

keyon gaskin,

d. a. carter

NASHA

A Braided Entry

1.

Pops and I sit in his basement surrounded by his record collection. We each sip two fingers of cognac. He schools me on the history of Black music and politics. I'm in my early 20s and arrogant in my youth. I think I know something, yet with every sip he casually undermines my certainty. It's humbling.

He tells me about an Isaac Hayes concert he attended in Kansas City sometime in the mid-70s:

The auditorium is pitch black. A spotlight hits centre stage, revealing an oversized music box. As the lid slowly lifts, a candy-cane striped pole rises into view. A figure emerges with the pole: tall, lean, bald, statuesque. A Black woman. Her body performs a soulful arabesque as it rotates before thousands of peering eyes. She is a ballerina in a soul concert. On her second rotation, she bends backward, gracefully, intentionally, her head and torso swan-like, sankofic, seeking return to a home that exists beyond the music box, the stage, and the audience. She descends into the music box. The lid closes. The lights dim. She's gone.

Pops never mentions Hayes's performance. Just the power of the nameless, mesmerizing ballerina. Over the years his memory and my reverie blend producing this shared (non)memory.

2.

There's this scene in Toni Cade Bambara's short story "My Man Bovanne" in which the protagonist, a black woman named Hazel whose children are newly radicalized by the Black Power Movement, dances with Bovanne, a blind neighbour, during a party.¹ Miss Hazel walks up to Bovanne and, to her children's chagrin, presses her body into his. I envision them hunched into one another; shoulder to shoulder, chest to chest, stomach to stomach, pelvic bone to pelvic bone. Amidst the partygoers, in the breathy warmth of that moment, they forge a public intimacy.

She chooses him for his hum; "this *thizzin* kind of hum which is quiet, but fiercesome just the same, if you ain't ready for it." A hum...that low vibration that moves with us...through us...more feeling than sound.

1. Bambara, Toni Cade, "My Man Bovanne," in *Gorilla, My Love*, Random House, New York, 1972, pp. 1-10.

For one night, at Bijlmer Parktheater,
NASHA attendees were part of a hum. It felt
like my father and I's shared (non)memory.
And it felt like the din of his basement.
In that din... a hum. Nyctophilic and radiant.

NASHA enacts black sociality across
medium, space, time, and context. gaskin
and his collaborators create an opening that
you pour myself into. A rupture you're not
quite sure you need. A yearning that you call
a *need* because it feels safer to *think* instead
of *feel*. Your prioritizing *need* is unnecessary,
an imposition. It's ok to identify this as
a *want*.

When was the last time you were held?

...two figures in white kaftans float through
the space. One of them, Adee Roberson, folds
us into serenity with a gong, chimes, and am-
bient sounds that just might be passing
through Earth solely for this performance.
As the music puts us at ease, gaskin marshalls
audience members to assist during the per-
formance. The volunteers are guided towards
star-shaped islands of layered white sheets.

Our guide, gaskin, has each person lay on an island with their eyes closed, and instructs the others to swaddle them. The wrapping, tugging, and tucking are prelude to the slow bundling of the swaddled participants. They are arranged in a row with the direction of the bodies alternating: head by toe by head by toe. Bodies at rest...

The plants in the room purify the air.
The soundscape lightens. Being bound
seldom feels this good.

When was the last time you were held?

During [redacted]: a self-portrait, I was one of three performers enacting a series of scores. The score that stays with me, called “cup dance.” A dance solo. It involves me putting on gaskin’s bathrobe, grabbing his phone, playing a song from a randomized playlist, and placing the phone into an empty coffee cup that amplified the sound as the song plays. The songs are randomly selected from a playlist created by gaskin. Adorned in the bathrobe, I stand, before a room of strangers, waiting for the song to begin. In that sliver of a moment, I beg for a song I know...something up tempo. A song that morphs me into a propulsive, whirling blur. “Paloma Negra” begins. Guitars fold me into a forlorn soundscape. Chavela Vargas begins singing what I understand to be a lamentation. I don’t speak Spanish so I act on how the song makes me feel. I let the tone guide me. I feel like a widow for the eighth time, spinning through a cavernous room, drunken...loving myself...holding myself...lingering and swaying with strangers, the robe a billowing third party. I share my sadness with the room. I delight in the mixture of uncertainty, anticipation, and excitement as I float through this non-communal assembly we’ll call the audience.

The hum continues...

Between performances, Samiya Bashir's *Field Theories* projects celestial poems featuring gaskin, moving from another space and time. The videos are a companion to what Bashir calls the "ink on tree" version of her award-winning poetry volume bearing the same name. The videos (six total) hurl us into the blackest of voids. This is the kind of unravelling I welcome, especially in/through/with performance.

Field Theories reminds us that gravity don't mean shit to an interstellar poem.

dead thoroughbred enters a room for the final performance. The mood darkens. The cascading gasps and whispers yield to held breath. The door closes, keeping light where it should be...outside. gaskin and o'neal arrive as an otherworldly structure, a towering shadow come to life with a pulsing third dimension.

You crane your neck and quickly try to figure out what to do with your eyes. Do you stretch them open so you can reconcile the mixture of disbelief and wonder? Do you squint them in this interrogatory way, fruitlessly investigating the draped layers of black which cloak the figure? Do you avert your gaze because looking directly at the towering entity feels too confrontational?

The figure morphs from structure/shadow to centaur-like quadruped. The driving staccato of the figure's heels punctuate each step. If your imagination allows, you can visualize sharpened, cloven hooves. Its heel-hooves scrape through the room. When gaskin and o'neal splinter off, we sit in darkness as gaskin's darting movements and o'neal's commands/meditations/reflections fill pockets of the room.

dead thoroughbred is acerbic and elusive. Their soundscapes simultaneously make you feel like you're in on the joke and the woeful butt of it. They surround us in uncertainty. Darkness and noise are the only things that seem clear.

Oil lamps produce two live vignettes, one for each performer. It's easy to believe that somehow they will now be stationary, easy to apprehend/comprehend. We shouldn't be so foolish. Vocal tracks, distortion, and low flickering lights conspire with and against us. Through sound, gaskin and o'neal speak to one another in a haze that pairs well with cigarette smoke. Ain't shit to do in that moment but pretend you're an air molecule, circulating in space, passing through objects and rejecting any concept of groundedness.

This is a black sociality that has no language.

When you encounter *NASHA*, refuse language.
Be present and patient with yourself.
Instead of trying to explain the work, let the
performance work on you. Allow it to build
memories, real and imagined. Let it hum
through you.

Trust your gut. It knows you well...

IF
I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT TO BE PART
OF YOUR REVOLUTION

keyon gaskin, NASHA
d.a. carter

NASHA is a work by keyon gaskin commissioned by If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution as part of VII – Social Movement (2017–18) curated by Frédérique Bergholtz and Susan Gibb.

Performers

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Essay

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