

Dr. julia elizabeth
neal on Transnational
Scholarship:
Performance, Race,
and Archives



By Jamie
Straw

Part of the 2022/2023 Visual & Critical Studies forum, Dr. Julia Elizabeth Neal joined CCA virtually on March 2nd, 2023, to give a presentation about the life and work of artist and co-founder of the Fluxus movement, Benjamin Patterson (1934–2016).

DR. JULIA
ELIZABETH
NEAL

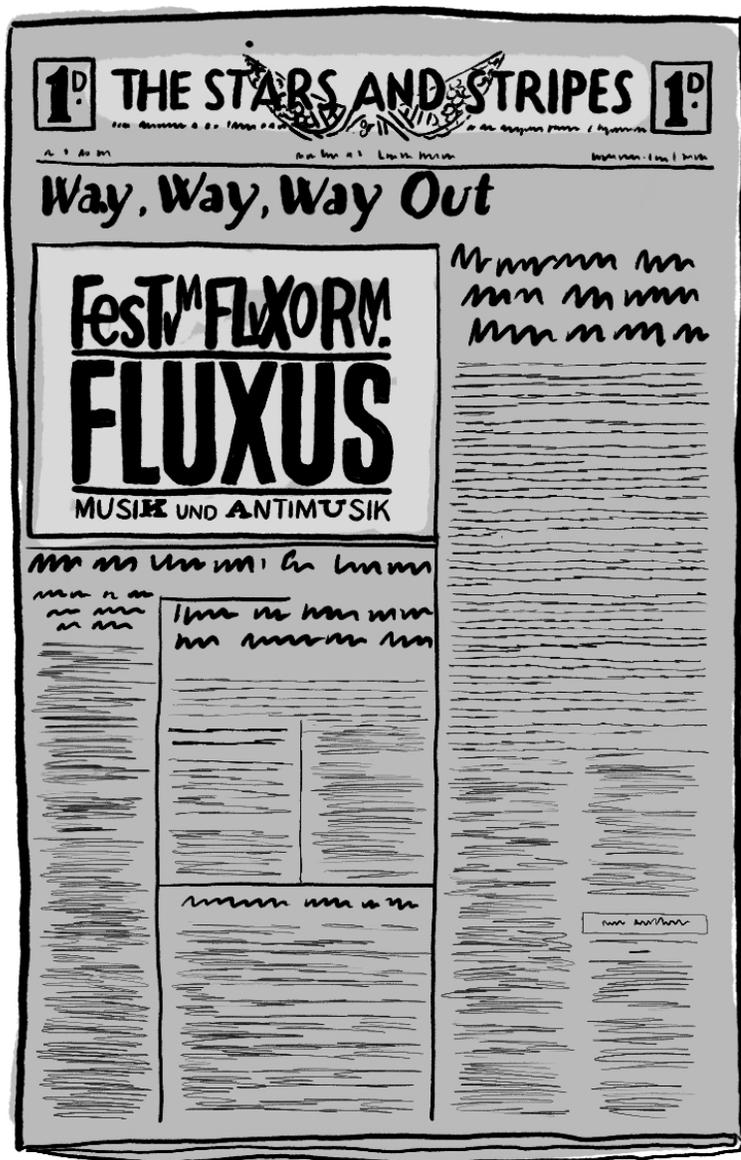


BENJAMIN
PATTERSON



Dr. Neal wove ideas about transnationalism, archives, and race into a narrative of Ben Patterson's work.

In the 1960's, Patterson collaborated on an article about Fluxus with Fluxus peer Emmett Williams that appeared in the *Stars and Stripes*, the US army daily newspaper.



Patterson was classically trained as a double bassist, but was prevented from performing with symphony orchestras in the US due to segregation laws. *Variations for Double Bass* (1961) is an iconic experimental music and performance piece where in one version he dresses up his bass with the head of a smoking camel.

Patterson founded the Museum of the Subconscious, a museum with seven locations but neither physical buildings nor objects. Artists from the Fluxus movement donated their subconsciouses to the museum using a bequeathment form written by Patterson.

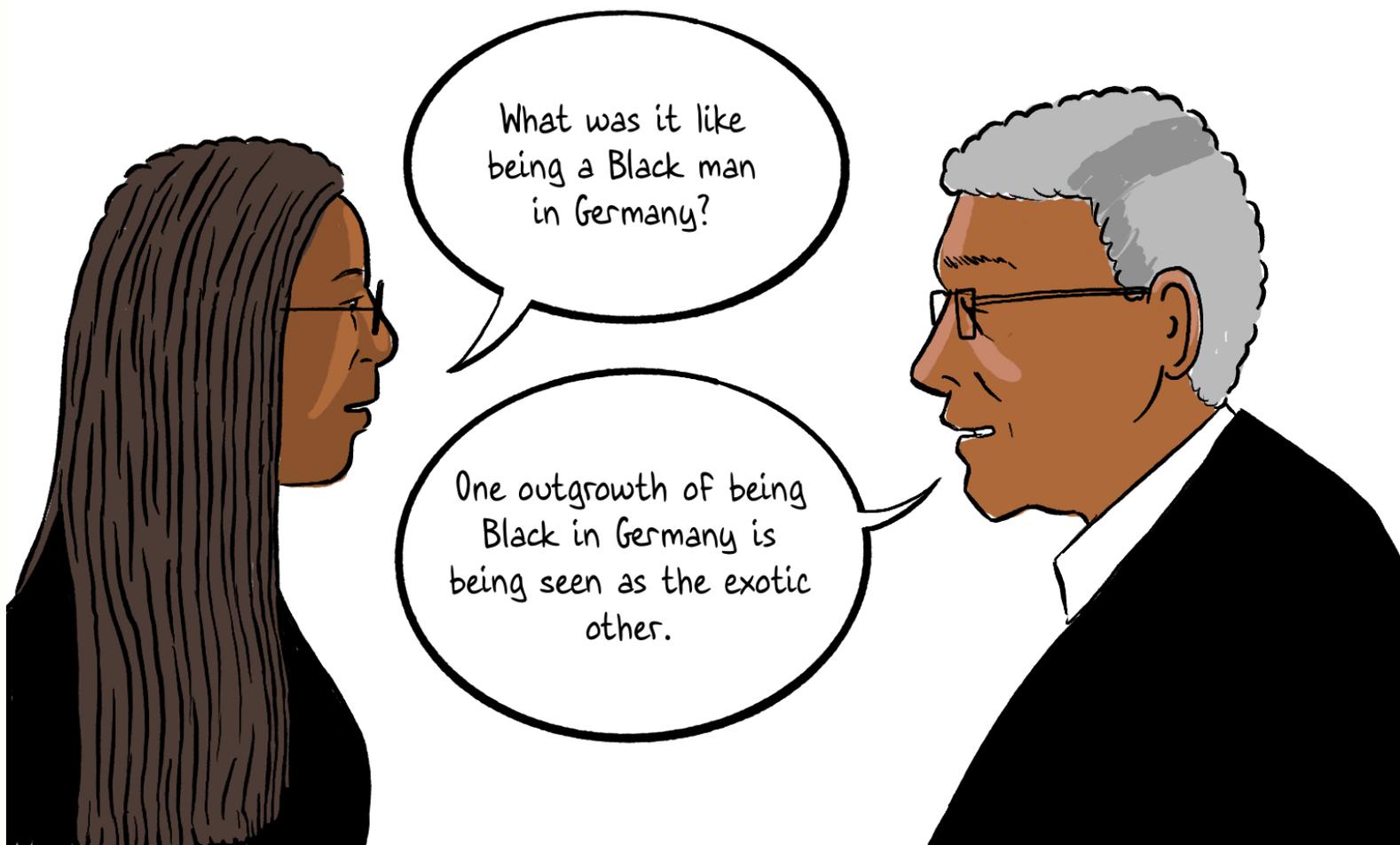


In his later years, Patterson utilized the bay window in his home in Wiesbaden, Germany, to create object assemblages, including one featuring a figure of a Black double bassist wearing the cracked mask of a grotesque white person.



First published in tandem with his exhibition *Getting Ready for 2,000 A.D.* in 1991, this periodical entitled *bullshit no. 2* exclusively features writing by Patterson. An act of self-possession according to Neal, Patterson includes a self-conducted interview where he talks about his work and Fluxus as a whole. Here he lays claim to his position in Fluxus and contemporary art.

I wondered, like Neal, what it must have been like living as a Black man at the center of the European avant garde scene.



But Neal demonstrates repeatedly that Patterson resists being essentialized, exoticized, or tokenized by an enduring ability to take possession of his own identity.



His claim toward multiple centers is an act of self-possession.

For example, Patterson lived what Neal refers to as a “transnational” lifestyle. Patterson studied in the United States and lived in Canada, Germany, and France. He ultimately set up a home in Wiesbaden, Germany where he would perennially return despite exhibiting and participating in residencies all over the world.



I was struck by Neal's ability to bring art history into the present.



BEN PATTERSON AND DR. NEAL IN PATTERSON'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE.

**ARTISTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FLUXUS MOVEMENT.
MANY STILL LIVING TODAY**



In the end, Dr. Neal's presentation seemed to raise more questions than it answered.

How does Patterson's transnational history inform the many myths we tell ourselves and repeat about Black movement?

What do histories of African American art production look like when attention condenses around formally trained and autodidactic artists who are aware of their options rather than their limits?

How might transnationalism in his work steeped in site specificity invite, expand, and challenge conceptualization of art and definitions of internationalism and transnationalism in the 21st century?

But maybe that's the point. Dr. Neal's engagement with Patterson's work is a process of recovery, preservation, and continued inquiry.

Current focus surrounding Blackness and archives is connected to academic interventions and approaches to Black subjecthood, absences, erasures, fugitivity, and escape... archives, as a collection of discourses, root histories not just in terms of the past, but through the future, through its interlocutors, us.



Jamie Straw (she/they) is a comics creator based out of northeastern Pennsylvania. They are a second year graduate student in CCA's MFA in Comics program. Her work is wide-ranging, but often focuses on the environment and social issues.