# Spinning on Blackness

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> It is important to remember that blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. 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.
>
> —Saidiya Hartman

> This door is really the door of dreams. This existence in the Diaspora is like that— dreams from which one never wakes…Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity.
>
> —Dionne Brand

Performance is an elusive object, always on the move, creating encounters against the technologies that assign meaning and value. In all of its etymological roots, performance is tied to an act of "doing," such as doing something to completion, to make, to construct, or to bring about. Performance is not only in the present, but it is an object that continues to move, circulate, and run away from the very performance of writing and other technologies of capture. From this view, performance studies can be viewed as a violent endeavor, an attempt to capture that which is free, to bind within its pages that which is attempting to elude its grasp. Yet, performance as an object transforms those who study it: "Just as performance is contingent, contested, hard to pin down, so too is its study."[1] The performance is not simply an object, but a "co-subject" that moves alongside the movement of the studier of performance. It is this *subjectively* disorienting practice that is the challenge and the "rush" of studying performance.[2]

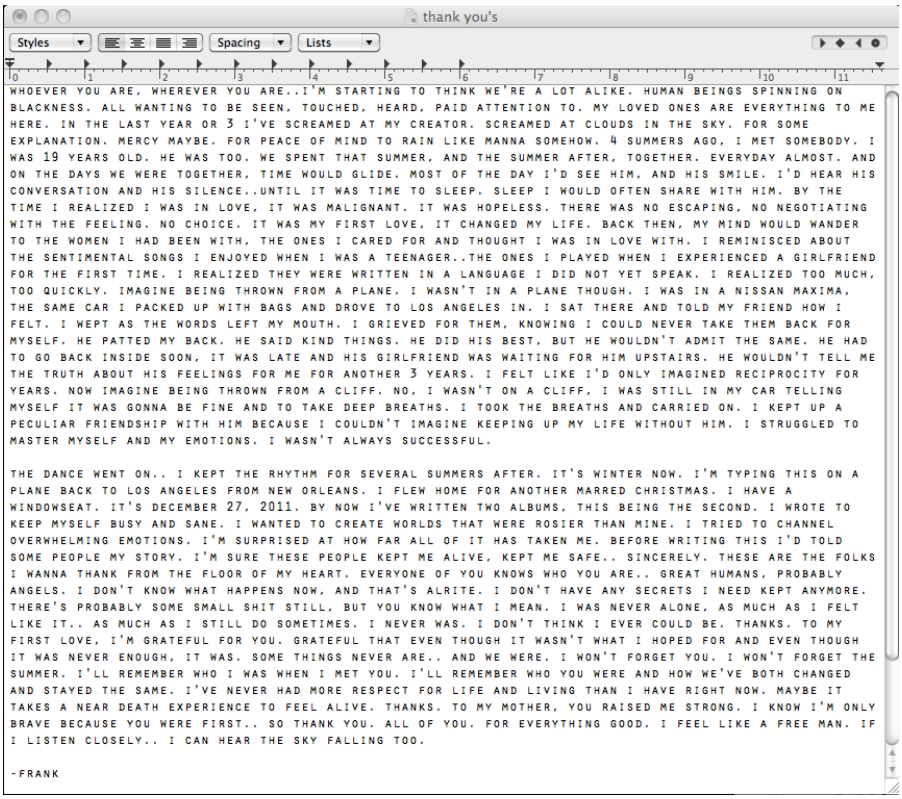
Black performance theory brings this concern with movement and disorientation to the study of black life by "offer[ing] a way to rethink performance theory… within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society."[3] The mobility exuded by black performers in different arenas was not an expression of free play, but a struggle with incredibly repressive violence. The fact that the black body *moves* is a very serious matter to consider given the enormity of the violence that it gesticulates into, moves through, and emerges out of.[4] Against the methods of reading the body as a text, Brown theorizes the body as a three-dimensional object-of-analysis that is not simply "seen," but moves on its own. Brown writes that bodies "can be commercialized, yet they are incapable of being owned. They are by definition public and collective, yet they can also be

intensely private, articulations of a bodily interiority."[5] Brown points us to the way that performance can be a heuristic for mediating between public systems that imposed meaning on the body and the way the body produces meaning for itself through movement.

With this in mind, this paper will explore this relationship between performance and publicity by investigating the discourse around Frank Ocean's Tumblr note of his first love. Hundreds of articles, thousands of words, millions of hits, shares, and retweets tried to locate the truth of Frank Ocean's sexuality, yet all of these writings further buried him. Our analysis shares a suspicion of E. Patrick Johnson's that "performance may not fully account for the ontology of race," specifically blackness.[6] This "ontology of race" is not the imposition of a metaphysical theory, but a particular understanding of being that is neither essentialist nor anti-essentialist. This particular inhabitation of essence can be described as a "third term" that is a radical *desedimentation* of this "fixed entity."[7] This is in the service of trying to figure out the relationship between "self-invention" (the *subject of performance*) and "dispossession" (the *force of blackness)*. From this we may ask further, can performance as a concept ever clarify what the ontology of blackness *is*? What does performance point us to as it may lead us away from this ontology? Can what performance point us to – in its elusive movements away from such an ontology – potentially outline the contours of what we may call a "political ontology" of blackness?[8] These questions will take us through an exploration of Butler's concept of performativity and Hartman entanglement of "performance" and "performativity" so that we may re-audition Frank Ocean's poetics of "humanity spinning on blackness" given to us in his Tumblr post. In moving through these thoughts, this paper will perform a critical (dis)orientation of thinking about performance's entanglement with the terror and pleasure of blackness.

**I.**

In 2012, Frank Ocean's listening party for his debut album generated publicity for something other than the quality of the album, *Channel Orange*. Several reporters focused on three songs from the album ("Bad Religion," "Pink Matter," and "Forrest Gump") that seemed to sing about relationships with a person with he/him pronouns. Instead of focusing attention on the music itself, it led to a firestorm of interest in Ocean's personal life. Across a diversity of media—from Complex Magazine to BBC news—journalists questioned the status of Frank Ocean's sexuality and what it could mean for both American popular culture and Hip Hop culture. Within two days, Ocean decided to respond to the noise instead of waiting for the official release of the album. On July 4, Frank Ocean released a post on Tumblr detailing his first love with a man a few summers ago. The prose was broken up in a few paragraphs and was stylistically placed in a frame designed like the software application named TextEdit.




Ocean would later comment that he planned to release this as the liner notes to *Channel Orange*. Instead of a declarative statement of identity, Ocean decided to write the note as a story of his youthful experience with love and grief for a relationship that never materialized. He describes how this relationship weaved its way through many major events in his life such as moving to Los Angeles after Hurricane Katrina devastated his home in New Orleans. This relationship continued throughout his first career in the music industry as a songwriter and then as a signed artist for Def Jam. The note takes place when Ocean was the third iteration of his music career, releasing albums under the moniker Frank Ocean. According to his description later on, Ocean was on a plane to work with Jay-Z and Kanye West on their *Watch the Throne* album when he wrote the note looking back on how the past three years culminated in that moment of success. Ocean describes how his songwriting was born in reaction to a love he did not have space to express, as a channel for "overwhelming emotions." Ocean's initial strategy for this narrative as a liner note is clear: the note would be an autobiographical narrative to welcome the audience in to understand the invention of his distinctive musical style.

Yet, Ocean's choice to release the story early is circumscribed by the conditions of the media's hunt for his sexual identity. Ocean flipped the media chase into his favor by performing with many eyes watching. Once he released his post, Ocean transformed from an underground rising star into a household name almost overnight. Of course, there was a significant amount of labor and media strategy that

went into this "overnight success." The Tumblr post was released at the same time as his debut on national television and the release of his first single for the radio. This is the double pressure of the black popstar, for not only is he playing with the fickle tastes of a mass media market, but he is also dealing with the known "gigantic sexualized repertoire" that pornotropes black flesh.[9]

The note was met with near universal praise, with even Jay Z and Beyonce coming out to explicitly praise him.[10] Much of the praise went for exaggeration, for example Telegraph declared him this generation's Prince for his songwriting and effect on popular culture.[11] Ocean's narrative was also described as endearing because it appealed to a supposedly "universal" storyline of unrequited love. Surely everyone – heterosexual or homosexual, white or black, normal or deviant – has loved someone that did not love them back the way they wished. Some reporters stressed the impact of his note on breaking a proverbial glass ceiling in Hip Hop, with some going so far as to declare him the first gay rapper even though he was neither the first nor even a rapper.[12] Yet, as noted above, Ocean's note does not make an explicit declaration of his sexuality. Ocean commented on his decision to write the story without any reference to sex in an interview:

> I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. People should pay attention to that in the letter: I didn't need to label it for it to have impact. Because people realize everything that I say is so relatable, because when you're talking about romantic love, both sides in all scenarios feel the same shit. As a writer, as a creator, I'm giving you my experiences. But just take what I give you. You ain't got to pry beyond that. *I'm giving you what I feel like you can feel.* The other shit, you can't feel. You can't feel a box. You can't feel a label. Don't get caught up in that shit. There's so much something in life. Don't get caught up in the nothing. That shit is nothing, you know? It's nothing. Vanish the fear.[13]

Ocean's expresses a critique of two things—(1) the interviewer asking him to label his sexuality and (2) the interviewer asking him to talk about the details he left out of his narrative. Here he makes a distinction between the "something in life" and the "shit [that] is nothing." This "something" is the universal concepts of love, affection, and romance. In contradistinction, the "shit [that] is nothing" is the (hyper)sexuality of the centerfold, where he fears what happens below the groin would over-determine the reception of his narrative. His comment is interesting for both refusing details while highlighting the centrality of editing for narrative construction. Ocean stresses his choice to give "you what *I feel* you can feel." He constructed his narrative shrewdly based on a calculation of many different concerns: (1) what he was comfortable sharing (2) what he thinks would be productive for others to consume and (3) details that builds the particular branding strategy he wants to carry forward. His answer reveals how important the invention of a public self can be to an entrepreneurial creator. In particular, his invention of the public self is

generated primarily through his choice to tailor his narrative to his own calculations of how the public would consume his invention.

Ocean plays with publicity, walking a tight rope between confession and secrecy. Ocean implies that there is an appetite swirling around the black queer performing body that he wants to avoid. Writing on various types of coming out narratives in the essay "On the Question of "Who's Out in Hip Hop,"" C. Riley Snorton writes that Ocean's post plays around with ambiguity more than we find in other public acts of coming out. This ambiguity tethers itself to a certain universality as a "temporally marked space of suspension where blackness might be unmoored long enough to produce a moment of possibility."[14] Snorton points us to temporality as the central concern of Ocean's post. The post focuses on youth, memory, and nostalgia in order to divert the gaze away from the "shit [that] is nothing." Ocean uses time to produce a sense of possibility in love, a possibility "where colonial, postcolonial, and continuously anti-black social conditions could somehow give way to a capacity to find the status of the black compatible with the status of human."[15] Ocean refuses the incarceration of identity by searching for something universal that escapes the box. This refusal of identity is ambiguous in that he seems to be critical of the media's gaze, but does not name the power relations and inequalities that structure the violence of media labelling. He instead appeals to the universal as a way to bridge "both sides in all scenarios." His pursuit of the universal that makes blackness and humanity compatible refuses to name or resist that which distinguish the two from each other. His description of "both sides" reduces relations of domination to interpersonal conflict that can be bridged through creative *labor*. This reduction of structure to the individual sets the stage for his branding of music as a product that can be enjoyed and bought by members of differing classes.

Beyond this critique of the self-serving nature of Ocean's nature, his strategy brings us to the curious way Ocean begins his note: "Whoever you are, wherever you are… I am starting to think we are a lot alike… Human beings spinning on blackness. All wanting to be seen, touched, heard, paid attention to." We can read his phrase "human beings spinning on blackness" as a description of human life as a universal choreography around a darkness. The nature of this blackness is ambiguous but seems to be oppositional to the universal feelings described afterwards ("wanting to be seen, touched, heard, paid attention to"). Will this so-called humanity fall into darkness if it stops moving or if it is not touched? Ocean uses universal humanism as a strategy of connection across difference, appealing to desire for recognition and feeling and a fear of blackness.

## II.

Against his own wishes though, Ocean's narrative was categorized by media representation. Ocean's Tumblr note was not released into vacuum. The story occurred in the same news cycle as Anderson Cooper publicly announcing his sexuality. In

spite of this, their public performances were very different. Cooper is explicit in his identification, writing in his letter, "I'm gay, always have been, always will be." Ocean narrative stresses the contextual nature of his feelings instead of his identity. While both Ocean and Cooper released their story amidst a slew of rumors regarding their sexuality, the rumors had been following Cooper around for years prior. His place in the cultural scene was already solidified and he released his story under little structural duress. Ocean, on the other hand, was in the midst of the pop culture equivalent of a manhunt. Ocean was a rising star in the process of releasing the album that would make or break his career. It became abundantly clear that unlike Anderson Cooper, Ocean could not simply wait until he wanted to release it.

While Cooper identified himself to the public, Ocean disidentified with the way queerness is categorized in the dominant media. José Munoz describes Ocean's style of disidentification as "the management of an identity that has been 'spoiled' in the majoritarian public sphere."[16] Disidentification can be understood as a form of "citational politics," where subjects infiltrate and remake the abject gaps within performativity. These acts of queer worldmaking are necessarily fleeting, yet they are also productive of a claim to mobility foreclosed by identification with the reiterated norm. These queer worlds proliferate at the borders of, and encircle or enclose, the performative norm. Thus, we can complicate the normal reading of Ocean's aim in a few ways: (1) Ocean is not merely seeking out the universal, but is attempting to inhabit the zone of the abject produced by the normative reiteration of this norm. This disidentification is not exclusive from a certain form of identification, but is a complicated way of citing the norm with a queered performance. (2) This disidentification occurs through his rejection of labels, therefore attempting to remain free of the violent naming practices of the dominant order. Ocean's tactics can be understood through the larger frame of understanding performance as ultimately "eluding our grasp," as an affirmation of his "body in motion." Ocean's tactic is to attempt to remain free—and thus remain a "something"—in contradistinction to being fixed—transformed into a "nothing." With Snorton, we can say Ocean disidentifies in order to invent a moment of possibility for his public performance.

Muñoz borrows from Judith Butler's theory of performativity and her explication of the citationality of identity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's text analyzes "the conditions of [the subject's] emergence and operation" and "the matrix through which all willing becomes possible."[17] If the body only materializes through the reiteration and citation of the dominant norms, then this also implies that there are identities—possible becomings of the body—that are performatively *excluded*. This is to say that for Butler's formulation, the construction of the body is only possible in "a differential operation that produces the more and less human, the inhuman, the human unthinkable."[18] These excluded positions of uninhabitability are, of course, inhabited by millions of abjected

bodies. And this—these gaps in, as well as provided by, performativity—provide the room for a resistance to produce a radical breakdown in social constructions. The consolidation and sedimentation of these norms produces the possibility of a productive crisis that the subject can take advantage of through what Butler calls "citational politics."[19] Butler's example is the re-appropriation of the term "queer" from the language of sexual pathology into a term of defiance and legitimacy. This radical form of "willing" operates within the matrix of performativity by performing a citation with a critical *difference*: the affirmation of the abject that is excluded from the norm. This makes it possible to produce a world "in which queer lives become legible, valuable, and worthy of support."[20] This is the critical differentiation of performativity and performance. While performativity is the condition of possibility for the subject, performance is a particular form of theatricality that, in its citationality, sits in the zone of uninhabitability, the gap of the abject.

Thinking along with Butler and Munoz, we may ask: Can we extend these forms of "citational politics" to the peculiar institutions of antiblackness? Is the slave abject? Is the "position of the unthought," to use Hartman's phrase, the same as the "zone of uninhabitability"? Butler is pessimistic on the extension of citationality to antiblackness, citing the ongoing re-appropriation of the term "nigger" as the foil to the successful re-appropriation of queer: "When and how does a term like "queer" become subject to an affirmative *re*signification for some when a term like "nigger," despite some recent efforts at reclamation, appears capable of only reinscribing its pain?"[21] Saidiya Hartman describes a force conjuring a "primacy, quiddity, or materiality that exceeds the frame of" performance in the very act of *uttering* "black" or theorizing blackness through performance. Hartman stresses that this force is not metaphysical but is the product of the history of anti-black racial terror.[22] The repeated spectacle of racial terror over centuries produced a material toxicity to blackness that makes it difficult to performatively untether itself from. Aside from this materiality is the fact that disavowal is a part of the grammar of *anti*-blackness. So, performances that attempt to escape from the hold of blackness end up repeating the very disavowal demanded by antiblackness. This is why Butler notices the appearance of a reinscription of pain in the attempt to disidentify with nigger—the disidentification with nigger is the violence that produced the nigger in the first place. Hartman and Butler raise serious concerns about the power of performativity for Ocean attempt to disidentify with media categorization.

In spite of the problems, Ocean found a type of success in his humanistic appeal. Yet, just as our analysis above showed that "citational politics" only intensifies the anti-black violence, so too went this strategy of disidentification. First, Ocean's affirmation of the universal grammar of love and acceptance did not force the dominant order to reflect on its own heteronormativity. Instead, Ocean's performance became an opportunity for catharsis and self-congratulation on the so-called progress of breaking a glass ceiling. Nicole Fleetwood describes the important role that racial icons play in mediating the divide between the espoused

values of American democracy and the clear shortcomings in its inequality: "The camera loves the black subject whose struggles for equality represent the possibilities of American democracy. Twentieth-century American visual archives abound with iconic images of larger-than-life and fixed black subjects in duress and achieving remarkable feats."[23] Ocean's story was declared a triumph on arrival, a proof of the progress of the nation to accept a figure such as him. Thus, the racial icon is used to both admit to the oppression of the past, but also the image of the icon consigns this oppression to the past. "Iconic images are emotional because they are born in conflict or confusion. Thus, we turn to the last and crucial function of the iconic image, which is that it encompasses a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis within the society, a deep problem that will already be coded into the picture."[24] The icon represents a progressive future and a redemptive present. This is only possible due to Ocean's own repression of matters below the groin, a censorship that allows a nominal acceptance without controversy.

Second, this moment of national catharsis quickly produces the "black community" as a phantasmic foil. If the dominant order is allowed to be temporized by progress—it is allowed to grow, mature, and change—the black community (in its many guises, "the hip hop community," "African-Americans," "the Black church," etc.) is frozen as a backwards culture or the last remaining space where homophobia is the paradigm. This claim is reiterated constantly in the discourse surrounding Ocean "coming out," constantly commending him for being brave especially because he is black or is a singer in the "hip hop community." *The Independent* reported that Frank Ocean's post was a "sea change" moment for Hip Hop, which they described as a "less tolerant community."[25] In the coverage of Ocean's story, this description was relatively normal, with the Black community being cast as especially homophobic in comparison to the increasingly progressive nation. Even the collective that gave Ocean's career new life, Odd Future, was used as an example of how uniquely homophobic Hip Hop culture is (in spite of the fact OFWGKTA might be the first popular Hip Hop collective to have multiple artists who are openly queer).[26] The phantasm of the Black/Hip Hop community is used as a ground floor to distinguish the progress of the nation through the iconic figure of Frank Ocean. Far from bridging "both sides in all scenarios," Ocean's ambiguous disidentification became a useful object for the construction of the antiblack national image.

**III.**

In spite of his intention, Ocean's capacity for self-invention is produced through a disavowal of the pathology of black sexuality. In attempting to repress the "nothing" below the groin, his performance swerved right back into it. Outside of the curated media response, the immediate reaction on Twitter to his Tumblr post were many who compared Frank Ocean to convicted child-molester Jerry Sandusky.[27] What trolls on Twitter do is not the fault of Ocean, but it does reveal that terror of

antiblackness exists outside of his reduction of power to the individual level. Ocean's strategy of refusing representation is a resistant posture, but one with severe limitations. His performance reveals that while this affirmation of humanism resists antiblack stereotyping in favor of the complexity of Black emotion and work, it also falls into a trap of ranking feelings and bodily performance according to what can be understood and consumed in public. To describe desire and sexuality as "the shit [that] is nothing" is to denigrate it. This is the double-bind of racial iconicity that Fleetwood writes about in her text *On Racial Icons*,

> The verb to denigrate, with its Latin origins and roots in light/dark metaphors, means not only "to blacken" but also "to defame," "to discredit." To denigrate is a castigation in which darkness is associated with incivility, evil, mystery, and the subhuman… The racial icon as both a venerated and denigrated figure serves a resonating function as a visual embodiment of American history.[28]

All of this is to say, Ocean's attempt to disavow the pornotropic force of (his own) black flesh was not merely a failure, but an intensification of such violence. Ocean's attempt to affirm his fluidity only spun him in a circle around the fixed, absent center of an always-already queered blackness.[29] In this way, Ocean's performing black body became the absent center of blackness that nation could build an image of humanity around. Iconicity affords Ocean popularity and money, but this also serves the other side of the coin: the denigration of blackness.

This denigration of blackness in the contemporary public sphere is the result of the *longue durée* of antiblackness, beginning with the devastation of capture of bodies from the African coast. Spillers describes this theft and *organ-ization* of the body as a reduction of the subject to "a thing, to being for the captor" or flesh "seared, divided, ripped-apartness, and riveted to the ship's hole."[30] This flesh, socially naked and reduced to a set of organs without a body, was an object to be transported wherever the transatlantic slave trade wished to shuttle them to. Spillers theorizes the flesh in distinction to the body. Hartman makes a slight departure in her analysis in a note in *Scenes of Subjection*: "Although I do not distinguish between the body and the flesh as liberated and captive subject positions, I contend that the negation of the subject that results from such restricted recognition reinscribes the condition of social death."[31] For Hartman, the slave is a body/flesh dynamic—person and property under the law—to be sliced apart, used, abused, and discarded according to the whims of the master and nation.

Hartman shows us across disparate, interlocking sites such as the coffle, the auction block, the slave quarters, and even the supposed areas of slave performance "outside" of the gaze of the master, that the performance of contentment and enjoyment were a fundamental aspect of this body/flesh dynamic. On the auction block, the value of slaves could fluctuate depending on their performance, so there was economic incentive in compelling slave contentment. This cannot discount the

economy of pleasure generated from the compulsion of slave performance. Outside of the work gained from a slave, the normalization of violence was used to weaponize the agency of the body against the slave to compel performances of contentment. In her groundbreaking text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry clarifies the weaponization of the body as making it "emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it. It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death."[32] This mimesis between pain and death is ontologized under the conditions of racial slavery where "the discursive constitution of blackness is the inescapable prison house of the flesh or the indelible drop of blood—that is, the purportedly intractable and obdurate materiality of physiological difference."[33] Perhaps this prison house can also be called a slaughterhouse, where racial slavery repeats the violence of its genesis, "a theft of the body—a willful and violent… severing of the captive body from its motive will."[34] In this schema, anti-blackness is a system of gratuitous severing and cutting black flesh from "its active desire" echoing throughout the longue duree of the modern world. In an introduction to a special issue of Black American Literature Forum, written with Farah Jasmine Griffin, they describe this process of severing as organ-ization, "The 'truth' of the body becomes evidence used against us. Fragmented, de-formed, and organ-ized—breasts, dicks, backs, hands, buttocks, and pussies are in circulation. The organ-ization of the body yields profits."[35]

Spillers' concept of the flesh as cultural vestibularity conceptually precedes the Butlerian concept of the body and performativity. And it is in the vestibule—what Hartman calls "the inescapable prisonhouse of the flesh"—where the black remains. Black existence slides back-and-forth between "sheer physical powerlessness" and a "general powerlessness."[36] This poses a conundrum of theorizing black performance, for the terror of powerlessness always haunts any attempt to assert a legitimate claim for the black to propriety and property (most notably the black's own flesh).[37] Even if unconsciously, black people have a memory or an understanding of the reductive violence that meets the flesh. Ocean's reason for repressing the fleshly aspects of his story reveal a desire to refuse how the commodifying gaze reduces black people to the raw vulnerability of the flesh. His weapon of choice against this commodifying gaze was the universality of a romantic melodrama. In order to resist hypersexuality Ocean forces the narrative in the opposite direction. Yet, the ambiguity of Ocean's narrative is its greatest strength, opening up very different ways to read its many parts. We return back to Ocean's poetic section of the Tumblr post which reads, "Whoever you are, Wherever you are… I'm starting to think we're a lot alike. Human beings spinning on blackness. All wanting to be seen, touched, heard, paid attention to."[38] The narrative simultaneously addresses, in a stunning intimacy, its audience and its own status as performance. Yet it is this imagery, of human beings spinning on blackness that is the most arresting and interesting. These are touchstones of the human—the desire to be seen, touched, heard, and understood. These touchstones may be what we could call a general

schema of the motor (ie the force that moves) that drives the narrative or dramatic strategy of humanism. Yet, like a possible energizing source for a motor, these tenets, and the bodies they move through, achieve their dynamism through a spinning around a fixed, absent center of blackness. Round and round it spins, revving up faster and faster, evading our grasp, contingent, fluid, and electrifying.

One could say that this fixed center is actually the norm while the abject—the black, the queer, etc.—is the dynamism that spins around it, eluding its grasp. Yet, as displayed by Ocean's projected relation to a phastasmic "black community," all the pathologies of the dominant community are projected into the absent center of blackness. In this trajectory of spinning, the subject can discharge all toxic elements through these reiterated acts of disavowal. This absent center is Hartman's "prisonhouse of the flesh." That black bodies move is undoubtedly true, but the movements' relation to the world is the crisis. In order for the black to gain the illusion of freedom and self-invention, a triple motion occurs: (1) the fixed-ness of blackness must be disavowed, as shown by Ocean's repression of the *nothingness of his raw sexuality*. (2) Such freedom becomes a monstrosity, an instance of frozen pathology and deviance, as displayed by the immediate comparison of Ocean to a child molester (3) Ocean's disavowal freezes him as an object of the humanity he is seeking, to be used for the progress of the nation he sells his narrative to. All of this then may give us a better sense for why Ocean ends his narrative with this, "I feel like a free man. If I listen closely.. I can hear the sky falling too."

Extending our epigraph from Hartman, Nicole Fleetwood defines blackness as that which "fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. [Blackness] fills in the void and is the void."[39] A void is not necessarily absence, but is a space of emptiness, a space that just *is*. Instead of the comforts of an identity, a being of emptiness is not a lack, but the full terror of possibility, a space where anything is possible. Without a schema, a path, or a way, black life is lived in the terror of possibility and impossibility. Dionne Brand gives us a different way to think about this in her collection "Land to Light On." The poem begins, "light passes through me lightless, sound soundless," which reads much like a black hole.[40] One can never see a black hole, but only see how it distorts the constellations around it. Light cannot escape its gravity. This a sense of place that normative geography cannot describe—an anti-*geo* that cannot be *graphed.* In the poem, Brand affirms this ungeographicness: "I don't want no fucking country here/ or there and all the way back, I don't like it, none of it."[41] This is not only a refusal of varying settler nations of the globe, but a refusal to take part in the national project in general. Brand lights on a refusal of any form of nationalism for a sense of place that exists outside of this conception. This is a political call of the void and from the void against any politics of integration or human community born from its dispossession: "I'm giving up on land to light on, and why not/ I can't perfect my own shadow."[42] Brand's poetics shine a light on a question for Ocean's performative strategy: what could Ocean have

achieved in his narrative if instead of calculating how the nation would consume his narrative, he instead focused on perfecting his own sense of darkness, his own shadow? What could Ocean have created if instead of seeing himself as humanity spinning around, he instead chose to perfect the Blackness in the center? Brand perfects a black poetics that does not seek integration and recognition into a global community. This is a black sense of place out its mind, just in time.[43] Instead of Ocean's politics of performative self-invention, Brand allows us to re-read his phrase "Humanity spinning on blackness" as a call for Humanity to fall into blackness, to perfect the shadow of "the shit [that] is nothing." Instead of the eternal motor of humanism, what would our politics and dreams look like if we affirmed the stillness of an absent center, a void, a shadow?

So we have spun back to where we began, where we are stuck, and where we may call home, if we so orient our thoughts towards this impossible object of black performance. An object made impossible not because it evades our grasp, but because it is the nothing we know too well, but can perfect. We cannot bear that what is grasped in our hands is nothing other than our hands, *in the flesh*. What if we took the advice of Baby Suggs in *Beloved* and choose, in spite of the world, to love our hands, to love this fixed and immobile flesh? What if our schema for understanding performance was neither mobility nor movement, but captivity?

## Endnotes

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20. Ibid., 21.
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27. K. Lincoln, "People On Twitter Are Comparing Frank Ocean To Jerry Sandusky," *Buzzfeed,* 2012, Retrieved from: http://www.buzzfeed.com/ktlincoln/people-on-twitter-are-comparing-frank-ocean-to-jer [Accessed 8 August 2020].
28. Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 8.
29. Tavia Nyong'o, "Punk'd Theory," *Social Text* 23, no. 4-5 (2005), 25.
30. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
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32. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 12.
33. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 58.
34. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
35. Farah Jasmine Griffin and Saidiya Hartman, "Are You as Colored as That Negro?: The Politics of Being Seen in Julie Dash's Illusions," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, vol. 2 (1991), 362.
36. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
37. Fred Moten gave a three-day seminar at UC-Irvine titled "Just Friends" where he engaged the relationship between his work and the group of work that has been "united" under the neologism "Afro-Pessimism." This relationship between "blackness" and "people raced as black" was also theorized earlier by Saidiya Hartman (mentioned earlier in the article) and is a part of a tradition of separating the ontological position of the black from the lived-experience that we can trace to W.E.B. Dubois question concerning blackness, "what does it mean to be problem" as well as Frantz Fanon's formulation of the "The Lived Experience of the Black."
38. The entire narrative can be read on his Tumblr page: Frank ocean, 2012. Retrieved from: http://frankocean.Tumblr.com/image/26473798723 [Accessed 8 August 2020].
39. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 5.
40. Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On.* New York: Penguin, 1997.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. I am thinking here of the song "Out My Mind, Just in Time" that ends Erykah Badu's stellar album "New Amerykah: Return of the Ankh." Yet one might also bring to this conversation the album title the first installment, "$4^{th}$ world war," that highlights the political urgency in her songs. This is music about the war between black subjects and the world.