

Face Changer

Ben Hall

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Introduction

Ekphrastic response as a practice of writing has long held an important role: interposing the boundaries between creative disciplines, allowing one form of expression to speak through another, providing commentary on the experience of witnessing works of art. Like the tradition of Black Mountain College, ekphrasis is inherently interdisciplinary. In this essay, Ben Hall responds to works by artists Tyondai Braxton, Grace Villamil, Jace Clayton, and Martha Colburn, which were themselves responses—to the life, work, and legacy of African American painter Jacob Lawrence. Together with his wife and fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight, Lawrence spent the summer of 1946 teaching at the recently integrated Black Mountain College. Hall's response links art with writing—as well as with the realms of the historical, personal, and emotional.

The contemporary works to which Hall is responding are:

- *Search for Function*, a collaborative multimedia installation by Tyondai Braxton and Grace Villamil.
- *The Jacob Lawrence of Jacob Lawrence* by Jace Clayton aka DJ /rupture. This included a performance lecture by Clayton with Arooj Aftab, as well as a single-channel video installation containing hand-drawn animation. The artist's research involved searching historic American newspapers for mentions of "Jacob Lawrence" that pre-dated the celebrated artist Jacob Lawrence, then bringing those texts and stories to life through the performance and video.
- *'Hammer-Camera-Scissors' (The workers of Jacob Lawrence)*, a four-channel video installation that animated the laborers depicted in Jacob Lawrence's artwork in side-by-side looping videos.

These were commissioned for the exhibition *Between Form and Content: Perspectives on Jacob Lawrence + Black Mountain College*, on view from September 28, 2018 to January 12, 2019. This essay was originally published in the exhibition catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

—JBMCS Editors



The impossibility of a response to this set of works, the contemporary response, is the same impossible task Martha, Jace, Grace, and Tyondai, the responders themselves have. To which Jacob Lawrence do they respond? Is it the Jacob Lawrence I know? — the one I found through John Brown? Or are they Lawrences, not a single being but an opacity? Though there's a question here about a multiplicity producing an opacity or maybe just a many faceted person that's more to know, to be known.

Maybe he's the Jacob Lawrence unfixed from his own moment, title, narrative, history painting and all? The single kaleidoscopic Lawrence is both static and evolving, a fixed set moving in relation to itself, the diaspora and migratory possibility of the individual, lobster shedding, growth into a too small shell, shell discarded, flesh exposed, new shell for growth, repeat. That's my guy. That's our guy, Jake.

Grace made a topography, and Tyondai made a circuit. Jace made a history of Jacobs, even though he seems to be a Jake in this history. That's how his wife calls him, "Jake." Martha made a dance that some people would think of as a performance doc. The seamstress, the watchmaker, the dishwasher, the cabinet maker all work in jagged interminable loops, "home chores," never completed. This animation, animated, the movement, the fixed moment of labor visibilized, visually to perform over and over the same tasks. It's like when they discuss the heroism of the everyday but then think about having to live out the everyday, EVERYDAY.

Jacob Lawrence as *ubermensch*. Jacob Lawrence as waiter. Jacob Lawrence as drinker, husband, teacher. Lawrence the U of Wash professor with no known extant teaching materials, at least they don't exist at the U, the myth of syllabus. Lawrence as soldier, coastal guardian, leaned back in that one photo crackerjack bellbottoms, not even a sailor tie, more like the loosest fold that could ever constitute a knot, which says something about him as Jacob Lawrence, sailor. Jacob Lawrence, in the USCG was a weatherman, sky viewer, cloud watcher, integrated yacht rider, (the yacht he was on first owned by the actual E.F. Hutton and later sold to Trujillo.)

Jacob Lawrence, drawer, Jacob Lawrence, printmaker. Lawrence, the line reducer, the color narrower, the hue intensifier. Lawrence, impossible to humblebrag given his humanity and his multitudes. Lawrence, Whitman, and John Brown are the same but also blades, comrades, 'camerados', as are all the other Jacob Lawrences that we know, we view, we learn.

I have long known Jacob Lawrence. It was Jacob Lawrence that introduced me to also *ubermensch* John Brown not the other way around as I said before. Jacob Lawrence, the visual Boswell to John Brown's, Samuel Johnson. The paintings he made about John Brown, abolitionist hero and all-around visionary invoker of righteous gun-stealing and hatchet-borne violence at Ossawatimie/Potawotomie Brown, Harper's Ferry Brown, were too fragile to travel. My home museum, my local, known most famously for

being caught in the cultural crossfire of municipal bankruptcy and a set of Rivera murals sonning Henry Ford, the just barely avoided being not pilfered, nor picked apart, neither sold for parts, Detroit Institute of Arts, created the screen prints that are now near ubiquitous messages of the possibility of a very specific Anglo-colonial interdiction against the routing of capital through forced labor of stolen, kidnapped, human trafficked, African diasporic bodies. I grew up on those prints. That was elementary school trips with Jake and John.

I mention these John Brown prints because I know them like I know an old suit, favorite, but also a single, onlyest suit, pockets stretched, shiny with wear, pant cuff hem a little less tight than one would like. The prints were made for kids, in a way. The prints, in my earliest memory, hung at my child's height so that they could speak to me at ear height. This is the whole series with a top row and a bottom row, and my ear was at printmouth height so that I felt their breath on my face and in my brain. They whispered to me sternly and gave me a talking to, like when an adult crouches in a catcher's stance, putting both hands on your shoulders to steady your future. Lawrence's description of Brown's journey is itself a libretto. The libretto itself a collection of descriptions that animate the material. To animate with language. Jake's wife, Gwen, would help him with the words, the just-rightness of those little descriptive phrases. Jake and Gwen being didactic in a way that no one gets away with in the whole of art history. But this is their libretto that you sing to yourself, following the pictures of Brown's fight and demise in past time, molasses time, pitch time.



Arooj Aftab and Jace Clayton aka DJ /rupture, *The Jacob Lawrence of Jacob Lawrence*, October 19, 2018. Performance lecture, with script including text collected from American newspaper mentions of “Jacob Lawrence” pre-dating the celebrated artist Jacob Lawrence. Photo by Jesse Kitt.

I had a dream, maybe ten years ago, that I was at a birthday party that turned out to be my own and that all the balloons had been filled with Jimi Hendrix’s and Eddie Kendricks’s breath, both of these heroes long gone. But no one was at the party. I was the first to arrive, a shade early. It was afternoon and empty. Sunny, but low sun coming in straight through the windows. Dust in the air, hazy rays. And stillness. I had this dream in my 30s. All the balloons waved lazy at nipple height. Only one friend showed up to the party on time.

I was disappointed in the way you are when you throw a party, no one shows up, and you’ve clearly cooked too much chicken. There was also the disappointed stilted gumminess of dreams that release you to a different consciousness as a sovereign, a cut time temporary autonomous zone, but somehow you still can’t flex the way you want to in the real or dream world. You can feel your words like little ill conceptualized jabs,

dash to the body of your consciousness, but they don't really do what words are supposed to. Or the jabs—they don't connect.

In that dream the lone early guest walked in and told me we should breathe those balloons like Kendricks/Hendrix nitrous, and such behavior would in turn make us Seattle/Motown helium golems. We did and it did. We animated ourselves in the dream with the breath of these other humans. Mouth to mouth resuscitation and in turn recitation of what in my dream memory became a Rainy Day Dream Date With The Rain. We sang the words. The sound not a dumb pitch-shift, pitchmunk Alvin high but just our breath bike pumped up with the breath of other humans. Then the other party goers showed up, and it was a real drag. No one else would breathe the balloons. No one complimented the chicken. This, dream, memory, imagined reality all might be because at the other and only museum I went to on an elementary school field trip, now called The Henry Ford, they have a beaker of Thomas Edison's breath that his son thought to capture when he was taking his last breaths. They also have the Bucky Fuller Dymaxion House prototype and Rosa Parks' bus.

In Jennifer Egan's *The Keep* there're a couple of convicted felons celling together and one of them builds a radio out of a shoebox and dust, a bit of paint and not much more. Davis, the radio builder shares it with Ray the other guy. He says it's all the voices you can't hear or can't hear anymore, the lower frequencies as Ellison wrote. Ray calls him, "A genuine bug. A bug who thinks he's built a machine that can talk to ghosts." "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" wrote Ellison.

Davis trying to convince Ray says, "I see that look. You're thinking, Whats old Davis playing at? Is he trying to pass himself off as some kind of sorcerer? But think about it, brother: new technology always looks like magic. When Tom Edison turned on that tin phonograph of his back in 1877, you think people believed that was for real? Hell no. Ventriloquism, they said. Voodoo."

Actual facts it was just a bit of recorded breath. Breath vibrating, breath from a needle, breath out of a tin horn. Breath in a beaker. Ghost notes.

Jake's breath, all the Jacobs, the Jacobs' breaths are all over all the things he made. And they breathe all over you, me, they, all, us, we. This is the only breath we have that animates. The lenders are their own diaspora, their own breath vessels, lended, landed all over the country a constellation of color and breath and depiction. When someone told me that they had animated Jacob's drawings, "Jake's", I felt faint with indignation. I hadn't thought that's a thing that could ever happen because the moments are fixed but there's always a clear before and after that happens off frame.

If the series *Tubman/Brown/Douglass/L'Ouverture/Migration/History of the American People* teach us anything, it's that each frame and memory has a before and an after. A good rectangle of time and space in a photo or painting stretches the temporality infinitely forwards and back, oscillating an all time present.



Detail view of Tyondai Braxton and Grace Villamil, *Search for Function*, 2018. Mixed media and sound. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Gift of the Artists. Photo by Michael Oppenheim.

Tyondai built a circuit—it is just that. And a circuit is like a map, a map of current and circulation, bodies and trade. Currents. Waves, waves, waving, the same thing, the same people, remaking themselves, the waves higher than the boat. The older, out of use definition of map is face. Faces as currents. All the faces Lawrence painted, Jake. Sometimes they're terrifying handmade masks. Sometimes they're skulls. They're always pulling a mug. Jake paints from memory so each mug, each map, is imagined. But every mug, map, face, mask is attached to a body specific to its present, its task, its labor and escape, its pre-framing and post-framing. But they're all from imagination, so how do we imagine Lawrence imagining their pre-frame, their post-frame, before and after the rectangle of time he delineates especially when these aren't "real" people?

They're just drawings. How does Tyondai imagine his circuit to work when it's clearly a circuit, a thing that demands current, but isn't plugged in like so many illegally powered light bulbs in a Harlem basement, the longest homemade circuit I know? Davis's radio didn't need to be plugged in either. What current does he imagine we hear and is it the same sound that's playing in the room? It's all the people moving like the ghosts in that Davis's radio. All those old voices. All those breaths making a sonorous meta-breath that circulates, performs a circuit, the current of all those made up ghost people in Jake's animation frames, painted cells—because that is what they are, without any belittlement, animated ghosts. Tyondai brings those ghost voices. Hello there, ghost.

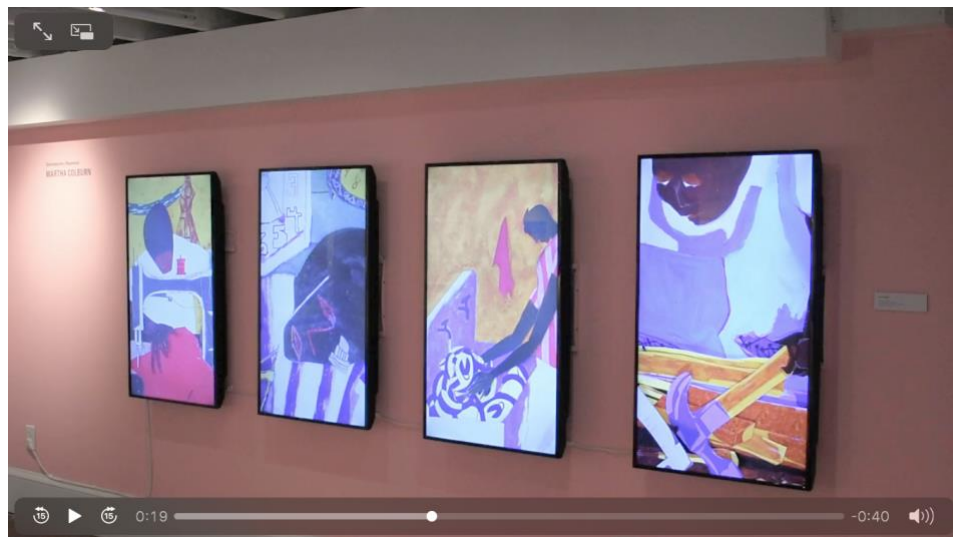
Grace made a topography. I know I said that already, but you have to remember this is Black Mountain. Black Mountain is an actual place. A Black Mountain. Even when you watch Merce talk with Paik, Cage, and Dore Ashton, he says, "Black Mountain"—not "Black Mountain College" or "Black Mountain, N.C." To come here/go there is to remember what the South is and also that Black Mountain, the college, was the first integrated higher-ed institution in this same South. Alma Stone Williams integrated Black Mountain, the college, a full ten years before *Brown v. Board of Education*. This was Albers and Julius Rosenwald and Stone Williams and Jake and Gwen all thinking about what Black Mountain, a black mountain is, could be. It is almost conspiratorial but

is also the punk thing you can do when nobody is actually paying attention.

Remembering too that Josef and Anni are refugees? On the lam. Can escape be punk?

Grace made a topography. Jake taught at Black Mountain. Gwen was there, too, but not as an instructor. In the South, on Black Mountain, at Black Mountain, on that topography, that thing that can't be seen but only felt as waves, as a wave, as a topography, as a surface, and Grace made a topography.

It also exists in the ghost-voice space of land, surface, and also in the breath of Tyondai's score for the circuit and topography. I wasn't there, but I'm told they, Grace and Tyondai, spent many hours on the scaffold together as partners. There is a video about Jacob Lawrence on the LACMA website, where he's described as a "Harlem Renaissance painter"—Harlem in 1930 same time as Garvey and Ras the Destroyer and Ellington and Bumpy Johnson. In this clip his wife, Gwen, softly corrects him, "Jake, don't downplay yourself." It's this incredibly self-aware moment of humility by Jake with the warmest bit of loving chide from Gwen. It's a conversation that I suppose had taken place many times between the partners. Jake and Gwen, Grace and Tyondai, Merce and John, Josef and Anni.



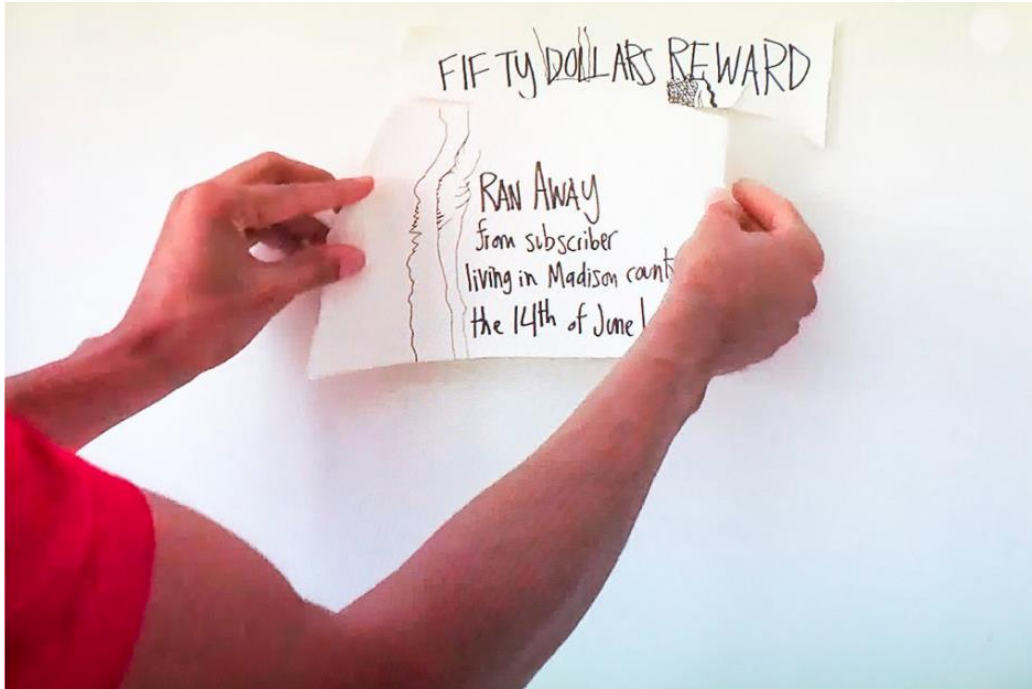
Installation footage of Martha Colburn, *'Hammer-Camera-Scissors'* (*The workers of Jacob Lawrence*), 2018. Two-minute animated four-channel video installation. Duration: looped (four two-minute clips). Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Gift of the Artist. Photo by Michael Oppenheim. [\[view at article URL\]](#)

Martha made an animation. That's what she does. It's a specious claim that someone would take the material, this material, a Jacob Lawrence frame and reimagine it actually moving. But I believe her, what she does here. Jake does something in so many of the paintings, which is to depict movement. I would say action, and you could say labor. There's certainly a lot of workers working, but it's something about the before and afterness of it all. It's not like Sly Stone says that. "Number one gonna be number one" because we don't know where in the sequence any given frame or cell is located in the measure. It's specifically part of a sequence.

The frames that Jake has created are frames. It's a frame taken from all the frames there are to see, but it's also imagined, so it's also the infinitude of imagination. To argue for sequence is to argue that imagination, this imagination, Jake's imagination, produces images in sequence. In this way we can also understand Henry Taylor's and Kerry James Marshall's aggregated commitment to representation, but there's the particularity of this early depiction of people that don't exist. This early depiction, some figures looking like skulls on bodies and ghouls and ghosts, he presents all people in lead, leaden, in flex, in clench, in weary and slouch. Martha animates slouch. Martha reanimates the flex and lead.

Each labor, each chore, each movement becomes a skill, a herky jerky, akimbo limbo, strut, Harlem buck strut dance, fully hully gully activated labor and representation thereof. The four videos phase, and in that the cycle of labor never ends. That is, it is endless, the Black dancing Sisyphean toil. This, in its way is sad, but in another way, there's a two-way mirror endless reflection that keeps the figures lit in a foreverness that adorns, brightens, police helicopter klieg-light illuminates each frame so that the imaginary doer, laborer, domestic, choreista/choreisto, a dancer not fixed but forever having the possibility of being "turned on" and shaking it. Not in the Luke, Lucas Jackson, and Dragline way of "Shaking it, boss, still shaking it!" but in inhabiting the given frame with their own restlessness, dance, and labor. Martha made an animation, but she proved it was collaboration because, while we know there's a pre and post frame in each Jake frame, she took him at his word and at his imagination and stayed

within the frame. Those imagined, inhabited ghosts dance a funky long form GIF, short for gift, a zombie jamboree. Martha and Jake produce the same thing in the same frame, a self-liberated possibility of decision making.



Installation view of Jace Clayton aka DJ /rupture, *The Jacob Lawrence of Jacob Lawrence*, 2018. Single-channel video installation containing hand-drawn animation with text collected from American newspaper mentions of "Jacob Lawrence" pre-dating the celebrated artist Jacob Lawrence. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Gift of the Artist. Photo by Jesse Kitt.

Jace represented them all. Represents. Jace knows diaspora as evidenced on Gold Teeth Thief. Here in Asheville, he's made another mixtape, the mix of all the Jacob Lawrences who speak in lower frequencies, lower than that of our Jake. Jace doesn't truck with Jake as a diminutive. He brings the Christian name of Jacob, not Jace, not Jake, hard C, performs the same naming as in the book for Genesis, but these are just some newspaper clippings as libretto. The "just" isn't pejorative but aimed at performing how refined and minimal they are. Why use three lines when you can use two? Why use five colors when you can use three? The Lawrence-after-Albers methodology loosened

by history, time and naming. I said naming before, but it's not naming because all these Jacobs is already named so. This is list as libretto.

Jace made all the Jacob Lawrences into transparencies. He laid each one on top of the other, and in that way all the ghosts inhabit the living Jake. The work is still living—I mean, c'mon, it's alive, and when you lay all these ghosts, this ghost language of naming and framing, when you posit the invisibles, the transparent as an unmoored thing, they can only suffuse the imagined Jacob who we, like Gwendolyn, Gwen, have come to know as Jake, that suffusion creates the meta-being.

If all Jacobs are real and all Jake frames are inhabited by people that Jake imagines, then I can only think of Whitman. "In all people I see myself, none more and one a barleycorn less, And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them." Whitman and Jake and Ellison are all of course the same Jacob Lawrence. That's not conjecture, brother. That's the reality of making a camera obscura of oneself and projecting the exterior light in. Jace takes a video of the synthesized transparent written Jacob Lawrences he found, not imagined. He makes a VHS tape out of digital video in a way because the tape stretches if not the time. He beat matches, mixing out on the chorus as in song form, but making all the Jacobs a chorus. He's EQing it the whole time, Theo Parrish-style but making sure each bit of language synthesizes out into the whole. It's a whole that we know as the one Jake, Whitman, Ellison, Jacob, Camerado, Jacob Lawrence. That's this mixtape.

Face changer is a term coined by the artist Eliza Myrie.