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Walking Tour Performance as Reparative History: Aya Shabu's Black Wall Street of Durham, NC

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Walking Tour Performance as Reparative History: Aya Shabu's *Black Wall Street* of Durham, NC

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Abstract

Blending the theatricality of oral history performance with the site-specificity of the historical walking tour, Aya Shabu's performance-based tour of the section of downtown Durham, North Carolina formerly known as *Black Wall Street* represents an innovative approach to the presentation of minoritarian histories. This essay examines Shabu's *Black Wall Street* tour, situating it within the recent resurgence of critical walking art and arguing that its sensory reconstruction of place constitutes a mode of reparative history.

Keywords: Black history, minoritarian performance, walking art

Walking Tour Performance as Reparative History

Over the past decade, walking art has experienced a period of dramatic artistic and scholarly revival. The proliferation of immersive pedestrian performances—from sonic art walks to ecosophical trail hikes—reflects the historically critical orientation of the art form (Springgay and Truman, 2018; Morris, 2020). Using inventive artistic strategies to cognitively and affectively transform our social and ecological entanglements, many contemporary pieces invite us to reimagine dominant historical narratives through the incorporation of neglected minoritarian perspectives.

The work of Black ethnographer and movement artist Aya Shabu offers a potent example of this trend. She describes her technique—which combines the theatricality of oral history performance with the site-specificity of the historical walking tour—as “the performance of geography,” saying: “I’m an artist, and I’m using history as my paint. The canvas is the neighborhood” (Carter, 2022, 21:07). With support from the Hayti Heritage Center and the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice, Shabu’s Whistle Stop

Tours offers three unique performance-based walking tours animating the histories of historically Black neighbourhoods in Durham, North Carolina.

Drawing upon ethnographic and archival research, I explore the creative tools of Shabu's *Black Wall Street* tour. This 75-minute tour through downtown Durham marks historical sites of Black entrepreneurship, celebrating the community's economic successes. I argue that *Black Wall Street*'s innovative approach to walking art constitutes a mode of reparative history, countering the ongoing impacts of the region's racist legacies. Focussing on stories of resilience and financial achievement, Shabu highlights neglected parts of the city's history and provides sources of inspiration and aspiration for contemporary Black communities. Her application of a critical Black aesthetic to walking art offers invaluable insight into perambulatory approaches to activist art and the presentation of minoritarian histories.

Figure 1

Photograph of Parrish Street in Durham, NC. (ca. 1912). Courtesy of Archives, Records, and History Center, North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC, USA.



Starting in the late 19th century, downtown Durham's four-block Parrish Street became a major locus of Black capital (Figure 1). In its heyday, it was home to a plethora of Black-owned businesses, including retail shops, restaurants, entertainment venues, and powerful financial institutions like North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company and Mechanics and Farmers Bank (Brown, 2008). Praised by W. E. B. Du Bois, it attained national recognition and earned the moniker of Durham's Black Wall Street. Unlike Tulsa, Oklahoma's Black Wall Street—which was famously decimated in the violent white-supremacist massacre of

1921—Durham’s Black Wall Street persisted until the 1960s, when urban renewal efforts in combination with the racial desegregation of the city’s business districts resulted in its gradual dissolution.

Combining creative storytelling with dramatic, poetic, and choreographic performances, Shabu’s *Black Wall Street* brings the stories of this history of Black entrepreneurship to life. The piece begins in a repurposed vacant lot known colloquially as *Chickenbone Park*, a popular gathering spot for the city’s Black community situated at the centre of Parrish Street. A tour guide outlines the history and emancipatory potential of Black Wall Street, introducing John Merrick—a former slave who served as the first president of NC Mutual—as a major figure in its development. Shabu follows up this introduction with a choreopoem about Merrick’s standing in the Black community.

As the tour progresses toward the former NC Mutual building, the guide points out the recent resurgence of Black businesses along the street. Shabu performs a monologue inspired by the experiences of Black women working as office clerks at NC Mutual, such as Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, Viola Turner, and Susi Norfleet. As the tour loops back to its starting point along Ramseur Street, the guides indicate local sites along the skyline, describing the historically Black Hayti district on the south side of town. After a dramatic reading from Walter Weare’s (1993) *Black Business in the New South*, the tour concludes with a participatory call-and-response song called “I Ain’t A Movin’.” This song names places important to the local Black community and asserts, “I ain’t a moving from my home. This is my home.”

The reparative character of *Black Wall Street* lies in its intervention into Durham’s contemporary Black community’s perception of these urban spaces, and thereby its self-perception. Reparative history seeks to recover and disseminate marginalised histories of injustice—especially with respect to racism—in order to address their legacies and rectify their lingering impacts (Hall, 2018). Shabu argues that her goal with *Black Wall Street* is not only to counter historical erasure but also Black communities’ internalisation of lies and negative stereotypes perpetuated by dominant historical narratives. Confronting audiences with a minoritarian historical perspective on a sensory and somatic level, her work reflects Hwang’s (2019) observation that walking tours can (re)construct identity through “the formation of an imaginary landscape” in which spectators “rearrange and recreate the perception of their environment” (p. 8). Shabu’s tours enable Durham’s Black residents to experience these urban spaces—and thereby themselves—differently because of their familiarity with these histories of Black entrepreneurship.

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