

## Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility

by Ashon Crawley. 2016. New York: Fordham University Press. 320 pp., 20 illustrations, notes, index. \$82.82 cloth, ISBN: 9780823274543; \$24.98 paper, ISBN: 9780823274550. doi:10.1017/S0149767717000274

“What do air, breath, and breathing have to do with black performance, with Blackpentecostal aesthetics?” Ashon Crawley asks (33). *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, a lush meditation on black living, black precarity, and black aesthetics, provides an answer. Crawley focuses on Black Pentecostalism, a multiracial, multiclass, and multinational Christian sect, a strand of which congealed in Los Angeles, California, in 1906. However, as the author makes clear, this book is not a history of Pentecostalism. In making a distinction between belief and practice, Crawley traces a black aesthetic that crops up from this distinctly black pentecostal repertoire.

Exaltations including shouting, noisemaking, whooping, and speaking in tongues are, he argues, collective, communal modes of *black pneuma*. They represent what Crawley calls “otherwise possibilities” that, by nature of their very constitution, challenge racialized knowledges and the violence inherent to such categorization. Crawley understands “otherwise” as copious and imaginative, as “a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoingness of possibility, of things existing other than what is given, what is known, what is grasped” (24).

Antiblackness depends on shortening, if not extinguishing, black breath, and Crawley pursues black lifeworlds that are insurgent precisely because they insist on black collective aliveness. “These choreographic, sonic, and visual aesthetic practices and sensual experiences” the author writes, “are not only important objects of study for those interested in alternative modes of social organization, but they also yield a general hermeneutics, a methodology for reading culture” (4). He continues: “What I am arguing throughout is that the disruptive capacities found in the otherwise world of Blackpentecostalism is but one example of how to produce a break with the known, the

normative, the violent world of western thought and material condition” (4).

Breath, although individualized, is a group activity, one inherently involved in a practice of sharing. Thus, breath is at once indexical of the violent strictures that bridle black life, even while it (a Blackpentecostal aesthetic) exceeds the boundaries of that violence. Black flesh is treated, he writes, as “discardable, as inherently violent and antagonistic, as necessarily in need of removal, remediation,” and yet black folks have always enacted performative modes, reliant on breathing, that refuse the indignity of this fact (1). Very early in the book Crawley argues that black social life is an abolitionist politics; from there on he shows us just how alive, effusive, and fleshy abolition can be.

In chapter 1, “Breath,” Crawley outlines his black breath framework, turning his attention to Blackpentecostal women preachers and their “whooping” practices. By extending what he calls “blackness pneumatology,” Crawley argues “that Blackpentecostal whooping during preaching and praying responds to the eclipsing of black breath through aesthetic breathing” (27). In the second chapter, “Shouting,” the author offers “choreographic itinerary and protocol” to detail the intimacy between sound and movement within Blackpentecostal traditions. Shouting refuses the distinction between sound and dance; it thus demands a different interpretive framework through which to make sense of its particular efficacy. Chapter 3, “Noise,” takes on testimony and tarrying to show “how Blackpentecostal choreosonics manifest resistance that exists *before* and *against* the power and force of aversion” (144). In the fourth and final chapter, “Tongues,” Crawley writes about the relationship between flesh, breath, and “speaking in tongues.” Regarding the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Crawley considers “how knowledge is produced and transformed in the setting of the university, how these institutional settings often require a reduction of black sound, of blackness, of Blackpentecostal aesthetic practice” (29).

It is the second chapter, “Shouting,” on which I would like to linger, since its resonances with and implications for dance studies abound. Here, the author considers Calvinist theology and Enlightenment philosophy to approach the spatial movements that contribute

to and impact on “the aesthetic value of Blackpentecostalism” (92). Crawley clearly names how an aversion to blackness and to Blackpentecostal aesthetics has worked to structure theology and philosophy by way of a practice of aversion. “And this because,” he writes, “these aversive modalities of thought are, collectively, a *choreographic protocol and itinerary*. The choreographic is set loose through thinking the concept of aversion that sparks these interconnected theological and philosophical traditions” (92, emphasis in original).

Dance appears in Crawley’s formulation of the ways secular and spiritual thought depend on “multiple leaps, splits, displacements, varied pirouettes, plies, and postures” away from the concept of blackness (93). But the author also examines dance more directly. In considering the dance tradition called “shouting,” he extends the term “choreosonic” to attend to the intimate relationship between movement and sound within Blackpentecostal performance. In theorizing black religious practices as not simply including both sound and dance but, rather, as constitutive of the inextricability of both, Crawley shows us that dance and the sonic must be understood as dynamic counterparts rather than a mere coupling. Shout traditions “are choreographic insofar as they are sonic, and are sonic insofar as they are choreographic” (94). This theorization is clearly in conversation with earlier work on black religious practice and performance, including Chireau (2006), Raboteau (1978), and Rosenbaum and Buis (1998).

One of the reasons why *Blackpentecostal Breath* is important to dance studies is its sustained consideration of flesh, bodies, and antiblackness during but also well before discussions of explicit dance practices. In other words, an attention to the inherent racialization of bodies reminds us that no mover is neutral and that the fact of one’s epidermal schema determines the lifespan of her breath. Crawley chooses not to use “embodiment,” a keyword in dance studies, and instead employs “enfleshment,” which he defines as “the movement to, the vibration of, liberation” (6). Consider, for example, Crawley’s discussion of the ring shout wherein the enslaved worked to exhaustion and *then* stole away to engage the otherwise possibilities conjured within black social circles. Here Crawley examines exhaustion as a kind of performative quality while reminding the reader

that these moments took place after a full day of slave labor, always after fatigue. This is one example of how Crawley successfully animates scenes of black social life, situating dance and music as central to its force. “These performances of Ring Shout were figurations of sociality: that what occurred with sighs, laughter, perspiration, and exhaustion while being together, in one place, on one according, waiting for, while at the same time producing, the sound of a rushing mighty wind of change and dissent with each jerked foot, snapped body was a politics, a form of life, a critique of the given, violent, violative world” (104).

Through a focus on breath and flesh, Crawley’s book itself extends new possibilities for understanding quotidian black life *as* dance. Breath, after all, is movement. A rise of inhalation and the fall of release: this ongoing undulation provides the grounds for exquisite scenes of black sociality alongside shy moments of black intimacy as well. From this durational act of human sentience emerges a black performance aesthetic. Within black respiration, Crawley suggests, are black folks’ otherwise social practices.

Crawley is not necessarily writing to dance studies, but he is also not averting writing to dance studies. One of the contributions of the book lies in this fact: a blackpentecostal aesthetic widens how we think about dance. Dance might indeed happen through the exaltations released in the ring shout. But it seems to me that Crawley is also asking us to think about the fleshiness of breath itself. As he writes, “Blackpentecostalism is an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibration and always on the move” (4). Breath depends on the previous one to make this current one advance; a breath always aspires toward the next. Breath is steady and successive although it is not guaranteed. He asks, “What to do, how to move, in such a world wherein your resistance against violent conditions—resistance as prayer meetings or protests, resistance as simply wishing to breathe—produces the occasion for violence?” (23). *Blackpentecostal Breath* is an antiphon to this inquiry. For black people, a pledge for breath, no matter how confident, inherently lacks assurance. And it is precisely within and against this context that alternative possibilities for black living and black performance emerge.

This book is a work of rigorous play. It is a welcome addition to a body of publications that theorizes the politics of black aesthetics and black death (Moten 2003); Crawley's work also speaks to a broader list of texts that engages dance studies through black performance frameworks (Brown 2008; Brooks 2006; Hartman 1997). These texts explore meanings of black movement, agency, and fugitivity through performance.

Because *Blackpentecostal Breath* is invested in undoing strict intellectual categorizations, listing disciplines that might find this book helpful somewhat disrespects the ethos of Crawley's offering. He suggests that the separation of categories of thought (philosophy, theology, history, etc.) does harm by way of segregation and presumptions of purity. In other words, it is the separation of these categories that produces and continues to abet racialized/antiblack thought. Indeed, rather than centering Black Studies (institutional, departmental, hierarchal), Crawley uses *Black Study* (collective, vernacular, peopled). As he writes, "Black Study is a wholly unbounded, holy, collective intellectual project that is fundamentally otherwise than an (Inter) discipline" (3). Therefore, rather than offering a catalogue indicating what fields might find *Blackpentecostal Breath* useful, let me instead write that those with an interest in race and performance, religion, philosophy, black movement practices, and gender will gain something worthwhile on the sojourn from this book's start to its close.

"Alternatives exist—*already*—against the normative modes under which we endure," Crawley writes. And then: "If we so choose to join up with the alternative, all the better. The work is to make apparent the fact of the resonance of alternatives, to let folks know that we are here engaging in otherwise work. And that is a beautiful thing" (31). This "otherwise work" no doubt resonates with scholars of black social dance—among them Malone (1996), Hazard-Donald (1992), and DeFrantz (2001)—who through their own means reveal the ways black social life produces distinct movement vocabularies. Within the realm of the vernacular, black dancers' breathing in the

flesh hails alternative, expedient, collective presences. And this, as Crawley writes, is "a beautiful thing."

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