



ARTIST. CURATOR. AUTHOR. INTUITIVE.

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko is a multi-spirited Nigerian-American poet, curator, and performance artist originally from Detroit, MI. Jaamil's work in performance is rooted in embodied ritual practice, poetics, Black critical studies, and queer theories of the body as a means to conjure and craft perpetual modes of freedom, healing, and care when/where/however possible.

JAAMIL OLAWALE KOSOKO

jaamil olawale kosoko is a multi-spirited Nigerian American author, performance artist, and curator of Yoruba and Natchez descent originally from Detroit, MI. jaamil's practice is conceptual and process based, fluidly moving within the creative realms of live art performance, video, sculpture, and poetry. Through rooted ritual and spiritual practice, embodied poetics, Black critical studies, and queer theories of the body, kosoko conjures and crafts perpetual modes of freedom, healing, and care when/where/ however possible.

jaamil is the recipient of awards including the 2022 Slamdance Jury Prize for Best Experimental Short film, 2021/22 MacDowell Fellowship, 2020 Pew Fellowship in the Arts, 2020 NCCAkron Creative Administrative Fellowship, 2019 NPN Creation & Development Fund award, 2019 Red Bull Arts Fellowship, 2019 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship in Choreography, 2017-2019 Princeton Arts Fellowship, 2018 NEFA National Dance Project Award, 2018-20 New York Live Arts Live Feed Residency, 2017 Cave Canem Poetry Fellowship, and consecutive 2016-2020 USArtists International Awards from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Blending poetry and memoir, conversation and performance theory, their book [Black Body Amnesia: Poems and Other Speech Acts](#), was released Spring 2022. Black Body Amnesia: LIVE, the performance reading, is a live theatrical event that examines the shapeshifting, illegible, and fugitive realities of Black diasporan people negotiating the psychic lifeworlds of living inside the American context. It is performed with an alternating ensemble of performers including jaamil olawale kosoko, Raymond Pinto, mayfield brooks, DJ Maij, and features original sound compositions by Everett-Asis Saunders. In this new work, kosoko uses complexity theory—which they define as the study of adaptive survivalist strategies inside complex networks or environments—as a performance device. From this artistic vantage point, the artist explores how minoritarianized communities record and affirm their existence through collaborative actions and protests, and how they then archive these personal freedom narratives to subvert culturally charged fields of systemic oppression, loss, and erasure.

Their 2020 project, *Chameleon*, is a multimedia living digital art work, film, and radio transmission project that explores the fugitive realities and shapeshifting demands of surviving at the intersection of Blackness, gender fluidity, and queerness in a pirated virtual space. *Chameleon* is a National Performance Network (NPN) Creation & Development Fund Project co-commissioned by EMPAC / Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY; the New York Live Arts Live Feed Residency program; and the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, in partnership with Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), and Tanz im August/HAU Hebbel am Ufer. Additional development support for *Chameleon* was made possible, in part, with commissioning support from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, through the Movement Research Artist-in-Residence Program.

Their 2017 work, *Séancers*, premiered at Abrons Arts Center in December 2017 and has toured nationally and internationally to critical acclaim. Recent highlights include *Mousonturm* (Frankfurt, DE), *FringeArts* (Philadelphia, PA), *Sophiensaele* (Berlin, DE), the Wexner Center (Columbus, OH), *Fusebox Festival* (Austin, TX) and *Montréal Arts Interculturels* (Montréal, CA), among others.

Their work *#negrophobia* (premiered September 2015, Gibney Dance Center) was nominated for a 2016 Bessie Award and toured throughout Europe appearing in major festivals including *Moving in November* (Finland), *TakeMeSomewhere* (UK), *SICK!* (UK), *Tanz im August* (Berlin), *Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival* (Norway), *Zurich MOVES!* (Switzerland), *Beursschouwburg* (Belgium) and *Spielart Festival* (Munich).

They are the guest curator of the exhibition *Portal For(e) the Ephemeral Passage* on view June 10-Aug. 14th at The Wexner, Co-Curator of the 2019 Black Poetry Conference at Princeton University, 2015 Movement Research Spring Festival and the 2015 *Dancing While Black* performance series at BAAD in the Bronx; a contributing correspondent for *Dance Journal* (PHL), the *Broad Street Review* (PHL), and *Critical Correspondence* (NYC); a 2012 Live Arts Brewery Fellow as a part of the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival; a 2011 fellow as a part of the DeVos Institute of Art Management at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; and an inaugural graduate member of the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University where they earned their MA in Curatorial Studies.



jaamil has performed with various dance companies including Keely Garfield Dance, Miguel Gutierrez and The Powerful People, and Headlong Dance Theater, among others. In addition, creative consultant and/or performer credits include: Terry Creach, Lisa Kraus, Kate Watson-Wallace/anonymous bodies, Leah Stein Dance Company, Emergent Improvisation Ensemble, and Faustin Linyekula and Les Studios Kabako (The Democratic Republic of Congo).

In 2009, they published the chapbook, *Animal in Cyberspace*. In 2011, jaamil published the collection, *Notes on an Urban Kill-Floor: Poems for Detroit* (Old City Publishing). Publications include: *The American Poetry Review*, *The Dunes Review*, *The Interlochen Review*, *The Broad Street Review*, *Silo Literary and Visual Arts Magazine*.

jaamil has served on numerous curatorial and funding panels including the Foundation for Contemporary Art, the Brooklyn Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, MAP Fund, Movement Research at the Judson Church, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, and the Baker Artists Awards, among others. From 2014 to 2020, jaamil served as a trustee on the Board of Directors for Dance/USA, the national service organization for dance professionals. jaamil is also a founding advisory board member for the Coalition for Diasporan Scholars Moving, and currently serves as an artistic advisory member of The Field Center in Vermont.

jaamil has held producing and curatorial positions at New York Live Arts, 651 Arts, and The Watermill Center among others. And has taught and lectured at various educational institutions across the world. In Fall of 2020, jaamil was appointed the 3rd annual Alma Hawkins Visiting Chair at UCLA World Arts & Cultures/Dance Department. Additionally, jaamil lectures regularly at Princeton University, The University of the Arts Stockholm, and Master Exerce, ICI-CCN in Montpellier, France. Follow jaamil's creative adventures on IG @jaamil_means_beauty

MISSION

Kosoko Performance + Studio is a new media performance studio whose mission is to push Black queer histories forward through global socially engaged performance, healing education, new media experimentation, and creative facilitation. The work of the company is deeply concerned with experimentation that combines Black and queer theoretical, poetic, and spiritual lineages with biographical and bodily knowledge. The work considers the materiality of “dissidence and unrecognizability” as performance tools for unlearning structures of coloniality while centering ideas that elasticate modern constructs of race, gender, and sexuality within which Black queer bodies have too often been erased.



VISION

Using intersectional modalities that encourage the functional, but fugitive uses of curatorial strategies, poetics, improvisational Black queer methods of survival, choreology, new media and visual performance technologies, Kosoko Performance + Studio envisions new possibilities for unlearning systems of coloniality embedded within institutional frameworks.

Kosoko Performance + Studio is a NYC based studio whose work and practice is in constant dialogue with history's role in the contemporary moment. KPS and its team of creative collaborators lean into their questions, trauma, and joy as a way to create environments of performance that hold productive modes of complexity and discomfort while also centering themes of care and healing. The work of Kosoko Performance + Studio is deeply concerned with experimentation that combines Black and queer theoretical, literary and spiritual lineages with biographical and bodily knowledge. The work thrives on questioning the distinction between theatricality, reality, and our collective erotic connection to devices of digitality.

The company's live performance work is deeply concerned with the concept of the performance lecture as a form of creative collective education that enlivens the historical record as the point at which history is rendered more present than the present.

BLACK BODY AMNESIA

Published 2022 by Wendy's Subway, NYC

Blending poetry and memoir, conversation and performance theory, *Black Body Amnesia: Poems and Other Speech Acts* enlivens a personal archive of visual and verbal offerings written and organized by jaamil olawale kosoko. Inspired by Audre Lorde's concept of biomythography, kosoko mixes personal history, biography, and mythology to tell a complex narrative rooted within a queer, Black, self-defined imagination.

This collection of intertextual performance acts captures the ephemeral data of kosoko's live performances. Developed out of their ongoing, multi-media live art project, *American Chameleon*, and elaborating on the artist's unique practice of Socio-Choreological Mapping as a means to explore queer theories of the body and its "hydraulics of grief," this book offers critical-creative frames to consider the fluid identities and life-worlds embedded inside contemporary Black America.

With an introduction by Dahlia (Dixon) Li, and contributions by Sara Jane Bailes, mayfield brooks, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Ashley Ferro-Murray, Nadine George-Graves, Nile Harris, Ima Iduozee, Lisa Jarrett, Bill T. Jones, Jennifer Kidwell, Malkia Okech, Ada M. Patterson, Tracy K. Smith, and Jillian Steinhauer.

Black Body
Amnesia:

Poems

Other

&

Speech

Acts

by jaamil olawale
kosoko

BLACK BODY AMNESIA: LIVE

A PERFORMANCE READING

Premiering in 2022, *Black Body Amnesia* (the performance reading) examines the shapeshifting, illegible, and fugitive realities of Black diasporan people that negotiate psychic and spiritual lifeworlds that exist beyond the captive conditions induced by racially reductive renderings of the African American body. It is performed with an alternating ensemble of virtual doulas including jaamil olawale kosoko, Raymond Pinto, mayfield brooks, DJ Maij, Nile Harris, KJ Wade with sound composition by Everett-Asis Saunders.

In this new work, kosoko uses complexity theory—which they define as the study of adaptive survivalist strategies inside complex networks or environments—as a theatrical device manifesting within the construction of the alternate ego J-Lov. From this artistic vantage point, the artist explores how minoritarianized communities record and affirm their existence through collaborative actions and protests. *Black Body Amnesia* attempts to archive ongoing acts and while re-activating histories of black collaborative action, we find personal narratives of freedom that subvert culturally-charged fields of systemic oppression, loss, and erasure.

Rooted in embodied ritual practice, poetics, Black critical studies, and queer theories of the body as a means to conjure and craft perpetual modes of freedom, healing, and care, *Black Body Amnesia* continues kosoko's engagement in public and performative scholarship. It is a communal act of public study in which the whole process is made visible.

The performance of *Black Body Amnesia* follows 2020's *Chameleon* (The Living Installments), which repurposed the online social platform Discord as an interactive venue where the artist hosted audio transmissions of original sound footage from a new moving-image work, a multi-media zine, remote conversations, a somatic workshop, and an archive of images, videos, and links. Many of the theories and documents from this event find themselves in *Black Body Amnesia*, now staged (as an in person or virtual transmission art work offering a deeper embodied experience for both the spectator and performers).

In addition to the performance work, *Black Body Amnesia* is also being shared as a book ([available now](#)) and as a living web-based archive which host documentation of the multiple iterations of the work serving as a public research hub, and as a repository for definitions of Black love.

SYLLABUS FOR BLACK LOVE

3 CHANNEL FILM INSTALLATION



Performers: Jennifer Kidwell, jaamil olawale kosoko

Cinematographers: Ima Iduozee, Sydney Lawson

Composition: Everett Asis Saunders

Editing & Postproduction: Alexis McCrimmon

Concept and Direction: jaamil olawale kosoko

Drawing from Black study and queer theories of the body, jaamil olawale kosoko's installation brings together two new works: the three-channel video work, *Syllabus for Black Love* and multi-media performance installation the hold having been realized through their three-year residency at the Wex.

Staged within milieus that reflect the ancient elements—air, fire, water, earth, and spirit—kosoko's *Syllabus for Black Love* is a meditative video work that embodies the shared care and healing qualities of Blackness. From a series of conversations, an intimate portrait emerges through a poetic quest that asks "What is Black love?". Arranged as a choreo-poem, *Syllabus* embraces the notion of 'doulaing' as a practice of nurturing through rhythmic and restorative gestures. Set to an original sound score by Everett-Asis Saunders, the three-channel work captures the movement of two dancers, kosoko and Jennifer Kidwell, as they embrace and display great affection for each other, reimagining Black queer bodies in natural settings that navigate between land and sky, bonfire and ocean, turning them into sacred intimate places.

Syllabus for Black Love serves as the ship inside which the multimedia installation, the hold, is positioned creating an experience that is both perceptive and somatic. An altar staging objects and materials composed from kosoko's personal performance archive is on display. Various fabric-covered floor sculptures invite one to spend time in the space. Aligned with kosoko's previous performances, the hold challenges fixed notions of Blackness, presenting a ritualistic encounter that offers new potentials of post-coloniality, sexuality, race, and through all this, the offering of new worldings to form.



CHAMELEON

A VISUAL ALBUM

Chameleon is an experimental visual album inspired by the radical queer feminist genre of the “Biomythography” which refers to Audre Lorde’s foundational work entitled *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* published in 1982. It combines history, biography, and myth, and holds a literary perspective that serves as a guiding light for complex narrative storytelling rooted in a queer, Black self-defined, feminist imagination.

Broken into five distinct confessional/autobiographical poems: *Linoleum*, *Stank*, *Entertainer*, *Wake*, *Effigy* (all written by kosoko); each poem acts as a chapter depicting and rewriting specific moments from the protagonist’s lived experience. In each shot, kosoko’s body responds to memory, moving in and out of dream, nightmare, present practice and ceremony. The process—a necessary re-conjuring—allows past ghosts to exist alongside present reconfigurations underscoring the creative, therapeutic and sometimes necessary but painful impulses of fugitive beings to shape-shift as a measure of survival.





THE HOLD

Performers: jaamil olawale kosoko, Nile Harris, Everett-Asis Saunders

Production Manager: Shana Crawford

Composition: Everett Asis Saunders with jaamil olawale kosoko

Concept and Direction: jaamil olawale kosoko

“The hold repeats and repeats and repeats in and into the present...”

-Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

Meshing the performative uses of fabric, lighting, time, and sound art as sculptural material inside the context of the multi-channel moving image installation, *Syllabus for Black Love*, the hold is an embrace, a place, a time between time. It is a slippery chameleonic emergent practice rupturing the borders of reality, digitality, and theatricality. Performed by jaamil olawale kosoko with an alternating ensemble of virtual doulas including Everett Asis Saunders and Nile Harris, the work resists capture by jumping through and bending the time-space continuum. It behaves as both arrival and exit - a birth passage into the intricate nuance of Black lives attempting the critical and alchemistic work of self examination, discovery, and becoming.

the hold is a multi-media live art work that explores the fugitive realities and shapeshifting demands of surviving at the intersection of Blackness, feminism, and queerness in contemporary America. In this new work from Nigerian American artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, a melanated stage saturated in africanist texts and iconography becomes a site of ecstatic spiritual fantasy in which an ever-present quotidian experience of grief is punctuated by moments of beauty, care, and pleasure. Inspired by an on-going fascination with erotic digitality and Black diasporic spiritual practice, Kosoko uses the apparatus of the gallery or theater to conjure an environment of sudden, unexpected, emotional complexity.

AMERICAN CHAMELEON

The Living Installments (2.0)

American Chameleon: The Living Installments (2.0) is a hybrid multimedia living artwork, instigated by Nigerian-American artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, that explores the ever-evolving ways in which digitality intersects with the fugitive realities and shapeshifting principles that Black queer people employ to survive and heal. The work also operates as a digital archive, a porous public performance in interactive pedagogy where Kosoko and collaborators seek to locate a space for healing both online and off. Kosoko and collaborators will host a series of events, including a film screening, discussion, and healing session, that aims to hold grief while also centering themes of liveness, beauty, humor, care, and joy.

The work operates as a flexible, digital commons. A pop-up community of organizers and practitioners who center adaptive interactive learning as a means of creating sustainable, multi-tiered networks of care. Occurring, in part, on the gaming platform Discord, The Living Installments server features the voices of Mayfield Brooks, Nile Harris, Kosoko, and others. This is an experiment in creating a flexible space where Black voices feel comfortable thinking and speaking out loud. It's a virtual venue for biomythographic* liveness conjuring chameleonic possibility and entanglement.

*"Biomythography" refers to Audre Lorde's foundational work entitled *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* published in 1982, which combines history, biography, and myth, and holds a literary perspective that serves as a guiding light for complex narrative storytelling rooted in a queer, Black self-defined, feminist imagination.



Previous Installments:

September 21, 2020 - International Day of Peace

Presented by Portland Institute for Contemporary Art & FringeArts.

[More details](#)

August 23, 2020 - International Day of Remembrance

Tanz im August, in collaboration with Zürcher Theater Spektakel.

[More details](#)

April 22, 2020 - Earth Day

Presented by EMPAC, New York Live Arts, and Wexner Center for the Arts. [More details](#)

Featuring: Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Nile Harris, Everett-Asis Saunders, Meena Murugesan, Vanessa Eileen Thompson, Ebony Noelle Golden, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild.

ASL and closed captioning provided. [More details](#)

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DANCE **The New York Times**

This Artist Proposes a Community Space ‘to Dream, to Imagine’

The poet and performance artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko has reimagined his work “Chameleon” as a daylong virtual experience, “a global gesture in listening.”



Jaamil Olawale Kosoko in “Chameleon” in 2019. The work is being re-envisioned as a daylong virtual experience. via EMPAC

Since New York theaters shut down in mid-March, creators of live performance have been quick to adjust: improvising on Instagram, reimagining dances for Zoom, uploading their archives to Vimeo.

The poet and performance artist [Jaamil Olawale Kosoko](#) was well equipped to adapt when he learned that his latest work, “[Chameleon: A Biomythography](#),” would not go on as scheduled at New York Live Arts this month. As its title suggests, “Chameleon” is mutable, the result of Mr. Kosoko’s exploration, over the past few years, of what he calls “adaptive strategies and ways of being in the world.” On April 22, Earth Day, it will take a much different shape than originally planned, re-envisioned as a daylong virtual experience, “[Chameleon: The Living Installments](#).”

DANCE *The New York Times*

A meditation on black queer life in the United States, dealing with themes of healing and survival, the work evolved along with Mr. Kosoko's increasingly international career, which, from his home base in Brooklyn, has recently taken him to Germany, South Africa, Sweden and England for residencies and teaching engagements. Like many of his projects, this one channels the ideas of writers and artists he calls his queer ancestors, in particular the poet Audre Lorde.



Mr. Kosoko in "Chameleon." In a repeated motif, his character slinks beneath an expanse of brown fabric, searching for a way out. via Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

Speaking by phone from Philadelphia, where he has been living with his partner during the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Kosoko said that the more he traveled with early versions of "Chameleon," the more he realized: "This thing needs to be adaptive. It needs to be able to respond to its audience, to the situation of the moment."

In the most consistent part of the live performance, a section called "The Hold," his figure slinks beneath an expanse of shimmering, stretchy brown fabric, searching for a way out: a metaphor, he said, "for certain psychic realities that many of us want or try to escape." Around that, everything shifts.

Mr. Kosoko, 37, did not anticipate the moment we're now in, but he is acutely familiar with [making art in times of tragedy and mourning](#). A Nigerian-American artist whose work incorporates movement, song, poetry and film, he grew up in Detroit and Natchez, Miss., with his mother and grandmother. Both died before he turned 17. In his early 30s, he lost his father and his brother, who was just 22.

DANCE **The New York Times**

“So much of my work already deals so deeply with grief and death and how to hold that alongside joy and pleasure,” he said. “And so this really was no different than some of the things I’ve had to negotiate in the past.”

Still, Mr. Kosoko has been shaken by the pandemic and the threats it poses to his friends, some of whom are health care workers, and his artistic community.

“Shortly after this thing unleashed itself and we were put on lockdown, something in me broke psychologically,” he said. “It took me several days to work through the fact that friends of mine were on the front lines of this thing. It was so intense. It still is.”

Not one to give in to despair, Mr. Kosoko has reconfigured “Chameleon” in order to bring people together from around the world, “for idea sharing, for resource sharing, and hopefully for healing,” he said. He calls it “a global gesture in listening.”

“We need possibility in this moment,” he added, “and so that’s really what I’m trying to propose: a space to dream, to imagine, and to do that in community.”

The day’s offerings include the release of the digital zine “Chameleon: A Syllabus for Survival”; the streaming of a prerecorded conversation between Mr. Kosoko and the choreographer Bill T. Jones; the premiere of an excerpt from the coming film “Chameleon: A Visual Album”; and a performance of “Pidgin Chorus,” a vocal section of “Chameleon,” by the work’s collaborators. Mr. Kosoko plans to host at least some of these events on Discord, a chat app used mostly by video game enthusiasts; anyone who prefers a less interactive experience can tune in on YouTube Live.

In organizing the online gathering, Mr. Kosoko has worked with the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (better known as Empac) in Troy, N.Y., where he has had several creative residencies for “Chameleon.” It was Empac’s engineers who introduced him to Discord, a platform that allows users to hear but not see one another.

Ashley Ferro-Murray, Empac’s curator of theater and dance, has been meeting with Mr. Kosoko on Discord to test it out. She said that at times, although she can’t see him, she feels as if they are physically present together.

“There’s something really poignant about being in the space,” she said. “Hearing Jaamil talk and perform and sit, I’m getting his presence somehow.”

Mr. Kosoko spoke about adapting to the present and changing the future. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Why did you choose to use Discord for this online convening?

DANCE *The New York Times*

In my experiments on the platform, there's been a kind of intimacy. Not being as distracted or seduced by visual content, you're asked to meditate a little bit more on the beauty that comes from hearing someone's voice.

This is a new platform for many of us, certainly for me. By no means can I pretend to become some tech guru in three weeks. [Laughs.] It will be a little clunky, especially if you've never experienced this thing before.

Liveness is such an important part of your work, being in the room together. Are you trying to approximate that?

There's nothing that really equates to the magic of being able to assemble in tactile, intimate space — to share breath, to be forced to brush against your neighbor, to maybe meet somebody new that you didn't expect you would.

What I am learning from this work is that I'm hearing the voice in a different way. I'm hearing the subtlety, the inflection, the vibrato, the cadence, just the rhythm of one's vocality. That's become for me the new elbow brush or shared breath. It's something that's really giving me hope, something to move toward.

You've been traveling so much recently. Has it been challenging to stay in one place these past few weeks?

Yeah, I was in the world. I was in the wind. My passport was my lifeline. Knowing that I could leave the U.S. at any time was what kept me sane in a lot of ways, being able to experience other cultures. It was very much a dream, and then suddenly I woke into a nightmare.

We're all grappling with this. There's something soothing about that but also petrifying, like there is no place to run but to where you are.

You've talked about the idea of changing the future, since we can't change the past. Do you see "Chameleon" as part of that effort?

Yes, yes, yes. When I was going through my episode, we'll call it, I was in panic. I saw a future, and it was like watching this tornado in the distance, just watching it come and not being able to do anything about it.

I think all artists have foresight. The work that we do is to create futures and invite people into them. And so that's what I'm trying to do: to put forward a proposal for the future and invite people into it.

What kind of future do you propose?

I think there's no way we can go back to business as usual. I think that would be a huge misfortune, to return to normality, whatever that could mean or whatever that meant. I think we have to be radical, we have to be strategic, we have to be strong and enduring,

DANCE *The New York Times*

we have to be organized, and we have to support each other in the grass roots, because we see that our government does not have the capacity to do it and isn't interested in doing it. We are the ones we have been waiting for, in the great words of [June Jordan](#).

Does this new iteration still focus on black queer identity — what this moment means for black queer people in particular?

I'm not trying to speak for all of any one group; that's impossible. But I do think that I can speak to my specific lived experience and the communities I circulate inside of.

I'm reaching back to these folks I call my queer ancestors: Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Sun Ra, Alain Locke. There are so many. I'm reaching toward them and asking them to help me through.

I think that no matter our race, creed, color, nationality, whatever, there's something to be learned from those who exist in that space of black and queer. And both of those words are very unstable signifiers. What is black and what is queer, really? I think there's something in that illegible, unstable set of identities that everyone can learn from. Whether we're open to that, that's another question, but there's something to be learned, believe me.

For updates on "Chameleon: The Living Installments," follow [@chameleon_coalition](#) on Instagram and visit [empac.rpi.edu](#).



Mr. Kosoko in an aerial scene from "Chameleon." He calls the work "a global gesture in listening." Sara Griffith via EMPAC

DANCE

Framing the Unruliness of Life and Loss in a Black Box

By SIOBHAN BURKE DEC. 5, 2017



Jaamil Olawale Kosoko rehearsing “Séancers” at Abrons Arts Center.

Credit An Rong Xu for The New York Times

The black box theater at Abrons Arts Center looked as if a storm had swept through it. Feathers, wigs and masks were strewn across the floor. Tulle, tinsel and deflated blowup dolls cascaded down the aisle between seats.

The artist [Jaamil Olawale Kosoko](#) was preparing his new work, “[Séancers](#),” and had just rehearsed a section that involved cloaking himself in these materials, then artfully shedding them. Much of the

detritus, as he called it, seemed disposable or replaceable. Yet one item stood out as more precious: a framed photograph of Mr. Kosoko's mother, who died when he was 16.

"Her portrait — I keep returning to it," he said. "It keeps showing up in my work. She's back again."

In "Séancers," which will have its premiere on Wednesday at Abrons, Mr. Kosoko deals with losses both personal and cultural — most intimately, the deaths of his mother, brother and father. At 34, he has no immediate family.

In exploring notions of resurrection, Mr. Kosoko, who is Nigerian-American and grew up in Detroit, has also been thinking more broadly about "ideas that may be extinct or dying," he said, particularly in relation to the black church, black folk tradition and the erosion of old modes of congregating.



Mr. Kosoko, whose "Séancers" is in some ways a continuation of his last evening-length show, "#negrophobia," presented at Abrons in 2016 as part of the American Realness festival.

Credit An Rong Xu for The New York Times

"I'm curious about what we worship now," he said. "In a way, we are practicing a kind of ritual of praise to the cellphone, to Hulu, to the computer."

"Séancers" allows other kinds of rituals to unfold, through movement, song, spoken word and a sound score by Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste. Slipping into and peeling off disguises and second skins, Mr. Kosoko undergoes many transformations, at times stepping into the shoes, literally, that his family members might have worn. In those moments he considers "what it means to embody a spirit, be overcome by a spirit," he said. "To become my mother or father and take on that physicality."

An avid reader who came to performance through writing poetry, Mr. Kosoko anchored the creation of "Séancers" in several texts, including Audre Lorde's [1978 poem "Power,"](#) Howardena Pindell's 1980 short film "[Free, White and 21](#)" and a [recent radio interview](#) with the civil rights activist and theologian Ruby

Sales. Fellow performers anchor him, too. A different guest artist, or séancer, will join Mr. Kosoko onstage each night, helping to usher in the work.

“It’s really an unruly experience that we’re trying to frame inside of this black box,” he said.

That unruliness reflects the personal history embedded in the piece, a life that has been anything but tidy. As a child Mr. Kosoko lived mostly in Detroit with his mother, who, he said, struggled with alcoholism, paranoid schizophrenia and scleroderma, an autoimmune disease. He also lived in Mississippi with his grandmother, a more stable caretaker; she died before he went to high school. In 2015, his brother was stabbed to death in Denver at the age of 22. Shortly after, his grandfather died. And this August, while creating “Séancers,” he received news of his father’s death.

“What might these losses reveal to me?” Mr. Kosoko said. “I’m thinking a lot about trying to heal, strategies of survival that have been embedded in black thought, black life, really since black people landed on the Americas — about larger societal traumas and my own personal traumas and how they’re engaged in this dance.”



Mr. Kosoko, rehearsing on the set of “Séancers.”

Credit An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Amid what he calls his “very complicated upbringing,” Mr. Kosoko found space to process loss, or begin to. He attended high school on a full scholarship at the bucolic Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan,

studying writing and photography. As a student at Bennington College in Vermont, he began taking dance classes and choreographed his first piece, “Schizophrenia.”

“I needed to learn how to feel less awkward inside of myself,” he said, and dance helped.

In some ways “Séancers” is a continuation of his last evening-length show, “[#negrophobia](#),” presented at Abrons in 2016 as part of the American Realness festival. That work, a more explicit reckoning with his brother’s death and violence against black men in the United States, has toured Europe over the past two years.

It was at American Realness that Mr. Kosoko met the composer M. Lamar, who investigates similar themes in a different medium. The two began a dialogue that has informed “Séancers”; M. Lamar will be the guest artist on opening night. Asked what his role entails, he replied, “I’ll be singing, and I’ll be talking, very simply.”

M. Lamar said if he had any artistic influence on Mr. Kosoko, it had been to lead him “away from realism and into otherworldliness” — toward the supernatural.

Friday’s séancer, Ebony Noelle Golden, teaches Mr. Kosoko’s work in her course Theater of the Black Vanguard, at the New School. She said that she sees his performances as “a form of creative activism.”

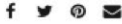
As Mr. Kosoko put it: “The creative work for me is a catalyst to engage in dialogue and critical conversation. That’s really what I thirst for, to be part of a larger conversation.”

A version of this article appears in print on December 6, 2017, on Page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: Inside a Black Box, Finding Meaning in Life and Loss.

Kosoko in his Chameleon. Photo courtesy EMPAC

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko's Career Presents a Syllabus for Change

Brenda Dixon-Gottschild / Dec 07, 2020



Jaamil Olawale Kosoko is a conundrum, a puzzle whose pieces must be mixed to match. It's appropriate that *Chameleon* is the title of his most recent project. Like the old-world lizard of the same name, the Nigerian-American performance artist/poet/curator/educator changes colors—moods, modes—and shakes things up, right before your eyes. As an improviser, none of his performances are the same. His art finds its own logic as it travels a mysterious inner trajectory with episodes of grief and terror, wit and healing, sometimes wrapped around one another.

Angela Davis said about the films of Ava DuVernay, "It's art that can begin to make us feel what we don't necessarily yet understand." That's true for Kosoko's major performance works—*Chameleon* (2020), *Séances* (2017), *#negrophobia* (2015) and *Black Male Revisited* (2013). He uses voiceovers, spoken word, live soundscape, archival and live video projection, performance collaborators and, at the center, his own Black performing body, to reveal a selected, complex version of what he terms his "curated life." His mirror reflects back on the spectator in ways that invite us to pause, ponder and reassess how we see what we see.

Kosoko in *Chameleon* Courtesy EMPAC

As Kosoko claims, "Not every story is a dance story. Sometimes you have to write it. Not every concept lends itself to the stage." In Belgium, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the United Kingdom, Finland and Norway he's performed full works and also shared his works-in-progress as movement-lecture-performances in museums, galleries, libraries and black-box spaces. His poems have appeared in a solo collection, *Notes on an Urban Kill-Floor: Poems for Detroit* (Old City Publishing), and in journals such as *American Poetry Review* and the *Dunes Review*.

Holding an MA in curatorial studies from Wesleyan University and writing essays on the subject, Kosoko has also provided his managerial savvy to events by emerging and established artists in the greater New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia areas. In addition, he makes films and podcasts to accompany or announce his performances. This spirit of trying various media to see what a particular story demands is part of what makes his work so compelling.

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Kosoko belongs to a generation of diasporan performance artists whose concerns dig deeply into the sources of their angst and the mother lode of their identities: African; Caribbean; North American; peripheral; othered; authentic; essential—the unapologetic outliers. Divested of the need to play it safe, they are rooted in their own cultural entitlement that empowers them to pursue a millennial, Afro-futuristic course as movers, writers, thinkers, lecturers, producers—as multidimensional creatives. They are shape-shifting imaginers of extraordinary worlds, dredging up and leaving exposed past stereotypes and closeted ghosts, and transforming trauma into catharsis along the way.

Dana Michel (Canada), Kettly Noël (Haiti; Mali), Nia Love and [Okwui Okpokwasili](#) are fellow travelers on this road. Senior visual conceptual performance artists Lorraine O'Grady, William Pope.L and Sherman Fleming, as well as dancers Ishmael Houston-Jones and [Bill T. Jones](#), are ancestors in this genre. Tim Miller, Holly Hughes and Karen Finley are lurking in the wings as seconds.

They all belong to the same aesthetic family tree, and Kosoko has created his own branch. He is the quintessential embodiment of James Baldwin's assertion that "all art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story; to vomit the anguish up."



Born in Detroit, Michigan, a hardscrabble home life exposed Kosoko to emotional and verbal trauma. He described it as "the theater of the house; the policing of gender, sexualities, behaviors." Nevertheless, grassroots performance modes at social gatherings, parties, cookouts and just hanging out—so significant in African-American urban settings—were part of his upbringing.

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It was not until he attended the [Interlochen Arts Academy](#) as a teenager that he was introduced to formal artistic training. He confesses that his two years there, from 1999 to 2001, changed his life. Accepted as a poetry major, he also studied writing and photography. Later, intense yoga training in retreats at the [Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health](#) was another lifesaver. Drawing upon his many talents, he created a particular mode of embodied performance art as a way to explore and untangle the grief of his early years.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the most recent terror/trap in the life of this Black male queer artist, but transforming to keep going was already part and parcel of his *modus operandi*. Deftly pivoting to virtual reality, Kosoko is making optimal use of digital platforms, including [Discord](#) (a gaming and communications interface) as well as Zoom, Instagram and the webinar function, allowing him to intersect his talents so that the poet/scholar seamlessly engages in the virtual performance space.

Last spring, he transformed the co-commissioned [EMPAC](#), [New York Live Arts](#) and [Wexner Center for the Arts](#) premiere of *Chameleon* into a series of visual installments honoring Earth Day (April 22). In his own words, this experience helped him "listen to how the work wished to behave, transform, respond." The performance morphed into "an act of digital protest and community interactive learning" and included conversations, readings, movement workshops and lecture-discussions.

For the fall semester 2020, he was engaged by the UCLA World Arts and Cultures/Dance department as the Alma Hawkins Visiting Chair—virtually, of course. He is also the recipient of a 2020–21 Wexner Center Artist Residency Award, for which he is creating "a second compilation of movement-based, visual choreopoems," he says. He is one of a select cadre of artists to be awarded the coveted Pew Center for Arts & Heritage Fellowship for 2020.

Kosoko's work is taking flight in an era when it seems the winds of change are finally acknowledging that Black Lives Matter—not as a catchphrase, but as specific and exceptional as the life and work of Jaamil Olawale Kosoko.

AMERICAN THEATRE

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A scene from James Thomson's "he is his own mythical beast." (Photo by Maria Baranova)

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK [FEBRUARY 2, 2018](#) [1 COMMENT](#)

Beyond Whiteness: A January Festival Wrap-Up

What I saw when I chose to focus on artists of color at Under the Radar, COIL, et al.

BY NICOLE SERRATORE

I once asked a prominent New York theatre critic if he actively made an effort to write about work from artists of diverse backgrounds. He said he relied on the theatres themselves to make inclusive programming choices and just reviewed what they put on. Not all critics get to select shows to review, of course. But it seems to me that being entirely passive in your selection is a political act. Particularly when you have the chance to pick from a large menu of options, as we New York critics do each January, during festival season.

But as much as I've tried to be conscious and inclusive in the work I choose to view and review, this year I realized that in the past I had been just as lax as that critic, picking randomly from festival catalogs based on what sounded interesting but not being mindful of where I was concentrating my attention or wielding my power (such as it is—let's not go crazy here). So I decided to be pro-active this year when I attended the *Under the Radar*, *COIL*, *American Realness*, *Prototype*, and *Exponential* festivals. I wanted to try to decenter whiteness as much as I could in the shows I booked, and so I focused on work by artists of color. This was not just about representation but also how art was framed and gazes were cast.

This approach brought me to an ice rink to observe the radiant opera singer Alicia Hall Moran skate while she sang in acknowledgement of the 1988 Olympic skating showdown between Debi Thomas and Katarina Witt (*Battle of the Carmens*). It led me to take selfies with performers (they insisted) as they moved around an art gallery (*[a swatch of lavender]: a self-portrait*). It landed me an offer of free soup and a consideration of 1960s protest movements and effective political action (*Free Free Free Free*). And at one point I found myself reading Shakespearean sonnets to myself while an audience watched me (*Ike's Wonderful World of Leisure*).

In the 19 festival shows I saw, theatremakers tackled death, rituals, cinema, art history, politics, activism, race, wormholes, ancestors, sex, secrets, confessions, and pain. I saw work by African-American, Asian, Latinx, Iranian-American, and indigenous creators. Some of these artists were non-binary, LGBTQ+, disabled, and/or women. Some white men even made appearances! But even within this broad spectrum of experiences onstage, I found that problematic tropes can still crop up, and intersectionality can be lacking.

To wit, *Mugen Noh Othello* (*Under the Radar*), an ethereal Japanese interpretation of Shakespeare's play which centered Desdemona and her suffering. Traditional "mugen noh" theatrical tools include a chorus, drums, and the introduction of the story by a disguised ghost or spirit who cannot cross over because of its anguish. Here, director Satoshi Miyagi and writer Suehiro Hirakawa keenly shifted the focus of Shakespeare's piece, giving voice to Desdemona through this narrating restless spirit. At last her story and her agony were not overshadowed by the machinations of Iago or the rage of Othello.

But Miyagi chose to darken the skin of the actor playing Othello in this production. Regardless of how this might be read in Japan, it was put before us in America; and though the character of Othello was smaller than usual in this production, this use of blackface swallowed up everything, dragging in its entire history, whether unintentional or not, and worked in dissonance with the adaptation, reminding American audience of segregation, minstrelsy, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation. None of these was likely the point of this production, but such is the weight of this dehumanizing racist practice. With show after show in the festivals focused on prejudice, violence, erasure, abuse, or the white gaze, I couldn't blithely overlook this blackface or minimize it without becoming part of its cruelty.

This *Othello* might be held in stark contrast to David Thomson's *he his own mythical beast* (*COIL*), in which Thomson donned a black latex mask over his own black head, thereby directly and intentionally calling for a conversation about black identity. Slipping into this second skin, a flowing white dress, and high heels, Thomson called himself Venus (in reference to Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, whose black body was put on display in side shows in the 19th century), and flashed his own naked body to us from underneath his dress. Race, gender, and sexuality were all at play in a piece that questioned our assumptions about what a black voice and black body are.

Apprehension of the white gaze created a searing moment in Nic Kay's dance-heavy, solo biographical show about race, queerness, and activism, *Lil Blk* (*American Realness*). In one scene Kay, physically boxed in by a square of white light and contorted into a twisted ball, began on the ground, then struggled their way into a standing position. But there was no release even when they were finally on their feet: Once erect, they spoke of white audiences watching their black body as entertainment.

Casting attention back on the audience and interrogating white viewership was central to the piece, as it called us out both for acts of active oppression and for passive acceptance of white supremacy and racism. Kay poured every ounce of herself into this performance, and when the piece ended I felt I had taken far too much from them—more than my share, at least. It's a consideration we all might want to reflect on about the performers who share their labor with us.

I felt a similar kind of invasion when Nona Hendryx and Kiki Hawkins sang a rendition of "Strange Fruit" in Hendryx's work-in-progress, *Parallel Lives* (Under the Radar). Focusing on the personal and musical commonalities of Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf, Hendryx assembled an *Avengers*-worthy team of killer vocalists, including Celia Faussart, Tamar Kali, and Raven O for this concert-style presentation. When they sang "Strange Fruit" with tears running down their faces, it was difficult to watch, as they bore the weight of a song about black people being lynched by white people. But that's why it had to be sung. It reminded us why we must bear witness to our racist history, as it's not really history at all.

Indeed, in the explosive and penetrating *Séancers* (American Realness), Jaamil Olawale Kosoko did not have to reach far back into the past to conjure spirits of black lives that have been needlessly lost to violence. Using a varied visual language of decadence and trash, with shimmering silver walls, inflated condoms filled with confetti, voluminous wigs, plastic dolls, and piles of tulle, the piece was symbolic and cathartic. Through movement, music, and voiceover, Kosoko hosted a nonlinear spiritual and musical ceremony that summoned voices, called for living life big and loud, then juxtaposed this against the devastating, smothering horror of violent death. In recognition of Eric Garner, Kosoko called out repeatedly "I can't breathe" as he was swallowed up by the detritus he had amassed on the stage, a tumult of bodies and objects.

And in *Pillowtalk* (Exponential) by writer and director Kyoung H. Park, two frames of symbolic white illumination surrounded a gay married couple, one Asian American and one African American. Each time they came together onstage, it was within an area defined by this shrill white light. Who this couple was with each other had been impacted by years of dealing with, reacting to, rebelling against, and being oppressed by whiteness. Though the production was strained at times (a queer pas de deux in harsh neon seemed visually at odds with the emotional content), the myriad questions posed about survival, suffering, and activism provided a rich background. It addressed sex/race/power/marriage in way I've never seen before.

Not everything I saw was looking at racial strife or personal pain. Angela Goh's transformation through dance, *Desert Body Creep* (COIL), was equal parts defiance and mischief. With electric guitar music conjuring a '70s road trip or echoing screams, Goh was playful and yet in control. Whether it was her body or the space that was morphing or changing, she held a firm dynamic tension with the audience. She animated a giant gummy worm, flopped like a fish, burrowed under and through fabric, and unexpectedly emerged naked. The potential for all these textures, shapes, and objects, including her own body, to evolve into the unexpected made for a compulsively watchable performance.

The duo of James Harrison Monaco and Jerome Ellis, who go simply by James & Jerome, incorporate music into storytelling, with contemplative results. Their tag-team art history slide presentation, *Museum: Lecture* (Exponential), combined personal narrative with a focus on the object of visual art. With quiet resonance, they dug into who made the art, the circumstances around it, who got credit, and what went into it (earth, bark, skin, metal). With music that varied from electronic vibrations to a slow sustained saxophone note, these storytellers were in a reflective dialogue with artists from the past.

For a bit of fun, entertainer and comedian Ikechukwu Ufomadu's droll *Ike's Wonderful World of Leisure* (Exponential) instructed us on the best ways to relax. Ufomadu's light-hearted approach is that of a Dick Cavett-esque host who relishes language, PowerPoint, and audience interaction. He's got a puckish quality. Even though I was brought onstage, and in a panic offered a really boring legal term when asked to say the most interesting word I had read that day, the often amusing presentation-style show was resilient enough to survive my weak contribution.