

Afrotropes:
A Conversation with
Huey Copeland and
Krista Thompson

LEAH DICKERMAN, DAVID JOSELIT, MIGNON NIXON

David Joselit: Would you define what you mean by an *afrotrope*, and specifically how it allows a kind of analysis that links the delays, accelerations, erasures, and hyper-saturation that images associated with experiences of blackness may experience through their circulation?

Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson: We coined the term *afrotropes*—not long after completing a special issue of *Representations* on those motifs that continue to structure the afterlives of slavery—as a shorthand way of referring to the recurrent visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African-diasporic culture and identity, whether the slave-ship icon produced in 1788 by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain or the nineteenth-century lithograph of an enslaved muzzled woman that became the locus for the cult of Anastácia in Brazil in the 1970s.¹ As these examples intimate, afrotropes are often translated across various cultural domains as well as transmitted over time and space, accruing particular density at certain moments and seeming to volatilize out of sight at others.

To illustrate, we might consider an instance derived from Krista's research on the photograph of Jimmy Cliff posing as the 1940s Jamaican folk hero Ivanhoe Martin that gained widespread popularity in the 1970s. The image was based on a photograph of the outlaw Martin that was printed in a local paper in 1948, but owing in part to histories of archival neglect and social devaluation, the early source image is barely legible today. Its ink-blotted surface is saturated, blackened, colored with the affective marks of its temporal and material disappearance from the archive, if not from public memory.

In the early 1970s, a period of black political mobilization, post-independence, and internationalism on the island and the world over, Cliff's photographic performance as Martin proliferated as a poster for the independent film *The Harder They Come* (1972), an image that subsequently

1. See Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, "Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual," *Representations* 113 (Winter 2011), pp. 1–15; Marcus Wood, "The Museu do Negro in Rio and the Cult of Anastácia as a New Model for the Memory of Slavery," *Representations* 113 (Winter 2011), pp. 111–47; and Hank Willis Thomas, "Artists' Portfolios," *Representations* 113 (Winter 2011), plate 2.



*Front page of Jamaica's Daily Gleaner,
October 11th, 1948.*

informed the making of an album cover, a book jacket, and, in studio art, Charles Campbell's performance piece *Jim Screechy* (1999), Hew Locke's *How Do You Want Me?* photographic series (2007), as well as Cosmo Whyte's photographic collage *Shotta* (2011).²

To our minds, what this and so many other examples go to show is that afrotropes materially manifest affective investments and historical necessities not only at their moments of appearance but also through their circulation and transmission. Afrotropes can slow down, wait, suddenly speed up, or seem bound to appear, given the right set of conditions, experiences, and technologies. In this way, afrotropes do not simply reappear over time; they are about time, its passage and return, its negotiation or reconfiguration by African-diasporic subjects. Afrotropes, in other words, emerge and remain latent, transformed and deformed in response to the specific social, political, and institutional conditions that inform the experiences of black people as well as the changing historical perceptions of blackness.

2. Krista Thompson, "I WAS HERE. BUT I DISAPEAR': Ivanhoe 'Rhygin' Martin and the Effect of Photographic Disappearance in Jamaica," *Art Journal* (forthcoming, Spring 2018). "I WAS HERE. BUT I DISAPEAR" (spelled with one *p*) quotes graffiti from the film *The Harder They Come*, dir. Perry Henzell, New World Pictures, 1972.



*Top: Perry Henzell. The Harder They Come. 1972.
Bottom: Cosmo Whyte. Shotta. 2011. Courtesy of the artist.*

Leah Dickerman: How do you understand the processes of formation, disappearance, materialization, and return? What forces bring an image into being as an afrotrope?

Copeland and Thompson: In engaging with scholars who have worked with us on various afrotropes, we note that challenging political and social circumstances—moments of great aspiration or desperation—can be particularly generative of afrotropes, enabling their appearance even as other forces may impede their circulation.³ Slavery, abolition, and emancipation; anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles; national, postcolonial, independence, and international black-power movements: All have been moments of emergence and resuscitation for afrotropes, especially the 1960s and '70s, as evidenced by, say, Sam Nzima's 1976 photograph of Hector Pieterse's murdered body in Soweto, or the I AM A MAN signs famously held up by striking Memphis sanitation workers in 1968. The apparent "return" of these afrotropes at particular moments brings out both structural continuities as well as the shifting concerns of various actors and audiences.

On these scores, Huey's work on the I AM A MAN sign provides a compelling example. When Glenn Ligon made that poster the subject of a painting in 1988, he not only underlined the continuing dereliction of black masculinity in the public sphere but also productively queered the sign in light of his own subjective positioning and contestations over homophobia and of the very meaning of manhood in the context of the AIDS crisis. Appropriations of the sign seem to have proliferated and accelerated in the early twenty-first century, showing up in the work of artist Sharon Hayes (*In the Near Future*, 2005–), in Benghazi during the Arab spring (2011), and more recently in a music video by neo-soul star Jidenna ("Classic Man," 2015). However, as neat as it might be to align this expansion with the rise of the internet, we would contend that the forces that bring an afrotrope into being should not be seen as entirely reducible to specific political or technological circumstances.

Afrotropes in many ways defy logic and explanation, appearing in unpredictable and highly selective ways across time and space, thickening and thinning in their substance even as, to borrow a phrase from linguistic theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his related theorization of the chronotope, they continue to "take on flesh."⁴ There is, then, much about the materiality of an image—its

3. The whip, the nineteenth-century public monuments of Queen Victoria, the 1976 photograph of Hector Pieterse's body in Soweto, the map of Africa, salt, the slave ship and small boats, and black monochrome artworks are a few of the afrotropic formations considered, respectively, by Rachel Newman, Petrina Dacres, Allison Young, Steven Nelson, Cameron McKee, Emma Chubb, and Adrienne Edwards. Some of these essays will be published in an *Art Journal* series that has been inaugurated with Emma Chubb's "Small Boats, Slave Ship; or, Isaac Julien and the Beauty of Implied Catastrophe," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 24–43.

4. In defining the chronotope—"literally, 'time space'"—Bakhtin means to underline "the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed." Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 250.



*Glenn Ligon. Untitled (I Am a Man). 1988.
Courtesy of the artist; Luhring Augustine, New
York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and Thomas
Dane Gallery, London. © Glenn Ligon.*

formal characteristics, reproducibility, and seriality; its mode and technology of circulation; its cost and its viewing contexts; its life in oral histories or sonic registers—that needs to align to produce an afrotrope.

For this reason, afrotropic study requires an investigation into archives, sources, and sentiments that speak directly to the exigencies of black life but that often exceed the contours of art-historical narration. Afrotropes are thus also about the visualization of what is known but cannot be spoken and about that which cannot be seen, enabling black folks to come to terms with loss, longing, and absence. The seizing of these imagistic surrogates suggests the kinds of opacity long sought after by peoples subjected to despotic visual regimes.

Mignon Nixon: In writings on the afrotrope, a series of terms emerges: opacity, which Glenn Ligon has developed extensively in his work over many years; the chronotope from Bakhtin; arrest and fugitivity, which Krista puts in play in her work on the figure of Ivanhoe Martin; re-memory, from Toni Morrison; passage; specularity; persistence; and a number of psychoanalytic terms including identification, latency, and fantasy. This of course is only a partial list. Could you reflect a bit on the critical lexicon of the afrotrope?

Copeland and Thompson: The intellectual frameworks we have relied on to describe afrotropes and their various operations return to, take up, cross-wire, and transform terms stemming from African-diasporic, art-historical, black-ontological, critical-theoretical, and literary scholarship concerned with the imbrication of form, transmission, and subjectivity. The term itself, for starters, is meant to simultaneously invoke Bakhtin's linguistic theory, Paul Gilroy's subsequent call for the study of "new chronotopes" that examine "key cultural and political artifacts in the transcultural formation of the Black Atlantic," and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s pioneering work on troping or figurative turns in black cultural expression, now mobilized, of course, in relation to visual rather than literary modes of performative utterance.⁵

At the same time, our conceptualization of the afrotrope resonates with and builds upon both recent and classic art-historical scholarship, from George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* to Christopher Wood and Alex Nagel's *Anachronic Renaissance*.⁶ Among such texts, we have found T. J. Clark's brief essay "More Theses on Feuerbach" to offer a particularly useful framework for thinking further about afrotropes and their material manifestations. "Form," Clark argues, "is a way of capturing repetitiveness and making it human, making it ours—knowable and dependable"; it is "redundancy made

5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 4; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g)," in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 44–88.

6. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); and Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

safe,” “endlessness without malignancy,” a contingent vehicle in the search for truth. “[F]orm—repetition—is change.”⁷ In their turn, these lines productively resonate with and depart from James Snead’s characterization of repetition in black culture: He emphasizes how change, often produced through accident, occasions a perpetual cutting back to the start within African-diasporic cultures, engendering at once coverage and rupture.⁸

Snead’s recasting of repetition aligns well with the critical deformations enacted by a number of scholars whose work, in revisiting tried-and-true Western conceptualizations through the lens of African-diasporic histories, freshly analyzes the transmission of form by lingering on the processes through which absence and un-visibility are produced. Joseph Roach’s understanding of surrogation, the circum-Atlantic cultural recreation through loss and forgetting; Brent Hayes Edwards’s study of the gaps in diasporic translation; Edward Glissant’s notion of opacity; Fred Moten’s work on fugitivity and the break; and Saidiya Hartman’s analysis of what is disappeared in spectacular performances and in the archive of black life all contribute to the lexicon of the afrotrope.⁹

Cast in these lights, the afrotrope emerges as a distinctively hybrid formation that poses a challenge to Western theories of the object, the self, authorship, and chronological narration, moving us in and out of the canon’s orbit materially, temporally, and theoretically in order to highlight the mercurial flow of the black image across the globe. Thus, while any number of frameworks might be engaged to think about afrotropes, including those deriving from psychoanalysis, they must always be reframed in light of the historicity of blackness and the particular unfolding of black experience as productively modeled both by Kaja Silverman’s rethinking of the logics of identification in regards to race and Frank Wilderson’s trenchant critique of her accounting.¹⁰

To turn the question around, we would ask how afrotropes serve to recast the theoretical frameworks upon which many of us have come to

7. T. J. Clark, “More Theses on Feuerbach,” *Representations* 104, no. 1 (Fall 2008), pp. 4–7.

8. James A. Snead, “Repetition as Figure of Black Culture,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 212–30.

9. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Edouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 189–94; Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

10. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Narcissistic Slave,” in *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 54–91.

depend and how they push against, put pressure on, or highlight that which is latent in the narratives, fantasies, and fictions of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century art. How, for instance, does the afrotrope occasion *October's* own reconsideration of its relationship to black cultural practice and its framing of modern and contemporary art?

Joselit: To briefly respond to your question before posing another of our own, your positing of the persistence of a form—an afrotrope—through various historical and cultural frameworks sounds very familiar with regard to one artist who has been extensively discussed in these pages—Marcel Duchamp—who thought deeply about questions of delay and transformations in format. And yet, while engaged profoundly, if problematically, with gender, Duchamp certainly didn't address race or ethnicity directly—and that is work that we are only just beginning to pursue in the journal. It is clear that in your formulation the afrotrope is both part of a broader art-historical revision that engages with canonical literature in the field while deeply inflected by the specific spectacular conditions of black experience and identity. Along with Hito Steyerl's "poor image,"¹¹ which you have mentioned elsewhere as a cognate, you are developing a theory of how images *behave* under actually existing conditions, which is a powerful tool for rethinking how to interpret their meaning through a different kind of social history of modern and contemporary art. In that regard, I wonder if you can say more about how your theory of afrotropes relates to strategies like Moten and Harney's call for an undercommons or, more broadly, the political tactics of Black Lives Matter.

Copeland and Thompson: Your response is both clarifying and promising, particularly in turning us to Duchamp, whose practice provides a prime model for thinking through the various ways in which blackness informs the production of modern and contemporary art despite its absence as an operative analytical framework from hegemonic histories. As Huey argues in his book *Bound to Appear*, a work like Ligon's *To Disembark* (1993)—which features crates, installed with tape players, based on the conveyance in which the fugitive slave Henry "Box" Brown shipped himself to freedom—looks back to Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), which, in its turn, takes its inspiration from Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* (1916). Ligon's riffing on these works reroutes them through the absent black body. But his practice also reminds us, on the one hand, of how Rosalind Krauss links Duchamp's invention of the readymade to his witnessing of Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, made into a play about art-making machines created for the investiture of an African king; on the other hand, Ligon's work underlines how the categorical transformations—of persons into things, objects

11. See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* #10 (November 2009).



*Ligon. To Disembark.
1993. Exhibition view,
Hirshhorn Museum,
Washington, DC, 1993.*

into fetishes—that are so central to racialization anticipate, find an echo, even an end, in the readymade itself.¹²

To our minds, blackness is related to but by no means reducible to “ethnicity” or even to the bodies from which it takes its moorings: Blackness must be understood as an ever-present medium, imaginary, and lexicon that is manifest and latent—sometimes both at once—within the history of modern art as shown in the case of Duchamp and most recently exemplified by the discovery of a racist joke underneath Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) thanks to X-ray technology.¹³ Such seeing provides an apt metaphor for the kind of looking at both what is apparent and hidden as products of the same modern epistemic regime based in and saturated by racialization that afrotropes require. One consequence of this approach is that individual artists and authors are placed within larger networks, histories, and genealogies that bring out the collective nature of the labor required to produce and sustain both blackness as a field of force and the emanations from it.

This analytical mode resonates with Moten and Harney’s work in *The Undercommons*, particularly their conceptualization of black study—likened, in one of their examples, to the sounds of a crowd before a Curtis Mayfield concert begins—since our approach takes sites and subjects not traditionally

12. Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 141–44; and Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 69–77. For a foundational account of Western fetishism’s imbrication with the logic of racialized misrecognition, see William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985), pp. 5–17.

13. On blackness, modernism, and Duchamp, see Copeland, pp. 10–19. On the underpainting of Malevich’s *Black Square*, see Hannah Black, “Fractal Freedoms,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 41, no. 1 (March 2016), pp. 4–9.

considered within art history as the locus for a capacious understanding of modern culture and what constitutes a radical intervention within it.¹⁴ Moten and Harney's work and that of scholars like Hannah Feldman, particularly her focus on the "image tactics" used by subaltern groups to bring themselves into a contingent visibility, suggest the terrain that the afrotrope aims to engage and bring into contact with hegemonic histories of art.¹⁵ Of course, forging such connections is a historically and interpretively difficult feat since there is always the risk of reducing complex visual articulations to the political conditions informing them as opposed to understanding cultural interventions as active producers of those very conditions.¹⁶

This is a particular liability where artists of color are concerned, since they often face the possibility that their work will be instrumentalized as an unmediated reflection of "black life" (particularly in moments when white liberal identity is in crisis!). Accordingly, we would be wary of imposing unmediated links between the afrotrope and "Black Lives Matter" (BLM), much as we would hesitate to say that the proliferation of references to the I AM A MAN sign in the 2000s could be chalked up solely to technological shifts. There is a connection, to be sure, but we would aim to think about how the image tactics of the BLM movement resonate with, take up, reframe, or engage other contemporary critical practices in the visual field. An *afrotropic analytic* insists on situating Black Lives Matter in broader networks and contexts, looking to its connections to and disconnections from other African-diasporic artistic and political practices.

Take the use of small, decorated, coffin-like structures held upright by BLM supporters at a gay-pride parade in Toronto in July 2016. We might see the coffins not as afrotropes themselves, necessarily, but as modified forms that resonate afrotropically with Ligon's taking up of the box vis-à-vis Morris and Duchamp.¹⁷ However, unlike the redemptive possibilities signaled by "Box" Brown's eventual emergence from the box that Ligon engages, the coffin *is* and highlights the matter of black death.¹⁸ What's more, the coffin-like structures in Toronto turn to a more recent artistic project, one that took place in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 2014, by contemporary artist Ebony G. Patterson. During the island's carnival, approximately fifty participants carried Patterson's coffins, which were covered with colorful patterned cloth, shiny beads, and plastic flow-

14. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe; New York; Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

15. Hannah Feldman, "'The Eye of History': Photojournalism, Protest, and the *Manifestation of 17 October 1961*," in *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 159–200.

16. On this score, see T. J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 9–20.

17. Here, we would aim to keep in mind the risks of pseudomorphosis as articulated in Yve-Alain Bois, "On the Use and Abuses of Look-alikes," *October* 154 (Fall 2015), pp. 127–49.

18. For a range of alternative visualizations of Brown's sojourn, especially that of the artist Pat Ward Williams, see Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, pp. 145–47.

ers. Titled *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, the work was a public performance-art piece and a protest against state and police violence, in particular the deaths of at least seventy-two people who died in Tivoli Gardens with the aid of United States government surveillance in 2010.

Invisible Presence—part of the exhibition *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean*, co-curated by Krista and Claire Tancons—drew, like much of Patterson's work, on image tactics from across the African diaspora that accompany the mourning, or what Moten describes as “mo'nin',” of black death, including carnival and Jonkonnu practices, local “bling funerals,” and traditions like the second line in New Orleans.¹⁹ Through the form of the cof-

19. Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson, eds., *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* (New Orleans: Contemporary Arts Center, 2016); Moten, “Black Mo'nin' in the Sound of the Photograph,” in *In the Break*, pp. 192–211.



*Ebony G. Patterson. Invisible Presence:
Bling Memories. 2014.
Photograph by Monique Gilpin and Philip Rhoden.*

fin, a box animated and illuminated by numerous performative and aesthetic practices, Patterson sought to bring visibility to and demand accountability for the deaths of black subjects who had been and continue to be killed by the state and to highlight parts of the local population denied access to public space in the predominantly middle-class carnival.

Bringing it back north, we might usefully locate the appearance of decorated coffins similar to Patterson's at the Black Lives Matter protest in Toronto within the broader networks and contexts of this particular



Annual Pride Parade, Toronto, July 3, 2016.

Photograph by Mark Blinch. Courtesy of the Canadian Press/Mark Blinch.

afrotrope. Although the coffins in Toronto were notably smaller in shape, more portable and makeshift, their use by Black Lives Matter supporters seemed to signal or mark shared experiences of state violence and un-visibility beyond the geographic coordinates of the United States, with which BLM is often associated. The coffins' reappearance at a pride parade—it's worth noting, coincidentally, that they approximate the size of placards—suggests too how certain vulnerabilities to the experience of violence, the possibilities of death, are shared with, or heightened in, LGBTQI communities. Indeed, LGBTQI carnival participants in Jamaica have been assaulted during such celebrations.

In tracking individual afrotropes, which reveal the operational logic of modern and contemporary culture, we have been compelled to develop and deepen an art-historical approach that requires an alertness to the confluence and accretion of aesthetic practices taking place in contemporary art and in popular cultures across geographic locations. Indeed, afrotropes open up shared spaces of connection, contestation, and even consolation that must be considered both synchronically and diachronically.

Nixon: That takes us to the question of how the afrotrope contends with sexualized violence. If we could circle back to an earlier moment in our exchange, concerning the critical lexicon of the afrotrope, you emphasized the importance of hybridity and of intergenerational cultural transmission in the afrotrope's techniques of resistance to violence against bodies marked by sexuality as well as by race. To what extent is work on the afrotrope engaged with feminist thought? Or, to put it another way, what use can be made of feminist interventions in cultures of mastery to think the afrotrope, and what pressure does it place on feminist strategies in turn?

Copeland and Thompson: Feminist thought, and more specifically black feminist thought, is intrinsic to how we think about the formation of afrotropes and the ways they sediment around understandings of race, gender, sexuality, violence, and their social and political intersections and aftermaths.

Hortense Spillers's mobilization of the term *pornotropes* is helpful in this regard.²⁰ In his elaboration on the concept, Alex Weheliye shows how pornotrope is derived etymologically from the Greek word *porno*, which refers to "female slaves that were sold expressly for prostitution," and *tropes*, which refers to "turn," "way," "manner," and, later (in Latin), "figure of speech."²¹ In Weheliye's account of Spillers's argument, the term characterizes the grammar, the names, and the forms invented to characterize the captive female subject—and to feminize the black male subject—within historical practices of sexual violence and other forms of extreme domination.²² Beyond the dynamics of naming, "pornotroping" refers to the processes—the markings, brandings, the hieroglyphics of the flesh—through which enslaved human beings were converted into property.²³

In conceptualizing afrotropes, we are attentive to the intersectional forces—central to the recent study of feminism—that bring pornotropes into being and, to quote Spillers, enable their "reappear[ance] in endless dis-

20. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 64–81.

21. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 90. In his turn, Weheliye draws on Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 2.

22. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, p. 90.

23. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," p. 67.

guise.”²⁴ We are mindful of—and turn to the concept of the pornotrope to consider—how such forms appear, disappear, and actively produce the realm of the visual. Spillers’s work thus foregrounds the ways in which we might think about gendered forms of reproduction, literally and figuratively. She underscores how notions of reproduction were reconfigured for the captive woman, whose offspring within the diasporic enterprise of enslavement did not belong to her and did not extend ties of kinship but rather circulated within capitalist economies of property.²⁵

Afrotropes are attuned precisely to such forms of visual and material reproduction that were denied socially and politically in the worlds of enslaved subjects because of the workings of race, gender, and sexuality, and the forms of reproduction that *did* occur in the wake of these conditions.

Dickerman: Since the afrotrope proposes a history that is not linear or teleological but is rather marked by repetition and loss, I wonder how it stands in relation to the modern model of the archive? And in particular how might it be understood in parallel to the extraordinary archival impulses within African-American and African-diasporic history, such as Arturo Schomburg’s building a collection of books, prints, and historical ephemera (in part through a network of deputized allies such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay), or the sweeping anthologies created under the aegis of Sterling Brown in his role as the editor of “Negro Affairs” for the Federal Writers Project? Does one necessitate the other? Are narrative models implied?

Copeland and Thompson: Afrotropes have often taken form outside of sites or institutions that may be conventionally understood as archives, which collect, order, and guard certain documents or materials. The photograph that inspired the poster for *The Harder They Come*, for instance, was destroyed in a fire at a newspaper archive in the 1960s, demonstrating how some afrotropes have been simultaneously informed and imperiled by archives. Afrotropes are often not contained in or bound to “archives” but press us to consider other sites, expressions, and oral histories through which knowledge and memory take form.

The I AM A MAN sign, our other key example, is instructive on this score. The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis makes frequent use—in its displays, publicity, and gift shop—of reproduced images of the poster, making the institution a key site of that particular afrotrope’s material transformation and dissemination. Ironically, however, the museum, to the best of our knowledge, owns no original versions of the poster, although several are kept on file in a local collection, thanks to the efforts of a couple who began archiving materials relating to the sanitation workers’ strike as it was unfold-

24. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” p. 68. For a useful framing of intersectional thought, see Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013), pp. 785–810.

25. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” pp. 74–75.

ing. These materials include audio interviews with a few of the men who held up particular signs, each of which reveals various levels of preservation as well as the multiple uses to which the posters were put during the period in question.

Afrotropic modes of engagement with these more conventional archives, then, encourage us to read and view sources with an attentiveness to their laws, to what is or is not kept, and to the manner of their care.²⁶ Foucault's understanding of the archive as a system of discursivity that governs what can be said at a particular historical moment is also usefully contrasted with the afrotrope.²⁷ To put a finer point on it, the afrotrope can stand against formations of the sayable and the imaginable, enabling the representation of African-diasporic histories and possibilities, particularly those with "the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as [they] happened," to cite Michel-Rolph Trouillot.²⁸ Unlike the efforts of bibliophiles such as Schomburg, who amassed large collections of materials, the afrotrope might be distinguished by its singular appearance and reemergence, the way it often stands apart from other images or objects.

Relatedly, Brent Hayes Edwards has argued that the anthological and archival impulses within modern African-diasporic cultures often serve to inaugurate the very traditions and collections that they ostensibly document.²⁹ As such, these formations are oriented toward a present and a future necessarily shaped by a logic of exclusion that afrotropes can serve to reveal, confirm, or even disrupt.³⁰ While the precise origins of afrotropes are hard to pin down, one can partially sequence them over time—but this does not necessarily mean relying on a linear structure in narrating the relationship between one iteration and another. So the afrotrope can be thought of as an archive of one or many singular images kept through varying yet often distinctly communal formations that resonate with and deform each other over time and space.

Joselit: What you describe as the behavior of afrotropes also calls for a different way of doing art history—or history in general. Typically, we work from the position that there is a meaning *behind* the image, but in afrotropes the image functions more as an engine of new meanings. What effect should this approach have on the discipline?

26. For a discussion of the archive and its relationship to law, see Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," trans. Eric Prenowitz, *diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 9–63.

27. Michel Foucault, "The Statement and the Archive," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 77–131.

28. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Presence in the Past," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 73.

29. Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, p. 44.

30. On this score, see Derrida.

Copeland and Thompson: The distinction you make is a generative one. In conceptualizing the afrotrope, we are still interested in, as you put it, the meaning behind the image—in some cases we’ve quite literally looked at the versos of individual instantiations of afrotropes!—and we would not want to abandon such modes of investigation, especially given the resonant, if contingent, linkages these forms share to a whole host of bodies, histories, and objects. What afrotropes also demand, however, is a consideration of what mitigates visibility as well as the effects and affects of loss, absence, or even, to cite Glissant, “the abyss” of oceanic death, which materially informs and transforms the image.³¹

In other words, an afrotropic analytic requires methodologies mindful of temporal moments and material markers of different states of appearance and disappearance. The forms themselves continue to morph; meaning arises in the interstices, in moments of transmutation and exchange, so that art-historical inquiry must be alert to the whole ecology that the afrotrope both participates in and actively produces. As Harney and Moten write, “[T]his information can never be lost, only irrevocably given in transit. We could never provide a whole bunch of smooth transitions for this order of ditches and hidden spans. There’s just this open seriality of terminals in off transcription. Some people want to run things, other things want to run.”³² The study of afrotropic behavior must be nimble, open, and responsive to meanings that remain fugitive and opaque; it must be alert to the ditches and spans, the processes of cutting, covering, and continuing, that at once produce and hinder the visual itself.

31. These processes, as Glissant contends, are formative: “This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.” Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 8.

32. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, p. 51.