

## Notes on the (Un)-Aesthetic

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### I

*god's little acre*

The wrong question to ask  
would be

*who is the artist*

*in possession of such a fine hand?*

Such a query could only ever escape that thin, mirrored box  
through which the critic sees the world.

Still, he waits for an answer,  
framing ignorance in a raised brow.

Beside him, a young boy flicks one eye open,  
his left hand tied to his mother's, who then herself takes a peek,  
having been interrupted in prayer.

To no particular audience, the critic asks again,  
*what skill did it take*  
*to carve a portrait so intimate?*

And the boy finds it so strange, that in this fruitless garden  
where his mother comes to hymn,  
there are no sweets or swings  
or trees big enough to climb  
but this man has only noticed a picture in the stone.

### II

*Afro-Atlantic Sustainabilities*

I don't mean to start such an abundant conversation with death. But, since we are discussing endurance and limitations, why not begin with the most persistent fact? Death, despite all its bad press, knows how to last. In terms of continuity, it is *the* most sustainable aspect of human life.

I hesitate to define sustainability here, because that, too, carries such a wide range of nuance. But for the purpose of this essay we will rely on two interpretations. The first, offered by Merriam-Webster, describes a thing sustainable as "capable of being maintained at length,

without interruption or weakening.” Death, in this instance, exists in the world permanently, unchanging.

But there is also the possibility of a less rigid sustenance, one that is **achieved** primarily through “techniques that allow for continual reuse.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, death may be permanent, but it is also quite flexible. Take, for example, the gravestones of God’s Little Acre in Newport, RI. One of them reads, “In Memory of Dutchess Quamino, A free Black of distinguished excellence: Intelligent, Industrious, Affectionate, Honest and of Exemplary Piety.”<sup>2</sup> James C. Garman argues that this marker is doubled in function, both as a symbolic ornament and as a coded message. *Here lies a free woman, survived only by her master, memorialized in stone of similar cut and quality to that of her white counterparts—even in death, she is no different.*<sup>3</sup> Although Dutchess Quamino has died and will remain dead, we only know this because the proof of her death exists in a dual continuum, both as tool and fact. Her gravestone is a clever use of what Garman calls the ‘material culture’ of death; it simultaneously acknowledges and subverts obtuse notions of race in American society. This subtle act of codification manifests itself in several aesthetic traditions in the Afro-Atlantic, from the graveyard to the front porch. It is a technique that, I argue, is unequivocally necessary for the sustainability of the Black built environment.

With the worsening climate crisis, the onus is on design and construction industries to evolve, adapt and rapidly work to reduce their respective carbon footprints. And, though important, this does not mean a quick introduction of already expensive building technologies. We have seen, time and time again, that inaccessible, un-affordable ‘green-housing’ is a provincial approach to the much larger problem at hand.<sup>4</sup> In fact, I wouldn’t be the first to say that a complete overhaul of *how* we design and construct, how we are *taught* to design and construct is in order. But, having barely attained my undergraduate degree, I will stick to what I can contribute: an idea.

A current trend in the race for green cities is to look back at what indigenous, ‘vernacular,’ or ‘primitive’ architectures might have to offer.<sup>5</sup> Being the descendant of such a society, I was inclined to do the same. But on a recent trip to New Orleans, I realized that I didn’t need to spend all of my time looking *back* on history—I just had to look around.

The shotgun house, a famed staple of New Orleans architecture, has been in existence for centuries. Historian John Vlach traced its origins from southwestern Nigeria, to Port-au-Prince in Haiti, to several states in the American South.<sup>6</sup> And just how did it travel so far and survive so long? Vlach calls it “an intelligent modification of culture.” As enslaved Yoruba people were forced to acclimate themselves to Haiti, many retained the basic floor plan and structure of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Definition of Sustainable | Dictionary.Com,” [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), accessed January 13, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Liz Gray, “God’s Little Acre - Newport’s Common Burying Ground,” Rhode Tour, accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Garman, “Viewing the Color Line through the Material Culture of Death,” *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 3 (1994): 74–93.

<sup>4</sup> Olivia Caldwell, “When Construction Is the Easiest Part of Housing Development,” *NewCities* (blog), June 4, 2019, <https://newcities.org/the-big-picture-when-construction-is-the-easiest-part-of-housing-development-developing-an-affordable-housing-market-in-haiti/>.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects, an Introduction to Nonpedigreed Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; distributed by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1964).

<sup>6</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Sources of the Shotgun House: African and Caribbean Antecedents for Afro-American Architecture* (Indiana University., 1975).

*orowa* house—an archetype still found in present-day Nigeria—and adapted it to their new environment.<sup>7</sup> When I asked my parents, who are both Yoruba, if they had ever heard of an *orowa* house, my mother said, “Oh! The one with the long hallway. We call it ‘face-me-I-face-you.’” Her husband went on to explain that the term ‘*orowa*,’ referenced by Vlach, is actually a conjunction of two words: *orọ* and *wá*, meaning “words are here,” or, in a less literal translation, “we should talk.” With these snippets and descriptions, a wider message began to decode itself. Arguably the defining feature of both the *orowa* and the shotgun house is the central hallway spanning the length of each structure. And yet, it is not the aesthetic of this hallway that gives the house its significance; instead, it is the *invisible*, the social context quietly woven into that space that allows the house to maintain its relevance.

George Lipsitz’s defense of the Black spatial imaginary helps us situate this context. Through systemic discrimination, Lipsitz writes, Black people in the US are limited to an ‘artificially constrained housing market,’ where our homes often cost more and appreciate less, compared to white people of similar incomes.<sup>8</sup> So, in turn, Black people have developed an understanding of space “based on sociability and augmented use value [...] relying on each other for bartered goods and services, mobilizing collectively for better city services, and establishing businesses geared to a local ethnic clientele.”<sup>9</sup> All of these factors exist through a spatial imaginary that Lipsitz says “revolves on solidarities within, between and across spaces.” This is in stark contrast to the dominant (white) spatial narrative in the US, that is based on exclusivity and the ideal of a prosperous, privately-owned home.<sup>10</sup>

The late scholar Lisa Smirl expands on the importance of the Black spatial imaginary, linking it to the heightened focus on New Orleans’ architecture post-Katrina. In the wake of the storm, the city saw an influx of tourists and eager professionals wanting to preserve the architectural fabric of regions hit hardest by the hurricane. Brad Pitt famously launched a non-profit organization to help ‘rebuild’ the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, sourcing designs from powerhouse architects like Frank Gehry and Sir David Adjaye. These homes made little effort to blend in or take notes from the existing architecture of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward, and were built with alternative materials that eventually started to decay in the southern Louisiana heat.<sup>11</sup>

There was also an effort to return to the shotgun model and rebrand it as a fashionable alternative to the dismal mobile homes offered by FEMA. Smirl **provides** a rationale for this endeavor, noting that, unlike structural racism, the shotgun house “provided a neutral, deracialized object that could be addressed and repaired.” She explains that this fixation on the architectural form of the house highlights an “inability of external humanitarian actors to tackle the underlying structural causes of the disaster.” Built with a hyper-focus on technical and aesthetic achievements, these new homes failed to account for the social context that had prolonged the need for a shotgun house in the first place.

Of course, no monumental work of architecture ever comes from plain speech. But we’re not talking about monumentality here, we are talking about human beings, who live in houses, and would probably like to continue doing so. As the current architectural canon finds itself so smitten with prestige and aesthetic, those of us who do not benefit from the systems holding those factors in place will have to re-define how we think about land, beauty and function—if

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<sup>7</sup> Vlach.

<sup>8</sup> “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” George Lipsitz, 2018

<sup>9</sup> Lipsitz

<sup>10</sup> Lipsitz

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Smirl, *Spaces of Aid. How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism*, Aug. 2016

not for ourselves, then for the future of our respective communities. Codification is one way of doing this, and it's not even really that new.

Since the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Black people have had to signify. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s analysis of the Signifyin' Monkey can attest to this. In his eponymous book, Gates explains that "thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination."<sup>12</sup> Once accustomed to this language, one can see it anywhere: in cemeteries, on the internet, in the theater, on the campaign trail.<sup>13</sup> And it does not have to be explicitly verbal—a certain degree of flexibility is needed in order to sustain such a complex phenomenon.

For example: the so-called 'architecture of fear' that permeates Nigeria's urban landscape is evident in both the rise of physical restrictions, i.e., high walls,<sup>14</sup> and also of visual signifiers, or ààlè, used to stave off potential thieves.<sup>15</sup> Often made of unassuming items like corncocks, brooms and snail shells, these artefacts have the ability to "transport messages from sender to receiver in situations where direct verbal communication is not convenient or possible."<sup>16</sup> In his book, *Vigilant Things*, David T. Doris explains that in order for the ààlè to work, there must be a shared cultural understanding on both sides, otherwise the warning would not be aptly conveyed.

Doris attributes the communicative properties of these objects to their 'anti-aesthetic' appearance. This term, first coined by Robert Farris Thompson, describes the "expression of artistic ugliness" used in many West African societies as a tool of psychological warfare, protection and self-sustainability.<sup>17</sup> I would like to clarify, though, that by evoking the anti-aesthetic in the title of this essay, I am not advocating for an ugly architecture. Nor do I see the need for a particularly more beautiful one. I simply want to suggest a different mode of thinking about the value and preservation of material cultures.

Where Thompson and Doris declare an 'anti' aesthetic, framed in opposition to Western standards of beauty, I recognize an 'un' aesthetic, which goes beyond form or appearance. The focal point of this un-aesthetic is the social syntax lying beneath a given façade. In her research on domestic building evolution in Yorubaland and Benin, Cynthia Adeokun identifies a theory of space syntax, summarizing that in these regions, "social space always exists in tandem with physical space."<sup>18</sup> Here, you cannot separate the function of a place from its social meaning, and sometimes, that meaning is encrypted for the survival of the space and of its occupant.

Adeokun's theory of space syntax sits well within the realm of the Black spatial imaginary. It helps us to understand that within these environments, survival of the object and of the self are intrinsically linked to one another. Further still, they are in conversation with each

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey : A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black : Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Tunde Agbola, *The Architecture of Fear: Urban Design and Construction Response to Urban Violence in Lagos, Nigeria*, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> David T. Doris, *Vigilant Things: On Thieves, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and The Strange Fates of Ordinary Objects in Nigeria* (University of Washington Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Doris.

<sup>17</sup> Carol F Jopling, *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies; a Critical Anthology*. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Cynthia Adeokun, Eghosa Ekhaese, and Folake Isaacs-Sodeye, "Space Use Patterns and Building Morphology in Yoruba and Benin Domestic Architecture: - A STUDY OF TWO CULTURES IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA.," 2013.

other. This relationship is upheld by way of (un-)aesthetic codification, which extends across various sectors and spaces of Black life. For example, the survival of certain African-based traditions in the US were made possible only through such a masking of communication. Beverly J. Robinson maintains that the ability of enslaved Africans to “communicate subversive messages through ritualized code, even under watchful eyes of whites, was indispensable” to preserving their integrity.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we can resist the temptation to attribute the shotgun’s longevity solely to its rectilinear, often colorful appearance. Even though, over time, the model has retained its basic principles of structure, each shotgun you see in New Orleans is distinctly unique, boasting its own history, its own story. It is not the timeless, architectural gesture that (Western) designers have presumed it to be, nor is it the deliberate expression of artistic ugliness that an ‘anti-aesthetic’ would suggest. Instead, the shotgun functions as more of a physical interface, granting its inhabitants the sustained ability to interact with their respective socio-material environments.

Un-aesthetic codification has played a major role in the evolution of Black material cultures. It is a safety mechanism, a marker of group membership, and a tool of both social and physical sustainability. Incorporating this practice into the design and construction industries will involve a cultural recognition of the communities at stake. It demands the participation and inclusion of various parties, ideas, and technologies into the design process from day one. We simply cannot afford to embrace ‘green’ architecture as a streamlined, merely representative practice—a truly sustainable architecture will include a number of complex, deeply rooted social connections that, from the outside, appear to be nothing at all.

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<sup>19</sup> “The Sense of Self in Ritualizing New Performance Spaces for Survival,” Beverly J. Robinson from *Black Theatre* (2002)