

FIGURE 1. The author and friend in the Beauty Plus parking lot, Mardi Gras Day, 2020.



Limnologics

The Black Queer Art of Uncertainty

ALIX CHAPMAN

It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

—Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal”

and limbo stick is the silence in front of me

limbo

limbo

limbo like me . . .

long dark night is the silence in front of me

limbo

limbo like me

—Kamau Brathwaite, “Limbo”

“t’s lit!” someone screamed as the star-spangled banner went up in flames growing brighter as the sun set, the smell of lighter fluid filling the air. I was in the parking lot of an abandoned beauty supply store in New Orleans, Mardi Gras night 2020 (fig. 1). There had to be at least two hundred punks gathered in their now-tattered costumes and standard faded black garb. The ecstatic vibe was complemented by the discordant tuning of guitars and a loud generator powering the show. I was excited to see old friends, especially my black queer chosen family, in and among the mass of people. It was a clandestine gath-

ering of “deviants” in the dystopic ruins of a city already prone to chronic disaster—a scene marked by a history of violent encroachment but also the fluid and flexible spark of creativity against all odds. We had no idea that in only a few more weeks COVID-19 lockdowns would begin or that, soon, we couldn’t know when we would see each other again.

I tried to hold on to the energy of that night and reflected on the parallels between that moment and the isolation brought about by quarantine. In the solitude of my small apartment, where I lived alone, I said out loud, “This feels like living in limbo.” The noun *limbo* can refer to (1) “a place or state of restraint or confinement, neglect, or oblivion”; (2) “an indeterminate or transitional place”; or (3) “a dance or contest that involves bending over backwards and passing under a horizontal pole lowered slightly for each successive pass.”¹ An analogy between the pandemic and limbo is what we need to move us toward a place where, even in the midst of immanent disaster, the most marginal of us and/or unlikely parts of ourselves, can still live.

During lockdown I dove into music and art, spent days planning evenings for one, and reflecting on the party at the beauty supply. The pandemic and the party, like limbo, were defined by the threat of a limit: the virus is akin to the systemic oppressions on the periphery of black queer kinship and sociality. Both presented the condition of entering or being in a place and time of uncertainty with both negative and positive possibilities. Finally, during lockdown

and the party, art, music, and play circumvented both social and ontological death in pursuit of renewal. For some people, *one* of these experiences might be unfamiliar, but the feeling of limbo is shared and resonates across differences of identity, place, and time.

I have always been interested in cultural responses to disaster. This article extends previous enquiries I have made into the efficacy of black queer southern performances that are produced and maintained by state violence and benign neglect. In my book chapter “Katrina Babies: Reproducing Deviance in the Future Unknown,” I theorize the ways Hurricane Katrina’s mass displacement of black communities compelled discourses of reproductive futurism.² The return and growth of white heteronormative nuclear families was taken as a sign of hope and New Orleans rebirth. I countered that these discourses marginalize forms of social, rather than biological, reproduction that are key to black and queer histories of kinship and futurity. I show how the performativity of caregiving and ephemeral points of social contact contribute to alternative futures in times of crisis. In so doing I challenge the reproduction of dominant social institutions that are conceived as the only reliable way to secure meaningful futures: for example, capital and heterosexuality. This essay furthers the ambit of my previous work while initiating a new approach to questions of crisis and disaster. What does limbo offer in terms of an analytical category and practice given the acceleration of crisis in the twenty-first century?

Still at home, on the couch, a citation led me to

THE LIMBO IMAGINATION IS DEFINED BY FLEXIBILITY AND ORIGINALITY UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES OF ENCROACHMENT

a book that was right beside me on my bookshelf. Within the edited volume was a chapter that piqued my interest in limbo as an Afro-Caribbean performance.³ I was certainly aware of limbo as a festive game, but Sonjah Stanley Niaah's "Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto" compelled me to consider the meaning of the dance, one of the first forms of African performance in the New World.⁴ I was suddenly struck by where this passive enquiry and the referenced book sitting on the shelf beside me were leading me. I turned to Stanley Niaah's words:

The limbo dance highlights the importance of not only the historical but also the spatial imagination. Emerging out of the lack of space available on the slave ships, the slaves bent themselves like spiders. . . . Consistent with certain African beliefs, the dance reflects the whole cycle of life. . . . Limbo holds memory and marks continuity among performance practices of the New World. . . . Firstly, limbo calls our attention to the dance movement and to the space (its limits and potential). . . . Secondly, it is a "ritual of rebirth."⁵

Stanley Niaah goes on to discuss the ways limbo as African cosmology, aesthetic, and genealogy is conveyed through Jamaican dancehall, African American blues, and South African *kwaito*. Each context reveals differing cultural productions as fugitive responses to the strictures of racial and socioeconomic marginalization.

The limbo imagination is defined by flexibility

and originality under circumstances of encroachment. This framework speaks to the African Diaspora and histories of survival in the New World; it also holds meaning for black queer subjects specifically, for whom flexibility and fluidity are often deployed in resistance to the normalizing processes of heteronormativity within and outside home and family. I explore and distill what I call limbologies, that is, the performance of indeterminate ontologies, temporal and spatial imaginaries that, however figurative, generate alternative ways of being and more livable conditions within terrains of encroachment, violence, and neglect. I combine *limbo* and *logic* to argue for a counterintuitive approach to struggle where subjective indeterminacy rather than fixed objectivism forms systems, methodologies, and practices. Instead of asserting the deconstructive tendencies of academic discourse, particularly over the creative work of musicians and artists I will engage ahead, this approach is my effort to recognize the limits of those same discourses and the uncertainties of positivist objectivism over felt knowledge—with the hope of transforming into a different kind of scholar.⁶

The sense of living betwixt and between life and death is relative, and for communities that have long been labeled vulnerable and at risk, such as black queer people, living in limbo is not new. There is meaning to be found within the specificities of these lives. Ahead, through a combination of personal experience, ethnography, and artist interviews, I highlight black queer cultural production in the US South

that speaks to limbologies as ontology, performance, and an aesthetic sensibility.

I Believe in the Pit

It was my thirteenth Mardi Gras in a row, and perhaps the unluckiest of them all. At the time, COVID-19 was on the periphery of our collective consciousness but materially present and circulating throughout the festivities. Only a few weeks later headlines would describe how Mardi Gras functioned as one of the first superspreader gatherings in the United States. Mardi Gras was also as a kind of homecoming for my chosen black queer family.

After running around the festivities all day, I got word that Alli Logout, a black queer nonbinary musician, was playing a show in the parking lot of my favorite beauty supply store. The location of the show was significant because the Beauty Plus on the corner of Elysian Fields and St. Claude Avenue was a prime destination for queer kids, counterculture white punks, and working-class black locals in the heart of downtown New Orleans.⁷ Unfortunately, a year earlier the owners of the store had to close up shop because of rising rents—a sign of the ever-growing gentrification of the area. The loss of the beauty supply store, like so much of what we enjoyed about downtown New Orleans, left many of us wondering where we would have to go to find our pleasure. I appreciated the party organizers' guerrilla-like takeover of this private parking lot and their challenge to the property relations that left what had once been a vibrant nexus

of cross-pollination across race, class, gender, and sex to become another abandoned and boarded-up structure, a precarious gap between benign neglect and gentrified exclusivity.

I followed the noise to the band in the midst of sound checking, greeted everyone, and circled around back so I could get a clear view of the performers and audience. The discordant guitars, thump of bass, and synthesizers began, and a spotlight descended on Alli, an Afro-crowned silhouette facing away from me and toward the crowd. They began to sing, and although the lyrics were as obscure as Alli's face from my position, there was an unmissable air of urgency in both the sound and the image. A mosh pit began to form directly in front of the band. People were dancing frantically, bumping and barging into each other—girls, boys, straights, queers, cis, trans, black, white, Asian—it was a chaotic kaleidoscope of differences unified in movement. Before long, Alli came out of their black turtleneck, Afro and breasts shaking to the beat.

I was tempted to go jump in the frenzy but thought, "What if I get hurt?" "Do I feel like risking a little violence and why?" As much as I could lose something through the pit—my safety, comfort, a tooth—there was also something to be gained through the momentary chaos and bounded uncertainty of joining others in that moment. I have had my share of Mardi Gras injuries, including a trip to the emergency room with a sprained neck. I was not a stranger to mosh pits either and had a few injuries in my younger days. I resigned myself to living vicariously

through the crowd and observing Alli and the band coax the audience to a frenzy. The entire day felt like winding down a spiraling and ever narrower ride, one limbo within another. First there was Mardi Gras (just another Tuesday throughout most of the world); second, an unlicensed and unpermitted punk show in the abandoned beauty supply parking lot; and then the mosh pit itself—each context presenting conditions of possibility that while ecstatic also meant risking a part of ourselves. What is the use of venturing into these unknown travails time and time again?

The next day, I interviewed Alli about their experience as a performer and they spoke to the meaning and power of punk music and pit culture in their life:

Alix: Please tell me a little about your background. And what led you to become an artist?

Alli: I moved to New Orleans in 2013. When I came here, I met people who were pivotal to me—in understanding my blackness, what it is to be a black punk, and that I'm not alone. There are so many beautiful and radical people out here. I was just completely enamored with them and their freedom and the way they lived and expressed and encouraged me. I have a warped perception of myself and my work, and they were like, "No, baby. It's OK. It's great." The environment I lived in [Texas] was very intense. It was very black, white, and Mexican because we were on the border. I grew up around a lot of fear: fearing deportation, scraping by, addiction, and a lot of adults who were in a lot of pain. It caused me to be very reserved and very quiet because of the extensive abuse. . . . I

spent a good majority of my life being very shut down and frequently just so scared. I couldn't do anything. One of the first rules I was taught was "Stay below the window." I was a latchkey kid and I was left home a lot. I am an only child. You stayed below the window so that you don't get shot, and you learn to drop down and to hide when those things are happening. It instilled a lot of fear in me; it's still very much affecting me to this day. I'm very flamboyant onstage, and that's kind of the only place where I've ever felt that freedom. Every aspect of my work, when it comes to films and music making, is all about this fantasy world that I want to live in. I want to believe that we can all change and hold each other, and not live in fear. I think that the violence I grew up around is manifested in me in an intense but also beautiful way. I have a really short temper, and if I get hurt, I really want to hurt somebody else, and these are all things I'm very much unlearning. This is what punk as an entity has helped me move through.

Alli's childhood was consigned to isolation because of imminent violence and a communal awareness of death as a limit that is never far. This boundary has as much to do with the sociopolitical geographies of living in a community along the US-Mexico border as the internal and intimate constriction of movement is shaped by this external violence. Alli literally grows up bending and contorting. The limbo stick can be reproduced anywhere we find violent private or public encroachment, and however it is naturalized, it remains an expression tethered to the ongoing flow of

systemic violence. The slave ship, the borderlands, and quarantine are historically and geographically disparate sites of trauma but have similarities when we frame them within the structure of limbo. I really felt Alli's fear and recalled the area where I grew up, where gunfire was not unusual. I, too, have had the experience of needing to hit the ground for fear of a stray bullet. These experiences become performances of our limits and our potential. Alli goes on to say:

Music really touches people. It's very much one of the ways I am actually me and it feels safe to be me. It's the ultimate relief from the chaos in my life and the chaos of poverty. There's a lot of violence that happens to my friends, that they inflict, or that I inflict because we're hurting. There was a really gnarly drive-by the other day and my neighbor got shot and I watched him bleed out for like thirty minutes. It took the ambulance sixteen minutes, and I don't know if he's dead. That fear and that chaos informs the urgency within my work. This is something that we need to talk about now.

Alix: How did you get into punk? What were your first experiences?

Alli: My stage character was informed by '80s hardcore; I love it and wanted to bring that energy. There was no greater release than a pit at that point for me—other than, like, drugs. I feel like I owe everything to the pit. Just to be able to have this controlled aggression release is very healing for me. That's why

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I love punk and creating this space. People are very scared of the pit, but I believe in it and how it has changed my life and the lives of everybody around me. Even though it's really intense and extremely violent, it's a place where I, and other people, can work through things. It's definitely a ritual that's important to me and an environment that I try to create. Having other black people in the pit is such a beautiful thing—watching them going wild and being free in it.

The limbo dance in Trinidadian culture was originally performed at funerals and, like baptisms, was incorporated into performances about the transcendental movement of the spirit.⁸ If the punk rock show is an alternative to dominant institutions like the church, the pit is like the baptismal waters where one crosses a boundary to return reborn. What can be learned from the pit in terms of redirecting that uncertainty and fear into personal and communal transformation? This is an example of limbologics, as Alli and community

suspend a space and time to cultivate rituals of indeterminacy and bring about union:

Alli: I deeply believe in the pit and pit culture. I have a scar on my pinkie, right here. We played in a basement and I was being dramatic and I knew I wanted to be very diva-ish onstage, but I also wanted to pretend I was very drunk like a sloppy boy. I lifted my hand up and all this glass fell on me. My instinct was to fall on my knees. I'm crawling and I'm bleeding, and it was our first show. The energy was a pit. That's where I started, and it felt right.⁹

Right now, there is a pit doing work that I can only hope is as significant in creating diverse and radical approaches to change. I think about it in terms of the simultaneous invisibilizing and sensationalizing of black suffering that has become a norm in the academy and creative spaces—where Blackness, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson emphasizes in *Becoming Human*, is being rendered “ontologically plastic” in ways that only perpetuate white supremacy.¹⁰ Yet resistant “plastic” creative practices continue.

Working with the Mud

Ryan Gilbert, aka Phlegm, is a twenty-something black gay-identified painter and DJ who first came to be known through his house mixes in the local club scene and then through self-portraits he circulates through his Instagram page, “@mynameisphlegm” (see figs. 2 and 3). In his exploration of African aesthetics, face painting, and ecology, Phlegm's artistic practice speaks to limbologics as speculative forms of



FIGURE 2. "Ritual Drama" by Ryan Gilbert, aka Phlegm. Photo by Ryan Gilbert. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 3. Ryan Gilbert, aka Phlegm, without face paint. Photo by Ryan Gilbert. Courtesy of the artist.

kinship and personhood. He discusses it in an interview I conducted in the fall of 2019:¹¹

Phlegm: The photography wasn't a serious thing until my face paint came into play, which started out as practice for Halloween and Mardi Gras costumes. When Mardi Gras and Halloween were over and I still had face paint, I had nothing else better to do than to continue working and, because I grew up on the internet, putting them online. . . . Then they kind of evolved: grew legs, grew arms, and now they're their own walking, talking, moving, thinking Frankenstein's monsters. . . . I'm just sort of watching them walk around, and that's the best way I can describe them. My work doesn't revolve around blackness in its relationship to whiteness. I don't reference my work in relation to whiteness. It's a waste of my time. I think New Orleans always has this interesting dance around death and dying. I grew up in New Orleans East, where if you go a little bit out of the city you can see cypress trees. You don't really see them here in New Orleans proper, but I was always interested in cypress trees, the swamps, moss, cattails, and that sort of muddy language that the swamp speaks in. I always liked greenery.

Alix: Can you say more about the mud?

Phlegm: It's always wet, so it's just always muddy. . . . You kind of learn to work around the mud. . . . especially in the east. It was literally a swamp sixty years ago. I took Louisiana History the year of the hurricane [Katrina], so my history is a little foggy. The East was the last part of the city to be developed. It's

a part of the city where black people were relegated, and black homeowners went on to own homes.¹² The Louisiana Nature Center is there. You could go see cypress trees and see this mud, the marsh and wetland, and it was a part of the city that I enjoyed aesthetically. The East is known for some of its violence because whenever you have black folk and you also restrict access to resources, poverty begets violence, and violence begets more poverty.

Central to the development of Phlegm's artistry is a connection with aspects of the ecological and socioeconomic terrains of New Orleans. Black people in New Orleans have historically been pushed into the most uninhabitable and flood-prone lands, often in or at least adjacent to swamps. Phlegm's "working with the mud" connects to genealogies of African Diasporic performance¹³ and blues epistemologies in which culture functions as explication and commentary of material realities.¹⁴

Alix: It sounds like your work has a life of its own.

Phlegm: When I am working on it, I'm not aware of time. I time myself, but if you ask me how long it would take me, I wouldn't be able to tell you what it feels like. I know it takes about two and a half hours from once the first paint touches my face to when I finish and prepare the picture. I don't know where I'm going when I start, but I know when it's finished. I photograph them and then I wash them down the drain. I don't go out in them. I always end up worrying more about what it looks like than enjoying them. It's the

opposite of what people would think a mask or a face painting would do. I become a lot more introverted and a lot less interested in having conversations. I can only equate it to me being a television, connecting a signal, and I move the rabbit ears until it becomes clear. I get the message out and then it goes back to gray and then I come out and I'm like, "This is what it is?"

I also consider them to be outside myself because my work has traveled places and has come across the eyes of people that I've never met in person. I will go out places and then people recognize me from the shape of my head, because I'm bald, more than my face. People recognize my work more than they recognize me, and so the work has been more places than I've been. They are pieces of me, but they don't feel like me. They feel like children of mine. I release them out and sometimes they bring people home, and I'm like, "Girl, who is this?"

Phlegm's limbologies are predicated by the ways his skin and the use of paint take on muddy potential, challenging the limits of temporality and space much like the indeterminacy found in the mosh pit.¹⁵ By imagining his painted face as a fecund and vestibular portal of transmission, he is able to produce cultural objects—his "monstrous children"—that spread, circulate, and digitally network in productive ways. The viral capacities of Phlegm's digital photographs correspond to the ecological energies that surrounded him in the swamps.¹⁶ Modern "rational" subjectivity is the limbo stick Phlegm dips beneath, moving to-

"I PHOTOGRAPH THEM AND THEN I WASH THEM DOWN THE DRAIN"

ward interpretations of rebirth, life, and death that are liberatory.

I am careful to assume that engaging in limbologies as a field of fluidity and possible rebirth is fundamentally positive, as we see in Phlegm's artistic practice. Limbologies do not presuppose the loss of self or intersubjectivity as wholly positive and self-evident moves toward personhood. In Phlegm's narrative we see forms of generative intersubjectivity happening between the ecology in which he grew up and the cultural objects he produces. We must be careful in asserting black queer performance as ontologically and socially fluid. Sound studies scholar Deborah Kapchan states, "Sound and sensation precede the visual in human interaction; they are the first passages, and the philosophical standing of the body finds no ground without this acknowledgment," and she goes on to ask, "How might attention to sound and affect produce a body unfettered by the dualisms of the Enlightenment—mind/body, nature/culture, man/woman, human/ animal, spirit/material?"¹⁷ In response, I am reminded of the ways black fungibility is normalized and, according to his-

torian Saidiya Hartman, whiteness “fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.”¹⁸ If limbologies are constituted by the maintenance of dominant forms of oppression, they do not presuppose a future in which the dualisms of Enlightenment thought, for example, are extinguished. Theories that celebrate ontological liquidity and embodied porosity achieved through the possibilities of intersubjective flows, against static notions of autonomous modern individualism, must keep in mind that in terms of blackness, liquidity is often a primary form of oppression.¹⁹

Conclusion: The Stick in Front of Me

This essay is an initiatory approach to limbologies and, as in the dance itself, I invite others to pick up the stick and collectively play and think with limbo. This exploration can take many directions: integrating traditional methodologies, archival work, memoir, and auto-ethnography. For example, I cannot recall playing the game as a child, but I was still fascinated with sticks, specifically, twirling them around my body in my own mash-up of karate and wizardry. My Nana would cheer me on and say, “You could be a major-ette one day out there leading the band!” I did not need music to take apart a broom and start twirling; rather, there was a rhythm that would develop with the continuous spinning, balancing, throws, and catches. Not unlike Alli and Phlegm, I would lose myself in a prepubescent ecstasy. For a child with little power but tons of imagination, the stick became an

object through which I could find and redefine my will and, as my grandmother recognized, potentially join a long history of performance.

In my research on the afterlife of Hurricane Katrina I have found that, in times of crisis, communities are often stuck between two choices.²⁰ On the one hand, they face the possibility of falling back on, or perhaps beneath, the oppressive rod of dominant systems of thought and the institutions they form. There is a tendency to take the path of least resistance and reaffirm the realities that those in power tell us are reliable solutions to crisis, even if only a small few can pass unscathed. Here again we see a limit of encroachment produced by efforts to maintain the status quo while compelling us to contort ourselves so as to not succumb to the stick of oppression before us. On the other hand, some resist, grabbing that which casts us into limbo and twirling, playing, and balancing the line toward greater power.

Not unlike the dance of limbo, ethnography is an embodied and dialogic practice, and I invite others to put their bodies into it, bending and creatively playing with methodologies toward transcendent and radical forms of research. I argue that black queer expressions of what I call limbologies speak to the production of indeterminate temporal and spatial imaginaries that, however figurative, mediate material violence and alienation. This approach to crisis, among communities already assumed to be vulnerable and at risk, might offer tools for communities living through the normalization of disaster in the

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twenty-first century broadly. Entering into the transcendental yet uncertain hold that is limbo harks back to the quote by environmental activist and scholar Arundhati Roy that opens this piece. Perhaps limbo is the portal and gateway by which we can imagine another world. ■

ALIX CHAPMAN's research focuses on black queer cultural production and nightlife with roots in the US South. With a background in performance art, music, and critical ethnography, Chapman's work sheds light on little-known and often marginalized subcultures in relationship to the sociopolitical conditions of displacement, state violence, diasporic longing, and infrastructural neglect. His work explores performance and other forms of culture as a mediator of dominant ideologies and exclusion from social institutions. His forthcoming book *Raising the Bottom: New Orleans Sissy Bounce* focuses on black queer performance in New Orleans bounce music as a lens for thinking through post-Katrina black experience. He is also taking up new research

on what he calls the Black Queer Circuit, which explores black men in the transnational and predominantly white gay circuit club scene.

Notes

- 1 Merriam-Webster, s.v. "limbo (n.)," accessed September 4, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/limbo>.
- 2 Chapman, "Katrina Babies."
- 3 McKittrick and Woods, *Black Geographies*. See also Brathwaite, 1973; and Fabre, "Slave Ship Dance."
- 4 Stanley Niaah, "Performance Geographies."
- 5 Stanley Niaah, "Performance Geographies," 345.
- 6 Here I draw on what Black Feminist scholar Barbara Christian referred to as "feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in . . . Western philosophy" ("Race for Theory," 72).
- 7 Larino, "Beauty Plus."
- 8 Ahye, "In Search of the Limbo."
- 9 Alli, interview by author, February 26, 2020.

10 Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 18.

11 Ryan Gilbert, interview by author, October 18, 2019. The circumstances of my interviews with Ryan and Alli emerged out of a desire to engage with creatives I had been partying with for years but to no particular aim. I was more interested in seeing what patterns emerged from their self-understandings rather than setting out to prove a particular point.

12 Souther, "Suburban Swamp."

13 I situate limbologics within genealogies of African Diasporic performance and Joseph Roach's integration of New Orleans cultural performances within the broader diaspora. See Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.

14 I integrate black queer performances of punk music and visual media into historian Clyde Woods theorizations of a blues epistemology, where black culture serves as a mediation of racialized and economic oppression. See Woods, *Development Drowned*.

15 My thanks to my friend and colleague Dr. William Mosley for this insight.

16 This speaks to the work Kathrine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*, where she describes the demonic as computational or digital indeterminacy that resists apprehension.

17 Kapchan, "Body," 34.

18 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.

19 Here I lean toward Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's theorizations of social liquidation. See Tinsley, "Black Atlantic."

20 See Chapman, "Punk Show" and "Katrina Babies."

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