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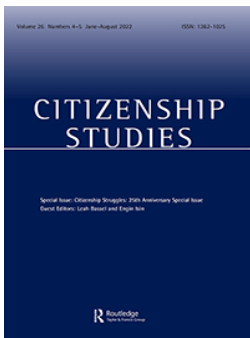
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## Remember to die: recovering belonging in diasporic end of life art

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### ABSTRACT

Anticolonial and Black feminist scholars and artists have made a convincing case that political and social legibility for racially marked peoples requires active and multi-sensory reiteration. To presence what has been effaced or distorted, images, numbers, and texts must be redacted, annotated, rescaled, reframed, relocated, and repurposed. In dialogue with this work, this piece discusses the vernacular of the diasporic art made in English hospices with Black and Brown migrants at the end of their lives. I suggest that such outsider art makes and rehearses migrant belonging in two inter-related ways: by creating temporary niches for rest, recovery, and pleasure; and by bringing into appearance the quotidian, heterogeneous times of Black and Brown diasporic belonging that are out of sync with the rights and timelines of formal citizenship. The critical possibilities that attunement to rest and pleasure can precipitate in citizenship studies is an underlying theme.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Art; death and dying;  
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Johnathan has advanced Motor Neurone Disease. When we meet in a London hospice, he speaks through a Caribbean accented eye-gaze system (Johnathan was born in Barbados). The technology is activated by tiny movements of the pupils, transduced into a cursor that retrieves and converts symbols and pre-stored phrases into electronic speech. We are preparing for a spoken word performance to close the *Misbehaving Bodies* exhibition at London's Wellcome Collection (2020). Because communicating with an eye-reader is hard slow work, Johnathan's contributions will come through jazz and reggae tracks, spliced with recordings of his electronic speech. In these advanced stages of the disease, it is too arduous to bank new or spontaneous words and phrases in the eye-gaze machine. Conversation shrinks, becoming more repetitive, insistent, out of sync. 'What day is it today, Wednesday or Thursday?' is banked in Johnathan's eye-reader, alongside the enjambed existential phrasing 'Where did this shite (his disease) come from? If I didn't have the breather I would be dead'

Here, at the edges of life, the eye-gaze machine makes palpable the distressed carnal relays between the disappearance of the speech act and its intrinsic limits in making personhood synchronously present and legible. In dialogue with the Black and Brown diasporic last art that is made in English hospices, I want to show something of how the matter of timing, as

much as the circumstances of representation, can recast diasporic citizenship in the living out – and dying out – of belonging. The critical possibilities that engagement with rest and pleasure can precipitate in citizenship studies is an underlying theme.

### Breathing apparatus

As anticolonial and Black feminist scholars and artists have taught us, political and social legibility for racially marked peoples requires active multi-sensory reiteration. In the presence of what has been effaced or distorted, images, numbers, and texts must be redacted, annotated, rescaled, reframed, relocated, and repurposed. The strenuous labour of reiteration is in part, what Christina Sharpe (2016) names ‘wake work’, where to be ‘*in* the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding’ (p.14, original emphasis). Wake work is care work, as much as it is a labour of social justice, seeking to ‘resist, rupture and disrupt’ (p.13) climates of anti-blackness. Within milieus in which Black dehumanisation and death are quotidian, care for Sharpe is ‘aspiration’. Both a hopeful politics and a matter of life and death; a means of ‘keeping and putting breath back into the Black body’ (p.130). In the realm of cultural analysis, Sharpe demonstrates wake work through the practices of ‘Black annotation’ and ‘Black redaction’ that breathe some context and humanity into texts and images. In these circumstances, wake work is the pursuit and affirmation of mediations of Black life outside ‘insistent Black exclusion’ and ‘ontological negation’ (p14), with full recognition that being in the wake is to exist ‘with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected . . .’ (p.22). If wake work tends to the disaggregating of Black life and belonging from formal structures and sites of citizenship – the state, rights, legislation, the public domain, and so on – it also renders racial time choppy and uneven, with the past forever seeping into the now and what is to come.

It is in the company of this scholarship on racial time, that I discuss the time and space given to the making of last diasporic Black and Brown art in hospices as a type of wake work; a breathing apparatus. While art, of all kinds, has always been mired in the work-leisure conundrum, it is a tension that is profoundly racialised: white creativity is granted a rich, leisurely interiority in relation to racialised others, known primarily through their capacity to labour. The palliative care artmaking that I will describe produces temporalities of rest and pleasure that work against the extractive and dehumanising rhythms of the history of time in the lives of Britain’s Black and Brown post-war cohorts of migrants. This wake work is shaped by the flows between an excessive, localised hospitality and the phenomenological weight of slavery, colonialism, and the violent policing of Black and Brown communities and national borders. In thinking of racism as a weight, I am also thinking of it as a time. I am indebted to Frantz Fanon on this, who imagined coloniality and racism in the most elemental terms, as a struggle for breath, necessitating ‘combat breathing’ (Fanon 1970 [1965]) and as a rolling back of racial time. In that renowned scene Fanon postulated between a Black man, a white woman, and her young son ([1967] 1986), racism is weight *and* the compression of racial time in its recourse to primitivism. Struck down and winded by the child’s racist hailing, the Black man finds himself “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial

defects, slave-ships, and above all else: ‘Sho’ good eatin.’ (Fanon 1967 [1986], 112). Compressed into an archetype, the Black man moves more slowly, more wearily in the world. ‘I progress by crawling’ (Fanon 1967 [1986], 116).

In attuning to racism as a weighty temporal force, I want to return to Johnathan. This time, keeping in mind the UK’s ‘Windrush scandal’ and the creeping disenfranchisement and undoing of residency rights for our long-established post-war Caribbean labour migrants – like Johnathan. Often known as the ‘Windrush Generation’, these adventurers had come to Britain between 1948 and 1970, enabled by the 1948 British Nationality Act and its extension of rights – unrestricted entry and residency, voting rights and access to welfare provision – to those in British colonies and independent Commonwealth countries. Ironically, at the same time as Johnathan was making art with paper, paint, and music at the hospice, the Windrush events were circulating in media headlines around us.

In 2017, the public was first made aware of how incremental changes in immigration legislation and the huge amounts of documentary proof required by the government to prove residency – described by Will Davies (2018) as ‘weaponising paperwork’ – had led to these residents and their children being deported, made unemployed, destitute, and homeless and denied lifesaving health care. The Home Office (the British government department responsible for immigration) had not kept records of those granted leave to remain. In 2010, it had destroyed all the landing cards of the Windrush era arrivals. An independent inquiry in March 2020 found that the Home Office’s culture of ‘disbelief and carelessness’ was ‘consistent with some elements of the definition of institutional racism’ (in Gentleman and Bowcott 2020).

If the relationship between rights, belonging and being a good citizen assumes a certain temporal simultaneity and alignment, the Windrush scandal reveals the conditionality of this relational timeline for some British residents. Regardless of citizenship obligations being fulfilled, rights and also time were clawed back, eviscerating the painstaking investment in all manner of life support. It is not that the authority of linear time – the assumed developmental arc of a migratory lifeline that promises redemptive betterment and security – was displaced by Windrush. Rather, the shape of this dominant temporal formatting of diasporic citizenship was selectively suppressed and reworked: for some migrants, things can only get worse. In May 2021, the Home Office confirmed that 21 of those wrongly stripped of their rights under Windrush had died while waiting for their compensation claims to be paid.

To be sure, thinking of diasporic art towards death as an ordinary space of citizenship-making, amidst racist state carelessness and deteriorating life, can come across as an impossible aspiration. Yet, I am going to suggest that Black and Brown diasporic last art makes and rehearses migrant belonging in two interrelated ways: by creating temporary breathing spaces for rest, recovery, and pleasure; and by bringing into appearance the quotidian, heterogenous times of Black and Brown diasporic belonging in the midst of multicultural hospitality and care. Before I come to the politics of rest and pleasure, let me say a bit more about last diasporic art and English hospice care.

### Listening to citizenship

The work of the late British artist Donald Rodney, described by Stuart Hall (2003, 6), as ‘a master of the social-pathological “investigation” as a critical artistic practice’, is a high-profile example of wake work as diasporic debilitated art, rooted in non-rationalist time

and dislocated belonging. Rodney, whose parents had migrated from Jamaica to Britain as part of the Windrush cohort, died of sickle cell disease in 1998. An artist of the 1980s Black Art Movement, Rodney used the materials of his care (X-rays, wheelchairs, the plaster cast, hospital sheets), as well as his own body (hair, blood, scars, and skin) to reframe the temporal circuits and scales of diasporic citizenship. Rodney's installation *Visceral Canker* (1990), exhibited in a disused gun battery in Plymouth – a port city in southwest England – is especially potent in rerouting consanguinity to signify the extensive arteries and legacies of colonialism. *Visceral Canker* is wake work; described by Rodney as a resuscitation (in Hall, 2003, 6). I think of it also as critical palliative care. The word *palliative* is derived from the Latin noun *pallium*, meaning to cloak, protect, or shield.

*Visceral Canker* is dominated by two wall-mounted heraldic shields of Queen Elizabeth I and Sir John Hawkings. Hawkings was a second cousin of Sir Francis Drake and England's first slave trader. The installation was designed so that silicon tubes attached to a blood bag and an electrical pump would circulate Rodney's diseased blood across the shields in an uncanny kinning, insinuating hidden axes and timelines of belonging. To recognise something of the strange frequencies of Black belongingness and care in Rodney's work is to tune into what Tina Camp (2017) thinks of as haptic tonalities, submerged below the surface of an image and what is conventionally legible. We are incited to listen for the quiet, recalcitrant registers of Black life, refusing the eye-centeredness of white racial schema.

What might it mean to listen out for the everyday, whispered tones of overlooked citizenship in the same way, as 'conduits of an unlikely interplay between the vernacular and the state' (Camp 2017, 4)? It is in the quiet care practices of English hospices, where there are the ends of a thousand small worlds, that I have been listening to images and other types of artistic experiments that craft, rehearse, and reiterate multicultural belonging and hospitality. Hospitality as a foundation stone of belonging has a particular relevance to the outsider art that is produced in hospices, because hospices aspire to affirm and alleviate 'total pain': pain that is bodily, psychological, social, and spiritual. Total pain recognises how disease and suffering can render experience non-relational and unpunctual, so that the nature of palliative care must hold a certain undecidability in being hospitable to pain cut adrift from, or without, a referent. This is why in hospice care you might come across live music being played at a bedside or see someone being helped to paint. In contrast to the care-less culture of disbelief that marks British immigration regimes, hospice care putatively/ideally suspends disbelief as to what might cause and manifest as pain and hurt, while all the time care-giving is encircled by the increasing rationalist demands of evidence-based medicine and audit culture.

As institutions, English hospices, which sparked the modern Northern hospice movement, were most firmly established in the 1960s, outside of the National Health Service. Like other modern care initiatives, such as the Foundation for the Victims of Human Torture and Sue Ryder (a British palliative, neurological, and bereavement charity), hospice care philosophies developed much earlier and are marked by the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. This was a time of syncopated losses and denial. Independence struggles in the colonial peripheries had perforated white global dominance, while death and catastrophe were more readily displaced onto the colonised. Aimé Césaire: 'death expires in a white pool of silence' (Césaire 1939/2013, 21). Death, dying,

and loss, in their different registers, were everywhere. And in the mundane spaces of English hospitals, dying people were shunned as shameful reminders of the failure of biomedicine as cure. So, there is an immense idealism in art as palliative care, in which the striving to relieve total pain is a mirror-image of the complete denial of the personhood of Others that drove the atrocities of Fascism (Gunaratnam, 2013), colonialism, and slavery. Cicely Saunders, the founder of the first modern European hospice – St Christopher’s in southeast London, where I met Johnathan – described the hospice as ‘a community of the unlike’.

In wider circumstances, where Black and Brown migrants and refugees are wholly defined and validated by their usefulness to a capitalist socioeconomic order, the space, and time that is given over to art making in hospices, runs counters to cultural and economic imaginaries. The generative politics of hospice art reconfigures capitalist time, fabricating what Elizabeth Freeman calls chronocatachresis, ‘the stretching out of time beyond its instrumental uses’ (Freeman 2019, 128). Keeping Johnathan and the UK’s Windrush scandal in mind, a profound incitement becomes how to think about diasporic citizenship through the politics of rest and pleasure and the low-key registers of belonging that are created in spaces, times, and practices that are useless to capitalism. For me, rest and pleasure are too often overlooked in critical migration, race, and citizenship studies, with scholarship so often dominated by a masculinist orientation to the spectacular image events and temporalities of the ‘crisis’.

### Restorative uselessness

Despite technological advances and automation, waged labour remains at the beating heart of the modern-day politics of belonging and citizenship, whether manifested in asymmetries in job security and working conditions; or in normative evaluations of who can be put to work, who is work-shy (the welfare queens, NEETS, and freeters), the ableist work versus benefit claimants divide, or the unrelenting whittling down of who counts as a desirable migrant and would-be citizen. At one of the meeting points in this latter undertow of prescriptive currents is the debilitated and worn-out migrant. Berger and Mohr’s (1975/2010) stunning 1970s visual ethnography of the Gastarbeiter (guest worker) programme in West Germany, illuminated this stark reality. Berger’s poetic text and Mohr’s dignifying black and white photographs showed how Turkish migrant labourers are fetishised within European capitalist economies; emptied of identity, history, or any needs at all outside of the workplace. ‘They are not born: they are not brought up and they do not age’ Berger asserted, ‘they do not get tired: they do not die’ (p.68).

What a tragedy for any life to be consecrated by work alone. Perhaps, this is *the* point rolling under that extravagant passage in *The German Ideology* that sketches the creative and utopian possibilities of a communist life. Under communism, we could be many things: hunter, fisher, rearer of cattle, or critic. And all in one day. Or, at least over a couple of days. Freed from the compulsion of working-to-survive, we would be more creatively free-range. Just imagine what it might be like Marx and Engels seem to ask, not to be beaten down by eking out a living, or weighed down by an all-encompassing job? And, if new technologies, artificial intelligence, pandemics, and ageing populations are coming to rejig the place of work in our lives, states, and

governments across the world do not yet seem to know ‘what tomorrow’s jobs will look like’ (Muggah and Goldin 2019). If we survive, some in the northern hemisphere could be working into our 70s, or even longer, with portfolio careers, lifelong learning, and continuous reskilling. At the same time, inequities in rest and sleep as circadian injustices that erode health and life expectancy, are becoming more prominent concerns. That gossamer other of the *German Ideology* day, ‘workless work’ (Wyschogrod 1998) or useless ‘unwork’ (Nancy 1991), as a node or toehold of unalienated, sustaining belonging, feels increasingly out of reach.

If the figure of the worn-out, or perhaps even the willfully indolent, migrant worker is unimaginable as a viable modern citizen, I want to push at this impossibility a little more, fleshing out the figuration with the contributions of Black and of colour feminist discussions, art-making, and practices of rest and pleasure-making. A refrain of The Nap Ministry, for instance, declares ‘Rest is resistance’, while we are invited to dwell in the question posed by Bronte Velez, ‘How will you be useless to capitalism today?’ (The Nap Ministry 2021). The Ministry’s social media feeds circulate arresting images of Black people sleeping and in exquisite repose. Elsewhere, in taking ‘Black feminist lessons from marine mammals’, Alexis Pauline Gumbs draws inspiration from Miouroung/Mirounga (elephant seals) – who spend a month resting and snuggling after the breeding season as they shed their skins. For Gumbs, ‘rest is the only way to be renewed’. ‘Thank you for all the forms of intimacy’ Gumbs says to the seals, ‘that teach me what my skin is not and what my armor never was’ (Gumbs 2020, 149).

What kinds of recognition and vulnerable belonging can be wrought when space and time are given over to practicing and reiterating rest and recovery in communities ‘of the unlike’? I am thinking about diasporic last artmaking in these circumstances as more than a chafing, negative space of commodified racialised labour. So, not really a Marx and Engels *German Ideology* sort of utopian space-time. As Graziano (2021, 178) points out, German Ideology days continue to attribute value to the energetic usefulness of self-actualisation, whilst also being vulnerable to co-option by the ‘deeply conservative idea of a society organized around an industrious *oikos*’. (emphasis in the original).

What I have in mind is how the durational time that constitutes care – time that makes and clears space for rest, indolence, malaise, fatigue, and the like – might be an alternative register of human value. Palliative care as artmaking in this sense feels akin to a type of pleasure activism. ‘Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this’, Adrienne Maree Brown writes, continuing ‘In this moment, we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression’ (Brown 2019, 19).

So, I am talking about valuing diasporic last art for more than its aesthetic qualities because it gives pleasure to those ‘most impacted by oppression’ *and* because it is an utter waste of rationalist time and resources. A waste of time, because these types of artmaking fall outside of the temporal frames of capitalist clock time and the orientation to maximising productivity, grind, and profit. Let me try to show you what I mean. Follow this link to two photographs of the painting ‘Friends in The Secret Garden Fighting for Life’ (you will need to click through to the third and fourth pages of my essay in the catalogue).<sup>1</sup>

The painting was produced by an art therapy group at St Christopher's Hospice for the 2013 'Manet: Portraying Life' exhibition in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts. Enlarge the photographs and spend a few minutes with the images, taking in what you see, before reading on.

In creating the painting, members of the hospice art group were first photographed in the hospice garden. The piece was then worked on collaboratively, using the photograph as guide and inspiration. Each person painted themselves, often working simultaneously in small groups of three, side-by-side; negotiating styles, disabilities, time, and space. Some people stood; others were in wheel/chairs. Differences of closeness to the canvas, differences of closeness to death, as well as the rich multiculturalism of southeast London, are materialised and held within the fabric of the painting. Reflecting on the painting and others he had created of huge, brightly coloured scenes of Jamaican wildlife and plants that he remembered from his childhood, Clem tells me that ironically his illness and the hospice has brought him unexpected joy. A construction worker by trade, the last time he painted like this was in primary school.

In real life, the visual impact of the sizeable painting comes through the golden frame. Donald Rodney-like, the frame is crafted with medical bric-a-brac; syringes, tubes, nebulisers, pill packets and tubs; equipment for daily living that has been sprayed gold. These technologies, so often out-of-sight, sustain the lives inside the painting and extend embodiment outside of the individuated body. The frame both gives and takes time. It is also a time piece, marking the unfolding of lateral informal care built between the dying people in their art therapy groups – through shared jokes, encouragement, listening, noticing, cajoling – as much it records the time of disease and its various progressions. This is how a spray-painted empty packet of oral morphine pills can come to tell of a time in someone's life when swallowing without choking was more possible. And how group working can turn individualised 'patients' into artistic flash mobs, pulsating with a pluralised agency. Rather like the Greek-Egyptian Fayum paintings – thought to be the earliest record of portraits, dated to between the 1–3 BCE – which are believed to have been created to accompany the dead, the hospice painting and its social and material framing, capture the registering and ephemeral reverie of an interdependent but differential being towards death.

Vernacular diasporic end-of-life art, like the *Secret Garden*, flouts political narratives in which the economic and emotional capacities of nations to care for (living) outsiders, are seen as unremittingly under threat from certain Black and Brown migrants. And it is the excessive wastefulness of these types of art, within larger political circumstances, that I see as the basis for the coming into being of alternative communities of work, care, and hospitality. This is what my reading of *An Ethics of Remembering* (Wyschogrod 1998) by Edith Wyschogrod seems to suggest, in the distinction Wyschogrod makes between a community of work, production, or exchange – the archetypal modern community – and the heterogeneous community or community of hospitality. For Wyschogrod, the community of work/production is a grouping of monads in which the 'object of production is caught up in a nexus of economic exchange'. (p.219). Of the community of hospitality, she wonders, 'Could communities formed in this way not be compared to an artwork whose value is not determined by labor, a non-work fissured by the cataclysm?' (p.219).

With the diasporic art created in hospices, where dying people are taught and helped to create artworks, often in groups, it is not so much the time of work interrupted by the cataclysm, but many small cataclysms interrupted by the gift of workless-work that I see as holding promise in how we might understand citizenship differently. It's also worth remembering that while end of life art may be therapeutic, it does not cure. Neither does it interrupt or shunt the trajectory of being towards death. What last diasporic art legitimises is an unprofitable, socialised, and prehensive self-enjoyment (see Deleuze 1989). This is a last flourishing and unalienated labour that could be the basis of political belonging (Taylor 1994) and spiritual growth (see Senghor 1963), as well as a refuge from the extractive compulsions of racial time, in which rest, pleasure, and social justice must be endlessly deferred. But the timing of the belonging that diasporic art offers is all wrong. And it is this abysmal belatedness of care and hospitality, as much as the art itself, that keeps me up at night and feels worthy of more attention. Why? Because last moment recognition makes legible the asynchrony and deficits of the current terms of citizenship, opening-up the question of what possibilities there might be for some of us to exist fully within the expanse of a whole lifetime, not only at its edges.

## Unwhisper

The opening lines of Ansel Elkins's (2015) poem 'Reverse: A Lynching?' bring us into the visceral timescales of mourning as reparation. 'Return the tree, the moon, the naked man/Hanging from the indifferent branch' Elkins implores. 'Return blood to his brain, breath to his heart/Reunite the neck with the bridge of his body/Untie the knot, undo the noose/Return the kicking feet to ground/Unwhisper the word Jesus' (p.35).

'Defense of "Candelabra with Heads"' by Nicole Sealey (Sealey 2017) evokes another temporal realm and the good fortune of being a Black woman, some hundred or so years from now. This lucky young Black woman will be 'dumbfounded' by the word *lynch*. The poem reads, 'May her imagination, not her memory, run wild' (p.56).

There is an underlying resonance in the circulating temporalities of social justice evoked by Elkins and Sealey that I have wanted you to hear in the smaller struggles for non-synchronous belonging and recuperation in diasporic artmaking: although we might be able to wake work our way to recognising past injustices – although we might tend to, shelter, counsel, resuscitate, chant, topple, reframe, repatriate, witness, and refuse – we cannot reverse violation. Nor know its extents. Between these times of social justice – of mourning and hopefulness – last diasporic Black and Brown art elaborates the possibilities for palliative care within timeframes where belonging remains precarious and incommensurable with formal citizenship rights and recognition

## Note

1. [https://issuu.com/visualising\\_affect/docs/va\\_catalogue\\_final](https://issuu.com/visualising_affect/docs/va_catalogue_final).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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