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Author: Anna De Vivo

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Anna De Vivo

Moses Sumney, *græ* (Secretly Canadian: 2020)

Moses Sumney explores the complexities of identity and belonging in his iridescent double album, *græ* (2020). Take these lyrics from ‘and so I come to isolation’, which parcel the related feelings of detachment and alienation:

Like you’re-you’re islanded
And I thought, that’s exactly what
I’ve been my whole life
I’ve been islanded¹

Unfolding the etymology of the word ‘isolation’ (from the Latin *insula*, meaning ‘island’, as he does in the track of the same title), being ‘islanded’ encapsulates Sumney’s own bi-cultural and bi-national identities (having grown up between Ghana and America, settling in California at 16). Written from the intersections of sexuality, intimacy, queerness and masculinity, Sumney’s lyrics defy easy essentialisms in taking us to this islanded space.

¹ Moses Sumney, *græ* (Secretly Canadian: 2020).

As a decidedly indeterminate confessional, *græ* is simultaneously a plea and evasion to be understood, one which finds Sumney articulating his own opacity. As theorised by the Martiniquan philosopher Edouard Glissant, opacity is to be understood as an unmeasured difference, a diversity that exceeds categorisation. While Western liberal society has moved to understand and acknowledge difference, this recognition often comes with ‘a requirement for transparency’: ultimately a negation of that very difference, under the sign of a false universality. It is in response to this situation that Glissant issues his stark counterproposition: ‘We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone’.² Discussing this concept in *Disaffected*, Xine Yao emphasises the significance of emotional opacity:

Lingering with, rather than debunking, the specter of unfeeling in its function as an antisocial rebuttal to discourses of universal feeling provides greater nuance in our understandings of politics and literature for the marginalized.³

In opposition to affective singularity associated with Western liberal individualism (often coded white and male), Yao foregrounds how acknowledging unfeeling has the potential to enable an acceptance of difference for minoritized groups in all and any form. These songs ask: what do we see when we encounter unfeeling subjects; and how can we use this spectral quality of unfeeling to redress fundamentally uncaring systems in our culture? As Sumney sings in ‘Neither/Nor’, emotional opacity offers an affective opportunity for ‘colouring in the margins’; he charts a route towards the ‘romance of the

² Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p.192-194.

³ Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2021), p.28.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

undefined', towards a more relational praxis outside of the universalising cultures of white sentiment that Yao urges us to disengage from.

Invoking the contradictory self-identifications of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (1892), 'also also also and and and' issues a defence of indeterminacy:

I really do insist that others recognise my inherent multiplicity

What I no longer do

Is take pains to explain it or defend it

That is an exhausting (exhausting)

Repetitive (repetitive)

And draining project (draining project)

To constantly explain and defend one's multiplicity

Whitman would write 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)'; in a sweeping embrace characteristic of his verse, the line looks to vigorously embody the ideals of American democracy.⁴ Taking this position a step further however, Sumney inflects Whitman's state with a greater sense of insistence and urgency. This outlook comes from a markedly experiential level; as Sumney explained in an interview: 'My foundational perspective on the world is one of many. So I found that I never really fit in in just one place or could see life through one lens'. Evading 'the repetitive tasks of racialized and gendered emotional labor', often a prerequisite involved in explaining the subject position of the marginalised, this lyric's expressly declarative vista offers an alternative reading of what a democratic position

⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1958), p.96.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

should entail: one where people are accepted for who they are, as they are, without question.⁵

The effects of such emotional labours are elaborated in ‘Bystanders’ as Sumney sings:

What’s the use of confessing the truth

To an executioner in a booth

About the duelling forces in you?

Yao writes that ‘depend[ing] upon white feelings as the catalyst for social change reinscribes the world that enables their power’: wearied by white sentimentality, Sumney relays how these hegemonic structures of feeling perpetuate his own disempowerment.⁶ Opposing the possibility of opening himself up to bystanders who speak of the ‘truth’, ‘honesty’ and ‘morality’, he sings of his vulnerability to this ‘executioner in a booth’, perhaps referring to the exhaustion minoritized groups, especially Black people, face in mental health services due to limited representation and accessibility to resources.⁷ Burdened by apathy, true understanding, ‘veracity’, is stunted throughout the song as difficulties in expression result in Sumney resigning himself to being misunderstood within the normative constraints of sentimentalism.

Beyond its psychic residues, Sumney recounts the origins of emotional disaffection in ‘Cut Me’ where he challenges commonplace career aspirations as he sings about the pains of pursuing an artistic career:

⁵ Yao, p.16.

⁶ Yao, p.2.

⁷ For more on structural racism in UK mental health services specifically, see Dr Frank Keating’s ‘Breaking the Circles of Fear’.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

When I'm weary and so worn out
Ooh, when my mind's clouded and filled with doubt
That's when I feel the most alive
Masochistic kisses are how I thrive

Self-reflexively revelling in the arduousness of his musical labours, Sumney's melancholy falsetto in these opening lines echoes Langston Hughes' 'The Weary Blues' (1925) where his speaker observes an African American man play the piano and sing, 'I got the Weary Blues | And I can't be satisfied'.⁸ Yet, while blues motifs of weariness are attributed to work as well as freedom from toil centre feelings of exhaustion, his lyric deviates from this tradition in a 'Masochistic' desire for the work itself. For Sumney, there is no escape from the grind; nor does he wish for it.

Specific to his context, pliable images of resilience encapsulate mutual processes of creation and destruction attached to the pleasure and pain of pursuing an artistic career. As Sumney sings 'If there's no pain, is there any progress?' and that 'Endurance is the source of my pride'. This sentiment of overstretching oneself as he strives towards his creative goal echoes the 'aesthetic of production' characteristic of post-Fordist zaniness which affect theorist Sianne Ngai observes as 'the uncertain status of performing between labour and play', of which occurs increasingly in precarious careers under disorganised capitalist organisations of work.⁹ In the music video directed by Sumney, we fittingly encounter him singing from an ambulance in the beginning,

⁸ Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2020), p.33.

⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p.188, p.13.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

followed by a hospital and performing, puppet-like at a talent show. All of these self-injuries foreground how the play of the artist is pressured under the creative (and concealed) labours that undergird its representation, acquiring ‘a stressed out, even desperate quality’.¹⁰ Indeed, amidst hustle culture and the increased neoliberal marketisation of the arts, these visuals stage the difficulties of “making it”, one compounded for artists of colour, without sacrificing the integrity of an artistic career under the taste-driven consumerism of the culture industry. Ultimately, however, in a moment of tongue-in-cheek acceptance, Sumney concedes to the zany as the song ends with him steering the ambulance he starts in, *Wacky Races*-style, brazenly forecasting his own way in spite of professional uncertainty (fig.1).



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1 Moses Sumney, 'Cut Me [Official Video]', Youtube.

In ‘Conveyor’, Sumney more simply refutes the usual rite-of-passage. While lacking a clear narrative the central metaphors of the conveyor belt, the colony, and beehive interlaced through the song reflect our modern obligation to fulfil a specialised role in

¹⁰ Ngai, p.182.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

society. The deadening rhythm of the song evokes a train chugging, elaborated in the first line ‘All aboard the bulletin board’, while images of automation under the assembly-line also springs to mind as Sumney sings of ‘the machine’. Following Michel Foucault’s examination of Mechanical Philosophy, Sumney describes a setting where docile bodies are disciplined (such as the private school or the workforce which he references), that functions as a ‘political anatomy’ serving to maintain modern power structures.¹¹ He will ‘anamorph into an organ, a spleen; and ‘assume form’; stemming from the Greek ‘to transform’, Sumney indicates how he reconstructs himself to fit in a broader system, an organ part of the biopolitical body politic. In this case, he fulfils his role, fitting into predisposed constructions where he ‘put[s] [his] life on a shelf, one of many.’

The transition from ‘Conveyor’ to ‘Boxes’ is important; if the album is about the relief of self-identification, this song stages a decisive break away from the systems wherein this potential is contained:

Dissatisfaction seems like the
natural byproduct of
identification
I truly believe that people who
define you control you
And the most significant thing
that any person can do
But especially Black women and

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p.138.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

men

Is to think about who gave them

their definitions

And rewrite those definitions for

Themselves

Voiced by Taiye Selasi who has spoken about the difficulties of representation placed on African artists which often slip into smoothing essentialisms¹², she states how ‘we have no place that we can claim without contention.’ Complicating common-sense ideas of desire, these lyrics invite us to question the satisfaction that stems from deviation and emotional opacity, sticking with and insisting on the failure to be understood, and on the will to exist outside of demarcated outlines. Along this vein, in *In the Break*, Fred Moten writes on the ontological problems of non locatability regarding the aesthetics of Black representation where ‘if we imagine a space between repetitions then we imagine something impossible to locate’, and how this discontinuity might seed political upheaval.¹³ As the bassline from ‘Conveyor’ continues into this song, it is overlaid by a syncopated and out-of-joint voice-over which signifies a speculative rupture, bursting from the boxes by attempting to voice an alternative characterisation outside of its present moment. The song ends by invoking future liberation through fabulation, and appeals towards self-definition, for Black people especially, by questioning ‘who gave them these definitions and rewrite those definitions for themselves.’

¹² Taiye Selasi, ‘Taiye Selasi: stop pigeonholing African writers’, *Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/04/taiye-selasi-stop-pigeonholing-african-writers>

¹³ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.69.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

If the album centres around refuting universal feeling, what does redressing this universalism mean? As Yao writes, unfeeling is ‘the detachment from hegemonic structures of feeling’.¹⁴ Sumney likewise turns this idea on its head, specifically detaching from the hyper-masculine ‘tough guy’ persona in *Virile*:

On the long hike through

Blue ridge mountains

I can feel the earth

Overtaking my skin

And I realise now

That none of this matters

‘Cause I will return

To dust and matter

Inverting the Romantic position of the *Rückenfigur* (as in Caspar David Friedrich’s ubiquitous *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818)), who overlooks their space and, as Sumney sings ‘stake[s] dominion over all that/ one surveys’, the song stages a shimmering disintegration of this subject-position characteristic of the Western enlightenment, splintering, and opening up new possibilities for vulnerability. Throughout, the lyric ‘I’ morphs, failing to settle on *any* fixed position. Initially relaying what has been told to him by an authority voice (‘You’ve got the wrong idea’ and have to ‘amp up the masculine’), he refuses to defend himself, eschewing this imprisoning persona (‘You’ve got the wrong guy’). He exists within, rather than on-top, of the mountain; as solidity, strength, determinacy, and stability melt, he acknowledges that

¹⁴ Yao, p.17.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

he, like us all, will eventually re-materialise and return into luminescent ‘dust and matter’.

By overturning the negativity of disaffection and its function as a protective antisocial affect, Yao also asks us ‘to speculate about the possibilities of feeling otherwise’ and the vulnerabilities that may stem from embracing the unknowability of feeling.¹⁵ ‘Bless Me’ lingers with this idea of counter-intimacies:

It's so predictable
To farm the parable
From every tête-à-tête
But when you see the end
In every beginning
Lessons are all you get
Bless me
Before you go
You're goin' nowhere with me

A queer consolation, with the charged reference to ‘the wrestling pit’ suggesting the latent homoeroticism of this encounter that we also see between Gerald and Birkin in D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, Sumney attempts to provide us with an antidote to normative ideas of the doting lover and their beloved. On this generic trope, Lauren Berlant warns against how ‘the love plot provides a seemingly non-ideological resolution to the fractures and contradictions of history’, often framed as a ‘beautifully shaped web

¹⁵ Yao, p.28.

Moveable Type 14 (2022)

of lyric mutuality' at the core of heterosexual reproductive futurity.¹⁶ Love's failures and the structures that uphold it even have the paradoxical power of reinstating a life around its conventions in the desperate hope for its return. Yet, while this plot often functions as a guise maintaining the status-quo, there is an ambivalence about romantic love here that destabilises this tendency: we know that the plot ends before it begins; and we are unsure of who is doing the leaving and why. Sticking with this indeterminacy however does not prove uncomfortable for Sumney as he takes its failures at face value; indeed, he would write of depictions of (a)romanticism in his earlier album that 'mainstream society has a way of distilling and simplifying things so that they can be easily consumed.' Against this simplification of desire that he writes of, and despite this ending's potential fractiousness, he resists the urge towards cruelty. Instead, in a radical moment of tenderness, we encounter its queer antithesis: kindness.

Acknowledgements

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¹⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2012), pp.92-3.