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WANDERING/WILDING: BLACKNESS ON THE INTERNET

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Devin Kenny | Tabita Rezaire | Fannie Sosa

Curated by Legacy Russell

#WanderingWILDING

A call-and-response to “The Peril of Black Mobility”, a critical essay by Doreen St. Félix, “Wandering / WILDING: Blackness on the Internet” presents the work of seven artists—niv Acosta, Hannah Black, Evan Ifekoya, E. Jane, Devin Kenny, Tabita Rezaire, and Fannie Sosa—whose work mobilizes an exploration of race via the material of the Internet.

Wandering points to the socio-cultural identity of the *flâneur*, mused on by Baudelaire as “a roving soul in search of a body”, later reintroduced into the academy by Walter Benjamin as a mark of modernity distinctly threatened by developments of an impending Industrial Revolution. Alternately, *wilding* is a slang word which came into mainstream use in 1980s New York, a dog-whistle term used to describe the gang assault of strangers that rose out of the controversial Central Park jogger case in 1989 wherein five teenagers of color were accused of and jailed for a crime they did not commit.

In relation to this event “WILDING” was the cover headline of New York’s Daily News on April 22nd, 1989 and became part of the fear-mongering language used to mark the collective socialising of black and brown bodies as inherent public threat and, in turn, justify increased profiling and policing of such bodies throughout New York City. With ongoing media attention turned to #BlackLivesMatter, a global movement that continues to grow online and out in the world in the U.S., U.K., and beyond, the reality of such policing as international phenomena has sparked a much-needed discussion surrounding freedom of movement, as well as race and class tied to the exercising of civil liberties.

Thus “Wandering / WILDING” presents a challenging dichotomy and essential opportunity for discourse, situating a spotlight on the privileged white body that Baudelaire’s “roving soul” has historically inhabited and that American culture has inherited and built into the consciousness of its cultural mythology with the ongoing desire to be “on the road”, the same roads and streets that are not equally carefree nor safe for all bodies that traverse them. What can the Internet do for the black *flâneur*? What freedoms can be found in the “publics” realized via the digital for bodies of color? In what way do artists make new spaces for black lives to matter, online? “Wandering / WILDING: Blackness on the Internet” and the artists therein aim to inspect, and investigate.

Legacy Russell

It's easiest to start from the impulse to problematize the position of the *flâneur*. The ugly word *privilege* hovers around it, and we turn to questions that we know the answer to, "Who, exactly, is allowed to wander, like so?" As Doreen St. Felix suggests: streetside, the would-be black flâneur is always out of place. Black wandering is always already an escape, an *a priori* wildness. To be discovered outside of the bounds of captivity, bounds which shift easily under the prosecuting gaze, can be three strikes all bundled together. However, it's no fun to accept that the black would-be flâneur's body is utterly scarred beyond repair. Certainly this does not mean that tomorrow I will take my notebook, grab a jacket, and wander the streets to assert my right-to-flânerie. I won't be so actively irresponsible. However, my preference here is to throw caution to the wind and be wildly irresponsible when it comes to the ideas that follow.

We might speak of the flâneur as necessarily enjoying the privilege of having a body which calls no excess attention to itself, casts no shadow. What we wish were only recent events have revealed a more complicated history, showing that the black body is not permitted to wander. In the United States, we have an ever-growing list of recent victims of not just aberrant instances of "police brutality," but a longer story of the excessive force that white civil society continually applies to blackness/black (non)subjects/bodies. Likewise, here—in the very neighborhood where this exhibition is staged and where you might be reading this essay, just five years ago, Mark Duggan was murdered by the [London Police]. Duggan's criminal activity is still debated, but the fact remains that on that day no gun was found on his person. Instances such as these—although instance is a word that obscures the structural and ongoing nature of the problem—might serve as a cautionary tale to the would-be black flâneur. The *flâneur*, an exemplary modernist subject, by way of Baudelaire and Poe by way of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, must float leisurely through public space.

In order to properly indulge in flânerie, one must be free to move about. It feels silly to explain this any further. If any more clarification is needed, take out your phone now and Google 'stop and frisk'.

The flâneur's loneliness seems of the utmost importance. According to Benjamin's analysis of Poe, the flâneur is alone by choice. He chooses to drift about, some embodiment of (white, male) modernist detachment, always *among* the crowd but never *with* or in it—apart *from* rather than a part *of*. If we were to skip a few steps and imagine a black flâneur, she would never follow Poe's flâneur in his choice to be alone. She might still be lonely, maybe even lonelier than Poe, maybe even the *loneliest*. But rather, I think that she is haunted. Ontologically speaking, she can never be a true flâneur, lost alone in the city, because she bears the image and the history of all the other black wanderers who took to the streets (or the fields, the forest, the sea) before her. Further, she buzzes with the presence of all other black flâneurs whose space-time is approximately her own—that is to say, those she might pass on the street, those to whom she gives the nod that my parents encouraged me to give upon seeing another black person in public.

What happens in that moment when blackness encounters itself, introduced by two or more bodies who bear its mark? It's certainly something beyond any sort of Althusserian recognition of subjectivity. The poet Anne Carson writes, "words have edges and so do you."¹ Maybe this is true for Carson, maybe this is true for some and not for others. I feel quite certain that this notion of the 'edge,' the *edge of oneself* requires reconsideration when it comes to the black subject. Perhaps what I am getting at here is that, the would-be black flâneur can never exist as such, apart from the crowd, because she is always a crowd herself.

It is quite the same as Moten's invocation of Glissant's "consent not to be a single being."² Her edges bleed.

Carson obsesses over the edges of the self as the playground of Eros; in her view, the erotic is all about boundaries. She writes that "the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me." I suppose this is all very related to psychoanalysis; Carson appears rather lost in a Freudian haze, wrapped around lack's finger.

Yet Frantz Fanon quips, in "The Fact of Blackness": "My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack." The work of Fanon and countless others, as well as my own experience—let us think of it as the gap between The Nod and that Althusserian acknowledgement of the subject—cast Carson in comparison as bland, stodgy and altogether some white people shit. A better erotic, a more apt Eros, might be Audre Lorde's erotic, rather "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feeling." I like Lorde's focus on the space *between*, between self and this strongest feeling, but also seemingly on the *space between selves*, cast not as lack, some dead space, but as electric. She writes: "The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony."

Somewhere in all of this, is an inkling of what I'd like to over-determine as an erotic of the black crowd. This crowd, as noted, need not be physically manifest as a grounded group of black bodies in space. It is rather the ontological totality that Cedric Robinson writes of. But what happens when the crowd is doubled over, when my crowd meets up with your crowd? Here, in *Wandering/WILDING*, I think that we watch this happen.

We also watch this happen on the internet—a fact that all of the artists here seem aware of and interested in—perhaps the one place where black wandering is permitted. The lame liberatory myths of the Internet should still be approached with caution, but it does seem to be the case that the internet has yet been unable to achieve the same transformation of black wandering into wildness, escape—into wilding. The black crowd congregates safely online, free to express itself in its full complexity and zeal.

I am thinking a lot about the Jukebox Challenge as I write this, which is a meme—or if not quite a meme it's a viral video phenomenon—where you and a group of friends, one of you holding a large speaker overhead, mob in public space, dancing to T-LO's "All Day" (again—Google it). Like most memes, the challenge originated among black teens and young adults. The Jukebox Challenge, to me, is a template for an aggressive manifestation of blackness in public space. It could be a false equivalency, but the same wildness that embroiled the Central Park Five in decades-long legal battles and still ongoing trauma presents itself here, unchecked. The videos always open with the subjects running directly at the camera, often at full speed. Black teens take to the street, the beach, the quad, with unbridled energy. Within the public space that these video frame, throughout digital networks, and here in the gallery, the black crowd manifests. In our chaos, our strongest feeling, our crowdedness, we are wilding.

Aria Dean

¹ Anne Carson, "Eros the Bittersweet," 1986, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 52

² Édouard Glissant, 2011, "One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28: 4–19