



The Chameleon Contingency

Reflections on Chance, Culture, and Coping

Text: Brenda Dixon-Gottschild

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko © Erik Carter

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

In response to the postponements of his live performances, dancer and choreographer Jaamil Olawale Kosoko has been re-imagining his practice. The result is the multimedia artwork “American Chameleon (The Living Installments)”, a series of events that hold on to grief while also bringing beauty, humor, care, and joy into play. Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, cultural historian, performer and anti-racist cultural worker, reflects on Kosoko’s work and its resonance in light of the Black Lives Matter movement.

“...the near intolerable burden of memory, a Muse for the poetry of identity...” Wole Soyinka¹

Circumstance. Chance. Or simply Fact. The fact of Coronavirus that precipitated global catapult into a wrinkled warp in time. Crisis. Crossroads. Cataclysm. Contingency. “Cruxed.” The words beginning with sharp C – sounding like K, as in CRACK goes the world as we knew it.

And then there is the word chameleon, which somewhat softens the bite of the crack, the cutting edge of the situation. But Jaamil Olawale Kosoko’s work, “Chameleon”, doesn’t blunt the blow. It leans on us to enter the fray and bear witness to this artist’s dig into another virus – namely, the plague of his personal history and memory that frame the past and predicate the future.

The Chameleon Contingency: “There’s always as much below ground as above..... That’s life. The dead keep the living alive.”² Kosoko’s “Chameleon” reifies these thoughts that open and close the novel “The Overstory” by Richard Powers (a prescient read during this pandemic). Seek and you shall find. A chameleon is “a small slow-moving Old World lizard with a prehensile tail, long extensible tongue, protruding eyes that rotate independently, and a highly developed ability to change color.”³ Kosoko’s eyes look inward to the database of his mind, reshuffling memories and repurposing their impact on him. His performance? His life! He ‘entertains’ us in order to entertain the possibility of liberation. As a Black man, how does he change color? Metaphorically by wrapping his luscious, smoothly muscular, mahogany body in equally luscious, silken, cocoa-colored fabric, which can be a second skin or a tender trap. Textiles touch us in more ways than physical. Metamorphosis. A Black man changes color by positioning himself in the European world, being unapologetically Black for predominantly Euro- and Euro-American audiences on two continents. How far can he lead them? How far can they follow? Black. Male. Queer. Kosoko’s ‘chameleonizing’ is a survival mechanism. In his code-switching format – in the 2020 Plague Year – perfor-

mances shape-shift on different virtual platforms, rather than the live events of his earlier works.

“Deliver us from memory.” Tracy K. Smith⁴

“The past will always leave a footprint.” Kosoko’s uncle⁵

Kosoko is the quintessential embodiment of James Baldwin’s description: “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.”⁶ Building on two of his previous works, “Séancers” and “#negrophobia”, he harnesses the power of family and ancestral spirit. He is both priest and novice. Mining his Nigerian and African American heritage to deploy cultural energies of trickster, conjurer, magician, healer, he is the conduit, negotiating the channel at the juncture between living and dead, between now, before, and hence. Freedom fighter Harriet Tubman⁷ ‘conducted’ runaways escaping slavery on a journey fashioned by the force of the Ancestors’ stories. Tubman could shrink time and space into a wrinkle leading to freedom. Her miraculous, psychic power, shared by select others of African lineage, is central to Ta-Nehisi Coates’ novel “The Water Dancer”⁸ and to recent stage plays and biographies about her. Kosoko’s calling forth of memories and ghosts is a metaphorical site of ‘conduction’, a transliteration of Tubman’s special gift, in the context of his own ugly-beautiful past, with the ‘stank’ (‘stinking’, ‘smelly’) stories of childhood trauma still pounding his senses, yet existing in the same place as the mystic elegance of his melanated metaphysical experience. He is always in collaboration with the Ancestors.

“I am performing myself into being, in an attempt to communicate my interiority...” Jaamil Olawale Kosoko⁹

“Chameleon” is a sense stimulator, with soundscape, voice(s), music, motion, dance, costume. Beyond the lurking shadows of grief, there’s a wicked wit at work. Throughout, Kosoko moves slowly, deliberately, navigating the thick air of his memories and fantasies. In some versions we see a short glimpse of his perfectly shaped brown buttocks, where the words Black Power are spray-painted in gold glitter. Elsewhere, he transforms into a soul singer, and later a pop icon. In a section called “The Hold”, as he emerges from his brown silken chrysalis, for a moment the fabric clings to his face, outlining his features – like Veronica’s cloth with the face of Jesus imprinted on it. Frequently he wears visors or sunglasses, which are known in Haitian Vodun to be necessary accoutrements for Guède, the deity of the crossroads between life and the hereafter. Indeed, Kosoko is performing multiple cultures and sides of his ‘interiority’, as both the knower and the seeker. His stage landscapes are cluttered with the stuff of ritual play. He balances on the limen, creating a liminal world and daring us to cross over and join him. To balance, but maybe to teeter and fall. He inhabits death (of his uncle, brother, mother) through a futuristic schema that leads back to himself. He embraces the transformative

power of performance to speak the unspeakable, to liberate the psyche. Each iteration of Chameleon changes the ‘color’ of perceptions around performance: the who, what, when, where, why, and how are more up for grabs, more than ever before, given the way our world has changed with Covid-19. What is shown in a performance event will not be the same the next time around, nor necessarily offered on the same platform. “I think all artists have foresight. The work that we do is to create futures and invite people into them.”¹⁰ Kosoko is onto something. His term ‘interiority’ is echoed by these words from African American poet Elizabeth Alexander: “The Black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the Back public everyday toward power and wild Chameleon imagination that Black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of.”¹¹ Kosoko reminds us, all of us, beyond the cultural, social, racial barriers of our particular comfort zone that who we are is more than skin deep.

As Danez Smith’s poem, “Don’t Call Us Dead” tells us, “every day you wake you raise the dead everything you do is a miracle.”¹²

Epilogue – From Pandemic to Protest

“I can’t breathe!!! ... Mama!!!” (The final words of George Floyd)¹³

Afro-Pessimism¹⁴ is a theme running through Jaamil Olawale Kosoko’s work, and here it is, once again on view for the whole world to see why. Death and Black annihilation are not nihilistic conceits but the stuff of daily life for Black Americans shackled by racism – the plague that’s as old and lethal as any viral pandemic. More than ever we need the breath, spirit, wind and air of change. We. Need. To. Breathe.

“I am aware that we are living in the middle ring of terrorism. The trouble of scars bleeding through new maps.”¹⁵

I wrote “The Chameleon Contingency” in April 2020. I write this coda two months later to acknowledge breath lost, blood shed, lives wiped out and the widening CRACK in the fabric of America’s social contract. African Americans inhabit a ‘ring of terrorism’, mapped by the martyred Black bodies of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery¹⁶. It was the brutal savagery of Mr. Floyd’s murder by police – on a busy city street in a midwestern American metropolis in broad daylight – that sent the world into waves of shock, anger and bitter protest. Mr. Floyd’s final utterances chilled the blood and shook the bones: “I can’t breathe!” and, finally, “Ma-ma!” – calling for his deceased mother with his last breath. Anyone who saw the virally-spread video of Floyd’s actual demise is marked forever by witnessing his life breath physically pressed from his body by the force of a white policeman’s knee bearing down on his neck for a full eight minutes and forty-six seconds. That meme is stamped for-



“American Chameleon [The Living Installments]” © Jaamil Olawale Kosoko and EMPAC

ever in our history and memory. That image, alone, explains Afro-Pessimism. Enough said.

Young and old alike took to the streets across continents demanding justice – a beautiful rising up. The Covid-19 pandemic and the protests will ultimately end, but life can never return to the former status quo.

Pessimism can be cathartic. There is life in death as surely as there is death in life. 🗡️

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko | Meet the Artist

American Chameleon: The Living Installments (2.0)

interactive performance

23.8., 18:00 | ca. 210min | Participation with prior registration on DISCORD or viewing via live stream

1

Wole Soyinka, “The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness”, New York, Oxford University Press 1999, p.194.

2

Richard Powers, “The Overstory”, New York, W.W. Norton & Co. 2018, p.3/ p.425.

3

Oxford Online Dictionaries.

4

Tracy K. Smith, Duende: “Minister of Saudade,” Minneapolis, Graywolf Press 2007, p.33.

5

Statement repeated by Kosoko’s ailing uncle.

6

James Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of A Native Son”, 1961.

7

Harriet Tubman, born Araminta Ross, escaped from slavery in 1835 in the South to become a leading abolitionist before the American Civil War. She led hundreds of bondmen to freedom in the North along the route of the Underground Railroad—an elaborate secret network of safe houses organized for that purpose.

8

Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Water Dancer”, New York, One World, Penguin Random House, 2019.

9

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Artist Statement, Séancers, programme notes, FringeArts Philadelphia 2018, p.3.

10

Siobhan Burke, “This Artist Proposes A Community Space ‘to Dream, to Imagine’”: NY Times online interview with Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, 19 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/arts/dance/jaamil-olawale-kosoko-chameleon.html>

11

Elizabeth Alexander, “The Black Interior”, YouTube WGBH Online Forum, uploaded 31 March 2014.

12

Danez Smith, “Don’t Call Us Dead”: “a note on the body” Minneapolis, Graywolf Press 2017.

13

Final words of George Floyd, unarmed African American murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, 25 May 2020 by policemen.

14

See Afro-Pessimism, Wikipedia: “...afro-pessimists across disciplines have argued that Black people are constitutively excluded from the category of the self-possessing, rights-bearing human being of modernity.”

15

Rachel Eliza Griffiths, “Whipping Tree”. www.slowdownshow.org/episode/slowdown/2019/05/122-whipping-tree

16

Breonna Taylor: murdered while sleeping, by plainclothes policemen who broke into her apartment (without a warrant) in pursuit of a suspect who had already been arrested. March 2020, Louisville, Kentucky. Ahmaud Arbery: murdered by two white vigilantes who saw him jogging in a white neighborhood and assumed without evidence that he must be a criminal. February 2020, Glynn County, Georgia.