



away, completely: denigrate

Introduction

Halima Haruna, Ashley Holmes and Eburn Sodipo

&

Languid Hands

Thursday 20th June, 6-8 pm

Doors open 5.30 pm

‘Did we surprise our teachers who had niggling doubts about the picayune brains of small black children who reminded them of clean pickaninnies on a box of laundry soap? How muddy is the Mississippi compared to the third-longest river of the darkest continent? In the land of the Ibo, the Hausa, and the Yoruba, what is the price per barrel of nigrescence? Though slaves, who were wealth, survived on niggardly provisions, should inheritors of wealth fault the poor enigma for lacking a dictionary? Does the mayor demand a recount of every bullet or does city hall simply neglect the black alderman's district? If I disagree with your beliefs, do you chalk it up to my negligible powers of discrimination, supposing I'm just trifling and not worth considering? Does my niggling concern with trivial matters negate my ability to negotiate in good faith? Though Maroons, who were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?’¹

¹ Harryette Mullen, *Denigration*, From Present Tense: Poets in the World
Image: Halima. Haruna. *Other Side of the Creek*. 2019 (video still)

narrative projects is pleased announce a live programme *away, completely: denigrate*. The project starts with an event introducing the artists and the ideas behind it by the curators Languid Hands (Imani Robinson & Rabz Lansiquot), and will culminate in a static exhibition at narrative projects in November 2019.

In popular lexicon, the English word *to denigrate* is used to describe the act of defaming, belittling, maligning, disparaging or slandering someone or something; specifically affecting the reputation or social standing of it. However, the etymological root of the word illuminates the anti-blackness that is inherent in the English language and it is as follows. *-Niger-* is Latin for "black"; *denigrationem* is Late Latin for "a blackening." The Late Latin *de-* does not mean "the opposite or reverse of," as *de-* so often does; in this case, as in *denude* and *declaim*, it means "away, completely"; and so, the etymological root of the word *denigrate* is "to blacken completely."

Afro-pessimist theorist Frank B Wilderson III employs a linguistic analogy to describe that which is unspoken as it relates to suffering and anti-blackness, referring to these fundamental yet un(der)articulated concepts upon which the world as we know it is built as "ontological grammars"¹. Grammar is that which goes unspoken when we speak, underwriting and structuring speech itself. Poet Harryette Mullen's poem *Denigration* attempts to speak the ontological grammar which structures language. She takes this linguistic exploration further than the simple and limited black/white good/bad dichotomy to analyse a number of commonly used English words which have this, seemingly hidden, anti-black sentiment whilst also interrogating the complex corporeal effects of this psycholinguistic association. Her work explores how language reinscribes blackness with inferiority, not as a negative stereotype but as an ongoing act of psychological anti-black violence which has placed the black in a "zone of nonbeing"², or as Wilderson calls it, social death.

Languid Hands (Imani Robinson & Rabz Lansiquot, formerly of sorryyoufeeluncomfortable collective) are interested in contemporary discourses of language and signification and the ways in which race, blackness and legacies of white supremacy are woven through and obfuscated through this process. They have selected five early-mid career Black artists of varying backgrounds to create new works that respond to the word *denigrate*, its etymology "to blacken, completely", or "to make black" and the ideas that its lineage evokes.

Libita Clayton (Bristol), **Ashley Holmes** (Sheffield/Luton), **Aisha Abdullahi** (London), **Ebun Sodipo** (London) and **Halima Haruna** (Lagos) are artists who work across a range of mediums: from moving image, to sculptural installation, to writing and performance. Each artist is working towards new commissions specifically for the exhibition.

¹ 'Introduction' in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Frank B. Wilderson III, Duke University Press 210

² Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire, masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks)*. Paris: Seuil.