

**JERWOOD/FVU  
AWARDS  
2022**

In partnership with  
Leeds Art Gallery

**MICHAEL.**  
*cleave to the BLACK*

A response by  
Kayo Chingonyi

# Kayo Chingonyi

## The Cape and the Cloak

There is a poem by Terrance Hayes which came immediately to mind when I started watching *cleave to the BLACK*, Michael's three-screen meditation on masculinity, psychogeography, and blackness. In the poem, Hayes, in characteristic ludic guise, explores the ways one word can hide in another — generating sometimes divergent resonances:

*and someone is telling me about contronyms,  
how 'cleave' and 'cleave' are the same word  
looking in opposite directions. I now know  
'bolt' is to lock and 'bolt' is to run away.<sup>1</sup>*

'cleave' meaning to hold steadfastly can also be 'cleave' meaning to separate (and 'leave' is there, chilling in both, hinting at this ambiguity). And ambiguity, as well as the work of Hayes, feels an apt point of entry.

<sup>1</sup> Terrance Hayes, 'New York Poem',  
*The New Yorker*, 29 November 2010.  
[https://www.newyorker.com/  
magazine/2010/11/29/new-york-poem](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/new-york-poem)

The rhetorical strength of a triptych, it seems to me, is the sense of surprise that attends simultaneity — the hybrid and fugitive sensation carried by the juxtaposition of contrasting images. Over Michael's three screens, what looks like the external stairwell of a housing estate block sits next to images from nature one might call idyllic which in turn buttress images of a figure, one of a number of black male figures, in repose. It looks to me like rest because perhaps I need it to be rest. The work recalls for me the condition in which I came to an understating of my selfhood as a black man in the West. The realisation was a violence enacted from without. And so, like the word 'cleave' my body transmitted ambiguous code. I belonged and was connected to others within blackness at the same time as this blackness was predicated on an enforced separation (no less forceful for its seeming subtlety) from belonging to the general unmediated subject position. Blackness felt at one time like a cape and cloak.

This feeling was reinforced at every turn by means of certain borders I was not permitted to cross. I was meant to occupy a particular place in society; a place in the world tied to abjection or lack. This much was intimated by the aspirations strangers had for me and the ways they treated me. What strikes me especially keenly about *cleave to the BLACK* is the way it hints at this vast network of complex feelings without recourse to a direct, representational, approach to lived experience. Instead, it offers us the

nuance of multiplicity and it is our role to disentangle, maybe better to say recontextualise, what we see. It offers, also, a challenge to the high premium we place on this seeing by resisting fixity, by cleaving to opacity.

The choreography, I can think of no better word, that governs the rise and fall of each scene has some connection, as I see it, to breath — the catch and release by which we are sustained — and this, too, starts to feel like part of the work's ruminations. When I see a black male figure lying down I wonder at the circumstances. *I can't breathe. I'm losing my breath. Fuck your breath.* The words that have been stinging my mind's ear for years now since they entered the wider consciousness are somewhere in the background of the images even as they might depict carefree moments. Even our interiority is subject to strictures. The sense of the body under surveillance by unseen but prevalent forces. Are we supposed to feel complicit in this surveillance or are we being permitted to enter the space of intimacy? The absence of resolution is an affirmation of the right each of us has to go sometimes without saying. A right frequently denied to those who live within blackness.

*cleave to the BLACK* holds indignation and rebellion in suspension. The repetition of set movements feeling sometimes like a refusal building at the back of the throat, being willed again and again into being by its necessity.



Michael., *cleave to the BLACK* (still), 2022

In that sense this is a work of resistance and creative revision. The imagery essaying what text cannot reach. As the propulsive sensation builds, the anticipation extends beyond the boundaries of the imagery and acts on the body. Watching, then, in relation to this, is not the passive spectatorship we sometimes associate with the term but an interrogation between image and viewer, a conversation.

It is in this fruitful space of exchange that *cleave to the BLACK* especially flourishes. Because of the richness of its palette the viewer is able to bring various interpretative faculties to their reading. When we consider a subject as complex and subjective as race this is a powerful approach because it lifts us from the cerebral realm into the guts and viscera which are of equal importance to how we understand ourselves (though you wouldn't think it to look at the focus of some of the art being made in the contemporary moment). In this space of suggestion and invocation is the power to engage the viewer; to bring us into dynamic relation not just with the propositional content – whatever a particular work of art means to say – but something still more evocative; what the work does at the level of sensation as an event-in-itself.

The main paradigm that *cleave to the BLACK* is working to challenge is the concept of linear time. Linearity is, of course, a kind of colonial force pressed down on the shoulders of time to try and bring order where

simultaneity is to the fore. The engines of capital require a predictable flow of productive effort to meet the targets which uphold the bottom line. If time is not actually as has been set out but is instead a set of echoes, in which past, present and future inhere in each other what does that mean for the racialised body? Does a space outside linear time encompass freedom or a renewed kind of restraint? This question hangs thrillingly in the air throughout *cleave to the BLACK*, pulsing with life. So to experience this work is not to watch it but to be brought into its orbit which does not begin or end as such but sets down a set of tributaries which, if followed, flow into the larger questions it quietly asks.

*cleave to the BLACK* leaves us, as viewers, with the sense of discomfiture which comes with interrogations of the prevailing order and it is this which I am most grateful to take from Michael's work. It feels at once impossible and like a fruitful challenge to try and find a form that can sufficiently hold the more difficult subjects. One can spend a lifetime in exploration of that creative tension. I wager a good deal of the enduring cultural production of our age is a product of this kind of engagement. The artist embarking time and again on what feels too difficult to grasp in the materials of their artistry. It seems to me, especially where race is concerned, the way to understanding is paved with thousands of these tentative, generative, steps.

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**Kayo Chingonyi** is an award-winning poet whose work speaks to how distance and time, nations and history can collapse within a body. His debut collection of poems, *Kumukanda* (2017) won the Dylan Thomas Prize and Somerset Maugham Award while his most recent collection *A Blood Condition* (2021) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection, the T.S. Eliot Prize, and the Costa Poetry Award. He lives in West Yorkshire and is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Durham University.

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