Horrible Beauty: Robin Coste Lewis's Black Aesthetic Practice

By Matthew Scully

Abstract: In *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* (2015), Robin Coste Lewis deploys "horrible beauty" as a dissensual aesthetic experience that challenges the perceiving subject. To be arrested by horrible beauty, in Lewis's poetry, is to be called to reflect on and critique the pathologies of whiteness upheld and perpetuated by aesthetic scenes, as well as to reframe what has been rendered either invisible or hypervisible. By arresting the perceiving subject, horrible beauty functions as a political aesthetic in its critique of the ways regimes of race, gender, and sexuality both shape and foreclose experience.

In an interview with Matthew Sharpe, Robin Coste Lewis describes her confrontation with Thomas Stothard's eighteenth-century etching, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, which provides her 2015 poetry collection and its lengthy central poem sequence their titles and genesis: "It's really horrible. It's beautiful and horrible simultaneously. It's a redux of the Botticelli Venus on the half-shell, except this 'Venus' is a black woman. Like Botticelli's Venus, she's attended by all these classical figures, but then you notice something in Triton's or Neptune's hand. Instead of the usual trident, he's carrying a flag of the Union Jack! So it's a pro-slavery image" ("Robin Coste Lewis").[1] Though Lewis begins by announcing the image as horrible, her description signals first the image's presumably beautiful characteristics,

such as the representation of a black woman in the image of Botticelli's Venus. The Union Jack suddenly introduces contextual reference—"but then you notice something"—which subverts the initial sensation of the image as beautiful.

Lewis can only describe the simultaneity of the image's beauty and horror in narrative sequence. A feeling of repulsion interrupts the attractive feeling of pleasure generated by Lewis's aesthetic encounter, and it is this surprising shock of the horrible—signaled both by her sudden "notice" of the image's context and by her exclamatory remark—that then frames her re-narration of the encounter. Lewis articulates the conjunction of the beautiful and the horrible as a conjunction of the aesthetic and the historical, which produces a disjunctive and dissensual experience for the perceiving subject, one that fractures any sensible coherence. As John Brooks points out, Lewis narrates "the intersection of aesthetics with politics" in this encounter with a historically-specific image (239). Lewis's description of this experience also inverts the apparent order of her sensations in a chiasmus—the movement from beauty to horror becomes reframed as a movement from horror to beauty—which performatively reenacts the disjunctive nature of her aesthetic encounter and its torsion. In "Boarding the Voyage," Lewis similarly claims that she "fell in love with the *Sable Venus* at first sight" and experienced a "simple delight" with the substitution of a white woman by a black woman. At the same time, she insists on the difficulty of the image—its "atrocious irony"—and the problematic logic of mere replacement, which does nothing to challenge the more fundamental structural racism against black women ("Boarding the Voyage").[2] Lewis's description highlights the way in which the image seduces its perceivers, yet she also acknowledges the horrifying realization of the violent and exclusionary norms inherent in the image. Lewis's shift from an aesthetic encounter to a scene of interpellation registers the complicity between sensory experience and modes of being and knowing.[3]

These conjunctions of the beautiful and horrible, as well as of the aesthetic and the epistemological, constitute a crucial aspect of Lewis's poetics in her first collection, which opens with the dedication, "*for* Beauty." Lewis ought to be read, therefore, as both a poet and an aesthetic theorist. While much of the critical commentary on Lewis has—quite reasonably—focused on her intervention in the archive and its particular historicity, I argue that Lewis's poetry develops an aesthetic of horrible beauty in order to challenge the logics structuring racist and sexist representations.[4] For as Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva have recently emphasized, these political, social, and cultural projects are constituted by the aesthetic ("Four Theses on Aesthetics"). Monique Roelofs and David Lloyd have similarly shown how modern racializing regimes depend on aesthetics. Roelofs, for example, argues, that race and aesthetics "saturate one another" to such an extent that they cannot be isolated (29-30). In this introductory section, I consider the implications of horrible beauty as a political and aesthetic category for Lewis. Situated within contemporary black aesthetics and alongside poets invested in (re)appropriating cultural and archival materials, including Claudia Rankine, Dionne Brand, and M. NourbeSe Philip, Lewis refuses to separate beauty from impurities and historical realities. More specifically, Lewis's conception of horrible beauty intervenes in contemporary approaches to aesthetics that center questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Similar to "wounded beauty" (Anne Anlin Cheng), which foregrounds the "vertiginous experience" of beauty that inaugurates "crises of identification," "terrible beauty" (Carolyn Korsmeyer), which characterizes a beauty "bound up with the arousal of discomforting emotions," and the "ugly beauty of the postmodern" (Kevin Young) that describes something such as the "magnolia" covering over antiblack violence in Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," horrible beauty names a political aesthetic that

works both to fracture the consensual formations of the white aesthetic regime and to open a space for other sensible worlds and experiences.[5]

What I call horrible beauty, following Lewis, therefore overlaps in many ways with these alternative designations, though it is most closely aligned with "terrible beauty." Carolyn Korsmeyer suggests that "terrible beauty shades towards horror and other aesthetic categories" and that terrible beauties can generate "a zone where terror and horror, beauty and sublimity and ugliness, can be difficult to distinguish" (63). In this essay, however, I prefer horrible beauty not simply because it draws from language used by Lewis herself, but because the horrible more precisely describes the poetic movements in *Voyage of the Sable Venus* that aim, somewhat paradoxically, to arrest us. In my estimation, if Korsmeyer makes a misleading conflation when she associates the terrible and horrible, then Adriana Cavarero offers a helpful correction by emphasizing that the horrible is only problematically associated with fear, which more accurately follows the feeling of terror (8). Rather than an experience of fear "manifested in a trembling body," horror "has to do with repugnance," and its physical symptom is more typically a state of paralysis, of "feeling frozen" (7-8). In what follows, the processes of aesthetic experience will be described as dialectical, yet the horrible paradoxically arrests these movements. Horrible beauty fixes the beholder, much like Lewis is fixed by Stothard's etching, in a paralyzing state of attraction and repulsion.

Many of Lewis's readers have responded to this antagonistic movement and paralysis of horrible beauty. Leah Mirakhor, for example, frames her interview with Lewis by announcing that *Voyage of the Sable Venus* "captures how beauty and brutality often exist not only simultaneously but also symbiotically, particularly in depictions of black female figures" ("A Door"). Francine Prose similarly remarks, "Lewis's book doesn't diminish our enjoyment of art

but rather enhances it by encouraging us to formulate a more conscious way of thinking about what we are seeing." With a slightly but importantly different emphasis, Lewis admits that she wants to make her readers "uncomfortable" ("Robin Coste Lewis: 'Black Joy'"). This essay extends these reflections on this conjunction of horror and beauty to explore its insights into Lewis's poetic reconfigurations of blackness and aesthetics. In doing so, I elucidate the precise feelings of discomfort, as well as of possibility, generated by Lewis's poetry. Rather than a project of liberal inclusion, Lewis's poetics of horrible beauty aims to reorient us to the aesthetic scene in order to sense anew or differently what has already been within its frame. Lewis argues, "the entire history of human beings is a history of erasure," and in her poetry, "horrible beauty" functions as an erasure of this erasure by drawing attention to how the aesthetic field frames—and elides—its subjects ("The Race Within Erasure").[6]

My emphasis on horrible beauty also aims to complement, rather than conflict with, Lewis's insistence that "black joy" is her "primary aesthetic" ("'Black Joy'"). Lewis reflects on the fact that black life appears saturated by "love and beauty" yet with an "undertow of profound terror, a terror inspired and supported by the state"; an experience, in other words, of "rich contradiction" ("'Black Joy'").[7] Lewis's attention to the horrible enables her to transpose this terror into a repulsive object, one that can be remade. In every poem, Lewis asserts, "Beauty is what I'm after" ("'Black Joy'"). Horrible beauty constitutes the space within which black joy appears, and they are therefore the two contradictory sides of Lewis's aesthetic project. Horrible beauty names the production of the sensible and insensible fabrics of black life, a schema in which blackness often gets "muted" by the horrifying exclusions of white hegemony ("'Black Joy'"). Yet in a dialectical reversal, horrible beauty turns this senseless violence—or violence of the senseless—against the aesthetic regime. In the space that opens up—or even within this

space of enclosure—black joy can appear. For Lewis, black joy emerges in spite of antiblackness, for "because of love and family and connection, our lives were gorgeous" ("'Black Joy'"). Black joy, then, is an insistence on connection and relationality, as well as on an experience of life and "a *lot* of fun" ("'Black Joy'"), despite the violence of white supremacy. Horrible beauty, in my reading, names the aesthetic frame of this experience of black joy within and against a space of antiblack violence. Horrible beauty's antagonism potentially disrupts the order of things to make possible new links and new modes of connection. In this way, horrible beauty foregrounds for readers the dissensual nature of black joy, an experience that reconfigures the contradictory experiences of black life.

A central strategy of the horrible beauty constitutive of Lewis's poetics is the embodiment of aesthetic judgment: her speakers and poems often experience or figure an affective encounter with the aesthetic. And this embodied or affective experience often depends on uncomfortable conjunctions. In "Pleasure & Understanding," for instance, the speaker casually asserts, "Everything's fucked up. Everything's gorgeous. Even / Death contains pleasure," before continuing a meditation on the antagonism between pleasure and understanding (129).[8] Lewis's emphasis on the bodily—and her poetry's attempt to make its audience aware of the bodily, of the felt sense of aesthetic experience that exceeds representational schemas—also marks an interest in blackness as excess. Writing about the most radical work of the Black Arts Movement, Margo Natalie Crawford argues, "the word 'black' always gestures to a profound overturning of the identity category 'Negro' and a desire to reenchant black humanity as much more than an identity category. 'Black' signaled excess, the power of the *unthought*" (3).[9] In what follows, I argue that Lewis's attention to the beautiful figures this excess and thus rebels against normative expectations. There is, then, a "fugitive" quality that defines horrible beauty

precisely because it reframes and disfigures those aesthetic scenes that depended on an inaugural distortion and disfiguration of black life (Moten, *Stolen Life* 30).[10] Horrible beauty's antagonism of attraction and repulsion does not, however, prevent Lewis from lingering with its disjunctive experiences. Where Immanuel Kant suggests, "We *linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself" (*CJ* §12, 68 [222]), Lewis and her poetic speakers linger not to reproduce their contemplations but to change them. To be arrested by horrible beauty is to be called to reflect on and critique the pathologies of whiteness upheld and perpetuated by the aesthetic regime, as well as to reframe what has been rendered either invisible or hypervisible.

Reframing Beauty I: Race and Aesthetic Judgment

Before turning to the title poem, which Lewis constructs by arranging titles and descriptions of already-existing artworks, I consider two brief poems, "Beauty's Nest" and "Plantation," to foreground Lewis's articulations of the beautiful and of the subject who encounters violent processes of subjectivation in an aesthetic scene. Ultimately, these poems reveal horrible beauty to be a way of accounting for a psycho-affective or libidinal subject, one constituted through racial, gender, and sexual regimes of identification. By aesthetic "scene" I refer to both Saidiya V. Hartman's notion of a "scene of subjection," which frames "the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject" in a movement of dialectical torsion (*Scenes* 4)," as well as Jacques Rancière's notion of a scene as "a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names, and ideas, constituting the sensible community that makes such weaving thinkable" (*Aisthesis* xi). Because the scene seeks

to "appropriate" and "reconsider" older objects and patterns, it potentially functions not only as a scene of subjection but also as a scene of emancipation (Rancière, *Aisthesis* xi). As Hartman argues, "the exercise of power" is "inseparable from its display" (*Scenes* 7). "Beauty's Nest," one of the brief poems in the collection's first section, frames the paradoxes inherent in beauty in an effort to break apart its exercises of power.

Like "Voyage," "Beauty's Nest" includes narrative components and conceptualizes beauty not as a simple object, but as a "nest." Nest suggests both a space of incubation and an entanglement, both a place in which beauty resides and in which beauty appears as an assemblage. The conjunction of the title suggests something uncanny, as "nest" speaks to both the familiar and the unfamiliar aspects of beauty. The latter become increasingly foregrounded. Following the title, Lewis establishes the historical stage on which the content of the poem will take place: "JIM CROW WELCOMES YOU HOME / AFTER THE WAR, JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT / GRAND CANYON: 1951" (21). The poem of course asks its readers to interpret the "welcome" that Jim Crow offers as an ironic gesture. This complicates the suggestion that black veterans return "home," since the "home" for which they fought is also the home that conceptualizes them as subjugated and disposable. The poem takes place in an uncanny scene in which the homely and the unhomely appear coterminous. The poem achieves this effect in part by situating itself in a specific history, one determined by the violence and racism of Jim Crow.

Given Lewis's figure of the "nest," Sigmund Freud's intervention in "The Uncanny" and more recent configurations of the uncanny in the black Gothic offer appropriate reference points for the poem and its investment in reframing the beautiful.[11] Freud describes his essay's psychoanalytic intervention as a supplement to traditional aesthetics, "which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime—that is, with feelings of a

positive nature—and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress" (619). The uncanny, as that which "arouses dread and horror," supplements traditional aesthetics with a consideration of a negative affect. The "doubling" effects that produce feelings of uncanniness—as in the doppelgangers of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019)—tend to proliferate and act as "a kind of fractal law of the Gothic" (Serpell). Sheri-Marie Harrison groups these trends under the "new black Gothic," which reveals how "Gothic tropes" function as a way "to make sense of black life in relation to the present day neoliberal manifestations of white supremacy and the institutions it requires to maintain its violent dominance—institutions such as the police, the judicial system, and the NRA." Where Harrison emphasizes "dark humor" as a characteristic of the uncanny representations of the new black Gothic, Lewis's uncanny poetics emphasize instead a sense of paralysis. "Beauty's Nest" fixes its subjects and readers such that they perceive the sensory deprivations of the white aesthetic regime, which in turn enables a new aesthetic construction.

Similar to her encounter with the etching, "Beauty's Nest" stresses the imbrication of aesthetics and history as one of the sources for the subject's disjunctive experience of attraction and repulsion. With the historical context of Jim Crow, "Beauty's Nest" proceeds to describe a violence and horror inherent in beauty as inseparable from the violence and horror constructed within history. The poem also incorporates autobiographical elements from Lewis's life ("Black Joy"). Upon telling her father her experience of the beauty of the Grand Canyon, Lewis discovers he had been there but had not seen it. Following World War II, he and some fellow black soldiers arrived at the Grand Canyon at night but were not allowed to stay in a hotel: "So there they stood in the pitch black looking at the darkness, unable to see the Grand Canyon, all because they at least wanted to say they had *stood* on the rim" ("Black Joy"). "Beauty's Nest"

provides a poetic occasion to "[use] our individual desires to connect to larger historical or natural themes" ("Black Joy"). This biographical context enriches our sense of poem, which opens by describing "Beauty's nest" as that which "renders the body / mute. An elegance / so inconceivable, / it's violent. Extreme" (21). This "nest" overwhelms the body and possesses an "elegance" so extreme as to be "violent." Already, the poem acknowledges this nest to be an uncanny structure; a nest refers to a place of security, a place of rest, yet the violent excess named by the speaker compromises that ostensible safety. The question, then, is not one of opposing aesthetic experiences, but of the impurity of—or differential opposition within—the experience of the beautiful itself. As the beautiful in Lewis's poetry elicits at once attraction and repulsion, it must be understood as imbricated with the horrifying. The racist scene reconstructed in "Beauty's Nest" emphasizes that the attraction of the beautiful is always already repulsive, even as this repulsion also carries with it an inherent attraction. Where Lewis's discussion of beauty and horror with which I began suggests a dialectical chiasmus, "Beauty's Nest" in fact suggests not an oscillation between positions but the structuring antagonism that inheres in horrible beauty. Claire Schwartz in fact reads "Plantation," a poem to which I will soon turn, as an articulation of the way in which "desire entangles repulsion and attraction" (230). The ambivalence of horrible beauty in "Beauty's Nest" reveals how racial schemas both produce and foreclose sensible experiences. Lewis's conjunction of the beautiful and the horrible as an uncanny encounter between "feelings of a positive nature" and "feelings of repulsion and distress" stages how the beautiful generates attraction and repulsion simultaneously precisely because the subject is always a particular—rather than universal—effect of processes of subjectivation.

Lewis's description of the body as "mute" in the opening stanza of "Beauty's Nest" also introduces an effect of synesthesia that emphasizes the embodied sensations of horrible beauty. Though the body tends to be thought of as mute already, to mute the body suggests an unreadability. This disruption of sensation and legibility continues when the speaker describes the experience of seeing the Grand Canyon: "It hurts / the heart to see / something so vast and deep / can also be made of dirt" (21). Sight reveals the incongruity of the Grand Canyon's vastness and its base matter, and the speaker links this visual sensation to the heart rather than to the subject. Although the heart cannot be said to "feel," the heart often works as a metonym for the center of feeling in figurative discourse. Lewis continues this strategy in the second stanza, when the speaker asks, "And if it can be / of the earth, the body / ponders, might such a landscape / exist also within me?" (21). Again, "the body" does not literally "ponder." These descriptions of synesthesia articulate both a conjunction and disjunction of sensation, which perhaps speaks to the violence perceived when the beautiful and the horrible merge, as well as when the sensory and cognitive appear complicit. For there is a disorienting conflation of an aesthetic scene with an epistemological one in the poem. The reference to "the body" can also be read as a particular body and a generalized body, which gets played out in the third stanza when four figures are introduced. As the poem develops, these sensations are shared across modes of sensibility by a particular body or by bodies in common. Lewis engages, then, with a common feeling or common sense. Rancière argues, via Schiller, for a rereading of "[a]esthetic common sense" as "a dissensual common sense" that "challenges the distribution of the sensible" ("Lyotard" 98). Lewis's poem and its disjunctive synesthesia stages this dissensual common sense in the encounter with horrible beauty it describes. But where Rancière preserves a notion of common sense to radicalize it, Lewis's disjunctions emphasize how racialized and gendered

notions of the "human" and of who counts as "Man" depend on a common sense that appears common only "through the constitutive excommunication" of "figures who nevertheless come to haunt Man as the bearers of an ontological dissonance, an immanent declension, we might call blackness" (Bradley and da Silva). In Lewis's poetry, then, common sense only appears as a catachresis, that is, as a figural articulation with no literal referent.

"Beauty's Nest" then turns away from these observations in the third stanza to the "YOU" referenced in the aforementioned setting description. This turn reveals the double temporality structuring the poem. The opening stanzas present to the reader an encounter with the beauty of the Grand Canyon in an ambiguous temporal location, which, despite the "1951" date, seems to be taking place in a non-specific moment. In contrast, the closing stanzas more clearly focus on the figures in a specific moment in the past—1951—and referenced by the opening "YOU." With the poem's autobiographical context, we might read this double temporality as the convergence of Lewis's experience and her father's. At the outset of the third stanza the speaker introduces "four" "uniformed" figures on the "rim" of the Grand Canyon. While the reader thus understands the "you" to refer to these figures, "you" nonetheless interpellates the reader. This in itself produces a potentially uncanny experience of doubling and reversal, for the reader/beholder suddenly becomes the read/beheld. Such a shift vertiginously changes our positionality within this aesthetic scene: "to be for the beholder is to be able to mess up or mess with the beholder. It is the potential of being catalytic. Beholding is *always* the entrance into a scene, into the context of the other, of the object" (Moten, *In the Break* 235). The opening of the third stanza reads as an uncanny repetition, as another beginning for the poem, in part because it places the reader uncomfortably into a scene, one that repeats or restages the scene at the poem's outset. Ironically, these figures cannot see the beauty before them because

they have arrived here at night: “the imagination tries / to conceive all the things / it is still too dark / to see” (21). “Beauty’s nest” remains inaccessible to these four because of the pervasive darkness of night. Instead of perceiving natural beauty before them, they must rely on the attempt of their imagination to construct the image of the Grand Canyon. Yet one cannot imagine an aesthetic experience of the beautiful. By definition the beautiful must be experienced; that is, the subject must be confronted by a presentation of something that they may then judge to be beautiful (Kant, *CJ* §1, 44-5 [203-204]). After this judgment the beautiful object or experience may be recollected, but the encounter itself must have taken place already. The two opening stanzas translate an encounter with the Grand Canyon into poetry, which makes possible an encounter with the beautiful in the reading experience. The poem, then, as a further attempt to inaugurate an experience of the beautiful, focuses not only on the terror of Jim Crow for its personae but also on the horror of racist subjection that regulates who has access to a beautiful experience. The poetic production of a beautiful experience, then, is overlaid with a feeling of repugnance toward racial subjection. Readers are fixed by this aesthetic scene to interrogate its sensory configurations and disfigurations.

The poem further draws our attention to the limits of the imaginative project of the four figures by putting it in conjunction with politico-historical knowledge. These figures return to their “wide tan Ford / and begin to drive / again—again—past / all the motels, and their signs, / which, were it not just after midnight, you know— / and could see—say / WHITES ONLY” (21). Racial exclusion does not need to be always visible to be known. Beauty, on the other hand, can only strike the observer when it appears in the particular, when it makes itself—or is made—visible and perceivable in a specific way. One effect of the poem’s double temporality is to stress this exclusion, for the reader is allowed to access the reconfigured encounter of the beautiful in a

way the figures within the poem are not. In the poem's closing "WHITES ONLY," Lewis insists on the constitutive exclusions that foreclose the possibility of any shared aesthetic scene. Horrible beauty names the uncanny attraction and repulsion of an aesthetic that both includes and excludes a subject from racialized communities of sense. In this way, the poem asks us to interrogate the constitution of the aesthetic field itself in order to see what gets produced, for some and in certain contexts, as insensible, invisible, or off limits. Yet the poetic object also becomes a substitute experience for those soldiers—including, in a biographical reading, Lewis's father—who could not access the beauty of the Grand Canyon. The poem emphasizes this substitution when reflecting on the literal or material grounds of the landscape's beauty—"dirt" and "earth"—and then converting this literality into a figurative substitution: "might / such a landscape / exist also within me?" (21). This rhetorical question, if answered affirmatively, suggests an internalization, such that no restrictions of access to an external scene of beauty could prevent one's aesthetic experience. Jim Crow may police the sensible field for the four black soldiers, but there is in the poem a counter-aesthetic that cannot be fully managed by the dictates of white hegemony.

Reframing Beauty II: Blackness, Sexuality, and an Aesthetic Scene

While "Beauty's Nest" works through the problems of characterizing the beautiful and of perceiving the beautiful, the collection's opening poem, "Plantation," announces these problems as already inherent in the perceiving subject and the scene of aesthetic encounter, especially when that subject is identified as a black woman. As a response to its title, the poem's opening stanzas introduce a scene between two lovers framed by images of incarceration and a dialogue

on enslavement: “And then one morning we woke up / embracing on the bare floor of a large cage. // To keep you happy, I decorated the bars. / Because you had never been hungry, I knew // I could tell you the black side / of my family owned slaves” (3). Unlike “Beauty’s Nest,” “Plantation” indexes no historically specifiable moment. While the title and dialogue on slavery refer to a past, the poem’s scene between lovers and its carceral logic refer to the present. As Joy James argues, “Prison is the modern-day manifestation of the plantation” (121). The poem’s conjunction of past and present therefore speaks to the way in which “[t]he means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (Sharpe 12).[12] In other words, the poem’s indistinction of past and present figures the persistence of antiblackness and subjection following “the nonevent of emancipation” (Hartman, *Scenes* 116).

In its conjunction of incarceration and enslavement, the poem also insists on the indistinction between literal and figural—that is, between living in subjection and living as if in subjection. Because the poem opens with the lovers waking up “embracing on the bare floor of a large cage,” the reader cannot with certainty take this as literal or figural (3). Such an indistinction announces, at the outset of this collection, the reconfiguration of slavery in our modern carceral state, that is, the state in which the technologies of the prison—including surveillance, containment, policing, and discipline—become generalized technologies of society. Like “Beauty’s Nest,” “Plantation” also disturbs the relationship between inside and outside. Though the lovers may not literally encounter each other in a cage, they are nonetheless imprisoned by social and historical forces that restrict and confine their identities. The speaker’s confession that “the black side / of my family owned slaves” further confuses easy divisions the reader might desire, which produces a paralyzing sensation in the reading experience. This scene of subjection is decidedly, and self-consciously, an aesthetic scene, in which a community—in

this case, a community of two—appears sensible and thinkable specifically in the terms of horrible beauty's attraction and repulsion.

The indistinction between literal and figural that takes place in the poem's aesthetic scene persists in the nature of the relationship to suggest a sense of confinement that complicates any potential experience of liberation, as the speaker describes both a fondness for her partner and a recognition of violence: "Then your tongue / was inside my mouth, and I wanted to say // *Please ask me first*, but it was your / tongue, so who cared suddenly // about your poor manners?" (4). The "poor manners" seem to normalize and regulate what appears to be sexual assault, an assault that escalates in its violence at the end of the poem:

> You pulled
>
> my pubic bone toward you. I didn't
> say, *It's still broken;* I didn't tell
>
> you, *There's still this crack*. It was sore,
> but I stayed silent because you were smiling.
>
> You said, *The bars look pretty, Baby,*
> then rubbed your hind legs up against me. (4-5)

Rehearsing a sexual scene in which the woman suppresses her own pain for the sake of the man's pleasure, the poem describes what Dionne Brand refers to as "[t]he burden of the body" at the same time it reiterates the trope of a cage with which it began (39). Here the woman remains silent, which speaks to the way in which "[t]he female is made for a man" in the cis-

heteropatriarchal order (Brand 35). An internal fracture persists in the woman's body, a fracture exacerbated by her sexual encounter. The speaker's broken bone is presumably "*still broken*" because her lover insists on gratification in the sexual act, a desired gratification that the speaker seems to have internalized by remaining silent despite her body's pain. In this reading, the woman and man appear as effects of a power dynamic in which the woman's agency gets suppressed—by internal and external forces—in order to accede to the desires of the man.

Yet who is the subject of this violence and pain? For the speaker complicates this reading by saying "who cared" earlier in the poem (4). With this suggestion, the speaker resists the binary logic of consent and its violation that a reading of individuality necessitates. Instead, the poem challenges any reading that depends on a stable sense of identity or individual agency. The violence of the scene, therefore, is not unambiguously the sexual violence that my first reading suggests. Rather, the violence might be understood as the violence of living in a subjectivity in which individuality remains impossible to escape at the same time that an anti-individual referentiality—to the world, through language—also remains impossible to escape. Hartman has argued that liberal narratives, such as those focused on the political agent or subject capable of consent, tend toward the "obliteration" of the black subject supposedly represented, which is especially true of the slave narrative ("Position of the Unthought" 184). And in *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman asks, "Does the extension of humanity to the enslaved ironically reinscribe their subjugated status?" (22). To resist this obliteration and reinscription, Lewis both dramatizes and undermines liberal expectations. The violence of the poem therefore appears as the violence of the psychic and emotional structures the narrator at once presents and subverts by resisting the imposition of psychology or individuality.

Such dynamics of power and violence continue in the closing description of the man's "hind legs," which engages in the violence of animalizing the human figure that is at once part of that figure's racialization. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson might read this as an instance of "bestialized humanization," in which "the African's humanity is not denied but appropriated, inverted, and ultimately plasticized in the methodology of abjecting animality" (23). In other words, Jackson complicates the human-animal binary by showing how "[d]iscourses on nonhuman animals and animalized humans are forged through each other; they reflect and refract each other for the purposes of producing an idealized and teleological conception of 'the human'" (23). The humanity of black people is not simply denied or excluded; instead, "this humanity is burdened with the specter of abject animality" (Jackson 27). Following Jackson, Lewis's poem might be said to thwart liberal expectations by re-deploying these very terms of "abject animality." Earlier in the poem, the man moves through a metonymic series of metamorphoses, "from a prancing black buck / into a small high yellow girl" (3). The end of the poem in a sense realizes the refracted and metaphoric configuration of the man as a gendered, racialized, and inhuman figure. Yet the poem refuses to allow any stability in these identity positions. As soon as the man becomes the "high yellow girl," he transforms into "the girl's mother, pulling // yourself away from yourself" (3-4). The man undergoes a series of divisions here, such that in the end he is both being pulled apart and pulling himself apart. This double gesture—being pulled apart and pulling oneself apart—speaks to the violence enacted on subjects by the orders of domination and by any universalizing effort that demands the divestiture of particularity and individuality, as well as the violence inherent in the subject. The violence enacted on others then mirrors these violent formations. Again, the poem stages an experience of horrible beauty to arrest its readers,

such that they engage with the attractive and repulsive logic of a beauty that fragments and fractures what appears in its frame.

"Plantation" dramatizes, then, the way in which identity formations are always an effect of the enactment of power, which itself depends on aesthetic modes of sensation and cognitive modes of intelligibility. As Madhavi Menon suggests, "Identity is the demand made by power—tell us who you are so we can tell you what you can do. And by complying with that demand, by parsing endlessly the particulars that make our identity different from one another's, we are slotting into a power structure, not dismantling it" (2). Rather than complying with this demand, however, the speaker's ambiguous position in "Plantation" suggests a negotiation with, as well as a struggle against, controlling and violent identity relations. The sensible fabric that constitutes the subject is being torn apart and rewoven throughout "Plantation," and the poem's focus on a sexual encounter is by no means arbitrary, for the sexual register emphasizes an embodied or affective dimension of desire that cannot be policed or even cognized. "Plantation" articulates the way in which the libidinal subject exceeds identity constructions imposed upon her; the woman in "Plantation" moves through different identity formations in a way that suggests she cannot be reduced to any single position. The subject emerges through these actions rather than being the volitional origin or agent of them. For Lewis, in "Plantation" "people are reincarnating in their own body many, many, many times within one lifetime" ("Robin Coste Lewis"). Here "identities can move even if the body stays static (which is to say repressed)" ("Robin Coste Lewis"). Blackness becomes a name for what exceeds restrictive identity categories. On the one hand, "Plantation" expresses an encounter in which the black woman's body "exists as a captive body, marked and branded as such from one generation to the next" (Saucier and Woods 13-14). On the other hand, "Plantation" foregrounds "the multiple

enactments of hypervisibility black women cannot escape" not to insist on social death but to insist on the production of a subject of/as torsion (Brown 7). Such a torsion figures the undecidability that inheres in formations of identity and subjectivity. Lewis delights in showing how the aesthetic scene persistently short-circuits any effort either to manage the vastness of embodied and affective experiences or to render them wholly intelligible. In her interview with Leah Mirakhor, Lewis states, "Blackness for me is incredibly vast. It's not domestic, nor is it *domesticated*" ("A Door").

By conceptualizing the subject as both mobile and as that which arises at the intersection of different regimes of violent racial, gender, and sexual categorizations, Lewis radically challenges the restrictions imposed by a stable identitarian subject position. Any supposed identity position constitutes the subject as autonomous only by excluding heteronomous contradictions. In "Plantation," Lewis dramatizes "blackness's signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips, when words like *child*, *girl*, *mother*, and *boy* abut blackness" (Sharpe 80). The black subject positions in Lewis's poem must be read as catachrestic placeholders for a surplus or excess that refuses positionality. Yet this refusal is not willed by the catachrestic subject but enacted by the force of blackness's signifying surplus, of which the subject only appears as a provisional effect.[13] Given such a surplus, Lewis asks us to reconfigure the subject who performs the aesthetic judgment—not simply as a subject of subjection, but also as a subject against subjection—as a subject constituted by an arrest of the dialectical torsion that constitutes subjectivization. "Plantation" develops, in other words, a poetic grammar of and for the black subject in its insistence on the arresting force of horrible beauty, whose antagonistic effects both fracture and constitute subjective positions and relations. Unlike the spectacularized violence often depicted by the black Gothic, "Plantation" emphasizes the everyday nature of

racist and sexist subjection. The horrible beauty of "Plantation" asks readers to linger with the contradictions within the poetic space, contradictions mimetically corresponding to the existence of black joy within the enclosures of antiblackness. Furthermore, any pleasurable attraction experienced in the beautiful cannot guarantee its separation from any corresponding—or co-constitutive—repulsion. Lewis's redeployment of beauty in relation to race, gender, and sexuality emphasizes the fugitive quality of that which escapes and disturbs the frame of the poem's aesthetic scene. "Plantation" therefore figures black subjects as catachrestic because their ungrounded force cannot be adequately represented.

Rereading the *Longue Durée* of the Black Female Figure in Art

The problem of the racialized, gendered, and sexed subject in relation to the aesthetic structures the collection's lengthy title poem, "Voyage of the Sable Venus," which begins with a prologue that explains Lewis's poetic practice in the poem sequence. To write "Voyage," Lewis selected and assembled "titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present" (*Voyage* 35). Lewis then constructs her "narrative poem" (35) by arranging these materials according to seven "formal rules" she set for herself (35-6). As stated in the first "rule," Lewis's main intervention—apart from the selection and arrangement of materials—is to modify completely the grammar (35). The content remains otherwise unchanged. Lewis thus articulates her poetics as a project of archaeology and genealogy. She returns to past and present artworks and places them in a new configuration or historical narrative. In addition to unmasking what Michel Foucault names "subjugated knowledges," Lewis's method suggests that such subjugation exists

on the surface.[14] Its visibility thus stands as a given; what Lewis attempts is to re-make this visibility, to make it appear anew and differently.[15]

Despite the visibility of racial depictions of black women, Lewis's poem stresses the failure to recognize the racism of such depictions. For Lewis, "the title poem is not about my imagination; it's about the failure of white imagination. It's about the pathology of whiteness" ("A Door"). Lewis continues to say, "I hope my title poem lifts the veil on how very, very dark whiteness actually is. Whiteness is the darkest ideology around. Whiteness is at the heart of darkness" ("A Door"). More explicitly than "Beauty's Nest," these comments and their Conradian allusion expose the pathological element of a notion like common sense, as well as of any experience of the beautiful, that fails to account for the horror in its production of consensus. The construction of whiteness is always already a pathological construction. Arthur Jafa, in an interview with Stephen Best, argues that "whiteness as a self-conception is based on purity," and this purity, this need to exclude contaminating threats in the name of self-protection, means that whiteness is a "fragile self-conception." As is already clear from "Beauty's Nest" and "Plantation," Lewis's poetry both abandons and immanently critiques such restrictions in favor of the expansiveness of blackness, an expansiveness that exceeds the antiblack world's production of normative regimes of identification and of social death. In other words, and in accordance with Jared Sexton's position, Lewis's notion of an expansive blackness insists on the social life within a space of social death, and this form of life in Lewis's poetry punctures or arrests the seeming totality of antiblackness and white pathology.[16] Lewis's poetics therefore affirms that black life exists within and despite the antiblack world's insistence on death.

Part of this expansiveness appears literally in Lewis's encyclopedic selection of materials for "Voyage" and in the poem's form. Lewis's fourth rule, which acknowledges that she

included "titles of art *by* black women curators and artists" (35), in part results from the claim that the "work by black queer artists, regardless of gender, […] has made consistently some of the richest, most elegant, least pretentious contributions to Western art interrogations of gender and race" (35). This expands the scope of materials and resources on which Lewis draws. In total, eight catalogs compose the poem sequence, and these catalogs move chronologically from "Catalog 1: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome" to "Catalog 8: The Present/Our Town." These catalogs announce a grand historical arc, and as Lewis claims, by leaving the art and removing the titles to construct her poem, she "stole back all the black bodies from each and every century" ("Boarding the Voyage"). Lewis also prefaces these catalogs with two more epigraphs and two framing poems, "The Ship's Inventory" and "Invocation: Blessing the Boat," whose titles stress the slave trade as one of the violent, structuring forces against black women. In her discussion of the writing of "Voyage," Lewis in fact deploys a series of extended metaphors of traveling with the Sable Venus by ship across space and time to collect these titles. As the fourth rule and the catalogs' chronology suggest, the sequence moves from violence against black women to expressions by black women against this violence. As such, "Voyage" resembles a (liberal) narrative in its structural progression along a metonymic series of poems from subjection to emancipation, and the governing metonymy works to connect the non-narrative ekphrastic moments constitutive of each individual poem.

Yet the extensive prefatory material to this poem, as well as the poem's multiple organizing logics, speaks to an excess of the poem's subject that cannot be reduced to a liberal, "integrationist" narrative (Hartman, "Position of the Unthought" 185). Lewis draws our attention to this excessive subject in her third rule: "I realized that museums and libraries […] had removed many nineteenth-century historically specific markers—such as *slave, colored,* and

Negro—from their titles or archives, and replaced these words instead with the sanitized, but perhaps equally vapid, *African-American*" (35). Lewis then corrects "this historical erasure of slavery" by returning the titles to their original (35); in other words, she "re-corrected the corrected horror in order to allow that original horror to stand" (35). Here the erasure of an erasure reveals Lewis's project to be at once political, ethical, and aesthetic (Lewis, "The Race Within Erasure"). The substituted term, "African-American," represents a curatorial effort to normalize and regulate a variety of different identity designations such that the violence of those designations becomes suppressed. With its normative function, "African-American" offers a "comfortable" and "easy" term for something uncomfortable and difficult ("A Door"). This is yet another version of what Hartman characterizes as the erasure committed by liberal projects in the name of restrictive and seductive ideals. Horrible beauty instead insists on difficulty, as well as on an expanded horizon of experience. In the interview with Mirakhor, Lewis notes her preference for the term "black," "which […] encourages a certain international glance, a vast unity."[17] While discussing Omise'eke Tinsley's claim that "the Black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic" (191), Christina Sharpe adds "that the Black and queer Atlantic have always been the Trans*Atlantic. Black has always been that excess. Indeed, blackness throws into crisis […] Black and (hetero)normative. That is, Black life in and out of the 'New World' is always queered and more" (30-32). The conjunction of the beautiful and horrible could be taken to name the aesthetic experience that emerges from an excessive subject, for the conjunction introduces a destabilizing and dissensual force into the traditional rules of aesthetic judgment.

Beyond the extensive nature of this framing material, Lewis's strategy of naming and numbering the main sections of the poem catalogs (1 through 8) has a second sequence that designates both place and time. Like "Beauty's Nest," "Voyage" layers aesthetics and history.

Catalog 1, for example, has the subtitle, "Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome" (43). Poems within this catalog are then designated by Roman numerals, I through V. This system of designation continues throughout the sequence, as Catalog 2 begins with poem VI. Within this sequence of Roman numeral designations, however, lies another subdivision, one that appears less clear. The first poem of Catalog 1 breaks off on its second page, and the following page begins with a colon (45). The colon designates an ambiguous relation between the two poems. Is one poem meant as an explanation or reading of the other? Are readers moving forward—as suggested by the chronology of the sequence—or are they merely shifting from one scene to another? Such ambiguities intensify the narrative and non-narrative logics in "Voyage." Another colon appears with the following break, and what seems to be a title follows this colon: "Element of Furniture Decoration" (47). Lewis's materials for the poem come from museums, spaces designed to order and categorize its possessions in its catalogs. Yet she disorders the expected workings of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Her own catalogs suggest that the act of categorization proliferates, rather than limits, what it categorizes.[18]

Lewis also stresses that the material and contextual placement of art objects matters, and in "Catalog 2: Ancient Egypt," she describes the way in which cultural appropriation depends on the relocation and positioning of objects. Aesthetic encounters do not occur on an "empty stage" (Felski 15), which is evident in the framing of artworks in poem IX:

> "King Amenhotep III commissioned hundreds
> of statues of the Goddess for his mortuary temple in western Thebes."
>
> "…brought to England in early 1800s…"
> "…these statues were exhibited in the recesses of Waterloo Bridge…"

"…and later by Lord Amherst on the terrace

of his country house." (62)

The poet who records these descriptions encounters them in largely Western spaces, and the ellipses appear to stand in for gaps that inhere in the archive.[19] The statues here register a history of appropriation and violence. Lewis's poem therefore stresses the imbrication of horror and beauty as the result of judging a work of art beautiful while at the same time confronting the domination that frames the viewing experience. Lewis's attention to Egyptian statues emphasizes the multiplicity implied by blackness, but it also emphasizes the uniformity and extractive logics of Western colonialism and imperialism. The "statues of the Goddess" commissioned by King Amenhotep III become displaced when "exhibited in the recesses of Waterloo Bridge" and then privatized when exhibited "by Lord Amherst on the terrace / of his country house." Against these colonial movements, Lewis's poetic sequence articulates a trans-historical community of women and of blackness, in which black women have persisted despite the injunctions of antiblackness and the erasures of white constructions. Yet as this section's attention to displaced statues of an Egyptian Goddess suggest, this community cannot be separated from the aesthetic enactments of power, which depend on specific configurations of sensible experience. "Voyage" engages with art's history of representation and relocation of black women "in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic" (McKittrick x). "Voyage" aims, in other words, to re-share or re-divide in a dissensual act that constructs and organizes a new "geography" of the black female figure in art. Lewis wants to erase the erasure of black women (Lewis, "The Race Within Erasure"), but in her poem, blackness is both dissensual and beyond the sensible, insofar as something of blackness always escapes aesthetic "capture." Fugitivity,

"as a kind of ongoing antisystemic break or breaking" (Moten, *Stolen Life* 7), therefore disrupts even dissensus both by refusing the language of abstraction and by emphasizing the anarchic force of blackness against regulative positions. Blackness and black women appear everywhere, throughout space and time, in "Voyage," despite their occlusion by normative histories and aesthetic practices.

Against the occlusions of representation, Lewis repeatedly turns to the materiality and concrete production of antiblack regimes of representation. The poem's very dependence on materials encountered by Lewis in art museums stresses the importance of spatial organizations and how such organizations work to stage our aesthetic encounters. The appropriation of the Egyptian statues described in Catalog 2 (62) operates as part of the poem but also mirrors the appropriation that has allowed Lewis to encounter the works of art she cites. As Claire Schwartz notes in her review of the collection, "the museum catalog grants access" at the same time it "limit[s] meaning—guiding the viewer in a single direction" (232). Schwartz locates a "fugitive" quality in Lewis's catalogs, for they "re-member" the black women represented throughout art history "without making invisible the violence that wrenched their names from us in the first place" (232). "Catalog 3: The Womb of Christianity" makes this gesture most explicitly. The catalog concludes in poem XIII with a list of proper names separated from the "Our Lady" that should have preceded them. For example, the poem opens, "—of Vladimir —de Lourdes —de Guadalupe— / Nossa—Nuestra—Notre—Nera— / —di Oropa —de Atochoa —de Guingamp— " (69). As Lewis states, the Christian era offered her, finally, a place to "rest," because here she found the black female figure "untouched" and represented as the virgin: "the cult of the black virgin is the largest active goddess cult on the planet," though rarely is she found in a museum ("Boarding the Voyage"). If we read this catalog as a catalog of black women whose generic

position—"Our Lady"—has been erased and figured by the repeated em dashes, then the poem, in its exhaustive list, makes visible the proliferation of this cult despite its erasure from the version of art history we get from museums. The exhaustive enumerations here confront and challenge the exhausting lists of horror elsewhere in the poem. As Lewis herself remarks, "museums and art institutions are not ahistorical or apolitical. They are as much a part of this history as anything else" ("A Door").[20] In this metonymic list, each woman signals and interrupts the "synecdochic system of representation that makes images of particular people bear general meaning" by returning us to the specificity of geographic locations across the globe (Grandy 520). The inventories of horror here give way in this moment of rest to an experience of relief or even of joy.

The logic of synecdoche structures much of the racial and gendered violence depicted in "Voyage."[21] During "Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial," Lewis describes "A Negro Slave Woman / Carrying a Cornucopia / Representing Africa" (75). The violent abstraction and substitution of part for whole, in which a black woman figures Africa, become the logic of categorization and objectification more generally. In this logic the particularity of the human gets disfigured to the point of erasure; in its place appears the inhuman commodity. Shortly after this moment, and in the same catalog, Lewis describes the way this violence appears in the commodification of the black woman's body when she describes a grotesque and horrifying clock:

> When the Woman's Left Ear
> Ring is Pulled
>
> Her Eyes Recede
> And a Mechanism Rises

Into Place

Showing the Hour (80)

Perhaps nothing so succinctly articulates the pathology of whiteness than the existence of such an "unbelievable object" (Lewis, "Boarding the Voyage").[22] The commodification and objectification of the image of a black woman as a clock exemplifies "how very, very dark whiteness actually is" ("A Door"). As Lewis states in her interview with Schwartz, "It is difficult to explain the psychological damage of what it feels like never to see yourself reflected back in your world in any way, ever, even physically, except as caricature" ("Black Joy"). Where Cavarero offers Medusa's severed head as the exemplary image of horrifying disfiguration (8), Lewis reveals with the ekphrasis of the clock both the racialized image of horror and that image's horrifyingly quotidian manifestations. Violence against black women appears as the norm rather than an exception.

In "Catalog 6: Modern, Civil, Right," Lewis then turns to a space in which black women appear in more explicitly resistant and affirmative representations, which again gives a suggestion of narrative progression to "Voyage." Here, one section opens, "Anonymous Do Drop Inn / Blessed Sun Bathing Negress / Rent Day Beauty in the slums—" (97). The allusion to New Orleans's Dew Drop Inn, a site famous for its role in the history of blues, suggests the ambivalence that inheres in this section. While the Dew Drop Inn functions as a black cultural space, it also bears the traces of racial oppression. As Frantz Fanon suggests, "the blues […] was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylized oppression is the exploiter's and the racist's rightful due. Without oppression and without racism you have no blues" (37). Later in this section and against such oppressive displays, Lewis alludes to *Now Dig*

This!, curated by Kellie Jones, in a series of stanzas that offer a more affirmative statement of black resistance ("A Door"):

> *Woman Power!*
>
> She's Black, She's Beautiful
>
> She's Smart, She's Registered
>
> She'll Vote.
>
> How about You?
>
> Now Dig This:
>
> Don't Hate Me
>
> Because I'm Beautiful
>
> Untitled.
>
> Somebody Paid the Price
>
> for Your Right.
>
> *Register to Vote!* (98)

Against the violence detailed in the Egypt catalog, in which British colonizers appropriate Egyptian art objects for public display on Waterloo Bridge and then for private consumption, this section and its syncopated rhythms detail an affirmation of black women and a call to action. Lewis's arrangement in these stanzas, which offer an explicit citation of the Black Arts Movement, adds a staccato cadence suggestive of a protest.

Despite Lewis's turn to more optimistic moments, "Voyage" closes with a profoundly ambiguous and ambivalent statement consistent with that produced by the difficult and uncomfortable conjunctions of horrible beauty throughout the collection. In "Catalog 8: The Present/Our Town" (110), the briefest section of the poem sequence, Lewis situates us both in time—the present—and in space—our town. "Our town" of course refers at once to a particular location and a generalizable, universal space, since the poem offers no context to define the "our" or "town" of the title. "Our town" thus plays on the ambiguous movement from particular to general in representational logics and aesthetic scenes. This ambiguity mirrors the ambiguity of "the present," for the present moment never appears as such; instead, the present marks the impossible meeting point of the future and past, a point always under erasure and one that constantly changes with each passing moment. Given the poem's obsession with history, this gestures to the persistence of that history beyond the moment of writing. Already, then, the title of the final section frames the text of the poem itself:

Still:

Life

(of Flowers)

with Figures—

including

a Negro servant. (110)

The poem's interpretation hinges on how one reads "Still: / Life." Taken negatively, this "still" announces the persistence of racism and subjection of black people: even in the present, we encounter a still life, or still (snapshot) of a life, that includes "a Negro servant." Taken more affirmatively, however, this "still" instead refers to a persistence of "life" despite and against such racial and gendered subjection. In its persistence, black life arrests the violence of antiblackness. Brooks stresses this reading when he claims that the poem "indicates that a sort of (life) force endures in spite of the racial discourse of the archive" (251). Rather than privilege either reading, however, I argue the poem depends on the undecidability of this conjunction, much as horrible beauty depends on a confrontation with its paralyzing entanglements. Lewis's poetics insists that both readings always remain operative. It is this undecidability that fixes the reader, encouraging them to linger with the final poem of the sequence. The poem offers, in other words, an allegory for the aesthetic experience of horrible beauty, in which attraction and repulsion appear commingled to fix us in their discomforting snare. In this way, the final poem articulates what Sharpe refers to as "anagrammatical blackness," that is, "blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made" (76).

More so than anywhere else in the sequence, "Catalog 8" depends on the spaces and gaps between words and lines to achieve this anagrammatical effect. While the entirety of the poem can be read quickly in sequence—"Still: Life (of Flowers) with Figures—including a Negro

servant”—the poem, which takes up the entirety of a page, slows our reading experience with its spacing and typographical layout. The spaces, line breaks, grammar, and parenthesis complicate the otherwise simple sequence. The disjunctive pacing of this final poem repeats the disjunctive experience Lewis describes in her encounter with Stothard’s etching. Faced with a paradoxical conjunction of the beautiful and the horrible, the time of perception and aesthetic judgment gets delayed and destabilized. Lewis’s poetry forces her readers to confront this deferred and confused sensation so that they might recognize the power dynamics and violence inherent in an aesthetic encounter with an ostensibly beautiful object that includes the horrors of that which traditionally gets excluded from the aesthetic: namely, the violence of racial, gendered, and sexualized categorization and objectification, which become all the more intensified by the slave economy and its legacies of antiblackness. As I mentioned earlier, Lewis insists that she wants to make readers “uncomfortable,” and the undecidability of her poem, as well as of the instability she reveals to be inherent in an aesthetic judgment that posits the perceiving subject as fractured, as a catachresis, produces precisely this sort of disturbance (“‘Black Joy’”). Rather than turn away from or disavow horrible beauty in the name of a universal subject, Lewis insists we confront horrible beauty even if such a confrontation, with its production of repugnance, undoes our desired subjectivity and its fantasmatic consistency. For only through such a confrontation can the subject of aesthetic judgment expand their experience of the beautiful and acknowledge its political implications, however difficult. Only such a confrontation can reveal the vast range of blackness, sexuality, and an experience of the beautiful that generates both attraction and repulsion, the latter working to disrupt the pathological enjoyment characteristic of whiteness and its fantasies of purity.

Notes

[1] Stothard's etching appears in the third edition of Bryan Edwards's *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, published in 1801.
[2] Lewis continues to suggest, "Perhaps our real neurosis is our desire for monuments of any kind" ("Boarding the Voyage").
[3] This scene of interpellation takes on a different resonance as Lewis continues in her interview with Sharpe: "I thought this is exactly what it feels like to be an American, for anyone, but more specifically for African Americans. On the one hand you have this myth of democracy and it's all beautiful, so you're compelled by the propaganda of nation—but at the same time you're repelled, because you know the history, you know the country is blood-soaked in every way."
[4] For representative approaches to Lewis, see Héloïse Thomas's "Inventories, Catalogs, and Venuses," John Brooks's "The Heretical History of Robin Coste Lewis's *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*," and Claire Grandy's "Poetics of the Record: Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus*."
[5] For elaborations of these concepts, see Anne Anlin Cheng's "Wounded Beauty" (196), Carolyn Korsmeyer's "Terrible Beauties" (52), and Kevin Young's *The Grey Album* (221).
[6] Lewis recognizes that she continues a critique started "over a century ago" by "Douglass, et al.," which enables her to realize that so much of what "is actually beautiful […] within blackness" is missed "by engaging in arguments around the right to exist, or useless rather obvious observations about the pervasiveness of whiteness" ("'Black Joy'").
[7] Dawn Keetley suggests that political horror often focuses on repression and oppression (13). Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, for instance, exposes "what is disavowed and denied (white racism)" (13). With a slightly different emphasis, Lewis's focus on "contradiction" stresses that such horrors exist on the surface of texts and images.
[8] In this way, Lewis's poetics could be read according to what Paul C. Taylor names "sarkaesthetics": "the practices of representational somatic aesthetics—which is to say, those practices relating to the body, as it were, as flesh, regarded solely 'from the outside'" (108).
[9] Lewis could be added to Evie Shockley's list of "renegade" poets, where "renegade" signifies "the rebellious, nonconformist approaches" taken by poets in their aesthetic practices (15). Such poetic work "might be said to have run away from (or with) the confining expectations many nonblack and black audiences hold for the styles and subjects of poetry by African Americans" (15).
[10] Another helpful framework for Lewis's poetics would be Paul Gilroy's notion of "counterculture" in *The Black Atlantic* as that which "defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own" (37-38).
[11] For discussions of the black gothic and contemporary appearances of the uncanny, see Keetley, Harrison, and Serpell.
[12] For Christina Sharpe, "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14). Sharpe's text aims to "investigate the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human." This investigation "ask[s] what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation" (14). Thomas reads Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* as a kind of "wake work."
[13] In "'Theorizing the Void,'" Zakiyyah Iman Jackson offers a counter reading of the excess of blackness when she develops the concept of "superposition" to describe the "virtuality and indeterminacy" produced by antiblackness (635). According to Jackson, "antiblackness presupposes and, indeed, demands that blackness signify neither an interstitial (in-between) nor a

liminal (teleology) ontology but a virtual ontology" (637). Jackson and Lewis could be read, then, as producing a parallax view of blackness as excess.

[14] Foucault's "subjugated knowledges" name both "historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations" and "a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges" (*"Society"* 7).

[15] Columbia University and the Musée d'Orsay partnered to present two exhibitions—*Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New York) and *Le Modèle noir, de Géricault à Matisse* (Paris)—on the black model in art (2018-2019), which attempted to perform a rereading of the artistic tradition analogous to Lewis's project.

[16] I have in mind Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death," as well as Kevin Quashie's project to imagine a world of black aliveness "so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary" (1). Quashie critiques forms of black pessimism that produce totalizing conceptions of antiblackness and declares that "Antiblackness is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world" (5).

[17] My ellipsis excises Lewis's comment that "black," for her, "includes everyone who is non-white." This extremely capacious definition of blackness differs both from my use of the term throughout this article and from its use by many of the cited scholars.

[18] Foucault discusses this phenomenon in *The History of Sexuality* when he describes "the endlessly proliferating economy of the discourse on sex" (35).

[19] The list of museums and archives at the end of the poem sequence reveals predominantly Western locations (111-114). This list speaks to both the contingency of locations Lewis visited and the Western theft of art objects from across the globe.

[20] Lewis follows this comment by referring to the epigraph of "Voyage" that cites the invitation to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's minstrel show, "a recurring event" that in this case was taking place, with "predictable irony," for the Women's Association ("A Door").

[21] Lee Edelman argues that "Synecdoche […] can be read as the master trope of racism that gets deployed in a variety of different ways to reinforce the totalizing logic of identity" (44).

[22] Brooks argues that such objects "function as political machinery that systematically dehumanizes black subjects while predetermining their representational possibilities in the historical record" (249). In "Catalog 5: Emancipation & Independence," Lewis extends her analysis of the reach of white pathology by engaging with the Wounded Knee massacre and Native American women (85-88).

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