

Buck Studies
Douglas Kearney
Fence Books, 2016

reviewed by Saretta Morgan

Revival and Survival in *Buck Studies*

Douglas Kearney's *Buck Studies* opens with a poetic retelling of the story of Stagger Lee and Billy Lyons—a mythologized folk narrative based on an actual account of black-on-black violence—framed through the lens of Herakles' parricide and subsequent twelve trials. Each of the 12 vignettes that comprise "Stagger Put Work In" re-catalyzes the work of poets, artists and musicians such as Rita Dove, Nick Cave, and Maxwell (to name a few) with multiple registers of riffs, quotation and allusion.

This is the conversation-straddling Amaud Jamaul Johnson acknowledges on the front interior flap of *Buck Studies*, where he insists that the collection be entered "at midnight, only after listening to Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* on repeat, skimming Pindar, Uncle Remus and the Bible, and eating at least two bowls of Count Chocula." True to Johnson's word, Kearney's multi-linealogical range spans western classics to east coast rap and diverse canons in between.

As suggested by the book's epigraph, a Petey Pablo lyric from "Raise Up (All Cities Remix)," this collection is for *us! us! us!*—Black people. Drawing from artists across diverse forms and various socio-economic and racial backgrounds (Eazy-E, Anne Carson, Saidiya Hartman, Robert Rauschenberg), Kearney's cacophonous re-contextualization gives shape to a nuanced and necessary take on identity politics. I think of this form as Black-to-Black Sampling—the practice and progression of an interior conversation in which Black artists revisit and re-contextualize experiences in and through art.

Kearney's contemporaries in this practice are many. Similar re-animation unfolds in Ja'tovia Gary's short film *An Ecstatic Experience*, an excerpt of which rotoscopes archival footage of actress Ruby Dee as she dramatizes a narrative collected from the formerly enslaved African-American woman, Fannie Moore, during the Federal Writers Project.

Ruby Dee pauses, reflects and recites through a brim of tears as she revives Moore's recollection of her mother's mental break into hysteria, laughter and declarations of her own freedom, which were met with—though not interrupted by—a brutal beating on the Carolina plantation where they had been enslaved.

I imagine Kearney and Dee's particular variety of sampling—akin to re-embodiment—as a form of intimacy: a means to hold our beloveds in our own bodies. Whether on the page, on the screen or in song, the re-animation of Black life fosters a productive ventriloquism as one body invites possession by the words of another, thus carrying (literally) their story forward with new voice and gestures.

Such conjuring provides conditions for both pleasure and harsh realization—the lush intimacy of invocation serving as a reminder of what has been lost. This tandem expression of loss pulses through much of black artistic production, as it does through Black life.

Another example: a camera slowly panning down Assoto Saint as he caresses his body in a red and black striped dress shirt during a voice-over of Saint describing how he came to learn he was H.I.V. positive, in Marlon Riggs' 1993 documentary, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*. The knowledge of his body's (at that time, quickly fatal) disease becomes a cause for celebration of its erotic and desirous possibility.

These seemingly incongruent expressions ask us to consider mourning as an unbound feeling capable of presenting itself as intense pleasure and/or pain—both perhaps the result of an irresolvable desire to hold closer that which one cannot. As in the final poem of *Buck Studies*, “Headnote to a Done Poem,” we are compelled to such oscillating expressions of loss.

The name of this elegy to the poet Wanda Coleman alone produces a linguistic teetering. Kearney starts and stops, gives and almost gives, his condolences to the city of L.A. (himself included) for the “funkless, bereft loss” of, among other things, its “...gut bucket-busting with Birds of Paradise, church socks, with coffee grounds...”

His poem tenderly tracks the traces of L.A.'s late, great (Honorary) Poet Laureate—through attention to her history of inhabiting the city and affecting its infrastructure. For example:

Dear Civic Offices of Wrung Hands and Ringing Lines,
I regret to be informed of this new Earthquake cure.
That our smogscrapers won't come to shiver
with pleasure, with terror, with snits.

Kearney privileges Coleman's body by protecting her from view. The reader has her, and doesn't have her. As opposed to the dead black male body that opens the book, and the tortured Brer Rabbit at its core, Coleman is refracted through a spectral and material landscape, as if her body were shielded by a mirror to the city she once reigned over without notice until, too soon, she became,

...all what's left below folding chairs,
in garage-rotting boxes,
and by the final curb,
her words where her picture would be,
the picture where her words.

Kearney's treatment of Coleman ripples back through the collection and offers another way to consider Kearney's commitment to (a re-focused) identity politics. Identity politics as a discourse around the *way WE do*, as opposed to *who WE are*. The former as a means to explore the connections between what groups of people under similar or shared conditions and registers of oppression and neglect have been moved to do/affect/create.

A more ocular approach to this concept presents itself in the seven-channel, silent video installation, *Live* (2014), created by Glenn Ligon (a contemporary of Kearney's), where each screen in a dark, soundless room displays a different area of Richard Pryor's body (including a frame dedicated to his shadow), from the 1982 recording of Pryor's performance, *Live at Sunset Strip*. Ligon's removal of audio allows viewers to focus on the zoomed in screens of Pryor's body parts, drawing attention to the nuanced postures and gestures that accompany the comedian's delivery.

Kearney's live performances are as nuanced with attention to gesture and timbre. The variations of tone and volume, his lightning fast asides, and his motion around the room or behind the podium track and amplify the movement of the work and its many voices through his body.

It matters how we move through the world. How we express ourselves, and how deeply. When I consider Fannie Moore's mother, I wonder if her feelings

of euphoria represented a kind of mourning she could inhabit as opposed to alter. I think of her and think maybe ecstasy is what we call an interior schism we can live through, and grief when we cannot.

To consider a form of mourning that moves us through the world is to look closely at our rhythms, movements and soundings. It's to ask: *what will make me possible, today?* And to re-imagine that possibility the next day. Then the next. This ritual requires innovation as well as the wealth of survival-inspired gesture and language remembered in black life and art. It's why we need artists like Douglas Kearney, whose work—its pressures on the page as well as in performance—ushers conditions of possibility with each parenthetical (!), superscripted^{tic}, jumbled WELL HUNG and KA-BOOM. Ever-evolving, his visual soundscapes continue to create and draw attention to the new, imagined and recalled spaces our bodies might (over)fill.

Saretta Morgan's work engages relationships between intimacy and organization. She has designed interactive, text-based experiences for The Whitney Museum of American Art, Dia Beacon, Tenri Cultural Institute, and as a 2016-2017 Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace resident. Her chapbooks, *Elegy Against an Obscured Interior* (2017) and *Feeling Upon Arrival* (2018) are forthcoming from Portable Press @ Yo Yo Labs and Ugly Duckling Press, respectively.