

BOOK REVIEW:

Daphne Lamothe. *Black Time and the Aesthetic Possibility of Objects*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 190 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4696-7532-9.

Theorizations of Blackness and the examination of its expression in various artforms have at times been myopic in the sense of limiting their scope to a certain geographical or temporal context. Such approaches risk overlooking the heterogeneity and broad spectrum of Black art and the way it (occasionally) interconnects, overlaps, or, conversely, contrasts and contradicts. Within this context, Daphne Lamothe's *Black Time and the Aesthetic Possibility of Objects* proffers a different perspective. Structured around the concept of "aesthetic time," Lamothe's monograph is largely disentangled from strict historical contexts and set conceptualizations of time. The liberty afforded by this approach allows Lamothe to examine a wide breadth of Black creative endeavors from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries without the constraints of viewing Black art as "definitive/defining acts," but rather as "partial attempts" (2). The stylistics of the book similarly go against the grain, as Lamothe writes in an essayistic style in order to facilitate innovative ideas within an infrequently employed framework.

The notion of thresholds (re)surfaces repeatedly in the book, and Lamothe's overall approach to artistic expressions of Blackness may best be described as similarly existing on a threshold. That is, throughout the book, Blackness and Black art are posited as (un)constrained by history (Chapter Five), as existing between "liveness" (111) and death (Chapter Six), as well as between optimism and pessimism (Chapter Three).

Lamothe's methodology expressly seeks to avoid suggestions of homogeneity and a rigid, monolithic sense of Blackness by emphasizing "potentiality" and embracing Andrew Benjamin's notion of the becoming-object of the work of art (24). This approach, combined with the wide range of artistic representations Lamothe analyses, posits Black art as capacious and multitudinous. At the same time, the essayistic format and the absence of a chapter dedicated to outlining the theoretical framework of the book at times hinder its coherence and the clarity of its argumentation. Structurally, Lamothe's monograph is divided into two sections consisting of four chapters each. The first four chapters provide analyses of case studies that negotiate what the author views as "the interrelated concepts of aesthetic time and optimism" (2). Section Two, meanwhile, revolves around a variety of works which emphasize the value of art by imagining and interrogating the notion of Blackness.

Chapter One focuses on Stromae's album *Racine carrée* (2013), particularly the track "Formidable" and its accompanying music video. Positioning Stromae's music as virtually uncategorisable due to the plethora of cultural influences it draws on, Lamothe argues that the unmoored and fluid characteristics of Stromae's stage persona and his music "make his work representative of contemporary Blackness" (6). Lamothe positions the music video for "Formidable" as a nexus connecting various geographies, societies, and temporalities by virtue of its aesthetic

qualities. She subsequently connects Stroma's "Formidable" with theories by critics such as Édouard Glissant and Nicolas Bourriaud, which emphasize the role of relations and connections; in this way, the music video can be regarded as an unattached and free-flowing aesthetic manifestation able to transgress varying "social and affective geographies," facilitated by "spatial, social, and subjective" entanglements (12). At times, the theories employed by Lamothe and her subsequent analysis incorporate notions which resemble concepts such as Achille Mbembe's entanglement (2001) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's globalectical approach (2012). Regrettably, however, neither scholar is mentioned in the book.

Chapter Two is framed as a reading of Tracy K. Smith's memoir *Ordinary Light* (2015). However, Smith's text is largely utilized as an entry point for discussing a range of critics and theorizations on writing and Blackness. Notions ranging from Toni Morrison's "invisible ink" to the concepts of "was-ness" and "is-ness" (28) are discussed. Lamothe impressively and intriguingly presents and brings into dialogue myriad concepts. At the same time, the recurring argument of literature/art as a joint effort between writer/artist and reader/audience struggles to convince this reader as distinctly innovative, given, for instance, Roland Barthes's well-known notion of writerly texts. The same arguably applies to the conclusion to Chapter Three, which largely revolves around questions of Black optimism and pessimism. Here, Lamothe argues that "the aesthetic realm is uniquely endowed with the capacity to hold and express multiple, sometimes competing, truths about Blackness without having to organize those realities according to a hierarchy of value" (50). The ability of art to express or interrogate complex notions by virtue of its aesthetic capabilities can hardly be viewed as a new insight.

Unlike the other chapters, Chapter Four is not framed around a case study. Instead it takes a more reflective approach as it considers post-soul aesthetics and the notion of "*Black time*" (51). Among other things, Lamothe considers the functioning of Black time as inherently tied to history (slavery, racism, oppression), yet simultaneously as possessing a freedom and potentiality by virtue of post-soul aesthetics, making it "no longer possible to uncomplicatedly index Blackness according to historical time" (66). Lamothe's emphasis on the way an attunement to aesthetics offers a sense of freedom and a means to capture Blackness in its capaciousness and complexity resonates strongly throughout the remaining chapters of the book. The same goes for the notion of the (un)timeliness of Blackness, which comes to the fore in a variety of cultural manifestations discussed in the monograph.

Section Two opens with a chapter on works by the visual artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. Ojih Odutola's exhibition *To Wander Determined* encapsulates Lamothe's aforementioned emphasis on the imaginative and liberatory potential of art. Adopting Tavia Nyong'o's concept of untimeliness (see p. 72), Lamothe views Ojih Odutola's exhibition of drawings as "represent[ing] a world beyond the historical determinations of colonality" (79). Perhaps paradoxically, Ojih Odutola's work is also argued to acknowledge these very histories, as Lamothe asserts that they are "simultaneously invisible yet felt and known presences too" (82). *To Wander Determined* exemplifies Lamothe's intriguing use of the notion of thresholds to conceptualize Black art as ambiguously and paradoxically poised between an anchoring and an imagination of an "alternate geography of Blackness in which subjectivity exists freely" (82). Lamothe's analysis of visual art alongside the other forms of cultural expression examined in the book displays the impressive range of her analyses.

In the remainder of the monograph, Lamothe again turns her attention to written work. Chapter Six centers on Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *Daughters* (1991). The former is read as an exemplar of aesthetic optimism, as Lamothe mobilizes the overarching tenets of her book to read *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as conceptualizing "Black past and future not as a binary but as a spectrum" (94). Lamothe subsequently observes a clear shift in *Daughters*, which, she argues, is characterized by a "melancholic tone" (97). All the same, *Daughters* is read as similarly challenging a straightforward conceptualization of time, specifically by framing it as a dialectic. Both novels are posited as providing significant reflections "on Blackness and its shifting meanings across time and space" (102). Similar notions recur in Chapter Seven, where Lamothe discusses Dionne Brand's work in the light of "the dialectical nature of death and aliveness, from which Blackness derives its meanings" (112). In addition, she expertly manages to reintroduce the notion of thresholds in relation to Brand's poetry by pointing toward the central role they occupy spatially and ontologically. Lamothe's decision not to discuss Brand's work from a literary trauma studies perspective may be considered surprising, however, given that Brand's work would seem to call out for such an approach.

The final chapter revolves around Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* (2016). Here, Lamothe skillfully sets up Smith's novel as an exemplar of work which encapsulates the "complexities of being Black and its multiple and ever-changing feelings and meanings" (133). Lamothe's analysis of *Swing Time* works excellently as the book's final chapter, as Smith's narrative embodies most of the key elements that resonate throughout *Black Time*; it points towards the entanglement, capaciousness, and the complexity of Blackness, time, and aesthetics and, like *Black Time* itself, counters a myopic, monolithic, and rigid view on these matters.

An ambitious book, *Black Time and the Aesthetic Possibility of Objects* features a wide range of authors/artists from different contexts. Its essayistic style and incorporation of a variety of concepts make for a compelling read that provides an innovative and unburdened perspective on Black art. Lamothe's stylistic decision can be seen as a double-edged sword, however, as the book arguably lacks a clearly defined theoretical foundation. More importantly, the general lack of engagement with previous research on the case studies Lamothe analyses does not allow for fruitful interaction of scholarship and obscures to what extent the book provides new or contrasting perspectives. Overall, however, Lamothe's monograph provides an impressive array of engaging and wide-ranging analyses that are testament to the value of focusing on art and aesthetics in a way unconstrained by strict categories and, in so doing, provides an important contribution to the field.

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