetics, Black building, and their radical companions just might carve out disjunctive, asynchronous spaces in which an architecture of Black living unfolds and gathers.

Opposite, left: Torkwase Dyson. *Strange Fruit (He She)*. 2015. Acrylic on board, 60 × 60" (152.4 × 152.4 cm)

Opposite, right: Torkwase Dyson. *Strange Fruit (She He)*. 2015. Acrylic on board, 60 × 60" (152.4 × 152.4 cm)

Above: Charles Gaines. *Numbers and Trees VI, #4 Animal*. 1989. Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, watercolor silkscreen, photograph, 46 5/8 × 38 5/8" (118.4 × 98.1 cm)

1. Tony Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 87, 88.
2. “The long emancipation” is what Rinaldo Walcott calls the unfinished project and the interdiction of a potential Black freedom. *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom* is forthcoming in 2021 from Duke University Press.
3. “Black Compositional Thought: Torkwase Dyson in conversation with Mabel Wilson,” in 1919: *Black Water*, ed. Irene Sunwoo (New York: Columbia GSAPP), 15.
4. “Black Compositional Thought,” 15.
5. Torkwase Dyson and Christina Sharpe in conversation at The Drawing Center, for *Torkwase Dyson and the Wynter-Wells Drawing School for Environmental Justice*, February 21, 2018.
6. I include the skyscraper in this list in reference to Adrienne Brown’s *The Black*

Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). Skyscrapers became another way to manage and contain Black populations moving to the city post-slavery and Reconstruction.

7. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 3.

8. Torkwase Dyson, Graham Foundation, Chicago, June 2018.

9. John Duda, “Towards the Horizon of Abolition: A Conversation with Mariame Kaba.” This interview can be accessed at <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/towards-horizon-abolition-conversation-mariame-kaba>.

10. Canisia Lubrin, *Voodoo Hypothesis* (Hamilton, Ontario: A Buckrider Book/ Wolsak & Wynn, 2017), 65.

IMMEASURABILITY

Emanuel Admassu



If architecture is a discipline that encloses space, making it measurable and exploitable, the spatial practices that work in the Black radical tradition exist outside of architecture, as refusals of measurability.¹ Such refusals manifest themselves in the carving out of temporal zones of liberation within various realms of suppression.² AD-WO’s installation addresses the pervasive systems of displacement and containment that impinge upon the sanctity of Black life, from the floor of the Atlantic to the ordinary environments of Atlanta.

My interest in the inseparability of the Atlantic from Atlanta is partially autobiographical, informed by my displacement from Addis Ababa to a northern suburb of Atlanta as a teenager. Both cities have rich histories of radical resistance to white supremacy, yet they maintain paradoxical attachments to both Blackness and capitalism, preserving wealth disparities while propagating examples of exceptionalism.

AD-WO’s installation is made up of two disks, each six feet in diameter, one horizontal and one vertical. The vertical disk evokes our racialized planetary entanglements through a drawing of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, which is a natural canyon, a planetary scar on the ocean floor, a metaphor for the violence that undergirds the extractive logic binding Africa to America. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is a space of disappearance that has witnessed an incalculable loss of Black life, from the Door of No Return to the port of Savannah, where Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, prior to the gin’s arrival, the state of Georgia was divided—like the vast and heterodox continent of Africa—not into nations but, rather, counties with varying densities of enslaved Africans. The maps measuring these concentrations illustrate the intimacies between bodies, cotton, and land, quantifying the ever-expanding definitions of property.³ After settlers cleared the forest, Savannah was divided into twenty-four squares, marking the brutal transition from the open communality of Indigenous caregivers to the violent enclosures of Europeans. Scars in the form of train tracks extended the port of Savannah to the hinterlands, establishing the city of Atlanta.

AD-WO. *Wiregrass WAHO*. 2020.
Digital collage

The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is also a site of movement and formation, a space that prefigures a global Black aesthetic. Disrupting the ocean floor, it presents a non-static zone of immersion, a space that “holds bodies and populations together by tearing them apart.”⁴ It is a topography that was an escape from the hold and manifests as a sectional inversion of it,⁵ signifying the slow erosion of confinement systems that attempt to fix and solidify Blackness. It is a vector, a non-site. Much like the vibrant spaces of Atlanta, its significance can never be fully captured by colonial metrics that apply mathematics to the material and digital realms of Blackness.⁶

In an episode in the second season of Donald Glover’s TV show *Atlanta*, Alfred Miles (played by Brian Tyree Henry), gets lost in the woods after fleeing from a violent confrontation. The camera cuts to a bird’s-eye view and continues to soar upward, revealing the ubiquitous green canopy that covers much of Metro Atlanta.⁷ A further expansion of this view would have revealed the spaces of Black quotidian life that emerge as clearings within the horizontal patchwork of trees: strip malls, gas stations, ravines, embankments, parking lots, and cul-de-sacs. The diffusion of the woods and the built environment provides temporal spaces for meditation and concealment beyond state surveillance and other enclosures implemented by racial capital.

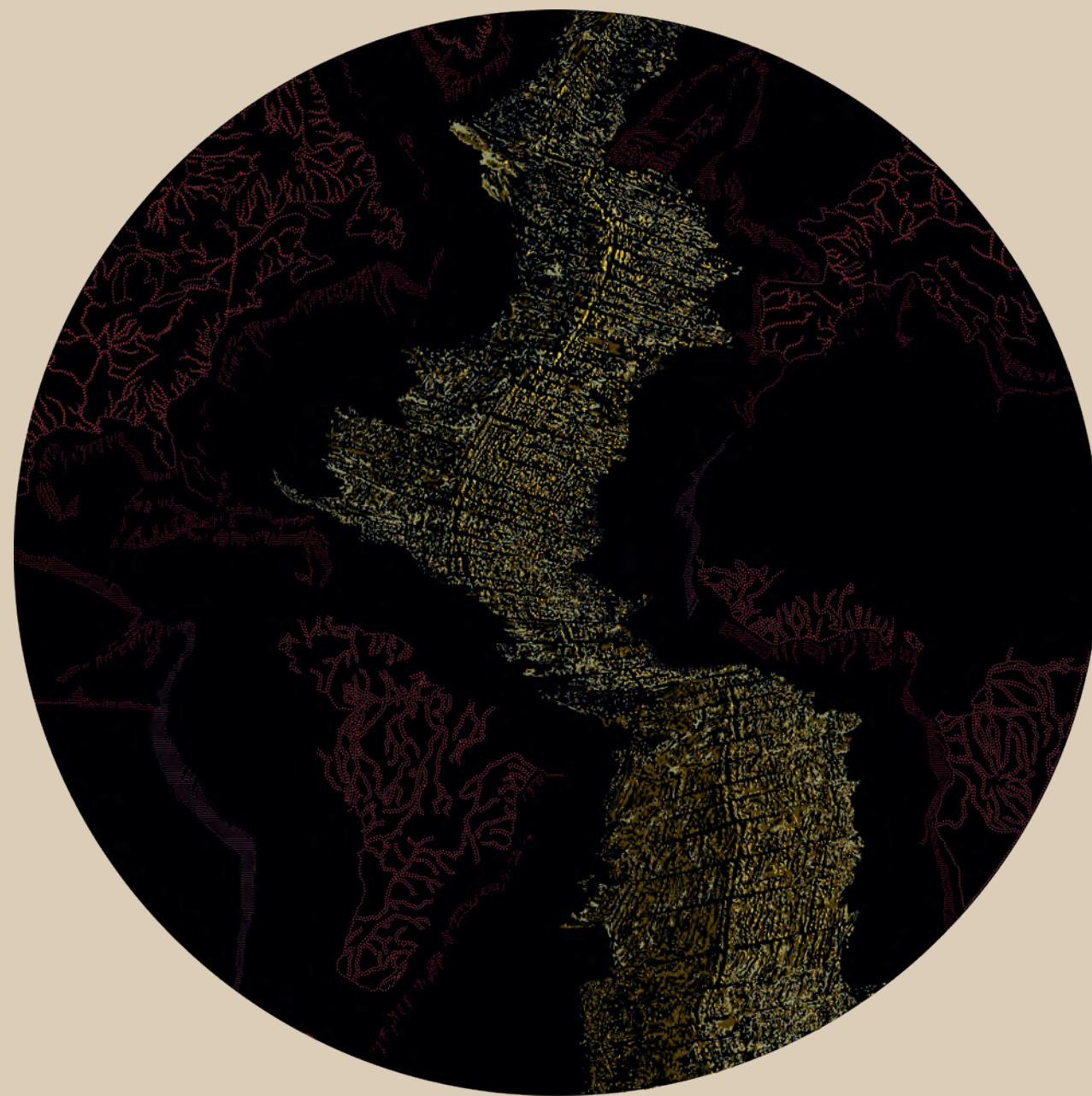
The installation’s horizontal disk explores these sites of diffusion by zooming into the scale of the city, floating above an inverted cone, projecting ambient sounds of Atlanta (one minute for every hour of the day): sounds of the forest and the highway layered with fragments of trap music. Black sand flows across the top of the disk, through and around a dense forest, vehicles, people, and buildings cast out of black sand. These are the blurred movements that frame the fugitivity of Black spatial practices while emphasizing the mythological nature of the Atlantan woods.

A constellation of images on the walls of the gallery present a landscape that is both mythical and ordinary. The spaces depicted do not qualify as Architecture because they are not strictly tethered to power and capital. They anticipate the contextual reframing that is emblematic of a city where



Above: AD-WO, *ATL Bricks*. 2020.
Digital collage

Opposite: AD-WO, *Planetary Scar*. 2020.
Digital drawing



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