

THOSE WHO  
HOLD A WAKE  
FOR NEGRO  
IMAGES  
NOTE 1

Those who walk, those who only ran, those who move around, displaced, transported, where are their images? **NOTE 2**

Those who remain on no soil, those always outside, those who live on the threshold, on the border. Those who do not get to sleep, those who aren't tired, those who do not know how to make use of the night and those whose knowledge is limited to it. Those who hold a wake for the deceased. **NOTE 3** Those who speak a blue smoke, those who do not own a space, nor a mouth, nor any other machine but a body dancing into dawn when everything is over. Those who hold a wake for gloomy images, those who hold a wake for images yet to come. Yet to be absolutely here. Those who gather in an instant a scattered continent with no name, those who deal with a rigged nation that has neither flag nor hero, those who live with false names, made up stories, forced families. **NOTE 4** Those who never spoke and those who speak not to tell. Those who lie and those who feel ashamed. Those for whom shame is a country and lying is a cloak.

Those who ruin a song expecting a revelation, at last, now, after ten thousand spins on the turntables just when we no longer hope, worn out from it all, a secret. Those who become a black liquid at the end of the night, a mirror of sweat spreading on the floor, the map of a world only filled with oceans. Those who distorted their bodies and those who broke it open. Those who have been exhausted. Those who hold a wake. And treasure the deceased names. Those who make a *foyer* wherein landscapes out of line precipitate. Those who excavate the stock of the museum of bones, those who hold a wake for angry images in their muscles, those who gush an archive onto the dancefloor. **NOTE 5**

Those who have a consciousness, **NOTE 6** those who have a double consciousness, those who have a consciousness squared of all the stories laid within themselves, of all the hands laid within themselves, of all the gazes laid within themselves, of all the grounds. Those who hold a wake. Those whose body is liquid landscape, those whose body is landscape of jungles, of railway stations, or machines tracking collisions and bus routes, boats' wake, planes' paths in the skies transporting humans tied to their seats like parcels made of useless and coarse material. Those who are dispersed. Those who gather for a moment. Those who are hardly able to sleep. Those who speed up time and those who slow it down. Those with yellow eyes in European construction sites and a green skin reflecting the neons of an African market.

Those who fit solely in the red and the black of America. Those whose monuments rest in ocean floors. Those who bear endless walks in their legs. Those who practice the noisy ritual of their breath. Those who are alive and those who ceaselessly rise from the dead. Those who hold a wake for negro images, without a master, unique treasure lying in the stomach and the genitals, in the chest and the retina, in the hand, the foot, the nail, inside the broken mouth that can only speak with a slant. Those who party, those who shake to the music, those who shake with images that no one can get, that no one ever saw. Those who hold a wake.

Those ones come back. Those ones create ghost places by simply being there. Those ones directly wear on their skin architectures of oil. Those ones throw the melancholic music of restless ghettos at home and wander in the suburbs' ultra-violet spectrum. Those ones whose faces are never really familiar. Those ones are harmful materials crossing every border, echo chambers for over the top speeches and reckless gestures. Those ones pour out nasty looks by way of ill-tempered geology and project their history with burnt eyes. Those ones exhibit their flesh full of writing that we do not have time to read. Those ones treasure the deceased names. Those ones speak and never finish a sentence, putting stolen languages through the vocoder.

They hold a wake.



**NOTE 1** I use the term “negro” as an adjective to name the qualitative attribute of a material, its negative geology, a chemistry built from travel towards oblivion, towards exhaustion and nothingness, but equally towards a return to the living, a comeback that does not go through a symmetrical journey, but through a detour<sup>1</sup> from an outer humanity, a sort of death.<sup>2</sup> The detour is not a restorative itinerary that can undo what has been destroyed by violence, but a struggle building a new way towards the living with a portion of it that is beyond repair, *a rise into humanity* (montée en humanité) to cite Achille Mbembé.<sup>3</sup> French-Algerian artist Kader Attia developed a significant part of his artistic practice around the idea of reparation and how to display it as a gesture of refusal against “erasure” that sees the body as a space where history can be written. In addition, an image is a *negro* image out of its introductory capacity, the ability to emerge and rush in with unrequited traces of the past; it makes the conditions and efforts through which it looms visible, in a spontaneous and always innovative manner. The image is moved. We do not *take* it, nor do we *understand* it. We appeal to the image, meaning we raise it to reappearance by *trembling* with it.<sup>4</sup> The image calls on a radical hospitality because it shows up to us and we are unable to identify it. And this *upcoming* image turns the place upside down,<sup>5</sup> it declines the establishing fiction as well as the pacification process that conceals violence.

**NOTE 2** The Anthropocene’s melancholic narrative fails to mention that in the preliminary scene of radical separation between Man and Nature, which, by the way, triggered the destruction of the latter by the former, certain human beings ended up associated with the wild half, a fungible material that belongs to the landscape, to be exploited, domesticated and later on (re) movable. Édouard Glissant, a poet and philosopher from Martinique, highlights in *Le Discours Antillais* the impossibility for the former Caribbean slave to intervene on his environment (in the case of Martinique), on his land, because to free themselves, they have to run endlessly and, for that reason, cannot stop to find and conceive

of means of intervention or to start a dialogue with their environment. Later on, when abolition is ordained, they cannot aspire to peasantry, or to be self-employed, as they are deprived of access to the tools, the apprenticeship and the status required to do so. On this matter, it is of interest to read the work of the French geographer Christine Chivallon about Martinique's 1870 insurrection and the post-abolition constitution of an entire legal system that reinstates racial prejudices in plantations while preventing the formation of the peasant class independent from major landowners. This sheds light on former claims of enslaved people, but more importantly on the foundations of French contemporary systemic racism as well as its narrative and legal strategies.<sup>6</sup>

**NOTE 3**      I therefore imagine a *foyer* for potential rearrangement, for reappearance, a particular space of consciousness—a plurality of consciousnesses—and, quoting the African American writer Christina Sharpe, a space allowing for “a state of wakefulness.” In her book entitled *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe implements and puts into vibration all the meanings of the expression “in the wake”: in the sense of the “wake” of a boat—the fragile trace on the surface of the ocean, a futile archive of the Middle Passage and a state of violence that flows through the present of post-slavery societies—but also the “wake” of “holding a wake for the deceased” as a state of consciousness, a singular being-ness, in a world where “the death of a Black person is not only foreseeable but it is also a constitutive aspect of this democracy.”<sup>7</sup>

**NOTE 4**      I would like to reopen here an artistic debate, not to bring it to a close, but to bring forward new elements. It deals with the African artist and their art—by default African. Having to depart from old folkloric assignments that shaped the image of marketable African art does not necessarily mean that one has to give up on slight hopes to search for new terms to define the status of the African in contemporary art. Here we experiment with the poetic potential to shift the sense of an undercurrent assigned to

the African from a geographical entity and a collection of fixed signs to a state of dispersion and discontinuity, a gaseous state triggered by Diaspora and forced migrations within and outside the continent, the trafficking of names and families, as in the violent establishment of an order by which the African is worthless and can only embody a deadlock of disgrace. From this first stance, the African becomes an endeavour to return, to reappear from the kingdom of death, a gesture of temporary recomposition of this experiential detour turned towards the living and ascribed inside the body and from the body to the realm of artistic forms. Here it would be wise to bear on the system that sometimes generates involuntary and undesirable forms, that do not always fulfill our expectations, and can be unruly and undecipherable or within sets of legibility that call on a certain attention. Finally, African as in the state of wakefulness that I highlighted earlier, in the wake of Christina Sharpe.

In addition, we will take on the task to consider the discourse of artists, Africans or descendent of Africans, claiming to be artists “just like any other,” in an attempt to point to a desire to rise, to ascend away from unfounded assignments. However, we cannot help but see here the trap of respectability being reopened as colonization continued into post-colonial times; lures the colonized with the promise of being recognized by the masters. All in all, where does the norm of “the artist like any other” arise, and who is its *body of reference*?<sup>8</sup>

We believe that if “like any other” implies “of equal human value,” nothing can impose an identical humanity, which signifies a humanity that does not pay attention to history or does not hold a wake for the deceased. Before the latest lustful assignments that summon African bodies to blissfully take part in an umpteenth capitalist iteration—be it an economy of political identities or the other way around, of vigorous wishes for creolisation—there exists more than the escape towards a norm produced by past violence fed by an universalism whose dark side can no longer be ignored. There exists the powerful ability to name ourselves without the need for self-appointment, a way to be accountable in the ritual of return

that is less of a discourse than a careful stance towards historical clues that use our bodies to “precipitate.”

**NOTE 5** We may have underestimated the way in which the colonized household has been blown to pieces by the colonial episode: to a radical extent with the Trade, to a deeper, insidious extent in other forms of colonization wherein the familiar and intimate circle was ceaselessly broken apart by and for the colonizer to infiltrate with ease. Men deprived of their capacity to look after their families, stripped of their responsibilities, the master appropriating women and children, building a forced household with his presence, his desire to see everything—to unveil all the bodies—and otherwise through his will for enslaved people to procreate. Further to this, the dispersion we mentioned earlier is an important aspect that shapes the experience of an African body. There is a submissive and gaseous family that leaves a mark at a time when the omnipotent discourse on the creole community represents the sole alternative to death proposed by leading occidental powers. For creolisation to occur, Édouard Glissant hints at the required evenness of terms to be “put in relation,” which is fundamentally an impossible horizon to reach. We are inclined to believe that a right to opacity on its own will not be enough to overcome the uptake and assimilation of racialized bodies on the return that we celebrate as the ultimate libidinous resource irrigating a decaying Occident. If a durable hostility and resentment compose a dead end, this community, for the reason highlighted earlier, will not be able to build itself either with the forced kinship that art and culture have been harmfully accustomed to. We will have to accept that different bodies share different images at the heart of the household and that the community development—the wake—cannot be the stage for clarification or the answer to conflicts. It is time to get over the desire to bring the situation to a close, the desire to move on that translates into a sort of impatience towards Occidental unease. The wake is a collective trial to witness and to learn who needs to

put “the body of reference” on the fringe. A way to gaze at, to pay attention to undisclosed images, speeches yet unheard. Henceforth a place is been built and re-actualizes itself from presence—human and non-human—as opposed to a falsely “natural” law. Nobody can aspire to a supreme reign over this place, as nobody knows what it will mean and where it will be.

**NOTE 6** I wonder if the singular attribute of a truly African museography wouldn't be performativity, as well as the use of the body as a tool to facilitate the return of the as-yet-unseen part of the objects.

**NOTE 7** In his curatorial proposition for Bamako Photography Encounters' Biennale, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung introduces the idea of “streams of consciousness” to translate the relationship between the landscapes lived by the artist and their internal ones. The latter suggest the unprecedented density of inner landscapes that precipitate into the African image as a counter-effect of the silence, the withholding, and accumulation that could only occur within the self, inside the body as the sole rescued terrain, a secret soil although a wounded one. African American thinker W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the idea of double consciousness<sup>9</sup> in regard to black diasporas, the consciousness to belong to both a nation-state and to the African world. We assume that an internal accumulation only augmented the levels of consciousness. An image in excess finds its way in the unbridled race towards death, heading towards the living in sight. In landscapes, scents, and sensations, it forms an ecology and a collection of unprecedented worlds, a testimony formulated through a language that calls on the gathering of bodies and the conflict of consciousness for the negro part to appear.

1. See Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discours: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989). See also Louis Chude-Sokei, "Blackness and Becoming: Édouard Glissant's Retour," *The Black Scholar* 48, no. 4 (2018), 43–53.
2. See Norman Ajari, *La dignité ou la mort* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).
3. See Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010). English translation to be published by Columbia University Press in April 2020.
4. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
5. See Jacques Derrida & Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
6. See Christine Chivallon, "L'assertion du moment colonial ou la répétition de la scène primordiale : L'insurrection du Sud de 1870 à la Martinique," in *L'esclavage, du souvenir à la mémoire* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 201–241.
7. Christina Sharpe, *In the wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 7. Here Sharpe is citing Joy James's 2012 lecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, entitled "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs."
8. Here we use "body of reference" to talk about a collection of habits, gestures, and ways of doing or communicating that in our opinion are part of what shape leading institutions.
9. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1903).