Ashunda Norris

I am Ashunda. A country Black girl who loves the ocean, obscure cinema and the star Sirius. Born and raised in the heart of rural, red clay Georgia, my art and mind space imagines Black futures, Black fugitivity and Black womxnhood as a freedom site. I believe in myth and the root as healing. I am a Black feminist, filmmaker, poet, intellectual, arkivist and teacher who enthusiastically answered the journal's Call to share my work with already free, trying to be free, bout to be free, getting to be free, staying free Black folk.

Praise House

coltrane's
dearly beloved
take 1 sax on sun
lodges every full moon
arthur jafa's practice sun ra's
audacity ms. e badu's mothering
cannabis in adequate doses maat's feather
aunties girlfriends wine in tuscany cornel west's
dance moves knowing zora neale hurston is a filmmaker
jhwanda singing now behold the lamb the precious lamb of
god the breath i take after telling donnell i'm leaving him for good
bruschetta in florence people of the stars sekhmet mighty fire flamed
one a slick camera angle on a Black body love jones on a loop miles davis
jacqueline playing tf outta marcus carrie mae weems' voice frank ocean when he
sang let go of a prayer for you just a sweet word the table is prepared for you the
blues georgia country clay muddy waters' moan the way blk womxn give
compliments : COME ON HAIR! denzel as easy rawlins as 'lonzo harris
as malcolm x sheen shine in james brown's afro the clark sisters pam grier
as anyone most of all herself ike & tina turner revue conjure man bishop
c.h. mason grandma's porch grandma's orange maverick speeding to dairy
queen grandma's hugs grandma's t.v. on her stories grandma's grandma
coretta's you hittin my spot plea nailing first chair clarinet korryn gaines'
resistance dogon tribe of mali yeshua flipping that table over at the temple
cleanse nikki giovanni's read of jimmie baldwin djibril diop mambety's
cinema yellow mary's return home octavia butler's prophesying celie &
shug saidyia hartman's theories fred moten in conversation beloved's rage

Black Women's Avant-Garde Poetics: Politics, Creative Survival & the Afro Surreal

"What good do your words do if they can't understand you/Don't go talkin' that shit Badu, Badu" …&
On –Erykah Badu, Mama's Gun

In this analysis, I strive to create a way to see Black Women's avant-garde poetics as creative survival with an emphasis on the Black female body as spectacle, an inherently political notion, in a quest to name Afro-surrealism as the lens from which to view the work itself. I aim to highlight, build from and focus on the experimental poetry of Black women which has been marginalized in the canon. Unlike a great deal of scholarship on Black experimental poetics, this reading will not focus on the lack of inclusion in a colonized canon, but instead, will delve into the notion that Black women's avant-garde poetics are, of themselves, the canon. An argument shall be made that the existence of Black women's avant-garde poetics is a decolonization, a *transmuting of language*. This study shall provide a way to see how *afro surrealist poetics* decenters colonized language and combats madness with an analysis that leaves room for th ancestral lineage to continue. An exploration of poems, politics and poetics of where I see my own work belonging in the tradition.

To gain an adequate understanding of the analysis which shall be presented here, one must explore the conception of afro-surrealism as poetics, an aesthetic of its own merit. What of the term afro-surrealism? There are several definitions offered by various theorists. According to D. Scott Miller, famed poet and scholar Amiri Baraka used the term in his writings about the works of Henry Dumas, a prolific writer in his own right. Baraka noted that Dumas perfected a "skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one… the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life." It is important to note here that the definition of the Black Aesthetic has been challenged by scholars as an incomplete one, namely by prolific poet Evie Shockley, the subject of this study, who notes in her text *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* that we must consider the term black aesthetics in plural form which she defines as a "multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies" that Black writers can use "to negotiate gaps or conflicts" between the writing itself and how race operates within that creation (8). These writers, according to Shockley, must be "actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society" (8). Shockley also

states that the poets she focuses on are those who "raise explicit issues of gender" and those not closely associated with the African American poetry canon as we know it, namely Black women poets who play with, reinvent and conjure new forms.

Miller's "Afro-Surreal Manifesto" also includes Leopold Senghor's definition that claims "African surrealism is mystical and metaphorical." According to Miller himself, the "afro surreal is necessary to transform how we see things now, how we look at what happened then, and what we can expect to see in the future." He also notes that the "afro surreal aesthetic addresses lost legacies and reclaims the souls of our cities, it "revisit(s) old ways with new eyes," and argues "Afro surrealists use excess as the only legitimate means of subversion and hybridization as a form of disobedience… distort reality for emotional impact." Essentially, an aspect afro surrealism names the everyday lived experience of Black people as surreal and therefore, art is created in a way to illuminate how the past revisits the present. If the past can be readdressed and even haunts us, how do we invoke the experience of such a life? What of the past needs reminders of our present and eventual future? What semblances from past lives occur in present, everyday life? How can this idea be applied to poetics?

According to Robin D.G. Kelly, author of *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, who argues that African influence on surrealism began to occur as early as 1924, surrealism's grounding in poetry, "in the *practice* of poetry as a way of life and, indeed, a social force –is directly related to it's openly revolutionary position" (6). Both Shockley and M. NourbeSe Philip's works can be seen as a positioning of social force, a survival of sorts, a creative healing, a notion of what I call afro surreal poetics. The revolutionary aspect Kelly speaks of is in the way the Philip and Shockley pull aspects from the past, reclaims the Black female body, normally viewed as a harsh spectacle and becomes one of the Black woman's own doing, a controlling image maintained by the dominance of self. Philip is also preoccupied with challenging language and her work delineates any narrative around Black women's bodies as political. For if the language, in this case, English, has been used to subjugate, it must certainly fail those who have been oppressed by it.

For Kelly, the early surrealists, rebelled against "all forms of oppressive authority and conformity" while also being concerned "with the individual, the inner self, the life of the mind, the world of dreams and chance encounters (8). It is in this text that Kelly mentions Philip Lamantia as one who named it "surrealist Afrocentrism," essentially an "underground" tradition. Kelly himself names members of this vanguard group as *Black surrealists*. Much of the appeal of

Surrealism, notes Kelly, to Black writers "was being able to find the language to experience and express the absurdity of being Black. It's absurd" (Miller 2017). I argue against this notion and assert that the absurdity is not being Black, but the framing of a Black body within the context of whiteness, constant attacks on such a body, specifically the Black female body, is where the inanity lies. As we know, Blackness as a lived experience varies within the Diaspora. Globally, it has been under ceaseless assault and emerges in a limited canon as an *other,* a misunderstood spectacle under the gaze of whiteness. Black bodies in any colonized space are subjected to nonsensical even grotesque limitations. The absurdness of white supremacy is the notion that the writers of this analysis seek to reveal. It should be noted that Kelly's definitions of the afro surreal, although useful in some instances, are limiting in others, especially in regards to the poetics of Black women. I offer that *afro surreal poetics* not only reveal the absurdities of whiteness, but also build a world in which the Black female body as spectacle is dominant, has always been dominant and poses itself as threatening in the power it offers self and those within reach of such a body.

How do poets contend with the absurdity of being Black under white scrutiny? How does a Black woman poet write of such a notion? We can examine the work of Claudia Rankine's Citizen which reveals the absurdity of the white gaze through an excerpt about how Serena Williams' Black body is seen as a spectacle and used as a foil in an attempt to undo her under intense public media scrutiny. Rankine surveys the policing of Williams' body, actions and speech over the span of eight years, 2004- 2012 during her illustrious, unprecedented career. In the text, speaker poses the question: "What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like?" and uses Zora Neale Hurston's assertion, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" to dissect how Williams' Blackness in a full Black body is not directly commented on but also commented on in every context. In the poem, Serena is at the U.S. Open in 2009 playing Kim Clijsters when the chair umpire blatantly cheats and Serena demonstrates an understandable rage. Speaker of the poem notes, "As offensive as her outburst is, it is difficult not to applaud her for reacting immediately to being thrown against a sharp white background. It is difficult not to applaud her for existing in the moment, for fighting crazily against the so-called wrongness of her body's positioning at the service line." Not only is Serena's body constantly on display, under microscopic scrutiny, but she loses the power of her own frame when it becomes a display under a colonized gaze. What other way can Serena battle it but through rage and extraordinary athleticism. What Rankine has reiterated is that Serena's woman body wrapped in Blackness is a fixed site of colonial

power if said authority is actually worthy of the attention it demands. In other words, Serena's body's warfare with those who deem it problematic can only be undone by her unwillingness to harness rage. As a Black woman living a contemporary America, this proves to be a near impossibility. Rankine closes the poem by placing attention on the whiteness of Caroline Wozniacki and her making fun of Williams by stuffing her top and shorts with tissue. The irony in the last lines spills forth: "At last, in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki's image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time." and indicates that stereotypes are fine, funny even, perhaps accepted when the body unearths Black and becomes white. This section of Rankine's text is part of a larger narrative in which speaker's identity is revealed through the racialized dynamics in which she has to live.

The most useful and fitting theoretical writings on surrealism is that of scholar Suzanne Césaire. According to Césaire, who was a leading theorist on surrealism in the Caribbean, the surreal is linked to what is revolutionary. Césaire viewed surrealism as a means to gain cultural liberation and negate colonist propaganda. That is, she argues in her essay "Surrealism and Us" that to be free, the Black mind must rid itself of the need to "mimic" its colonizers and look to surrealism as it "assigns itself the goal of exploring and expressing the forbidden zones of the human mind" (34). The "surrealist cause" Césaire asserts, "in art, as in life, is the cause itself of freedom" and notes that surrealism "is living, intensely, magnificently, having found and perfected a method of inquiry of immeasurable efficacy" (35, 37). What's notable about Césaire's argument is the quest for true liberation and her insistence that surrealism is a "tightrope of our hope" (38). Of surrealism, Césaire writes:

> Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals...Our surrealism will supply his rising people with a punch from its very depths. Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid antinomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages--at last rediscovering the magic power of the mahoulis, drawn directly from living sources. Colonial idiocy will be purified in the welder's blue flame" (37-38).

Can surrealism become what a Black body and mind need it to be? Certainly, if the dynamics of an afro surreal poetics lends itself to not only an exploration of what Césaire calls "ancestral

anxiety" but also a quest for what I refer to as *transmuting language*. As *trans* refers to change, the *mute* or *mutation* signals an alteration in form in which the appearance changes, especially to a higher form. I argue that the English language itself is not enough, becomes a failure as is in the hands of a Black Woman poet. Because it's a recycled, forced, colonized language, English cannot serve the needs of one in which it has been used to subjugate. The language must be altered to fit the needs of a Black mind, specifically a Black female mind. What the Black womanmpoet must do with an unfit language is to transmute it to a form which can serve the needs of such eloquence. How does a Black female body and mind free itself from the colonial gaze? What language must be used to do so? How does a poet manipulate a language to illuminate the chains placed on her body and mind? She *transmutes language*. Afro surreal poetics of Black women are preoccupied with first and foremost the Black female body and a "freed image," embracing the bizarre, subverting the expected and colonized, "fucking with language," and innovative poetic forms.

One such poet, M. NourbeSe Philip who is also a scholar and theorist, almost always concludes her collections with notes about how the text came to be. Specifically, in the afterword for *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks,* (herein shall be referred to as *She Tries Her Tongue*) Philip introduces what she calls the "i-mage." According to Philip, what the African in the new world must do is seek to create in her own "i-mage" and argues that "it is impossible for any language that inherently denies the essential humanity of any group or people to be truly capable of giving voice the i-mages of experiences of that group without tremendous and fundamental changes within the language itself" (82). What must be done instead, Philip asserts, for such a writer is to be "consciously restructuring, reshaping, and if necessary, destroying the language" (87). If a language in a colonial society has, does, will and can dehumanize a people, a writer can and must explore the ways a Black body has been subjugated due to said language and break free of such literary chains. Philip's notes that her goal with *She Tries Her Tongue* was to "decenter language," and I argue that she has certainly done so with both S*he Tries Her Tongue* and *Zong!* as well is to *transmute language*.

Where the transmuting of language is most evident is in Philip's collection *She Tries Her Tongue*, as in the poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language." The poem is a feat in form, language use, use of white page space and a challenge against the use of English as a mother tongue. I see the poem in five distinct voices; a storytelling voice, poet voice, authoritative/legal voice, scholar voice and knowledgeable voice. The voices can be seen as battle against each other for space on the page though each of them make a distinction about what the language

and use of a "mother/father tongue" does. Philip has left it up to the reader to determine which voice she is led to read first. In any order, the challenge against one true language and form is evident. The storytelling aspect is presented in all caps. The new born gains its true voice through the mother tongue. In the poet voice aspect of the poem, it is formulated in four distinct stanzas in which at first, the English is revealed to be both the mother and father tongue as declarative and then in the third stanza, it becomes a questioning. In the first two stanzas, the word "language" emerges as "anguish" in the poet's hands, and this word play signals that language perhaps is not logical, hence the need for a discourse. In the third stanza where the inquiry occurs, the speaker declares, "What is my mother/tongue/my mammy tongue/my mummy tongue/my momsy tongue/my modder tongue/my ma tongue?" and here the repetition of tongue along with the differed names for mother indicate a distinguishable yet familiarity across times and languages of the Diaspora. In the fourth stanza, the speaker declares, "I have no mother/tongue/no mother to tongue/no tongue to mother/to mother/tongue/me" and again, the repetition is effective as the speaker is insistent on mothering self, giving self through a tongue, a language that becomes one's own.

The authoritative/legal voice under *EDICT I* can be viewed as that of the colonizer, the slave owner seeking to dominate and control the tongues of those he owns. What's notable about this voice in this portion of the poem is that it does not, as perhaps expected, dominate the text. The edit is an aside, literally shoved to the far right corner of the page. On a single page, Philip has given us a mother and newborn child being licked clean, a speaker's dilemma with the idea of a mother tongue and a slave owner attempting to control the communication and language of those he owns. The effect of this poetic choice is that of a seemingly deliberate chaos channeled into an actual discourse which can resemble a debate. The voices debate each other and defy each other for space on the page. The scholar voice which appears on the next page is formatted in three distinct paragraphs in which speaker reveals the pseudo science behind the so-called lack of intelligent on the part of "women, Blacks and other peoples of colour." Giving this racialized science a voice juxtaposed with the voices that represses on the previous page further reveals its attempt at becoming a truth, but essentially fails.

The second half of the poem on the next two pages are again in the same voices which is a shift in the poem's dynamic with the appearance of a knowledgeable voice. The storytelling aspect of the poem notes a speaker who narrates a mother literally giving voice via her tongue as it blows into the child's mouth, providing her with a language of ancestral mothers. This is a formation of a new language derived from the foremothers who have risked death for

even speaking it. The poet voice is now in two stanzas and uses repetition and word play to indicate that the English language is an agonizing one for the text reads, "is a foreign lan lan lang/language/ l/anguish/anguish/a foreign anguish/is english another tongue/my mother." The poem continues in the second stanza, "with the tongue of your/lan lan lang/language/l/anguish/ anguish/english/is a foreign anguish" which denotes the speaker as lamentable for *EDICT II* demands that the tongue speaking its native language, "the offending organ" be removed and displayed for all others to see. As the edict attempts to rip the tongue of its native instinct, the mother of the storytelling breaths a mother tongue into her daughter. This creates a battle for true language on the page and the ultimate winner is that of Philip's ability to transmute it.

The final portion of the poem, the knowledgeable voice, encloses the poem. What Philip has done here is borrow from testing formats and provides various questions and multiple choices that signal the inability to actually choose. The insistence on the poet to include what is usually not thought of as poetry and make it so is a tenant of *afro surreal poetics*. For the language is forced to bend to fit the poem, not the poem twisting to fit the language. For instance, the first "question" reads, "A tapering, blunt tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy organ describes/ (a) the penis./(b) the tongue./(c) neither of the above./(d) both of the above." Here the tone of the poem shifts to one of all knowing. Almost as if the speaker knows all of the answers and understands that any answer is a correct one. The tongue, both oppressed and a site of oppression as indicated by the voice of the enslaved and the slaver, becomes entrapped in confines of an answer, an impossible choice to be made. Here, the knowledgeable discourse offers no salve to the affliction of one tortured to speak a new language or be "severely punished" for choosing otherwise. In the final aspect of this poem, Philip has created a new form in which to engage for Shockely has produced pieces in the same vein. Here then, the ancestral lineage is transparent and allows for room in the canon for this type of poetic work to expand. One Black woman poet begets another.

In an interview with Kate Eichhorn for *The Elder Series*, Philip elucidates on how she conceived of "Discourse on the Logic of Language," For Philip feels "this sense of utter foreignness in what is supposed to be my mother tongue" (16). While writing the book, Philip felt she "actually taste the foreignness of these words" and shares with Eichhorn that she "can't apply profound theoretical language to it," but can explain the intense feeling behind it. Philip is preoccupied with how English feels not her own even as she works so flawlessly with words in her poetics. What emerges is a confident text in its ability to reveal the unwholesomeness of

language, specifically English. A notable aspect of this interview is when Philip shares that her poetic practice is informed by spirituality, but in a way that is deeply ritualistic, sacred, steeped in a practice and not at all aimless or random. Philip also engages in the idea that *She Tries her Tongue…* is specifically a Caribbean and post colonial text though a great deal of people did not understand it to be. Philip's writing is a revealing but also a discovery of what's been concealed about the African and her lived experience across borders. The poems create a survival within text, unsilencing voices muffled for centuries as she does with her latest collection *Zong*!

The poems of *Zong*! are a reimagining of the the murder of 150 Africans by drowning so the captain of the Zong ship could collect insurance monies off the dead bodies. The text itself is an anti-narrative, a rewriting of history which erased the lives, stories, and memories of those murdered. Philip provides the dead, through text, with voice, though fractured and incomplete. The ways the words line the pages of the text indicate as much. The appearance of "zong #" without actual numbers behind it used as titles signals a lessening of language as numbers appeared in previous poems of the text. As the text relies entirely on the legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*, Philip takes a language and decolonizes it by virtue of ripping the text into pieces. In Philip's hands, the original court document is murdered, spread out, as if a splayed Black body which has been forced to surrender to the sea. The text begins with what we can see as formatted poems that splatter across the page and eventually fades out, nearly disappearing.

In the interview with Eichhorn, Philip notes that with the arrival of her text *Zong!* she finally felt as though she was "fucking with the language" in a way she's craved her entire life. For the first time, she "had her own language. True it's fragmented and broken, but it is my own tongue. This totally ruptured, fragmented, dissonant language that is my mother tongue" (17). In *Zong*! the poems leave spaced unattended and blank with several words lining the page, in fragments as if full sentences hinder the history the language is attempting to retell. Philip states that after a reading of poems from *Zong!*, a woman tells her "she felt the silences created images of water washing up to the shore and washing back" and "another person said the silences conveyed to him a sense of being under water, drowning" (19). The performance of Philip's poems echo the intention displayed on the page and gives prominence to the idea of a Black woman subject of text becoming Black woman subject as spectacle dominating the image in which she arrives to another's consciousness.

Philip's poem "Meditations of the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying

Cheek-bones" innovates form and the way a poem can be read through and between lines preceding and concluding repetitions. The piece is across two pages and appears to be a single stanza, but a second reading indicates the stanzas are separated by limited line space with the first half of the poem on one page lined to the left and the second page eating up more page space. The beginning of the text begins as a language halted with "am I not," "In whose" along with "language" as repeated words floating on the left side of the page. Though there are no question marks, the poem clearly asks "Am I" and seeks an answer in who possesses language, who claims it and who can replicate it. The second half the poem begins the phrase, "Girl with the flying cheek-bones," and declares her whole despite the way her body delivers reactions beyond her control while using the language to demand rightful ownership. The text states: "Woman with the behind that drives men mad/And if not yours/Where is the woman with a nose broad/As her strength/If not in yours/In whose language/Is the man with the full-moon lips/Carrying the midnight of colour/Split by the stars--a smile." The lines slowly descend into themselves with three and no more than four words on a single line which, without any punctuation, makes the lines appear staccato. The poem then extends beyond itself when the line with the word 'moon' appears. As the moon is full lips on the face of a man dark as midnight, this metaphor disseminates stereotypes with the same language used to subject such a body. The poem asks: is the Black body still beautiful in shrouded language and if the words become figurative in its description of beauty, does the aesthetic still stand without hindrance? Between the five lines that repeat "Am I" and "yours" over two lines, the following can be read: "In whose/language/Am I/Beautiful" The answer can be, should be, all, as the speaker notes the "flying cheek-bones" which are keen, high, royal. As cheek bones that are sharp cut, so does the language.

Like her literary foremama, Evie Shockley's poems *transmute language* and question the violence heaped upon Black life, but she also handles the Black female form with care, reclaims the spectacle of the body and questions the validity of its place in previously colonized texts. Take, for instance, her poems in the collection semiautomatic. Specifically, those in the "the topsy suite" which include "studies in antebellum literature (or, topsy-turvy)," "topsy's notes on taxonomy," "topsy talks about her role" and "from topsy in wonderland." The poem "studies in antebellum literature (or topsy-turvy)" is comprised of twelve stanzas of couplets, with twenty four lines peeling back the illusion formulated by 19th century novels which do not include a dominant black figure. Speaker of the text notes: "for comic contrast/some give us black humor:/national relief projected/onto one dark little head,/in turn projecting, in all/directions,

a local choler." In 19th century antebellum texts, the Black body is comical, usually solo and used to contrast the validity or sanctity of whiteness. In other words, a Black body can be seen as the wronged, winged one while whiteness exists unscathed. In this poem, however, the Black body as a righteous, angered entity becomes valid and demanding with the lines: "our language is loaded,/packing heat, a weapon/concealed only, it seems,/from the blissful." Ignorance does not negate atrocities that propagated over centuries. The use of the couplets gives the poem an abruptness that resembles Black anger. The asterisks note the reasons for such anger: "*things that grew/just like topsy: the middle/passage death toll./the black prison/population." The concluding lines of the poem radiate with what has thrived in Blackness despite the violence: "the crop/of negro spirituals. like/crazy. like a weed. like/a motherless child." The enjambment is a commanding, remarkable device employed here that slices through the most devastating effects of a white supremacist regime.

Topsy's emergence in the poem is the release of a Black body from a colonized space. Therefore, Shockely makes quite a revolutionary choice to include the likes of such a figure, who, in the hands of Harriet Beecher Stowe, is conceived as motherless and useless to self, becomes the predominant subject with a voice divergent from genderized, racialized expectations. In this poem, Topsy is the "comic contrast," "the black humor," "the black little head" which causes Black wrath to emerge. As Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tyehimba Jess reminds us, the foundation of the American entertainment industry is steeped in racist, stereotypical images of Black people. Topsy's fate in Stowe's clumsy narrative is no exception as she "never was born" (249). With no parents, no birth, no sense of time, Topsy is simply a grinning, twinkling eyed child, who just "grow'd," (250). The fact that Shockley reclaims Topsy and gives her voice via a series of poems signals a radical notion steeped in the idea of liberation of the Black psyche. An idea linked to the surreal and more specifically the afro surreal. The examination of the title in relation to the poem that follows is revealed to be an indication of what occurs when a Black mind gains strength to question its subjugation for topsy-turvy means to be in a state of utter confusion or disorder; upside down. To shift a Black mind outside the confines of an antebellum text is the assertion and also to interpose the idea of what has been perceived to be antebellum literature as head downward or in a state of murdered chaos.

In "topsy's notes on taxonomy," the language encompasses eight stanzas and twenty-three lines with six tercets and a single couplet landing in the middle of the text. In Stowe's text, Topsy knows nothing, is nothing, realizes nothing without the aid of her masters. In Shockley's text, Topsy emerges as a trickster for in the beginning stanzas, speaker proclaims: "your

thumbs may be opposable (i'm opposed/to being under them) ~ and your communication/may be complex (colored, coded) ~ but the closer/ the ocean gets to cauldron, the more specious/ your classifications be." This is a speaker who vehemently objects to being a monetary commodity, yet coded language, racialized scientific theories and taxonomy keep her caged. The alliteration employed here can be read as a cut, a slice through the supposed language barrier keeping the body fenced. The single couplet in the center of the poem reads: "i'm my master's flesh and blood ~ he tends/to me, to them, as if they were his own (raw-/hide, quick kiss, intimate, hit it)" and this signals the looming threat, constant concern that the Black female body will be pillaged, ravaged upon by slave owners. Historically, the Black female body has been used as a breeding ground, without choice and been forced to engage men who rip their children away without a second thought. The phrase "quick kiss, intimate" notes that the speaker may expect brief notes of immediacy while also understanding her body is money as indicated by the lines, "as tenderly/as if I were legal tender." Though objectified, the speaker again reveals a trickster nature: "o believe me, whippersnapper, i'm whip-/smarter than i look ~ linnaeus' system made/some sense ~ shared characteristics matter ~". Or do they? What Shockley has done here is to illuminate the inner mind of an enslaved body struggling to contend with its supposed fate.

In examining the poet's use of the tilde symbol, which means approximate in mathematical terms, it can be understood that what Shockely is doing with its usage in the poem is to negate or challenge each insistence that the Black female body is unworthy of devotion. Each tilde use is after a declaration by speaker and between pseudo scientific racial language understood to be a truth. Here, in this poem, the only truth is in what Topsy says is valid. The following phrases from the poem: "(i'm opposed to being under them)," "o believe me," "let me put it to you plain," "it ain't cause my plaits're too tight," and "*Man o Man*, you're not my kind" are all declarations, especially in the last line as speaker uses standard English. Speaker can use colonized language to negate a truth and speaker can use decolonized language to do the same. It is the ultimate trickster move and to see it appear in the concluding line of the text is to see that Topsy triumphs as dominant, her body and words her own, even within the confines of a language used to unhinge her body, spirit and mind from itself. Here in the last line, the Black female body is re-centered and even within the looming threat of ownership, a new self emerges to a liberated body.

Shockley further demonstrates a Topsy in control of self as spectacle in the poem "topsy talks about her role" as poet imagines the mischievous child becoming the voice of revolution-

ary Black women. For she gives Topsy the role of audacious and heroic, a fearless personality for contemporary Black women living under tyranny. Shockley makes Topsy irreplaceable, godlike in the life of the Black woman, particularly Sandra Bland, built as an aspect of her psyche determined to live and self governing above all else. Topsy shifts in intimate, telling tones. Speaker notes: "i don't mean to get into their heads' -- i / jes' go. it's like i'm possessed, too: as if/my mind and body aren't my own." In this poem Topsy is arrogant, self assured, the boss bitch who knows that Ms. Bland can truly survive without her sovereignty and yet, she doesn't but dies unlimited and unbonded. As the text states, "this sandra was anything but bland. i/was hooked! i do like to ride a tongue/that's limber, that can keep up with/the flash of my spirit. she had a dancing/mouth, the kind that could give you/warm" and bestows to Topsy a power to quell her fire through a living being. The lines feed us a woman whose loose tongue becomes a warm dance and a fire untamed. Of the two exclamation points used in the poem, the one after 'hooked' is used to declare Topsy's blissful marriage to Sandra's tongue. The enjambment flows from a last line to a beginning line in the next stanza giving the couplets a calm, river bend flow as opposed to the static effusion reminiscent of the form.

The poem achieves status because Topsy becomes an ancestral feat, a wild fantasy come to life in poetic form. This piece employs the use of all lower case letters, in couplet form with twenty-six couplets spread across two pages. The lack of capitalization distinguishes subjects of the poem as vital and worthy of attention. The focus lies in Topsy's achievement as vigorous and potent as indicated in the lines, "but if i hold a sister too long,/not a thing on earth can tether her." and "i know where/ i'm welcome. i was still cutting capers/behind her smile the week she died." The words 'smile' and 'died' appear in the same line and is a coarse use of internal rhyme but effective as grinning and dying are not usually synonymous with each other in such condensed formatting. The use of "i'm welcome." at the beginning of a line in an annunciated tone can serve dual meanings; 'In a: bitch, I'm here. Don't fuck with it' vein and also a 'I'm wanted here by a sister' soul energy vibe. Topsy is a rejuvenation. There is kinship here and recognition of what strengthens Black women when they have been offended by society, men, non Black women, and sometimes, unfortunately each other. As with Shockely's poems included in this exploration, the last lines are impactful: "but when i roll black women's brown eyes, they always turn into sapphires." Think of the so-called attitude and anger Black women are always claimed to carry. Think of the prankish nature, once deemed unacceptable in a previous text, be used here as heartening, deserved, magnified exaltation.

What an impressive poem "from *topsy in wonderland*" is with its artwork by Alison Saar,

the use of classic texts by Lewis Carroll and its ingenious form that expands across six pages. Each stanza is essentially a chapter with, eight in total, brief paragraphs that explain Topsy's original quest for a liberated body and her struggle through worlds that demand she not be.

The Carroll texts of choice include *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The first stanza is six lines with italics, the greater than less than symbols and exaggerated Black dialect as spoken by Topsy. Beneath the first two stanza paragraphs of the poem, Topsy, as imagined by A. Saar, is crouched into the fetal position, one hand on her head, the other holding onto her legs. Topsy's eyes are devoid of color, simply white irises and her plaits streaked about her head like a budding halo. Her dress, which resembles a nightgown is white, the bows on her head are white and her skin is an ash Black. Topsy's face is here is devoid of a smile or grin. Her teeth are hidden by her firmly shut lips and she appears to be in a melancholy state. The first stanza begins with "what are you?" a captain addressing Topsy as "what" and not "who" with Topsy being unsure herself. Unlike the other poems of this analysis, "from topsy in wonderland" presents to us a perturbed Topsy, flustered by her new surroundings for she was herself and "knowed who i was when i got up on my own continent this morning" but is now lost in this preoccupied United States. Unlike Alice, Topsy is forcibly lost. The second stanza, a brief three lines, reveals in an extended metaphor, how Topsy's life mirrors that of a Black woman in America. The language employed in the lines "*are you to get in at all?* said the gatekeeper. t*hat's the first ques-/tion, you know*. it was, no doubt: only topsy did not like to be told so." reveal Topsy's dilemma, for she is to not be loud, not be Black or not be herself to get past the gates. In using Alice as an adjacent character, what Shockley suggests here is that there is a stark difference in the way little Black girls navigate the world constantly seeking adventures and how little white girls find adventures apparently without intense exertion of labor or trouble.

The poem continues on the next page, also accompanied by the artwork of A. Saar. In it, Topsy gazes into a mirror and sees not her Black skin, but a gray, pale white woman staring back at her. Topsy either views herself as white or seeks to be what whiteness demands of her. A white reflection stares back at a Black Topsy with the same plaits, this time splayed over her head in a full halo while she wears the same grim expression on the previous page while also reeking of a longing and loneliness not unfamiliar to women like her. The stanza paragraph on the same page reveals an uglify/beautify binary and a mocking speaker in the poem stating "uglification" as a mathematical equation as fact with a distrustful Topsy questioning her own existence in such a life full of binates. The last line of this stanza cuts: "*if you don't know/ what to uglify is, you are a savage*." To see the image of an insecure Topsy looking at/longing for

a white face alongside these lines is to know that Topsy will know and love herself but not before examining that which causes her pain. Each subsequent stanza paragraph of the poem takes Topsy through the unwelcoming adventure that is navigating white supremacy as a Black woman sure of herself but doubted by those who do not want to or simply refuse to engage her humanity. Following a stanza in which Topsy battles becoming the pawn of a white queen is an image by A. Saar in which Topsy stands before a mirror with boxing gloves on and staring back her is the whitened, hair straightened version of herself also with gloves on and up ready to fight. Topsy is boxing against whiteness for the fight of a realized, free self against the world and societal expectations. Throughout this poem, it's evident that Alice's life and adventures is full of a wonder of exploring gardens and talking to cats while Topsy's is that of chasing freedom, an escapade that become a hindrance without a gifted internalized loved self rejecting the rat race of a life.

In addition to freeing and addressing the life of Black women during the enslavement and reconstruction era, Shockley also redeems contemporary Black women like Shirley Chisholm in the poem "owed to shirley chisholm:" The piece is a sonnet at fourteen lines, four stanzas with a couplet enclosing the poem and with not a single word capitalized. The poems breaths with stunning imagery and pays homage to Chisholm, a deserving candidate. With Shockley's pen, Chisholm is "a woman who ate boulders/ for breakfast, bravely" with "sapphire's tongue, and props for behaving/like a natural woman, a world-shaper,/ who deserved a room--a trust--of her own :" The poem takes on an ode phrasing in outlining what Chisholm is owed via an ode, a praise of her power. The word 'sapphire' stands above the words 'natural' and 'woman' and signals that a woman of Chisholm's stature is as precious as jewels. In first line of the couplet, 'a trust ----of her own : ' lands above 'democracy's throne' and again reveals the connection between two seemingly unlike aspects and joins them across lines to indicate a retelling of what governed bodies can appear to be with a Black woman body in the phantasmic space. In focusing attention on the second stanza, the lines most noticeable are the first two which read, "dreams, unmuted by the sound of rising/dough : yards of respect wrapped round her shoulders," for the there is a loudness to visions. The lines weave to indention and back again while each one singled out a greatness that is in Chisholm. The piece is also an ingenious list poem in which everything due to Shirley Chisholm is catalogued in the form of a sonnet with colons dividing the series of debts. The first stanza begins: "a nation outrageous in its hunger/for heart (not hearts) and enough sun touching/ladders to go around : hearty anger/unquenched by wet (american) (crutching)." At the end of nearly every line, im-

agery is applied, "sun-torching," "hearty anger," with America and its political downfalls at the forefront. Otherwise, the poem would not exist as is, for Ms. Chisholm would be owed nothing. The work of Philip and Shockley can be viewed as a reflection of selves, Black women writing for and to each other across generational and Diasporic borders. What materializes is an objection to a dominant narrative which excludes the specific experiences of women like Topsy, Sandra Bland and scores of unnamed aunts and mothers who seek a tongue in which to carry their lives whole. Through the work, each poet has created a survival, a way to view the world and a way to live in it without succumbing to madness and preconceived notions of self. Black women's work is a commentary on the ways in which our bodies are sometimes not our own and we seek to constantly reclaim and also nurture a creative survival in lived experiences and in art form, specifically, afro surreal poetics. The art of Black women is a form of alchemy, a magical enhancement elevated by the innovation of transmuted language.

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