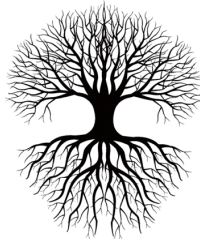


Ree Botts

Ree Botts is a doctoral candidate of African Diaspora Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation centers Black women's healing spaces in Oakland as sites of care and resistance. As a creative writer and arts researcher, this journal invites Ree into an opportunity for deep creative reflection on the nuances of her own healing journey.

Osceola Ward

Osceola Ward is a graduate of the UCLA African American Studies MA (Sustainability Certificate Program), and currently a Bay Area secondary school educator. His research centers the intersections of Blackness, environmental health, and food access, and how these disparities have longterm impacts on Black youth. This journal for him is a call to Black folks for us to reclaim our space in nature in the midst of Black suffering.



a wake work for 2020: on meeting black grief with tenderness

Ree Botts, University of California, Berkeley
reebotts@berkeley.edu

Osceola Ward, Bay View Hunter's Point Adventure Club
osceolaward@gmail.com

To cite this work: Botts, R., & Ward, O. (2020). a wake work for 2020: On meeting black grief with tenderness. *Root Work Journal*, 98-114. <https://doi.org/10.47106/111104774>

To link to this work: <https://doi.org/10.47106/111104774>

a wake work for 2020: on meeting black grief with tenderness is a call into grief for communities of Black folks working to survive Quarantine 2020. We meditate on what wake work looks and feels like in this particular season of Black suffering, as we grapple with the weight of quotidian Black death and the possibilities for the restoration of sacred Black lives. Using a methodology of reflexive poetics, we paint portraits of intimate ontology, inner worlds, and unraveling. We use repetition as a tool for deep emphasis, and write in and out of I and We statements to illustrate the multitude of voices present within this text - the collective love of we, the individual I, the communal fight of us, and the sacred oneness of Spirit. We work to reimagine our relationship with reading, writing and words in order to reject performative notions of intellect that often divorce us from the intimacy so necessary for engagement with the Black intellectual tradition, particularly the subsets of our tradition that center our imaginaries of fugitivity beyond suffering. We acknowledge that, in order to write care into the wake, we must first center language that makes space for our affective experiences. By refusing the gaze of academia and reclaiming our intimacy to education beyond the project of schooling, we free ourselves up to write creatively, illegibly, and in dissonance. In fact, we see our writing as a fugitive practice in and of itself, one that allows us to reclaim our voices to map out new sites of marronage where we might nestle ourselves up into alternative scapes of freedom.

We, two indigo children birthed into the remnants of 1993, meet each other with tenderness in this wake.

With oldies and love songs and gestures of care. We cultivate love in the wake. We laugh and joke and throw pillows into each other. Do each other's hair and hold each other close. We dance and read and dream and think in intertwining motion. And yet, we struggle to tell truths of the wake. The stories of who we used to be before grief returned us to roots. Who we still are. Who we are triggered to become when the world falls apart. Ugliness. Misfit. Unwhole. The deep wounds of insecurity.

The relentless searching //

We return to our breath in the wake. Make ritual of mourning. Convene beneath sun. Commune amongst moon. See reflections of ourselves in stars. Dip toes into waters. Soak flesh in warm baths of cascarilla and Florida water. Repeat. Retreat to separate rooms. Work to make peace with doom. Heal the best way we know how. Quarantine is the wake, and we write wake work(1) from this place.

We use repetition as a tool for deep emphasis, and write in and out of I and We statements to illustrate the multitude of voices present within this text - the collective love of we, the individual I, the communal fight of us, and the sacred oneness of Spirit. We work to reimagine our relationship with reading, writing and words in order to reject performative notions of intellect that often divorce us from the intimacy so necessary for engagement with the Black intellectual tradition, particularly the subsets of our tradition that center our imaginaries of fugitivity beyond suffering. We acknowledge that, in order to write care into the wake, we must first center language that makes space for our affective experiences. By refusing the gaze of academia and reclaiming our intimacy to education beyond the project of schooling, we free ourselves up to write creatively, illegibly, and in dissonance. In fact, we see our writing as a fugitive practice in and of itself, one that allows us to reclaim our voices to map out new sites of marronage where we might nestle ourselves up into alternative scapes of freedom.

We use grief work as a primary site of reclamation, centering inner child work and ancestor work as tools of fugitivity in the midst of state orchestrated violence. We ask, how does the predicament of Black life produce Black death? What do we, as Black folks who love Black folks, do with the weight of our suffering? How might we see this moment of collective trauma as an invitation into collective grief work? What does grief have to teach us in this season? How do we meet grief with loving tenderness, even as we meet state orchestrated violence with rage? How might we return to ancestral knowing and inner child wisdom to re-member the dismembered body? How do we recognize this struggle for freedom as a cyclical fight with deep roots in other planes, other times, other realms?

We begin with a reflection on the door of no return as the site that produced the condition of Black suffering(3). We move into an interrogation of Black death and the wake. We conclude with a conversation on Black grief and wake work. We write in intimate conversation with Dionne Brand, Christina Sharpe, and Sadiyah Hartman, working to read their texts as invitations into developing a praxis of spiritual restoration in this season.

We believe that mourning has something to teach us about how to survive this world and the next. So, we invest in grief. We insist on re-membering. We write love into the wake. We write care into each hashtagged and non hashtagged name. We write blues into the page with hopes that, in growing comfortable with this pain, the weight of the wounds of Black suffering will not be held in isolation.

We invite you into intimate encounters of love, loss, levity, longing, mourning, and grief. We invite you to celebrate with us that we are still here, holding the sanctity of our lives together, even if just by a thread. We invite you to celebrate yourselves for doing the same.

I. THE DOOR(4), THE SHIP, THE ARK

dream of the door
that is both
a place and a space
a site and a sight
a feeling and a failing
a fleeing and a wailing
a floating out by the sea
a sometimes/ maybe/ never

i dream of this door
and could not bring myself
to knock it down

i am at the door
i see the daughter
of deb morgan
smile in a fluorescent light

we, like boats floating
into the abyss, are
on troubled water
the foundation
of this ship
this ground
we stand on
will crack
wide open
to swallow us
whole.
these ghosts
don't let up.
so we must
move through the door
with sacred intention.

she,
the daughter of ms. morgan,
smiles in the fluorescent light
looks directly into a camera
held by no one
and poses
i try to breathe, deep
try not to shiver
shudder
at the sight of her failure
to recognize the palimpsest
of this site.
the life we live
made possible in death
and my breath/ and my breath
i can't catch it

i go to her
"you are offending me
with your fluorescent light
with your frivolous mood
in this sacred space where
bones and tombs
of the tortured still
churn. turn. mourn.
remember
in yo spirit who you are
where you are what you are
do you not recall the weight
of this water?"

the daughter of deb morgan
does not remember
rolls her eyes
in my opposite direction
does not apologize to ancestors
for blasphemy. refuses
to release the gaze of that lens
"girl, it was never that deep."

she does not see how deep
how deep
how deep this water goes
how deep the veins of
bloodlines flow
how blood and water mix
to make her, to make me.

i plead with her in a language
of palimpsest.
of tide. of wave.
of wind. of wake.
of underpinnings.
the shipwrecked of diaspora.
the impossibility. the never ending.
the lose yo life to gain no place
in the whole wide world.
the lose yo mind and
lose yo soul still tryna make sense
of this madness that made us
blackness.

i plead with her in a language of
the wake. the hold.
where we were kept.
how we were kept.
how we are kept
still, in the hold.
put on hold.
hindered. splintered
in the vines of us. vacant lot
our home. thrown. bought. sold.
still.

.
this door the site
of surrender. of no choice.

this door a marker
between here and there
this liminal space
unsteady. unstable
this door to dungeon
she wanna call castle
she wanna be royal
so bad
she take pictures to pretend
she reclaims a throne
she was never on

this door, solid wood,
splinter her finger
this wood, solid wood, will
force her into wonder about origins
she could never pin down

this door made the
crack of her back black.
this door made the crack of the whip
black. what of this space to reclaim?

we be
the people that the door made
we be
the descendant of unknown slave
we who learned language
of throat choked song to sing
back to black
before it was a color of skin
we who seek to know
we who can't sleep with unknowing
we unsettled
we who stopped seeking
long before those battle wounds
we who gave up
gave in

we who still live
still linger
in the life after the life
of chattel slavery
we who work to salvage
what is left of us
we who demand
we who do not
we all still know
this shit ain't ova

the daughter of deb morgan
stares at me sideways
and i wonder who wronged her
she looks as if it is me
me who tell lies
me who spew a tale of
a time she does not know
me who assert that the time she claims she does not know
is now.

is now.

is now.

she lives in it
breathes in it
it is what her body knows
the poetic of her bend
the trend. the trace of her navel.
the slight curve of hip.
the pain at every joint of her rib
the internal site of mourning
she never let herself know
the backstage, the show
it is a father's violent grip of a black girl's twist
it is the cry of freedom's daughter

*don't you know, chile,
whose grandbaby you are?
don't yo spirit remember?*

.
still, she poses
for the light of fluorescent lens
like no spirits live
here
like haunting does not happen here
like pain and suffering
do not have to be felt
like favor, like joy
is the start and the end

.
suddenly
the ship
beneath the door
where she poses
the ship
beneath the door
where i preach
plunges into sea
suddenly
waves whip
turn us in
to the deep
suddenly
the dead demand
she learn
what time it is

the daughter of deb morgan
frantically yells over crashing dusk
"what have you done
with the door? the ship?"
it is dark. the light of the lens

has been broken.
 "why are you moving this ship?
 stop moving this ship!"
 i am silent
 awe struck by how spirits move
 yet unsurprised
 "it's not me girl.."

ancestors
 motion for us to feel this
 to heal this wound
 to hold this gape
 this hole
 this whole fucking chunk of a world
 falling into us
 crashing into the bare of our bones
bleeding out the pore of our skin
if you will not pour libation
 you will be sunken in
 the choir repeats the spell
 we smell blood we do not see
 we crash into sea
 we watch ship sink deep
 just me and the daughter of deb morgan
 whose mother never made her remember.

There is a balm in Gilead. Gilead bursts inside of me. My grandmother is suddenly here and I am riding an ark beside her. This is not a drill. This is not a dream. This is an opening up, an invitation into an elsewhere my eyes have yet to see, a curation of a new door, a decision to enter. This is a labor of liberation, a tale of treacherous endeavor. I do not know how far this ship will go but I trust the anchor of the wind. I bring along my kin. We float to a world that will lead us beyond the rubble of here.

. ///

Our home becomes a boat, a floating of selves from there to here. Our home becomes a ship. A rift in the tide. A transport from one end of the world to the next. Our home becomes an ark. A moving container of holy energies. An invitation into knowing self beyond flesh. A meeting of self as the site at which higher power convenes with spirit. An invitation into the rupturing of false selves inside us. We feel the weight of the transport. The sea sick. The sea is sick. The water contaminated. All seventy percent. This intake of illness is killing us. We work

to cleanse. Our interiors fragile like loose ends. We travel into our home, into our own. We witness the spiritual movement inward. Deeper into the depths of us. The sea has roots. The sea grows deeper into its soil. We sink. We drown. We come back up alive, anew. Shed shit that never served us. Wipe down skin. Get that shit up off us.

Step into tub with cracked egg white and rosehip water. Lavender bath salts and coconut oils. Lather wounds. Be still. Be slow. Be calm. Listen to Tasha(5) and her love for the moon. The music that soothes. SOL Development(6) and not wanting to be alone. All the songs that soothe us. Ancestral Recall(7). Trumpets and horns and djembe drum. The music that returns us to self.

. ///

In what direction might we travel to take us from here to there? With what compass? With what care? What catastrophe warrants Black death? And what celebration? Every single one. We have become more comfortable with the Kalunga Line than any other lineage of the socially dead(8). We live life alongside the Kalunga line, the veil is between Black life and Black death. The thinning of the veil between Black life and Black death dares us to slip into it. Dares us to see how the “past that is never really past returns always to disrupt the present.(9)” How death is ever present in our dealings. How heavy a weight we carry, how cancerous this load. How dare we pretend that every body dropped and sold ain't still etched into the skin of us. How dare we act like life was ever not a luxury. This was not never meant to be life. But we make it. We make it over and over and over again. With our own compass. Our own architecture and lens. Lending a lofty dream to a hope that unravels every time. Too tender a heart to accept the truth about where we stand. Where we lay. How we lay. How we wake each day and make these beds we are forced to call our own.

II. BLACK DEATH & THE WAKE

We who know Black death intimately. Who feel it creep up in our bones. Who battle it daily. It's ever pervasive lingering. In the thought of suicide. In the idle time. The torturous midnights. The stillness. When one does not wish to be alone. When one wishes to get lost in the lingering of another. We who know Black death like a dearly dilapidated enemy. Some days a friend, some days a foe. We who befriend the darkness to see if we were worthy of the route from here to there. Worthy of the journey into the root of the self, the root of the ground, the gutted concrete and cobble stoned ghost heads haunting that reveal themselves at dusk(10). We who wonder whether or not a fight for life is worth it. Whose ancestors remind us that we must stay until it is our time. We are summoned into realms unseeable to most. We know secrets the secrets themselves into wind. We hover over hauntings. We waste time frolicking in other skins, only to return to what we know to be most true. What lies beneath this flesh, beyond these starried eyes.

Every Black Death is a state sanctioned death. Black social death.

Black spirit death.

Black death of flesh.

Every Black Death is a state orchestrated death.

CoronaVirus

Cop Killings

Cancers

Quarantine

Isolation

No circulation of blood

Panic. Manic depressive

Desire for darkness

Desire for the end of this world

The end of this suffering

Every Black Death is a state sanctioned death.

Because the conditions of our Black waking lives
require the persistence of death.

Everyday something is dying.

We “celebrate.. that everyday something has tried to kill [us].. and has failed.(11)” Yet, something inside a Black self dies five thousand times each day. Stakes to claim a place as yo own. Home. Humor. Humanity. Something inside Black life has died every single day. Death by fear. Fear of fatality. Fear of who is next. Fear of calculations that add up to our death.(12) Calculating each family member's last doctor's visit and wondering who will be next. Calculating each trauma charge and wondering who will break next. Be behind bars next. Be shot four hundred times next. Be the target of four hundred years later next. We imagine we have power over the numbers. Imagine our lives are worth something. Worth calculation. One hundred thousand lives lost. Disproportionately our own. For every Black Death, four hundred years rumble. Four thousand lives crumble. Four hundred families face fatality. Four hundred cries go unheard.

Every Black death has the same cause. Cause of death? The impossibility of Black life. Cause of death? The implausibility of Black living. Each death compiles the next. Each lifeless body piled on top of the next. Black life itself a grave site. Every Black life is taken by the same thing. The encroachment upon our Black lives. The compilation of precarity. The knowing that we could go from anything. That the things that could kill us continue to expand. The enclosures we are forced into produce this wake. The world around us seeps into wake. The concrete. The refusal of breath.

Rest in power to all the spirits whose bodies exited this realm in this season. In the season before this and the season before that. Chynna Rogers. Overdose. Aunt Stacy. Cancer. Aunt Ruth. CoronaVirus. Every Black death piles upon the next. Cause of death? State sanctioned refusal of Black life. A lifelong battle of telomeres. A life long shrinking of selfhood. A whole entire life of fighting. From the womb you are cursed and you know it. Birthed into the bareness of Blackness. The vulnerability of it. The impossibility of it. The implausibility

of it. Rest in power to the babies who knew it was not safe to come out into the world from Black wombs. To the Black mothers who died birthing Black babies. Black mortality normalized from infancy. Infant mortality. Rest in peace Kamaiu Sol. Baby Bailey Girl. Rest in peace Brother.

Recon with the source. The sickness at the core.

Black Death looms in the air we breathe. Black Death haunts like haints in concrete. Black Death determined Black life. Is ever present in Black living. Is the calculus of survival. How many days took away and added back would equal free? How many lives lost sacred ancestors killin white supremacy in another realm?

Every encounter with whiteness kills Black blood cells. Shrinks telomeres. Every face off with death kills something in our sea, something at the root. Even when we survive one thousand times. Something deep within us dies.

How do we revive it?

Black folks force Black life into the wake. Wake work. Work to wedge a parceled self into the wake. Work to fumble fragmented pieces of a Black self together to curate a body that feels like home. A self that resembles care. Stumble upon a piece of a self and wonder whether or not it is good enough to build a foundation for a life. And somehow we do. Somehow we always manage to. Root work. Revolutionary. Healing from the root. The source. The core.

This season, an invitation into the grief we have always known. A national exacerbation of our generations old heartache. A world wide reckoning with the precarity we have been forced to call home. A persistent refusal to name this the wake. This, death after life. This life we had never had the chance to live. Black life be Black death at ever corner. At every turn. Get well soon Ula. Get well soon Auntie Cherrie. Get well soon Daddy. Get well soon Mama. We be so used to being unwell. So used to the lingering of our loved ones being unwell. Not having what we need to be well. Space. Time. Freedom. Independence. Unreliance on a system that seeks to kill us. How do we be well in the wake? How do we get well in the belly of the beast?

. ///

Since our sojourn to the wilds of the Americas, we have lost a great deal of ourselves. This loss continues to haunt my genealogy, my family tree. In trying to heal and grieve, there is a long line of ancestors whose names have been lost in transition, migration, through marriage, through enslavement and incarceration. It has deeply severed my connection to them. So it's an imagined grieving. It's a generalized Black pain that is tied to a mythical genealogy that stretches back to a pride in some distant nation in West Africa that I will never have a name for, will never have claims to. In times, we try to fill that gap with hope. To feel that distance as a richly productive longing. Yet, if we had a time machine, the truth is we would not know what time to go to or what place to trace. Like Hartman, who arrives in the dusted planes of the place once named Gold Coast, searching to find nothing but loss and emptied space. Gutted out scapes of what once was, who once called these tombstones home. No answers to the where or when. Just loss. Suffering. Pain. Unknown. Impossibility.

In this season, I am trying to reclaim my self. A deep love for myself and for every self that has informed the self I have become. A love for every name I know and every name I do not. A person dies only when their name ceases to be spoken. We live within a system that requires forgetting. Yet, I insist on remembering. I remember my self and my past through the will to know Spirit on my own terms, to learn from nature how to love more humbly, to witness the cyclical motion of water and wave and to recognize myself as an extension.

III. BLACK GRIEF & WAKE WORK

Everything requires tending. The land, the love, the self. Just as fires break when woods are left untended, so too does the soil shatter when roots are disregarded. A thing only becomes wild once it is forgotten. I insist on remembering.

. ///

To grieve is to mourn a loss. The loss of life, the death of something. Every sixty seconds a Black life is grieved. Every minute of every hour of every day we are grieving something. The death of a loved one. The death of our own spirits. Grieving the childhoods that we're lost in the wake. Grieving the deaths we know will come. Grieving the pieces of our self we still cling to.

This season has called us into a season of collective grief. Invited into a collective grief in this moment. To go deeper and deeper into ourselves. To get lost within our own interiors. To reckon with the encroaching of death and the decision to know the capaciousness of life more fluidly. The many spaces it exists. Grief work that tends to the tattered soul. That holds the holes of the murdered spirit and tends to you with a promise of restoration. Revival. Resurrection. Grief work is the process of contending with that sadness, that ever present presence of despair. It is facing the haunting, the horror. It is to view grief as medicine. To recognize what it cures us from.

We grieve the little boy child bused from East Palo Alto to Pali. The little girl child bused from College Park to Sandy Springs. The bus as the ship. The bus as the vehicle that transport Black childhood from the urban to the suburban, the communal to the performative, a Black Self to be loved versus a Black body to be gazed upon. To be tortured and talked down to. A Black boy and a Black girl take two separate buses in 1999. Worlds apart, we were told to travel from our world to theirs, to get what our people could not give us. Access to better life outcomes. More chance of success. No one ever speaks of what we lost. What died inside us every morning as we step two feet in front of the other onto that big yellow bus, that big yellow ship, that took us towards the plantation.

As children, we were never granted the privilege of grief. As adults, we draw stick figures of flying arcs that will redeem us. Arcs that take us from the milieu of Black suffering, at the school site, on the corner, in the home, and drops us off in the Afro future. Here is where we dare to dream.

What are you grieving in this moment? What loss?

What wake?

What memories haunt you in this moment?

We map grief into the body. Notice where it hurts. Notice where the body stores grief. Like excess flesh on bones. Hold our own flesh when tears fall like foreign raindrops down a spine. Sip sparkling cider and find some shit to toast to, like being alive.

The body becomes an arc. A sacred site of convening for each piece of the self that was lost. A locale from which one might travel deeper into one's own interior. The body shrinks itself into childhood. Becomes physically small. Reminds the adult child of the terror he survived. Reminds the grieving girl of the horrors she must still heal from.

How do we grieve the ongoing sites of terror that have mapped themselves onto our bodies? The fear, anxiety of death, the depths of pain we have yet to uncover? How do we mourn the weight of our weariness, the predicament of Blackness we were birthed into and it's lasting, ongoing, compilation of griefs? Illness. Loss. Instability. Insecurity. Poverty. Spiritual terror. Tremors. Dimed light. Darkness. Disposability.

. ///

Spirit communicates through sensory stimulation. Receipt of resonance requires presence. Patience. Expanded capacity to feel, see, hear, taste. I open myself up to experience divine in all of my senses. I witness limitlessness in the bones beneath my skin and withhold nothing. Recovery is making peace with transition.

Watching birds. Witnessing the intricacy of their movement. Recognizing glimpses of my own flight in theirs. Feeling the frailty of my wings. Wondering how they maintain strength in theirs. Finding inspiration to fly from them. To escape. To embody marronage. To become fugitive. To be a part of growth beyond myself. Growth of tree. Of bird. Of sea. Of plant. Of root. Growth of God-like lotus and sunflower. To witness the unwavering love of the life giving force of Creator.

I shift my fear of death. From a fear of hell to an embrace of convening with celebrator ancestors. A veneration of those across Kalunga lines. Those whose spirits grace alternate planes. I see death as a deeper invitation into connection with those who continue to fight for me.

. ///

We insist on loving in the wake. Lean into each other in the wake. Find tenderness in the intimacy of each other as the world crashes down around us. Invite each other into heart space. Refuse the performance of put together. We fall apart. In front of each other. Behind closed doors. Dig deep into the wounds of the warriors we were taught to become. Work to redefine healing for ourselves. Life for ourselves. Grief and mourning and wake work, for ourselves. What does it mean to mourn in love? To let yourself linger like death in the lifelessness of old halls, of buildings you used to frequent, of spaces you once knew as your own? What does it mean to know you will never own nothing. To relinquish that desire to own. To simply steward. To steward the

land. The sand. The walls within which you live. To let life be lived alongside death. To not fear it. To face it with brave indignation. To declare that Black life is worth living. To sink into that.

How we heal. How we schedule Zoom calls in rainfall. How we convene in the wake. Make freedom in the wake. Make a bop to bump out yo speakers. Make a lil two step. Make a lil love. Make life. Look at the love we made. In the wake. The pleasure we found in the midst of the fight.

REFERENCES

- (1) Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press. Duke University Press. 2016. (7)
- (2) Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press. Duke University Press. 2016. (7)
- (3) Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Vintage Canada Press. 2002.
- (4) Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Vintage Canada Press. 2002.
- (5) Tasha. *Alone at Last*. 2018.
- (6) SOL of Black Folks. *SOL Development*. 2018.
- (7) Christian Scott. *Ancestral Recall*. 2019.
- (8) Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press. Duke University Press. 2016. (17)
- (9) Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press. Duke University Press. 2016. (17)
- (10) Smith, Christen. *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence and Performance in Brazil*. University of Illinois Press. 2016.
- (11) Clifton, Lucille. "won't you celebrate with me" from *Book of Light*. Copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton.
- (12) Katherine McKittrick. "Mathematics Black Life." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, pp. 16–28. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.44.2.0016. Accessed 13 June 2020.