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REVISIONING THE ARCHIVAL TURN
Ariel Martino

None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life by Stephen Best. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 208 pp. Paper $24.95.

Readers of African-American literary criticism will already be familiar with Stephen Best's now-famous provocation from his 2012 essay "On Failing to Make the Past Present" that "a sense of racial belonging rooted in the historical dispossession of slavery seems unstable grounds on which to base a politics."[1] Regardless of one's orientation to that article and the critical conversation that it generated, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* provides an extensive framework through which an astute reader might question the assumptions, orientations, and biases that undergird the field. The monograph allows Best the space to elaborate a methodology, one that depends upon a careful examination of the critical desires and practices that have come to define Black cultural studies. Bringing together an extensive critique of the collective impulse in Black studies and a discourse of "unbelonging" from queer studies, Best argues that "there is something impossible about blackness" (2). Taking its title from David Walker's 1833 pamphlet *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*—wherein he prays "that none like us may ever live again until time shall be no more"—Best begins with historical refusal. Walker's prayer negates the connection between the past and present; it denies Best a filial relationship with Walker because, subject to Walker's wish,

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Best does not exist (9). How, then, do we position ourselves in relation to this history that denies our existence? Best argues that we must do it in ways that preserve history's contingency, resisting narratives that relate history to the present and that define political collectives through recourse to the historical. In his estimation we must face history through glimpses and glances, and we must do so alone.

The first half of the book is most concerned with the art object and its ability to "perform, in one way or another, an intellectual or philosophical project" (34). United by a resistance to centralized history and memory as markers of cohesion, these art works produce their own contingent conceptions of "freedom" that Best encourages critics to adapt. The first chapter, titled "My Beautiful Elimination," reads visual art by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, the Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford, and the poem "Boy Breaking Glass" by Gwendolyn Brooks. Best posits these works as "surfaces that point reflexively to their own, internal complexities so that they can also be said to offer their own form of critical understanding and, in that sense, to be the very medium in which thought happens" (34). He focuses on the ephemeral, changing, mutable qualities of each work, arguing that through perceptual effects that resist permanence, they take on a "self-consuming form" (34). The work of El Anatsui provides a phenomenologically confounding example. *Fading Cloth* is a wall-sized installation that appears to be a tapestry made of gold but upon closer examination is revealed to be bottle caps fastened together by copper wire. In fact, the bottle caps were collected by the artist, and their materiality gestures to a history of exchange between West Africa and the United States emanating from the slave trade through global capitalism in the twenty-first century. Best deemphasizes the work's frame, focusing instead on the effect produced by its trompe l'oeil, and what happens in the space between perceiving the tapestry as gold and realizing one's mistake. In that moment, he claims, "the artwork ceases to exist; it forces you to lose sight of form, and what have disappeared along with this form are all of the symbolic 'links' it was said to sustain" (50). The artwork produces the trick and, in doing so, resists the historical and contextual frameworks that might impose other meanings.

The chapter also contains an elucidation of how the critic might practice self-consuming work. Drawing on Cedric Robinson and Robin D. G. Kelley, Best identifies the Black radical imagination as a tradition that "inspires the urge to find other ways to articulate loss" (42). Aesthetic markers like

opacity and surrealism present a challenge to interpretation, just as El Anatsui's exceeds its contextual frame. Both fail to register historical loss and confound the desire to ascribe meaning to the work. Rather than compensating for that failure, Best examines the gap, the trompe l'oeil, and his relation to it. He "observe[s] that the agon of wrestling with the failure, resistance, or impossibility of something that was lost to history making an *appearance* often carries with it fears and desires about social *acknowledgement*" (43). The concept of social acknowledgement comes from Stanley Cavell, who regards the skeptic's rejection of appearance—the refusal to accept the phenomenological world as it is—as analogous to an inability to acknowledge other humans. Best affirms this failure of sociality in Cavellian skepticism and argues that the link also has implications for the way that social acknowledgement bears on questions of race. He contends that the relationship between appearance and acknowledgement "provides a way to understand how our attachment to objects that are beneath the threshold of appearance bears the weight of various modes of belonging" (43). Put another way, a collective desire to "uncover" hidden meaning, in the work of art or in the archive, corresponds to a specific mode of belonging. In Black cultural studies this correlation has led to a critical position that encourages continual acts of framing and meaning-making. Through skepticism towards appearance, or what appears, Best suggests that other social formations or other forms of acknowledgement might cohere. If we "think like a work of art," we might be attuned to what is produced in the act of criticism itself.

Read in this light, the book's second chapter, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," feels buttressed by such a methodology as Best stages his trenchant critique of the link between the slave past and the present. Pushing back against the urge to define racial belonging through the historical rupture of slavery, Best argues, "To be historical in our work, we might thus have to resist the impulse to redeem the past and instead rest content with the fact that our orientation toward it remains forever perverse, queer, askew" (65). Turning to the work of Toni Morrison, Best compares her 1988 novel *Beloved*, a narrative of mourning that he ties to a movement in Black literary scholarship that interrogated the slave past, to her 2008 novel *A Mercy*. The latter text, set in 1680, "conjures up a moment of pure possibility, before a decision has been made and history has begun to rumble down a path that leads to us" (78). It provides a difficult and slippery

model of history, one that cannot be neatly posited as an originary point on a teleology from slavery to the present day. Instead, the novel insists on discontinuity, a strategy that Best argues allows Morrison to question and delimit her earlier recuperative historical projects. What seems to be at stake in this chapter is historical particularity. Best wants the novel to evince the fleeting, ephemeral qualities that the artworks examined in the first chapter undeniably do. If that is the case, and we acknowledge the gaps and fissures in history as sites of production, rather than as failures to be redeemed, we might gain a sense of the unfixed nature of the past.

The book's second half continues theorizing this mutable historical past, turning to mistakes, rumors, and representations of death in the archive. These failures, often regarded as lost or receding historical objects, point to an archival mode that describes rather than recuperates. Best conceptualizes the "archive as process—attending principally to archivization as a process whose goal is both to preserve some record of Black culture and to deform it in the process" (87). The third chapter, "The History of People Who Did Not Exist," examines historical descriptions of suicide across several archives, posing a question as to "whether self-immolation presents a problem for history *writing*" (94). The fourth chapter, "Rumor in the Archive," evaluates the archival practice of recording rumor and makes a case for the ontological instability of rumor-as-writing, making it a quintessential representation of history as unstable, subject to ruptures and deformations that cannot be repaired. Together these chapters ask us to examine our relationship to the archive and to alter our archival practices to better account for history's contingencies.

For a book that is so skeptical of a shared cultural past, *None Like Us* contains a payoff that is strikingly collective in its call for a more capacious critical future. Best concludes by arguing, "Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a 'we'—or if it is, that 'we' can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal" (132). Even in acknowledging the absence of a collective, however, Best advances a methodological shift in how we write about the past, one that he hopes other scholars will emulate. Adopting Brent Hayes Edwards's formulation of the "queer archive," he posits a practice of "multiple approaches towards one's object, [but] never arriving at it" (26). This asymptotic orientation toward the archive echoes Christina Sharpe's contention in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* that the archival object is not straightforward. Sharpe writes, "I am interested in how we imagine

ways of knowing the past in excess of the fictions of the archive."[2] While Best would undoubtedly refuse Sharpe's rhetorical collectivism and her argument that the Black subject is defined by his or her relation to the violence of slavery and its afterlife, I am struck by the fact that two thematically opposed books make a similar methodological claim. Examining the archival processes that underwrite how we understand history is crucial in producing scholarship that really contends with that history. For Sharpe, that means uncovering the ways in which violence has structured Black experience, and for Best, that means acknowledging the fact that history is completely unknowable from the vantage point of the present. Contending with that fact challenges paradigms that would characterize history as stable, calling for a mode of analysis that portrays the marginal, contingent, ephemeral, deformed, and discontinuous without redeeming or otherwise politicizing them. Best inscribes a history that can be as experimental and tentative as our present.

Ariel Martino is a PhD candidate at Rutgers University in New Brunswick and a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellow. She is currently writing a dissertation called "Governing Aesthetics: Form and Politics in Black Hemispheric Literature 1929–1962" about Black radicalism, literary form, and state formation.

NOTES

1. Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 454.
2. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.