



Against Black community? Organizing solidarity through the archive

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review of

Best, S. (2018) *None like us: Blackness, belonging, aesthetic life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (pp. 208, \$24.95 in PB, ISBN: 978-1-4780-0150-8, DOI: 10.1515/9781478002581)

In the embers of May 1968, French post-structuralists such as Maurice Blanchot (1988) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1986) made the argument that ‘community’ was no longer a tenable concept, nor a desirable political end. Per this line of thought, the ‘communism’ that would close off and essentialize what constituted community had to be fundamentally rethought. For Jacques Derrida, the archive was similarly an object of (State) power that closed off what could be (communally) known – a foundationally troubled mode of consignation, often violent in its ‘gathering together [of signs]’ (Derrida 1996). It is in these strains of attempts to rethink community and communitarian thought that Stephen M. Best’s *None like us* intervenes, stressing the apparent impossibility of organizing collectivity – specifically, ‘Black’ community – through the archive. Beginning with how Black studies has (re)constructed ways of knowing Black – especially Black American – pasts, Best takes the reader through ‘surface readings’ of artwork and historical records, arguing for an ‘unhistoricist’ that, he proposes, would

enable contemporary Black people to reconsider their grounds of being-together. Specifically, Best argues, organizing Black community around the historical wound of slavery is an error; the horrors of slavery should not be treated — literarily and historically, narratively and archivally — as an accumulative and accretive epistemology and ontology, but a *past* that shatters any attempt at consignment, at present community.

Best's critique of community begins with Black studies itself, particularly with what he calls its 'communitarian impulse', that is, 'the thesis that black identity is uniquely grounded in slavery and middle passage' [1] and that 'the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present' [2]. The phrasing of '*none like us*', which Best takes from David Walker's 1833 text *Appeal to the coloured citizens of the world*, thus implies a litote, producing 'a meaning by denying its semantic opposite' [8]. The 'us' that is apparently constituted in Walker's time, when slavery persists in living memory, is called to negativity, to a hope that the figure of the slave be impossible in the future. 'None like us' also, Best suggests, calls to a reader in the present day to say that none from that wounding time be reproduced, a call that may be read as underscoring 'an assumed and impossible universality to Walker's "us"' [9].

What Best wants us to pay attention to are two tendencies he notes in the *reproduction* of literary and historical narratives of slavery over the past few decades of (American) Black studies — what he calls 'the recovery imperative' and 'melancholy historicism'. The former is 'the ethic of an empathetic historicism fundamentally recuperative in its orientation' [12], that seeks to recover what is unrecoverable. What was instituted and conserved (Derrida 1996) in the archive *then* cannot, Best argues, be constitutive of the *now*. Best's criticism of the recovery imperative implicitly rejects the construction of 'counter-narratives' (Bastian 2006) that can reconstruct an alternative past from and through historical recovery. This imperative is to be interrogated because what it seeks to recover *from*, i.e., enslavement, becomes what is to be recovered at all, that is, 'a "we" *at the point of our violent origin*' (emphasis added) [14].

Per Best, then, work that follows the recovery imperative recovers violence from the archive to apparently produce a ‘melancholic’ treatment of history, a narrative mode that he argues was inaugurated by Toni Morrison’s classic novel, *Beloved*. This narrative performs accounts of pain — most notably, of slaves — to extend to the racialized social body as redemption, as an ontological beginning; here, ‘blackness derives from bearing a negative relation to [history]’ [9]. Such a ‘transference *from readers to characters*’ (emphasis added) [78], as seen in readings of *Beloved*, acts, according to Best, as a ‘refusal of...detachment’ from, and ‘persistent identification’ [68] with, history — with a melancholy past. Assigning the beginnings of Blackness to such violence is therefore problematic to the author, as it relies on ‘a sense of impossible black sociality’ [10], one that is ‘to be appreciated in the *failure* to make its racial legacy present’ (emphasis added) [78]. In other words, Best argues that these historically-derived accounts of moments when Black people were subject to the violences of slavery are mistakenly reproduced as the constitutive conditions of Black solidarity. These accounts apparently fail *because* they are interpreted as accounts of solidarity rather than separateness, i.e., where a Black *person’s* wound is misread as that of Black *people’s*. Best therefore encourages us to read in these instances ‘a selfhood that occurs in disaffiliation rather than in solidarity’ [22].

These differences in accounting for Black pasts leads to Best arguing in favour of a *rhetorical* mode of uncovering what happened before (irreducible to something like a collective past), rather than a *historical* mode. The emphasis here is on how we might *write* history, rather than on recovering the lives of archived subjects — or, Best might argue, the objects — of history. It would mean questioning ‘what it would mean to write about figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness, who resist our projects of historical recovery’ [25]. Best begins with the question of how we might read the *surface* of historical records, of the archive, before moving to the archive itself, and in particular the ‘rumors on the surface of the archive’ [26], the indeterminate and indeterminable traces from which we have recovered history. Along the way, Best rejects melancholy historicism, that which assumes slavery as the originary point for Black community, instead setting out through the rest of the book in search of ‘a historicism that is not

melancholic but accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it' [20].

(Surface) Reading the archive

Historical recovery or 'reconstruction' from 'below' the surface of the text, the textual present, is for Best doomed to always carry presentist modes of relation to refigure the past. A critic — of art or narrative — who engages in such recovery may be accused by Best of overestimating their critical remove from and/or mastery over the object of recovery. For Best, an artwork (or the work of art) provides an alternative model for thinking that confronts us in the present, against historicizing depth. Through the example of El Anatsui's *Hovor II*, which comprises thousands of reworked liquor bottle caps, Best argues that the political note here — Europeans traded alcoholic drinks such as Scotch with Africa from the time of the earliest contact between the two peoples — lies *on the surface* of the artwork, rather than requiring critical access. By reading 'surfaces that point reflexively to their own, internal complexities so that they can also be said to offer their own form of critical understanding and, in that sense, to be the very medium in which thought happens' [34] such as those of 'the layered paper canvases of... Mark Bradford, Gwendolyn Brooks's free-verse poems, and... the recent novels of Toni Morrison' [22], then, is to enact a 'non-sovereign form of critical subjectivity' [33]. '[T]hinking *like* a work of art' (emphasis added) [35], then, forces us to linger with what that art *itself* surfaces. The work of art presents itself as a clue to, and method for, surface reading (Best and Marcus 2009). Dissolving the critic into the *experience* of art, then, allows Best to emphasize that the political work of such experientiality is 'not an interpretation or contextualization of it, but a *description* that allows one to inhabit it' (emphasis added) [36]. Surface reading, then, works out an '*aesthetics of the intransmissible*', one that eludes knowing its depths in its shimmer. For Best, this enacts "a "style" of freedom: freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and legitimacy; of history as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction; of diaspora as kinship, belonging, and dissemination" [22-23]. Such an

aesthetics also re-figures the surface as a layering of fragments, of ‘notions of disturbance, interruption, performance’ [51] that enrich the surface.

The surface is then not an inert layer, but a *layering* of fragments accumulated through history. The critic can ostensibly reveal something of that history without needing to reach (impossibly, Best argues) for a cohering of those fragments. Best’s method, then, enacts a ‘separation [from the past] as a condition of relation [in the present]’ [56]. Such a distancing, says Best, is to perhaps be found in the narrative of Morrison’s *A mercy*, written decades after *Beloved*, which ‘abandons us to a more baffled, cut off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past’ [78] and hence ‘what it means to be held by the grip of slavery but not race’ [79]. The slavery narrative, once again, is a melancholy historicism that is not to be treated as constitutive of Blackness.

This critical distance that Best argues for is both temporal and subjective. The epistemic anxieties that arise from such a project of knowing, or more precisely, the past’s unknowability, is especially relevant for reproducing history from the archive(s). The archive notably presents a ‘fiction...of plenitude’ [84], an excess of the recorded past, while still suffering from a notable poverty in what is *knowable* about that past. Archival work, then, has a foundational lack that Best wants us to pay attention to. He is, however, not concerned with the production of archives (cf. Azoulay 2019, Mbembe 2002, Sekula 1986) nor its architectonic dimensions (cf. Derrida 1996, Mbembe 2002). He is not concerned so much with the Derridean *arkhe*, the memorial ‘inside’ of the archive (Derrida 1996). He is, however, concerned with the archival aspect of memory, or rather, the archive’s deformation of memory. We cannot get past the outer skin — the surface — of the archive not because we cannot access the material depths of the archive, but because there is nothing in it that is epistemically unmarked by racial or colonial violence. The implication, then, chimes with Arielle Azoulay’s (2019) invocation to value what remains ‘outside’ the archive, outside the violent making of historical memory. Past the surface, the critic is ‘at risk of mistaking the recovery of the past for its redemption’ [87], especially if we don’t recognize the ‘ontological *disturbance* [in Black culture] the archive produces’ [88]. In other words, the slave figures that are recovered by the

critic from the archive are ‘metaleptic, the figure of a figure’ [90] — the critic reproduces a violent reduction of real, which is to say fuller, persons. Reading these figures on the surface, then, is Best’s attempt not to *misrecognize* those figures as easily readable in — or simply transferable to — the present.

This mode of surface reading, then, immediately throws up problems of the *critic’s* spatiotemporal — which is to say historical — location, and more importantly if there is such a thing as a stable surface at all. As Carolyn Lesjak (2013: 246) puts it, ‘[s]urface reading hopes to freeze time, to stay in the present in its appeal to the commonsensical, to a thing’s face value’. However, this occludes the movements of those apparent ‘fragments’ that came to be arranged as the surface, which can only be read in their historical arrangement. Best’s surface reading of artwork — which is also how he reads the archive — is neither exactly ‘along the grain’ or ethnographic (Stoler 2010) nor hermeneutic (Lesjak (2013: 244): ‘a hermeneutics of suspicion is replaced by a suspicion of hermeneutics, a disavowing of interpretation itself’); instead, it claims that what the surface *presents* is what the surface *is*. This seems to ‘leave untouched the level on which ideology [and other productive tensions] structures the apparent contiguity and coherence of the surface of the text itself’ (Lesjak 2013: 249). This negativity at the heart of the text — an absent-presence which pulls reading in a certain direction — produces a certain narrative of the wound, of the history of slavery (one certainly structured by colonial and racist power) that Best identifies but does not *interpret*. This negativity may in fact be better understood by *reading dialectically* — by reading the surface of the text in its negation, looking *below the surface to surface* the historical forces that structured the unknowability of the past, the violence that made Black sociality impossible. Such reading, then, is of a particular political project (informed by Marxism, certainly, but also queerness — Lesjak cites both Fredric Jameson’s espousal of dialectical ideological critique and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s attention to the sensory, lived experience of reading) that would value how the organization of the text can both reflect and deform sociopolitical organization.

It is important here to keep in mind how the politics of reading dialectically comes up against the political valences of the critic as interpreting-self, the latter of which for Best must be pursued towards the direction of the abnegation of the self. Such a mode of reading, extended to the social text, can generate a reading of community as a form in which the critic, the apparent political agency, is always-already imbricated and implicated in, and cannot *exceed*. Specifically, Best argues that this latter orientation is truthful to the political tradition that Cedric J. Robinson brought forth: ‘There is an essential opacity to the black radical tradition, an “imagination” amenable to neither the *utopianism* of a revolutionary consciousness nor the pure *negativity* of a black nihilism’ [41]. It is important to respect this tradition, and acknowledge the questions surface reading asks of us, on why even ‘effective’ dialectical reading can fail in ‘doing anything’ to the depths (such as those produced by ideological structures) of the text.

Archival limits

The opacity of texts, for Best, coincides narratively and politically with the opacity of archived acts and figures that he suggests have been historically instrumental in producing narratives of Black ‘community’. Knowing and reproducing these agencies in contemporary narratives is a path to tread with caution.

For Best, these ontoepistemological difficulties, especially of the political self, are exemplified at their limit with the (recording of) the act of suicide. Narratively, it represents the unknowable, or the knowable at its limit. The act itself becomes, for Best, ‘a singular principle of negativity at the center of the order of history’ [94]. The presence of acts of suicide in the archive, he contends, subverts the classic distinction between a closed totality and an opening of/through creativity, between structure and agency [101-103]. Simply put, what agency might we ascribe to an act of suicide? *Whose* agency? Death, as a ‘fact of social existence’ [99] is made politically useful when archived as suicide, but this political agency attributed to suicide, argues Best, is another instance of attempting to ‘restore to wholeness’ a community of the enslaved which simply cannot be. Taking up the case of

Willem Bosman's *A New Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705), Best points out how an error of translation produced a figure of the suicide-bombing 'Commander in Chief of the *Negroes*', where in fact, the (accidental) suicide bomber was a Dutch commander. In other words, the agent of suicide is misattributed, eliminating the source of political agency in the act of suicide that abolitionist scholars have 'romanticized' as 'good death' [106].

To reproduce archived acts of suicide as a particular kind of political agency that could make collectivity is, per Best, to mistake the form of that agency. Reading the corrected translation is to recognize that agency as 'expressed as a refusal of the possibilities of social action that have been shaped and organized by colonial power — in short, when the enslaved innovate in the interest of their own oblivion' [105]. It is an act of negativity, of *negative creativity*, that distends its place in the archive through its opacity; the opacity of the act, then, reflects the slave's (the past figure's) opacity. Reading suicide as political practice is difficult because that reading is conditioned by the act's colonial-archival figuration, by the metalepsis wherein the recovered slave 'makes himself once over from the stuff out of which he had been made' [105].

Like suicide, the rumor is a surfacing of fragments that are readable as they come to us via the archive — in other words, without certainty in their relation to the eponymous 'us'. Their very whispered uncertainty would mean that they cannot functionally be put to use for an organizational project. The many voices that make the rumour paradoxically vacate it of a subjective position. Rumour, provided with 'material textual support', becomes an aural object that is 'neither ordinary speech nor literary invention, but something approximating their transaction' [121]. Rumour as archive, archive as process. It is then the very availability of rumours to us that 'makes them more subject to doubt at the level of their ontology' [115] since their auralness is now reified as writing, beyond the fragmented ontological impossibility, their whispers, that rumours surface from. We were never meant to read the rumour. Rumours are emblematic of the non-recoverability of historical subject-making. Leave the past in the past, says Best (which is to say, in the colonial archive). Do not make community out of

a melancholic past. What else, however, gets left behind if and when we leave the past alone?

An unhistorical organization?

The descriptions of violences done to and by raced subjects in the archive cannot then, per Best, be (re)written and narrated as registers of that which may record (and hence possibly organize) a collective Black experience. The ‘past’ recovered from recordings of the enslaved is separate from the present — it is *theirs*. Such a non-melancholic historicism would require us ‘to see in our severance from figures in the past, to see in their opacity, the idea that they are present to us in the only way they can be, and thus to be acknowledged, but not to be known’ [99]. But is melancholy, history, and collectivity to be so easily abandoned?

We may first ask of Best, is melancholic historicism merely reparative or could it be performative of something other than melancholy? Diana Taylor (2003) argues that there is no subjectivity outside the historical memory, even — in fact, especially — if such memory is traumatic; its ‘remembering’, its ‘thought’, organizes an embodied subjectivity that reanimates present possibilities of collectivity. These possibilities reverberate in differential ways across the social body; trauma, which is ‘anti-archival by definition’ (ibid: 193), cannot be reduced to a singular experience, an argument which Cvetkovitch (2003) also makes. Particularly, it is embodied and communitarian *performance* that makes trauma anarchival: ‘Looking at performance as a retainer of social memory engages history without necessarily being a “symptom of history”; that is, the performances enter into dialogue with a history of trauma without themselves being traumatic’ (Taylor 2003: 210). In other words (and *pace* Best), it may not be trauma but mourning that is to be found in the heart of the archive (Cvetkotvitch 2003). Melancholy, then, does not need to hold onto its object in a Freudian sense, but perform a being-together that still holds its negativity.

Secondly, taking Best’s historiographical philosophy seriously upends historicity itself. It restores agency to the past only by breaking from it in the now. Best acknowledges the *unhistoricism*, the *unframing* of time, of such a

method but asks us to consider its value in avoiding tendencies to remake the past in the narratives of today. Best's historiographical method might be usefully applied towards a sort of perceptual, or phenomenological, constitution of raciality, particularly Blackness; of how, '[i]n the archive, we discover not who we are but how "we" are not' [132]. There is, for Best, no Black solidarity to be found in histories of agency constructed interpretively along the grain, with a view to forging contemporary collectivity. For example, Best may agree with Azoulay's assertion that the archive, as a mode of instituting citizenship (and hence organizing the potentialities of collectivity and solidarity in modern liberal democracies) forecloses modes of being-together in the present, but goes further in his abandonment of historicity than Azoulay's unlearning of history¹. It is a troubling extreme to which Best's unhistoricism takes us, but this is not to abandon his compelling insights into the 'place', the source, of the archival whisper. We do need to be careful that we are not seduced by the fallacy of a definitive and wholly recoverable history. In other words, we cannot simply be organized *by the very presence* of a traumatic or melancholy history.

Such caution does *not* mean, however, that the historically (which is to say ideologically, colonially, racially) constituted surface is to be taken as is, recognized as constituted violence, and hence quickly abandoned. To do so would equally be to give up our future(s). Reading dialectically, 'notions of surface and depth can be seen in productive tension or unease with each other' (Lesjak 2013: 248). It is then precisely in what is *not* on the surface of the archive that is of importance, not to reconstruct a past that has no ontological certainty, but to recognize how it is that very ontological negativity, the contradictions immanent in its recovery, that is vitally constitutive of the now. In other words, it is precisely in reading that opacity immanent to text that Best's mode of archival reading can be enriched. Historical recovery — not reproduction — is fundamental to making our

¹ By reading on the surface of the archive we would go beyond the Azoulay's critique of archival recovery, that 'a place *in the archive* is meant to supersede people's place *in a world* previously shared with others' (Azoulay 2019: 173), that in fact the very memories the archive writes demonstrate that the world was never shared. We would have to disavow any record of world-sharing itself.

present legible *through* its structuring occlusions and whispers, even if we acknowledge that the past cannot simply be superimposed onto present contexts, that its figures cannot be made present.

How, then, are modes of organizing our present sociality — of making community — modulated by (carefully) reading Best's invocations? For one, relying on archival records of enslaved Black life to construct contemporary modes of being-together is a fraught exercise, owing to the ontoepistemological disturbances of colonial violence that conditions what is knowable through the archive. In other words, Best argues that assuming the past is simply translatable to present ways of knowing would be a mistake. Historical trauma modulates the spaces and experiences in which Black people can organize today, but, Best argues, they do not — and should not — determine the narratives of community that thus emerge. Simply put, when we cannot be certain about *a* past, we must not make of it *the* present.

However, it is vital to remember, *pace* Best, that what is not easily known about historical reverberations in our present spaces and experiences of being-together *cannot be ignored* — *it always and continuously structures our present*. To understand the separation and differences that organize the 'surface' of our contemporary moment, that name and shape the forms and relations of community, it is essential to think and study critically the productive forces (a production that can very well be of negation) of our histories. We may be severed from our pasts in multiple ways by the violence of the archive, but to imagine that we may forge an unhistorical future is firstly to disregard the persistence of colonial and racial violence in subjectivization today, as, for example, the vast literature on sociolegal racisms demonstrates (cf. Harris 1993, Roediger 1999). In other words, to leave the past in the past as Best suggests, painful as it may be, is to disregard its persistence into the present, and hence to abandon the very possibility of acting against the violences of the now.

Collectivity, and hence solidarity forged through and against modes of historical recovery, is necessarily the mode of effective political action when faced with the atomizing logic of racial capitalism. Community cannot so easily be dissolved. Our narratives must reflect this. To make our futures,

those faced with historical violence must be able to mourn what they have lost. Community generates spaces for powerful performances and narratives that move *through and beyond* what they recover.

To abandon solidarity in favor of Best's anti-communitarianism is to cut away the filigree linking pasts to presents, and imagines futures on unsteady grounds — it would simply see us flattened to temporal stasis. We may (and, I would agree, should) reject essentialized images of community, but many radical hopes and creative openings have been violently closed by neoliberal and fascistic political tendencies that have crept up everywhere. Certainly, *None Like Us* reminds us that community is a fragile thing, one whose ontology escapes us whenever we try to grasp and fix it. But, if I may be so bold as to suggest, it is precisely in the dynamic, generative joys of organizing community — with all the hurt it may force us to remember — that we may find ways of being-together that step beyond melancholy historicism. The goal, then, is to produce alternative modes of organization rather than be impeded by negation — in fact, making more than what has been, and what is, *through and beyond* that very negation.

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