

# Steven Shaviro

Moses Sumney insists that love is not the answer; and he's not too keen on traditional formations of masculinity. He seeks through his music both to redefine gender roles and also to question the all-too-often-taken-for-granted social norm of the romantic couple. The latter, even more than the former, is unusual in a popular music context, since so much of that music is focused on love, sex, and romance. In his early releases – the EP *Lamentations* (2016), and the full-length album *Aromanticism* (2017) – Sumney rejects the clichés about love that are so prevalent both in pop music and in American culture more generally. Sumney notes in an interview that romance “can't be separated from a patriarchal structure” that dominates and restricts our lives in so many respects. Indeed, “someone can love you and still be oppressing you, still not listen to your voice” (Cliff 2017). In these early works, Sumney both mourns, and yet finds comfort and strength in, a fundamental condition of existential loneliness.

Sumney continues and expands his gender-revisionist project in his second full-length album, *grae* (2020). The album's title is homonymous with the achromatic color “gray,” which is both the absence of color and the result of mixing together all colors. Sumney seeks to explore an “in-between” space for himself (“Neither/Nor”), which has no single definition, and cannot be contained within our society's “edifice of boxes to put people in” (“boxes”), but where his “inherent multiplicity” (“also also also and and and”) can flourish. This means that Sumney, much like the Black radical theorist and poet Fred Moten, asks us to “consent not to be a single being” (Moten 2017).

Sumney's musical style, like his persona, is intrinsically difficult to categorize. His sound is sufficiently idiosyncratic that it is not likely to be confused with anyone else's. But for that very reason, it cannot easily be slotted into any particular musical genre. Simply because he is Black, Sumney's music has often been characterized as a sort of r&b. But this is one attribution that he summarily rejects, saying that “it's very obviously racist when people call me an r&b act” (Pearce 2020). In positive terms, Sumney's songs range from the bare minimalism of “Worth It” (where his falsetto voice is set against nothing more than finger snaps and

## The Virility Fades: Moses Sumney's "Virile"

hand claps), through the folkie riffs of “Polly” (with its backing of solo acoustic guitar, occasionally supplemented by long-held synthesizer notes), all the way to the multi-instrumental, heavy rave-up of “Virile.” Sumney's melodies tend to avoid strong profiles; instead, they have a floating, unresolved feel. Sumney's voice, often multitracked and nearly always mixed upfront, is the most distinctive feature of his music. Sumney slips easily back and forth between his rich, modal vocal register and a quivering, vibrant falsetto. His words are always clear, but he also often draws them out in ways that could not happen in ordinary speech. The intonations of Sumney's voice express both yearning and resolution.

Sumney's music always has an intense corporeal focus, despite his heavy use of synthesizers and filters. Some electronic dance music sounds and feels disembodied, as if it were made for robots; but this is never the case with Sumney's songs. A lot of the music's densely physical feel is due to the power and weight of Sumney's voice. In both its modal and falsetto registers, and despite being so heavily processed electronically, Sumney's vocalizations never float free, but always remind us of their embedded origin in the chest, larynx, and lungs. TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and other bigots often blather on about supposedly fixed biological categories. But Sumney knows that doubts, hesitations, and fluctuations of identity are themselves most powerfully manifested and played out in the flesh.

In addition to his albums, Sumney has released a number of extraordinary music videos. And his self-presentation, in live performance as well as in videos, is a pointedly expressive one. He usually wears loose, all-black clothing; this sartorial style, together with his falsetto voice, suggests a flowing smoothness far from the hardbodied masculine norm. His body is strong and impressively muscled, but also relaxed and graceful. It suggests an openness to touch and to affection, rather than any sort of self-enclosed masculine mastery. Thanks to his videos, as well as to his form of self-presentation, Sumney must be regarded as a fully audiovisual artist, rather than just a strictly musical one.

Sumney made lyric videos, with various collaborators, for nearly all of the songs on *grae*. These videos are usually fairly minimal in set-up. They invoke a low-fi aesthetic, recalling the look and feel of 1980s VHS tape. For instance, in the video for “Polly” Sumney simply sits in his room, staring at the camera, listening to the music without lip-syncing. The lyrics scroll by at the bottom of the screen, speaking of a polyamorous lover whose split affections make Sumney feel belittled and undervalued. Behind Sumney, we see two guitars hung on the wall to the left of the frame, and a piano on the right. Sunlight also streams in through a window way in the back left. Sumney simply sits there and softly cries for most of the video. Tears stream down his face, and his mouth occasionally convulses in sobs. But all these reactions are fairly restrained, as if Sumney were willfully holding himself back. Several times, he wipes his hands over his face, and back through his hair. At one

point, he momentarily breaks into a winning smile. But by the end of the video, he is crying again. Throughout, Sumney continues to stare at the camera, never breaking eye contact. This music demands intimacy, even when it proclaims distance and solitude.

Alongside these low-fi lyric videos, Sumney has also made a number of full-fledged music videos, with higher production values and more intricate scenarios. To date, these have all been directed either by Allie Avital or by Sumney himself (in one case, “Quarrel,” they are both listed as co-directors). I have written elsewhere about Avital's videos for “Worth It” (Shaviro 2019) and for “Me in 20 Years” (Shaviro 2021). Here I would like to focus on Sumney's self-directed video for “Virile” (2019), the first song from *grae* to be released. This song overtly rejects the mainstream social conception of masculinity: “You wanna slip right in/ Amp up the masculine/ You've got the wrong idea, son.”

Sumney has said that the “Virile” video “takes place in a post-human world; the last remaining man is caught between Beauty and Brutality's battle to dominate the earth and his body” (Aku 2019). The overall *look* of the video isn't as science-fictional as this description might imply; but it is definitely strange and alienating, with its outdoor sequences in a barren landscape, and its indoor ones in the oddly lit decor of what seems to be a meat locker. “Virile” is mostly a dance video, with the dancing choreographed by Sumney in collaboration with Chris Emile, whose work is also concerned with redefining the Black male body (Emile 2021).





The opening shot shows Sumney lying on the ground, amidst dried grass. His shirt is open, and his chest exposed. The camera is way up in the sky, and the sound is indeterminate ambient noise; then the camera lowers itself, moving in on Sumney. The song proper begins with Sumney's a cappella voice, crying out wordlessly: "Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah..." Then we hear a series of shimmering runs on the harp. The video cuts to a new indoor location, the meat locker, just as a piano joins the harp, and Sumney starts singing the first verse of the song. In this verse, he comments on his awareness of mortality, which makes "virile" masculine postures ridiculous: "none/ Of this matters/ 'Cause I will return/ To dust and matter."

The lighting in the meat locker is bluish and indirect; it mostly seems to come from way back. Fumes of dry ice swirl around, close to the floor. Enormous slabs of dead meat hang from hooks. Some of the meat slabs are entirely still, while others cross the space, suspended on horizontal poles that slide back and forth. Sumney enters the scene from in between the moving slabs, also hanging down from a horizontal bar; with his hands gripping a small trapeze. Soon, he lets go of the bar, and jumps to the floor. His chest and torso are bare; below them he wears loose, flared black pants. His dark skin glistens, and his muscles stand out in clear definition.

The sound thickens as the song proceeds. Flutes screech, and vigorous treble percussive rhythms cut across the melody and the singing. In the pre-chorus,

guitar and drums join in, and Sumney's voice battles to stand out against the wall of sound, as he belts out some of his most sarcastic lines: "Cheers to the patriarchy/ And the marble arch." When the song reaches the chorus, the mix gets even denser, with harsh skittering beats and bombastic emphasis at the beginning of each bar. This is where Sumney most overtly states his scorn for normative ideals of masculinity and virility. He is almost screaming, drawing out syllables as his voice fluctuates back and forth between modal and falsetto registers.

As we hear all this, Sumney engages in a furious dance. The camera moves forward towards him, and then pulls back again. For the most part, it remains far enough away to show either his whole body, or his body from the waist up. Sumney's dance adopts a start-and-stop rhythm. At times his body ripples and flows, while at other times it freezes momentarily into tight, contorted poses. Occasionally, his back is to the camera; we see his shoulder muscles vibrating with tension, in a way that is reminiscent of Martha Nichols in Sumney's earlier video for "Worth It." All in all, it seems as if Sumney were both trying to free some energy trapped inside him, and yet also trying to bottle that energy up and prevent it from escaping. Everything is taut and tensely wound up. It is as if Sumney were taking the patriarchal, virile postures that he has been socially conditioned to adopt, and shaking them out, and twisting them into harsh and bizarre shapes, in order to exorcise them once and for all.

When the song reaches the second verse – in which Sumney sarcastically sings, "To stake dominion over all that one surveys/ Is the virile, viral way" – the video moves into another room. This room is reddish in tone, and it is set up like a religious chapel. There are rows of pews on both sides of a central aisle that leads to a kind of altar. Candles are burning on the altar, and to both sides of it there are giant slabs of meat hanging. Is this a site for the worship of meat-eating and masculine violence? The camera moves down the aisle towards the altar, as Sumney writhes in front of it. His motions are a bit less frantic than before; he almost seems to be doing some sort of exercise routine, alternately stretching his arms up high and having them touch fixed points on his shoulders and face. As the song moves to the intensified beat of the second pre-chorus, Sumney writhes and gesticulates before the altar, in a parody of prayer.

Then the camera moves back and away from the altar. This is followed by a sudden cut to a metallic wall lit in cool blue, against which Sumney is now dancing. We get extremely brief jump cuts back to the red room, though mostly we see Sumney writhing against the wall in blue. These violent disjunctions of the image correspond to the musical ferocity of the second chorus, with its raving power chords and heavy percussion.

Finally we get a shot of the entire blue room. It contains still more giant slabs of meat. Some of the slabs are hanging from hooks as before, while one slab lies on a long work table, as if it has been prepared for dissection. As the chorus continues – grimly warn-

ing us that "too much is not enough" – Sumney skips across the room in a boxer's pose. His fists are nearly clenched, as if he is going to punch out the meat, and he skips backwards across the room, almost like Muhammad Ali when he would "float like a butterfly." But then – after a shot that pans across the ceiling of the blue room – Sumney crouches before one of the slabs of meat, seeming to caress it. When he pulls himself back upright, his right hand arm, all the way up to the elbow, is covered with some blue, glittery substance. As the chorus continues, we are reminded that "you pick your own prison."

The camera backs out of the room, and as it does so, the room lighting changes from blue back to red (recalling the light of the "chapel"). The room has no door, but it is separated from the rest of the space by hanging plastic strips (such as are often used at the edge of a refrigerated area). The camera, looking through these strips, shows us Sumney in silhouette, dancing just behind the strips, still in the (now red) room. Sumney's dancing is considerably gentler and more fluid than it was before; he waves his arms upward in alternation. All this takes place during the song's bridge, with a somewhat gentler sound than the chorus. The lyrics are once again sarcastic, with their accusation against masculine imperialism: "You want dominion to make minions of the stars,/ Made up of what you are..." The word "are" is repeated many times, as if Sumney were testing it out on his tongue. The instrumentals are still quite thick and loud, but now they play in unison with Sumney's voice.



While the stream of “are”s continues, the video cuts from the meat locker to a long shot in which the camera rapidly moves over a landscape, mostly dry grass with a sparse scattering of trees. The instruments suddenly drop out, so that for a moment we just hear Sumney’s voice once more reciting wordless “ah”s. The video cuts to an extreme closeup of meat, with ladybugs crawling over it. This is slightly reminiscent of the closeup of maggots on meat in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1926, though ladybugs are far less disgusting than maggots). Then full instrumentation resumes, for the last reprise of the chorus; and we cut back to the outdoors. We see Sumney running along a path; from high up in the sky, we see that the path on which he runs is really a closed loop. Then the camera, from somewhat closer in, and closer to ground level, circles around Sumney as he dances in place. The sky behind him is filled with an ominous, spiraling swarm of insects or birds (it is hard to tell which; evidently this is a CGI construct).

There are a number of quick jump cuts as Sumney dances ever more energetically, waving his arms towards the sky, and with an expression of ecstasy. At the same time, the swarm fills more and more of the sky. Just as the singing ends, and the music fades out, we cut to a shot of Sumney lying on the ground, panting heavily as if exhausted. In the absence of music, his breaths are quite loud on the soundtrack. An enormous mass of ladybugs (like the ones on the meat earlier) crawl all over his face and torso. The camera slowly moves closer and closer to Sumney’s face, with the bugs in disturbing profusion. Finally, the video cuts to black, though the heavy panting continues on the soundtrack for a few more seconds.

The emotional power of the “Virile” music video comes from its accretion of details, both in the music and in the visuals. Though the song is a rave-up, meant to overwhelm, its instrumentation is finely articulated, and continually varies over the four minutes or so of the song. At times, staccato beats and ferocious treble riffs cut across the melody, while at other times the instrumentation closely follows it. Meanwhile, Sumney’s singing repeatedly shifts its register, as its mood varies between longing, anger and sarcasm, and resignation. Throughout the swirl of the music, our attention always comes back to Sumney’s singing, which is to say his embodied breathing.

Visually, the “Virile” music video is stylized in ways that open up the message of the lyrics, but without literalizing them, or forming them into a narrative. The subdued lighting of the meat locker, alternately

reddish and bluish, sets off, in contrast, the sheen of Sumney’s dark skin. (It’s only recently that cinematographers have learned to overcome the built-in white bias of the cinematic apparatus, in order to light black peoples’ skin properly – Latif 2017). Sumney’s dancing moves through a variety of gestures and postures; it is highly energetic and dynamic, as it both enacts what we might call the character armor of normative masculinity, and pushes to break free of it. If Sumney’s dancing expresses a conflict between Beauty and Brutality, it demonstrates the difficulty – no less than the necessity – of escaping from the latter. The video continually reminds us of death and carnivorous predation: we have taken life from the animals now reduced to slabs of meat, and this violence is very nearly our implicit religion.

We might see Sumney’s dancing, and the video as a whole, as expressing the struggle of life against death – and in particular, against the violent putting-to-death that characterizes hegemonic masculinity and virility. But Sumney also reminds us that life itself is finite. Indeed, this is part of what makes normative masculinity’s pretensions of mastery so absurd. The slabs of meat, no less than the ladybugs and the CGI swarms, remind us how life always gives way to other life. The music video is a living demonstration – as Sumney sings in the chorus – of how “the virility fades,” and how efforts to “amp up the masculine” are futile.

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**Works Cited** continued on page 44



## Austin Svedjan

# Speculum Sexualis: Voyeuristic Pessimism, or the Body at a Distance

*speculum, n.*

1. A surgical instrument of various forms, used for dilating orifices of the body so as to facilitate examination or operations.
2. A mirror or reflector (of glass or metal) used for some scientific purpose. (“speculum”)

We are all, to varying degrees of intensity and devotion, voyeurs. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud depicts the maximal outlier of these degrees in the “scopophile,” a sexual subject who, finding “pleasure in looking,” becomes perverse insofar as that looking supplants the “normal sexual aim” (23). However, in contrast to the other inventoried “aberrations” avoiding the genital contact of het-

erosex (mouths, asses, feet), Freud includes scopophilia as a “fixation of the preliminary sexual aim” (21). Voyeurism, then, is not one of many possible misdirections of erotic attention toward other objects of affection, but rather a lingering over a sexual relation’s inciting interest—a relational nonstarter.

Perhaps it is this Freudian scopophile that Luchino Visconti had in mind while directing the

# Tiny Asian Female Seeking Analysis: Representation, Aesthetics, and Performativity in Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*

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I have noticed lately the emergence of an idiom as oft-used as it is insidious. It began when I arrived at my workplace and was met with a latte from a managing partner at the company. What I saw as a gracious gesture prompted a different response from my supervisor, a slight unbeknown to its offender, an offhand remark at once jarring and familiar: *he likes pretty Asian girls*. For me—and, surely, many others—this designation and its variants have become routine. We are categorized using a convenient formula, appearance + race + gender, which functions to condense and dismiss us as *pretty Asian girls*, *cute Asian women*, and *tiny Asian females*. In every case, our image precedes our merit.

Asian women's place in the North American lexicon indicates their peripheral existence in male-dominated Westernized societies as "figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate"; "bodies [without] a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" and race; and "images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality all [pointing] to a deficit of power" (Said 63; Butler 13; Ngai 18). Since the Western imperialist lens through which the East is imagined positions the West as "self" and the East as "Other," it follows that the former is the standard by which the latter is measured. Representations of the East are thus restrictive, passive, and non-normative as they exist solely to affirm the superiority of the West. Indeed, always regarded as small—that is to say, inconsequential—Asian women can be seen as the epitome of the cute aesthetic. In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, cultural critic Sianne Ngai contends that "objects already regarded as familiar and unthreat-

ening" bring forth, not only "an aestheticization [of cuteness,] but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (3). The ambivalence with which one objectifies the pretty Asian girl is evident precisely in the word "girl"—frequently used to describe Asian women well into adulthood—which indicates her infantilization and the subsequent need to be controlled. The colloquial preference for "girl" speaks to an Orientalist tradition of fetishization, particularly as it signals a paternalistic relationship between the childlike, Asian object and the powerful, Western subject. Paradoxically, to call someone "cute" is often to offer a compliment with the inference of attractiveness. However, regarding Asian women, what may be attractive to the person deploying the compliment is not the women themselves but the appeal of asserting one's power over them.

1. Cultural critic Edward Said theorizes Orientalism as, "in short, . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," that is, the Eastern world and its constituents (3). Examining the history of Western scholarship, he argues that the Orient is "Europe's . . . cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1). The nature of Orientalism ensures that "European [or Westernized] culture [gains] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3).