

Religion and
Economy of Affect:
A Reading of *Love
is the Message, the
Message is Death*

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Economy of Affect:
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For Valerie Cassel-Oliver who curated
My Black Death, Houston, 2002

¹ My final two classes at the College for Creative Studies, Detroit were *Introduction to Art Writing* and *What Makes Modern Art Modern: Blackness*, in both of which a group of very talented students allowed for extended reflections on Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*. My new students in the Program in Critical Studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art have been generous in their response to the challenge of discussing Arthur Jafa and John Akomfrah. To them all, my gratitude.

What, then, is love but mourning...?

Elizabethan art song

The sudden event is unexpected, swift, startling; we might speak of a striking discontinuity.

David Daube, *The Sudden in the Scriptures*²

² David Daube, *The Sudden in the Scriptures* (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock, 2019), 72.

Love (I)

A title. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*. The title functions like the title of certain poems—Celan, say—where the title is also—but may be not—the first line of the poem. This title moves, and its movement has a directedness that is not dependent upon the reader—or viewer. It shall not accommodate. Once you begin to take in the title it unfolds smoothly, even swiftly from left to right toward a target, its target. Love. Message. Death. If the signifier *Love* elicited deeply entrenched cultural connotations of, say, Christian (or for that matter, Hippie) Love (Agape), or, say, Greek erotic Love (Eros), or Romantic Love, and *Message* suggested a *medium* for the delivery of a truth—say, a truth of an elevated kind—then the swiftness of arrival at Death—*of Death?*—startles and stuns the consciousness and conscience into perhaps momentary suspension, which the rapid rhythm and quick editing scansion will reinforce, as the film moves too quickly for reflective thought even as content (which still bears expressiveness) is recognizable, not unlike seeing the fist or slap coming your way as you simultaneously are aware that you are the target of this move.... One might even, depending upon one's cultural repertoire, think this some satanic Message (à la Byron?): Death alone will set you free! And this would not be unreasonable given the sedimented religious significance of social suffering for a targeted social group whose existence would seem in the particular anthropology of the world captured-depicted-projected in this video essay, wholly to derive its social meaning from the many and various ways in which its movement—of capture, resistance, expression—seems devoted to spectacles of suffering which yield voyeuristic satisfaction, a satisfaction that has found economies of renewal whilst fundamentally un-changing. That would not be unreasonable. Death as deliverance would indeed be a viable message.

Intimacy (I): *Something was wrong*

Love is the Message opens on news footage of Charles Ramsey (Black, working-class American) speaking about his rescue of Amanda Berry, a young white woman abducted and imprisoned for ten years by Ariel Castro in Cleveland. Ramsey is surrounded by a mixed local crowd as he speaks into the microphone of the reporter from ABC 5:

She says, "Call 911. My name is Amanda Berry!" I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran into a Black man's arms! Something's wrong here! Dead give-away!

It is a "dead give-away," declares the hero of the moment, who had just helped save a woman imprisoned as a sexual slave for ten years and who escaped with her six-year-old child conceived in rape. I knew ... and had no doubt ... in this condition of emergency ("Call 911"), this state of exception in the neighborhood (Tremont, Cleveland). The state of exception is marked by the subsequent demolition of the house where Amanda Berry was imprisoned, thereby recognizing the place, the site as taboo, as in some visceral sense beyond human measure, beyond symbolization. A refusal of continuity. And yet, in third-person diction, "I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran into a Black man's arms!" and it is worth emphasizing that "Something's wrong here!" and more emphasis, "Dead give-away!" So, *Love is the Message* opens by marking in *surprise* the historicity of the refusal of intimacy between Black and White.

Love (II): The question of questions, or, The refusal of return

“What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?”

Amandla Stenberg, in *Love is the Message*.

If, for example, we take Freud’s article “Die Verneinung [Negation],” concerning what is *ausstossen* [eject, expel], concerning what is not admitted into the interior, concerning what is excluded, and concerning what reappears in the exterior, it is indeed the real of which Freud is speaking.³

Solange Faladé, “Sur le réel”

He stood for a conscious approach to *American* culture - and I stress American culture because I think we are in a great deal of confusion over our role in the creation of American culture.⁴

Ralph Ellison, “Alain Locke”

³ Solange Faladé, “Sur le réel,” *Lettres de l’Ecole freudienne* 16 (November 1975):31.

⁴ Ralph Ellison, “Alain Locke,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 441.

In a video replete with smartphone documented footage – and older news film footage – of police violence against Black Americans, there comes a passage of particularly concentrated violence: against mothers, against girls in bathing suits (who are body slammed to the ground), against children on the road at night, against children in the very heart of their homes – a link between domesticity and damaged subjectivity that deserves further exploration – at 3:34 seconds, following a scene of a mother being arrested with her child onlooking and holding up his hands, and as if looking back on this scene of mother and child, there is a frame of an especially mordant portrait in black and white of Bobby Seale looking as severe as any executioner that I have ever seen. From the appearance of Malcolm the iconography and movement quickens even more into fire and images of police violence in public stopping momentarily on the rich color portrait of an Amandla Sternberg posing what I take, each time I watch this video, to be the question of questions: “What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?” With Kanye West’s “Ultralight Beam” playing there is a montage of images of Black dancing⁵ [Fig. 0.] and pleasure and police violence in the home. Scenes of Black culture - music, athletics - dancing [Fig. 1.] (Storyboard P). I isolate these examples as Amandla Sternberg’s mournful question, “What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black Culture?” calls to mind David Hammons’ conceptual installation at Mnuchin Gallery in Manhattan, *Which Mike do you want to be like...*, 2001, three very tall microphones (Mikes/ Mics), each a synecdoche for an example - or form - of African American exceptionalism in physical talent: Michael Jackson (singer), Michael Jordan (basketball), Mike Tyson (boxing). You can reach for the

Fig. 0.



⁵ The swirling of the dancers (at 4:04) is almost Sufi-like!

Fig. 1.



heights (symbolized by the height of the mics), but these are your options, the horizon of limitation. *Love is the Message* shows people at play in public and private, people in church, people in states of spiritual possession in church [Fig. 2.] (at 1:00) but also in the home [Fig. 3.] (at 1:54⁶ [Fig. 4.], or a near secular context at 6:30),⁷ [Fig. 5.] and again in church (at 5:58) [Fig. 6.]; at 1:52, the editing of the video arranges a fast visual rhyme between a voguing ballroom scene and this scene of possession in church showing a collapse of verticality through bodies falling to the ground [Fig. 3. and Fig. 4.] – but under identical cosmologies? or merging cosmologies? – the social choreography of which deserves further attention and close reading. What is clear is that Jafa's practice, the visual and editing practice, assumes a continuity between the social choreographies of street dance [Fig. 1.] and religious possession [Fig. 2.]. *Love is the Message* also shows people (and children) indulging in simple pleasures, but it is clear that the Black culture implied in the question, *What would America be like if it loved Black people as much as it loves Black culture?* is not the culture of Black people in moments of intimacy but is rather the culture of spectacle and commodification, the culture of the star-system working through the commodified gaze and thus culture as consumption in which there is a culture of performing blackness. Culture, when it is not consumption, is fundamentally participation in the event of being-with. (I construe the brief moment of Ella

⁶ I regard this parallel, this morphology between profane and sacred in social choreography, street dance and the movement of possession in church dance, as wholly emblematic of Jafa's iconological practice, that is, the epistemology of his image-use.

⁷ And yet...so much of the social choreography depicted in *Love is the Message* comes near to or might be construed as consonant forms of possession – the flow in dancing, in sports, in heightened speech, even in moments of joy, etc. One is struck by the prevalence of retrograde steps, to use the dance term for backward movement, both in sacred and profane frames. Any further account of what is distinctive in Jafa's formalism and epistemology, for there is a Jafaerian formalism, would need to take account of the presence and deployment of figures of possession throughout the oeuvre.

Fig. 2.



Baker speaking at at 5:17 as touching on something of this order: Ella Baker, trained in the Black debating tradition in college, brilliant public speaker in her early years, who will come to renounce the brilliant speaker / leader role, the star approach dominant in the civil rights movement in favor of participatory communal practices and as such a renunciation of the patriarchy implicit in the civil rights model.) The pseudo-culture in which Black culture is loved points to a system and practice in which Black people are *prized* – they are indeed commodities – but they are not loved. This is the effect of the inversion of life in the spectacle that produces the star-system of pseudo-worship, and this is so, as Ellison's cultural criticism has shown, most programmatically in his essay on "What America would be like without Blacks," something which Ellison insistently characterizes from the opening of the essay as "The *fantasy* of an America free of blacks..." but available for labor and entertainment. Here is Ellison's re-formulation of the question of *What America would be like if it loved Black people as much as it loves Black culture*:

What is ultimately intriguing about the fantasy of "getting shut" of the Negro American is the fact that no one who entertains it seems ever to have considered what the nation would have become had Africans not been brought to the New World, and had their descendants not played such a complex and confounding role in the creation of American history and culture.⁸

⁸ Ralph Ellison, "What America would have been like without Blacks," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 579-580.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Jafa's response to this question – what the nation would have become had Africans *not* been brought to the New World – is ready at hand: we are this suffering, the entailed misery, the Middle Passage, and we cannot wish it undone since this would be to undo us, Black people, and the cultural achievement that is also American culture. (There is, it must be said, in Jafa's person and his practice, a powerful *aestheticism* at work – this is an aspect of his distinctive formalism – since everything is built on Black *culture* and Black *expression* and *expressivity*. It is *beauty*, the beauty of a particular *form of life*, that strikes him, that motivates his practice. And there can be no doubt that for Jafa *life* is movement.) Where Ellison's tone is celebratory – even as he always draws upon what he himself characterizes as a tragic vision of life – Jafa speaks as though an extinction event is on the horizon, whence the channeling of Hortense Spiller in his film *Dreams are colder than Death* (2013): "I know we are going to lose this gift of black culture unless we are careful!"⁹ It is in this framework – of the separation of "culture" from persons,¹⁰ where persons can be disappeared from visibility – that one might be able to make sense of the charge of cultural appropriation – given that one cannot make sense of any culture that is purely its own – as the charge is about making Black culture in some sense dis-tasteful (even poisonous), uneatable (jouissance), indigestible, un-consumable, or at the least as difficult as possible to consume. Cultural appropriation in the hands of most practitioners is like an argument-form which licenses an attack on persons and the social relations embodied in their *tastes*, it is not, though, an argument, since the point is to create maximum discomfiture in persons and / at the / risk of interpersonal relations. Cultural appropriation cannot and is not meant to make sense as an argument or claim about cultural ownership – no one owns culture or can own culture which little nationalists have

⁹ Hortense Spillers quoted in Mathias Ussing Seebag, "Beauty through Horror: An Introduction to the Work of Arthur Jafa," in *Arthur Jafa: Magnumb* (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 25–26.

¹⁰ But there has long been a critical theory (from *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) to *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)) that comprehends commodification as destructive of the person.

long learned and large nations cannot even begin to think this possibility – it makes sense as a performative strategy aimed at diminishing the possibility of separating Black culture from Black people (as example of the *inversion of life* in the spectacle), expression from substance, etc., so that the apparently most prized *product* of Black people cannot, through *separation*, be used to *mask* the neglect of Black *persons* through which masking other blows of power take place – not least because it may well be possible (even if not fully articulated) that there is inchoate the intuition that it is a condition of the production of Black culture – a *production of the animal substance Black culture* (see Marx on the social substance called labor) – that it remain in this subject-position: only if you – as a cast (Isabel Wilkerson)? as a permanently dominated and dishonored group (Afro-Pessimism)? – are in this position can we have the Black athletes, singers, boxers, etc. The Black entertainment industrial complex. Is Black culture loved? No, it is *prized*, and talk of *love* is the cultural masking of the relation to commodity, a cultural masking which doubles as *disavowal*. *Love is the Message* seeks to demystify this state of affairs, a form of socially sustainable psychosis.

Fig. 6.





Intimacy (II): Jouissance

The opening footage of Michael Ramsey is approximately 13 seconds, and the opening strains of Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" (2016) begin to be heard – cut to first of many crowds, each crowd a new item of found footage (it would be possible to schematize *Love is the Message* through its editing and depiction of crowds and forms of crowding as historical, social, or religious markers) in sports halls, in civil rights marches, or a crowd in confined room around a virtuoso break-dancer followed by slow motion footage of police officer Michael Slager shooting Walter Scott in the back (April 4, 2015) – civil rights crowds from the 1960s (voting rights) – late night dancing male figure – girl dancing / bumping / grinding male figure in front of on-looking crowd [Fig. 7] – author – church – Obama in South Carolina. Within the first 44 seconds the scansion (the metric) is set up, the high and low of content (civil rights iconography juxtaposed, followed without transition by exuberant working-class sexuality, church juxtaposed with same, or Black critical theorist Hortense Spillers).

This movement of found footage – whose metric of quick, sharp, sudden juxtapositions or sequencing is *grosso modo* Black working-class cultural expressivity / Black bourgeoisie / church / civil rights / markers of high achievement / police violence with the "high" followed by the "low" – is set to "Ultralight Beam," which I shall suggest, is one of the principal means by which Jafa's complex attitude to questions of (Black) religiosity is articulated. (I do intend to say *Jafa* as there is every reason to believe that the author "Arthur Jafa" means to be understood as part of the stories and scenes depicted.) The other means by which issues around religiosity are addressed, I shall suggest, is through a Deleuzian lens of affect.

What is to be understood by intimacy, other, that is, than shared experiences, shared interiorities – even where interiority is grasped as a kind of fiction? This question of intimacy has become an inescapable part of current critical theory through the minoritarian lens almost, in places, as if who or what gets to exercise the capacity for intimacy becomes definitive of the human. John Akomfrah frequently refers – both in interviews and his film-work – to Philip Donnellan’s BBC documentary *The Colony* (1964) – which Akomfrah often draws on as an intertext – as important to his, Akomfrah’s, generation of Black British filmmakers for its capturing of moments of Black intimacy – people of British West Indian heritage simply conversing amongst themselves about themselves and about life-questions of import to them. Akomfrah conveys this sense of intimacy by saying how important it was – and remains – to see Black people not presented as *a sociological problem*, which was for many decades, that is, since mass migration into Britain, the principal means by which Black British citizens were *represented* on the screen to a larger mainstream population. The question of intimacy is also internally related to the modes and possibilities of mainstreaming on the screen since the kind of intimacy allowed to be publicly represented is a function of settled power relations and social status. Think, for example, of the Motion Picture Production Code (more popularly known as the Hays Code) which, between 1934 and 1968, controlled the depiction of kinds of intimacy permissible on the silver screen; think, too, of how, as the authority underwriting these codes began to disintegrate – responding to social as well as constitutional pressures – it remained that intimacy – erotic, sexual – between Blacks and Whites could not be represented on screen... we can continue the examples to include: the first kiss between Black and White (at the movies, on tv), the first explicit homoerotic kiss, etc., and then we enter

the zone of what one may characterize as regional ontologies, not the respectable Black life of the Cosby type or the smoothness of cleaned up soul dancing (Soul Train), nor the sublimated homoeroticism of homosociality, but the down-and-dirty, the real of outsider life – the Black homosexuality, say, of Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989), or Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1963-64), in other words, the type of marginalized intimacy where there is a tacit social agreement as to non-representability in the mainstream, but the kind of work available in and *that comes through the artworld* and its mainstream adjacent institutions (its alternative venues and informal institutions – pop-up spaces, theatres, galleries, and then museums and catalogues protected by the First Amendment, as the many cases pursued by Grove Press attest).

Intimacy in *Love is the Message* – and more broadly in Jafa's practice – is more than a question of sociological decorum (something which we shall see in James Tiptree's "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death" so admired by Jafa¹¹). Michael Ramsey has given us the opening when in surprise he re-marks on the strangeness, the dead-wrongness of "a little pretty white girl [running] into a Black man's arms," almost as if that *Black man's arms* might be the arms of an alien. Orlando Patterson, in another register to be sure, also gives us an opening when he speaks of the considerable public achievements of the civil rights movement – and here I take the iconography of *Love is the Message* to be so many markers of such achievement in syncopation with the non-middle class indecorous social existence of the Black working class – before adding:

I hear from a lot of my younger colleagues, and from students, the fact that nothing has happened really among Blacks. That's not true. The civil rights movement was successful in one im-

¹¹ James Tiptree Jr., "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death" (1973), *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (1975) (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), 207-231.

portant respect - Let's put it this way: Black Americans were excluded in two ways: from the public domain and from the private domain. The civil rights movement succeeded magnificently in incorporating Black Americans into the public domain: they are now an essential part of our politics; they are the foundation of the Democratic Party; they play an outsized role in our nation's culture and intellectual life; they are an integral part of the military; and they also led to the rise of a real middle class, however precarious its economic base. But the civil rights movement did fail in one other important respect: it did fail to integrate Black Americans in the private domain of American life, and that's reflected in the fact the Black Americans are as segregated today as they were in the '70s, believe it or not...¹²

This is the signal separation and failure of American life: the exclusion of Black Americans from the private domain, which is also the to say from the domain of *jouissance*, the pleasure derived from proximity to the Thing (*das Ding*, Freud; *la Chose*, Lacan) that makes possible the symbolization of inclusion and exclusion, "this place, as Solange Faladé formulates it, that Lacan has called, the Thing [*la Chose*]. The subject is going to have to find out how to live with [voisiner] that which is forbidden, this place of *jouissance*,"¹³ the protection of which will necessarily entail a social technology of power and taboo. Look again at Michael Ramsey, his face, his eyes, his body language, and it becomes visible that his amazement is not only at the *sudden* appearance of "a little pretty white girl [running] into a Black man's arms" (the third person diction as mark of separation) but also that this suddenness could not be a *scene with a future* (that is part of his imagining), and thus a movement of marked dis-continuity, a caesura in every level of social articulation.

¹² Orlando Patterson, *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell*, MSNBC, June 5, 2020, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oezz6yV38_E&list=PLXNa3iktusntAZMYji5bNtzJ2lmb-5Jjf&index=6. Accessed 02-04--24

¹³ Solange Faladé, "Un Parcours autour de la Chose," *Autour de la Chose* (Séminaire 1993-1993) (Paris: Economica / Anthropos, 2012), 15.

Intimacy (III): The pleasure that gets to be publicly represented

So, let the scansion, the saccadic rhythm of *Love is the Message*, be public and private – yes, there will be outer space and sci-fi space, too – public space and private space, private pressures and public forms, public decorum warped by the pressures of private desires which are nevertheless *social* desires. It might seem appropriate, even insightful, to speak of the relationship between the iconography of church, civil rights, and bumping, and street dancing as *dialectical*, but another kind of materialism, psychic materialism, would seem required as if the work is saying that intimacy (figured as the private domain), shared jouissance, is already performatively public, a performance seeking and finding its audience, its stage, its visibility, through a practice of desire that may be characterized as non-oedipal, that is, not regulated by the Law of the Father of which the Oedipus complex would be the psychic instance. The (public) *exposition* of jouissance is the refusal of the public / private distinction, and this is the matter of the juxtaposition of “low” and “high” in *Love is the Message*, the abjection without which, says Jafa, none of it matters [Fig. 7. and 8.]. In a conversation with Greg Tate at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Jafa, invoking his persistent formulation of Black being – “Inside the black worldview, black being, the black continuum” – declares in all directness and simplicity that “it’s impossible to completely separate out what’s magnificent about [Black being] and what’s miserable about it. They are intrinsically bound up.” And were it possible for *some* supreme being to make it all un-happen one could not accept that since

¹⁴ Arthur Jafa and Greg Tate in conversation at the Hammer Museum, June 2016, quoted in Mathias Ussing Seebag, “Beauty through Horror: An Introduction to the Work of Arthur Jafa,” in *Arthur Jafa: Magnumb* (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 37.

that would be to make Black existence, too, unhappen.¹⁴ In other words, there is a recognition of the internal relations linking precarity and (anthropological) entanglement.

Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



The scenes of violence – police violence, drug violence, child neglect¹⁵ – depicted in *Love is the Message* are public acts the afterlife (*Nachträglichkeit*) of which are de-formative of subjectivity. When there is talk of living with trauma nothing else is meant other than that the sense of self is *après-coup* continuously exposed to the wound of symbolic hurt without possibility of evasion or escape even as the economy of the wound is not fully comprehensible or cognizable to the subject. For the intimacy of trauma, living with trauma, a public performance becomes interior and interiority the effect of introjection from public acts [Fig. 9]. There is an homology here whereby private desires retrace the afferent networks of injury – a form of working out – in an attempt to make one's own the space of action for desire but a desire no longer shaped by the paternal figure (or Law of the Father) that seeks to possess the agents of desire – this is the significance of the public acts of desire, of *jouissance* on which *Love is the Message* – and Jafa – puts such emphasis. In a dialogue at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art with the Danish photographer and author of *American Pictures* (1977), Jacob Holdt, Jafa recounts a conversation – or rather, an incident – with his father during a road trip from Atlanta to their native city of Tupelo in Mississippi during which he asked his father to look at the photobook *Juke Joint: Photographs* (1990) by Birney Imes which, for Jafa, showed the

Fig. 9.



¹⁵ See Tina M. Campt on the “striking montage of domestic images [which paint] an unsettling portrait of Black kinship,” *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing how we See* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2021), 97.

beauty in difficult and marginal Black social spaces in the Delta region, but Jafa reports his father as saying: "I don't see any creativity in this book whatsoever, there's no creativity in taking pictures of people who *have nothing*."¹⁶ As Jafa pushes his father on the matter, his father, reports Jafa, "just went crazy and began screaming at me – I've never seen him so mad before. I had to drive with my head out of the window. I've never forgotten that."¹⁷ In our diction, Jafa's father viscerally rejected the forced confrontation with graphic representations of precarity. These are people who don't have a prayer.

¹⁶ Arthur Jafa and Jacob Holdt in Conversation, "A Message of Love," in *Arthur Jafa: Magnumb* (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 46. My emphasis. A fuller version of this account of traveling with his father is available in the interview, "Arthur Jafa: Not all good, not all bad," May 2019, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iprTrTgX-vZ8&t=18s>. Accessed 02-10-24

¹⁷ Jafa and Holdt, "A Message of Love," 46-47.

Prayer and Precarity: “Ultralight Beam”

I believe in black people believing.

Arthur Jafa

Artists are opportunists, and art—Western avant-garde art from Dada and Surrealism to John Cage—an occasion of chance, or, in Jazz, improvisation. The unforeseen is the occasion for synthesis, for the crystallization of what had been long brewing yet which (until the occasion spontaneously presented itself) lacked form. Jafa has made clear in many interviews the extent to which *Love is the Message* came together (“it auto-assembled itself,” he says in his 2019 interview with Louisiana Museum of Art), came into being not through being plotted, but suddenly, as if the thinker and theorist of what he calls *Black visual intonation* suddenly found that his theorem was not an idiosyncratic intuition but something whose self-evidence was now shareable. The year 2016 was not only the crystallization of the video essay *Love is the Message*, it was also the year that saw Kanye West and his collaborators produce the hip-hop gospel song “Ultralight Beam” for the studio album, *The Life of Pablo*. Not only is *Love is the Message* entirely composed of found footage, the music, too, is borrowed – *Love is the Message* is the major work of détournement (majeur) since Guy Debord’s *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [we go round and round in the night and are consumed by the fire] (1978) – What good fortune that Kanye’s “Ultralight Beam” should have appeared in February 2016 – by which time, Jafa has said, 80% of *Love is the Message* had been completed – and be grasped by Jafa as the music, the ethos, rhythm, feel, and

poetry that the still inchoate *Love is the Message* needed in counterpoint or *confluence* to enter the world. No viewer henceforth can imagine the video of *Love is the Message* without the accompaniment of "Ultralight Beam." Each work has become an occasion for the other and, crucially, neither is illustrative of the other¹⁸ – just as one would not say – thinking of John Akomfrah's use of Schubert's *Die Winterreise* amidst the landscapes of *The Nine Muses* – that Schubert *illustrates* anything in Akomfrah's film essay or vice versa. There is both intimacy and distance between "Ultralight Beam" and *Love is the Message*. The reception of both works, "Ultralight Beam" and *Love is the Message*, has been all but unanimous in acclaim, but it is by no means obvious that the music and words of "Ultralight Beam" bear the same role and significance in each work.

Our emerging concerns have been love: Black Americans are prized (not loved) for their culture, and thus subject to the processes and gaze of commodification; Black Americans, through the civil rights movement, have won access to the public domain but have been denied intimacy, which in our conception is not merely the sharing of interiorities but access to shared *jouissance* the role of which is attested in and through public representation – the movies, tv, art museums, billboard, music, etc., in other words, the visual anthropology of our late modern condition. Now, let's surface, address more directly, something that has been accompanying our deliberations all along, namely, the *language* of religious experience.

I would like to frame this reflection on the language of religious experience by drawing upon two concepts, precarity and abandonment. Part of the power of "Ultralight Beam" is the way in which it compresses many of the topoi and tropes of Black American musicality beginning with the

¹⁸ Jafa himself makes this point explicitly when he says: "I think some of the power [of the music] is in the fact that the images are not illustrating the music and the music is not illustrating [the images]." "Arthur Jafa: Not all good, not all bad," Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

Spirituals which W.E. B. Du Bois so tellingly renamed the Sorrow Songs in his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). From the Spirituals and folk songs through to the Blues and gospel, a common interpretation is the *affirmative* interpretation: these are songs of survival against all odds, songs of trial followed by triumph, songs of spiritual sustenance, songs of jubilee and jubilation. These musical traditions come to be read as so many social documents tracking the survival and triumph of Black Americans even as – pace Antonin Dvořák after his arrival in the USA (1892) – the musics, above all the Spirituals, are taken as the source of authentically American music, including art song, and here one does not mean only the concert tradition of the Spirituals.

Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Atlantic* essay on the Spirituals as folk music represented a burgeoning nineteenth-century literature on the spirituals as *American* folk music in danger of being lost¹⁹ – needless to say, the Black middle class of the period kept their distance from such music until the concertization of the Spirituals begun with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, LeRoi Jones, and, for Jazz, Ralph Ellison, are amongst the principal social theorists of such musics. Within this lineage of social commentary on Black music, Du Bois holds a distinctive position for the way in which he foregrounds the music as a certain kind of experience, indeed, he expressly accords *all power and value to the music* – the bearer of affect – and expressly rejects the “words” of the Spirituals as nothing but mangled theological remnants and *evident dross*.²⁰ Both Locke and Weldon Johnson, without endorsing Du Bois' dismissal of the words of the Spirituals, clearly struggle with how to understand what they call the *words* of the Spirituals,²¹ but it will not be until an aristocratic French writer and novelist, Marguerite Yourcenar, that the words of the Spirituals will be treat-

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” *Atlantic Monthly* 19 (June 1867):685-694.

²⁰ Cf. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 235.

²¹ Cf. Michael Stone-Richards, “Painful Time: A Reading of Poetic Experience in the Sorrow Songs,” *Logics of Separation: Exile and Transcendence in Aesthetic Modernity* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 191-266.

ed seriously as poetry and as part-and-parcel of a distinct poetic experience.²² And what is that poetic experience that Yourcenar sees in the Spirituals – not only spiritual steadfastness, but *precarity* – let us say initially, poverty of experience, existential tenuousness, leading to and accompanied by the material and psychical senses of abandonment, the constant and continuous fear of ontological abandonment which has in-built a phylogenetic fear of madness (collapse, breakdown, psychosis). Yourcenar's insight is that in the poetic experience of the Spirituals, affirmation is never separate or distinct from abandonment, and that prayer – for fundamentally, the Spirituals are acts of prayer – is born of precarity. It is a socially overdetermined interpretation, then, which chooses affirmation when confronted with the precarity – the tone and diction of pleading, supplication, passion – since the felt force of the experience of precarity is the *substance* of pleading. On this framing, it is by no means obvious that “Ultralight Beam” on its own terms is a song of affirmation still less that it functions as such in its accompaniment of *Love is the Message*; it is, rather a *collage* of the musical and thematic topoi of Black American longing and faith-forms confronted with obstacles to faith, from its very opening with the Child Preacher, “Yes God,” followed by the *sentences* resisting the devil's entry into the house (“We don't want no devils in the house, God (Yes, Lord)”) interwoven with declarations of what is wanted (and *needs* will not be distinguishable from *wants*), “We want the Lord (Yes, Jesus).” (When Hannah Arendt objected to the use of children in the civil rights movement – she believed that children ought to be protected from violence not exposed to it – it required Ralph Ellison to explain to her the socio-theological role of the Child in Black American experience, but Arendt could not shake the sense of the Child as shield, as sacrificial victim, or, as in the opening of “Ultralight Beam,”

²² Cf. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Fleuve profond, sombre rivière: Les “Negro Spirituals,” commentaires et traductions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

the Child as first witness to horror, whose innocence or lack of worldliness might protect it and offer protection to others, adults.) Then the chorus (that is, the structure of repetition) on the (repeated) effort to keep faith (given many, perhaps even *unnameable*, obstacles):

I'm tryna keep my faith
 We on an ultralight beam
 We on an ultralight beam
 This is a God dream
 This is a God dream
 This is everything

And the first verse:

Deliver us serenity
 Deliver us peace
 Deliver us loving
 We know we need it
 You know we need it
 You know we need it
 That's why we need You now, oh
 Pray for Paris
 Prayer for the parents
 This is a God dream
 This is a God dream
 This is a God dream

Of course, one readily understands that a prayer of supplication – the most common type of prayer known to most – is based on, well, what *we need*, but what *we need* is also and simultaneously a marker of permanent privation: no serenity, no peace, no loving (oneself? one's own? others? and the need, which is privative, is reciprocal: "We know we need it / You know we need it," and as something reciprocal

no ground is left untouched by need) – one almost hears the end of Arnold's "Dover Beach," that (secular) prayer of the former(ly) faithful no longer capable of faith yet not able to abandon the language of faith:

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

We might, indeed, quickly compare "Dover Beach"'s "land of dreams" with the "God dream" from "Ultralight Beam." For "Dover Beach," that which lies "before us like a land of dreams" is clearly illusory, a night mirage, and no more than seductive deception of a piece with the underlying truth that hides "ignorant armies" that "clash by night." In "Ultralight Beam," on the other hand, the music itself, which induces a weightless (ultralight) trance, is a state for the light of lights, the light *beyond* any lightbeam (the *ultralight beam*).²³ Still, is the *God dream* adverbial – a Godly thing? Or might the *God dream* be something else – and why not simultaneously? – such as reality as a dream-state – I think here of André Breton's Shiva-inflected poem "Je rêve je te vois": (to the letter): *I dream I see you*, dream as mode of perception – or Godhead (*Gotttheit*)? This is *everything* – the ontology conveyed by three Anglo-Saxon syllables *all at once*.

²³ S.v. *ultra* as prefix: beyond, going beyond the limits of, extremely, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Robert K. Barnhart (New York: H.H. Wilson and Company, 1988). It remains that the *ultralight beam* is an image of all or nothing, of tenuousness.

Like the Spirituals, but also the Blues, "Ultralight Beam" draws upon the language and rhetoric – the tone – of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Job, and in this light, something interesting happens in the second verse as the meta-physical and the social elide and the pathos of the sublime *God dream* slips into the pathos (or, indistinguishably, bathos?) of certain *social types*: the defeated, the wronged (the abandoned?) lover ("Why, oh, why'd You do me wrong?" is so utterly a Blues line as to be meta), the frightened child ("Oh, no longer am afraid of the night"), who, overwhelmed by *oppressions rather than blessings*, *look to the light*:

So why send oppression, not blessings?
 Why, oh, why'd You do me wrong? (More)
 You persecute the weak
 Because it makes You feel so strong (Safe)
 Don't have much strength to fight
 So I look to the light (War)
 To make these wrongs turn right
 Head up high, I look to the light
 Hey, 'cause I know that You'll make everything alright
 And I know that You'll take good care of Your child
 Oh, no longer am afraid of the night
 'Cause I look to the light

This eliding of the meta-physical with the social brings to the fore the extent to which the *affirmation* of faith is always already a *testing* of faith – for example, where Kirk Franklin and Choir sing: "Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels that they're not good enough" – but is this any different *in principle* from the night DJ who dedicates a song to...? – in an economy of address where the subject and object of enunciation are one and the same – consider, say, Sappho's Fragment 1, "Deathless Aphrodite," a poem of

address to the goddess Aphrodite and as such a prayer (of supplication) but also readily construable as a lyric poem of the self imploring, addressing itself but without the need for any ontological commitment to the social or the theological.²⁴ Once the listener registers the elisions between the meta-physical and the social it becomes comprehensible how “Ultralight Beam” functions as accompaniment to *Love is the Message* with this difference (and this is in part what is meant when it is said that the song and video do not share an illustrative relationship), namely, that just as every social type in “Ultralight Beam” can be found in *Love is the Message* – the various figures of abandonment, the Child as Protector of the parent, the preachers, congregations – the role of the crowd as choric function – *Love is the Message* is singularly and continuously de-sublimatory and explicit in its foregrounding of abjection in Jafa’s practice – here I think of the monumental *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions* (Serpentine Gallery, London, 2017) – the figures of which are, inter alia, the slum,²⁵ the rectum,²⁶ and the discursive articulation of which is framed by Sylvia Wynter’s conception of the need for an aesthetics conceived as *deciphering practice* of the sensorium / affectivity²⁷ alongside three chapters from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980): “Becoming-Intense,” “Becoming-Animal,” and “Becoming-Imperceptible”²⁸ which three chapters also help to frame a Jaferian reading of Tiptree’s “Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death” and its depiction of the cannibalistic breaching of limits, boundaries, and the shared porosity of sensation as a presentation of *intimacy as exteriority*. There is nothing in the verses or the performance of “Ultralight Beam” that allows affirmation to be distinguished from (social and metaphysical) abandonment. There is, too, another dimension where *Love is the Message* reads “Ultralight Beam” into a new set of possibilities: the role of

²⁴ Cf. Sappho, “Deathless Aphrodite,” in *If not, winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 2-5.

²⁵ Cf. Saidiya Hartman, “The Terrible Beauty of the Slum,” in *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, ed. Arthur Jafa (London: Serpentine Galleries and Koenig Books, 2017), 155-160.

²⁶ Cf. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” in *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, 237-262.

²⁷ Cf. Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice,” in *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, 183-210.

²⁸ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” in *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, 441-492.

repetition. Both works simply end, come to a stop – they do not conclude, and one may go so far as to suggest that each is meant to continue: *Love is the Message* – like Debord's *In girum nocte et consumimur igni* which ends "À reprendre depuis le début" – makes sense as a set of moments extracted from a larger *continuum of the Same* so that its repetition would function as mirror. One hears this repetition, too, in certain (choral / choric) word endings, not unlike the word endings in a sestina, *Faith, More, Safe, War*, as if no escape were possible from this cycle. On our reading *Love is the Message* co-opts this deeply moving and equivocal posture (and accompanying affects) in the service of a dramaturgy of abjection that is also the foundation of a critique of (Black) Christianity. The interviews where Jafa is asked about Black Christianity are too many to mention though here one may mention Isis Pickens of Harlem's Zion Hill Baptist Church as typical – and symptomatic? – of the attempt if not to get Jafa to commit, at least to acquiesce to the sentiment that his practice is *consistent with Black Christianity*: "If I didn't know any better, says Isis Pickens, I would think you were a believer," to which Jafa responds with the extraordinary – and in many ways deeply unsatisfactory – statement, "I believe in black people believing."²⁹

²⁹ "On Spirituality and Contemporary Black Life," Arthur Jafa in conversation with Isis Pickens, June 2, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/274901100>, Accessed 02-09-24

“a black hagakure”: a provisional reading

Though Jafa is not a Black nationalist – how could he be! – he shares with Black nationalism, and this is so in spite of his implicit Deleuzianism, an at times crude, almost reductive set of attitudes toward Black Christianity: He is fully aware of its role as a *social* institution (“For every Aretha Franklin, there are twenty people in churches who would have eaten her alive”³⁰), and its social technology of affect will be of import to his practice – *akingdoncomethas* (2018) is nothing if not an extraordinary display of the technology of sonic affect at the disposition of the Black Church³¹ – but at no point is he interested in or fundamentally willing to be concerned with the phenomenology of Black Christian *belief* and so at no point can he consider the *description under which its subjects themselves act* – “I believe in black people believing” means that people can believe what they want, the content of their belief being of little importance to him. He expresses solidarity with the Church as *Black culture*, draws upon the social technology of the Black Church – especially as this bears on phenomena of possession or getting the spirit – an approach which at times treats the Black Church almost as a source of tropes for affect, but the implicit critique is there – on the provisional reading proposed here – one in which the Black Church is fundamentally regarded as unheroic – which is also to say, shameful, passive, adaptive, co-opted, a means of social control, an extension of the master’s religion, *a boon for Christ* – but in his most telling essay, “My Black Death,” Jafa cloaks, would mask his blow against Black Christianity under the guise – but also through the form – of prose poetry in the concluding

³⁰ Arthur Jafa in conversation with Ulrich Obrist, 2019, quoted in Seeberg, “Beauty through Horror,” 34. And does Jafa think that there was no one (financier or artist competitor) wanting to take the place of / usurp Aretha Franklin or Mahalia Jackson? That Detroit, for example, was not overpopulated with challengers to Motown, singers and producers and financiers, for example, who produced the kind of music that Brits call Northern Soul?

³¹ The great French analyst and writer, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, spoke of experiencing the Black Church on a visit to Harlem and feeling – evidently against his will – that he came within a whisker of being converted.

section of "My Black Death," through a mode of writing (that is, the prose poetic) that eschews both the law of meter and the law of Reason, open, thus, to the cunning of unreason, that is, the non-Eurocentric, the measures of polycentric movement, all of which is signalled in the way in which "a black hagakure" stands apart in its orthography, marking its self-transforming movement in the passage from prose to poetic utterance through visual blank scan-sion, with transition to a use / practice of the lower case – with the sole exception for *Christ*:

a black hagakure

a dream of death and continual dissipation of dense black being (power and consciousness) osiris dismembered (diafra) and a part can't come together (can't remember) though the parts no longer fit, and this not fitting, this growth after dismemberment, keeps us (men and women) harder coming strong (anti entropic beasts) falling together even as we fall apart would limit the number of blacks that can gather, a boon for Christ, one a bitch two a threat three an insurrection, no getting together coming together no drums rising up so churches, funerals, simple gatherings and places become reunions become remembrance be luciferian (fire, light) be revolution.

to the central conundrum of black being (the double bind of our ontological existence) lie in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are such that our efforts to eliminate those forces which constrain also functions to dissipate much of which gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor and that by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the good death (cachoeira) and to be embraced.³²

³² Arthur Jafa, "a black hagakure," the concluding section of "My Black Death," in *Everything but the Burden: What White People are taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 256-257. That this section of "My Black Death" can be read as self-contained is borne out by its republication in the exhibition catalogue, *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970*, ed. Valerie Cassel-Oliver (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2005), 78. A later, slightly different, version of "a black hagakure," can be found in Arthur Jafa, *My Black Death* (2020) published as a pamphlet in the collection *On the Blackness of Blackness*. In this version from 2020, the work closes: "but this is the good death (boa morte) to be embraced," where the Portuguese *boa morte* (good death) replaces the earlier *cachoeira*.

(We shall return below to the appeal to poetic utterance as a mode of masking, but not indirection, and here masking is partly being deployed in the sense of figurative mask through which a desired role is performed – or not.)

a black hagakure

The use of blank space as visual scansion is prefigured in the use of blank space following the discussion of the young Jafa's experience of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and immediately preceding "a black hagakure," setting up a parallelism of the voyage – blackness – middlelessness in *2001: A Space Odyssey* with the Middle Passage – Black Death – of the Black diasporic experience. After the title / first line, "a black hagakure," more blank space, followed by

a dream of death

Death (I)

Here, let us pause for a moment. The phrase “a dream of death” triggers many echoes in Jafa’s practice, and pushes one to reflect upon, not the prevalence of scenes of death per se – the death of Black bodies – but death (we cannot say *itself*), in order to ask: What is to be understood by *death* in Jafa’s practice? What “conception” of death is at work in this thinking, the repetition of which, and the violence of which is *itself* a mark of non-representability? The following are seminal works at seminal moments in Jafa’s trajectory: the exhibition *My Black Death* in 2002, curated by Valerie Cassel-Oliver in Houston; the essay “My Black Death,” published by Greg Tate in 2003, within which is embedded “a black hagakure,” which itself is republished as a stand alone, independent prose-poetic work in *Double Consciousness* in 2005, another exhibition curated by Cassel-Oliver; we have, too, the film / documentary / narrative *Dreams are Colder than Death* in 2013, and, in 2016 the video for which the ground has been long prepared, the work undertaken: *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, and behind which, we learn from Greg Tate, is the work of speculative sci-fi, James Tiptree Jr’s “Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death” (1973).³³

Within the poetic economy of “a black hagakure,” structured by the oppositions and movements of osiris and Lucifer against Christ, it is clear that

1. death cannot be thought in (Black) Christian terms as redemptive suffering, something also made clear by Jafa’s thought-experiment discussed above which said that even if it were possible to have a history without the Middle Passage and its entailments, it would not be accept-

³³ “The title [*Love is the Message, the Message is Death*] is a layered homage to the 70s club anthem ‘Love is the Message’ by Philly International’s studio orchestra MFSB [...] and to the classic short story, ‘Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death’, by one of Jafa’s most beloved shape shifters, 70’s ‘New Wave’ speculative fiction author James Tiptree, aka Alice ‘Raccoona’ Bradley Sheldon.” Greg Tate, “The Changeling mis-en-scène - Arthur Jafa’s Meta Love and the New Black Reportage,” in *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (New York: Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, 2016), n.p.

able to want this since this would mean the undoing of Black people and Black existence (as American culture).

2. Not unlike Jung – but, to be sure, Jafa is no Jungian – to be able to think one's death, one's definitive ceasing to be, one's non-existence, with no consolation of a beyond or any possibility of continuation for a personal identity, is an act of integration of the psyche, a creative act of mental health.³⁴ This sentiment, which, again, is non-Christian, is powerfully expressed in, and is a core aspect of, the eighteenth-century Japanese treatise *Hagakure: The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo.³⁵

3. For Jafa, his (positive) conception of death is not in any way linked to Christian ideas of redemption, but the confrontation with one's own death – “Rehearse your own death every morning and night,” says the *Hagakure*³⁶ – along with the refusal of fear or any longing for the continuation of personal identity paves the way for a *black* *hagakure*, death as a practice of living as an aristocratic warrior disposition as codified in Yamamoto's *Hagakure*, the core of which is encapsulated in its most famous passage, to wit, *The Way of the Samurai is found in death*, a gloss of which, it might be suggested, can be found in Mishima who, in introducing the existential significance of *Hagakure* for him, observed that

Those who have read carefully only the most famous line from *Hagakure* still retain an image of it as a book of odious fanaticism. In that one line, “I found that the Way of the Samurai is death,” may be seen the paradox that symbolizes the book as a whole. It was this sentence, however, that gave me the strength to live.³⁷

³⁴ See, for example, Yukio Mishima in his book on the *Hagakure*: “We are ignoring the fact that bringing death to the level of consciousness is an important element of mental health.” *The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, trans. Kathryn Sparling (London: Penguin, 1977), 34.

³⁵ In her book on Mishima – for whom the *Hagakure* was definitive of his sensibility – Marguerite Yourcenar rightly draws parallels with Montaigne and Madame de Sévigné “Méditant sa propre mort en bonne chretienne,” but the framework of *Hagakure* important to Jafa and, indeed, Mishima – aristocratic and warrior based – is decidedly non-Christian. See Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima, ou, La vision du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 108-109.

³⁶ Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure: The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai*, trans. Alexander Bennett (Tokyo, Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 43.

³⁷ Yukio Mishima, *The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, 15. My emphasis.

And what is it to *live* according to Mishima drawing on *Hagakure*? To live is to channel, to feel, the "glorification of energy and passion. Energy is good; lethargy is evil"; and, continues Mishima, "it is impossible to value energy while rejecting self-respect."³⁸ This emphasis on self-respect points to an ethic of *Hagakure* in which death plays a central, psychically creative and spiritual role, hence, again to quote Mishima, "*Hagakure* insists that to ponder death daily is to concentrate daily on life. When we do our work thinking that we may die today, we cannot help feeling that our job suddenly becomes radiant with life and meaning."³⁹

³⁸ Yukio Mishima, *The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, 16.

³⁹ Yukio Mishima, *The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, 35.

Death (II): a dream of death

Let us now concentrate on the unfolding of what this dream of death entails, namely, an economy containing a black hagakure in and through which is a (spiritual) struggle, a contestation against “the continual dissipation of dense black being (power and consciousness),” the loss of a god, “osiris dismembered,” against what, *a part*, that “can’t come together (can’t remember)” – be re-assembled, be again in memory – where the failure and incapacity to remember (the presumed black god, osiris recalled in wholeness, in bodily *intactness*) is linked to a *cancerous* condition, namely, “this not fitting, this *growth* after dismemberment” [my emphasis], a cancerous life which “keeps us (men and women)” – the parenthesis is telling here as “us” is and is not, by parenthesis, in apposition with “(men and women)”: real men, real women – which “keeps us (men and women) harder coming strong (anti entropic beasts) falling together even as we fall apart” (no period / transition), the diction of *falling apart* an articulation in both cosmological and psychiatric registers, the fear of collapse (Winnicott) or disintegration of the Self that one finds in Fanon, but also at the opening of Frank B. Wilderson’s memoir,⁴⁰ in other words, not neurotic anxiety, but ontological anxiety as mark of psychotic undoing. This condition, we learn, that is, the cancerous condition of post-dismemberment leading to the permanent dis-organization (entropy) of “falling together even as we fall *apart*,” this condition we learn “would limit us,” would limit us quantitatively and qualitatively, would indeed limit the possibilities of sociality and all that, in terms of social ontology and imaginative release, resides in configuration of social ontology, and there is a further name for this form of social ontology chez Jafa, and it is *Christ* capitalized (“a boon for Christ,” the text will say), that is,

⁴⁰ “A psychotic episode is no picnic, especially if you know you can’t call it madness because madness assumes a change in the weather, a season of sanity.” Frank B. Wilderson III, “For Halloween I washed my Face,” *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 3. But of course it *is* madness – and not the legal (term) *insanity* – but the commonplace word for the break with sociality and reality. It is insanity that is difficult to prove, not madness, which, pace Henri Maldiney, is available to us as part of the being that would be human, that is, a permanent risk.

the counter to the black god osiris - think, here, of Hölderlin, in his spiritual and metaphysical crisis, trying to reconcile Christ with Dionysus – two gods, two cultures, two world-views – in the attempt to render as one (“Der Einzige” – The Only One) what are forces of dissension, and we may grasp something of the stakes in play.⁴¹ So, this condition

would limit the number of blacks that can gather, a boon for Christ, one a bitch two a threat three an insurrection, no getting together coming together no drums rising up so churches, funerals, simple gatherings and places become reunions become remembrance be luciferian (fire, light) be revolution.

The *boon for Christ* is the limitation on Black sociality and the limit of sociality, “no getting together coming together no drums rising up” – the absence of punctuation serving to affirm what *no* denies, namely, the running and coming together in rhythmic overlay; instead of the poly-rhythmic gathering of “getting together coming together drums rising up,” the Christ condition, the Christ-imposed and accepted limit – which becomes “the central [fact] of black being” – the opposite of the limitless erotic cannibalism of Tiptree’s “Love is the Plan,” yields a place where “churches, funerals, simple gatherings and places and reunions become remembrance,” that is, so many occasions for the display, the viewing of our Black Death,⁴² that is, our social death, a living death,⁴³ “but this is not the good death,” the text declares, that is, the hagakure, a black hagakure; instead, such places and occasions (“churches, funerals”) should “be luciferian (fire, light) be revolution.” The spirituality of a warrior class – Bushido, the hagakure – is, then, the need, a heroic embrace of death in life, the way of dying, the good, the heroic death that is the antithesis of the Christianity as social custom the teaching of which would seem to demand staying in this life at all costs.

⁴¹ Cf. Friedrich Hölderlin, “The Only One” (Second Version), in *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 455-461.

⁴² But consider, too, the Black Death: The bubonic plague (1346 -1353), and Europe loses half of its population. My Black Death (the part for the whole)? a continuous sacrifice for which and in which my (black) hagakure performs a self-transmutation confronted with social death.

⁴³ See Frantz Fanon on this everyday death in Fanon, “Le Syndrome nord-africain,” *Pour la révolution africaine* (1964) (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 23.

Death (III)

This, of course, is heroic mystification – at one level – but it permits an understanding of Jafa's refusal. – And if not Black Nationalism, here, stripped to the core, un-masking itself, is a thesis of a possible alternative Black essentialism, Jafa's formulation of the entangled identifications of Black ontology:

to the central conundrum of black being (the double bind of our ontological existence) lie in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are such that our efforts to eliminate these forces which constrain also functions to dissipate much of which gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor and that by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the *good death* (cachoeira) and to be embraced.

In this passage, the good death is no longer uniquely a black hagakure, the living absolute for death in terms of an aristocratic warrior code, but an acceptance of what "gives us our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor" – making for *the central conundrum of black being* – and thereby making for "the good death (cachoeira) to be embraced." Let me explain. At first glance, the *good death* is the *beautiful death* characteristic of aristocratic honor-based cultures, but, as we touched on above, Jafa modified "My Black Death" in 2020 to read "but this is the good death (boa morte) *to be embraced*" (my emphasis) where the Portuguese *boa morte* (good death) replaces the earlier *cachoeira* (lit. Portuguese for waterfall), the name of the place in Bahia, Brazil where the cult of Our Lady of Good Death (Boa Morte), a Candomblé / Roman Catholic syncretic religion, is practiced (by the Sisterhood of Our Lady

of Good Death),⁴⁴ thereby foregrounding the role of place and historicity amidst syncretic religious practices transmitted from the formerly enslaved into the bloodstream of our contemporaneity, practices of *spiritual* survival and political deformation *from within* the master culture, as if two forms, two cultures, two beings are confronting each other and mutually, cannibalistically, transforming each other - the dramaturgy of Tiptree's "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death."

⁴⁴ Cf. Stephen Selka, *Religion and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Bahia, Brazil* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008). Mary's Good Death in this context is her Assumption.

Intimacy (IV): Cannibalism, Vitalism

Here I should like to bring attention to what I have already characterized as Jafa's Deleuzianism through a quick outline of the significance of Tiptree's "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death," the first word of which is: "Remembering—" ⁴⁵ It is less the plot of "Love is the Plan" that is relevant here – a story of alien insects awakening and coming to the realization, following an irresistible urge (dictated by the Plan) that one must consume (cannibalize) the other in the process confounding gender, breaching boundaries and coming to share sensations (becoming-animal, becoming-intense, becoming-imperceptible) in the fulfillment and realization of the Plan: "He eats the other, that is how he lives. That is the Plan. As you will eat me, my youngling." ⁴⁶ The merging – the intimacy – is not only of bodies and sensations but also of language (as this emerges in physicality and affect, a love-language of cannibalism): "How we blended our singing wordlessly and then with words, until more and more we came to see with each other's eyes, to hear, to taste, to feel the world of each other, until I [Moggadeet] became Leelyloo and you became Moggadeet, until *finally we became together a new thing...*" ⁴⁷ This is an allegory of *vitalism*, and to the point, for Jafa, this text in speculative sci-fi can usefully be read as an exploration of vitalism and as such offers an opening onto the practice and conception of spirituality proper to Jafa and, indeed, Deleuze, namely the reverence and incredulity confronted with Life itself. Indeed, freedom, ⁴⁸ for Jafa, is the experience and movement of Life itself, and so the fundamental harm, the unforgivable hurt, is the restriction upon and violence against move-

⁴⁵ Tiptree, "Love is the Plan," 207. *Remembering* and so putting back together what had been torn asunder, what had become dis-membered, but also in the same act re-calling, re-membering, the Deleuzian act of creative repetition.

⁴⁶ Tiptree, "Love is the Plan," 223. In another context, I hope to develop the role of the teaching voice, the speaking voice, the voice of *transmission* which one finds in this story, "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death," and which is also characteristic of Jafa's practice. In this respect, one may compare Jafa and Theater Gates: in the practice of each, the vast collection of images, and the insistence on an epistemology implicit in the organization of this body of images – see Warburg, see Breton – because there is something to transmit, "until we came to see with each other's eyes," as Tiptree's story says.

⁴⁷ Tiptree, "Love is the Plan," 213. My emphasis. The loss of personal identity – in sensations, perceptions, language – may be grasped as an avant-garde practice of spirituality, of which Breton's formulation that psycho-analysis aims (*visé*, targets)) at nothing less than the expulsion of man from himself (say, the subject from itself) may be taken as symptomatic. Breton's *expulser* evokes the Freudian *ausstossen*, namely, the psychic mechanism to eject, to expel, and so makes clear that the relation in question is the relation to the real and so necessarily the possible loss of contact with the real which is named psychosis. (cf. André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 1: 653.

⁴⁸ *akingdoncomethas* ends, simply with a song – a threnody – led by Gil Scott-Heron, "We want to be free," which is a biopolitical song if ever there was one! In the end,

ment as participation in the event of Life itself. It may well be that Afro-Pessimism, more than any other movement in Black American thought – since the reception and impact of Fanon – has put the term *ontology* at the disposal of Black critical theory, has made available Blackness and ontology, even onto death – whence “My Black Death” – and once it became available to speak of Black ontology, where once one might have spoken of the *social condition* of (the Negro, the Black person, etc.) the way was open to pursue Blackness without the reductiveness attendant upon all forms of Black Nationalisms. Black being and its derivation – or autonomy – is one of the subjects of “My Black Death” and *Love is the Message*. Once Black being – “the stuff of black being” – is categorially delimited, the work of Black critical practice – Jafa – is to demystify the *social* naturalism (or social technology) through which Black being is systematically distorted and its life-movement and correlative life-world reduced, distorted, and *dissipated*, so when Jafa comes to formulate the aporia and challenge of Black being it should come as no surprise that the diction on which he draws *comes through* Deleuze. I say comes through Deleuze, not because I believe that Jafa does not have access to this conceptuality independent of Deleuze, but because it is clear that Jafa shares in Deleuze’s vitalism and his formulations on the conceptuality of becoming – see, here Jafa’s reprinting of “becoming-intense / becoming-animal” / etc. – and the obstacles to the flourishing and expansion and unforeseenness of becoming are characterized by “a black hagakure” in terms of the pathogenesis of schizophrenia in language derived from Gregory Bateson as used by Deleuze and Guattari: *double bind*. Here are Deleuze and Guattari introducing the concept of double bind: “Bateson calls *double bind* the simultaneous emission of two orders of messages which contradict each other (for example, the father who says to his son: go on,

⁴⁸ (cont.) though Jafa’s work is in dialogue with Afro-Pessimism, he cannot be an Afro-Pessimist since his primary preoccupation is a quest for spaces of freedom where Life can be expressed.

criticize me, but the son strongly understands that any effective criticism [...] will not be well received)."⁴⁹ For Jafa, this is the condition of Black American culture in a double bind, the central conundrum of Black being: the misery and limitations of our past (*the boon for Christ*) define us, make us, and so we cannot escape without at the same time destroying what we are; further, in Bateson – with Deleuze and Guattari – the phenomenon of the double bind is the genesis of schizophrenia, and so by implication there is a cultural schizophrenia inherent to Black ontology. "a black hagakure," a *boa morte* (as it is written in the later version of "a black hagakure"), seeks a heroic spirituality of "the good death (cachoeira)" as possible *Aufheben* or supersession. That is Jafa's act of faith.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Psychanalyse et familialisme," *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1973), 94.

Colophon

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