VIOLA MARCHI
(UNIVERSITY OF BERN)

Dismantling the Archive of Anti-Black Violence: Performing Futurity in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's "Zimmer Land"

The circulation of images of police brutality and Black suffering has reached a dramatic intensification in our hyper-mediatized times. While their effectiveness in eliciting outrage and fostering grassroots mobilization is undeniable, their unbridled dissemination also raises fundamental ethical and political concerns: Can the political gain these images might afford make up for the psychic devastation they inflict? How can the possibility of change and futurity itself be imagined from within the constraints of a deadly archive? This essay reads Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's "Zimmer Land" (2018) as a narrative intervention in the contemporary economy of images of racialized suffering. By foregrounding their mediatized character – and by privileging performance over representation, the speculative over the spectacular – the short story reintroduces these scenes of violence within the frame of the techno-racial capitalism that sustains (and is sustained by) the precarity of Black bodies. Furthermore, while addressing the status of the Black body as fungible commodity, "Zimmer Land" circumvents the Afropessimist claim of the impossibility of Black narrative and of a Black future by exploiting the very features that would make Black emplotment inconceivable: a flattening of historical time, the lack of causality in gratuitous violence, and the foreclosure of the transformative promise of narrative.

Keywords: Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah; anti-Black violence; visuality and narrative; Afropessimism; performance and representation

The Visual Culture of Racialized Suffering and the Limits of Narrative

The visual culture of anti-Black violence, both physical and symbolic, has always constituted one of the defining threads of the US national narrative

and, more broadly, of modernity as such. The ambiguous status of those images – serving both the perverse iconographies of white supremacy as well as the struggles against the state-sanctioned aggression of Black bodies – has reached a dramatic intensification in our hyper-mediatized times. Due to the unprecedented availability of communication devices granting access to public representational spaces, especially in the form of mobile phone cameras and social media platforms, images of police brutality and Black suffering have multiplied and reached every corner of the globe as instruments of denunciation and forensic testimony.

The effectiveness of these images in eliciting public outrage, raising awareness, and fostering grassroots political mobilization, in the effort to build a solid counter-hegemonic discourse, is undeniable. Yet, what has determined their efficacy – namely, their immediate global reach and incessant circulation – is also what has led several scholars in recent years to question their status and uses.[1]

As their unbridled dissemination risks turning them into commodities for exchange within an economy of watching and sharing, the line that separates denunciation from spectacularization, responsiveness from voyeurism, grows increasingly thin. The issue is ethical as well as political: Should these scenes of suffering be made public? Is the political gain they might afford sufficient to make up for the psychic devastation they inflict? Is not their compulsive reproduction going to simply normalize them in the eyes of casual viewers, once the shock-effect begins to wear off? How can change, transformation, and ultimately the possibility of futurity itself, be imagined from within the constraints of a deadly archive?

In her seminal work on nineteenth century slavery and its aftermath, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman interrogates "the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body" (3) in the context of abolitionist literature. Hartman recognizes that the goal of such painstakingly detailed horrific depictions was "to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved" (18). Yet, Hartman questions both the role of identification and empathy as well as the required evidence of the enslaved's feelings as the signifier of their own humanity. Whereas identification and empathy are too easily prone to turn into a liquidation of the other and into mere self-reflection,

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[1]   For a discussion of the potential pitfalls of visual representations of violence, even when intended to promote social and political change, see the work of Teju Cole, Jared Sexton, Rasul A. Mowatt, and Catherine Zumroskis.

the emphasis on the affectability of the Black body in pain risks reproducing "the hyperembodiness of the powerless" (19) that has always contributed to relegate them to the side of passive, reified materiality. In contesting "the spectacular character of black suffering" (3), Hartman is questioning the role of the reader/viewer and the porous boundary between "witnesses" and "voyeurs" (3), between terror and enjoyment. The investment of the reader/viewer, of course, does not merely depend upon individual good or bad faith. It is rather produced in the interaction with the text/image and forged by the frames of representability and affectivity that invite and, to a certain extent, structure different forms of responsiveness.

Hartman's critique of slave narratives in *Scenes of Subjection* – in their reliance on empathy, in the hyper-affection of the powerless, and in the spectacularization of suffering – echoes throughout her work as an exploration of the potential and the limitations of narrative in the context of what she calls "the afterlife of slavery."[2] This concept is used to describe the ways in which slavery's racial, social, and economic structures continue to shape contemporary Black life in the form of "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (Hartman, *Lose* 6). In particular, the enduring legacy of slavery remains embedded in the "representational structures" that perpetuate Black death, framing it as the "only horizon for Black life" (Hartman and Siemsen). At an existential level, the "ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril" (Hartman, "Venus" 13) manifests itself as a condition of temporal entanglement and of perpetual simultaneity in which the past, spilling over into a looped present, seems to make the future unimaginable.

As Hartman's analysis suggests, therefore, these ethical and political questions can hardly be addressed without transposing them within

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2   In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," for example, Hartman explores the potential and limitations of narrative in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, especially in terms of Black women's experiences. Hartman reflects on the difficulty of representing the lives of the enslaved and the violence done to them in a way that does not reproduce the very conditions of objectification and disempowerment that they endured. In the case of Venus, as an emblematic figure of the female captive, the official record provides little beyond her commodified body, leaving gaps that are difficult, if not impossible, to fill with narrative. In this essay, as well as in her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman pushes against the confines of conventional narratives, advocating for new forms of storytelling able to acknowledge their inherent limitations while still attempting to bear witness to the past and its ongoing effects.

broader aesthetic, representational, and interpretive considerations. In this essay, I am interested in understanding the role that contemporary Black fiction might play in the dismantling of the growing archive of images of anti-Black violence, and in the literary strategies, representational frames, and forms of responsiveness that can be mobilized in this regard.

In shifting the attention toward the text rather than the image, my aim is not to follow Susan Sontag's privileging of textuality and narrative coherence over photography as "an emanation," "a material vestige of its subject" (Sontag, *Regarding* 154), unable to provide the parameters for its interpretation. As a matter of fact, when considered in connection to anti-Black violence, and in the context of the afterlife of slavery, it is first of all our understanding of narrative itself that needs recalibration.

Sontag's notorious invective against lens-based media in *On Photography* (1977) has played a crucial role in undermining the myth of photography's transparency and in revealing the ideological nature of seeing as a social practice. Yet, her critical approach remains tied to a classic paradigm of rivalry between the arts (the so-called *paragone*) that fails to acknowledge the fragility of media boundaries and that, in the confrontation between the text and the image, unequivocally privileges narrative coherence over the "muteness" (Sontag, *On Photography* 15) it attributes to the visual. Especially when what is at stake is the suffering of others, photography for Sontag not only risks fostering "a certain familiarity with atrocity" that makes "the horrible seem more ordinary" (Sontag, *On Photography* 15). As predominantly spatial and lacking temporal progression – as fundamentally non-narrative – photographic images also hinder understanding as a process that "takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand" (Sontag, *On Photography* 17–18).

Yet, if we follow Sontag and admit that a picture is *not*, in fact, worth a thousand words, we run into a problem exactly at the moment in which we narratively attempt to address anti-Black violence, namely an image's referent that throws narrative into crisis. In particular, we are faced with two major difficulties. First, how to explain "in time" something that has no access to temporal development. Second, how to make narrative cohere around something that cannot "be explained" at all because it lacks any discernible reason and shows no logical concatenation of cause and effect. As Frank B. Wilderson claims, in an Afropessimist radicalization of Hartman's position, what characterizes anti-Blackness is the gratuitousness of the violence, inflicted on a body whose vulnerability is "not contingent upon his or her transgressing some type of law" but "structur-

al" ("Master/Slave" 18). This is why, for Wilderson, anti-Black violence is not only impossible to emplot, but it is also "totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks" ("End of Redemption"). As he argues,

> anti-black violence is hard to mold into narrative because violence in a narrative must have an explanation, a trigger, a contingent moment that makes it make sense. But anti-black violence can't cooperate with narrative. […] When violence is the law, and not the effect of its enforcement, it presents the rules of narrative with a crisis […]. (*Afropessimism* 89)

In other words, when violence is the structure and not the event, how can narrative hope to address it? When the narrative arc of Blackness is "not an arc at all, but a flat line" (102), how can it participate in narrative's diachronic and paradigmatic development? As "an existence void of the transformative promise which narrative holds out to human subjects" (103), how can Blackness be emplotted? Are there alternative "representational structures" that, instead of producing what Orlando Patterson calls Black "social death," would open up a different horizon for Black life?

In what follows I read Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story "Zimmer Land" (2018) as a literary and critical intervention in the contemporary economy of images of racialized suffering. I argue that, by foregrounding the mediated character of the visual archive of anti-Black violence, the short story offers a reflection both on the possibilities of narrative and on the limits of representation. In particular, in privileging performance over claims to representation, "Zimmer Land" not only suspends the rhetoric of sentimentality and empathy, it also constructs a context of legibility for these performances of violence by reintroducing them within the frame of the techno-racial capitalism that sustains (and is sustained by) the existential precarity of Black bodies – what Judith Butler defines as "the politically induced condition" of a differential exposure "to injury, violence and death" (26). Furthermore, by turning to the speculative rather than the spectacular, the short story transforms scenes of sensational violence into repetitive daily chores that are able to convey, more than the exceptionality of such events, the quotidian exposure to harm that defines precarity as a mundane aspect of racialized existence. Finally, while mobilizing an Afropessimist theorization of Blackness as commodity, "as a position of accumulation and fungibility" (Wilderson, *Red* 58), "Zimmer Land" circumvents the claim of the impossibility of Black narrative and of a Black future by paradoxically exploiting the very features that, according to Wilderson, would make Black emplotment inconceiv-

able: a flattening out of historical time, the lack of causality in the gratuit-
ousness of the violence, and the foreclosure of the transformative promise
of narrative (Wilderson, *Afropessimism* 92; 102; 199; 226–228).

Walking in Circles: Narrating Historical Stillness

The short story "Zimmer Land" is contained in the collection *Friday
Black*, the 2018 literary debut of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah. As an
evident and playful inversion of Black Friday, the notorious mid-Novem-
ber celebration of savage shopping and consumerism, the title of the col-
lection already points to its own pungent and satirical approach to the
deadly entanglements between the logic of capitalism and material pro-
cesses of racialization.

   "Zimmer Land," in particular, tells the story of its protagonist and
narrator, Isaiah, a young man working in a theme park called Zimmer
Land. The short story thus takes its title from the name of the fictional
park, which in turn owes it to its founder and CEO, Heland Zimmer. As
the company's mission itself asserts, the goal of the park is to "create a
safe space for adults to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgement"
(95). The activities of the park are organized around a variety of modules
in which, through staging and re-enactments, the paying patrons can con-
front different scenarios able to "capture that visceral, intense, in-your-
face moment when justice is begging you to do something" (98).

   Upon entering Zimmer Land, visitors can participate in an assortment
of experiences of "interactive justice engagement" (94), from the "Work
Jerk" module, in which patrons are supposed to bring to justice the em-
ployee stealing money on the job, to the "Terror Train" module, in which
– for only an additional 35 dollars! – patrons can pride themselves of hav-
ing uncovered and stopped a deadly terrorist plot. But the most profitable
of all the modules in terms of revenue is "Cassidy Lane," the one in
which Isaiah works.

   The module reproduces a quiet, dead-end street in a suburban neigh-
borhood, with a row of family houses, driveways, streetlights, and "auto-
mated bird chirps" (85). Within the module, Isaiah's job description is,
very simply, to walk down the lane with no particular purpose. The inter-
actions between Isaiah, the primary player, and the patrons all happen
according to set guidelines and very specific scripts and protocols. While
the patron sits on a couch inside one of the houses on Cassidy Lane, Isai-
ah wanders outside, without a specific direction or destination.

At this point, the floor opens inside the house and three pedestals pop up in front of the patron. The first has "a holophone that could be used to call the cops," the second has a gun, and the third one is empty, "for the tough-guy patrons" (87) willing to engage in direct physical confrontation. Needless to say, as Isaiah comments "[a]lmost all patrons (84 percent when I've been on the module) grab the gun on pedestal B. Almost nobody uses the holophone" (87).

According to Benjamin Schwartz, the story's disturbing and at the same time humorous character lies in "the congruity between exaggerated dystopia and recognizable present-day United States" (304). As every narrative bearing some aspects of the dystopian, the readability of the text itself is tied to issues of referentiality. While maintaining, up to this point, a completely race-neutral language, the text's references to the suburban street, the neighborhood watch, the gun, the stranger walking down the street, and most of all the name "Zimmer Land" itself, make it hard for the reader to avoid drawing the connection between what is happening in the short story and the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old boy shot in an act of 'vigilante justice' by George Zimmerman just because he was walking down the street.

The type of relationality at work here, however, is not the conventional one of a fictional text referring to the extra-textual world. It is the extra-textual world itself that has been so thoroughly mediatized, reproduced, and circulated that it has found its way into the fictional universe as its foundational script. Furthermore, the emphasis on the idea of the script, as the blueprint that regulates the interaction between Isaiah and the patrons, highlights the disquieting structural similarities that connect many scenes of anti-black aggression, as staged periodic rituals of white supremacy.

While there is a relation of congruity between text and world, there is also a certain incongruity at play in the short story that calls for closer investigation. The text does not offer any specific temporal coordinates as far as its setting is concerned. There are references to high-tech devices, such as self-driving cars, holographic communication technologies, powered exoskeleton suits, all meant to passively transport, virtually reproduce, and physically enhance the body. The impression this produces is that of a technology-infused environment. Yet, on a closer look, we realize not only that these futuristic machines and devices require a technology that is in fact already here and in the process of being implemented, but that certain items seem in fact a little outdated.

Juxtaposed to autonomous cars, now available even to the working class, and advanced augmented reality equipment, allowing for the ubi-

quitous virtual presence of the company's CEO in different parts of the globe at the same time, there is the huge statue of Lady Justice, with the usual sword and scales, towering over the entrance of the park. Greeting visitors and employees alike, Lady Justice is a 30-feet high mechanical monster, whose squeaking rusty mechanism makes it possible, when one is near it, to "hear the gears that move the huge scale she's holding up and down" (85). In the same way, the "mecha-suit" Isaiah is obliged to wear on the job is an "outdated version of the exoskeleton battle suits that marines use" (85).

The pitifully obsolete mechanical statue of Lady Justice and the outdated version of the US Marines' exoskeleton link the capitalist/racist enterprise of Zimmer Land to both the justice system (and its prison-industrial complex) and to United States imperialism (and its military-industrial complex). The incongruous coexistence of 'state-of-the-art' (communication and transportation technologies) and 'antiquated' (the justice system and an imperialistic politics of military intervention) not only makes it hard to locate the story temporally, but also reveals the target of criticism of Adjei-Brenyah's dystopia, namely the widespread faith in the relentless advancement of techno-capitalism that will finally and teleologically determine long-awaited changes in the social and political sphere.

On the narrative level, the collapse of the distinction between past, present, and future that come to similarly coexist on the same historical plane is mirrored by the circular structure and repetitive style of the short story, that troubles the very idea of linear development and of progress itself, bringing to mind what Wilderson, citing Hortense Spillers, calls the "flat line of 'historical stillness'" (*Afropessimism* 17), namely the impossibility of any sort of narrative development for Black existence caught in the afterlife of slavery.

If the short story traces some kind of development in the futuristic-but-not-quite environment it imagines, it is perhaps the passage from Guy Debord's idea of a "society of the spectacle" to a society of what we could call 'immersive entertainment capitalism.' The park Zimmer Land functions as the miniature model of a hyper-advanced liberal democracy in which economic and technological progress coexists with deep-seated hatred and violence, and where scientific innovation, far from paving the way for a more just future, is offering more sophisticated technologies of racial domination and exploitation.

In "Zimmer Land" (with and without quotation marks, both short story and park), in fact, the violence perpetrated against Black bodies is

transformed from a spectacle (of lynching photographs, of images of police brutality circulating across social media), to be consumed by a spectator, into a first-hand, interactive experience, opening up Hartman's distinction between "witness" and "voyeur" – still bound to a regime of spectacularization of Black suffering – to another ethical dimension, that of the 'participant.'

Yet, despite all the augmented and virtual reality technologies described in the story, the patrons' experience needs to remain a physical, corporeal one. The disembodiment that cyberspace allegedly affords, and the related fantasy of "out-of-body transcendence" (Hayles 2), is available only to the white CEO, who, during the meetings, appears as "a giant floating head with a beard" (Adjei-Brenyah 93). The giant floating head, immaterial and unencumbered by the burden of the flesh, is both a reminder of the ethereal substance of capital in the figure of its owner and manager, as well as an instance of the metaphysical violence that assigns transcendence and subjectivity to the rational mind, to masculinity, and to whiteness. Isaiah, on his part, as the discourse of race itself, remains fixed to the materiality of his own body, albeit enhanced by the outdated exoskeleton.

Iterative Scripts of Anti-Black Violence

The short story is divided into three parts, separated by a blank typographical space. The first part follows a day in the working life of Isaiah. After arriving at the park and being greeted by Lady Justice, Isaiah prepares for one of his several walk-throughs of the day. He wears his usual work uniform (baggy jeans, white T-shirt, boots, sunglasses, and, underneath it all, the mecha-suit), grabs the skinny joint that is actually the remote that activates the exoskeleton, and gets ready to enact his umpteenth death at the hands of a white patron.

As the patron approaches him and repeatedly asks him to leave because he does not want any "thugs" (88) around, the confrontation quickly escalates. If it escalates so quickly it is because Isaiah, a conscientious worker, strictly follows the module's engagement protocol which is "response through mimicry" (87). When the client shouts, he shouts; when the client wants to engage him physically, he reciprocates. Still following the script, after Isaiah receives the first punch in the face, he bites on the joint pending from his lips and activates the suit:

> The orgometal on my legs and chest expands, and I can feel it synching to my body. The orgometal hugs me tighter, and soon I can't tell where the machine starts and the human begins. […] I become a huge block of muscle. Something different, more dangerous than a man. (89)

The park's management presents the suit as a protection for the employee, to avoid liability issues. Yet, when Isaiah suggests getting rid of it, they are also very open about the fact that the suit is "literally the point of all modules, where patrons feel more viscerally connected to the experience" (98). At a very basic level, by transforming Isaiah into something other than a man, something more dangerous, the mecha-suit serves to justify the patron's violence against him. Once again "[a]ccording to the guidelines," in fact, after the patron shoots Isaiah, "he's to be brought into the second part of the module, the Station, for a brief questioning, after which he'll be emailed a complimentary story about how he was found innocent in court after claiming self-defense" (90). Satirically pointing to the impunity of the perpetrator – another foundational narrateme in the script of scenes of anti-Black violence – the term "complimentary" can be read here as both 'free of charge' and as 'congratulatory,' a signifier that simultaneously partakes of both the discourses of capitalism and racism.

Yet, the mecha-suit also serves another, more profound, function, namely that of giving reality to a certain white fantasy about the Black body, one that Elizabeth Alexander describes as a fantasy "of black male bestiality and hyper-virility" (80). At the moment of the activation of the suit, Isaiah effectively stops being a player in the module, an actor in the reenactment – and even a character in the narrative – and becomes the pure fulfillment of a fantasy, what Wilderson calls "structurally inert props, implements for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochist pleasures" (*Afropessimism* 15). The fetishization and commodification of the Black body reaches its apex here. What Patterson's analysis of slavery defines as "the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished" (7), turns here into an infinitely renewable resource and sustainable supply that allows for the never-ending iteration and iterability of murder.

Non-Sublimable Forms of White Supremacy

The second segment opens with Isaiah putting on a tie (a very different signifier from the ones constituting his usual work outfit) and getting ready for his first meeting with the park's creative team, to which he is

been recently promoted. The insistence on these scenes of 'dressing up,' one time in baggy jeans and white T-shirt, the other with a shirt and tie, points to the fact that, in this environment of advanced entertainment capitalism, heavily infused by a post-racial rhetoric, Blackness has been in fact de-essentialized, only to be now appropriately 'accessorized.'

What the promotion means to Isaiah is both a career advancement on the corporate ladder as well as the opportunity of going from mere player, compelled to act but without agency, merely following the script others have drafted for him, to actual writer of the stories he will live out in the module.

Despite the excitement for his first meeting with the creative team, it soon becomes clear that Isaiah is torn between the stability of what he calls "a solid job" (92), in which he also honestly sees potential for societal improvement, and the accusations he receives by a group of protesters assembled outside the park of being a sell out to the new system of racial exploitation. As *Friday Black*, the title of the collection, is a playful inversion of Black Friday, through the same ironical reversal Isaiah's compliant work ethic slowly turns into an anguished reflection on the ethics of his work. But if he keeps working at Zimmer Land, despite his own doubts and the protesters' attacks against him, it is because he is convinced that it was better for him "to get fake blasted ten or twenty million times a day than for an actual kid to get murdered out of the world forever" (92).

In "Barred Objects (⊖): Police Brutality, Black Fetishes, and Perverse Demonstrations," Calvin Warren reads the video of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of officer Derek Chauvin to claim that police (or vigilante) anti-Black brutality is a libidinal impulse and that what we keep on witnessing are stagings and re-enactments of a fantasy. And the amusement park Zimmer Land – in its mission to "provide the world with life-changing experiences that foster real growth" (Adjei-Brenyah 101) – is quite literally offering a way to sublimate those libidinal investments, using staging, re-enactments, and gaming as a way to transform primal urges into less destructive and more socially accepted behaviors.

However, as it becomes increasingly clear during the meeting that the scripts will remain untouched, and that a great innovation is about to be introduced in the park – namely the fact that minors will now be allowed on the modules – Isaiah's hopeful attitude toward the promise of social change begins to falter. While willing to sacrifice himself *fictitiously*, in the pay-to-play game of death in Zimmer Land, Isaiah understands that the attempt to transport, release, and ultimately sublimate white society's

murderous drives within a controlled environment will not change anything beyond the walls of the park. And this is because the inner workings of capitalism, by their very nature, cannot allow for the satisfaction of a desire, nor for the pacified sublimation of a libidinal drive. As Todd McGowan argues in *Capitalism and Desire* (2016), capitalist society is "a society structured around the subject's dissatisfaction" (160). Since "any sense of satisfaction […] would have a paralyzing effect" (McGowan 12) on consumption, it is necessary that, within the libidinal-economic circuit of the Zimmer Land park, "[t]hough the commodity always promises a complete satisfaction, it never delivers on this promise" (McGowan 159). The near-fulfillment of the promise, always withheld and delayed, serves to stimulate the growth of the demand as well as the production of ever more-refined fantasies. And this strategy seems to work perfectly on Cassidy Lane, according both to the stellar scores on the "postmodule surveys" (Adjei-Brenyah 90) and to the number of customers that keep returning to the park, usually wearing the same "killing shirt," "stained a brownish red already" (Adjei-Brenyah 103), in order to avoid annoying laundry problems.

Breaking the Loop

In keeping with the circular structure of the story, the third part, like the first, brings Isaiah back to Cassidy Lane. With the introduction of children on the modules, the protocols have been updated and, while it is explicitly forbidden to touch the kids, the player can "engage in the usual measured violence with of-age patrons in front of the children" (102).

In a text punctuated by endless cycles of repetitive performances of (social) death, the presence of children is the one element of futurity that the short story introduces and that forces Isaiah to try and break free from his own narrative loop of violence and exploitation. He does that by refusing to activate the mecha-suit, exposing his body in its precariousness and vulnerability, and refusing to comply with both the material forces of exploitation as well as with the symbolic forms that determine the precarity of 'a Black body walking.'

Violating all guidelines and protocols, Isaiah effectively rewrites the script, not from within the parameters of the park's creative team, but by dissolving and re-coding the pre-ordained meanings and cultural signs that are meant to inform the child's reading of the event. The changing of the script, which consequently also changes the frames for the interpreta-

tion of the scene of violence, is accomplished by Isaiah not by installing himself into the role of transcendental subjectivity and authorial agency. Breaking with the pre-scripted protocol of "response through mimicry" (Adjei-Brenyah 87), Isaiah refuses both "what has been refused to and imposed upon" him (Moten 77), namely both active subjectivity and the status of purely reactive being.

Instead, he repurposes his performance into a process akin to what Uri McMillan calls "performing objecthood," in which objecthood features as "a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivities" (9). While the performance of objecthood is imbued with immediate dangers, especially in a context of violence, the specific setting in which the episode unfolds, that of a fictitious staging, makes it clear that what the story ultimately suggests is not an ethics of self-sacrifice or a passive acceptance of suffering. Furthermore, while inextricably linked to the long history of objectification of Black bodies, in which, as Spillers argues, "the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor" (67), Isaiah's object-being is definitely not 'for the patron.' As broken and non-collaborative commodity, Isaiah's performance dodges the task of conforming to the white patron's fantasy, jamming – if only momentarily – the libidinal machine of racial capitalism.

Conclusion

Adjei-Brenyah's "Zimmer Land" corroborates Jared Sexton's claim that "Black artists [...] wrestle with the ethical question of representing the effects of anti-black violence in ways that few non-black people (and maybe even many black people) ever come to appreciate" (67). Adjei-Brenyah's 'ethical wrestling' is already evident in the paradoxical status of a narrative that, while strongly criticizing the compulsive reproduction of scenes of Black suffering, in effect turns them into the basic script of its own plot. The short story thus remains haunted, as does our historical moment, by the clash between the political urgency of exposing the perpetual loop of violence inflicted upon Black bodies, and the dangers of commodifying, distributing, and ultimately selling Black suffering on the (literary) market.

The homonymy between the infamous entertainment park (Zimmer Land) and the title of the short story itself ("Zimmer Land") is indicative of the story's awareness of its inner conflicts. Yet, while playing with this referential confusion at a meta-level, the short story manages to keep the

world of Zimmer Land and the text of "Zimmer Land" separate. If, as I have argued, sublimation is impossible in the *world* of Zimmer Land, in the *text* of "Zimmer Land" – embedded in and saturated, but not utterly determined, by that same world – it is humor that offers an alternative strategy, one that strives to transform the tragic passivity of naked suffering into the social and political passion of a body that resists and – as the comic demands – *survives*.

The use of the comic register, however, is not intended to provide relief or resolution. Instead, it further amplifies how a backdrop of anti-Black violence shuts down the very possibility of a cathartic emotional response, one that would enable us to make sense of death and not perceive it as a random, senseless event. The narrative does not achieve closure, nor does it fulfill its promise of redemption, leaving the reader at the instant before the (fake) gun might go off, with Isaiah on the ground and the terrified child standing behind his father. Yet the scene has been irremediably altered by Isaiah's performance, and what is left open at the end is not only the empty space for an alternative ending, but also a quiet call to participation.

The opening line of the short story – "Welcome to Zimmer Land" (85) – pronounced by Lady Justice, is in fact a greeting that is addressed both to Isaiah, as he is entering the park, and to the reader, as we enter the fictional, speculative world of the story. Thrust into the position of participant, the reader is denied the safe distance of both the titillated voyeur and the truth-bearing witness. Claimed as participants, we are compelled to abandon the privileged status of spectators, to recognize our own entanglements with the world of Zimmer Land (which is also our own), and to attend to the ways in which we contribute, benefit, and suffer from it, without the consolation of sentimentality or empathic identification.

In its effort to "illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle" (Hartman, *Scenes* 4), and to find in that quotidian alternative performances of refusal and futurity, "Zimmer Land" foregrounds the potential of narrative in the dismantling of the archive of images of terror and death. As the extra-textual world has progressively leaked into the textual one, becoming a pre-established script through its various mediatizations and iterations, the short story seems to suggest that the moment might be ripe for imaginative, speculative, and performative interventions aimed at reframing and destabilizing the grammar and the tropes of its ossified codification, before letting it seep back into the world.

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