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In Conversation with Erick Msumanje and Alexis Hithe

Erick Msumanje, Alexis Hithe, and Kristen Laciste

Erick Msumanje's short film, *VOLTA VOLTA*, and the accompanying artist statement, written by Alexis Hithe, reflect on the "ritual" and "digital" spaces experienced by Black bodies. Editorial board member Kristen Laciste had the privilege to interview Msumanje, who is currently a Film and Digital Media Ph.D. student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Hithe, an alumna of the Visual Arts program at the University of California, San Diego, and a collaborator with the collective, Lotus. Laciste asked them about their endeavor, particularly the film's inspirations and the articulation of "ritual" and "digital." Laciste interviewed Msumanje in person and Hithe via Skype and over the phone on June 14, 2018. The following is the result of the dialogue between Msumanje, Hithe, and Laciste.

Kristen Laciste: How would you characterize the relationship between *VOLTA VOLTA* and *Refract*'s theme, "Refraction"?

Alexis Hithe: My understanding of "refract," physically speaking, calls to mind an example from high school chemistry when you stick a pencil in a cup of water. On the top surface, it looks like the pencil entered one direction, and on the bottom it looks like it entered from another, creating this break-up. In relation to *VOLTA VOLTA*, it would be about these two things that seem to be at different points through our perception that really begin at one origin. And the perception doesn't rule out any truth. The pencil is in two different spots broken up. You can't deny that physical seeing. So for me, *VOLTA VOLTA* visually and formally gives us that experience.

Erick Msumanje: How would you, Alexis, insert Blackness within “refraction”? In my mind, I viewed it as a code, or some kind of vessel that you use to break down the way in which we think about “refraction.” If possible, could you walk us through what you were thinking and how you applied Blackness to open up the space of “refraction”?

AH: I think it’s important to acknowledge the duality—the dualities—of Black bodies that W.E.B. Du Bois outlines in his theory of double consciousness and also further, a dual physicality to the Black body. It is a container for consciousness, but it is also a container that outside bodies fill with their projections in order for them to benefit in a certain way. So, the Black body is interesting to think about in terms of “refraction” because it is an entry point and an exit point. It’s a place from which someone’s consciousness comes from, and place from which someone else’s consciousness projects into, and from that interaction, we can go back to the pencil. It’s connected, they’re not separate acts; they come from the same point, they come from the same history of dehumanization, enslavement, colonization, brutality. I think that’s why we’ve seen many times before, for example in the tradition of Afrofuturism, the ways in which Black authors, theorists, illustrators and creators think these tropes or styles all to communicate the phenomenon that the Black body is a vessel, an entry and an exit point. Speaking in terms of Afrofuturism, you see the alien as a character that Black bodies are often attributed. You look at the cartoon body and magical beings beyond physical explanation—ghosts, spirits, shamans—all these kinds of vessels that Black bodies are assigned serve as allegorical devices to communicate this in-betweenness and this sameness, that is the entry and exit: the “refraction” of that existence.

KL: I was reminded of Frantz Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” and his experience of being shocked, which is an understatement, by the young child who assigns a role to him, seeing him as a “foreigner” or “outsider.” I appreciate that you’re tying this into Afrofuturism as well. Afrofuturist authors and artists use these tropes to show how the Black body was, is, and continues to be projected. So, who are filmmakers or artists that you are in conversation with through this piece?

EM: The fantastic book *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri (1991) was the original inspiration behind *VOLTA VOLTA*. It’s about a young boy named Azaro. He has the ability to see spirits and creatures from an alternate universe that interact with his current reality. He is a spirit child, which means that he is an *Abiku*. Loosely, it translates to “predestined death.” This is because they have the ability

to navigate between the worlds of the living and dead. In fact, they are really unique because they possess the ability to be reborn. Still, the tension for Azaro is really what intrigued me. He is in the in-between space of life and death. That space was really inspirational. It allowed me to ask questions. How do you tell a story that exists in the in-between? How do you see the unseen? What is this sense of being like? Another point of inspiration is simply my grandpa telling me stories about him seeing spirits and talking to spirits, or interacting with his friends that have passed, like literally ending up sharing a beer with them. But the way in which he talks about them is not scary or weird, it just is what it is. I would say those are the base inspirations, and from there, comes works from John Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History* (1996) and his concept of the Data Thief, how that character can move forwards and backwards. Another layer is Pedro Costa's phenomenal film called *Colossal Youth* (2007), which is about this old guy who's really slow. It relates to slow cinema; when you're bored or when you're idle and in a space where nothing happens, it becomes a space where everything happens. How do you create a space where everything, yet nothing, is happening? How does that look? And then a lot of African records, a lot of Haitian records. And then photography also really inspires the work.

AH: Speaking of photography, the constant issue of it being documentary comes up for me. I would be interested to know how you, Erick, would place *VOLTA VOLTA* in conversation with documentary?

EM: That's a good question. As soon as you asked it, I was taken back to a typical dialogue that comes up around my work, something that I always try to work through, and I think it has to do with the way Black bodies and Black spaces are represented. An easy reading is to say that the work shows Black people in a negative light, it's stereotypical. One of the things that I've been trying to work through is getting the work to move beyond that space, beyond that kind of reading. A lot of the time when people approach the work, they view it as documentary, particularly the first half. I tell them that actually a lot of these things that you're seeing incorporate documentary practices, but the little twist is that it's actually fiction, it's staged, it's improvised, there's collaboration happening. It can be difficult when submitting to a film festival, for example, to explain that the film has documentary qualities, but is actually a narrative piece that looks like a documentary. I think that's one of the challenges. How is a piece like *VOLTA VOLTA* supposed to be read? Where can a film like this or bodies of work like this exist? How does the maker, in this case me, negotiate that? As a Black filmmaker working in Black spaces with Black people, how do you not redo the

stereotypes? I think that's a challenge at times. It raises questions like: What's Black cinema? What's Black filmmaking? And to complicate it further, what's Black filmmaking like when it's a person from Tanzania filming in Haiti, connected by the slave trade?

KL: I also think of the ways in which documentary practices become further complicated once you insert yourself into the film and when you invite others to collaborate. Turning to the artist statement, Alexis, you mention "ritual spaces" and "ritual exchanges" repeatedly. Could you further elaborate what is meant by "ritual space"? And are these spaces in the film gendered?

AH: Ritual space is not limited to a building or a particular geography, but is a space, or a container for a ritual moment. In the film, we see the interior of a church where young girls are dressed in white. The ritual space is that church, but it could also be the pews, pulpit, or baptismal water basin. They have to do with the physical location. The ritual exchange refers to the specific action—in *VOLTA VOLTA*, the razor coming up against the face in a routine manner, up and down. It's made clearer by the way we see those ritual exchanges filmed; there's a sort of reverence for those moments. That's what points us to ritual for them. As far as those two things being gendered, that's interesting. I don't particularly see in the filming of these spaces and exchanges a gendering, but I think we can acknowledge that ritual is often gendered, so there is perhaps a gendered experience with those spaces. Speaking for my own self as a woman raised in a family where my grandparents on my mother's side were Baptist, and I would go to my aunt's church in the South, you have women sitting on one side of the church and men sitting on another. The ritual space becomes gendered because of that. I think there is definitely a potential for ritual spaces to be gendered, as well as exchanges, as bodies have an experience of gender, whether that be cis, trans, non-binary. The rituals that one has with one's own body definitely have a particularly gendered experience—shaving a beard for one body would be a completely different experience for another.

KL: Thank you so much for that clarification. Moreover, what is meant by "digital space"? And is this connected to "ritual space"?

AH: The digital space, connecting back to what we were speaking about earlier regarding Afrofuturism, is an allegorical space. In this film, we see it literally in a digital space because it's a film that we're viewing on a digital platform with digital codes and digital files. But on a larger scale, we're seeing it as an allegorical space.

I think it's important to point out that *VOLTA VOLTA* has that deep, dark, black space in the second half of the film. When we first cut to it, I think for me it immediately read as "digital," maybe because of the year I was born, and this experience is well-documented through Afrofuturist techniques: using the "digital" as an allegory for the Black body and for its experiences. Black children in the early 2000s were coding on platforms on MySpace in order to communicate with others, to explore new things, but also, it was about expression of identity. What song are you going to add to your page? What's the background? What photos are you going to use? How are you going to manipulate those photos to make them look totally different? There are so many expressions of and engagements with Black identity through a digital platform, and so when I see a black space like that in the film, I instantly think of the internet, which completely fucks up our way of thinking about the Black body. What happens when that body goes digital? What happens to that body when you cannot physically act on it, but you have a digital code for it. I think in my writing on the digital space, that's what I'm drawing on: that complication, the new perspectives that the Black body exists in. I remember when I saw *VOLTA VOLTA* and approached Erick, I said, "Hey, I really want to write something about the film, the Black body, and digital space." That was something I received from the film. I'd love to hear what Erick has to say or thinks about that digital space that I feel the film places the Black body within.

EM: I love how you talk about those two worlds in terms of the ritual and the digital, the ways in which they complement each other. And I think, for me, to take a step back, one of my earliest things that I was trying to tackle is: how do you tell a story in Black space? A space in which there isn't really a background to situate the viewer. How do movements work? Where does the sound come from? To give myself some grounding, I imagined the space operating in a circle. And then I thought about where things were happening vis-a-vis the sound. Maybe the sound is coming from the left or from the right, up or down. That's where I was kind of dabbling. As you were talking, I was thinking about how we engage in ritual every day, even though we don't call it "ritual." For some reason the term, perhaps viewed in the Western context, is this scary or alien thing, even though every day we wake up in the morning, make coffee, go to work—that's a ritual. And people forget how in terms of the digital and our reality, we're so connected, you know. So can one's life play out in the digital space? How does a Black body operate in the digital space? Is it still a body, and if it's code, what does that code mean? In connection to the question of gender, I was thinking about how in the digital, the body is fluid. The way I was thinking about digital space had to do with the traditional voodoo African practices. You know, you go to a medicine man and he

gives you something to transform you into something else. I think that's what the digital space does. It's a transformative apparatus where you can be yourself and everything at once. You can exist in various places, and that's how I imagined the digital space. Also in connection to the film, if we're treating the Black space as digital, and it's black, literally, how do you see in that space? How do you make things visible? How does listening work in that space? And that is how I was approaching "digital-tality" —is that a word?

KL: If not, then you're coining it!

AH: I've always wondered if every computer in the just world shuts down and nobody accesses the internet ever again, where does it all go?

EM: Uh-oh!

AH: I feel the same for Black people in this world. We have a problem where a lot of people who write sci-fi don't write Black people, people of color, in the script, and so we see these futuristic films coming out on the big screen without any people of color, and I wonder where did their impact on the world go? You can watch a whole film about zombies invading New York City, a city that was built by people you do not see in the film. For me, digital in the context of origin is so important to draw parallels to when we're talking about the Black experience and the Black body in a film like *VOLTA VOLTA*.

EM: When I started thinking about Blackness in relation to a technology, my form of inspiration, I guess in the margins of Afrofuturism a bit, is actually the blues. And in particular, Robert Johnson. He's known as the godfather of the blues, but the way that the legend is situated is that the blues is a Black technology that he got at the crossroads.

AH: I like how you brought up the blues and Robert Johnson. I am fixated on this idea currently that I speak a different language because I am Black. Not because I am speaking another language other than English, and not simply because of the regional dialects of English and vernacular that people have because I am in a body that experiences Blackness that reads as "Black." I am from a family of Black bodies, I have those Black experiences. I really believe that speaks another language because of my body. I believe that when I speak to someone who does not have a Black body, there is the great chance for misinterpretation or no communication at all. And I think what kick-started this idea for me that now feels

like a reality was when I was at a concert by a rapper named Isaiah Rashad. I think he's ahead of the curve because of his narrative use and exploration of his experiences with his particular body. When he was performing on stage there was a moment he stopped rapping, and just began to make noises with his throat. He was doing it melodically and rhythmically, but he wasn't saying anything. He was just using his voice, and he was trying to get the crowd—this was at UC San Diego by the way—to do this with him and to follow his rhythm, to move with him, and to make noises like that with him. There were very few Black people in this audience. I was with two Black friends of mine and I saw maybe three other Black people the whole night I was there. The three of us hummed back with him, rocked along to the rhythm back with him. And I looked up and no one else in the crowd was even moving. It blew my mind and I remember saying to my friends, “Do they not hear what he is saying?” For me, that was a moment of epiphany, because of this body; sometimes there are things that I say, or things that other people's bodies say that other people do not understand because it's coming from this body. They don't understand it.

I love that you were thinking of Robert Johnson and the blues because so much of it is about feeling and experience. The blues is completely expressive and also has a strong formal backbone. There are so many lyrics that the kings and queens of old blues sang on the spot. My favorite blues artist is Lead Belly. I didn't know until last year that most of his sound, songs, and recordings were made in prison in Louisiana. The money that was made from most of his recordings went to the white men who came to record him singing because they had heard that he was participating in this new folk sound. It really speaks to me about the Black body being that way. If we're speaking digitally, there is a code to the Black body and the Black experience that can't unlock simply by entering the code into one address bar and then it comes up. You either have that code or you don't. The word “code” comes from our understanding of DNA as well. And if your DNA does not have the right code, those cells will not be copied. So those are all the things that circulate in my head when you talk about Robert Johnson and his use of blues, and that very Black, very digital experience. I think you can go so far and say that the Black body is a digital experience.

EM: I know I wasn't there, but I've been thinking about sound studies here at UC Santa Cruz. I was thinking about listening. What is listening? How do we listen? And how are we trained to listen to certain sounds, and why do we hear certain sounds and leave others out? What does the sonic say about the human experience in general? In connection to *VOLTA VOLTA*. I've been thinking about the

concept of listening. To me, listening is seeing. Listening is reading. Listening is connecting.

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Erick Msumanje is an award-winning hybrid filmmaker and visual artist. He holds a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of San Diego. His work primarily focuses on telling meditative and poetic stories that blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Currently, he is a Ph.D. student in the Film and Digital Media program at University of California, Santa Cruz.

Story-making and history-telling, Alexis Hithe creates conceptual and experimental work that focuses on the Black experience and its imaginings. A graduate of University of California, San Diego's Visual Arts program, Alexis draws inspiration from her childhood in the Mojave Desert of southern California and takes a non-traditional approach to filmmaking; she believes that truth emerges somewhere between doing and dreaming, and practices radical patience as a part of her art process.