

## *Resisting Ontologization: An Intercultural Comparison of Glissant, Moten, and Suh*

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Michael Wiedorn. *Thinking Like an Archipelago: Paradox in the Work of Edouard Glissant*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018, pp. 156 + xli, USD 20.95;

Fred Moten. *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 339 + xvii, USD 28.95;

Sharon A. Suh. *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 218 + viii, USD 36.95.

*This essay examines several contemporary works in cultural studies that critique universalizing tendencies in western intellectual discourse. Michael Wiedorn rereads Glissant as a philosophical and political thinker, focusing on the concept of paradox in Glissant's method of archipelagic thinking, aimed at transforming the imaginaire of collective consciousness. Fred Moten examines a variety of works of interactive, auditory, visual, and textual formats that are representative of black aesthetics to track the affectability of the trauma of anti-blackness and the entanglements between blackness and anti-blackness that blur or resist a stabilized definition of black subjectivity and expression. Sharon Suh recovers the Buddhist practice of gazing to critically examine images of Buddhist ideas and practitioners in western and Asian films to challenge a racialized and gendered hierarchy of Buddhism in mainstream culture. Such a project seeks to recover the laywoman's Buddhist subjectivities and reimagine Buddhism in ways that overcomes the problematic depictions enabled by orientalist studies.*

**Key words:** archipelagic thinking; opacity; blur; black aesthetics; haunting; entanglement; embodiment

### 1 Methodology: Why Read These Texts Together?

The three works discussed in this article reorient our understanding of established western philosophical concepts and represent an emerging discourse of decoloniality. Michael Wiedorn examines Edouard Glissant's archipelagic thinking as philosophical method, reorienting the philosophical project from "west-as-project" to actively living to transform the world. Wiedorn clarifies Glissant's reconfiguring of western metaphysics and philosophical anthropology through archipelagic thinking, *tout-monde*, *opacite*, *creolite*, and *Relation*. Fred Moten examines ontological blackness and performance theory through black aesthetic criticism, engaging multiple formats to challenge ontologizing blackness and dismissing/rejecting racialization as an analytical category within performance studies. "Blur" plays a prominent role in his analysis of different aesthetic productions in blackness as eluding conventional analysis, rather opting for a pluriform and constantly shifting understanding of blackness that is neither absolutely ontological<sup>1</sup> nor performative. It operates in comparable ways to "opacity" for Glissant. Moten reconfigures our

understanding of blackness and black away from the language of ontology that pathologizes blackness or “a certain sense of decay” to blackness as blur or parantological resistance to whiteness (Moten 2008: 177).<sup>2</sup> Sharon A. Suh challenges racialized depictions of Buddhism in US and Asian cinema that reify racial and gender stratification in civil society and religious institutions. Suh critiques the racialized and gendered stratification of Buddhist depictions and embodiments in North American and Asian social imaginations. Suh posits the transformative potential of film for rereading Buddhist praxis and embodiment, arguing for using Buddhist films as *sutra* to transform Buddhist practice, harmful racializations, and gender role assignments to liberate Asian American Buddhist practitioners, particularly Asian American women. Suh also engages Buddhist philosophical concepts in the reconfiguring of Buddhist film as *sutra*.

The method of comparison used in this article is inspired in part by Glissant’s notion of archipelagic thinking as interpreted by Susan Gillman,<sup>3</sup> Walter Mignolo’s “border thinking,”<sup>4</sup> and Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s post-continental philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Gillman’s own rendering of archipelagic thinking and archipelagic comparison is indebted to her reading of W. Adolphe Roberts, C.L.R. James, and Edouard Glissant, creating a disjunctive parallel to existing models of comparison that focus on the hemispheric, the continental, and oftentimes the atavistic. Roberts proposes an archipelagic mode of comparison that is “theorizing conjunctions and disjunctions between and among noncontiguous space-times, interisland, continental, hemispheric, and proposing speculative comparisons grounded in asymmetrical geohistories of imperial conflict” (Gillmann 2017: 135-36). This essay adopts an archipelagic logic for comparison that eschews “the limits of conventional comparative studies, the assumed disciplinary symmetries of two-country pairings or nation-language equations that so often underlie comparative history and literature” (Gillmann 2017: 136), in favor of an open-ended comparativism amongst texts that theoretically engage the asymmetrical geohistories and subjectivities of racialized and gendered bodies that are the non-white “other” in both philosophical anthropology and religious studies. Such a mode of comparison differs from comparative philosophy as cross-cultural philosophy, which is adjacent to and informed by methodologies of comparison found in comparative religious studies and orientalist studies. The texts do not aim to create “dialogue” between modern western and classical Asian philosophical traditions, but rather critique modern western philosophy through Caribbean, Black, and Asian American intellectual discourse. The value of such juxtaposition enables comparison that breaks from the disciplinary rigidity that separates these discourses and prevents cross-cultural examinations without a Euro-American interlocutor. Examples of such comparisons have often been dismissed by philosophers as being “cultural studies” or “ethnic studies.” However, I contend in this essay that such work could be understood as comparative philosophy with a decolonial emphasis and methodology. The three authors engage in critique of racialized ontologies and reveal a decolonial imaginary that links the theoretical discourses of scholars working through the legacy of European colonialism, modernization, and globalization. Resonance among Glissant’s poetics of relation, Moten’s blur and “consent not to be a single being,” and Suh’s reading of the *Jeweled Net of Indra* led me to choose these texts.

## 2 Wiedorn on Glissant

Michael Wiedorn is an associate professor of French at Georgia Institute of Technology and has authored chapters on Albert Camus, Aime Césaire, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Edouard Glissant. He has also contributed articles for the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies’

journal, *The International Journal of Francophone Studies, Callaloo*. *Thinking Like an Archipelago* is Wiedorn's first monograph. In *Thinking Like an Archipelago*, Wiedorn examines the body of writing by Martinican writer, poet, and philosopher Edouard Glissant. Wiedorn focuses on the role of paradox in Glissant's writings, and the centrality of paradox in Glissant's articulation of archipelagic thinking and analysis of Caribbean culture and philosophy. Wiedorn explores how paradox in the later writings of Glissant mediates the apparent disconnect between Glissant's earlier political works with his later theoretically oriented texts. "Rather than constituting a weakness, paradox proves to play a key role in Glissant's political and aesthetics ambitions. It allows Glissant to pursue his—arguably quite political—goal of using art to breathe new life into thought" (Wiedorn 2018: xv).<sup>6</sup> Glissant operates in the aesthetic and poetic to shift the *imaginaire* or "the site where knowing and being come together, within the context of aesthetic production" (xxxiv). Glissant's *imaginaire* is independent of Lacan and Irigaray's psychoanalytic conception of the term. The epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic meet in Glissant's *imaginaire*. As a concept informing the relations between each aspect of reality, the *imaginaire* reorders relations in the world. Transforming the imaginary through engaging aesthetic productions that offer different possibilities of knowing and being allows the spectator to transform their way of living. It leads to ethical and political shifts in agents seeking social transformation.

Wiedorn focuses on Glissant's essays for the scope of his analysis. "Although it has received relatively little critical attention, the essay form is far from a tangential offshoot of Glissant's vast oeuvre" (xxxvi). Wiedorn reads the essays philosophically, arguing that Glissant himself breaks from rigid genre distinctions in his writings and saw the essay form as a style of poetry. Wiedorn also registers Glissant's relation to western philosophy "as one of *confluence* rather than *influence*," noting that rather than being simply appropriation or reaction against, it was "one of exchange [...] and also [...] of moments of divergence and resistance" (xl). The theme of paradox and relation thus for Wiedorn is key in reading Glissant's corpus philosophically. In chapter 1, Wiedorn explicates Glissant's notion of *tout-monde* as rethinking totality in a post-Hegelian framework. "Understanding the global, the totality or the *Tout*, implies attention to the local (or *Place*, in Glissantian rhetoric), which in turn is meaningless without robust theoretical consideration of the totality" (3). There is a characteristic of constant deferral or referral to other terms in Glissant's understanding of the "real" that resists static ontologization.<sup>7</sup> *Tout-monde* must be understood phenomenologically in terms of activity rather than essence (ontology).

When understanding the "real" as *Tout-monde*, Glissant utilizes the metaphor of the archipelago, *Le monde entier s'archipelise et se créolise*. "The entire world is archipelagoizing and creolizing" (3-4). Creolization here refers to *creolization* not in the sense that the world is increasingly becoming creolized or hybridized, but rather in the unpredictability of the result of intermingling between cultures. "I call creolization the meeting, the interference, the shock, the harmonies and disharmonies between [*sic*] cultures, in the realized totality of the world-earth [*monde-terre*]" (6). Creolization is a process that is rapid due to advances in communication, cognizant or conscious in human subjects involved, dissolving a hierarchy of values by reevaluating values, and unpredictable. It also rejects Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity.

This is due to the multiplicity, obscurity, and vagueness of the products of creolization, in contrast to hybrids that assume purity and knowability of the origins of the two things that are being combined. Related is Glissant's notion of *opacité* or opacity, distinguished from Deleuze's understanding of *assemblage* and western philosophy's insistence on the transparency or givenness of the subject and object of inquiry. "The opacity that Glissant demands serves as a sort of protective mechanism insinuating the radical difference of the other from the self's at times depredatory search

for knowledge (ITM<sup>8</sup> 29). Opacity dictates that in the other, an unknowable remainder will always persist” (36). Glissant rejects the capacity of *Aufhebung* to reconcile the alienation or contradiction between the “other” and the “self,” and certainly the transparency and domestication of the “other” through discourse or alterations of material reality.

What is “knowledge” of the other that is purported in positing the transparency of the other’s subjectivity? Glissant sees it as merely a mirror state. “Rather than seeing the truth of the world, western humanism was in fact gazing on itself [...] the transparency of the other thus amounts to a transparency for the self to the self—one which is, moreover, a false transparency” (37). Opacity preserves the irreducibility of the other or the dehumanized. It allows new pathways for knowing the other. One can come to know the other paradoxically through admitting the other is unknowable or dense. “The other resists the self’s effort to know him or her in two ways: in terms of density and in terms of change. The other is never ultimately knowable because the entirety of his or her being never becomes apparently or readable to the self. Moreover, even if it were to become thus, its nature of constant flux would preclude any knowledge of the other that could boast mastery” (42). Here again we defer to another concept, from opacity to the archipelagic, to break from atavistic modalities and transparent others. “The opaque, Glissant explains, ‘is not the obscure, but it can be, and it can be accepted as such. It is the non-reducible, which is the most vivacious of guarantees of participation and confluence’” (PR<sup>9</sup> 205-6) (41). Opacity guarantees participation and confluence between others without the hierarchical connotations emerging from totality or universality in philosophical thought.

The archipelagic here is invoked as a metaphor in contrast to thinking continentally or atavistically, in which origin points and vertical hierarchies are reified. The archipelago represents a decentralized model of the relation between islands, as well as ideas and material objects that make up “reality” for Glissant. Each constitutive aspect of reality is fragmented yet interconnected. Totality does not subsume all things into an absolute universal in which different constitutive elements are expendable or interchangeable. The ontological vagueness of archipelagic thinking, which resists systematic thinking and rigid categorization, leads to paradox and ambiguity in *tout-monde*. The hermeneutics of the archipelagic or *tout-monde* is rhizomatic.

Another key term to understand *tout-monde* is *Relation*. “Relation [...] links and connects (*relie*) as it relays (*relaie*) from one term to another. It relates (*relate*), both in the sense of activating and maintaining relationships among terms and, crucially for Glissant’s insistence on the centrality of aesthetics in the *Tout-monde*, it also relates in the sense that it narrativizes, telling stories in both oral and written forms” (9). Relationality resembles Buddhist radical interdependence and indispensability of constitutive aspects of reality rather than the meeting of two demonstrably and ontologically distinct aspects that come into relation. Glissant’s *Relation* challenges territorialization or the absolutization of an identity grounded in linear causal chains. “Where Hegel’s progression toward Absolute Knowing unfolds with a relationship of particulars to a universal, Glissant grounds his idea of the *Tout-monde* in a pairing of place and totality” (17). Glissant shifts from Hegelian mereology to relationality conceived spatially and geographically. *Relation* also embraces paradox rather than seeking its resolution through the sublation of one dipolarity over another. “Relation thus envelops apparent opposites: forgetting and memory, the emptiness of the chasm as well as the plentitude of the *Tout-monde*” (12).

The archipelagic resists the universalizing tendency of western intellectual discourse or the “west-as-project.” *Tout-monde* does not provide definitive truth or a unified totality. In *le quatrième siècle*, Glissant undoes teleological quests for absolute origin/destination. “If there is a truth to be distilled from *Tout-monde*, if there is one primary and unifying meaning to be retained, it is this

performance of fragmentation, movement, and circularity that Mathieu's desire leads him into (and not to, for it is an activity in which he is immersed, rather than a destination)" (80). What remains is not a stabilized definitive understanding of the past or the creation of some unifying definitive value, but merely the performance of vacillation. Archipelagic thinking, like spatio-temporal oscillations, is neither definitive nor exhaustive. The archipelagic as analogy for *Relation* and *tout-monde* points to the decentralized and constantly deferred aspect of knowing or apprehending reality. The "Caribbean condition" as spatiotemporal paradox exemplifies the world and *imaginaire* creolizing and archipelagoizing. These paradoxes are not ahistorical or disembodied. Paradoxes emerge from Caribbean subjects' experience of dislocation, particularly descendants of slaves in the neocolonial present. The material/historical reality of the Caribbean subject in archipelagic geolocal grounds understanding. Thinking in *Relation* or archipelagically thus emerges out of the paradoxical experiences of Caribbean subjectivities; such thought and cultural productions remain unpredictable rather than regular.

Archipelagic thinking radically challenges and destabilizes normative understandings and applications of continental philosophy. "It becomes clear that the way of thinking and knowing the world that has its grounds in the archipelago form is first and foremost a means of resistance to what Glissant frames as the moribund fixity of the Western intellectual tradition" (113). Rather than focusing on "reductive and homogenizing synthesis" that prioritizes universalizable concepts and truths, Glissant engages the particular. Wiedorn notes totality as *tout-monde* works because the increasing ambiguity or unpredictability of the world through the archipelagoizing process reflects reality itself. The world is irregular, indeterminate, and unpredictable. Glissant's paradoxical understanding depends on "the truth of all reality, past and present," being "chaos" (116). His writings are archipelagic: "multiple, fragmented, interrelated, and decentered" (117).

Glissant's particular philosophical method, which refuses to conclude and takes pleasure in illuminating the world as opaque, constitutes, in his view, the clearest vision of the world to date [...]. Glissant's rethinking of totality-in-Relation is grounded in a sense of the fundamental oneness and interconnectedness of all beings, of a force traversing everything that breathes life both into embodied beings and into artistic creation; his literary-critical framing of alterity takes as its foremost concern the protection of the life of the other; his staging of teleology frames it as a proliferating, ever-augmenting and creative vivacity, and his own philosophical methodology as exemplified in *Philosophie de la Relation*, calls for an inconclusive, ever-active lived experience of meaning-making on the part of his readers (129).

Glissant reorients *imaginaire* of the reader through developing a philosophical method grounded in archipelagic thinking, itself emerging from the experience of paradoxical spatiotemporalities of Caribbean subjects as well as a multiplicity of subjectivities in archipelagoized spaces and temporalities throughout the world. Wiedorn thus offers a bridge between the "praxis" or politically oriented Glissant with the more "theoretical" or "philosophical" Glissant.

### 3 Moten, Blackness, and Blur

Fred Moten is a professor of performance studies at New York University and a renowned poet. His scholarship examines black studies, performance studies, poetics, critical theory, music, and visual culture. His academic books include *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), *The*

*Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013), *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018). His poetry anthologies include *Hughson's Tavern* (2008), *B Jenkins* (2010), *The Feel Trio* (2014), *The Little Edges* (2014), and *The Service Porch* (2016).

Moten's *Black and Blur* consists of twenty-five related essays that explore and resist the ontologization of blackness. By ontologization, I refer to how the language of ontology attempts to offer some final and complete determination of blackness. The analytic practice or the grammar of defining involves the predication of a subject in which subjectification makes an object of that which is being predicated. Moten resists attempts to exhaustively define, delimit, or predicate blackness that is present in both the analytic of anti-blackness and in the analytic of celebrating blackness. Rather than ontologize blackness, he defines blackness as errant activity of constant escape from subjection, a "resistant, relentlessly impossible object" that is "subject less predication" (vii). The language of ontology supports a philosophical anthropology centered on defining whiteness and blackness, white subjects and black subjects, human beings that are given full ontological status and those that are not. Moten critiques and resists the sedimentation of an absolute identity or racialization of black bodies or blackness.

The three-volume "consent not to be a single being" series "attempts to figure out what's wrong with" (vii) the opening sentence of Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.<sup>10</sup> By framing the series on the sentence, "Performance is the resistance of the object" (Moten 2017: vii), Moten identifies the problem with the sentence and the relationship between the recitation of an analytical statement that qualifies and predicates blackness with anti-blackness. Blackness is predicated by anti-and ante- categorical predications of blackness; the celebration of blackness is not fully detached or separated from anti-blackness.

Subordination is not detachment. Disappearance is not absence. If blackness will have never been thought of when detached from anti-blackness, neither will anti-blackness have been thought outside the faculty of blackness as anti-blackness's spur and anticipation; moreover, neither blackness nor anti-blackness are to be seen beneath the appearances that tell of them (viii).

Moten adapts Saidiya Hartman's<sup>11</sup> "diffusion" of the terror of anti-blackness, which he sees inseparable to apposition. Anti-blackness and black suffering do not just appear in "the terrible spectacle" of violence against slaves and black bodies, but also the mundane. These mundane "scenes of subjection" for Hartman include "the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip Coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization" (Hartman 1997: 4). Anti-blackness therefore can be reproduced in mundane scenes of black performativity. The diffusion of anti-blackness is inseparable from the apposition or "alternative operation" of anti-blackness in its dipolar opposite, blackness. Reflecting on the aesthetics of blackness (inscribing blackness as  $x$  through performance), Moten notes how terror of anti-blackness expressed/captured in black art, the context and the violence, are "uncontained by the boundaries that emerge in the relay between self, world, and representation" (Moten 2017: ix).

Moten states "that my work [...] is invested in the analysis, preservation and diffusion of the violent 'affectability' of 'the aesthetic sociality of blackness,' to which the violence of the slave owner/settler responds and to whose regulatory and reactionary violence it responds, in anticipation" (xi). This violence is diffusive rather than limited to isolated extraordinary events that are causally linked: the term "event" is inadequate when discussing captivity and enslavement. The inseparable

connections between freedom and slavery, or that “slavery is understood to have always been yoked to freedom” (xii), ought to be understood as a durational field rather than a singular event. Continual interaction between the enslaver and enslaved, the former slave master and former slave, revisits W.E.B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness”<sup>12</sup> and Frantz Fanon’s reflections on Hegel’s master/slave dialectic.<sup>13</sup> It is impossible that this consciousness state is merely an event that transpires and expires on a singular linear temporal progression. Moten alludes to the impossibility or aporetic character of the durational field of the trauma of enslavement, the object expressed in black art that holds a tenuous relation with blackness and anti-blackness. Throughout the essays he tracks the traumatic and the celebratory, affirmation and abjection, capture and elusiveness of blackness, in various mediums of black aesthetic performance:

Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study. That continually rewound and remade claim upon our monstrosity—our miracle, our showing, which is neither near nor far, as Spillers shows—is black feminism, the *animaterial* ecology of black and thoughtful stolen life as it steals away. That unending remediation, in passage, as consent, in which the estrangement of natality is maternal operation-in-exhabitation of diffusion and entanglement, marking the displacement of being and singularity, is blackness (xiii).

Black aesthetics, black study, and blackness are constantly in remediation, making the defining of such things—ontologically, exhaustively, or as universal singularity—impossible.

Moten examines the monograph *Remembering the Present*<sup>14</sup> to recover a sense of the postcolonial future that resists the attempts of the European anthropologist to deepen knowledge of a culture, which he notes is where the “ethnographic and the neocolonial projects converge” through promoting a “return to authenticity” (Moten 2017: 23). “Tshibumba [...] reinstates the lyrical singularity, manifest always and everywhere as surplus, which is the *material spirit* of the postcolonial future. This frayed singularity moves through the opposition of Afro-diasporic particularities and the universality that the West has mistakenly called its own” (1). Moten’s reading of Tshibumba<sup>15</sup> challenges depictions of postcolonial futures that reify the alterity or hybridity of the postcolonial subject and preserves the universality/normativity of the Euro-American subject. In *Remembering the Present*, Johannes Fabian is the ethnographer “conscious of himself as mediator and sponsor” and Tshibumba Kanda Matulu is a cultural informant who “is conscious of himself as painter and historian” (13). Moten reads against Fabian’s attempt as an ethnographer to define an Afro-diasporic particularity that is “other” or a neocolonial project of continuing to define, domesticate, and romanticize the non-white subject.

The tension that Moten draws out in the interview between Tshibumba and Fabian shows the difference in appreciating their co-created work in that Tshibumba “thought about the future even before Fabian commissioned him to” (26), that the postcolonial future is captured through the capturing of Lumumba’s passion in his work. This passion is “not only suffering but an overwhelming aesthesis [...] an irruption of the outside in its fullness with regard to every sense” (25). It is not merely documenting a historical event or the recovery of knowledge of a culture that is deemed authentic; it envisions postcolonial futures that are not merely dependent or are prompted by the European subject. As an improvisatory work, it operates “through the opposition of description and prescription, representational memory and theoretical vision, totalizing and cognitive mapping” (27). It exceeds the merely performative or the cultural and notes the contours and linkages between the aesthetic and the political. Tshibumba resists Fabian’s attempts to capture

an “authentic” expression of Afro-diasporic subjectivity. Whilst Fabian’s own theoretical aim was to reorient historical studies away from written text to event or experiences, Tshibumba aspires for the “transcendence of genre” through memorializing Lumumba’s lyricism to signify the “spirit of the postcolonial future” (21-2). Whereas Fabian ultimately privileges the “historical over the aesthetic” Tshibumba points to the “aesthetic-political (historical) encounter” that blurs and resists the false totality of an “authentic” culture. (23).

In chapter 23, entitled “The Blur and Breathe Books,” Moten reflects on “the phenomenon of blur” (246) in artwork. Blur here is related to Denise Ferreira da Silva’s notion of entanglement or “difference without separation” (313, n. 1). Moten reads Charles Gaines’ *Manifestos 2* and *Librettos*, quoting from Manuel de Falla’s *La Vida Breve* and Stokely Carmichael’s *Black Manifesto*: “[B]lur is the alternate process” (248), the reading of a text that describes movement or represents an activity or experience in reality. “To be serially unable to look at it while reading it is to understand that the book substitutes for what it represents; that the substitutes defers what it commends” (248). Reading relies on a deferring substitute composition, only defensible through the alternative process of blur. Falla and Ture’s works blur visual, choreographic, musical, and oratory mediums of communication. Neither piece is claimed to allow the reader/spectator to reach the experience that it is referencing. “Doubling opens out, rather, onto certain questions [...] which are to reveal and also insist upon a certain proliferation of relations—as if the viewer is activated in relation to the relation that he sees, or makes” (249). The process of reading or encountering a piece then is one that operates through the process of blur, or the raising of these questions of the relations found both within and without the work encountered.

In Carmichael’s speech, “anticolonial righteousness requires vigilance against postcolonial, which is to say neocolonial self-righteousness” (249). Moten complicates the statement’s analytical clarity by reading the notion of self-determination alongside the rejection of the possibility of self-condemnation. When read in relation to the process of blurring, it becomes “not simply the king’s but [...] the settler’s and the freedom fighter’s twin imperatives” (250). In Gaines’s exhibit, where Falla’s score is superimposed on Carmichael’s speech, doubling creates thickness or opacity in Glissant’s terms. Do the two superimposed objects gain or lose meaning apart or related from one another? Is there a seriality or order expressed in the work? Citing Wittgenstein, Moten posits the notion of meaning as use: the usage of blur expresses the recessive imagination. “All throughout Gaines’s work there’s a blur materiality of shade, of colored number, in number’s inexactitude, the way it’s always off the beat, as beat’s incessant overlap and undertow and undertone and overwork, no matter what” (252). The indiscretion, or the ways aesthetic topology in Gaines’ piece blends and entangles, allows blur to be expressed.

Doubling that constitutes blur is referred to as haunting in Gaines and Hoyun Son’s collaborative work, *Black Ghost Blues Redux*. Blur here overlaps ongoing black/Korean tension in Los Angeles with coloniality. Just as “Koreatown and South Central Los Angeles blur into one another,” entanglement or haunting of spatial blurring with “international and domestic neocolonial pressure” complicates the questions. Blur, doubling, and haunting challenge the emergence of relations “against self and Other,” understood more as a saturation or a “transoceanic feeling of/in, passage” (254-55). Blurring and radical entanglement “obliterates the theory of relation,” rejects dualism and individualism, and “admits of no personhood” (256, 259). Gaines critiques the dialectic by using blur and revisiting the notion of marginality:



Marginalization is a radical nonlocality, a double blade rather than a double-edged double bind, that incisively renders provisional even black personhood and the black work of art, insofar as if they are at all, they work a general undoing not only of themselves and their other but also the very idea of others and selves (261).

Through art criticism, theory, and performance studies, Moten analyzes various works of black aesthetics that challenge the ontologization of blackness. Such moves reject both abjection and celebration of blackness as an ontological category of being that is ascribed absolute positive or negative valuation purported to represent the reality of bodies and subjects designated as black. Instead of reifying blackness using the language of ontology and reinforcing a political ontology of white/black racial binary, blackness offers paraontological resistance to whiteness or having an ontological status of an individual human subject. The aesthetic or performative dimension of the analyzed works deploys the process of blur, which defers and posits a radical doubling or entanglement that challenges the dialectic as well as stabilized notions of self and other. The aesthetic, performative aspects of black work and expression critique conventional ways of knowing, seeing, and being. It points towards an unidentifiable referent, but only defers meaning towards the performative and experiential relations emerging in reception. Moten points towards and refuses to identify blackness, black aesthetics, identifiable knowledge, or definition of blackness and the intellectual and cultural work of black *assemblages*.

#### 4 Suh, Film Criticism, and Buddhism

Sharon A. Suh is a professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University. Her research areas include Buddhism, gender studies, religion and ethnicity, film and religion, and immigration, race, and religion. Her academic publications include *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean American Temple* (2004), *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* (2015), and *Occupy This Body: A Buddhist Memoir* (2019).

Suh begins her *Silver Screen Buddha* by reflecting on four scenes from four different films depicting a Buddhist monk. These scenes reinforce “widely held beliefs that meditation is the central, if not the most important, ritual in Buddhist practice” (2) and center the monk as Buddhism’s primary religious actor. She offers several reasons why this is problematic. First, most Buddhists are laity and “practice little to no meditation at all” (2). Reifying meditation privileges it as “authentic” Buddhist practice and subordinates lay Buddhist practices. The hypervisibility of the meditating monk in film depictions of Buddhism continues to exoticize it as “other.” “The reception of the image of meditating monks as the defining characteristic of Buddhism is one mired in a tangled web of racialized difference that simultaneously exoticizes and denigrates Asian and Buddhist difference” (4). Second, Asian Buddhist practitioners deviating from popular depictions are alienated as inauthentic and undesirable “others” while white Buddhist practitioners who adhere to “authentic” Buddhist molds are vindicated. Third, Buddhist women are omitted from the category of “true” Buddhists. Suh examines how some Buddhist films reduce women to accessories of male Buddhist practitioners aiding salvation or corrupt jezebel figures hindering the Buddhist path.

This book aims “to provide a critical practice for analyzing Buddhist films such that these bad habits don’t prevail but give way to an expansive vision of Buddhism that rings true to authentic Buddhist life” (4). Authenticity here does not refer to some essence or valid core principles that make up Buddhist life, but rather “matters of representation and reception of the varieties of actors

that make up the Buddhist world” (5). Like Moten, Suh resists attempts to ontologically define a Buddhist identity or authentic Buddhism. Attempts to delineate an essence of Buddhism is a form of ontological reductionism, much as blackness as the deprivation of the ontological status of whiteness or blackness as death is analogous to a political ontology of anti-blackness that essentializes racialized bodies with the identity black. Buddhism for Suh is like blackness for Moten, consent not to be a single being.<sup>16</sup> This is a “fugal, fugitive, radically imaginative sociopoetic work of refusal to” (Moten 2017: 194)<sup>17</sup> accept and self-project the settler’s delusional sovereignty. Suh challenges Orientalist depictions of Asian religions, particularly Buddhism, in the figure of the exotic monk “other” that is gendered and racialized. Orientalist scholarship on Buddhism collaborated with colonial projects in Southeast Asia to purge aspects of Buddhism that Europeans saw as superstitious or “lesser, backward, corrupted and watered-down version of an orthodox Buddhism” (Suh 2015: 22) that western scholars purported to be authentic and trustworthy.

Like Glissant, Suh sees Buddhist embodiments to be pluriform and in a relationality of deferral. There is no singular absolute embodiment of Buddhism that is authentic, exhaustive, or definitive for Suh, just as for Glissant the totality of reality or *Tout Monde* cannot be reduced to an absolute unity or a static essence. Just as reality cannot be understood through a static ontological totality for Glissant, Buddhism cannot be understood through static monolithic definitions and images based on discourses of authenticity. “A guiding concern of this book relates to the disconnect between what is projected in film as real Buddhism and what I see in real life when I visit Buddhist temples in Asia or America” (5). Again, the issue of hypervisibility and invisibility of different representations and modalities of being Buddhist is raised. Suh contends that often such representations render the lay Buddhist women—whose work is indispensable in the continued operation of temples—invisible and “inauthentic.” The imagined elitism of the meditating Buddhist is challenged. Furthermore, Suh critiques American Buddhist converts for uncritically adopting a Zen Buddhist identity fused with Japanese Samurai *bushido* and for being amenable to the cultural iconoclasm popularized by the Beat generation. Such a move displaces or invalidates the Buddhist identities of Asian/American immigrant Buddhists for being “pre-modern” and “superstitious” while idealizing the white Buddhist convert for idealizing and “recovering” the authentic embodiment of Buddhist tradition.

By critiquing established and dominant images representing Buddhists (imagined elite or inauthentic laywomen), Suh seeks to reconfigure how Buddhism is imagined or understood:

I address the following constructive concerns: How can Buddhism be constructed, refashioned, and adapted through the medium of film? How are these images implicated in the mediated constructions of race and gender? What are the kinds of Buddhism that have predominated in filmic texts and why? How can film be deployed to reimagine and re-image the prevalent construction of Buddhism’s historically-marginalized others (such as, women, lay Buddhists, Asians, and Asian Americans)? And finally, how can such a diversity of Buddhist images transform popular constructions of the religion as forever foreign and exotic into something more salient to those who actually practice it? (6)

These questions broadly examine the role of racism, sexism, as well as Orientalism in the construction, reception, and regulation of Buddhism in the world. Analyzing film as a “text” for reimagining Buddhism does not just challenge and reconstruct mediated notions of Buddhism. It is related to “gazing” in Buddhist visual culture. “The production of the many splendid bodies of Buddhas through art and meditative recollection (Buddha *anusmriti*) highlights the power of religious

modes of seeing in the Buddhist imagination and their function in the transmission and reception of the Buddha *dharmā*” (7). Suh critiques Orientalist studies-influenced readings of *dharmā* as textual and mental enterprises of communicating esoteric knowledge in Chan/Zen and Vajrayana traditions. Instead, visual culture and practices such as watching a film are seeing tracks transforming understandings of Buddhism and *dharmā* for practitioners and the general public. “In this book, I show how mediated images of Buddhism have largely neglected the active and self-enhancing presence of women’s religious lives and have perpetuated images of Asian and Asian American lay Buddhist practices as less valuable forms of the tradition” (7).

Kyenste Norbu’s<sup>18</sup> usage of “film as a *tanka*<sup>19</sup> (visual meditational device)” (10) supports the usage of film as *sutra* to reimagine Buddhism. Suh adds additional criteria to Norbu’s to address the concerns Suh raised about Buddhist representation in mainstream films: “Address the ordinary lives of the laity; Affirm everyday life as a potential ground for enlightenment; Represent women as agents in their own spiritual lives; Include Asian and Asian American Buddhists in the larger picture of Buddhism as it exists today” (10). Such aims are supported by what Suh refers to as counter-readings of Buddhist scriptures or reading Mahayana Buddhist texts through representations in Buddhist films. This interpolation between text and film, an anticipating dialogue between reader/viewer and text/*sutra* or interpellation,<sup>20</sup> both reproduces and disrupts subjectivization, similarly to Moten’s reading that the black radical tradition, hip-hop music, and “Ghetto Suapastar” offers anticipatory interpolations and resistance to interpellative calls by power in chapter 2 of *Black and Blur*.<sup>21</sup> Suh alludes to further “in-depth analysis of how spectators are interpellated into the filmic text” or how the spectator “of a Buddhist (filmic) text comes to identify with or resist the cinematic gaze” (191), indicating that the visual *sutra* offers interpolations that resist interpellative calls by orientalists and white Buddhists that reify racial stereotypes against Asian and Asian Americans and dismiss Asian practitioners, particularly laywomen, as inauthentic Buddhists. The interpolation of film and *sutra* as *tanka* resists the interpellation of dominant ideological constructions of Buddhist identity to the production and reproduction of embodied lay Buddhism that is liberatory for Asian/American Buddhist women.

Suh conceives and defines “*embodied female lay Buddhism* where the female body can materialize virtue and a healthy sexuality that is productive to enlightenment” (12). A plurality of images within Buddhism are recovered and sexuality is de-pathologized. The encounter of Buddhist images in film is performative in that it creates and reconstructs presence for the viewer, functioning as a visual *sutra*. (13). The films that she engages for constructive aspects intersects with Suh’s readings of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra* as informing the films themselves. Specifically, the film *Hwa-om-kyung* discussed in chapter 7 mirrors the journey of Sudhana in the *Gandavyuha Sutra* and represents the concept of the *Jeweled Net of Indra* as well as the value of *kalyanamitras* or spiritual friends/advisors in the journey of the Buddhist practitioner. “Chang employs his *kalyānamitras* in the form of beggars and drunkards not only to illustrate spiritual awakening, but also as a direct critique of the poverty found in the margins of many parts of rural and urban Korean locales” (140). The impoverished, not the social elite, operate as *bodhisattvic* figures in this film, inverting the notion that only Oriental monk figures can be spiritual guides, guardians of the *dharmā*, and embodiments of authentic Buddhist practice.

Suh critiques *Broken Blossoms*, *Lost Horizon*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, and *Zen Noir* for reifying the Oriental monk image while vilifying the inauthentic Asian/American Buddhist “other” and demonizing women’s sexuality (see chapters 2 and 3). They imagine Buddhism, Asians, and Asian Americans as exotic “other” by abjecting Asian and Asian Americans while promoting western appropriations of Zen. Suh critiques Asian films such as *Spring, Summer Fall*,

*Winter... and Spring* for depicting women as either obstacles or necessary sacrifices for men to attain enlightenment (chapter 4). This film “reaffirms the textual perspective that women bind men to samsara” and considers women merely as “an impermanent yet fortuitous object lesson in the monks’ mental development and spiritual purification” (93). Buddhism is imagined for the male monastic, and laywomen are vilified as jezebel-like seductresses. Suh examines two Korean films that recover some value in women’s sexuality and bodies as well as ordinary lives in the quest for enlightenment (chapter 5). The films analyzed are *Aje Aje Bara Aje* and *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* The former focuses on a young female nun who leaves the mountaintop temple and becomes an earthly bodhisattva through her “engagement in the world through intimate relationships with men” (96). Suh notes that the protagonist “engages in radical acts of somatic compassion,” primarily through “relationships of intimacy and care with alienated and broken individuals,” which deconstructs the notion that monastic living is the only effective practice towards realizing enlightenment (97). It is in engaging the ordinary world that the protagonist makes progress towards enlightenment. The next set of films “embrace and [affirm] the ordinary self as *karmically* limited yet spiritually potent” (26). The primary film analyzed is *Departures*, a 2008 Japanese film about a laid off cellist becoming a *nokanfu* or “Buddhist mortician” (119). Suh compares the narrative of the *nokanfu* to the recitation and practice of the nembutsu in Shin Buddhism that emphasizes dependence on other-power or “belief in powers other than one’s own ego to experience liberation from suffering” (125). This is dependent on radical interdependence or *pratityasamutpada* extended to Buddhist soteriology.

Suh examines *Hwa-Om-Kyung (Passage to Buddha)* as a filmic reimagining of the last book of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (chapter 7). It also functions as a radical critique of the social and political structures of late 1980s/early 1990s South Korea. Because the film is adjacent to Huayan Buddhist thought, Suh notes the film also provides an ethical vision of embodying the *bodhisattva* through radically embracing the world. It is not exotic monks that embody the *bodhisattvic* vision, but rather ordinary people. Suh reads the protagonist’s wife in *Samsara* “as an embodiment of a female lay Buddhism that embraces female sexuality and materiality as a virtue” (27). It counters essentializing ascetic Buddhist spiritual practices and images of Asian bodies/religions as exotic and atemporal. Buddhism is reimagined in the Chinese Canadian film *Eve and the Fire Horse* through the life of a nine-year-old Chinese Canadian girl who negotiates Buddhism in a multi-faith religious household, deftly adapting elements of Chinese folk tradition, Buddhism, and Catholicism to make meaning and support aspects of immigrant life (chapter 9). Such a *reimagining* does not entail a predictable hybridity or a *bricolage* but unpredictable *assemblages* of Buddhist religiosity that eludes static definitions, uniformity, and rigid typologies. She concludes that films as *sutra* or spiritual technology reflect the Buddhist concept of *upaya* or skillful means in the *Lotus Sutra* that validates a multiplicity of teachings and pathways in transmitting *dharma* and leading towards enlightenment.

## 5 Conclusion

The three texts are connected by radical critiques of established understandings of the designated “other” in western intellectual discourse. Wiedorn’s reading of Glissant recovers the dimension of paradox in reorienting *imaginaire* to reject readings that split Glissant’s earlier politically minded works with his later theoretical and abstract works. Glissant’s metaphysics and way of thinking, modeled off the Caribbean and the archipelagic, rejects an understanding of reality that is an ontologically stable, absolute totality. Reality is fragmented, constantly archipelagoizing, and not

reducible to a simple universal. Moten challenges our desire to create an ontologically stable definition of blackness through black aesthetics, performativity, or subjectivity. He also argues blackness and anti-blackness are inseparably entangled. Triumphant celebrations of blackness are underscored by the violence and trauma of anti-blackness that continue to interact and remediate blackness and its expression. Blackness is not a definitive singularity but pluriform, implying entanglement and haunting doublings between seemingly paradoxical aspects in dialectical tension that blur or destabilize established categories and definitions.

Lastly, Suh challenges Asian and western films' hegemonic portrayals of Buddhist practice, thought, and subjectivity that create hierarchies of meaning and power in Buddhism. Suh uses film studies, religious studies, and Asian American studies to critique Orientalizing images of Buddhist subjectivity and practice. She recovers the ordinary, lay, and women's Buddhist subjectivities by critiquing harmful images of Buddhism in film and embracing helpful ones as a visual *sutra*. Like Glissant and Moten, Suh reconfigures *imaginaire* by deconstructing predictable and established notions of Buddhist religiosity and subjectivity. She challenges the established image of the Oriental monk as the authentic Buddhist practitioner as well as the hegemonic status of Zen Buddhism in the Euro-American imagination. These writers embody an emerging discourse of decoloniality in the black Atlantic and Asian American contexts through affective, aesthetic, auditory, visual, and expressive knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> “Don’t be a ghost, be a spirit, Baraka said, in a movie about white people, the socially dead. Can the socially dead organize their own? What are the socially dead, anyway? This is an ontological inquiry only insofar as it’s concerned with what it is, or what it would be, to have an ontological status. What it would be to have an ontological status, and know it, is what it would be to be a white person” (Moten 2017: 280). To be centered as a human being, as a subject or historical being that is granted existence and personhood. Black persons are racialized as the “Other” or foils to white persons with ontological status. Blackness escapes from subjection.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2, (Spring 2008), 177–218.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Gillman, “It Takes an Archipelago to Compare Otherwise,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian R. Roberts and Michelle A. Stephens (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 133–51.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Post-continental Philosophy: Its Definition, Contours, and Fundamental Sources,” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 1, no. 3, (Fall 2006): 1–29.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Wiedorn, *Think like an Archipelago: Paradox in the Work of Édouard Glissant* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> *Tout-Monde* is understood in terms of what it does rather than what it is. Here ontology is understood as being concerned about “Being, and by extension in the real: identity, belonging” (Faulkner, *Mississippi*, 181–82, quoted in Wiedorn (2018: 65)). Here Wiedorn is in agreement with Clevis Headley, in that Glissant is not engaging in “an ontological project searching for the essential nature of things or the essence of human nature” (Headley (2012: 54); Clevis Headley, “Glissant’s Existential Ontology of Difference,” *The CLR James Journal* 18, no. 1, (Fall 2012): 59–101. Thus, resistance to static ontologization refers to resistance to essentializing the nature of things or human nature to a

- particular model, portrayal, or definition that is totalistic or universal. Here, ontologization refers to the essentializing of identities, particularly the racialization of non-white subjects.
- 8 Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).
- 9 Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).
- 10 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 11 Saidiya V. Hartman writes extensively about the diffusion of terror in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997). Hartman focuses on “the terror of the mundane and quotidian” (Hartmann 197: 4) or the terror and violence experienced by slaves in the nineteenth-century United States. Such terror “dramatizes the origin of the subject” (3). Hartman understands subjectivation to lead to subordination. The diffusion of terror extends the subjection of the racialized body into ordinary life as well as reproduced in celebrations of blackness in both theoretical discourse as well as in the performance of blackness.
- 12 Particularly in *Souls of Black Folk*. “The Negro [...] born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois 1903: 9). Double-consciousness is a classical concept in black studies to discuss the sense of alienation experience by blacks in the United States. Double consciousness is a divided or split consciousness, a condition of the black subject “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1903: 9). It is a subjectivity that has lost self-determination and is subjugated by the other, or in this case the white subject.
- 13 See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008). Martinican psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon has been influential on anti-colonial and liberationist movements in the mid-twentieth century. Fanon diverges from Du Bois by advocating that the black subject must reject the internalization of the split consciousness or reify the racial hierarchy: “In no way must my color be felt as a stain. From the moment the black man accepts the split imposed by the Europeans, there is no longer any respite; and ‘from that movement on isn’t it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the white man’s level? To elevate himself into the range of colors to which he has attributed a kind of hierarchy?’ We shall see that another solution is possible. It implies restructuring the world” (Fanon 2008: 63).
- 14 Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 15 Tshibumba Kanda Matulu is a Congolese artist who was involved in African popular art or African genre painting in the 1950s. Moten is examining Tshibumba’s collaborative project with German ethnographer Johannes Fabian, who commissioned Tshibumba from 1974 and 1976 to produce a series of paintings on Congolese history. Tshibumba admired Patrice Lumumba, leader of the Congolese National Movement and first prime minister of the Republic of Congo. Within 10 days of his dismissal from office, Mobutu Sese Seko led a coup and became president of Zaire during his second coup in 1965. Tshibumba critiques Mobutu in this project.
- 16 Moten derived “consent not to be a single being” from Glissant that defies and unravels normative discourses of agency, offering another mode of approaching relation between the self and other, individuality and totality, the notion of entanglement or “blue, black, *blur*” that offers paraontological resistance to whiteness (312, n.1).
- 17 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 18 Lama Khyenste Norbu is a Tibetan/Bhutanese filmmaker and writer. As a lama, he is the reincarnation of the Tibetan lama Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö, a nineteenth-century Tibetan lama. His filmography includes director/writer for *The Cup* (1999), *Travelers and Magicians* (2003), *Vara:*

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*A Blessing* (2013), *Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait* (2016), and *Looking for A Lady with Fangs and A Moustache* (2019).

<sup>19</sup> See “Thang ka” in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 903. Here Suh and Norbu see film as a modern day *tanka* or a visual medium to be used for meditation. Suh notes Norbu’s films “reimagine Buddhism for a contemporary Bhutanese audience” (10).

<sup>20</sup> In the Althusserian sense. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” trans. Ben Brewster, in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014), 232–72. “Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (264).

<sup>21</sup> See Moten (2017: 28–33).