

[MAILINGLIST](#)[Art Books](#)

July 14th, 2017

# E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon H. Rivera-SERVERA, Eds., *Blacktino Queer Performance*

by Timothy Francis Barry

Blacktino: As a *nom de plume*—strike that: as a *nom de guerre*, a label, a brand—it bespeaks power. As when at the age of ten I first heard the name Malcolm X—I didn’t know who or what it was, but I knew it was badass. Likewise, the very title of E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon H. Rivera-SERVERA’s collection of performance scripts, interviews, and critical essays, *Blacktino Queer Performance*, made me sit up and take notice.

But first, a confession: I’ve got a performance art problem. Nine-tenths of what’s out there today skews to pretentious MFA program drivel, hatched over bong hits in the wee hours, vying to out-transgress what its practitioners regard as high modernist traditions. Karen Finley draped naked in chocolate sauce; Carolee Schneemann pulling a string followed by yards of text out of you know where; Vito Acconci doing who knows what under the gallery’s floorboards—these were authentic gestures. But, they were of a moment.

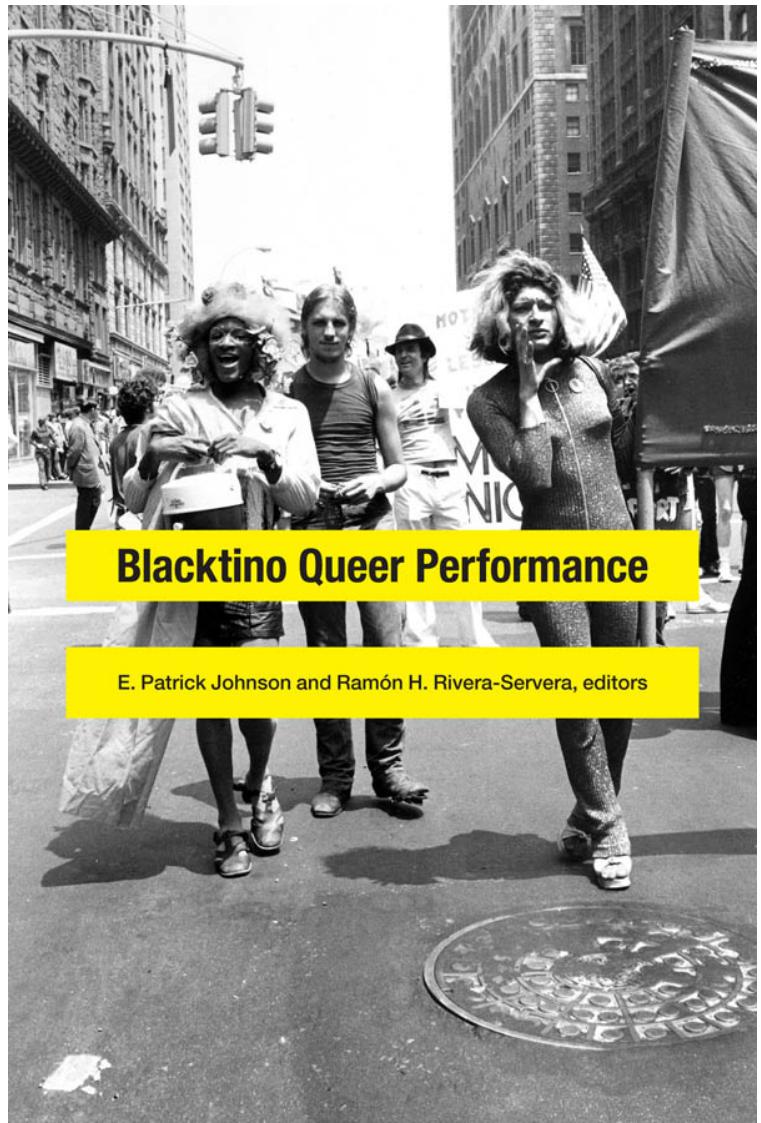
I also harbor reservations with respect to issues of authenticity. Like other privileged, cosseted, white fat-cats (though for the record I’ve been on welfare and food stamps, received 10-pound blocks of orange USDA cheese, and at one time was some social worker’s case number), if the menu promises queer black/Latino performance, I

expect the Bronx queens of Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990), not performance by a professor of African-American and Performance Studies, fresh from a panel discussion on postcolonial ahistoricity.

If the groves of academe have given rise to a critical cottage industry, well, folks need to get paid. But one can only wonder what the editors mean by such a statement as, "Black and brown artists have been at the forefront of a creative scholarly production." Henry Louis Gates and the (albeit, growing) handful of nonwhite critics notwithstanding, there aren't all that many who enjoy the name recognition of a scholar like Gates. However, note the presence of Fred Moten and Alexis Pauline Gumbs also on Duke University Press's roster, both fostering the burgeoning scholarly tradition that Johnson and Rivera-Servera's collection also advances.

Yes, today is a good time to be a black or brown artist, as institutions are beginning to feel the pressure to revise canons and right wrongs. As examples, take the work of Kerry James Marshall, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Drake, Paul Beatty, Marlon James, Major Jackson, Beyoncé, not to mention the artists behind *Hamilton* and *Moonlight*. But the plays and performances discussed in *Blacktino Queer Performance* are of an outsider, subversive slant, even if the stated goal of an "enunciation of identity" is a common thread through all black art forms. Does this mean artists of color must only make race or genre-based work—harking back to the 20s when white folks cruised up Harlem way after hours to sample hot jazz in smoky basements—in order to have a career? The jury's still out.

The documents in this collection catalogue performances that are mostly



underwritten by universities. This is not in itself a critical deal-killer because someone needs to pay for sets, lighting, and the venue. Admission might be charged, but these are not profitable endeavors. And the very noncommercial, in some cases anti-art, nature of these works is what makes them a valued and worthwhile enterprise.

Take for example Paul Outlaw's 2003 *Berserker*. The performance script is a mind-bending admixture of the late Essex Hemphill's exceedingly graphic blow-by- blow account of his teenage affair with the local (white) butcher-shop owner; a short interlude by the always strange and compelling Samuel R. Delany; excerpts from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the record of the 1831 slave-revolt that ended with a body count of 59 white men, women, and children; and transcripts of serial-killer Jeffrey Dahmer's 1991 murder trial for the killings of 17 predominantly African-American men. One such excerpt from Dahmer's trial:

Dahmer: "That afternoon I got a large suitcase with wheels, put him in a cab and drove home. When my grandma went to church I took the body out. Using a sharp knife that I got somewhere I stripped the flesh off the bones and put it in three plastic Hefty bags and kept the skull and the scalp."

Onstage, Outlaw paces among eight large black trash bags. Sampling of others' texts is a high postmodern strategy. Here Outlaw uses it to weave ruminations on gay desire, the fear of being termed effeminate within the macho milieu of the hood, and most interestingly, a soliloquy on the time-honored African American trope of "Who Is The Darker Brother":

Paul: "Now, my mother's real light-skinned, like this (showing his palm and stroking it)....and my father was darker...like this...(slapping his stomach)"

This is one show I'd line up to see. The accompanying essay/interview, "What's Nat Turner Doing Up In Here With All These Queers?" finds Bates College Professor of Rhetoric Charles I. Nero considering why Outlaw employs the "camp trope of homosexuality as cannibalism that appears so frequently in writings by gay males." He brings in James Baldwin, Aeschylus, Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant* (1993), while also teasing out the factoid that some of the black male audience members agreed with Outlaw that Jeffrey Dahmer "was hot," and that they "found him sexually

attractive.” Nero sums up the entertaining subversion of heteronormative discourse in this performance: “Erotic desire for the racial other cannot be contained easily.”

Fiction writer E. Lynn Harris has chronicled the *métier* of life on the down-low, and there’s quite a bit here about the paradigm of gay black masculinity and the masculine imperative to “do the right thing,” i.e. not be gay. In Omi Osun Joni L. Jones’s essay, “Women-Loving-Women As Dramaturgical Transgressions,” she quotes Kara Keeling who decries “the primacy of binary and exclusive gender categories in the articulation of sexuality.” Nero’s essay mentions Eldridge Cleaver coming down hard on James Baldwin for desiring white men; in his 1968 bestseller *Soul On Ice* he called it “an interracial deathwish.” There are still many rivers left to cross.

The funniest performance on the page, as well as the least queer, least specifically racial piece, is Coya Paz/Teatro Luna’s 2008 *Machos*, a droll riff on John Ford Noonan’s play, *A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking* (1984), except in this case it’s a chorus of Latina actors playing men who deny their sexist, woman-bashing natures. One thread winds around the trope of “Gee, I must have had a lot to drink because I forgot what happened last night,” as in Mart Crowley’s 1968 gay play *The Boys In The Band*. From *Machos*:

“I like women, girls, and chicks  
Not interested in dicks  
Except that tranny prostitute  
(She was pretty cute)  
Didn’t know ‘till were in the car  
By then it had gone way too far  
Already paid a ton of cash  
Closed my eyes got it done real fast

And yeah, okay  
I went back twice, but hey  
What can I say, girl I’m not gay....”

The long script of *Machos*, covering 62 pages of the book, works particularly well as a reading experience, perhaps because of its clipped, staccato diction, evoked in plain-

spoken slang jive. Or because of its realist animation, and its rhythmic, echolalic cadences, reminiscent of Beckett, that accumulate while the players act out straight-world roles without a wink. Again from *Machos* (in this passage, numbers denote speaking roles for different characters):

One “Football is the sport I love”  
Four “My ultimate favorite”  
Two “I Love Football”  
One “Football season comes around I’m football 24-7”  
Two “I love. Football.”

At moments, the experience of reading the scripts, interviews, and essays collected in this book feels incomplete. For such a scholarly tome, why no bibliography? Names like Marshall Sahlins, Sherry Ortner, and Stuart Hall drop throughout the text, but with no mention of source materials. Also, how about a glossary of terms? I still have no clear idea of what constitutes an “orisha.”

Reading the nine performance texts included in this collection, another critical problem surfaced: these pieces need to be seen, and heard. Critiquing works that incorporate music, sets, costumes, and a lot of movement is akin to judging the music of the punk band Bad Brains by examining its sheet music. Sharon Bridgforth’s 2004 *The Love conjure/blues Text Installation* requires three video screens, conjuring “a wealth of projected images to create a sensorial overload for the audience.” Without them, as readers, we are left to imagine. Still, in their struggle toward an authentic voice, the Blacktino works as presented in this collection rankle and disturb, taunt and tantalize, ripping back skin and exposing raw nerves like no other.

---

#### CONTRIBUTOR

##### **Timothy Francis Barry**

TIMOTHY FRANCIS BARRY has written for the *Boston Globe*, *New Musical Express*, *Aesthetica Magazine*, *artcritical* and *artsfuse.org*. His first column was under the editorship of Byron Coley at *Take-It Magazine*. Summers he operates Tim's Used Books in Provincetown, Mass., which book critic David L. Ulin, called his "favorite bookstore in America." (Los Angeles Times, 8/29/13) He lives in New York.