

Reppin' Blackness: Five Beats on the Art of Derrick Adams

ISAIAH MATTHEW WOODEN

Black visual artists have been central to the development and evolution of performance art since the medium's beginnings. And yet, dominant histories of the art form have often failed to recognize the contributions of its Black innovators. Rarely, for example, do such accountings acknowledge the influential work of pioneering figures like Benjamin Patterson, the classically trained double bassist who, as one of the early architects and disciples of Fluxus, helped redefine the boundaries of what constitutes art.¹ As Uri McMillan points out, "The Eurocentric narrativization of performance art elides the presence of Black artists as historical coconspirators."² A notable effect of these elisions, of course, is the proliferation and reification of an idea that Black performance art practices are always already belated and, indeed, derivative. What the resurgent interest in restoring Black performance art to its rightful place in (art) history in the past few decades has demonstrated, however, are the ways that Black artists have long understood and engaged the power of performance to imagine new horizons and enact fresh possibilities. Certainly, for many Black visual artists, performance has served as a vital means through which to embody and interrogate a diverse range of aesthetic, cultural, political, and personal concerns.

While the increase in Black performance studies scholarship in recent years has yielded

abundant evidence that suggests that Black performance may, indeed, be "our mist," less prevalent still are critical explorations of the work of Black visual artists who, at times, employ the body as a central element in their practices.³ This essay endeavors to intervene in this gap by sharpening focus on an artist, Derrick Adams, whose work often sees him powerfully drawing on and extending the rich tradition of Black performance-making. Significantly, it examines the ways that, in his *Communicating with Shadows* series (2011–13), the multidisciplinary artist renders and reveals performance as an especially potent site for investigating and renegotiating the meanings and boundaries of Blackness.

I have organized this performative essay into five "beats," an expression I deploy here at once to gesture to the five mini-performances that constitute *Communicating with Shadows*, to call attention to the hip hop sensibilities that inflect Adams' art-making practice, and to evoke the sense of the term as it gets marshaled in training and preparation for more traditional stage and screen performances. Within the context of acting for theater and film, a beat can signal a shift in a character's objectives (what it is they want) and their circumstances (the conditions influencing their actions). It can also refer to the breaths, pauses, or breaks that alter the rhythms of a character's thoughts, intentions, or tactics. Along with marking a change in aims and pace, my use of beats here is meant to shed light on the ways that Adams' performance work—and, surely, performance art more generally—resists totalizing interpretations and, thus, necessitates more fragmentary, less conclusive, sometimes recursive reading approaches and strategies.⁴ Of particular

interest to me across all five of the essay's beats, which necessarily flout temporal linearity, are the ways that Adams surfaces and engages manifold layers of performance—embodied and discursive, spectacular and quotidian—and, in so doing, activates multi-generational conversations that attest to the thickness of Black life and experience.

Beat 1

Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1970 and educated at the Pratt Institute (BFA) and Columbia University (MFA), Adams is one of the most prolific and idiosyncratic artists of his generation. His ever-growing body of work—which includes collages, drawings, paintings, illustrations, sculptures, videos, and textiles, as well as performances—has been exhibited at prestigious museums and galleries throughout the United States and internationally, including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the California African American Museum (CAAM), and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Reflecting on the breadth of his art-making practice, Adams notes:

When I'm making work I don't really think about being any particular type of artist. I don't consider myself a painter, a sculptor, video or performance artist. I do think that there are certain ways to communicate ideas about culture and cultural perspectives through different types of material like your body, a piece of paper, or whatever. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel. I am really trying to highlight certain aspects of culture. The culture that I really think about is significant and a culture that has been appropriated by other cultures.⁵

The culture Adams cites here—Black culture—has no doubt proven a consistent source of inspiration and revelation for his art.

As those who traveled to The Proposition, a tony gallery in New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood, in fall 2012 to see Adams' *Hillman U: A Dream Deferred, A Dream Fulfilled* installation can affirm, the artist's work often betrays an interest in pondering and exploring the lushness of Black popular and expressive cultures, in particular. Adams filled the compact space with a collection of handcrafted, wearable art pieces that he designed with Blackness in mind.⁶ The brightly colored, intricately patterned, and richly textured dashikis, polos, T-shirts, skirts, dresses, shorts, tote bags, banners, and other accessories Adams put on display in the "pop-up shop" of wares revealed the inspiration that he'd found in expressions and performances of Blackness from ostensibly bygone times—notably, the Garveyism of the early twentieth century and its afterlife in the trendy urban fashions of clothing labels such as FUBU and Cross Colours (Figure 1).⁷ The "Hillman U" logos Adams affixed to each item and the subtitle he gave the collection not only offered additional evidence of the pull of the past on his artistic process but also brought into sharp relief the ways that, to echo Margo Natalie Crawford, Black popular culture often provokes distinct forms of play with Blackness.⁸

Signifying on the name of Hillman College, the fictitious historically Black institution of higher learning remembered fondly on *The Cosby Show* (1984–92)—both Heathcliff and Clair Huxtable were alums—and centered prominently on its spinoff *A Different*



Figure 1: "Derrick Adams, Hillman U (pennants), 2012. Photo courtesy of Derrick Adams."

World (1987–93), the logos recalled the cultural importance of certain televisual representations of Blackness in the 1980s and '90s, as well as their impact on the fashion trends of the day. The installation's subtitle, "A Dream Deferred, A Dream Fulfilled," at once evoked the famous inquiry from Langston Hughes' 1951 poem "Harlem"—"What happens to a dream deferred?"—and the oft-cited "I Have a Dream" speech Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. These palimpsestic details served to instantiate Adams' commitments to deconstructing certain iconic signs of Blackness in the collection as a way to, as he put it, test for "relevance and purpose."⁹ In defamiliarizing familiar elements of these popular Black cultural

representations, the installation opened crucial space to converge the *not yet here* of the recent past with the *not yet here* of Black art in the twenty-first century, thereby revealing what Crawford cites as "the circularity of black aesthetic traditions."¹⁰

The work Adams created for *The Shadows Took Shape*, an exhibition presented at the Studio Museum in Harlem that focused on the interrelationship between contemporary art and Afrofuturist aesthetics, further exemplified this latter point.¹¹ Titled *We><Here* (2013), the piece, a metallic, sculptural riff on the large, fire-breathing prop that the Wizard in Sidney Lumet's filmic adaptation of *The Wiz* (1978) used to shore up his power and authority among the common people of Oz, specifically turned



Figure 2: "Derrick Adams, WE><HERE (2013) (MDF, acrylic paint, sand) 69 × 92 × 45 in.). Photo courtesy of Derrick Adams."

to the history of Black popular culture to grant spectators an opportunity to visualize and contemplate Blackness in the future tense (Figure 2). Powerfully, it also beckoned spectators to reflect on the ways that, as Richard Iton argues, Black popular culture has long played a significant role in the making and remaking of Black politics.¹²

Beat 2

Adams, I propose, is a virtuoso of *reppin'* Blackness in and through his art. In hip hop culture and discourse, *reppin'*, a slang shortening of the word representing, is generally invoked to signal a person's willingness to boldly stake a claim or take a stand for someone or something significant to them.

Kermit Campbell describes *reppin'* as a cultural practice that "gives 'authentic' voice to the attitude, style, and collective identity of [one's] hood and peoples."¹³ Importantly, for Adams, whose art evinces the hip hop generation's investments in "referentiality and reflexivity ... appropriation and redefinition," representing and re-presenting Blackness in his work provides opportunities not only to grapple with the complexities of race and representation but also to inspire the refigurations of cultural politics, norms, and meanings.¹⁴

For my purposes here, I offer and consider *reppin'* as a shortening for two additional terms that are central to Black performance theory and performance studies more broadly. The first is repetition, a concept fundamental to many definitions of

performance.¹⁵ Within Black performance and expressive cultures, repetition—especially when accompanied by revision—has often served as a vital aesthetic strategy. This is perhaps best exemplified in the musical form that emerges from the Black communities of New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century and is now recognized as one of America’s greatest cultural inventions: jazz. African American dramatists—Suzan-Lori Parks and August Wilson, among them—have also embraced repetition and revision as techniques in their writing, thereby expanding possibilities for what Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr. call “the Black dramaturgical imagination.”¹⁶

The other term my use of *reppin’* in this essay is, at times, meant to evoke is repertoire, particularly as theorized by Diana Taylor. Working from the premise that Western cultures and epistemologies have often dismissed embodied practices and ways of knowing as less important, Taylor argues that the repertoire, which “enacts embodied memory” and includes “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge,” can offer insights on events, cultures, and lives not recorded in the archive.¹⁷ In addition to representing, repeating, and revising aspects of Blackness, Adams’ work, I suggest, also frequently functions as a kind of repertoire through which to recuperate and transmit, among other things, neglected or suppressed memories, histories, knowledges, and expressivities. In this way, it demonstrates the capacity of Black performance to reanimate what Badia Ahad calls the “delicate push-pull

between past and present” while also helping us “decipher the imperatives of Blackness.”¹⁸

It is no doubt Adams’ performance work that reveals the efficacy of his *reppin’* most saliently. Exploiting the ways that the Black body remains, as Valerie Cassel Oliver writes, “a site of desire and loathing, strength and vulnerability,” Adams’ performances often betray a concern with exploring through presence and intersubjectivity the questions and conundrums that embodiments and enactments of Blackness often generate.¹⁹ Routinely structured within the works are considerations of the ways that performances of Blackness are “capable, sometimes, provisionally, and contingently, of amending dominant discourses that manage representation and constrain the lives they organize,” to echo Malik Gaines.²⁰ Notably, for Adams, *reppin’* in and through performance becomes a significant means through which to activate aesthetic conversations across temporalities. As he explains in a 2011 roundtable discussion with fellow artists Terry Adkins, Sherman Fleming, Maren Hassinger, Steffani Jemison, Lorraine O’Grady, and Clifford Owens moderated by curator and art historian Kellie Jones, “I always consider making work to be like having a conversation with another artist of the past.”²¹ The series this essay principally explores, *Communicating with Shadows*, certainly bears out this claim. The five short pieces that comprise the series each witness Adams drawing on works by earlier performance-makers: notably, Adrian Piper, Senga Nengudi, David Hammons, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, and Jim Henson. Resonant throughout the project is Adams’ dedication to harnessing the possibilities in creating performances that

lay bare Blackness' multidimensionality and fecundity.

In turning attention to the series, my aim is, in part, to attest to the potency of Adams' *reppin'*. To that end, I embrace performance studies' commitments to combining thick description with critical analyses as a way to situate and illuminate an event's significance in the beats that follow.

Beat 3

First presented in Brooklyn over several days in fall 2011 and later remixed and reactivated at the Studio Museum in Harlem, *Communicating with Shadows* features Blackness looming large. Each of the series' performances sees Adams repeating, revising, and reinterpreting signal elements or moments from the work of some of performance art's earliest and most influential practitioners. While not all the artists whose work Adams engages self-identify as Black, its presence is unquestionable throughout the series. Indeed, along with Adams' own confident embodiments of it, the oversized silhouettes that serve as the backdrops for the performances also suggest the potential presence of Blackness. To create the silhouettes, Adams turned to documentation of Adrian Piper (*Funk Lessons*, 1982–84), Senga Nengudi (in performance with *Inside/Out*, 1977), David Hammons (*Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983), Joseph Beuys (*I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1975), Bruce Nauman (*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966–67), and Jim Henson's (television performance of *Sam and Friends*, ca. 1956/1957) iconic performances, using an old-fashioned overhead projector to cast enlarged shadows of representative images from them

onto a blank wall. "I used the silhouetted image projected on the wall as a backdrop for the performance as a major element of the work. I used a traditional overhead projector—the instrument used for presentations—which enabled smaller imagery to appear larger-than-life, through illumination of light and magnification. I like using basic objects that have practical function, as they can also highlight duplicity in meaning," he explains in an interview with writer Nico Wheadon.²² With the larger-than-life silhouettes seemingly keeping watch, Adams methodically proceeded to carry out his *reppin'*, performing a number of actions—planned and improvised—aimed at exploring themes of influence, inheritance, genealogy, legacy, and intergenerational exchange.

In the piece that reanimates Hammons' 1983 street performance, which showcased the Conceptual artist peddling neatly shaped and placed balls of snow in New York City's Cooper Square in the wake of a huge blizzard, Adams, for example, carts a large cooler, a roll of paper, and a bag of props that he places in front of the wall projection (Figure 3). After laying the paper out on the middle of the floor, he positions three bags of ice that he grabs from the cooler on top of it. He then acquires a mallet from the bag, which he uses to hammer away at the ice to break it into more manageable chunks. Once he is satisfied with his smashing, he reaches into the bag again to grab a moisture-wicking, hooded jacket with several zippered pockets that he puts on over his otherwise unremarkable outfit. For several minutes thereafter, he determinedly fills each of the pockets with the crushed ice cubes, using gloves and, at times, a small scoop to assist him.



Figure 3: "Derrick Adams, *I Just Crush A Lot*, 2011–13 (digital photograph). Quadriptych, 24 × 36 in. each. From *Communicating with Shadows*, performance and photo series. Photo courtesy of Derrick Adams."

The weight and bulk that the ice adds to the jacket is not particularly noticeable until, after he fills the outerwear, Adams rises to position himself in front of the projected image of Hammons, where he remains for two or so beats. The final image of Adams standing in Hammons' shadows brings to mind the call-and-response in the bridge of hip hop artist André 3000's colossal hit, "Hey Ya!": "What's cooler than being cool? / Ice Cold!"²³ It also serves to punctuate the performance and to reemphasize the artist's resolve to explore the relationship and connections between his practice and those of earlier performance-makers. "The motivation behind this series was more about my conceptual relationship with these particular artists as their beneficiary—how I view my creative practice as it relates to what these artists make, and how they make it," Adams explains. "My performance takes place within the shadow of what they have left for me to experience, understand, and respond to," he goes on to add.²⁴ The piece's title *I Just Crush a Lot (Hammons)*, a reference both to the actions Adams carries out during the performance and to hip hop artist Big

Pun's 1998 hit "Still Not a Player," indicate a desire to also explore the relationship of the artist's practice to the aesthetic sensibilities of the hip hop generation, wherein, much like *reppin'*, both "*crushin'*" and "*crushin' it*" accrued fresh meanings.²⁵

Especially striking about Adams' engagements with *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* in *I Crush a Lot (Hammons)* are the ways that, in addition to honoring the significant impact Hammons has had on the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art and, indeed, opening up new ways of understanding and interpreting the earlier work, they also serve to spotlight and revitalize Hammons' own prowess for *reppin'* Blackness in his practice. Having come of age as an artist amid the 1960s and '70s Black freedom struggles, Hammons has long demonstrated a dedication to producing work that interrogates Black culture and experience and their tangles with racism and the project of white supremacy. As Jones writes, "Hammons's work not only comments on a specifically African American version of life, it is composed from the material elements of this experience."²⁶ Much of the work in Hammons' vast *oeuvre* no doubt examples

this—from the body prints he created in the 1960s to the *Spade* series he made in the 1970s to his *African American Flag* (1990). Works like *In the Hood* (1993), which took on renewed significance in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s 2012 killing and is featured on the cover of Claudia Rankine’s arresting *Citizen: An American Lyric*, surely continue to prompt examinations of the violences and injustices that Black people regularly endure. (It also anticipated Adams’ *Four in One (The Same League)* (2008), a mixed-media piece composed of faux brick paneling, hooded sweatshirts, wood, and glitter that invites reflection on the ways the hoodie often renders its Black wearers as targets).

One of the most potent effects of Adams’ reinterpretations of *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*—a work that, even as it trades in the ephemeral, offers up commentary on, among other things, the collusions of capitalism, white supremacy, and the high art world—is its reinvigorations of the radical force of Hammons’ categorically Black art-making practice in the present. Hammons has been unequivocal in his disavowals of the tastes, conventions, assumptions, and prescriptions of the white art Establishment throughout his career. “The art audience is the worst audience in the world. It’s overtly educated, it’s conservative, it’s out to criticize not to understand, and it never has any fun ... So I refuse to deal with that audience and I’ll play with the street audience,” he once declared.²⁷ Present throughout Hammons work is a commitment to exploring the power and potential of honing a practice of Black refusal. In *reppin’* Hammons’ *reppin’*—and, indeed, in situating himself squarely in the middle of the elder artist’s shadow—Adams provides a new

vantage from which to probe the possibilities of such a practice.

While, much like Hammons, Adrian Piper is often cited as one of the most important innovators of conceptual and performance art practices, her relationship to Blackness has been marked by greater ambivalences; she, in fact, announced via her website that she was retiring from being Black in 2012.²⁸ Adams’ channeling of her *Funk Lessons* (1982–84) in another short piece in the *Communicating with Shadows* series is, however, no less impactful in its *reppin’*. Among her most well-known works, McMillan directs us to situate *Funk Lessons* in a genealogy of Piper performances that feature the artist’s “improvisational executions of Black American dances in mundane public spaces.”²⁹ The projected silhouette from the collaborative performance that serves as the backdrop for Adams’ reinterpretation captures Piper mid-groove during one of the lessons she offered to participants on how to embrace and embody funk. With a track evoking Bootsy Collins’ 1978 hit “One Nation Under the Groove” providing a steady beat—the title of the piece, *One Nation Under the Groove of Instruction (Piper)*, riffs on the name of the funk classic—Adams begins carrying out the action, strategically placing sheets of paper with crude drawings of shoe prints on them that he numbered onto the floor (Figure 4). A change in music sees the single silhouette become many, and Adams hit different dance poses as he steps across the numbered sheets. The boom box he carries brings to mind the many urban youth for whom both funk and hip hop music have served as important sources of entertainment and cultural transformation.



Figure 4: "Derrick Adams, *One Nation Under a Groove of Instruction*, 2011–13 (digital photograph). Quadriptych, 24 × 36 in. each. From *Communicating with Shadows*, performance and photo series. Photo courtesy of Derrick Adams."

Writing about *Funk Lessons*, Piper notes that she, in part, wanted to "restructure people's social identities, by making accessible to them a common medium of communication—funk music and dance—that has been largely inaccessible to white culture and has consequently exacerbated the xenophobic fear, hostility, and incomprehension that generally characterize the reaction of whites to Black popular culture in this society" with the performance.³⁰ Adams' short meditation on the earlier work opens space to consider the ways other Black pop cultural forms—hip hop, in particular—have themselves become "a common medium of communication" across differences that, to echo E. Patrick Johnson, serve as "fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies."³¹ Powerfully at play in the piece—and, to be sure, all of the performances in the *Communicating with*

Shadows series, even those that do not seemingly engage race matters explicitly (at least not at first blush)—is a demonstration of the ways that enactments of Blackness can serve as a means not only to transmit knowledge but also "to trace traditions and influences," as Taylor asserts.³² This is a crucial effect of Adams' *reppin'*.

Beat 4

Many viewers first came to know about and experience Adams' *Communicating with Shadows* series through the photographic and video documentation circulated in the aftermath of the performances presented in Brooklyn and Harlem. This is worth highlighting because the series' shrewd engagements with the ongoing debates about the relationship between performance and its documentation

is among its most intriguing aspects. "Many scholars have written well about the complexity of the relationship between still photography and performance, a relationship in which issues of artistic power jostle for supremacy in both temporal and aesthetic registers," Peggy Phelan writes.³³ The durability of mediums such as photography and video and the ephemerality of live performance, Phelan goes on to state, have "led some to think that the performance may be incidental to the larger aspiration to create a permanent visual image."³⁴ The outsized role that photography and video have often played in the history of performance art is made quite literal in the *Communicating with Shadows* series. Indeed, Adams' short performances are as much a reinterpretation of the photographic and video evidence of the iconic works that they channel as they are of the original live events.

By strategically entangling the ephemeral with the durable in *Communicating with Shadows*, Adams powerfully opens up space to interrogate the demands to communicate the effects of a live event long after its disappearance. He also prompts considerations of the ways that Black performance might further complicate the conversations about performance and its documentation. Yona Backer speaks to this latter point when, having noted that many performance artists have faced the challenge of "extending the impact of the live art experience," she writes: "Such issues have been particularly charged for Black artists, who found themselves marginalized by the established art world and often had difficulty finding venues and audiences for their live performances. Their work received scant art historical

attention and thus risked being left out of the discourse."³⁵ To be sure, for many Black artists, documenting their performance work has been crucial for confronting and combating the racism of the art world and larger society. In placing an emphasis on documenting their actions, Black performance-makers join a host of other Black cultural workers who have understood the value in strategically mobilizing mediums such as photography and video to, as Leigh Raiford puts it, "transform national consciousness through the critique of racial logic, through the assertion of themselves as viewing and acting subjects, not simply objects, and through the attempt to provide a fitting memorial for Black lives so viciously cast aside."³⁶

Performance documentation, needless to say, generates its own meanings and interpretations. While, by design, the digital prints in Adams' series are incapable of fully capturing the intensity, vibrancy, or complexity of the original live events, they provide yet another way of understanding and engaging the project's most resonant themes and, indeed, the potency of its *reppin'*. They also return to the present some of the performances' energies and personal, cultural, and aesthetic motivations. Take, for example, the four digital prints documenting the *I Crush a Lot (Hammons)* performance that were displayed side-by-side in the groundbreaking exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*.³⁷ While each photograph in the series only captures a single beat of what was a highly kinetic performance, they nevertheless brim with movement and meaning. The first image in the series, for example, shows Adams in profile, mid-walk, carrying a mallet in his right hand, his body and

shadow inching toward Hammons' magnified silhouette, which promises refuge from the starkness of the white walls that surround it. Adams' grip on the mallet suggests strength and perhaps a desire to strike at creativity. The artist is confident in his Blackness and, indeed, his desire to summon the power of his artistic inspirations. The conversation the picture stages is not only between the past and present but also between the iconic and non-iconic, understood here as what Nicole Fleetwood defines as "an aesthetic that resists singularity and completeness in narrative; one that exposes the limitations of its framing and the temporality and specificity of the moment documented."³⁸ The image and, to be sure, the broader series bid viewers to perform a particular kind of imaginative work—work that invites further consideration of the ways we can continue to liberate Blackness from the "limitations of its framing," to echo Fleetwood.

Beat 5

It is fitting that it was on the HBO television series *Insecure* that Adams' penchant for *reppin'* Blackness went "Hollywood" in the summer of 2017. In episode 2 of the series' second season, the show's central protagonist, Issa (played by the co-creator Issa Rae), attends an event with her three best friends—Molly (Yvonne Orji), Tiffany (Amanda Seales), and Kelli (Natasha Rothwell)—at CAAM, where the exhibition *Derrick Adams: Network* is on view. While the camera follows the quartet ambling about the museum's elegant confines, it also captures some of the saturated mixed-media collages and installations strategically placed

throughout the space. As the promotional material for it explained, "Images abound of classic African American television shows such as *Sanford and Son* and luminaries including Oprah Winfrey, Diahann Carroll, and O.J. Simpson, along with representations of television monitors with SMPTE (Society for Motion Picture and Television Engineers) color bars" in the exhibition.³⁹ Many of the pieces on view further displayed Adams' ongoing fascination with examining and, indeed, critiquing the relationship between Blackness and its representation in popular entertainment and media.

Issa and friends become particularly captivated by Adams' *Pilot #1*, a 2014 mixed-media collage on paper featuring a fragmented Rudy Huxtable-looking figure made of bold patterns, shapes, and colors framed by a vintage television box (Figure 5). The work becomes the setting for a conversation among the friends about some of the joys, pitfalls, and perils of dating as a Black woman in the twenty-first century. There, however, is another, less conspicuous conversation unfolding simultaneously—one between the defamiliarized rendering of one of the most iconic televisual representations of Black girlhood and the women characters who she very well could have grown up to be. At stake in this latter conversation is a consideration of the ways that television and other media have too often served to imprison ideas about Black girlhood and womanhood and, concomitantly, Black female sexuality. Adams' *reppin'* becomes the impetus for additional *reppin'* in the scene and on screen. It is *reppin'* aimed at liberating Blackness from the anti-Blackness that so often suffuses the popular



Figure 5: "Derrick Adams, *Pilot #1*, 2014 (mixed-media collage on paper), 48 × 72 in. Photo courtesy of Derrick Adams."

imaginary. It is *reppin'* that demands that those who bear witness to it desire better, desire more, desire differently.

Notes

1. For a rich discussion of Patterson's work, see: *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us*, ed. Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston, TX: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2012). This essay is greatly indebted to Cassel Oliver's groundbreaking curatorial work, which has been instrumental in ensuring that many Black visual artists have received their critical and historical due.

2. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 3.

3. Here, I am riffing on Jon McKenzie's suggestion in *Perform or Else* that we might understand performance as "our mist, our mad atmosphere." See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From*

Discipline to Performance (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

4. Gaye Theresa Johnson discussion of "beat juggling" as a method for syncretizing multiple temporalities, spatialities, memories, and experiences is no doubt also useful to me here. See Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlements in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). My use of beats is also inspired by the "Overture" to Harry J. Elam's *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. See Harry J. Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

5. Charles H. Rowell, "Derrick Adams," *Callaloo* 38, no. 4 (2015): 797–900, 798.

6. The Proposition exhibited *Hillman U: A Dream Deferred, A Dream Fulfilled* in its Bowery location from October 5 until November 11, 2012. Adams collaborated with Brooklyn-based industrial designer Michael Chuapoco on the "sculptural project"; Chuapoco crafted the

display environment for Adams wearable art. For more information on Derrick Adams, visit: <http://www.derrickadams.com/>; and, for information on Michael Chuapoco, visit: <http://www.michaelchuapoco.com/>. I wish to express my gratitude to Derrick and Michael for their generosity.

7. FUBU, an acronym for “For Us, By Us” or “Five Urban Brothers United,” was a clothing label founded in 1992 by Black entrepreneur Daymond John with help from his childhood friends J. Alexander Martin, Carl Brown, and Keith Perrin. The company primarily marketed its clothing to the burgeoning hip hop generation and was catapulted to national prominence by rap artists such as L.L. Cool J. Launched by Carl Jones and T.J. Walker in 1989, a few years before FUBU, Cross Colours was also marketed to lovers of hip hop. Often composed of bright colors and patterns drawn from West African cultures, the brand was distinguished by its labels, which included socially conscious messages such as “Clothing Without Prejudice” and “Fight the Power.” The 1990s would see the rise of a number of “hip hop” fashion labels including Karl Kani (who, for a time, worked for Cross Colours), Russell Simmons’ Phat Farm label, and the Wu Tang Clan’s Wu wear, among many others.

8. See, Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty First Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

9. In a discussion about his creative process and objectives, Adams remarks that “deconstructionist philosophies” inform his practice. He writes, “I’m drawn to deconstructionism as a philosophy and as a practice because of my interest in the interpretation of signs and symbols and how we decode messages and images. We decipher constructed objects by how they appear on the surface, but through deconstruction we can investigate what lies beneath the surface and test for relevance and purpose.” See Jonathan Metzelaar, “Deconstructing Derrick: In the Holodeck of Human Society with Derrick Adams,” *PMC Magazine*, March 2012, [\[mag.com/2012/03/derrick-adams/?full=content\]\(http://pmcmag.com/2012/03/derrick-adams/?full=content\) \(accessed March 15, 2019\).](http://pmc-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

10. Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 2.

11. On view at the Studio Museum in Harlem from November 2013 through March 2014, *The Shadows Took Shape* was organized by Naima J. Keith and Zoé Whitley.

12. Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

13. Kermit Ernest Campbell, *Gettin’ Our Groove On: Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 23.

14. Nicole R. Fleetwood, “Hip Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety, and the Discourse of Americana,” in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 327.

15. See, for example, Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

16. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr., eds, *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2013), xxv.

17. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memories in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

18. Badia Ahad, “Post-Blackness and Culinary Nostalgia in Marcus Samuelsson’s *Yes, Chef*,” *American Studies* 54, no. 4 (2006): 5–26, 8; D. Soyini Madison, “Forward,” in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), vii.

19. Valerie Cassel Oliver, “Putting the Black Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance,” in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art Catalogue* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2013).

20. Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1.

21. Derrick Adams, Terry Adkins, Sherman Fleming, Maren Hassinger, Steffani Jemison, Lorraine O'Grady, and Clifford Owens in conversation with Kellie Jones, "Clifford Owens: Anthology—Roundtable," in *Clifford Owens: Anthology Art Catalogue* (New York: MoMA PS1, 2012).

22. Nico Wheadon, "Offal Truths: An Interview with Derrick Adams," *White Zinfandel* 7, <http://www.nicowheadon.com/writing/2017/2/28/offal-truths-an-interview-with-derrick-adams-white-zinfandel-issue-no-7>.

23. See OutKast, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* (New York: Arista Records, 2003).

24. Wheadon, "Offal Truths."

25. In hip hop parlance, "crushin'" is used to suggest an infatuation with something or someone. "Crushin' it" means performing or excelling beyond expectation.

26. Kellie Jones, *Eyeminded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 146.

27. Kellie Jones, "David Hammons," *Real Life Magazine* 16, (1986): 8, quoted in Dawoud Bey, "In the Spirit of Minkisi: The Art of David Hammons," *Third Text* 8, no. 27 (1994): 45–54.

28. See http://www.adrianpiper.com/news_sep_2012.shtml (accessed March 15, 2019).

29. McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 123.

30. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, Vol. 1: *Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968–1992* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 198.

31. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 6.

32. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.

33. Peggy Phelan, "Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral," in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970–1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

34. Ibid.

35. Yona Backer, "Performance Trace: Staged Actions, Live Art, and Performance Made for the Camera," in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art Catalogue* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2013), 20.

36. Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 7.

37. I first became interested in writing about Adams' *Communicating with Shadows* series after seeing the images of it on display in *Radical Presence* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. As I wrote in a review of the exhibition published in *Theater* in 2014, "The digital prints capturing Adams's performances and displayed in *Radical Presence* stood out as the exhibition's most evocative and compelling documents." See, Isaiah Matthew Wooden, "Shadows, Acts, and Radical Presence," *Theater* 44, no. 3 (2014): 66–73.

38. Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, Blackness* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 64.

39. CAAM featured a full description of the exhibition on its website: <https://caamuseum.org/exhibitions/2017/derrick-adams-network> (accessed March 15, 2019).

Isaiah Matthew Wooden is Assistant Professor of Theater Arts at Brandeis University. A scholar of African American art, drama, and performance, he has contributed writing to *Callaloo*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Modern Drama*, *PAJ*, *Theater*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Topics*, among others. Wooden is currently completing a book that explores the interplay of race and time in post-civil rights Black expressive culture and is co-editing an anthology on the work of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney.