

## Space as Place, Scalar as Vector: Torkwase Dyson's (Black) Abstraction

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"[B]lack matters are spatial matters. The displacement of difference, geographic domination, transatlantic slavery, and the black Atlantic Ocean differently contribute to mapping out the real and imaginative geographies of black women; they are [...] social processes that *make* geography a racial-sexual terrain."<sup>i</sup>

— Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*

In her essay "Black Interiority: Notes on Architecture, Infrastructure, Environmental Justice, and Abstract Drawing," artist Torkwase Dyson insists, For black people, moving through a given environment comes with questions of belonging and a self-determination of visibility and semi-autonomy. This means for the systematically disenfranchised, compositional movement (ways in which the body unifies, balances, and arranges itself to move through space) is a skill used in the service of self-emancipation within hostile geographies.<sup>ii</sup>

Dyson's approach to abstraction by way of geography provides an aesthetic and material critique of the former, while opening up new interpretive frameworks for the latter. Geography is a discipline that "grounds," so to speak. In particular, the field of Human Geography, which attends to the relationship between people and place, is apt for analyzing how formations of power—conditioned by race, gender, and class, for example—manifest in both bodies and spaces. Or, better put, Human Geography draws attention to how oppression is produced and lived as a complex network of relations. Simultaneously, Dyson intervenes in canonical (white) abstraction's aspiration to transcend place—which is to say, context, or inescapable entanglement in webs of power—by subtly surfacing abstraction's imbricatedness in racial formations. She redeploys fugitive desires frequently expressed by canonical white abstract artists—such as Kazimir Malevich and Tony Smith—to imagine how black people in particular might navigate and rework what Achille Mbembe has termed modernity's "creation of death-worlds."<sup>iii</sup>

To activate these interventions, Dyson has developed a visual lexicon of shapes derived from African-American slave narratives in particular. For example, squares and rectangles in Dyson's work conjure Henry "Box" Brown's *Narrative of*

*the Life of Henry Box Brown* (1851).<sup>iv</sup> She references the wooden crate or “box,” in which, on March 29, 1849, Brown, born around 1815, shipped himself from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia seeking freedom. As Brown recalled, “[T]he idea suddenly flashed across my mind of shutting myself *up in a box*, and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state.”<sup>v</sup> He relates that the shipping crate measured a mere “three feet one inch wide, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide.”<sup>vi</sup> Brown’s expressed desire for a “free state” links geography, ontology, phenomenology, and the law—formulated in light of an acute awareness of his legal status as “goods.”

While squares and rectangles conjure Brown’s un/free state, triangles in Dyson’s art invoke Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). Using the pseudonym “Linda Brent,” Jacobs, who was born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1813, details the dimensions of an attic garret above her grandmother’s cottage in which she survived seven years while hiding from her sexually predatory owner.<sup>vii</sup> Like an architect explaining a blueprint, Jacobs informs the reader that the space “was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor.” Jacobs frames this attic space as both severely confining and, within the context of her enslavement, a “loophole of retreat.”<sup>viii</sup> Such complex negotiations of space (and/as place) exemplify McKittrick’s contention that “racism and sexism are not simply bodily or identity based; racism and sexism are also spatial acts and illustrate black women’s geographic experiences and knowledges as they are made possible through domination.”<sup>ix</sup>

For her exhibition *Scalar* at Bennington College’s Usdan Gallery (Sept. 18–Dec. 15, 2018), Dyson revisits and regrounds abstraction through what she articulates as a site-specific “study.”<sup>x</sup> While conceptualizing the exhibition, Dyson decided to engage the work of architect, sculptor, painter, and drawer Tony Smith, who taught at Bennington between 1958 and 1961. The fact that Smith worked across a variety of media and was committed to abstraction made him particularly attractive to Dyson. Likewise, she is interested in the experiential dimensions of his approach to art making, asking, of both his work and her own: “What does it mean to create a phenomenological experience?” At the same time, Dyson intends to interrogate the imagined (and monolithic) viewership that frequently constituted Smith’s generation’s understanding of phenomenology—and, thus, of art. Regarding her relationship to Smith and his contemporaries, Dyson clarifies, “I don’t look through or with them, I’m just using Bennington as a space to research [...] editions of geometric abstraction to use to my own ends.”<sup>xi</sup> Her remark not only situates or “grounds” research (and, thereby, the art made in relation to it)—nodding toward the knowledge produced in and through Brown’s box and Jacobs’s garret—but also

introduces the question of direction and scale: she draws attention to the ways in which abstraction has multiple “editions” and works toward multiple “ends.”

### **Scalar/Vector—Space/Place**

A turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* illuminates how the word “scalar” speaks to Dyson’s overarching project. As a noun pertinent to mathematics, “scalar” has both a specific and a more general definition: “In quaternions [complex equations that apply to three-dimensional spaces], a real number. More widely, a quantity having magnitude but no direction, and representable by a single real number.”<sup>xii</sup> As an example, the *OED* cites Edward McWilliam Patterson and Daniel Edwin Rutherford’s *Elementary Abstract Algebra* (1965). There, the mathematicians explain the terms “scalar” and “vector” as follows: “By a *scalar* we shall mean an entity determined by a single real number and by a *vector* we shall mean an entity determined by both a positive real number, measuring magnitude, and a direction in space.”<sup>xiii</sup> In other words, “scalar” denotes that which is “real” and unattached—something entirely self-referential, having no “direction” beyond itself. At the same time, a “scalar” is designated as such *because it exists within a spatializing equation*; it is a “real” number, ready for takeoff, as it were. The formulation of a scalar as “having magnitude but no direction” resonates with historically dominant conceptions of “abstract” art. It is only when a “vector” comes into play, when the “single real number” is given “a direction in space”—which is also to say, *made historical*—that the “scalar” assumes a relationship to anything in excess of its self-containment. Further, the latter’s independence is already a “fiction”; this “fact” is inscribed in a scalar’s very definition as a participant in a vastly complex equation. Put another way: black abstraction. Which is also to say, white abstraction. Which is also to say, abstraction. One way of approaching Dyson’s (black) abstractions is to examine how a “scalar” is always already a “vector”—an ever-shifting constellation of vectors, in fact. Its directionality is unstable, over- and under- and never-quite-determined. Indeed, Dyson describes her artistic process as “an equation [she] [is] setting up about African-American liberation.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Additionally, not unlike “black,” the word “scalar” can function as both a noun and an *adjective*—as in: “Of the nature of a scalar.”<sup>xv</sup> Thus, for Dyson, perhaps “black” is “scalar” and “vector.” In other words, it is impossible to posit “black” without having it “stand for” something—even, and perhaps especially, when “black” is (only) a “color” in abstract art. Following Alessandra Raengo: “There is no way [...] to say, think, or write about ‘blackness’ without activating innumerable points of tension.”<sup>xvi</sup> The same is true for “white” and “whiteness”—though, in a white supremacist society, the vectors that attend “white” scalars elaborate the spatiality of whiteness differently.

Taking such concepts in the direction of ontology and visuality, Kara Keeling asserts that “neither ‘the Black’ nor ‘the White’ can exist unproblematically.”<sup>xvii</sup> Turning to black Martiniquan psychoanalyst and theorist Frantz Fanon, Keeling argues that he “posits an originary experience of colonization and violence as a spatio-temporal coordinate from which ‘the Black’ and ‘the White’ are projected.”<sup>xviii</sup> It is this erasure—and normalization—of the racialized underpinnings or coordinates of power structures and their attendant geographies that Dyson, perhaps surprisingly, endeavors to disrupt *through* abstraction.<sup>xix</sup>

## II/legibility

A certain pedagogical framework—or even a pedagogical *imperative*—underlies Dyson’s artistic practice; she has insisted that her work approaches “art as a way of learning and knowing.”<sup>xx</sup> Dyson’s *Scalar* similarly reflects an orientation toward “study,” including in her choice to engage one of Bennington’s former teachers and to position herself, one might say, as both wayward student and time-traveling colleague. But to apprehend Dyson’s coded visual lexicon for her abstract art as a kind of didacticism misses one of her key interventions *into*—or, better put, *within*—abstraction. Dyson explains, “If I think about Box Brown, I am *left* with the square; when I think about Harriet Jacobs, it is the triangle. Those shapes are from a certain language where I *don’t* have to push their legibility away from those recognizable objects.”<sup>xxi</sup>

What Dyson deftly conveys in this pithy remark is an acknowledgment of the way in which the *particular* “leaves one with” the *abstract*. Put differently, Dyson (re)articulates the “abstract” shape as a *precipitate*; (abstract) shapes are not transcendent forms. A shape is indexical (too), which is to say, it has *vectors*—as do its viewers. This phenomenological dis/orientation is reflected in Dyson’s insistent and embodied “I” that disrupts pretensions to a universalizing and transcendental “we.” For the artist, any effort to evacuate shapes of their referent(s), which is also to say their compositions, requires that one “push their legibility away from those recognizable objects.” By selecting slave narratives as sites for (and *of*) abstraction, and engaging contemporary forms of oppression such as environmental racism through her abstract art, Dyson suggests that abstraction evacuated of all meaning—art that has “pushed away” any would-be referent so forcefully as to leave no trace—is impossible. As Isaac Newton might quip: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Or, to riff off of the 1974 film *Space is the Place* (dir. Jon Coney), starring and co-written by experimental jazz musician, poet, and Afrofuturist *avant la lettre* Sun Ra, the space of “pure” abstraction necessarily exists “after the end of the world.” (“Don’t you know that yet?”)<sup>xxii</sup> By contrast, one might say that Torkwase Dyson’s art, following Alexis

Pauline Gumbs's black feminist Sun-Ra remix, is located "[a]fter the end of the world as we know it. After the ways we have been knowing the world."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Indeed, McKittrick declares that "human geographies are, as a result of connections, made alterable."<sup>xxiv</sup> In a critical intervention, she illustrates how "the politics of black geographies expose racial disavowal on spatial terms: what is seemingly not there, is; what is geographically missing for some is geographically relevant to others."<sup>xxv</sup> Put another way, an abstract *space* is always already (some kind of) abstract *place*, and "blackness is integral to the production of space."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Dyson insists that geography and abstraction are intertwined. Regarding her association of geography with Tony Smith's art, she explains, "I understand him to be thinking about these things not directly, but it was the atmosphere he was in."<sup>xxvii</sup> This statement calls to mind Fanon's assertion that "[t]he [black] body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty."<sup>xxviii</sup> It also resonates with Christina Sharpe's recent evocation of "the weather" to describe "the total climate" of the present, defined as "antiblack."<sup>xxix</sup> In turn, one might propose that race (and racism) inflects Smith's (and Dyson's) "weather"—and abstraction's, more broadly.<sup>xxx</sup> As Keeling writes, "[I]t is impossible in the current conjuncture to theorize outside of the contentious *terrain* glued together by 'race,' even as this inescapable reality prompts "a search for alternate articulations of race and representation."<sup>xxxi</sup> In Dyson's art, black/ness is not *synonymous* with "race," even as the latter in/forms the former.<sup>xxxi</sup> This orientation differs markedly from Tony Smith's belief that abstraction "has the quality of *freeing* the particular. Of *releasing* it from its limitations as specific and giving a universal aspect to it."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

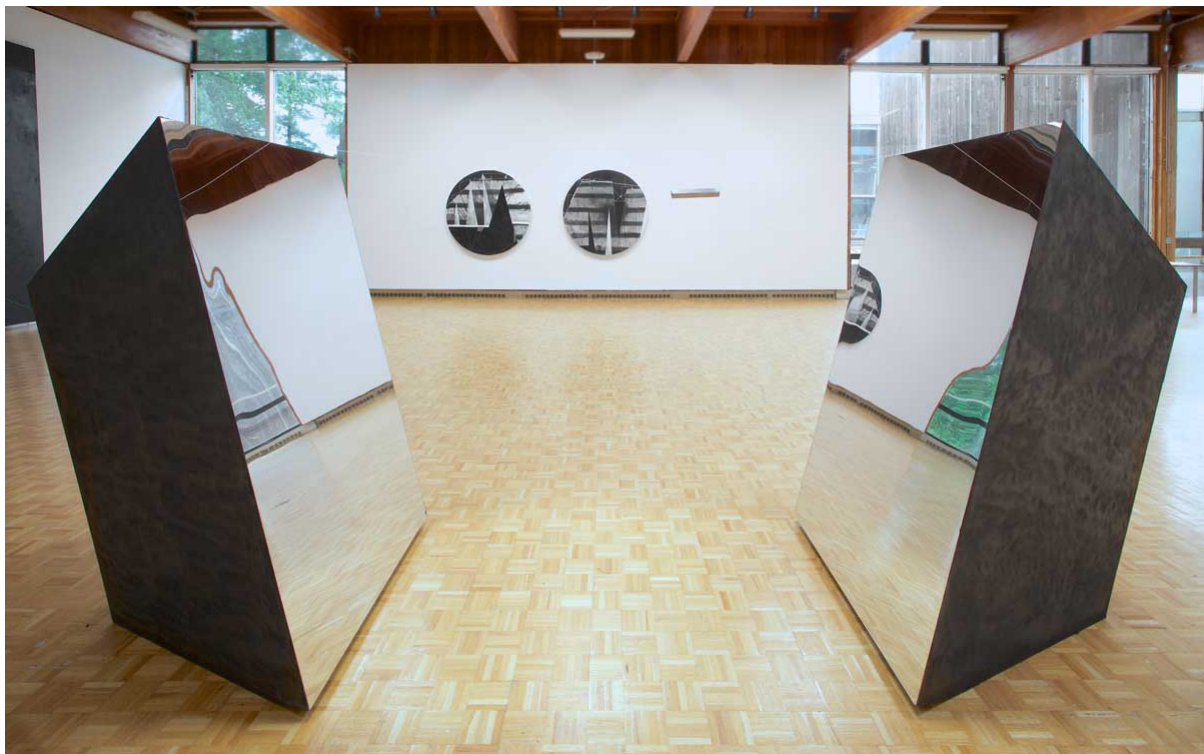


*Orientation #1 and Orientation #2*

## Re/orientations in time and space

It is not insignificant that the first (abstract) painting that one encounters upon entering *Scalar* is titled *Orientation #1* (2018); just around the corner hangs *Orientation #2* (2018). Dyson renders both in shades of black, white, and gray, with varying degrees of transparency and opacity. A viewer familiar with Dyson's visual lexicon might be, to invert the artist's phrasing, "left with" Henry "Box" Brown at the sight of grayish squares scattered across the surface of *Orientation #1*, and rectangular forms made from broad, horizontal applications of black paint in *Orientation #2*. Eliciting such associations is no small feat on Dyson's part—to (re)appropriate a taken-for-granted or taken-as-neutral shape, and to "vector" that scalar otherwise, otherways. Indeed, Dyson's brush strokes and paint dribbles create a sense that the canvas's components are traveling through time and space—perhaps Dyson's response to what she characterizes as Tony Smith and his colleagues' "flattening of geometry to fit into their time."<sup>xxxiv</sup>

For the remainder of this essay, I will focus on Dyson's sculptural work *1994 (Rate of Transformation #Scale)* (2018) and its relationship to Tony Smith's *Bennington Structure* (1961), which he created at Bennington College.



View of 1994, *Rate of Transformation (#Scale)* in Usdan Gallery





Left: *Bennington Structure*, Bennington College / Right: Tony Smith, 1961  
(Photo courtesy of Tony Smith Estate)

## The Race for Space<sup>xxxv</sup>

It is critical to approach *Scalar*—specifically, Dyson’s dialogue with *Bennington Structure* (1961)—in light of the “space race” and the Cold War, both of which coincided with the Civil Rights Movement. In what follows, I will consider *Bennington Structure*, including its placement and the posturing it provoked, in relation to these historical events. I will suggest that Dyson’s 1994 (*Rate of Transformation #Scale*) is in conversation with *Bennington Structure*, as well as the aesthetic production of Henry “Box” Brown.

The “space race” rendered galactic the terrestrial Cold War contest over global (white) “supremacy,” battled out between Russia and the United States. At the same time, the vectors attending and constituting the “race” in “space race” were not lost on African-American musician Duke Ellington, for example. He drafted an essay titled “The Race for Space” (ca. late 1957) sometime between Russia’s launch of *Sputnik I* in October 1957 and the United States’ launch of *Explorer* in January of the following year (four years prior to the completion of Smith’s *Bennington Structure*).<sup>xxxvi</sup> As Mark Tucker notes, “Ellington seems more concerned here with race relations, showing more anger and frustration on the subject than anywhere else in his writings.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> The musician (who was, at the time, composing the commissioned work “Dance Ballet of the Flying Saucers”) begins his essay with an explanation of why he feels moved to weigh in on strivings for outer space: “I’m talking about the race for space for the logical reason that what happens in the race for the moon and other planets and the control of space affects me as well as every other American.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

I want to propose that a “race for space” is not absent from Tony Smith’s *Bennington Structure*, which he landed, so to speak, in the school’s “secret garden” in 1961. Photographs of the work show that it was comprised of pentagonal and square cement panels assembled into interconnected, three-dimensional, vessel-like forms. The pentagons reveal themselves to contain conjoined triangles, reminiscent of another canonical modernist architectural form, Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome. Indeed, Fuller also taught at Bennington and, like Smith, he constructed one of his steel “Dymaxion Deployment Units” on the college’s campus in 1942.<sup>xxxix</sup> Perhaps significant for engaging Dyson’s project is the fact that Fuller had developed the structure in response to the outbreak of the Second World War; it was intended to house families on U.S. military bases. Moreover, a recent *New York Times* article on the only extant units, found at the decommissioned Camp Evans in Wall Township, New Jersey, likens the “collection of corrugated metal houses with porthole windows and conical roofs” to “alien habitations dropped from the sky.”<sup>xi</sup>

Similarly, Smith’s *Bennington Structure*, which seems to self-replicate or scale-up like the honeycombs and cellular structures that inspired the artist, evokes or anticipates a spaceship coming to rest in a crater on the moon or settling into a clearing on a distant planet. Indeed, in one photograph, Smith poses before his structure, framed by a foreground of foliage and a brick-wall background that partially surrounds the grassy, weedy site—marking and laying claim to the (overgrown) “garden” as a kind of *terra nullius*. Approaching *Bennington Structure*, it is important to keep in mind that, as McKittrick writes,

One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race is through *multiscalar discourses of ownership*: having ‘things,’ owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest.<sup>xii</sup>

*Bennington Structure* certainly implies Smith’s intention to “use” space. Indeed, at the time, the artist was teaching an architectural course at Bennington titled “Space,” and there is something science-fictional about Smith’s description of his move from architecture to sculpture as one toward “speculation in pure form.”<sup>xlii</sup> It suggests that the artist viewed the (weedy) garden as raw material for his use, for his speculations. Reverberating here are colonialist understandings of the Americas, for example, as *terra nullius*, “uncultivated” or “improperly used” (as-yet unexploited) “space” free for the taking and ripe for the making of a “new” (settler-colonialist) “place”—what McKittrick terms “cartographic abstraction.”<sup>xliii</sup>

One might argue that *Bennington Structure*’s positioning materializes a scalar-vector relation that reflects and engenders a twinning of “conquest” and “identity.” Are these phallic cannons or warhead launchers aimed at an “other,” or



at “outer space”? Each unit’s angular projection from ground to sky suggests and produces (further) prospects; they vectorize. As Fanon might respond, “The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it. An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him.”<sup>xliv</sup> Smith’s apparent intention for *Bennington Structure* to be temporary also suggests a perception of space as malleable and a belief in (white male) subjects’ ability to (re)configure it at will, accompanied by a sense that “past” structures do not haunt “present” and “future” landscapes.<sup>xlv</sup> Critically, Dyson insists upon connecting anti-racist activism with indigenous peoples’ struggle for sovereignty; for example, in recent work, including two tondo paintings exhibited in *Scalar*, Dyson identifies the “circle” with the *pipeline*. Such associations ideally encourage settler gallery-goers to reckon with the fact that Bennington College lies on Mohican and Wabanaki Confederacy land.<sup>xlvi</sup>



Paul Feeley poses with *Bennington Structure*, 1961  
(Photos courtesy of the Tony Smith Estate)

Photographs of the long-since-dismantled *Bennington Structure* offer a glimpse into (white male) viewers’ interactions with the work. I would argue that men’s poses perform and instantiate the kind of “acquisitive relation” to space (place) that Fanon describes and seeks to unsettle. In one photograph, artist Paul Feeley, one of Smith’s Bennington faculty colleagues, stands next to the structure, placing his right hand against it and his left hand on his hip. He stares directly, confidently into the camera, in a gesture reminiscent of photography’s possessive aspirations; his documented self-positioning with respect to the structure recalls tourists posing with canons and tanks, weaponry old and new, or hunters claiming dominion over their lifeless prey. Another photograph, a close-up, captures Feeley peering out from one of the structure’s units, surveyor- or sovereign-like. He stands

in profile, visible from head to waist, sculptural and stately. The upward angle of his gaze follows or realizes the cosmic aspirations of the structure's apertures. It is as though he is unaware of that other aperture, the camera's, because he need not fear its surveillance.<sup>xlvii</sup> Feeley's orientation toward *Bennington Structure*, and the space (place) it occupied, both does and does not resonate with Dyson's attentiveness to *her* body in space and time, in relation to structures and places. While making work for *Scalar*, Dyson asked herself, "How do I orient my body toward a particular building, space, interior?" She connected this approach to Tony Smith's, proposing that he, too, "lived these things, worked them out."<sup>xlviii</sup>

However, Dyson's "study" takes place through different orientations, and yields different shapes. Her sculptural work *1994 (Rate of Transformation #Scale)* (2018) is the piece in her Usdan exhibition most closely in dialogue with Smith's *Bennington Structure*. It consists of two three-dimensional shapes formed by connecting trapezoids, which produce a closed rectangle on the larger side and taper to an open rectangle on the smaller side. The forms are made of wood covered with acrylic and graphite; mirrors serve as their "closed" rectangular sides, and the smaller "open" rectangles lead to cavernous spaces within.<sup>xlix</sup> Both forms angle upward—reminiscent of *Bennington Structure*'s outward-and-upward, weapons-at-the-ready orientation. And yet the sculptures "face" one another. *1994* (if one is to read "1994" in the title as denoting a year) comes over three decades after *Bennington Structure*. However, *1994* was the year in which U.S. President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Kremlin Accords, banning nations from aiming nuclear weapons at one another.

The mirrored sculptural forms' *angled* positioning compounds (even) the endless reflections engendered when two vertical mirrors are placed opposite one another. Dyson's double mirrors send viewers' gazes in multiple directions at once, from the gallery's floor to the beams of its ceiling. A dialogue is created between the two structures—one in which a viewer, entering *in media res*, is instantaneously engulfed and implicated. However, the outcomes of this kaleidoscopic phenomenological experience are diverse, dispersed, and intertwined with other works in the gallery. The art (together with the exhibition attendees) comes into and out of view, depending upon one's positioning. Dyson activates the gallery "space," including its human and nonhuman contents, (re)situating both viewer and viewed as constellational beings, launching them like vectorized scalars. Indeed, the mirrors' enacted dis/orientations lend the works themselves a kind of sight or observational, telescopic capacity, thereby amplifying a viewer's awareness of that which exceeds their vision, and touch—in other words, phenomenological experiences in the plural. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one might say that *1994 (Rate of Transformation #Scale)* reflects "a self [...] that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future."<sup>l</sup>

The mirror has a longstanding purchase on art and theory alike; it is a favorite trope in the work of canonical white French theorists in particular, such as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.<sup>li</sup> Black Studies consistently disrupts such oft-cited theorizations, demonstrating that, for black subjects, a mirror does not necessarily reflect “self-unity”; state-sanctioned violence against black people sees to this. Additionally, the notion of being “locked together” with the “other” who views and re-presents one’s self in the manner of a “mirror” has had devastating long-historical and ongoing impacts on enslaved and colonized subjects, and their descendants.<sup>liii</sup> For alternative formulations, one could turn to African-American author W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of “double-consciousness,” put forth in his canonical *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). There, Du Bois describes “double-consciousness” as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>liiii</sup>

Additionally, one could consult Fanon, who remarked in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.” Confronted by “the glances of the other” that “fixed” him, Fanon “burst apart.” He explains to his readers, “Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.”<sup>liiv</sup>

To return to *1994 (Rate of Transformation #Scale)*, the “mirror” also has a direct link to Henry “Box” Brown. After escaping to the north, Brown turned to the aesthetic as a means of both strategically reinvigorating abolitionists’ interest in slavery and attempting to convey his and his fellow enslaved persons’ experiences.<sup>liv</sup> In February of 1850, Brown solicited money for, and had painted, a panorama, which he titled *The Mirror of Slavery*. He debuted the work—which “consisted of many thousands of square feet of canvas”—in Boston on April 19, 1850.<sup>lvi</sup> The passing of the Fugitive Slave Act later that year—which decreed that escaped enslaved persons in the “free” north could and should be recaptured and returned to the slaveholding south—prompted Brown (nearly recaptured himself in Providence, Rhode Island) to leave America for Britain, where he continued to exhibit the panorama.<sup>lvii</sup>

Focusing on the “spectacle” of mirrors in *1994*, a critic (or viewer) might almost forget (or accidentally entangle themselves in) a second element of the work: a scarcely visible white string that stretches between the two mirrors’ upper ends, disappearing into the “negative” (and black) space behind. The white *string* easily blends into the gallery’s white *walls*—a sort of “booby trap” for an unsuspecting, or other-where rapt, viewer. However—and, perhaps, just in the nick of time—a third component of *1994* surfaces to register (and redirect) the string’s

presence. Dyson has suspended a hollow steel hyperrectangle (a rectangle expanded to a third dimension), which she found in the college's metal shop, by running the string through its cavity. As though arriving soon or recently departed, the steel construction hangs several inches from one of the mirror's "landing" spots. Recalling the squares-turned-elongated-rectangles of *Orientation #1* and *Orientation #2*—and, thus, Henry "Box" Brown's unfathomable journey—the metal is suspended between the two mirrors, whose reflective surfaces send both "box" and string careening in multiple directions at once. Indeed, both *Orientation #1* and *Orientation #2* featured a white string stretched vertically down the canvas's center; moreover, from certain angles, the string in *1994* seems to launch and weave itself into the trajectory of a third string that Dyson stretched diagonally across the exhibition's massive, nearly all-black diptych, suggestively titled *I Can Feel You Now (Accumulation/Distribution)* (2018).



View of "Scalar," Usdan Gallery, 2018

Simultaneously, the weight of the steel in *1994* tugs the stretched string downward, creating—if one connects the dots—a triangle, which perhaps summons a garret. String is also a mapping device, a surveyor's tool employed in the creation, carving up, and claiming of geographies; string is indexical of the "multiscalar discourses of ownership" that continue to characterize how "modern" racialized violence produces and polices space.<sup>lviii</sup>

However, Dyson's utilization of string in these works also calls to mind string *figures*. As Donna Haraway writes, "String figures are like stories; they propose and enact patterns for participants to inhabit, somehow, on a vulnerable and wounded

earth.” They “can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained.”<sup>lix</sup> Haraway’s remarks and the intimation of a steel-“boxed” Brown traveling along a string in 1994 (and 2018) raise questions about what alternative worlds might emerge through the passing back and forth of communications, across space and time. Indeed, in his *Narrative*, Brown himself contemplated his approximation to “mail.”<sup>lix</sup>

Multiplicities, combinations and intersections of the “real” and the “reflected,” the far-flung and the strung together, characterize Dyson’s (black) abstraction. In 1994 (*Rate of Transformation #Scale*)—and the *Scalar* exhibition itself—all pretense to linearity is disrupted, “past” and “present,” “here” and “there” bounce off one another, re-turn. If the mirrors in 1994 are, in some sense, “mirrors” of slavery, then the positionality and temporality of each viewer is called into question; each is destabilized, simultaneously scaled up and down, out and around, caught up, string-figure like, having a deeply historicized yet ultimately indeterminable outcome. Dyson casts “scalar” viewers as conscripted participants in a drama through which each is revealed to be always already and multiply vectorized, with both historically conditioned and differentially plastic relationships to space (place) and time.<sup>lxi</sup> Usdan Gallery becomes Dyson’s “secret garden”—not in the sense of a partially walled-off “space” defined by possession (though many art institutions do function as such) but, rather, as a place for interrogating and reimagining relation toward the realization of “more livable geographies.”<sup>lxii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), italics in original, xiv.

<sup>ii</sup> Torkwase Dyson, “Black Interiority: Notes on Architecture, Infrastructure, Environmental Justice, and Abstract Drawing,” *Pelican Bomb*, Jan. 9, 2017, accessed Oct. 7, 2018, <http://pelicanbomb.com/art-review/2017/black-interiority-notes-on-architecture-infrastructure-environmental-justice-and-abstract-drawing>.

<sup>iii</sup> Achille Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, trans., “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40 (italics removed, 40).

<sup>iv</sup> Dyson’s exhibition *Dear Henry* (March 15-May 5, 2018) at Davidson Contemporary in Chelsea was “conceived as a letter to Henry ‘Box’ Brown” (Davidson Contemporary, Press Release, posted by Artsy, accessed Nov. 16, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/show/davidson-dear-henry>).

<sup>v</sup> Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown Written by Himself* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), italics in original, 58. This edition was published in Manchester, UK, in 1851. An earlier version was published in Boston in 1849, but was heavily influenced by white abolitionist Charles Stearn’s perspective as he transcribed Brown’s story. See Richard Newman, “Introduction,” in *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, xi-xxxiii (xii).

<sup>vi</sup> Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, 59.

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- <sup>vii</sup> Indeed, Jacobs's sexually predatory owner, James Norcom, deployed architecture as a weapon. Nell Irvin Painter explains that "Norcom was building a cottage in which to hide her from the town whose gaze had lent her some protection" (Nell Irvin Painter, "Introduction," in Harriet Jacobs and Painter, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, Penguin Classics [New York: Penguin Books, 2000], ix-xxx [xv]). In other words, Jacobs's fifty-two-year-old owner endeavored to build a structure that would facilitate his predations on the thirteen-year-old Jacobs without the townspeople's observation and, perhaps, their disapproval.
- <sup>viii</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 128.
- <sup>ix</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xviii.
- <sup>x</sup> Torkwase Dyson, author's interview with Torkwase Dyson at Bennington College (Bennington, VT), Sept. 1, 2018.
- <sup>xi</sup> Dyson, author's interview.
- <sup>xii</sup> "Scalar," adj. and n., *OED* online, accessed Oct. 31, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171698?redirectedFrom=scalar&>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Emphases added; cited as an example of the use of "scalar" in "Scalar," *OED* online. Edward McWilliam Patterson was English and Daniel Edwin Rutherford Scottish, but the fact that their text was published amid the U.S. Civil Rights Movement may have interested Dyson.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Torkwase Dyson, interview with Osman Can Yerebakan, "Unlearning America's History with Torkwase Dyson," *Elephant*, June 20, 2018, accessed Nov. 16, 2018, <https://elephant.art/studio-visit-torkwase-dyson/>.
- <sup>xv</sup> "Scalar," *OED* online.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Alessandra Raengo, "Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity," *liquid blackness* 1 (April 2014): 4-18 (5).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Kara Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 91-117 (93).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Keeling, "'In the Interval'," 96-97.
- <sup>xix</sup> The scalar-vector quality of "black" that I sense in Dyson's art suggests comparison with the concept of "demonic ground," proposed by Jamaican theorist, philosopher, literary critic, and author Sylvia Wynter—among Dyson's inspirations. See McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiv.
- <sup>xx</sup> Dyson, "Unlearning America's History with Torkwase Dyson."
- <sup>xxi</sup> Dyson, "Unlearning America's History with Torkwase Dyson," emphases added.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Space is the Place*, directed by Jon Coney, written by Sun Ra and Joshua Smith (1974; New York: Plexifilm, 2003), DVD. The film was completed in 1972 by the firm North American Star System Intergalactic Solar Arkestra Plexifilm, but not released on video until 1974.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), emphases added, xi.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxxi.
- <sup>xxv</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 18.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiv.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Dyson, author's interview.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Frantz Fanon, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, *Black Skin, White Masks*, repr. (1967; New York: Grove Press, 1982), 110-111. Originally published in French as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* in 1952.

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<sup>xxix</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104.

<sup>xxx</sup> In her review of Dyson's exhibition *Dear Henry*, Sarah Jane Cervenak also evokes Sharpe's concept of "the weather." See Cervenak, "Un/Sent Stream: A Review of Torkwase Dyson's Recent Exhibition, *Dear Henry*; Maxwell Davidson Gallery; March 15-May 5, 2018," *Women & Performance* 28, no. 3 (Oct. 12, 2018), <https://www.womenandperformance.org/bonus-articles-1/cervenak-28-3>, accessed Nov. 16, 2018.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Keeling, "'In the Interval'," emphasis added, 92.

<sup>xxxii</sup> As Keeling reminds us, "any anti-essentialist understanding of 'race' must contend with the continuing power of racial discourse and of racism to organize social reality according to racial categories that finesse a violent rupture between an ostensible Black being and the present contours of Black existence" ("In the Interval," 91-92).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Tony Smith, "The Pattern of Organic Life in America," unpublished manuscript, 1943, emphases added, Archives, Tony Smith Estate, New York; quoted in Robert Storr, "A Man of Parts," in *The Museum of Modern Art, Tony Smith: Architect, Painter, Sculptor* (New York: distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 10-35 (11).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Dyson, interview with author.

<sup>xxxv</sup> With "The Race for Space," I nod to Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 51-63. For more on black cultural production and "space," specifically in the work of Sun Ra, see Anthony Reed, "After the End of the World: Sun Ra and the Grammar of Utopia," *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 118-139.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> For the approximate date of composition and satellite launch context, see Mark Tucker, introduction to "The Race for Space," in Duke Ellington, *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 293. The typescript from which the essay has been reproduced is in the Duke Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Tucker, introduction to "The Race for Space," 293.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Ellington, "The Race for Space," 293.

<sup>xxxix</sup> See "Buckminster Fuller," *Our Bennington*, accessed Dec. 13, 2018, <http://our.bennington.edu/page/fuller>. I am grateful to Anne Thompson for directing me to Fuller's connection and records in Bennington College's archives. It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into Fuller's work. However, a photograph of the College's then-President Lewis Webster Jones standing with a section of the unit, holding open a porthole out of which a smiling female student peers, will receive consideration in my larger project.

<sup>xl</sup> Alastair Gordon, "War Shelters, Short-Lived Yet Living On," *The New York Times*, Dec. 31, 2013, accessed Dec. 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/02/garden/war-shelters-short-lived-yet-living-on.html>.

<sup>xli</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, emphasis added, 3.

<sup>xlii</sup> John Keenen, "Architecture," 36; Tony Smith, quoted in Keenen, "Architecture," 36.

<sup>xliii</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 129.



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<sup>xliv</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 128.

<sup>xlv</sup> For a recent collection of essays on haunted landscapes, see Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>xlvi</sup> The following online project (which the creators note is a work-in-progress) enables visitors to type in their geographic locations and determine which indigenous peoples' land they occupy: Victor G. Temprano, dir., *Native-Land.ca*, accessed Dec. 13, 2018, <https://native-land.ca/>.

<sup>xlvii</sup> For a discussion of blackness in relation to surveillance, from slavery to the present, see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

<sup>xlviii</sup> Dyson, interview with author.

<sup>xlix</sup> While Dyson has used black plexiglass as a reflective surface previously, this is the first time that she has used mirrors in her art (interview with author). A somewhat similar sculptural piece was featured in her 2016 exhibition *Unkeeping at Eyebeam*. It differed in that it consisted of a single construction (not a pair of structures), did not have a mirrored side, was painted black, and was elevated slightly from the gallery's floor.

<sup>i</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 163.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, chapter one, "Las Meninas," in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3-16, English translation copyright Random House, Inc., 1970; first English translation in Great Britain, copyright Tavistock/Routledge, 1970; originally published as *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966); Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986); and Jacques Lacan's lecture "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75-81, delivered July 17, 1949, at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in Zurich.

<sup>iii</sup> As Russell Grigg explains, when gazing in the mirror, "the child experiences itself as a whole, as a unity, for the first time. Furthermore, the experience of a self-unity lays the basis for the ego, which is formed through the subject's identification with this image" (Russell Grigg, "From the Mechanism of Psychosis to the Universal Condition of the Symptom: On Foreclosure," in Dany Nobus, ed., *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, repr. [1998; New York: Routledge, 2018], 48-74 [57]).

<sup>iiii</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, introduced by Donald B. Gibson, with notes by Monica M. Elbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 5. First published in the United States by A. C. McClurg & Company, 1903.

<sup>lv</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

<sup>lv</sup> See Newman, "Introduction," xxvi; see also Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, repr. (2006; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 77.

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<sup>lvi</sup> Newman, "Introduction," xxvii.

<sup>lvii</sup> For the Fugitive Slave Act, Brown's near recapture and departure with a black man named J. C. A. Smith, who was born free in the north, and the pair exhibiting *The Mirror of Slavery* during journeys around northern England between the winter of 1850 and spring of 1851, see Newman, "Introduction," xxviii.

<sup>lviii</sup> For "multiscalar discourses of ownership," see again McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 3.

<sup>lix</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 10. There is also, of course, the science of "string theory," but that would send this essay in yet another direction.

<sup>lx</sup> Dyson seems to have referred to this in her earlier exhibition *Dear Henry*, which Cervenak describes as "framed around an im/possible salutation" that "bespeaks the promise of a letter-to-come to Henry Box Brown," although I would add that Dyson also seems interested in letters-to-come *from* Brown. In her discussion of *Dear Henry*, Cervenak proposes that "Dyson's time-travelling poetic address to Box Brown bespeaks a para-hapticality of another order. Put differently, the painting's dispatch to a long-gone, impossible addressee suggests a telepathic, or more nearly a seanced element such that its hapticality might be host to more than one para-physical expressivity" ("Un/Sent Stream").

<sup>lxi</sup> With "conscripts" here, I am thinking of David Scott's study *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and for a quantum physics-inspired analysis of "spacetime" in relation to blackness and the African Diaspora, see Michelle M. Wright, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>lxii</sup> For "more livable geographies," see Dyson, "Black Interiority."