

by the beloved scholar's absent presence, tasks us as readers to think with and through Chambers-Letson in order to imagine what's next.

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## Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life

By Tavia Nyong'o. *Sexual Cultures*. New York: New York University Press, 2019; pp. x + 264, 20 illustrations. \$89 cloth, \$29 paper, \$29 e-book.

Stephen Low

Independent Scholar

*Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* argues that black life is beyond the capacity of modes of representation and documentation developed in an antiblack world, and thus challenges white hegemonic time and temporality. Tavia Nyong'o demonstrates how artistic, aesthetic, and archival records of black life disrupt normative structures of temporality, both historical and quotidian, which, in turn, challenge white supremacist notions of gender and sexuality. Nyong'o appeals to a diverse set of aesthetic objects and practices, including fashion, performance art, film, music, and literature, to illustrate the critical potential of what he has termed "afro-fabulation." Overall, this book weaves together critical theory to establish an analytic poetics that maps intellectual terrain in which we can imagine the human beyond its current conception determined by antiblack representationalist forms.

Nyong'o demonstrates a virtuosic capacity to engage critical race theory, feminist theory, literary theory, and queer theory to establish modes of afro-fabulation that allow him to remember and imagine a past and future of black queer life. Extending Audre Lorde's remark that black life was "never meant to survive," Nyong'o adds that black life was "never meant to appear" (3). According to Nyong'o, the impossibility of representing black life via means that were never intended to allow black life to appear is exemplary of "impossibility" (6), which he describes as the intersection of "what was with what might have been" (7). Nyong'o describes afro-fabulation as "tethered to the classic paradox of fiction: the matter of why and how it is that a story we know to be untrue can nonetheless inspire belief, emotion, and attachment" (7).

Because an antiblack racial order cannot engender the means through which black life can be represented faithfully, afro-fabulation challenges that which is represented to be true and exposes the representational mechanisms that necessarily burden black life with white supremacist ideology. Nyong'o extends Amiri Baraka's concept of "the changing same" to deploy "angular sociality," a critical mode of black polytemporality that, as Kara Keeling puts it, "'reveal[s] the operations of history itself and the ways that any invocation of the past is an exclusionary construction of that past'" (23). In short, angular sociality "is a doing of history that

is a showing of the doing of history, and in that showing, history's undoing" (23). Afro-fabulation thus "'anarranges' the developmental and linear timeline of history" (26) by fabricating new genres of the human out of the fabulous, formless darkness of an antiblack world. This then provides the foundation upon which Nyong'o claims, "we do not yet know what a human outside an anti-black world could be, do, or look like. The critical poetics of afro-fabulation are a means of dwelling in the shock of that reality without ever becoming fully of it" (26).

*Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* articulates and applies this critical poetics to a diverse set of case studies. The introduction describes Crystal LeBeija's fabulative performance in the documentary *The Queen* (1968), in which she resists being captured by the gaze of the camera even as she simultaneously invites the camera to be a coconspirator in her struggle for authentic representation. As Nyong'o notes, LaBeija performs an act of afro-fabulation when she "demonstrates how to perform for and against the camera" at the moment when she is filmed, but in a way that speaks to the future (3). In the first chapter, Nyong'o examines performances of critical shade in choreographer and performer Trajal Harrell's solo dance-cum-runway show *Twenty Looks* (2009), where Harrell "manages to be at once inside and outside of his performances, disrupting the evaluative and objectifying gaze critics might seek to direct toward them" (32). He then applies the concept of critical shade in the second chapter to an analysis of Shirley Clarke's film *Portrait of Jason* (1967), attending to the "'crushed black'" patina of the film (the "'shadow areas that lack detail and texture due to underexposure'") (47). Nyong'o posits that these can be archives of queer black life that could not be represented by antiblack representational forms. In Chapter 3, an examination of the funk music of Brer Soul and the performance art of the Mythic Being, Nyong'o then moves on to disrupt "narratives that retell the familiar origin story of queer theory" (77) by arguing that "if blackness cannot ever fully accede to the norms of gender and sexuality that constitute it as, at once, excess, lack, and variance, then there is a nontrivial sense in which blackness is always already queer" (94).

Chapter 4 examines *Piedra* (2013), performance art by the Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo, and *A Subtlety* (2014), artist Kara Walker's seventy-five-foot-long monument coated in sugar exhibited in a decommissioned sugar factory, which "engage[s] the collective memory of a violent process that regularly precipitates sublimations" (128). Whereas Chapter 4 unearths sublimated impossibilities of the past not able to be represented by conventional modes of archive or representation, Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) to imagine the future of gender and sex beyond the threshold of the human. Chapter 6 applies afro-fabulation to argue that the science fiction of Samuel R. Delaney should be read as a precursor to queer theory, disrupting conventional histories of queer theory and activism that begin in the 1980s. Chapter 7 examines the films *Manderlay* (2005) and *Mandingo* (1975) via the cinematic thinking of Kara Keeling (and others such as Fred Moten) to consider the ambivalent "im/possibility" (172) of representing onscreen slaves who escape or evade the cinematic instrument as a mode of capture. The last chapter, a meditation on the black female cyborg prototype Bina48, appeals to Donna Haraway's feminist theory of the cyborg to argue that the cybernetic future is shadowed by the afterlives of slavery. The conclusion "aims to de-dramatize death and dying, insofar as death

and dying have become . . . unbearably overinflated in contemporary discursive registers of necropolitics and afro-pessimism” (202).

*Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* knits together dense theories and philosophical ideas to chart invigorating terrain in queer theory and critical race studies. The challenge engendered by the many threads that Nyong’o weaves together is necessary for greater awareness of the limited capacity of normative modes of representation to represent authentic black queer life.

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## The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances and Their Afterlives

By Selby Wynn Schwartz. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019; pp. xiv + 285, 22 illustrations. \$80 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$34.95 e-book.

Charles O’Malley

Yale University

Perhaps the most erroneous assumption about the practice of drag is that it rests on the skin, that it reflects only from the surface of the body and stands for nothing more than a mixing of signifiers. This belief derives from an understanding of drag as static, as a choice selected from within a binary, a view that elides nuance, cancels out contradictions, and asks for practitioners (and spectators) of drag to consider it stable—or worse yet, constantly legible.

Selby Wynn Schwartz confronts and repudiates this idea. In her book *The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances and Their Afterlives*, she considers the roots of drag within the performer and brings her reader to question systems of notation present in drag work. Schwartz understands drag dance as a redoubling of the dimensions of drag performance: through layers of movement, signification, and study, these works find new methods of exploring gender as constantly in flux. This is an art form that can, as Schwartz puts it, “take gender from the surface of the body (what the body looks like) and embed it in the kinetic and kinesthetic experience of dance (what the body can do)” (3). Dance—an art form that requires a great tension among the roles of the artist, spectator, and critic—is uniquely positioned to bring forth an expression of gender inaccessible in other media.

Schwartz’s introduction to *The Bodies of Others* creates a theoretical framework that she then employs in her four subsequent case studies, and to marvelous effect. The author begins with an argument that drag is neither frivolous nor just an outward effect, two accusations it has often faced in both academic and general cultural assessments. Regarding the former (a perceived frivolity), this attitude is perhaps an effect of antiqueer bias, antifemale bias, or a general bias against the study of forms of movement—theatrical performance to some extent but dance more specifically. This, she argues, is crucially tied to the second accusation, that drag proves only an