

NINA CRAMER AND EMIL ELG

# Invested in Light

## A Conversation with Krista Thompson

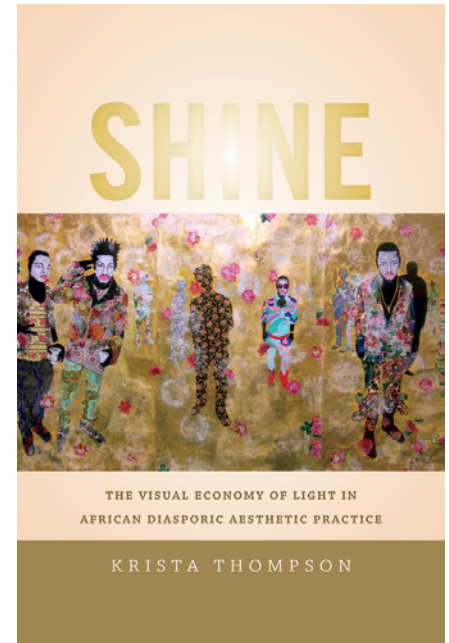
Krista Thompson is Professor of Art History at Northwestern University. Her research examines modern and contemporary art and visual culture of the Africa diaspora and the Caribbean, with a focus on photography and lens-based practices. Thompson is the author of *An Eye for the Tropics* (2006) and *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (2015). Taking its point of departure in the latter publication, this interview revolves around the historical and contemporary connections between blackness and light, photography as art historical method, and African diasporic visualities.

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**NINA CRAMER, EMIL ELG (NC/EE):** *Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us about Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice [1] – a book that has meant a tremendous amount to both of us.*

*In this book, you develop the concept of “shine” through the analysis of African diasporic performances of visibility in Jamaica, the Bahamas, and the US (such as dancehall videography, street photography, and high school proms); and you explore the complex role light plays in these practices. In the book’s introduction you present one of its central concerns when noting that “Light has the power to bring geographic transcendence and social ascendance” (p. 6). Can you tell us about how you arrived at light and shine (and related concepts of shimmer, bixels, sheen, and bling) as a conceptual frame for understanding black diasporic visualities?*

**KRISTA THOMPSON (KT):** The project came out of being attentive to the aesthetic practices that were going on around me when I lived in Atlanta, Georgia as I was completing my graduate work and travelling regularly between Jamaica and the Bahamas. At the same time as I was doing work in the archives as a trained art historian, I became interested in these things I was seeing literally in the streets in these locations that I was working on, and I just started to document them and to think about them together. If anything, the book is just asking questions like, how do we develop art historical methodologies that are attuned toward how different people define their aesthetic practices? How do we take that seriously? How do we study that? And what are the outcomes from being attentive to what is going on on the ground locally? One of the things the book is trying to do is to understand how every place has different practices and a different language – it’s not only “bling”, it’s “shimmer” in the Bahamas, and so on. So, it’s about thinking in a deeply local way about what these practices are and trying to understand the connections between these locations.



**NC/EE:** *Methodologically, Shine seems to be informed by a multiplicity of disciplinary modes. Expositions on hip hop album covers are juxtaposed with analyses of canonical European paintings, such as works by Hans Holbein the Younger and Dirk Valkenburg; painted street photography backdrops where “Light emanating from cars, moons, sunsets, and other sources of illumination is key” (p. 59) from both the Caribbean and the US are considered alongside stills from Hype Williams music videos and contemporary artworks by Ebony G. Patterson and Kehinde Wiley, among others. Your own photographs of high school prom entrances in Nassau, Bahamas and dancehall performers in Kingston, Jamaica [2] also feature prominently along with descriptive prose where you almost seem to write from the position of a participant-observer. Commenting on your research approach, you write: “In order to assess the social and sensorial effect of visual technologies and how they intercede in ‘performance genealogies,’ I did much of the research for the book with and through a video camera or still camera [...] I sought to pursue an art history formulated not just in the archives but in the streets, sites where art historians typically do not look for their subjects” (p. 14). Can you elaborate on the methodological considerations that shaped this book and informed your research process?*



Video light in Passa Passa dancehall, Tivoli Gardens, Jamaica, 2009. Photo by Krista Thompson.

KT: What I try to do in the book is to start by following these photographic practices. For example, in the analysis of street photography and the use of painted backdrops, I literally started following different photographers and, in a couple of instances, filling in when things got so busy that they needed me to help out. I started following the routes that they followed – there were these circuits going around the southeastern United States. Photographers that I had worked with in Atlanta I followed to New Orleans, and I was exposed to this larger network of people as I travelled. That also included following these practices outside the US, to my surprise, and finding that this form of photography was also taken up in a Jamaican context. So, part of the methodology was hanging out with the producers of these images and asking questions to people who were using these technologies. I see my approach as less participant-observation than... what are the questions that art historians ask when they're doing their research? When I'm doing research on an artist and I go to their studio, I'm asking them: What are their sources, what are they thinking about formally, looking at things that are on their canvases, what are the formal languages, what are the material languages? I feel like *Shine* was simply about using art historical methodologies to understand

how practitioners themselves thought about what they were doing. And I have to say that these are some of the least ideal sites to ask questions... let's just say if you're in the context of clubs and concerts and you're asking nerdy art history questions, it is not the best place to conduct art historical research. But again, I was just really interested in getting a sense of how people were defining their own ways of engaging with these technologies.

I was also interested in using the camera, although the history of the camera is one loaded with power dynamics. I was always mindful of that even as I thought it was important that I adopt a visual language that people were using. For me to do otherwise would have been to impose another form of analysis when I was really trying to engage the way these practices were being performed on the ground. But as I say in the book, sometimes the camera did the opposite of what I wanted. Sometimes, to my dismay, people weren't answering my questions – they saw the camera as this opening to an audience that they were imagining, to the people that in the future would see them, to people in a different geography that might somehow see their visibility. So, in an interesting way, as a researcher at first, I was like, “this camera is just ridiculous.” But the camera immediately solicited a kind of response that was so central to local practices of photography. I thought it was important to put aside the way I might typically do research and really engage with the visual languages being used in the spaces in which I was working – going to these locations, paying attention to how people talked about what they were doing, doing formal analyses, looking at content and then using that as a lens to revisit how we might think about contemporary artistic practice.

You mentioned all these different sources that I look at in the book, and these are all sources that artists that I interviewed told me they were looking at. So, when I go to Kehinde Wiley and say, “you're looking at light and shine in your work, what are your sources?” he talks about the street photography backdrops as something that he grew up seeing, he talks about his interest in particular historical paintings and periods, and so I go back to those periods. Ebony Patterson talked about the importance of “blinging” the skin in Jamaica, so I look at those practices. Even looking at music videos – when I'm interviewing artists about what their influences are, they're talking about growing up at a particular moment when a certain video culture was important and how light was a very important visual culture within it. So, I really started methodologically with an attention to what's happening on the ground, trying to take that seriously as a paradigm and a language, and then looking at contemporary artists' work based on that as opposed to on a canon of art history that we might be familiar with to talk about their practices.

NC/EE: *We have also been very inspired by your piece “‘Negro Sunshine’: Figuring Blackness in the Neon Art of Glenn Ligon” (2013). This article, like Shine, revolves around light, shine, and blackness. However, the focus is somewhat different in this earlier text as you primarily foreground ways in which light and shine historically have been instrumental to the commercialization and commodification of black people.*

*This notion is also present in some sections of Shine – for instance in “Shine and the Fact of Blackness”, where you (with reference to Frantz Fanon) talk about surface aesthetics, shining skin and different forms of commodification pertaining to blackness, among other things in relation to the shining, sculptural black bodies depicted by Dutch artist Dirk Valkenburg in his painting Ritual Slave Party on a Sugar Plantation in Surinam (1706-08, SMK - National Gallery of Denmark) – but to a far lesser degree than in the aforementioned essay.*

*In the introduction to Shine you briefly point towards the racial aspects of the enlightenment tradition and you connect (via Isaac Newton’s notion of “white light”) this raciality with the raciality inherent in different photographic media. But you also underline that the African diasporic practices examined in the book depart from this racist, Eurocentric light; you underline that this black light is a different light with other possibilities. You write: “The ‘racial character’ of photographic technologies, as Lorna Roth and [Richard] Dyer point out, directly informed the appearance and illegibility of black people” (p. 22). But shortly thereafter you contend that:*

*The different popular photographic practices in the African diaspora explored here intervene in these histories of technologies of light and the production of race, making different claims on and investments in the photographic effect of white light. How can black people, through popular practices, create different forms of legibility through photographic and videographic technologies, given the historical relation between whiteness and light and the very notion of the representable? How might they differently shine, glow, or bling through the photographic sphere? (p. 22)*

*As we understand it, your work on the intersections of light and blackness thus takes off in at least two different – and seemingly irreconcilable – directions, where light on the one hand is something that works, ideologically, towards the exclusion of black subjectivity and on the other is something that has the capacity to foreground, and perhaps even produce, black subjectivity. Can you tell us more about these different tracks in your work?*

KT: Interestingly, I was almost done with *Shine* as I was thinking about that piece on Glenn Ligon's work. I very much had *Shine* in the background as I also started to think about contemporary artists who were dealing with light as an electronic technology. I am really concerned about commodification in that piece because Ligon himself has talked about shine, and the shine of skin, within his own practice. You know, he has this great work *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book"* (1991), which I discuss in my essay, where he wrote notes on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men. One of the questions he asks is, "Why are we always shining?" My piece was really about taking up these notions of light but trying to ground them in the longer arc of Ligon's career and how I could see his move to light as electronic technology as a part of a longer investigation within his artistic practice that has dealt with notions of race, the surface, and commodification, and ways of pulling back from that. It's just to say that I think there are really interesting correlations between those things, but I want to be attentive to the very different modes of light in all of these different practices.

But in terms of the seemingly irreconcilable differences between those modes of light, I think that chapter 2 of *Shine*, which deals with video light, is a good way of giving an example of the complicated ways that both of those things can be at play at the same time. That chapter deals with the phenomenon of video light in which a cameraman holds the light of a camera onto dancehall participants, highlighting different performers and sometimes projecting their images on a screen within that space. Sometimes the videographer is recording what is happening, but a large part of what I look at in that chapter is the way light itself and basking in the visual effects of the technology of photography become themselves something that many performers were really interested in. I'm looking at how there's a lot of blurring, a lot of what I call "bixelation", that occurs in the creation of images within dancehalls which often take place late at night and into the early morning, because the camera technology wasn't created to capture black people. I'm also really interested in looking at what happens in dancehalls as creating alternate forms of visibility and visibility that are deeply interested in light, but differently so. People become differently legible within that space, and within the technology itself, if the camera is recording, and the way that technology is then circulated in diasporic contexts. So again, there's a deep investment in light, but there's an investment in its performative, emotive and affective dimensions, which I think allows participants to do something else with this technology.

I hesitate to bring up skin bleaching here so quickly because it's a very complicated practice with very different local manifestations and histories. But there was a practice of skin bleaching that arose within dancehalls as this camera light



was becoming more central. In the book I try, based on interviews, to think about skin bleaching as itself photographic, as something that literally makes the skin light sensitive. The photograph in its more conventional sense is something that has been captured on paper, which is sensitized, but I wanted to think about the body itself as a kind of photograph. In this way, the subject of the photograph and the materiality of the photograph become located on the participant who is bleaching their skin to become legible within the light of the camera. What does it mean to make one's skin photographable and changeable in the way that the surface of a photograph might be? This is a process of making oneself into a photographic object at the same time as one is claiming a new form of subjecthood precisely through this transformation. It's refusing a technology that only renders someone visible if their skin color is a certain way. It's refusing a society that grants mobility to people based on their skin color being a particular way. I'm trying to linger on that complicated state of the photographic object and subjecthood that, to my mind, is being produced at the same time.

*NC/EE: You use the concept of a "visual economy" to examine the ways African diasporic communities are constituted through shared visual literacies and the circulation of consumer culture throughout the region you refer to as the "post-Civil Rights", "postcolonial" and "postnational" circum-Caribbean. And in focusing on the Bahamas, Jamaica and the US, Shine really brings to the fore the specific power relations and conditions of transmission between these national contexts. But at certain points, the book also reaches beyond this area, for instance to discuss histories of continental African photography. A key methodological question that your work speaks to for us is how to set the geographical boundaries of research on African diasporic visual practices. How did you select the transnational, intraregional focus of your research for Shine?*

**KT:** Part of the reason for the focus was that I wanted to be attentive to the practices I was seeing in the locations in which I was already working. But I also wanted to use those locations to make a broader argument about how we might see geographic connections differently if we trace the technologies and the visual economies that are shared across these spaces. What I was trying to do was less about choosing certain places than thinking about how geography was reconfigured through the circulation of technologies related to shine and all the attendant social, aesthetic and political possibilities. But I hoped that the book would provide a model not only for thinking about shine necessarily, but for thinking seriously about doing work on these practices that are taking place across loca-

tions, following those technologies and aesthetic expressions and opening up a set of conversations and inquiries into these practices that in many instances are all around us, unfolding locally within our communities, that people might take for granted because they haven't been taught to see them or to ask questions about them.

#### **LITERATURE**

Thompson, Krista. 2015. *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Thompson, Krista. 2013. "Negro Sunshine': Figuring Blackness in the Neon Art of Glenn Ligon." In *Black Is, Black Ain't*, ed. Hamza Walker, 14-25. Chicago: The Renaissance Society.