

# The Narratives of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr.

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## ABSTRACT

Developed for the context of the V Narrative, Media, and Cognition Colloquium, this article focuses on the narratives generated by the works of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. With the intention of focusing on marginal productions, and using “*Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse*” by DeForrest Brown Jr. and “*THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CAN NOT BE DISPUTED*” by Juliana Huxtable as case studies, this paper tries to understand what narratives try to be asserted, and how are they put into practice by these works. With the help of the contributions made by Patrícia Castello Branco and Levinas, the article concludes that the works of the artist’s move towards the creation of collective narratives with a clear social impact that simultaneously tries to steer away from a dominant historical narrative.

## KEYWORDS

Juliana Huxtable; DeForrest Brown Jr.; history; artistic practices; narrative; fiction.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes to investigate the marginal practices of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. From these, our objective will be to understand what narrative propositions, if any, the works of these artists generate. Hence, we will attempt to understand how these productions manifest and how they’re put into practice.

The case studies we will be taking in consideration will be the performance “*THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CAN NOT BE DISPUTED*” by Juliana Huxtable and the multidisciplinary project “*Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse*” by DeForrest Brown Jr. . This paper will analyze these works through the lens of two authors: Patricia Castello Branco in relation to the aesthetic and performative component of the artists, and Emmanuel Levinas in regards to of the social impact of the works.

This investigation will be divided in three parts. The first chapter will seek to clarify what are the main contributions of the works, the second chapter will try to answer the question “What narratives are trying to be affirmed through these works?”, and the third chapter will focus on the question of “How is fiction used to transform reality?”.

Through these, this paper intends to underline the importance of marginal contributions, illustrating not only the way in which they make way for the existence of alternative collective narratives, while also trying to clarify the expression these take in the context of contemporary artistic production.

## 2 | AGAINST A HEGEMONIC HISTORY

Juliana Huxtable is a writer, performer, DJ and multidisciplinary artist and DeForrest Brown Jr. is a writer, critic and curator, working between writing and experimental music. Both artists are American. Although it is increasingly common for both to work beyond U.S. borders, the impact of the American context is present throughout all their work, as they are partly informed by the social and historical fabric of the U.S.. Even though the eminently fluctuating is an inherent characteristic of the contemporary individual (Bauman, 2007: 88), it has been associated, from the very beginning, with the American identity. On this, Mélandri says the following:

*"This is the fundamental challenge with which the American experience has always been confronted with: was its main source of identity not always the 'permanent revolution' that it intended to embody from the very beginning?"* (Mélandri, 2000, p.176)

By focusing on this same aspect, the productions of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. can be used as a mediator to reflect upon this same identity and on the narratives that are born out of this sphere. The works we will report on will also focus on a recodification of identity that will be in agreement with Mélandri's perspective.

While the United States have always been known by its cultural diversity, internally, it has not always welcomed this diversity and multiculturalism with open arms, which we know, was considered by many Americans as instruments of balkanization and weakening their country. The works we will mention here lie upon this experience and legacy which, acknowledged or not, is an essential part of American history and society.

Our starting point will be the multidisciplinary project "Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse" by DeForrest Brown Jr. and the performance "THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CAN NOT BE DISPUTED" by Juliana Huxtable, both from 2016. Briefly, the work of Brown Jr. exists on a virtual medium, where his textual production generates a dialogue, anachronistically, with sound and image. The performance of Huxtable, presented at MoMA, was divided into three acts and made use of multimedia components in conjunction with poetry. In it we witnessed different staging's and exhortations of the

artist's poems. So right away we're able to discern two of the defining aspects of the works, which are, first of all, their coincidence in a transdisciplinary approach and, more importantly, the importance that writing has both works.

Along with their transdisciplinary methodology, another fundamental characteristic of the works relies in their criticism and rejection of the historical archetype in power, or with the universal historical narrative that is frequently presented to us in institutional contexts. Juliana Huxtable opens her performance with an abstract symbol of the passage of time and history, which arises in response to the kind of images that que «*construct an idea both of the passage of time but also aestheticize a relationship to history (...) and creates a sort of hegemony of certain sources of knowledge and information*». DeForrest Brown Jr. develops the idea of an alternative historical version in Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse, where he not only states that «history is contained in a generative flux», but was also born out of reflections on what the author called the «end of «history» and «anti-history», which places this work, along with Juliana's, in opposition to a hegemonic historical narrative.

In both cases, besides denouncing a demarcation of one's own space, we witness a recognition of the historical space as *fluctuating*. If all metaphysics are physics and all these structures are constantly meshing and unfolding, then both these productions are, as Juliana mentions, trying to «*chart the desire to participate in history (...)*» [1]. If the historical narrative is a combination of the events by which it is composed, and if Juliana and DeForrest present an alternative perspective as a reflection of their reality, these examples indicate an historical dominium in flux. Through the lens of these works, history is thus presented to us, no longer as a single and unique image, but, like the images by which it is composed, as «*fluid, shredded, and infinitely decomposable and reconstitutable*» (Branco, 2013, p. 575).

As divergent models, the artists' productions emerge as critical perspectives of a dominant narrative. When DeForrest Brown refers to an anti-historical perspective, beyond a pure negation of it, he recognizes it as anachronistic, as a «construction of a series of moments that ultimately collapse into a fiction of functional archived bits» [2]. The alternative perspectives presented add to this plural historical

space through its critical component. If artworks generate new ways (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 149, 152), Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. seek to create new ways to make history.

Through the use of transdisciplinary methodologies - opposite to singular perspectives - we see in these productions an intention to participate actively in an historical domain of their own. By making use of a predominantly reformulating aspect, these processes acquire, in a way, the ontological status of a project and a postulate (Bauman, 2007, p.88), something we can see in the transfiguration and development of the works here mentioned in their updated versions, such as the case of Juliana's *Triptych* and the projects *Absent Personae* and *The Wages of Being Black Is Death* by the media theorist. This allows us to draw two initial conclusions: first, if the historical image has been aestheticized, and is in the production of the artists affirmed as inconstant and fluid, this perception of an history in flux also affects the historical image of art that emerges through works of the artists, that is no longer *continuous, logical and explicable* (Rothko, 2007, p.70). The univocal image that art preserved, it is either dismantling, or being updated – something that the practices of Juliana and Brown Jr. aim to make visible. Moreover, when they affirm themselves as propositions, external to a current historical sphere - and because of this, alternative to this narrative - they present themselves as speculative compositions that aspire to redesign a conception of the real. In the same way that DeForrest Brown Jr. understands the concept of identity as being architectural [3], he uses the apparatus of fiction, just as Juliana's performances seek to do, in order to redesign reality, or a perception of it.

Thus, the application of transdisciplinary practices, coupled with fictions that strive to transform the real, converge in the images and narrative discourses presented by the artists, that diverge from the dominant spectrum. Which brings us to the question: What narratives are trying to be affirmed?

### 3 | THE NARRATIVES OF JULIANA HUXTABLE AND DEFORREST BROWN JR.

The need and desire to redesign reality are motivated by the lack of something. DeForrest Brown Jr. redesigns, and Juliana Huxtable inserts herself in a space where she can actively participate in an historical plane, both conjuring alternative images of a present and a future. But with which purpose?

In a conversation with Mark Dery, Samuel R. Delany argues that the absence, and consequent need for images of the future, in the context of black history, is the result of a systematic ban of images of the past (Dery 1994: 190,191). This perspective aligns itself with Juliana's speech regarding the insufficiency and hegemony of certain sources of information, in relation to the construction of the historical image. Furthermore, it also contextualizes the rejection or aversion of the present historical narrative by DeForrest Brown Jr. as more than just pure rejection, since it could also be seen as the reverse of the dominant historical narrative. In light of this perspective, both productions could be framed as alternative propositions, or possible constructions of images of the future: «The black body chants: we are only material for the future.» [4]

While for Samuel R. Delany the viability of these images was connected with writing, in particular science fiction, Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. have a more broad approach, and make use of written, multimedia and performative practices. This choice is not inconsequential, reflecting, on the one hand, the recent technological accumulation to which Huxtable refers during the performance, «*The totality of recent history is swallowed by a single obtuse comparison: retrospective value generated and the accumulated resistance to a rapid succession of technology*», and on the other hand, incorporating a transgressive attitude that pretended to distance itself from a history that is seen as condemned. «*There is no hope in #postcrash, only the automatic, the automated, the performance of the expected and indelible. It is banal, banal beauty.*» [5] These divergent perspectives, rather than insubordinate acts, come from a legacy that, as Samuel R. Delany mentions, pioneered the creation of new methodologies through *miss-uses* and conscious *desecration of technological artifacts* and popular media (Dery, 1994, p.193). The use of video in the artists' production also makes sense since, as Patricia Castello Branco argues, this can be seen as a criticism of the mechanisms of popular culture. Like the nature of the case studies mentioned here, video, as a hybrid medium, questions «the purity of the artistic medium» and is also in an intermediate position, not belonging strictly to the modern or post-modern era. (Branco, 1999) This means the artists' processes are not naive insurgencies, but projects that make use of practices that originated new processes.

If both artists set in motion processes divergent from a normative historical view, what narratives aim to be affirmed? Note that the technological use made by both artists, extends beyond the operational. As Patricia Castello Branco clarifies, rather than merely an instrument, technology is increasingly becoming an environment within which cultural and social life develops. (Branco, 2013, p.285). DeForrest Brown Jr. speaks of platforms that *usurp the memory and live forever outside the territory of the self*, affirming this same perspective that expands from the individual, to the social and the collective[6]. In the same way, as we can confirm in the her various poems, the scenarios generated by the production of Juliana Huxtable are often contextualized in situations that propel us beyond an individual perception. The frequent performative aspect of the artists' works, and the discourse therein, shows us that these are more than just individual cathartic experiences. «*The black body is a technology. Level based technology for a futuristic society detached from manual labor. (...) The black body is such a frame work that the very idea of technological discovery is proven true because the black body in its reduced state is its technology.*» [7]

More than individual experiences, these works are placed in a collective space with a clear intention of social impact and transformation; after all, the «*Global village must be re-engineered, re-learned.*» Both productions seek to affirm collective narratives. Underlining once again this idea of an alternative history or post-historical perspective, it is not a coincidence that DeForrest Brown Jr. refers to work existing «*beyond the post-crash, as being founded on conjugated particles in a disparate space.*». Marginal production living on the edge of the dominant narratives, founded by the conjugation of collective particles. The performative aspects, inherent to much of Juliana's and DeForrest's production, may also justify why these narratives try to function as «*a reversal of the nominal gaze of categorization, the paranoid disavowal of an uneven and silent social contract as well as intimate encounter with the daily, incessant slights and traumas felt by the Black Body in everyday life.*» [8] The body that recognizes that it sees and is seen, recognizes the perception of an Other. The work of both artists also coincides in this acknowledgment, making it clear that «*art is not just a form of action, but of social action.*» (Rothko, 2007: 42)

The relation described by Levinas between the Same and the Other could help us read these works. Levinas defines the relationship between the Same and the Other upon an ethical dominium, where to be for the other, is to exist for other (Levinas, 2017, p. 260). If the world is offered to us in the language of others, and if our relation with another consists in communicating the world to another, Huxtable and Brown Jr. move towards the establishment of a common world through the generality of the word (Levinas, 2017, p. 82, 167, 168), which might explain the importance and preponderance of the word, in the work of both artists. As a result of the acknowledgement that the judgment of history is enunciated in the visible, these productions are inserted in a space where, by affirming their undeniable presence, they protect themselves from dissolution. If to make suffer is not to reduce to the category of object, but to maintain the individual in its subjectivity, the establishment of a self-proclaimed narrative is an objective act that goes against this same depersonalization. (Levinas, 2017, pp. 237, 241). Being is produced as multiple and simultaneously split in itself, and in another, being both individual and society, bond that both Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. seek to emphasize. The exhortation of a discourse that impels to the invasion of a space that territorializes in the form of preaching or of the prophetic word (which in this case is the production of the artists), is an extension of this relation with the other (Levinas, 2017: 208).

Fiction that is presented as an alternative to a hegemony of knowledge and information with the purpose of reconfiguring an image of the real, arises from the recognition that Being is a world where you speak, and of which one speaks. Similarly, the construction of these fictions understand that what is communicated is constituted in relation to the others and becomes objective only through communication (Levinas, 2017, 205). Through a redefinition of a collective narrative, the images of a present and a future move towards the creation and distribution of previously absent images – the images that Samuel R. Delany referred to as the images of the future. Although ephemeral, the theatrical productions of its productions generate socio-cultural spaces, ruled by their own rules, and by a historical legacy that is strictly dictated by the artists.

Levinas tells us that we are *in truth* when we produce ourselves in history under the judgment it makes of

us in our presence. (Levinas, 2017, p.251). If we subscribe to this perspective "THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CAN NOT BE DISPUTED" and "Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse" work as propositions that oppose themselves to tyrannies that compromise the truth of being. (Levinas, 2017, p.251).

#### 4 | FICTION AS A TOOL TO REDESIGN REALITY

The importance of the word in relation to the way it can be used to rewrite reality, lies, above all, in its capacity to map and survey. According to Huxtable in an interview with Artnet in 2018, «*Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.*». The act of rewriting is thus the catalyst that happens, allegorically, in the performative space, and literally, through the written production of each of the artists. Following this, Ben Bieser, critic, states that: «*Run though feedback and trauma, Brown, Jr. presents a fleeting moment of resistance, a remapping and rewriting of the conditions of the trap into something delightfully ambiguous and radically spacious.*» [9]. In here, the act of rewriting embodies an attitude of resistance; it chants a narrative alternative in relation to a recent history. This way, postmodern productions like these gravitate towards allegorical expressions where the idea of flux and interaction become the focal point. (Branco, 2013, p.109, 110).

The third and final act of *THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CAN NOT BE DISPUTED* ends with a digital manipulation where several figures act in front of different paintings by Juliana Huxtable, used as backdrops, which we could think in juxtaposition or see as precursor to the work of artists like Cindy Sherman for example. The passages allude to images of family, aristocracy, history, and everyday life. For Patricia Castello Branco, whilst an image of the image, photography as mediator of the real is the technological product that builds history. The insertion of Juliana Huxtable into this space, created by her, in this image that as a multimedia artefact is now more than image, makes the historical image generated by Juliana, as real as any other. (Branco, 2013, p. 551). That is, it legitimizes the histories and narratives the artist seeks to affirm. The transdisciplinary practices that intended to be founders of new methodologies, and which we see at work within the works of these two artists, converge in the pursuit of a language and time of their own.

Above all, it confirms to us that the society we inhabit is a society of images, where reality is both image and reality, and that the construction of our reality, as Juliana Huxtable confirms, is within our reach. The way the artists use the image, reveals the same awareness of this aspect. Rewriting does not refer only to a historical component, but also, as Ben Bieser mentions, to a «re-codification and re-mythologizing of identity» that this way, can evade institutional meaning and redirects us back to the post-modern concept of the collapse of the traditional notion of identity and to the triumph of fiction (Melo, 2003, p.255, 256). We rewrite ourselves by choosing where we want to insert ourselves. It is in this way that language that is directed towards the construction of a common world through the universality of the word, generates teaching and introduces something new in thought, seeking to reduce the distance between Me and the infinitely Other. (Levinas, 2011, p. 215).

Instead of rigidity or closure, the productions of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. materialize the perpetual movement and rhizomatic development of the modern world, confirming that, as Patrícia Castello Branco points out in "Atas Do II Encontro Anual Da Associação de Investigadores da Imagem em Movimento", change is underway «*infiltrating our bodies and our culture and its speed is unstoppable and titanic.*» The perpetual transformation of the substract of the American identity described at the beginning of this article by Pierre Mélandri is, in the productions of the artists, reconfigured in order to generate or seek, a new discourse and a new historical narrative. This is made clear through the written production of each artist and through the formal components where they are placed, whether they are performances or virtual spaces, respectively. Thanks to these processes the narratives put forth by both artists transform these bodies into agents in control (Eldursson, 2018).

Lastly, it is known that the defense of an *an-historical* and totally decontextualized work is as unsustainable as the defense of a work completely enclosed in itself or in its the self-proclaimed identity (Gomes, 2004, p.341, 342), aspects to which both works are susceptible at their most extreme. Nonetheless, the examples of Huxtable and Brown Jr. were called into this investigation as mediators to examine the relationship between the historical process of art and the cultural and civilizational traces left by the latter,

proving to be valuable contributions for this subject matter.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

The productions of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. try to assert alternative historical and collective narratives. The historical component perpetuated through the declaration of its own historicity, aims, simultaneously, to rewrite a discourse that connects us to the other.

We have attempted to show that the creative act of Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. as acts that try to rewrite conditions of the real and overpowering narratives, come from a disagreement relative to an historical structuring and an hegemony of information and knowledge. By outlining the extension and possible implications of the artists' narratives, we have tried to show that these works conjure up an image and history of their own that allows them to be autonomous and removes them from the subjugation of the narratives they were previously subjugated to. Through destabilization and redistribution of predetermined ideas and structures, it is possible to dismantle or transform the practices that hold power. Thus, as complex artistic works, the collective and marginal narratives put into practice by Juliana Huxtable and DeForrest Brown Jr. can be interpreted as small moments of resistance.

## 6 | ENDNOTES

[1] «<https://youtu.be/eG5soJNJa4k>» Accessed on 13 of October.

[2] Quantum Natives. 2016. Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse. «<http://quantumnatives.com/OCCC/index>» Accessed on 21 of October

[3] Quantum Natives. 2016. Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse. «<http://quantumnatives.com/OCCC/index>» Accessed on 21 of October

[4] Absent Personae – DeForrest Brown Jr. e Jon Davies. Purple Tape Pedigree, 2017

[5] Quantum Natives. 2016. Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse. «<http://quantumnatives.com/OCCC/index>» Accessed on 21 of October

[6] Quantum Natives. 2016. Outwardly Coiling Context Collapse. «<http://quantumnatives.com/OCCC/index>» Accessed on 21 of October

[7] Absent Personae – DeForrest Brown Jr. e Jon Davies. Purple Tape Pedigree, 2017

[8]«<https://purpletapepedigree.bandcamp.com/album/the-wages-of-being-black-is-death>» Accessed on 27 of October

[9] «<https://www.adhoc.fm/post/kepla-and-deforrest-brown-jr-recode-trauma-absent/>» Accessed on 29 of October

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