

## On Blackness as an atmospheric condition

Jason Allen-Paisant

*the atmospheric pressure [...] increases my pains*

— Aimé Césaire

*But let us return to this atmospheric violence, this rippling under the skin.*

— Frantz Fanon.

*...the life my friend has is not a life I can achieve. Ever. Her kind of security, because it's not merely monetary, is atmospheric...*

— Claudia Rankine.

### **Atmosphere:**

Whiteness is a way of being in space. 'White' denotes an ownership of space. The White body belongs *everywhere*. Whiteness is 'an incorporeal hereditament' says the African American writer Saidiya Hartman: it does not inoculate the person from harm, threats, danger – of course, it doesn't – but it is an atmospheric inheritance, a rightness of placement exuded from the body unconsciously. And that *thing*, whiteness – so oblivious of itself, because it has never had to see itself, because it never *will* – interests me endlessly.

In this thinking through  
my body  
I'm trying to retrieve  
the ownership of it in space

From a distance  
I have seen  
this seemingly intangible, visible thing

Could I touch it?

***Atmos / Atem-los:***

Blackness is inscribed within the temporality of labour. Even though Black people here are over-concentrated in the ranks of the unemployed, and in the spaces of enclosure, including prisons. We are hyper-visible in the spaces of toil, where breathing is – literally – more laboured.

To have time on your hands is to feel that you're still *there* – that you belong to yourself, that you occupy your moment.

Time is a hold on your body—a sense (or not) of control, of steadiness, of unthreatened breathing.

***Atmosphere:***

The plantation is the hidden geography of industrialised Europe. We live in its long shadow. Our era is the Plantationocene.

The creation of leisure and luxury goods in industrialised Europe entailed the creation of anti-leisure in the plantation world, the slave plantations of the Americas.

In the plantation, leisure is a negative, a time-space of capture, of enclosure. As Saidiya Hartman says: 'all whites were allowed a great degree of latitude in regard to uses of the enslaved... there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body ... enjoyment was predicated on the wanton uses of slave property'.

In the Western view of (self-)possession, leisure is a fantasy world that one enters and exits, a kind of 'other' space, that can involve the use of an 'other' body.

At the centre of leisure is the masterful subject. For the Western subject, leisure is an enclosure of 'otherness' as an appendage to the self-possessed, entrepreneurial / – political philosopher John Locke's possessive individual. Locke was himself a shareholder of the seventeenth-century Royal African Company which held a monopoly on the English trade in slaves from Africa.

**Breath in:**

In the Plantationocene, Black resistance to racism entails creating a different way of being in time. Marronnage is an attempt to dodge or flee the plantation's timekeeping, through symbolic acts of sliding away from the world that's proposed, and instead actualising the time of embodied rituals, of the sacred, and of submerged knowledge.

Marronnage, the act of fleeing the plantation, of dwelling beyond and beneath its surveillance, enacts a shift to becoming one with the impenetrable hinterland, its multiple forms of intelligence, awareness and ways of being.

How to enact today the thinking of the impenetrable forest?

**Breath in:**

Still, there is a need to grasp something of what is called leisure, to take hold of some right to be slow, to not be used, to not be that 'other' available space.

As a Black person living in a hostile environment, I need to marshal all the ways of jumping white society's clock, of taking hold of inner slowness, of recalibrating time (as if claiming something that did not originally 'belong' to us). *We*, those who've long been bumped out of land and money. We live in the after/life of the trade in African flesh, the after/life of the Black body as property. I want to claim what's called *leisure*. I want to reclaim my right to time.

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But how does one enact a politics of refusal in the spaces of White retreat, in the outdoors, spaces that also constitute, as African American cultural theorist and poet Fred Moten calls them, 'the common,' all that's 'here, around, on the ground', including the land we do not have, the space of orchestrated dispossession? In Britain, how does one create an alternative space-time that transcends the alienated, enclosed common?

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Atmosphere:

the gaseous envelope surrounding the earth

the air or climate in a particular place

a general pervasive feeling or mood

Atmosphere – weather; climate

Atmosphere – surroundings; air

Atmosphere – environment; mood

from Ancient Greek *atmós*, 'vapour'.

It recalls the German *Atmen* – to breathe

### **Time:**

A central idea in Erna Brodber's novel, *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, is that slavery and its lasting regimes have generally slowed down time for Black American and Caribbean people. This slowing down of time means, generally, a familiar feeling of proximity to the events of the past. Our bodies are physically nearer to the past is how the literary critic Njelle Hamilton theorises and so we haven't stopped living its events; we are still in them; they are still unfolding in our bodies. Whether or not we can somehow, more or less, affect this is a question that haunts me. Are we condemned to be forever close to the past? In which case, what am I to think of myself, of my place in the world now?

Some physicists theorise that we all live in the past, in that we all live in eternity; that the demarcations we assign to time are merely analytical ones to project the way time appears to us. Einstein wrote in a letter that, 'the distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion'. But perhaps we in the African diaspora, based on the physical conditions surrounding our bodies and the stubbornness of the past, perhaps we, more than others, perceive time as slowing down, as

regressing. Perhaps some of us may perceive time as not only slowed down but stuck. So that our bodies age without us feeling a sense of movement.

I think this may be a feeling common to those forced to only work, only produce, only repeat. The feeling of existing for others and not for oneself, the feeling of being absent from the time of the present, of being there but not fully, so that time to be oneself is always in deferral.

We talk about living in the present. It could be said that more and more as a society we do not live in the present. We live in the future, which means of course that we live in a fiction. Always hurtling towards something, pushing ourselves out of our bodies, towards something that's next, that's new. Plus, our technologies have created virtual worlds for us, and in the virtual, we're not on earth, we're actually in a place that's neither past, present or future, or is potentially all at the same time. The point is that we're pushing ourselves out of our bodies, slowly, quickly, out of this world. The 1960s yearning to inhabit another planet has been replaced by the world of social media, the cloud.

But there are still those who would first want a piece of earth. Fundamentally, existentially – a piece of earth. Yes, so many are still struggling for access, for time on earth, for time in our bodies, regular time, as opposed to forestalled, stuck time. Time where the body can be present, where time feels like space to be.

***Atmos / Atmen / Atem-los:***

Blackness is *atmos*-phere.

For thinking about nature and the more-than-human, Blackness is a terrain of infinite possibility. To be Black is already to possess an awareness of human vulnerability, the sense of being a(n endangered) species. To move in a Black body is an atmospheric condition. Blackness is already, intrinsically, environmental.

### **Breath:**

Black aesthetics cannot be uncoupled from the act of breathing, both because of the metaphysics that underlie them and the vulnerabilities that shape them. Black aesthetics are underpinned, as Ashon Crawley, the author of *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (2016) writes, by an awareness of the threat that 'gets into and out of the flesh'.

The myriad forms of enclosure that are the barracoon, the slave ship, the hold, the plantation, the tenement, the prison, produce contractions and constrictions, provoking movement and escapes, ongoing attempts at inventing and engineering space, at creating or preserving the conditions for breathing (deeply). According to Crawley, this 'compression of space... produced an otherwise temporality wherein hearing, wherein listening, became heightened'. To say breathing becomes aestheticized is not to put too fine a point on it: one has to listen to what lies out there – to the physical threat and the (re)possessing spirit – to breathe in searching the invisible. One finds refuge in the 'otherwise reality' of the interspecies communication of human to plants and vice versa – of human to tree, to rock, to water. In other words, it's not only the narrative of escape that entrains our attention to breathing, but the narratives of (self-)preservation, the narratives of what I suppose Crawley would term, very beautifully, 'otherwise-knowing', 'otherwise-dwelling'.

Breath is the Spirit.

The very fact of breathing highlights our inter-dependence with other species, our co-naturalness. The current pandemic spotlights this; the effects of COVID-19 are linked to the act of exchanging breath.

**Atmosphere:**

I am subject to the materialities of racism. But I am not only matter, not barely matter. I was always, and will always be, spirit-matter. In the 'space' of nature, I go into a different order of time, and when I'm there, in that other order of time, I breathe differently. Perhaps the composition of my body changes as my spirit does.

The Jamaican American poet Claudia Rankine writes that the 'knowledge' derived from anger 'responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived'.

I must instead slip away, carving a space outside of plantation temporality.

I find silence in a tree, a bird; it's a state of mind, a response, essential in my ability to resist oppression. I'm a poet because I want to go away, to be a fugitive, to slide away from the world that's proposed. This is not a cop-out, but a refusal, and refusal is a political stance that's as old as the African diaspora. To slide away from a culture that enables anti-Blackness is its own form of critique.



## **Jason Allen-Paisant**

Jason Allen-Paisant is a poet whose work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro-diasporic history. His critically acclaimed collection, *Thinking with Trees* was named an Irish Times Poetry Book of the Year in 2021. His work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *The Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, *New Poetries VIII* and on the BBC, and is forthcoming in *More Fiya: A New Collection of Black British Poetry*. Jason has been the recipient of a prestigious Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. He holds a Doctorate in Medieval and Modern Languages from the University of Oxford and is on faculty in the School of English at the University of Leeds.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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