



Jaime Soler Frost*

Logan Ryland Dandridge

All My Gods Are Black

*By the rivers of Babylon
There we sat down and wept
When we remembered Zion.
Psalms 137*



University Contemporary Art Museum (MUAC) virtual exhibitions Room 10 has hosted the work of African-American artist Logan Dandridge on video since April of this year¹. Dandridge graduated in the arts from the University of Virginia in 2016 and received his graduate degree at the Oxford University Ruskin School of Art in 2018. Since autumn 2021, he has been an assistant professor of film at the Department of Film and Media Arts at the Syracuse University College of Visual and Performing Arts in New York.

The images in the exhibit center on the African-American experience and have very different sources, although most of them date from the 1960s until today, that is, from the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement to the times of Black Lives Matter. For Dandridge, “Images are sometimes just documents, some are provocation, but others are testimony,” and, together, they allow him to show his “interest in web-based culture and media convergence,” but above all, in the “associative dialogue” that emerges from a “visual montage, proximity and simultaneity.” In this exhibit, the MUAC is showing two recent videos, *Black Continuum* and *Reprise*, both from 2019. Despite this focus on a very different reality, issues do emerge that undoubtedly resonate in Mexico: racism, oppression, exclusion, racialized violence, and the urgency of imagining inclusive futures. In this work by Dandridge, the arts, political movements, sports, and daily life co-exist in a constantly shifting collage. This may not be so evident in these two videos, which are very different from one another, but does become clear if we delve into the rest of his production available on line on his personal accounts both on Vimeo and YouTube.

Dandridge is an artist of images in movement for whom “the sound is the picture.” So, music — whether blues, gospel, jazz, reggae or ska, rap, or hip hop — and also the rhythm of the spoken word, like that of dub poetry, are essential for his work. This is always set in counterpoint by either the audio (different superimposed voices, pushing and evening each other out) or through different visual sequences that are simultaneous or piled on top of each other, parallel to each other, from his multi-channel installations, since Dandridge conceives counterpoint as “the art of balancing similarity and difference to create harmony between separate melodies.”

In *Black Continuum*, for example, on top of images of nebulas and galaxies, of African-American musicians and basketball players, of liquid fire in movement, of police arrests and Black Panthers in military formation, we hear the hypnotic voice of Linton Kwesi Johnson reciting in Jamaican patois his poem *Tings and Times*:

Now like a fragile fragment af lite
Trapped inna di belly a di daak night
Like a bline man stuicified an dazed
Last an alone in a mystical maze
Fi days
Upan days
Upan days
Upan days

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^{**}All images are still photos of the video *Black Continuum*, 2019, and are courtesy of the University Museum of Contemporary Art.

(This is not the only piece that uses the voice of Linton Kwesi Johnson. In *How Many Black Futures Will End Before They Begin?* also on top of images of African-American athletes and activists, of arrests and police abuses, he can be heard to say, “The rhythm just bubbling and backfiring, raging and rising, when suddenly the music cut. Steel blade drink in blood and darkness.”

In *Reprise* — which in music means a repetition or sound reiteration — in contrast, the rhythm and counterpoint of the images mark the palimpsest of the voices of those who come on stage: Angela Davis, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Fred Hampton, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Bobby Seale of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, John F. Kennedy, one of the few white men to be seen in his work, among other creators, activists, politicians, and social fighters who occupy the screen and talk about their journeys. Later, against a background of syncopated music, appear those who we only see images of: Sam Cooke singing; Muhammad Ali giving an interview; Martin Luther

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King, Jr.; tennis-player Arthur Ashe at his 1975 Wimbledon victory; a musical video of ScHoolboy Qu; the aftermath of the JFK assassination; football player Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem; protests in New Orleans; and Gil Scott-Heron reciting a poem in front of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital.

These same images and sequences can be found again in many other Dandridge pieces, as though he were attempting time and again to appeal to the trauma and memory, thereby being able to reconstruct the history of the African Diaspora or imagine their many possible derivations. Because, regardless of the techniques of film montage or musical counterpoint that he uses, a series of recurring themes emerge from his work. One of the main ones is so-called Afro-futurism, which writer and filmmaker Ytasha Womack has described as the combination of "elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs." This is a creative framework for other experiences of the Diaspora, a practice and an aesthetic of expansion, in which science fiction and technology, the visual arts and music, partly through the global community of the Black Speculative Arts Movement, come together to reveal alternative realities and histories, are the catalyst for new currents of thought, and imagine the future of liberation for Blackness and an inclusive future society.



The mighty man will become tinder,
and his work a spark;
both will burn together,
with no one to quench the fire.
Isaiah 1:31

Other athletes, other artists, other activists join Dandridge's work, that synchronic dialogue that he establishes between physical and psychological movement, that hyper-condensed compendium of Black cultures that is his filmography: writers like Zora Neal or Alice Walker —"In search of my mother's garden, I found my own"—; basketball players, professionals like Michael Jordan, Sterling Brown, Kobe Bryant, Vince Carter, and James Harden, or streetballers like Taurian Fontenette (the fellow who in July 2006 made a basket after a jump with a full double twist and from then on would be known as Mr. 720° or "The Air Up There"); skaters like Frenchwoman Surya Bonaly, who was denied the gold medal in the 1998 Nangano Olympic Games; poets like Countee Cullen, Margaret Walker —"Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born"—, Claude MacKay, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka —"reaching, changing, humanism is for animals, spiritism for humans"—; movie people like Bill Gunn —"In 1973 Bill Gunn imagined a world where death wasn't the end"—, Spike Lee or Laurence Fishburne; and musicians like Fred Hammond, Meek Mill, Etta James, Aretha Franklin, the Jackson Five, Nina Simone, or Scott Travis, because, as Dandridge himself says, "The physically coded language of Black music is a spiritual provocation."

And spirituality is another constant, intricate theme of his work, from gospel choirs, adult baptisms by immersion, and the enthusiastic communion of the faithful, to the preaching of the great African-descendants' community leaders and what is called Black Theology. "Black theology is situated somewhere between Utopia and madness," says Dandridge in *Here, Yesterday* (2021), because Black theology, like its relative to the south, Liberation Theology, asks which side God should be on: on the side of the oppressed or the oppressors. And if God truly values justice more than abuse, then he/she wants the liberation of all oppressed persons, and that just, true God wants the empowerment of the oppressed through self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-determination.



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And the quest for liberation from the political, social, economic, and religious yoke is linked, of course, with the Black power movement. And therefore, there again we see emerge the parallel discourses, although with opposite methods, of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and the iconic images of the members of the Black Panther Party and the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games.

As for me
I will remain on Earth
because
all of my Gods are Black

In October 2021, Logan Ryland Dandridge was awarded the first Cavendish Arts Science fellowship for one year at Girton College, Cambridge in the United Kingdom. There, with the collaboration of physicists from the Cavendish Laboratory, he will seek to create works focused on the memory and possible reimagined futures in the context of physical concepts like non-linear time, in which the past and the future are indistinguishable. In Dandridge's words, "I'm thinking about how physics can be used to reckon with the continuum of Black experience in the interest of more disruptive scientific and artistic interventions. The research project will channel an experimental storytelling practice through an Afrofuturist lens."

How many Black futures will end before they begin?
To dream removes you from the world to find what lies beyond it...
because the resonance will exist in different, potentially infinite versions. **MM**

Notes

¹ You can watch the videos at <https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/sala10-logan-dandridge>