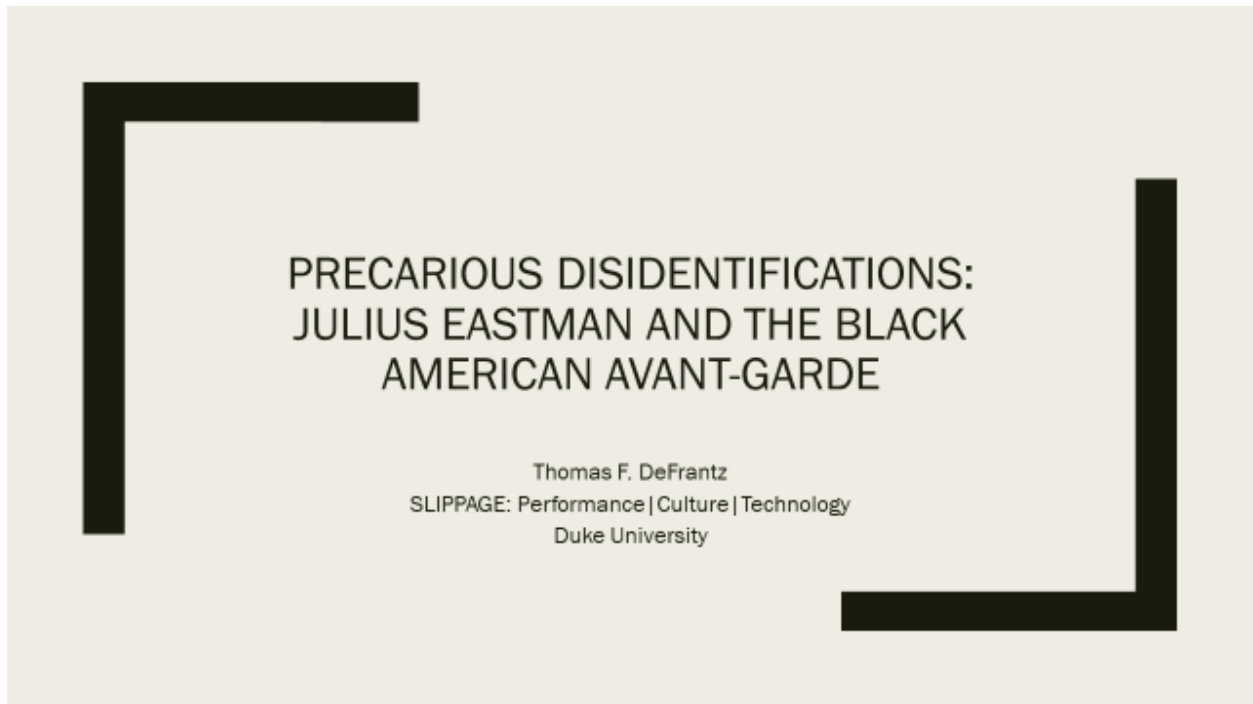


Precarious Disidentifications:

Julius Eastman and the Black American Avant-Garde

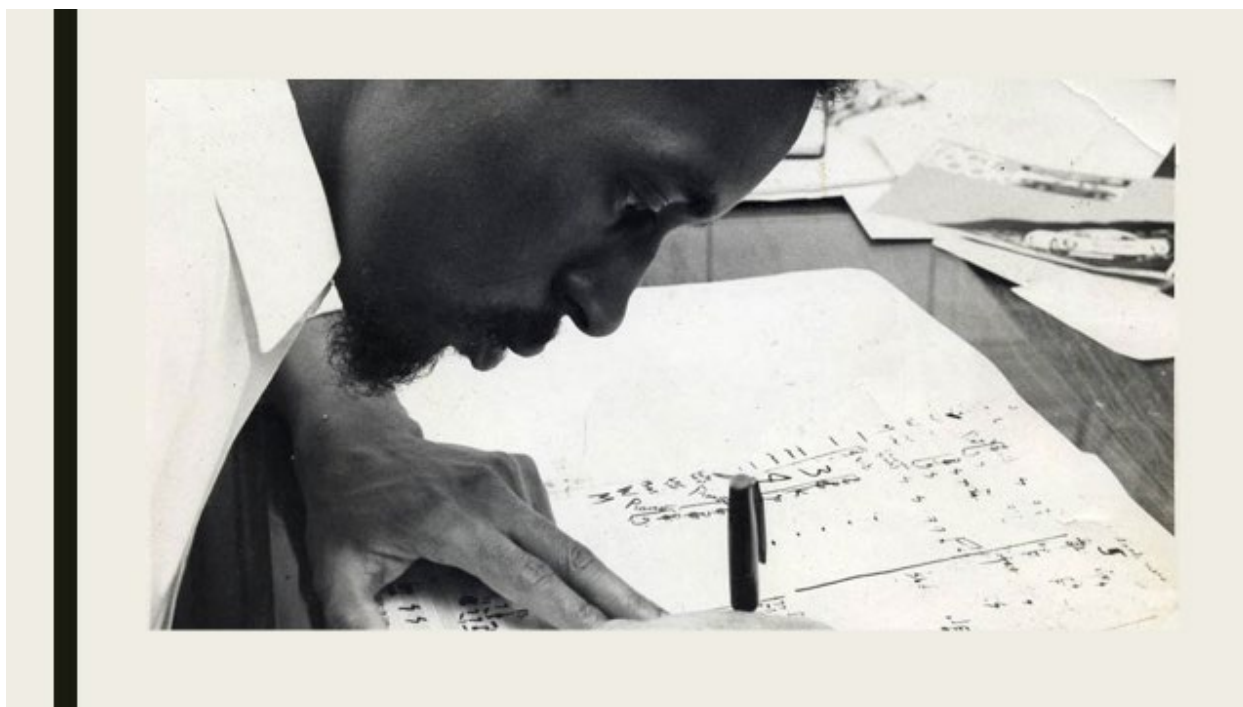
45 minutes total with Audio Files



TITLE SLIDE

1. let the punishment suit the crime! the older dancer told me this Black american adage. he wanted to remind me to maintain an intentional focus in our work. let the punishment suit the crime. no more no less.

so then, this is an elegy or a requiem for julius eastman. an afrofuturequeer accounting. no more no less. I'm trying to do what's needed here - to bring forward a way to think about eastman within a context of his identities and their complexities.



we begin with our prompt: The complex but short career of composer, singer, and performance artist Julius Eastman (1940-1990) demonstrates the difficult journeys that many Black American avant-garde artists endure. Eastman composed many musical works and performed frequently in other people's creations, even as he struggled to secure a stable living for his creative practices. This talk explores the precarity of expressivity for African Americans engaged in systems of avant-garde artmaking. How can we understand Eastman's achievements within systems of a Black American avant-garde that resisted a politics of respectability?

I want to provide a context for thinking about how he lived his life and came into adulthood as an artist in the United States. Of course the urgent pivot of Eastman's legacy comes now, in our recent, and first real consideration of his output. we take on this labor now in response to his identities as queer Black American man working in classical music at exactly the moment of shifting civil rights legislation in the United States.

so our task here is to consider eastman's artistry in relationship to his emergences into adulthood at the time of disco, afro-punk, aggressively visible sexual fluidities, black power, and the shifting grounds of cultural supremacy, each of which social transformation in the US which treated him with a certain indifference, so much so that he literally fell off the planet, under-acknowledged, homeless, and destitute.



afroFUTUREqu##r

I want to think through Eastman's achievement within a frame of afrofuturequ##r, a gathering notion I've been working with for the past few years to help provide a context of flexible particularity that might circumscribe how Black artists find our way in the world. Afrofuturequeer intends to mark a difficult but well-trod path towards experimental Black creativity, which inevitably arrives as futuristic and queer for many reasons. To begin though, I'd like to go back to the compositional circumstances of musical minimalism, to consider Eastman's arrival in the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.

to do this, we begin with the afterlives of slavery.

the afterlives of slavery

the afterlives of slavery offer a contemporary thematic to consider how black people find our way through the world. In this paradigm, we think towards the impossibilities of black life as a tangible remain of lives in complete abjection. of course, Black americans have had broad legislative recourse only in the last fifty years; home ownership, voting rights, the privilege to marry or partner up as one might, access to clean water or social services - these are all newly-won possibilities in the united states for Black people. And of course, the abjection forced onto Black people stolen into slavery continues to this day, in the afterlives of apartheid, the vestiges of colonialism, and the global circulations and contemporary movements of Black people - black people who are refugees because they are Black. they are not immigrants, they are refugees of worse places, who do not become immigrants. they are not people who have moved here; but they are instead a problem to be dealt with; always out of place.

The afterlives of slavery surround Black creativity with a binding containment: Black artistry will always be marked for its difference from a white norm; Black artists will always be rising up out of abjection; our stories will always tell of an unlikely, near impossible feat of transcendence. This isn't wrong, and this is how the afterlives of slavery operate. Every bit of public expression is bracketed by its impossibilities; it is always more than what was expected, and therefore excessive; it is always overwrought in some way; beyond remarkable and profoundly exceptional.



in this context Eastman constantly represented a cipher for his peers. Always like them, but not them; always visible in difference and unexpectedness, always compelled to answer for his presence even when its question went unasked. Eastman was accomplished, but much more than this; he was crazy accomplished, and could do more than many of his colleagues. Compose, sing, dance, choreograph, play organ, piano, violin, and on and on and on. And orate. He could speak well.

minimalism and task

an irony for eastman is that he cast his lot with a musical avant garde concerned with minimalism. Now, minimalism and task became important markers for experimental european music and dance performance in the 1960s. The search for new forms - part of the condition of Western modernity, that there should always be a new form that somehow discarded with the old forms - well, this search created an affordance of task and austerity for composers. But task also sounds like labor, rather than expression, and for Black people, labor had already been a defining characteristic of so-called modernity. For black people labor and task signalled a return to a devalued gesture, one that could not transcend itself toward an expressivity of style. Task-based choreography and performance was never popular among Black american communities, in some part because tasks and labor are the stuff of everyday; who needs to encounter the everyday for spiritual deliverance? in general, black audiences enjoy being in the presence of expertise rather than ironic detachment.

minimalism, like task, predicted a return to the basic structures of rhythm that subvene all life. This so-called “return” was not necessarily of interest for large swaths of black

audiences. Black expression generally arises from a social desire to elaborate, to embellish, to recast an expressive moment with the sensations of the individual within the group. Minimalism seemed to explore the tinyness of adjustment as an end in and of itself.

We might also want to remember that until the 1950s, public creative expression for Black Americans was still always tied to a possibility of enhancing social life for the larger group. Public expression for Black people needed to speak to a rhetoric of excellence for Black artists and Black audiences, while at the same time satisfying a white gaze that seldom understood its complexities. The work of Black artists tended to be valued most in the most recognizable idioms of the day: as representational visual art, as hard-swinging jazz transformed to bebop, as ritualistic modern dance, or as conventional theater and literature that told stories of Black life. Afro-surrealism, and abstraction that disguised references to the political circumstances of Black existence, tended to be mocked or disparaged as derivative by whites, and appreciated only haltingly by Black audiences. that circumstance began to change with the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, amid the afrofuturistic concoctions by Sun Ra and amiri Baraka, and Eastman's star rose alongside those specialized arts movements. Eastman might have achieved celebrity among a general Black public as a pioneer; as a first Black classical minimalist composer, if such a thing existed. It didn't though, then, or now, and general Black interest in classical music remains limited. We might understand why this is: classical music tends to answer itself in terms of its own legacies; Black performance responds to the material of the moment and the relationship of performer and audience.

Eastman, remarkably, bridged these competing assessments by living a life emboldened by his personal style, his outrageous performative choices, and his compositions that forced musicians to do more than simply play the music with feeling. Eastman's

minimalism is a labor of deliverance, of working toward a performance through some sort of spiritual assembly of musicianship.

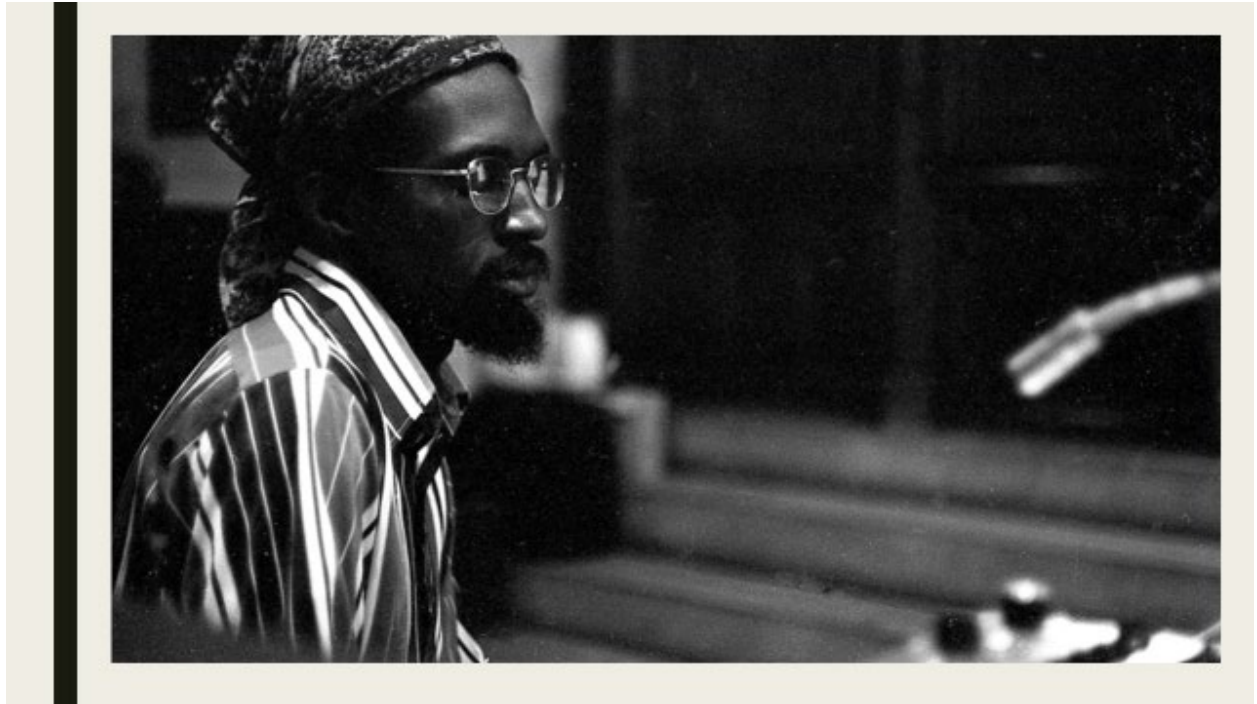
this last point deserves a bit of nuance.



Eastman's wildly underdocumented career includes many references to a sort of spiritual narrative that he followed. Sometimes this included literal references to saints and martyrs in the texts he set or sang. But also, in the unfolding of his compositions, we listeners might be compelled to hear beyond the dissonances and seeming misalignments towards something fragile and humanly-flawed; something like the missteps any of us make that might connect us in the contemplation of a chance to try again.

queer black youthfulness

Eastman arrived into adulthood alongside gay liberation and lived a queer life that included Bondage and SandM long enough to for him to succumb to an exhaustion of sorts. Queer life brings with it a misalignment to conventional notions of care; Eastman was constantly willing to place his sexual desires and needs for gratification ahead of any presumption of sustained, long life or some sort of old age. For Eastman, caring for his queer self meant allowing it to bloom and blossom, to materialize emphatically and without discipline; to astonish others beyond measure. It would have been unsustainable for anyone to burn so brightly; but this fire is typical in queer black youthfulness.



queer black people are drawn toward any available strategies or tools of self-expression; within black cultures, artmaking and performance hold queer valence as sites of extraordinary differentiation and unexpected worldmaking. So many forms of black artistic expression emerge from the textured bending, of queering, of something seemingly stable - whether that be a pitch, a physical stance, or the meaning of a word. Bending, or making something strange, is like the queering of everyday life toward something else, maybe not any more palatable, but surely more stylish in some way. This is how our artmaking assembles, through the distensions of form towards something unexpected but clearly related to its sources. Black art builds out, in some ways because of its legacies amid the afterlives of slavery, but also because we believe in ancestor worship that values the voices of the eldest in the room.

For eastman, his queer black elders were many: james baldwin, maybe zora neal hurston or langston hughes, sure, but more than that the people he met in the bars and streets of the cities.



The dancer Karl Singletary was a close pal for some time. These people and their seeing of him were as much of his artistry as his memories of his mother and brother and growing up in Ithaca, NY. Queer youthfulness afforded Eastman a brash social dissidence, one not concerned with Black respectability or middle-class uplift. His mother, like all the Black mothers of queer kids, mine included, called him 'special;' he was lucky enough to explore music theater and dance as a young man in a house that allowed him to grow into his special-queerness.

Eastman was a proto-punk, an afro punk avant la lettre; carousing and exploring gay affordances as they became available to him. His alignment of queer death to his performances and his composing deserves scrutiny. Queer death, or a kind of queer negativity, explores a blatant refusal to capitulate to rhetorics of futurity or the sacred space of children as the bearers of future hope. Like afropessimism, emerging amid the afterlives of slavery, queer negativity exists emphatically for the here and now, transgressing propriety for the purpose of making do with the grit of the moment. Queer negativity says noooooooooo..... and yes! and nooooooooooooo.....

eastman's performances juxtaposed materials and approaches to performance in a decidedly queer - negative manner. Nothing need be saved or preserved, or even demarcated all that carefully; what might be more important is the fact of the moment and its confusions. This didn't mean "anything goes" in his life as a composer. But surely some of Eastman's success as a conductor and arranger came from his willingness to coordinate a chaotic assembly, one under-rehearsed and expressive in its unknowability. Queer sex can be like this in the bathhouses and bars that eastman likely frequented; it may be joyful, even within this queer negativity that relishes a resistance to an orderly unfolding of life. Queer living might be difficult, but hopefully we may find pleasure in its unexpectedness and unruliness. I hope that for eastman.



detachment and precarity

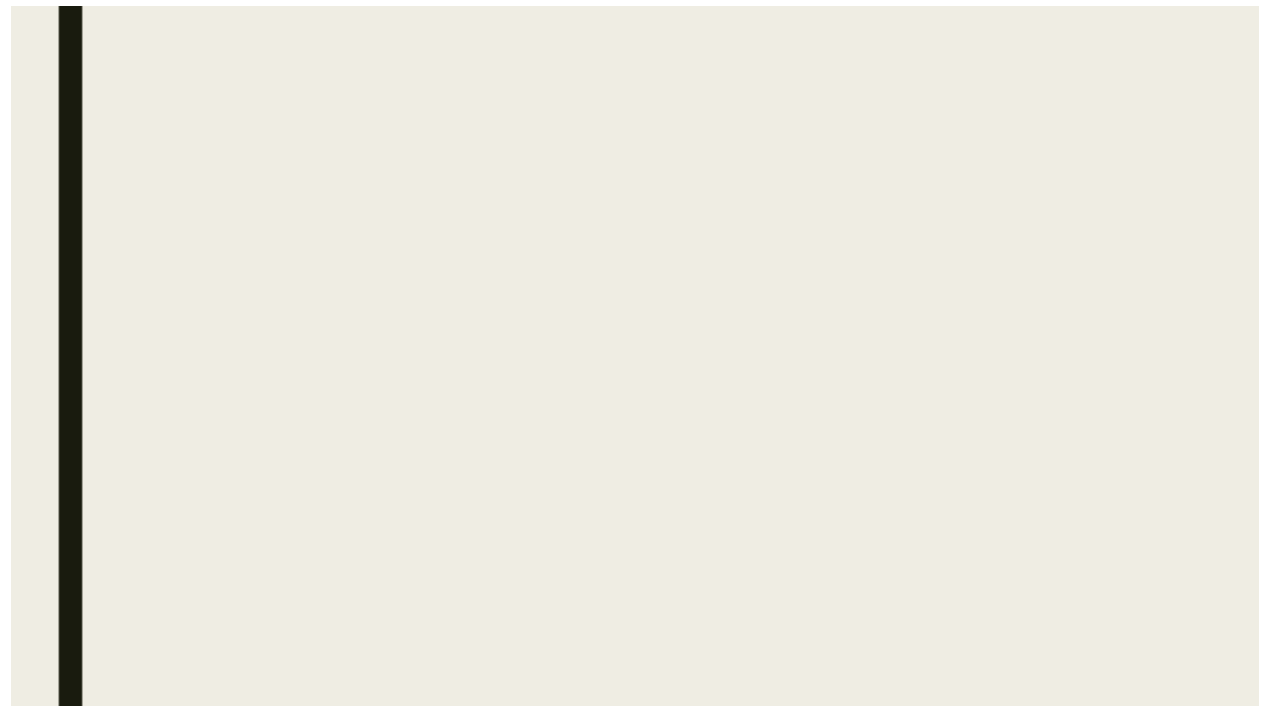
Eastman grew into many reasons to detach from his classical surroundings; the most obvious being his visible Blackness and his queerness. He was more than special. He had reasons to disidentify in order to align himself where he needed to or wanted to, and to redesign himself where it suited. Performance theorist Jose Munoz's theory of

disidentification tends to build out from an identity politic rooted in biography. In Eastman's case, his Blackness was not US-based, but from a proudly West Indian lineage. In the context of the united states, african americans understand social differences from Black people of the caribbean; then and now. But Eastman was already working in classical music, and experimental classical music where there were few Black people to form a collective rich with diversity; he was forced to disidentify from his Blackness in order to work as a classical musician and from his West Indian-ness in order to be American. And of course his queer motives predicted a disidentification from Blackness at times.



all of this standing apart from surely took its toll. Even when working alongside other Black classical composers and conductors, Eastman found reasons to stand apart. Solo work is tricky and exhausting work; it's hard to say whether it's easier to align with almost any group than none. Surely, though, being constantly detached is a precarious way of life.

Eastman developed a very resonant speaking voice, which he used to great advantage in his singing. He was described with a 'spindly body' that might have helped him be flexible in his dancing performances. He played piano for dance classes when he was still a young man in Ithaca, New York. He operated as something of a communal radical, as his colleague Renee Packer recalled, she said: "Personal indifference toward possessions bled over to disdain for any notion of 'mine-yours.'" Eastman had mostly white colleagues, teachers, and friends, and a fellow musician Andrew Stiller noted: "I don't think any of us at the time fully understood how deeply divided he was inside between being an African American on the one hand and an openly gay classical musician of the most esoteric sort" on the other. His life was precarious indeed, and he essentially staved to death after living homeless in new york. He died may 1990 and his obituary was not published January 1991. Precarity tilts, towards stillness or its opposite, dissolution.



Eastman's brand of minimalism has been termed "organic music" in that its adjustments through time seem to arrive as needed, rather than on a schedule. this is a bit misleading, as some of his compositions are notated on a timeclock, with markings for section changes to occur at particular timings. in all, though, shifts occur not according to some mathematical algorithm, as they might in scores by other minimalist composers, but rather just after any previous ideas have been completely exhausted. the sensation of these works is accumulative and disorienting, difficult but humorous, undisciplined and uncompromising.

for me listening to eastman is like hearing a fight.



... like hearing a fight ...

a disagreement over pitch class, tuning, rhythmic attack and tonal address. approach to playing. a disagreement over how long or what to play - as Eastman often provided instructions without necessarily determining octave or number of iterations. consider the beginning passages of "if you're so smart, why aren't you rich" from 1977, which commissioning conductor Lukas Foss described as "merciless" in its approach.



in contrast “stay on it” works through a buoyant, harmonized, figure, animating rhythm towards a seemingly positive effect, inviting something like a ring dance on a hillside.

MUSIC TWO – LISTEN to three MINUTES OF STAY ON IT

even here in this piece, though, things dissolve and the rhythmic agreement disintegrates over time; dramatic events occur and the composition devolves painfully to reveal its dystopic alter-ego. a kind of musical anarchy takes over the sonic world of **stay on it** for a time, and here’s where I think it matters that this music is composed by a Black man, a queer Black man who wrote from a place of assumed abjection, in the afterlives of slavery, doing the work of queer disidentification from even his own career as a classical musician.

earlier I spoke of minimalism in relationship to task and its resistance to elaboration. but minimalism also has a relationship to pulse-life and spirituality; in an assumption of the bare continuities of rhythms that, like heartbeats, constitute the possibilities of time.

minimalism suggests a sort of shearing away of the decorative, the fanciful, the elaborate. of course Eastman was nothing like a “true minimalist” if such a thing exists; his music cries out with theatrical invention and unexpected ruptures.



Eastman does follow the minimalist tenant that the simplest elements can reveal a wealth of information, and there is a certain faithfulness tied into that belief in austerity. minimalism delivers asceticism as righteousness, in a way; spiritual health is tied here to an ability to survive with less. but eastman’s musical method also tended to assume an ongoingness of everything that might be revealed in time. musicologist and critic kyle gann calls this method “vertical additive” which expands through time “until all 12 pitch classes are heard simultaneously [creating a] ... continuum in which we can hardly distinguish the elements. [more stay on it]

affinities

Eastman did work alongside others, and grew into his mature voice collaborating with others. He composed music for dancing - his own, early in his career, and for other people later on. He achieved a great success as a singer, stretching his mellifluous voice into the nearly impossible extended registers of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*.



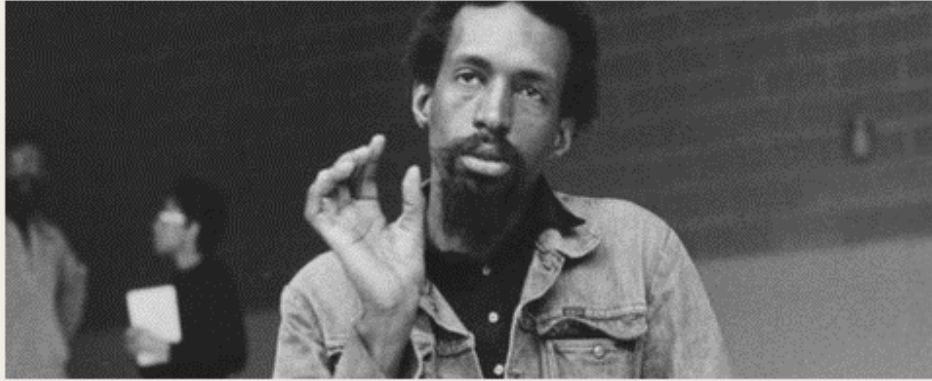
This must have been the sort of challenge that appealed in its impracticality; the half-hour monodrama describes an insanity of sorts by realizing it in song and gesture. In this, Eastman was able to move towards his own obscure ends within broad theatrical trappings that called for an unavoidable flamboyance.

Eastman brought a sort of flair to most things he did. In 1968, one colleague recalls that he sang the role of the Messenger in *Oedipus Rex* by Stravinsky. Even though the performance happened at music stands, rather than in full theatrical setting, to heighten his solo in the Second Act, he painted his face silver and shone a light on himself when it came time for his vocal solo, right at his music stand. He demanded attention and pushed for a movement away from what might be expected, toward an unknowable outcome.



the current vogue

Eastman's stories checks the boxes. Outrageous. Black. Queer. Classical Composer. Sad. Tragic. Including him in new music histories answers the challenge of today's diversity initiatives, desperate to demonstrate some sort of inclusiveness that might render classical music differently than all-white.

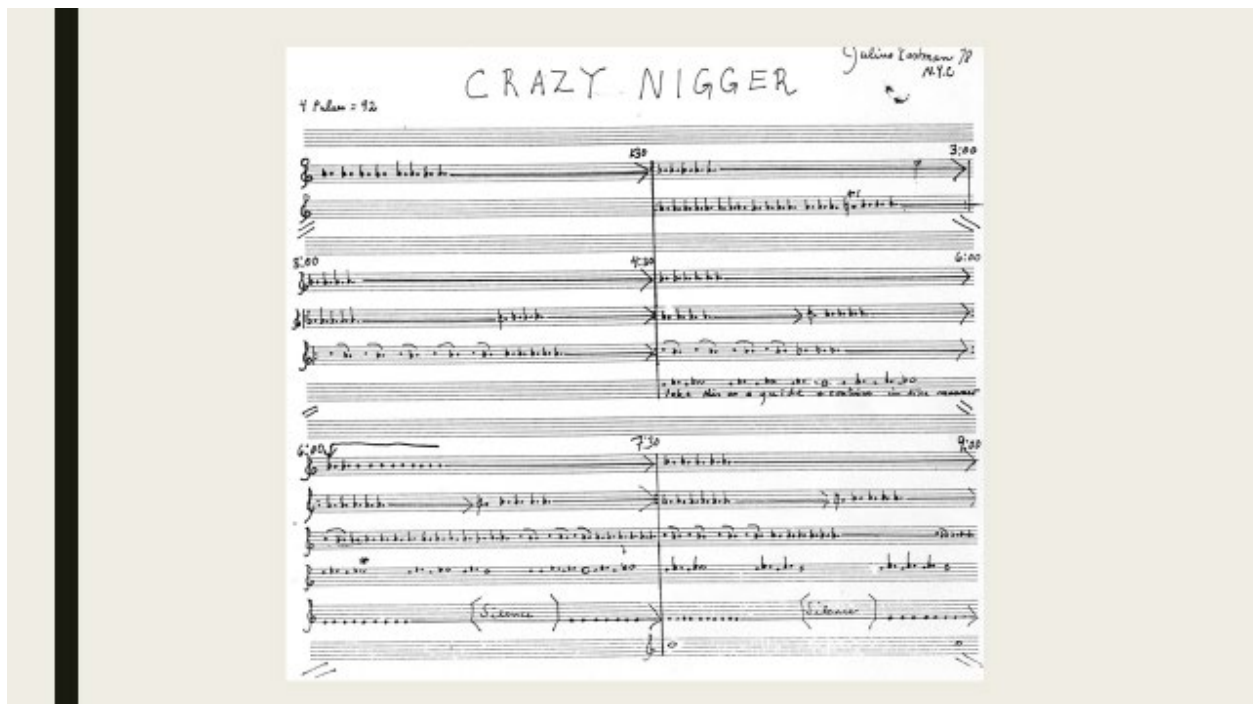


Eastman's work arrived alongside the way-too-venerated whites-only movement in postmodern dance that keeps popping up everywhere. he was gay gay gay gay gay, complete with leather jacket and chains, and visibly active in a spectacle of erotic life. luckily for researchers eager to stake a claim in the crowded feel of crafting intellectual histories, Eastman provides a certain sort of hope for queers of color that there might be other stories like his that emerge; stories of queer presence in avant-garde performance like that of joan miller, queer black woman whose Chamber Arts Dance Players set a standard for Black American participation in experimental performance in New York in the 1970s. Programmers think, "If we can find Eastman, maybe we can find the others, and rescue them from oblivion. And there will be grant funding for this activity!"

My cynicism aside, the problem with this sort of vogue is that it operationalizes another aspect of the afterlives of slavery; that Black American experience will be mined for its ability to restabilize white supremacy, white aesthetics, white benevolence. In turning our attention to this queer black artiste who died homeless and destitute, we demonstrate that we are now somehow 'woke' to systems of oppression and our own

complicity in structures of racism that left him an outsider. we think, we get it now! look at this evidence of how bad things have been for Black people, we say; how sad that another tragic gay Black succumbed to the cruel world that was just too hard and real for him.

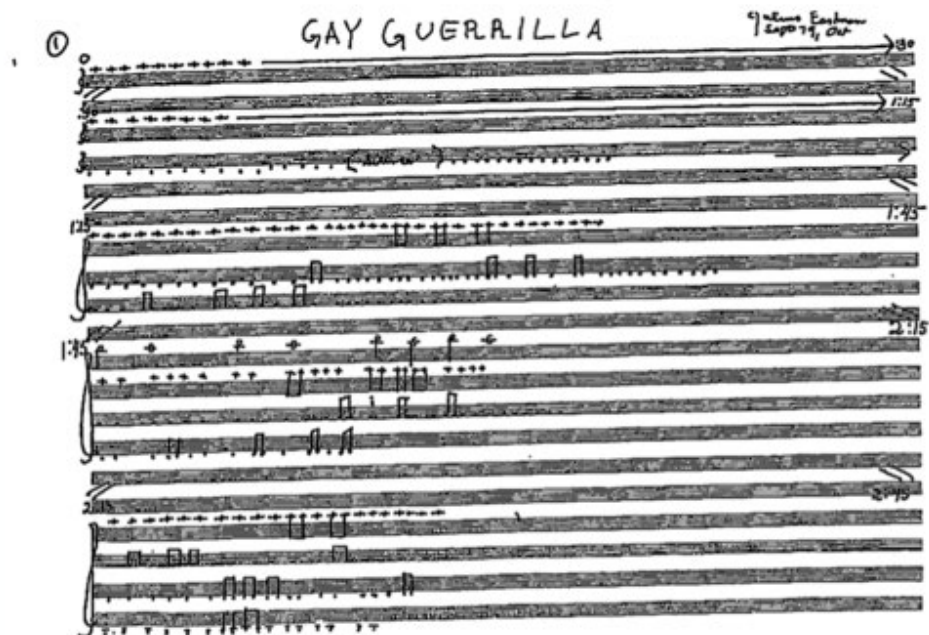
and in the disavowals that produced Eastman's demise, we reaffirm that his movement into madness was inevitable, and even sensical. experimental artistry and minimalism are not for everyone, we say, and it's just too bad that he couldn't handle his successes. neoliberalism works well with the afterlives of slavery, ensuring that the responsibility for our continued miseries as Black people rests squarely on our backs, again and forever, without needing to call bullshit on the myriad ways that Black people can never be remotely allowed to express within experimental modes of creative address, unless they are first marked as Black, and thus, in alterity.



Eastman understood this capitalist/modernist deathgrip, and tried to loosen its hold as he could. titling his works Crazy Nigger,

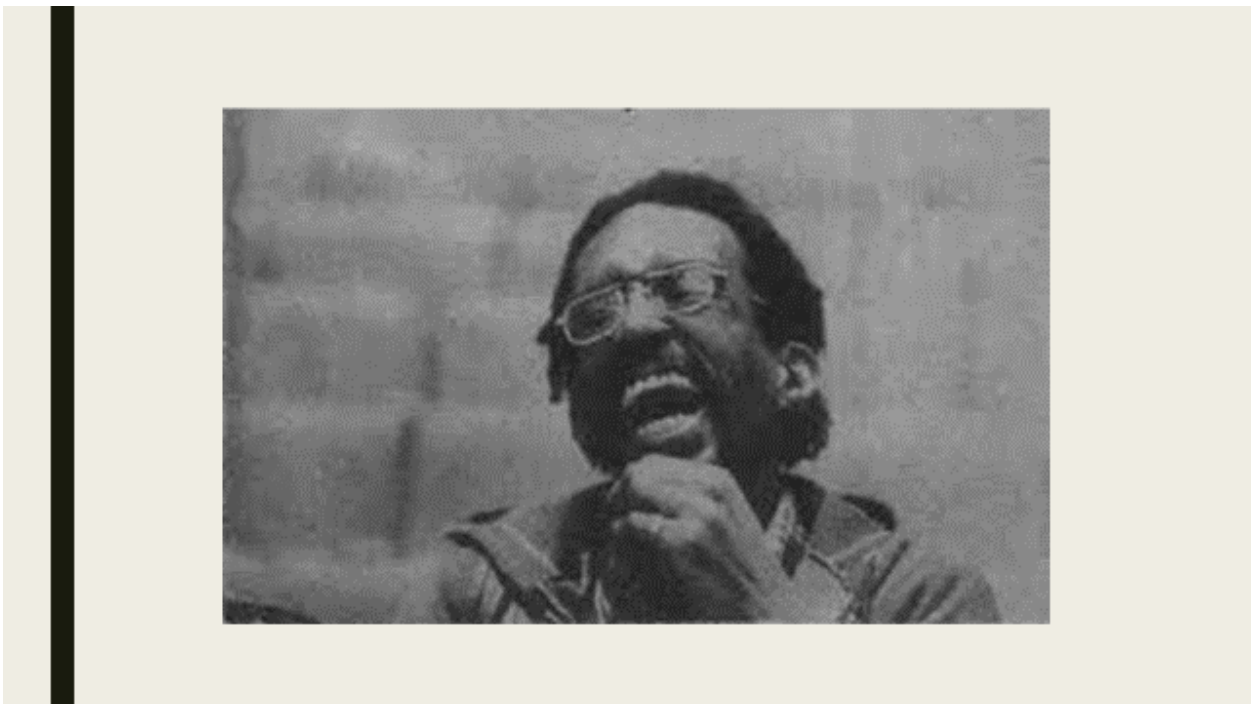


Evil Nigger, Nigger Faggot,



Gay Guerilla - these titles would never 'belong to' the concert halls where they might be performed. when he explained what he meant by using these words in an address to the public at Northwestern University in 1980, he didn't explain much at all beyond his own resoluteness to confound. His short narration tilts toward a sort of minimalism in itself, calling on the language of degradation as a clarion call to get down and get dirty, to eschew that which is elegant.

MUSIC THREE – LISTEN TO THREE MINUTES OF 'INTRODUCTION TO WORKS'



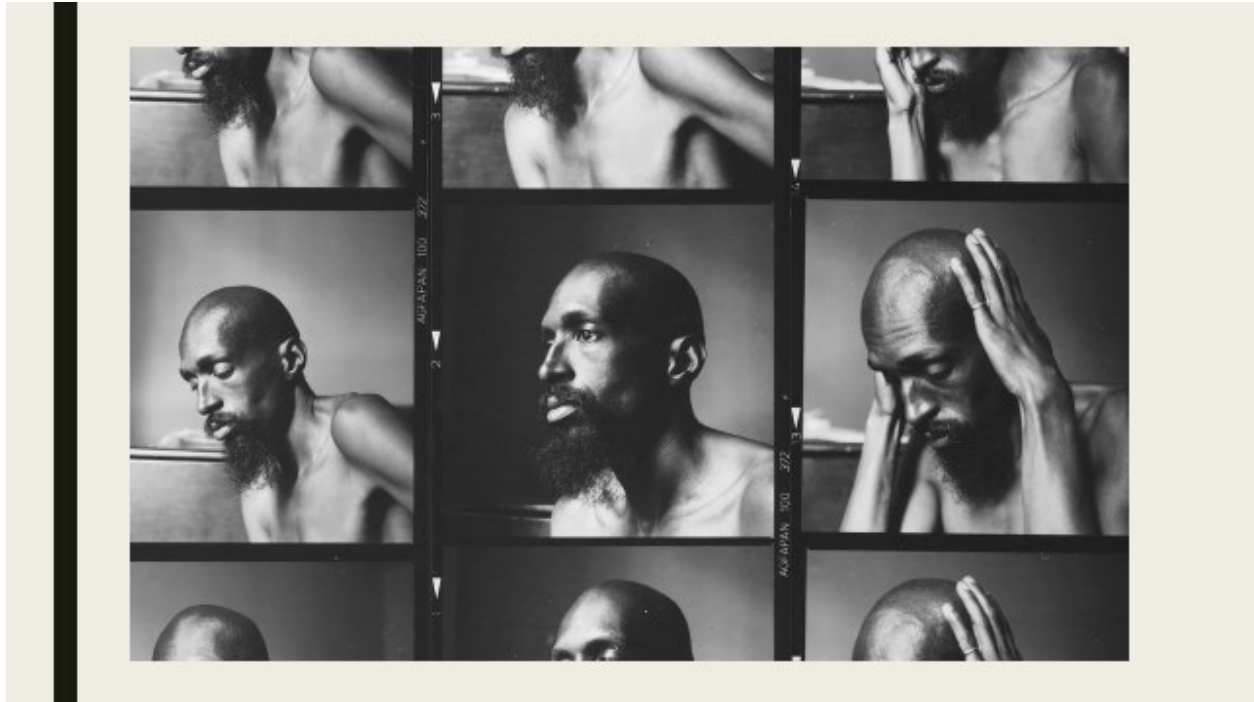
Some scholars have discussed Eastman's titling as a reclaiming of hate speech, or as "self-empowerment: the titling as a way of exercising power, a way of taking control over words and their meaning." (Chessa) if we think that, I imagine Eastman laughing

at our gullibility, to think that an explanation of nigger could ever be produced, or that such an explanation could ever actually answer the open wound of Black disavowal.



dancing into madness

Eastman ended his life in a certain kind of madness, one not unlike that of so many avant garde Black artist of the 20th century. the list is long long long long long: albert ayler, jean-michel basquiat, zora neal hurston, sun ra, alvin ailey, nina simone, louis johnson. some might say arthur mitchell or even bill t. jones is on his way there. something about being uncompromising leads to an impossible space; add onto that the challenges of the afterlives of slavery and we might all indeed understand this outcome.



Bi-polar. Roaming the streets of new york in a kaftan and turban. living in thompkins square park. drinking and smoking crack. later in his life, Eastman said, "I usually write imaginary music more or less ... "

eastman pushed, in the way that all avant-garde artists do, towards something beyond. in his infamous interaction with John Cage's Song Book in 1975, he directed two members of the audience to undress and engage in a sex act; the Black woman and the Blonde white man he chose didn't complete the activity, but it was enough to set Cage on a rampage. Cage was not *that* avant-garde; he was much more bourgeoisie and willing to set up house with Merce Cunningham and make their slightly strange performances together over a lifetime. this prospect of a life shared with another across time probably never occurred to Eastman, who moved through composing, performing, dancing, and varied sexual encounters as means towards a goal of pursuing creativity. moving toward and through, rather than arriving. being fugitive: a fugitive; in motion, always a little blurry, always out of phase. dissident. disidentified. dissonant.

I think that he must have been lonely in his life.

In 1976, when his achievement was still ascendant in some ways, he told an interviewer: “What I am trying to achieve ... is to be what I am to the fullest - Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest. ... It is through art that I can search for the self and keep in touch with my resource and the real me.” (July 1976) The context for this search became more and more constrained in time though, and in response, Eastman contracted and twisted, pushing notions of civility and a clear path towards sustainability further and further away from himself. A colleague wrote, “He permitted himself the luxury of choosing what he would devote himself to and what things he would deal with in a passing manner.” (thomas) But that luxury, of course, afforded him a death unremarked and alone.

coda - afrofuturequeer



afroFUTUREqu##r

Fugitivity remains as a term of engagement for Black life in the 21st century. we keep moving, because sitting still we are too obvious targets for even more disavowal. Maybe precarity feels a little better if we're already moving anyway; compelled to move by the slave trade, by apartheid, by colonialism, we can seem to choose to move, at least, by dancing or rhyming or making music beyond sound or form. Disidentifying from the group, we carve out little pockets of possibility; to be queer, to be Southern or from the West Indies; to be geeks and nerds; to love animals or sex; to do things that black people don't usually seem to do, at least in public. To become minimalist classical composers. But disidentify too much, past the tipping point, and there may be no group to return to. No Black fan base or family base to take us in. Would Eastman be living homeless today, if he were a 49 year old queer black composer with his resume, his list of achievements? I want to think not.



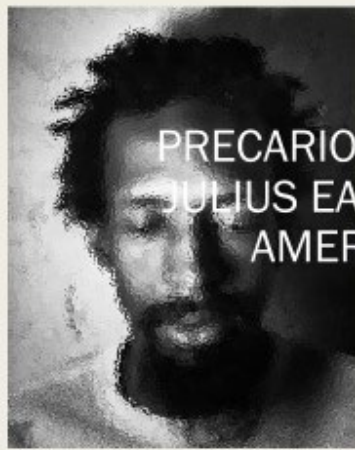
I want to think he would be aligned with the afro-future-queer movement we enjoy now, one that keeps evolving toward its surprising affiliations; its mixed-race trans assemblies. Indeed, about once a month I get an email asking for financial support for

a queer artist of color who needs to move from here to there, to pay for a visa or legal representation as they begin the long struggle to immigrate from one terrible living circumstance to the next. But I get these calls and I answer; we are moving each other away from degradation and disappearance toward affirmative support. as best we can. eastman came and went too soon.

coda 2

For a show at the New York venue The Kitchen in 1981, Eastman wrote this note: “I could be a dancer, choreographer, painter or any other kind of artist if I so wished; but right thought, speech and action are now my main concerns. No other thing is as important or as useful. Right thought, Right Speech, Right action, Right music.” Rightness as a doing. With purpose. Black aesthetics call for the action of the group to answer the encounter of performance; the performance exists because we all decide how we will participate in its contents. Right now. Maybe this is what Julius Eastman modeled for us. A willingness to stand apart so that something vital and unprecedented could emerge. Right thought, right speech right action right music. Thirty five years too late, we say right on. we claim your music as ours to share, but we don’t claim your despair or your tragedy or your addictions or your madness. but maybe that is the task you propose; a scaffolding out from the afterlives of slavery toward ... well something ... else.

let the punishment suit the crime. scream. become illegible. keep moving.
fuck. bend. heal hope love. resist. dissolve.



PRECARIOUS DISIDENTIFICATIONS:
JULIUS EASTMAN AND THE BLACK
AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE

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