

ROOT WORK JOURNAL

"The Water (a Series)" - Tafari Meliziswe



NAVIGATING THE OCEAN:
ON THE SURREAL LEGACY OF BLACK LIFE & RESISTANCE IN THE
21ST CENTURY

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ARSIMMER McCOY

Arsimmer McCoy is a 34-year-old poet, storyteller, & Speaker, and the mother to a righteous 10-year old girl child. Born in Baptist Hospital, raised in Richmond Heights, Fl. Arsimmer earned her Bachelor's degree of Arts and literature at the historic Florida Memorial University. Arsimmer gives thanks, for being able to produce work in the form of poetry, short story literature, performance workshops, and creative direction, for over twelve years. McCoy resides in Miami Gardens, Fl which she will still refer to until the day she dies, as Carol City.

Down By The Riverside

"Gonna lay down my burden Down by the riverside Gonna lay down my burden
Down by the riverside I ain't gonna study war no more Study war no more
Ain't gonna study war no more"- Negro Spiritual

Gather your grit.
Remember your training.
Stand steady on the balls of your feet,
then wait.
This is the moment.
We have rivaled with these interlopers
for centuries.
It comes to an end now.
We've agreed to meet
at the water's edge.
Bring The women in to perform the ritual.
Rub bergamot on the daughter's temples.
Ground Geraniums into our son's hands.
Rub the legs and arms down with lemongrass.
Place lavender flowers and eucalyptus into the hair.

Push nickels into the navels of the children.

After the death of our sweet King
the elders say we lost our audacity,
and replace it with reasoning.
Say we were wandering aimlessly.
Forgetting our training.

They took our babies and hung
them from trees for trophies.
Drugged us and left our girls
Sputtering to ghosts on the streets.
Split open our veins and let them
leak.
Just to see how we bleed.
And they saw magic,
Stardust and unknown planets;
Enchantment.
Since then, they have been seeking to end us.
Our survival means their demise.
Now is the time.

Remember your training.

When your mother took you
out to look at the stars and
told you to follow the gourd.
When the pipes froze in the walls,
your uncle wrapped you in sheepskin,
rubbed your dried skin with petroleum,
and told you how he survived the dust bowl;
The black smoke.
Like his grand pap survived the ship bowels,
rollin round in puke and shit.
Threw our Kuba overskirts overboard;
The goats blood from the rite of passage
Hadn't even dried yet on our flesh.
We join hands at the ocean
to call on them.

When yemoja troubled the watwers
she heaved and pushed.
Murky Tsunamis drew back and rolled.
There was an eclipse of that same black smoke.
Iridescent ravens flew from her,
spread their wings, and
kicked up red dust.

When the current comes,
it will take us first.
We the children of Yemoja,
fish children.
When you put your hands
on us,

to drown us,
we bob right back up to the surface,
with hoarse laughter.
We been breathing underwater.
We been wading through rivers.
And this land was all river once before
and it will be
a river again.

Our ancestors sit on the bottom
of the ocean floor waiting.
When the tide washes up
Its them whispering,
Remember your training.

When you separate a people,
destroy their culture,
take their language,
and never atone for it,
and they still find a way to come together,
it is dangerous.

So I say remember Stono,
remember the German Coast,
Chekika and the seminoles.
Remember Turner
Amistad
And the Gold coast warriors.
Soldiers who never forgot who they were.
Slaughtered their captures
and sang to the sun
with nooses on their necks
At the public execution in New York.

It began in the water.
It will end in the sea

Fish children,
Remember your training.
Remember your training.

Now take to the water
and let peace be still.

AFI ESE

Afi Ese is an African American contemporary realism and figurative conceptual artist living in Houston, Texas with roots in Togo and Mali. The artworks of Afi Ese represent and venerate the rich history of the West African diaspora with an emphasis on generational trauma and triumph in Black America. As a child of the diaspora, her paintings

A Woman's Worth



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are conceptualized narratives of the African plight through the eyes of a self-aware Black American. She combines and re-imagines historical events and attributes specific to the Black American experience. In doing so, she gets to shine a spotlight on the beauty and resilience of her community by using the gifts and talents given by her ancestors. She recognizes the importance of positive black images in daily life and uses her work to help direct the Black narrative and experience in an honest and transparent fashion. AC wants each piece to leave the viewer feeling culturally empered, especially the youth. She tries to embed boldfresh images in the minds of viewers and hopes to replace some of the mis-education and misleading imagery that plagues her community.

Fish and Grits



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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 womanhood 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 tuscan 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 korrin gaines'
resistance dogon tribe of mali yeshua flipping that table over at the temple
cleanse nikki giovanni's read of jimie 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 the 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 its 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 woman-poet 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-images 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 *She Tries Her Tongue* and *Zong!* as well as 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 foremother, 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, Shockley 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 Shockley 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 plait's'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 announced 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 Shockley'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. *that'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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LENA CAMILLE OTALORA

Lena Camille Otolora (she/her) is a young writer and multimedia artist currently based in Boston, MA. Born and bred in Miami, Fl, she developed a strong fixation with the ocean throughout her childhood--it became a source of amusement, awe, and unease alike. Eventually, the ocean's enigmatic image crept its way into her adulthood, insisting itself a motif. As in life, so in art; Lena Camille's work tends to focus on her generations-long relationship with the Atlantic ocean and the affairs of nature, emotion, and memory. She's acquired a BA from Boston University, having studied Film & TV Production and Comparative Literature, and lovingly tends to her houseplants in her downtime.

Atlantic

I felt this groaning,
groaning inside of me

lifting up in my ribs

shimmying and rattling,
crafting a xylophone of my
bones,
turning over and punching
at my chest
wanting me to spill over, wanting
to spill out

if only my skin could howl
along with my soul
at least then, perhaps I could cry
at least then, a chorus we'd become
am I allowed but
a moan?

are wails reserved alone
for the holy spirit?

permit me a sadness
all my own—
if I am allowed to hold anything, let it be, at least, my tears

my mother's
my grandmother's
my grandmother,
she swallowed hers whole

for no one to see—
the taste, like a stone,
smooth
and hard and
ever growing larger

I always knew the world began and
ended with her, my Cronus,
sickle in hand,
poseidon in her belly
the salt, the salt wearing at her throat—

tracking sand into the car,
my toes curling, curling, curling,
bringing the earth into me, feeling like I had seen the world,
my muscles forgetting to let go of the waves—

I understand now, why
she'd take me to the ocean

I had to learn the taste

Man Went Down

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.”

Toni Morrison

we waited so long,

occupying ourselves with song,

lulling ourselves, preparing these muscles for the waves—

God’s-a gonna trouble the water!

salty necks and baked shoulders

in exchange for damp feet—

Wade in the water

up to my calves, up to my knees

drudging ahead,

the soles of my feet opening up over rough stones,

making a Moses out of me

God’s-a gonna trouble the water!

Yemanjá’s womb

sighing to Us,

murmuring for me

Wade in the water

I bring my cowrie shells, nesting them in my hair,

nesting them in my eyes,

God’s-a gonna trouble the water!

my eyes shine like alabaster in the sun,

my whole body cloaked in pearly cloth,

delicate in the brine of baptism

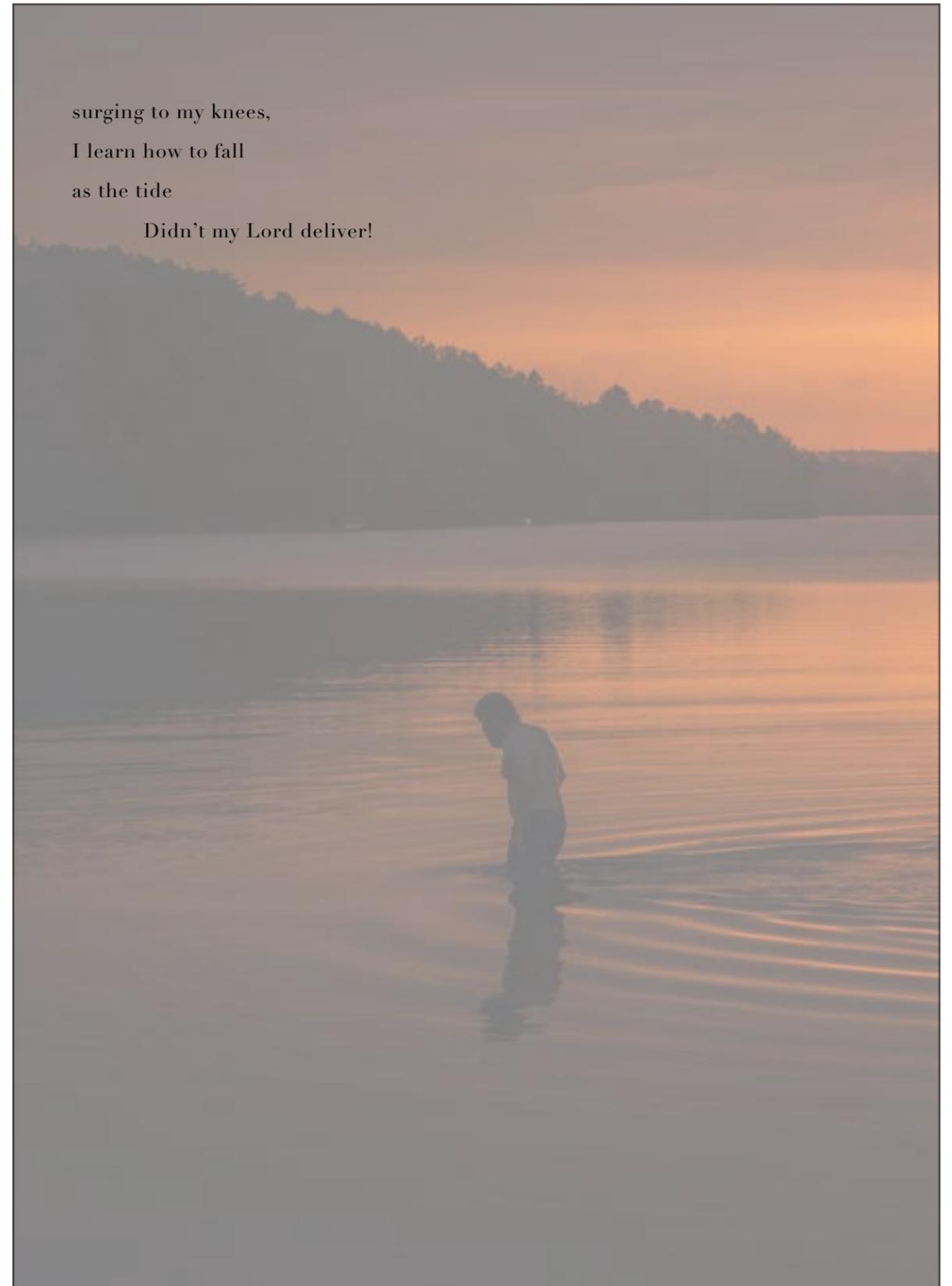
Wade in the water

surging to my knees,

I learn how to fall

as the tide

Didn’t my Lord deliver!



CINDY BONAPARTE

Artist, Womb healing Practitioner, Social & Environmental Arts Practice MFA-Candidate. I hope to expand the work of womb healing into spaces of education and learn how this collective work can advance Black peoples Liberation.

Salt Water Voices: Listen between the Trauma

Grandma said, *"I dreamed of fish last night, someone's pregnant..."*

Mamma said, *"You have to say a prayer whenever you go to salt water, put your feet in the water. Do not go to the beach without saying a prayer before you leave, because you are at salt water."*

The voices of all my mothers, conduits for the Spirits of the sea. Salt Water voices echo in my veins, the Spirits of the Waters survived weaponized Christianity, survived the confinement to double consciousness in The Souls of Black Folk. Forced forgetting, breaks our hearts, the spiritual weapon of choice against the watery souls of Black Folk. For Black folk, memory and liberation lie in our Salt Water Voices.*

*Water holds memory of Black Folk,
water heals, water hears, water becomes
all that you say, curse, or pray.*

Salt purifies, heals, and repels negativity.

Your eyes cry ocean water,

Your skin sweats sea water,

All cues to tap into your power.

Your body is more ocean than land.

Your Blackness is more water than politics.

Your Black body is as sacred and healing as the waters.

Put your feet in the ocean, listen to the Salt Water Voices between the trauma when you ask:

How do we heal the breaking hearts from our collective rising blood pressure, of our salt water veins, under duress? Have we forgotten ourselves, the we are enough salt water? Are our desires, habits, likes, and taste, expressions of the collective traumatized identity? How do we measure the distance of disconnection from our watery Blackness to map the roads toward liberation?

Salt Water Voices continue Black liberatory pedagogy, healing how we listen between the trauma. Salt Water Voices cleanse the pain of double consciousness and reconciles our internal waters to the power of the Ocean Mother.

**W.E.B. Dubois The Souls of Black Folk*



Salt Water Midwife: Aunt Dora Green & Comfrey – 2021 – Digital Collage – Cindy Bonaparte. Source Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Document 36.

TEJU ADISA-FARRAR

I am a geographer, writer, poet, and facilitator. I am focused on environmental and cultural equity. Connecting the dots between issues by centering space, place and identity. Rooted in a politics of de- : decolonization, decentralization and de commodification. I look to historic Black geographies and urban ecologies, including: nature, activism, and art--to imagine alternative futures. I use speculative geography as a type of Sci-Fi to envision Black life after social death and in the wake of climate change. By submitting this piece, I hope to affirm this experimental process and extend my belief in the possibilities.

All Mermaids are Black

When the giant wave comes washing over our bodies

Black people will become mermaids, and indigenoous people will become seeds.

What will you become?

Critical Fabulation:

The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future...¹

Two years ago, I heard a young scholar named Kali Tambreé ask: “when they jumped from the slave ships, where do they go?” This is a response.

Some matter that ends up in the ocean settles to the sea floor as a form of sediment. Over time, this sediment becomes rock and may eventually—through pressure and temperature change—be pushed up above the surface again. When they jumped from the slave ships, they became the sea floor...or rather, returned to the seafloor to become the earth itself. In millions of years, we will know that continents are made up of fugitive Africans who jumped into the ocean to remap their freedom.

¹ Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14. muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

In August of 1619, 20 Africans arrived at Point Comfort after being stolen by British Pirates from a Portugese Slave Ship, which originally stole them from Angola.² Earlier than 1500, Portuguese colonists were in the business of stealing bodies from the continent of Africa³ and sailing them across water. On the coasts of the Americas lie Black communities, scattered there by slave ships. Just as soon as we were “imported,” we were fugitive.

When God made mountains

He made runaway slaves⁴

The middle passage is not all we are made of. Like a lunar eclipse it overshadows—but does not destroy our light. Our memory of freedom was longer than our experience of bondage. Like the tides being pulled by the moon’s gravitational force, in the light of the moon we were propelled to cultivate freedom after arriving on the shores of the Americas. In the thick of the forests we became maroons, always returning to the water to say *thank you*. At the edge of rivers, above the waterfalls we became *cimarrones*, navigating waterwaysto liberation. Giving libation to *Yemaya* and going back for others. We are coastal people, shorelines are the site of our refusal. On both sides of the ocean, we refused. In the middle of the ocean, we refused. On the bottom of the ocean, we refuse. In the wake⁵, we refuse.

We are Black because of our relationship to water, because of our traversal and dispersal across waters, because of our spiritual connection to water. Our communities developed along coast-line, sometimes as maroons—other times as survivors. The pathways of sustenance created by indigensoous peoples alongside nature, allowed for fugitive Africans to adapt their knowledge from home to the terrain of the Americas asthey built self-sustaining maroon communities. Braiding seeds from home into their hair. Braiding maps to free Black villages into their hair. Always returning to the ports, to the water, to extricate others.

² Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “The 1619 Project.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 14 Aug. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.

³ “Brazil: Five Centuries of Change.” *Brazil Five Centuries of Change*, Brown University Library: Center for Digital Scholarship, library.brown.edu/create/fivecenturiesofchange/chapters/chapter-2/african-slavery/.

⁴ Giovanni, Nikki. *Chasing Utopia*. William Morrow, 2013.

⁵ Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

If the only accounts of freedom and agency during slavery are oral stories, then we must believe these stories are the truth. If the only maps deemed valid show our bondage, then we must look to the ocean for evidence of our collective manumission. We must “uncover the sea’s dynamism as a maroon geography that alters with time and space.”⁶ After all, we will all go back to the ocean anyway. Some of us are already there.

We are situated on the edge of land, closest to water. Still in the wake of dispossession. Still most vulnerable to the ocean. Still closest to the levees. Still allowed to be flooded or washed out. Still expected to drown as the sea level rises. Still. Eventually the water becomes still. We were not supposed to survive, but the flesh of our ancestors live in the currents. Reaching every side of the Triangular Trade; Western comfort is made from us. Point Comfort was not our beginning and Igbo Landing was not our ending. We are transitioning. The ashes of our ancestors are building worlds for us on the seafloor.

We say we can’t breathe. Our lungs are collapsing, becoming gills. We were not meant to breathe in this world. Our skin is thick, not able to propel bullets, but so that we are hydrodynamic. Our ritual movements: fluid, flowing against the pressure of society—we are preparing ourselves to move through the resistance of water. We are evolving because the ocean will reclaim the land.

We will all be submerged.

Black people will emerge under water: our eyes open, able to breathe, think, and live. We will not be destroyed.

⁶ Dunnavant, Justin P. “Have Confidence in the Sea: Maritime Maroons and Fugitive Geographies.” *Antipode*, 2020, doi:10.1111/anti.12695.



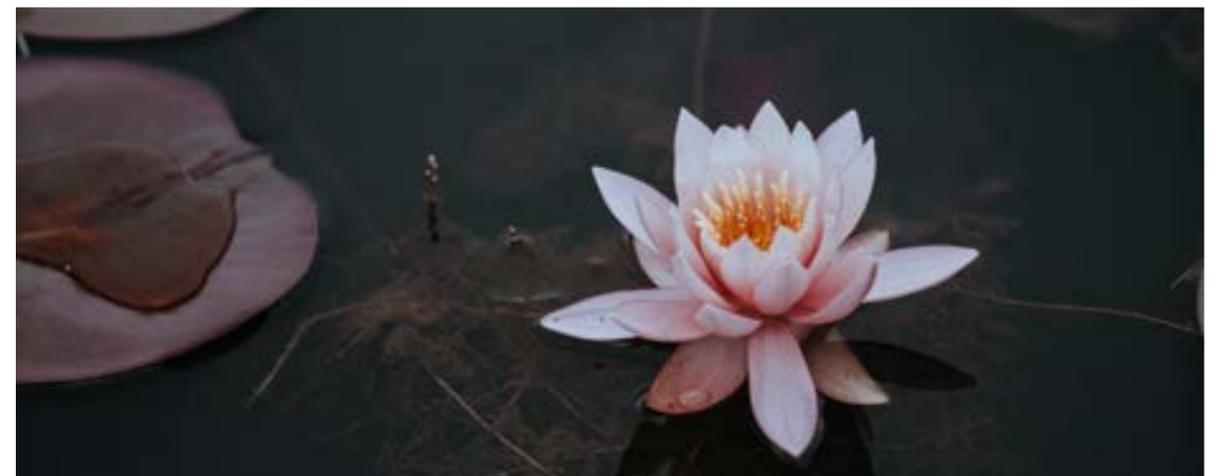
SHERESE FRANCIS

Sherese Francis is a Queens, NYC-based, Afro-Caribbean-American (Barbados and Dominica) poet, editor, interdisciplinary artist, workshop facilitator, and literary curator of the mobile library project, J. Expressions. She has published work in various publications including Furious Flower, Obsidian Lit, Spoken Black Girl, The Operating System, Cosmonauts Avenue, No Dear, Apex Magazine, Bone Boquet, African Voices, Newtown Literary, and Free Verse. Additionally, she has published two chapbooks, Lucy's Bone Scrolls and Variations on Sett/ling Seed/ling, and has another one on the way from DoubleCross Press called, Recycling a Why That Rules Over My Sacred Sight. Besides her publications, she has had work featured in exhibitions from The Lit Exhibit, NY Live Arts, Queens Public Library and Baxter St. Camera Club. Through Root Work, she hopes to make connections with other Black visionaries to build and collaborate.

How Can You See In The Dark Part II Mapping



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Page 37

MARIE MEDJINE ANTOINE

My name is Marie Medjine Antoine, I'm a Black Haitian artist and most of my work feature Black women. In this specific image I am calling for the women who have come before me, specially Erzulie Dantor and the Virgin Mary to help me understand the virtues of motherhood and feminist. I hope this piece resonates with who comes across it and they feel seen.

Zulie



STEVE PRINCE

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True Vine



such body since long before any wooden ship dared traverse our depths. Never without power, we are a great tide in motion. And yet.

The 1441 kidnap and enslavement of 12 West African people – by Portuguese “explorers” Antão Gonçalves and Nuno Tristão off the coast of what is today Ras Nouadhibou, Mauritania – did spark the storm of chattel slavery, terror, and anti-Blackness from which ripple effects are still felt almost 600 years later¹. As Christina Sharpe explains it, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”² In this sense, the question of Black fugitivity is an ever-present tangle of contradicting realities to be unraveled. What does it mean that the large body of water which is Blackness could be irrevocably marred by the far inferior body of a fledgling boat? What sorcery must be this so-called ark, to contain our vastness, both as structure from which we seek to escape and as shelter when we are in need of asylum? How best to throw off such confines and conjure a new vessel, a better gourd, into which we might pour ourselves?

Beloved, 1:4 - An Appetite for Color

*“Her past had been like her present – intolerable – and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color. Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don’t.”*³

I have often wondered about Baby Suggs, holy, and her end-of-life cravings for color. Recently, I’ve formed a theory about her thirst as a kind of synesthetic coping mechanism. Synesthesia is formally defined as a neurological condition – one which triggers the experience of multiple sensory pathways at once. People who say they can taste or smell certain colors, for example, might be considered synesthetes. But outside of this formal definition, what are the social implications of Baby Suggs’ desire for color, notably at a time of renewed racial trauma and upheaval in her life? If our senses are the mechanism by which we experience and understand the world as it is, could Baby Suggs’ sudden focus on color have been a metaphor for her shifting sense of internal order? A reorientation of her entire world view after the collapse, or failure, of her faith system to spare her grandchild? And what is the significance of such grand-

¹ Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-between and the Colonization of Brazil: 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1-5, quotation appears on 4.

³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2004), 4.

child, that grand daughter who “walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned on [Toni Morrison’s] gazebo”⁴ with an almost eagerness to set the record straight regarding herself and all those women involved?

...in ears&

nose&

cunt&

There is a connection here, I think, between that visual chimera which ushered Baby Suggs unto death and the watery deep that re-birthed Beloved up out of it. Water cleanses, makes clear that which has been obscured, and reorients that which is off cycle. But, when submerged in the expanse of it, water also disorients and leaves one unsure of what their eyes have seen. Water then, like the sensory, is the ultimate trickster. This notion takes on greater shape when we acknowledge the tenuous grasp modern science holds over how our senses operate in the first place; and when we consider the ableist way our society privileges certain cognitive abilities like sight or the neurotypical. What if Baby Suggs’ appetites shifted, not as some kind of woeful trauma response but as a very deliberate solution to the problem of a world where everyone else’s senses lie askew? What if Beloved likewise rose up from the water, not as a vengeful haunting but a haintful reminder for those living who had lost their way?

Thinking about the legacies of resistance depicted in *Beloved*, and which we have inherited, (from both the novel itself and the real-life ancestor, Margaret Garner, upon whom the book was loosely based) one might consider Sethe the obvious choice for a character study. However, when we consider the idea of “life after the hold” and reflect on who in the novel spent the most time actually released from captivity, we are able to get our hands around another reality. Baby Suggs spent nearly eight years in the little house on Bluestone Road before Schoolteacher tracked Sethe to that place using records based on her personal whereabouts. There is something especially surreal about this method of capture. What does ‘after the hold’ even mean if there is no *after*? We are made to understand that Halle worked himself to exhaustion doing extra labor as part of a seemingly benevolent financial arrangement with the owner of Sweet Home; but, even years after her release, Baby Suggs was still being kept track of and line-item-logged like so much cattle. Therefore, she too was a fugitive, in spite of her status as someone whose freedom had already been bought and paid for. *Capitalism will not save us.*

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2004), Author’s Foreward, XVIII. Future references to *Beloved* appear in parentheses within this text.

Baby Suggs, of course, was never ignorant of the many violences enacted upon herself, or upon her people, by whiteness. Rather, she seemed to consider herself lucky to have earned a hard-won reprieve from such abuse, albeit late in life. That is, until she was made to once again taste the coppery stench of blood, upon Schoolteacher's arrival at 124. The killing of Beloved matters here. Blood, too, is water. The necessary memory of that blood is what Beloved brought back with her when she returned to flesh. Morrison writes: "And what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather ... Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss." (324)

In our current moment of global pandemic compounded by police violence and the intra communal violences of transphobia, ableism, misogyny, colorism, homophobia, fatphobia (all manifestations of an internalized anti-Blackness), we are experiencing our own iteration of this same core awakening to a continued status as fugitive despite seeming progress. A lifting or removing of the veil is taking place on the "good" slave owner, "good" white person narrative often manifested through buzzwords like inclusion, bipartisanship, unity, civility, etc. These empty benevolences will not protect us either. *Abolition, not reformation.*

The question then becomes what are we to do with this intimately resurfaced awareness of white violence and our many complicities? What were the women of 124 to do with Baby Suggs' insatiable need for color, and later, the sopping wet girl who showed up on their front stoop one day? How are we to bear the weight of such rage and grief and hope and always, always, our ocean-like depths of churning power? We need a healing. I would argue that the best model we have comes in the form of that unchurched preacher, Baby Suggs, holy. I've already confessed that I don't really think of Baby Suggs' seclusion as a crisis of faith so much as a spiritual conviction to withdraw from the lie of conditional freedom. Not so much a retreat from the living as a moving inward, into empowered Black identity, and away from the false notion that there can be any negotiating with whiteness. *Liberalism will never offer true healing.*

How then might we make a similar spiritual journey? Because this is a journey of the spirit. The fugitive spirit. I do not refer here to colonial Christianity or its many manifestations. This is no kidnapped Christ, shackled and sold in service to whiteness. We have lived enough of that unholy gospel. Rather, I am interested in a more subversive, perhaps hoodoo-vodun entry

point to Spirit. I mean the unchurch as one of several sensory functions acting in tandem with Baby Suggs' colors. After all, what is synesthesia at its core if not a hoodoo-ification of our more stagnant perceptions? And, if the ultimate goal is healing, which texts in addition to *Beloved* offer their own synesthetic ability to refocus us toward that particular brand of freedom?

N E X T, 12:26

Egyptt Labeija is alive and her memory is long. *now hear / the word of the Lord.*⁵ "I literally lived on that pier that's no longer there. I lived there, in a hut."⁶ These opening words introduce the 2017 short film, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, which borrows its name from the title of a Lucille Clifton poem. Although Clifton's words echo thematically throughout the film, the first voice we are actually made to hear is that of Labeija. From the very beginning she lets us know that there are some memories we have not been made privy to. Sans the makeup and glamorous dresses which mark her status as a legendary performer and member of the infamous House of Labeija, she is free to cry at the remembrance of her one-time homelessness. However, just as the ocean is not always blue, these tears do not signal regret but triumph. *my elegant afrikans / connecting whydah and new york*

Regarding the Atlantic, its waters are in this instance a frothy seafoam shade of ivory at turns signaling roiling wave, fleshy congealed body, and the solemn remains of sunken bones. Such complexity is what it means to be a living water. Similar complexity permeates the film. Early on, the camera shifts to a dazzling image of Labeija, her ivory manicured nails fanned out across the sky. For a moment her inviting fingers become fins and she a fiery mermaid. Then she is Baby Suggs descending into the milky murky underwater color of her own memory. Fatima Jamal is the Beloved thing (re)birthed up out of that milky ocean. Gloriously fat, vampish, and sinister, Jamal rejects any hint of self-denial. Full in her humanity, she stares down the camera and waits patiently, demanding that Labeija mirror this fullness. Sure enough, the ivory fins begin to fan out again followed by a montage of Labeija's many colors. She is now red and blue and purple and dancing and laughing and sexy and playful teasing the crowd around her. Meanwhile, Jamal is the coy temptress orchestrating all of this. When she spreads her legs and briefly dips low to feather a sheer scarf between them, I am Paul D, both undone and put on notice at how weak my own understanding has been until this very moment.

⁵ Lucille Clifton, "Atlantic is a Sea of Bones," in *NEXT: New Poems* (Brockport: BOA Editions, 1987), 26.

⁶ Egyptt Labeija, "Atlantic is a Sea of Bones," for *Day With(out) Art*, dir. Tourmaline (New York: Visual AIDS, 2017).

i call my name into the roar of surf/ and something awful answers.

In many ways, I watched the film as an outsider, an interloper, lurking upon the hard wrought peace Labeija has clearly carved out for herself. But this limited, and somewhat limiting, gaze was not allowed to go on for long. What Jamal makes clear, as does the general arc of the film, is that these women are not the ones who need a healing. We are. The “we” here being the Black cisgender imagination⁷. *seabed they call it.*

“Atlantic” has consistently received critical acclaim since its release almost four years ago. This is in large part due to the brilliant vision and execution of director and filmmaker, Tourmaline. But I wonder if there isn’t another reason so many, myself included, have fixated on the merits of this one short. A perceived chance, perhaps, to package all of trans womanhood into a single shade of existence. *a bridge of ivory.*

This is not an unfamiliar possibility. So much of Black existence involves navigating the expectations and presumptions of an external viewer. Adjectives like raw, gritty, and tragic pepper the landscape of white imagination regarding Black life, perpetually culminating in yet another story of “loss and redemption” that does more to exonerate said whiteness of its own guilt than to liberate Blackness from the ties that bind us. Such is the ark from which we are so often seeking escape. in its arms my early mothers sleep. And yet what does it mean that, until the riptide of each woman’s performance snapped me out of my own complacency, I too was prepared to approach the film with a comfortable focus on “hard-wrought peace” and redemption? At a time when duck walks and death drops abound throughout popular culture, simultaneously with the names of a seemingly endless list of murdered Black trans women and other queer folk, whom does such comfort actually serve?

I am reminded of another Lucille Clifton poem, *why some people be mad at me sometimes*, which comes from the same Pulitzer-nominated 1987 poetry collection. Like that poem, what “Atlantic” does best is resist the false memory of Labeija and Jamal as preemptively extincted figures, made flat and one dimensional in order to be more easily consumed by external forces. Egyptt Labeija is alive. Fatima Jamal is alive. Black trans refusal of death in the face of both murderous intent and morbid imaginings holds a power equal to and greater than any that Beloved ever wielded in demanding her place among the living. This equation holds true regarding her so-called sexual coercion of Paul D as well. Beloved’s true power in such moments

⁷ Fatima Jamal, “The Thrill and Fear of ‘Hey, Beautiful’.” The New York Times, 30, June, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/opinion/trans-sexual-assault-black-women.html?referer=https://t.co/KSvYhoinGN%3f&=1>.

is not any sinister attempt to drive Paul D from the house but an ability to coax open the sealed shut tobacco tin heart leading to his eventual healing. (137-38) There is power being wielded among the waves. But there is also power – and liberation – to be gained for those of us willing to be submerged in the depths of our own scarred tin hearts.

Annie Mae Stewart

“Pink, if you don’t.” This phrase, from Baby Suggs, sums up most of my relationship to that color and, in my youth, it was also an apt descriptor for my relationship to my one living grandmother, Annie Mae. Pink is alright. It’s not a deal-breaker of a color. There’s nothing inherently wrong with it. And, in a pinch or a bind or some other situation where options are limited, pink has been known to come through just fine. Pink is dependable and safe and sweet. Doesn’t the name, Annie Mae, just ooze a kind of powdered sweetness?

I should pause here to clarify something that I hope is understood: I deeply love and respect my grandmother. But my early imaginings of who she is and what she represents, as a person separate and distinct from simply the mother of my father, have not always held the most nuance or depth. When Baby Suggs asks her daughter-in-law and granddaughter to “Bring a little lavender in” then quickly adds the caveat that pink is an acceptable substitute, on a surface level, it would seem that she has set up a hierarchy between the two colors. Lavender is preferred. Pink is second best.

Likewise, when I was young and my parents moved us all to the Bronx, away from my father’s family in Chicago, a hierarchy of distance was created between my two grandmothers. The one who lived in our neighborhood, a few blocks away at most, was now preferred. The other, my sweet Annie Mae, became too far off for anything resembling that kind of intimacy. We would, of course, make summertime excursions to visit that side of the family (when there was enough money to transport our nuclear unit of four, and later five, out of state) but “that side of the family” speaks volumes about what those trips were actually like. I can remember one Summer when my older sister and I spent days-on-end giggling at the absurdity of how my grandmother pronounced the word syrup as she made us pancakes – like something straight from the mouth of Whitley Gilbert – until my father scolded us for being dismissive of her northern Mississippi, next-door-neighbor-to-Arkansas, accent.

It is under these circumstances that I formed an understanding of the color pink and, for the most part, that first impression held firm well into my adulthood. Pink became the pale, unsexed, wide-eyed ingenue built to passively serve and cater to the needs of others, or at least

to virtue signal at that kind of purity, but never to trouble the water by operating from a color theory rooted in any deeper pigmentation. This idea was and remains, though, more of an historical – almost visceral – reading rather than one drawn from any kind of 21st century politic. What my youthful intuition failed to notice were the many flavors of pink that exist, for Black people especially, in the modern. A more accurate shade might be Kelis’ cotton candy ovré hair from her *Caught Out There* video where she pretends to send a cheating lover to the E.R. Or, perhaps, Lake Retba with its candy-colored surface overlaying a complex relationship to labor, survival, colonialism, and Western tourism. Navigating the swell and undertow implications of these many pinks, however, (and my place among them as a cis-het product of the U.S.) becomes a more difficult task. At times, my own saltiness has been an equally bitter thing.

Case-in-point: When Janelle Monáe released her 2018 single, Pynk, I was initially unimpressed with her attempts to complicate the sexuality and wider reputation of that hue. Lyrics such as “Pink like the tongue that goes down, maybe...”⁸ did little to overcome the fact that she was largely singing about a pink-pussied anatomy which did not fit my existence or that of countless other Black people.⁹ Of course, if my gripe was (and to some degree still is) based on the feeling that, anatomically speaking, pink is a surrogate for whiteness, then how did I come to associate it with my grandmother? Moreover, am I strange to offer this meditation on our relationship through the lens of various pussy colors and their often (mis)associated sexualities? Probably. Sex is not the only entry point for a discussion on all that I misunderstood about my Annie Mae but it does matter in the wider context of contemporary Black life and healing. Again, I return to *Beloved*.

slick cankered tooth-

-lick wielding wordspell

&wither.

--- a demand for memory.

It matters that Baby Suggs asked for lavender first, then pink, but it is also important

⁸ Janelle Monáe, “Pynk” featured on *Dirty Computer* (Atlanta: Wondaland, Bad Boy, 2018).

⁹ Tauri Moton, “Janelle Monáe’s ‘Pynk’ subtly acknowledges the existence of trans bodies, but we deserve more than that.” *Black Youth Project*, 24, April, 2018. <http://blackyouthproject.com/janelle-monaes-pynk-subtly-acknowledges-the-existence-of-trans-bodies-but-we-deserve-more-than-that/>.

to think about how her cravings were met. We are told that “Sethe satisfied her with anything from fabric to her own tongue.”⁽⁴⁾ The ambiguity of this phrasing offers endless opportunity for speculation on the Sethe-Baby Suggs relationship; including, in the context of the aforementioned *Pynk*, its potential as a greater Ruth-Naomi allegory filled with womanlove both sexual and non-sexual.¹⁰ When Paul D pulls down Sethe’s dress to inspect the tree on her back and the thought occurs to her that “responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands,” it could be argued that she is thinking of Baby Suggs in this moment rather than Halle. (10) After all, it is Baby who last kissed Sethe on the mouth, bathed her in sections – face, hands, arms, feet, legs and between them, as well as the crust of her nipples – before noticing, too, the many “roses of blood [that] blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe’s shoulders.” (109)

Beyond this mildly incestuous laying of hands, though, what most intrigues me is the path that is opened up for a pink that might actually be rooted in a warmer, more melanized shade – not simply in matters of revenge or desperation but also comfort and mutual care. If historical notions of pink refer to the tepid femininity of white women as depicted by Mrs. Garner – perpetually weeping at all the violence to which she is complicit – this is not the same pink that is shared between mother and daughter-in-law. For starters it can be assumed that the soft fabric extended to Baby Suggs is lavender and Sethe’s pink tongue is the grittier tithe being offered up. Which is to say that the verbal relationship between these two is no superficial affair. “Don’t talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful why don’t you. I had eight.” (6) The gruff tone of this exchange belies a tenderness and an empathy unfamiliar to any of Sethe’s other relationships.

Baby Suggs makes clear here that she understands what it means to have multiple children ripped away from her and she places Sethe’s killing of *Beloved* in the same context – not as a callous personal choice, but as another rung in the collective chain of ‘some dead Negro’s grief.’ In theory, she says *don’t talk to me*. But in practice she does the exact opposite. She keeps right on talking and denying Sethe’s request to run away (or move away) in shame. This, notably, at a time when Ella, Stamp Paid, and the other townsfolk have all decided to show their judgeful disdain of Sethe through silence. Thus the oral becomes the most intimate thing these women have to offer each other and they do so with a fury.

¹⁰ See Alice Walker’s definition of ‘Womanist’ from the introduction to *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, 1983.

On another occasion, Sethe displays a similar vulnerability (in stark contrast with her usual proud stance) softening so much as to speculate on the merits of white redemption. “Don’t box with me,” Baby Suggs retorts. “There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout.” (287) And, again, we are given ample taste of the tongue-twisting nature of Sethe and Baby’s shared connection to pink. They are two sides of a single blush-toned coin.

Where Sethe typically clothes herself in an unapologetic uniform of defiance regarding her decision to kill Beloved, behind closed doors she reveals its weight to be a burden. Such fierce independence is not sustainable; she craves some space to be mournful (and hopeful) again. Baby Suggs seems to understand this need but she also understands that dabbling in notions of white innocence or attempting to outrun the realities of their station in life are also no viable solution. Instead, she picks up the mantle of a perceived hardness when it becomes too much for Sethe to bear. In this way, the women trade liabilities.

Likewise, I am learning that this may also be the reason Baby Suggs included pink among her list of dying requests. Perhaps, pink represents a desire to not always be in fight-or flight mode. Especially when paired with an alternating relationship to lavender. Lavender, I think, must be nuance. Subtlety. Balance. Not so much a retreat from the living as a moving inward, into empowered Black identity. Not so much an escapist desire to avoid reality, nor to unload harsh abuse onto others, but a pleading to not be so easily shut out from the full range of one’s human emotion – both sour and sweet.

In which case, when was the pink of my own grandmother’s tongue a rough gritty thing that I couldn’t see? When, and how, might her mouth have been shut up so as to obscure the bristly taste buds lining that muscular organ inside? If I pause to really think about it, there are many examples:

That time I caught the afterburn of her outrage when gentrifiers began to infiltrate her Northwest Chicago neighborhood and she became the foreign Black woman in Noble Square. “I been here since ‘76, cracka! Where you been?”¹¹ Or the Sunday afternoons she’d sit gossiping with my aunt about some woman acquaintance and, under her breath, I’d catch the subtle shade from a whispered “She think she sumpin on stick. Please.” If I was lucky, she might forget I was in the room and let slip what she really meant. Then, “sumpin” became shit and I could feel the full weight of Anne Mae Collier, née Stewart, at her finest. I am even told that before she became a devout Christian my grandmother was first a devout smoker. I have a hard time

¹¹ Annie Mae Collier, née Stewart, Oral Tradition (Chicago: Re-Memory, 2004)

picturing the woman I know today with any kind of menthol stick on her tongue and I sometimes resent the very pale pink religiosity and distance which denied me access to that other Annie Mae.

More often, my grandfather would wander in with his own unsolicited advice. Some minor lewd joke about Prudential life insurance being the reason all the womenfolk were in such heated competition – they wanted a piece of the rock. Annie would quietly scold him in the moment but later when he’d call her Sug, short for sugar, with a hint of molasses on his tongue, my grandmother would respond with a coy smile that hinted she knew all about “the rock” and a heavier sticky wet kind of sweetness.

If this covert display of affection is not quite as satisfying as my own elicit imaginings, I remind myself that sometimes it’s best to stay out of grown folks business. Who am I to say that my grandmother didn’t receive everything she needed in the way of care and companionship? Who am I to say that she did? The reality is that not all of our foreparents have had access to both lavender and pink. They, like Baby Suggs, have had to make due with one shade or the other. In the case of my Annie Mae, maybe she chose a sensibility that afforded her the nearest approximation to wholeness. It is common knowledge that a well-behaved Black woman has a better chance, though still no guarantee, of safety in this world.

When my grandmother was soft and sweet, it also usually meant that she was well taken care of and she didn’t have to rage at some injustice or desperately scrape together a means for survival. When Annie Mae glowed pink, it meant she was comfortable, hopeful even. A luxury for a Black woman of her era and likewise for many Black people today. My grandfather, Annie’s husband, died in 2008. She’s still here. Two of her sons, my uncles, have also passed away. Grandma Annie Mae is still here. Born in 1934, she is quickly approaching 90 years old and has buried several of her siblings too, but the madness of the past year hasn’t taken her either.

Sometimes I think underneath all that fluffy pink softness is an undercarriage of reinforced steel born from a lifetime of picking her battles and selectively deciding when rage or angst or some other reactionary display of emotion did not actually serve her. And in this regard, I remind myself that unless my craving for a more palpable sexuality is equally rooted in a desire for material liberation (read: safety) from the confines of gendered expectation then it is no more than surface aesthetic anyway. This is not to say that every aspect of my Annie’s living is something I need to carry forward in my own life but I have another grandmother, now an ancestor, for some of those colors. This meditation could just as easily be titled, a reading from the book of...

Bernice Greene

In my mind’s eye, my late grandmother Bernice occupies the space between a Toni Morrison creation and some wanton woman out of a Zora Neale Hurston novel. I say this in reference to both the stature of those two women authors and in terms of what their characters represent for so many of us. As a teenager, long before I learned that most people read Janie Crawford to be a light-skinned, multiracial, relatively thin Black woman, I conjured up a physical appearance that better mirrored the dark brown heft of my own grandmother.¹² Born among the muddy waters of rural South Carolina and raised by her grandmother, Betty, in the heart of Geechee country, she seemed to fit the description of a swaying wide-hipped girl with long ropes of hair and a sexuality so palpable she’d been quickly married off. Their lives weren’t exactly the same – Bernice bore seven children for her first abusive husband before pivoting to the pretty young thing who would become my grandfather – but the connection was close enough to satisfy my cravings.

Later, when I read *Beloved* for the first time, Baby Suggs only served to add a more firm outline to the mental picture I’d already begun to craft for my mother’s mother. Mr. Garner’s deep blush when Baby Suggs refuses to be called Jenny Whitlow, opting instead for ‘Baby’ because it’s what her husband called her (167), ignited a feeling I thought I understood about the very specific juju both women must have invoked in order to proudly be called in such intimate terms by their husbands. Where my father’s mother is typically a demure woman, Bernice has always felt wild and unrestrained. I wouldn’t exactly describe her as the lavender of Baby Suggs’ request. She would be some darker, earthier, rooted shade of brown. High John the Conqueror, perhaps. The sex root. Regardless of color, though, the aura of Baby Suggs still hangs over her. Is it strange that I attribute such emphasis to the intangible sexual nature of a dead woman? Probably.

High John the Conqueror is known as the sex root but it is not only that. It is also a gambling root, a good luck root, a phallic root, and most importantly, it is the root of Black resistance and survival. The Conqueror. When I want to embody the spirit of an unloosed woman, set free from any shame in her Blackness or her dripping sexuality, I channel Bernice Greene – before she became Forrest or even Hopkins – wild, unmarried, Bernice Greene. When I am blasting some variation of *Dr. Feelgood*, or *Girls Need Love*, or Lyn Collins’ *Rock Me Again*

¹² Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1937), Chapter 2. Janie describes her grandmother, Nanny, as “yaller” in skin tone and her mother, Leafy, as gray-eyed with “yaller” hair. But a picture of herself, the product of rape by a Black schoolteacher, she describes as “a real dark little girl with long hair” whom she doesn’t at first recognize.

& *Again & Again & Again & Again & Again*, I feel as though I am riding the undulating wave of an unencumbered sea and have conquered some invisible enemy that is trying to place me back in the hold. Similarly, when I am raging over the latest attack or belittling of Black survival, it is Bernice Greene’s spitting tongue in my mouth, edging me on to the most explosive of reactions. If there is also some small voice in my head telling me that my anger is too much, that I am a hard woman to please, Bernice is there to quickly reply that sometimes hardness is a necessary thing. Say it plain:

“Oh, y’all kneeling now. Foolishness. How long Colin been asking folks to kneel? How many years? And now y’all wanna kneel? Go from me. Got all these black screens on your socials “in awareness of Black people’s pain.” Y’all so performative with that shit. Out here getting your one Black woman (is God) employee to speak on your behalf. All I’m saying is, I ain’t with the shit. But let me stop. Newspaper man out here trying to tell me “black” is a color, not a person. Maaaaan, please! We know.”¹³

I am telling you that this is Bernice in my mouth and that I love when she/we are at our most stubborn, militant, ferocious. Then, “rock me, baby, like my back ain’t got no bone” becomes a healing balm of pleasure and a necessary respite from the storm. But I am also lying to you. Because Bernice died over 10 years ago and she stopped being the wild unmarried woman, Greene, long before that – before I was even born. Bernice Hopkins, the woman I knew, was just as deeply religious as Annie Mae, she never cursed or talked about sex, and though she was known to say it plain that saying was often turned inward against herself and the many women in her life. She could be downright mean if she thought you were behaving like a slut.

heaving thrash of me

grown root&

tail&

rut&

I am all young buck, prancing

isles of lush green though I strut ocean floor.

Where High John the Conqueror is known for its vernacular comparison to a pair of testicles, this connection is meant to evoke a kind of sexual admiration for its cis male name-

¹³ Bernice Hopkins, née Greene, *Embodiment* (New York: Ancestral Connection, 2020).

sake,¹⁴ but no such praise exists for the Black woman with a similar or even the exact same rooted nature – only derision and the possibility of violence. This reality is why, until her death, I believe my grandmother carried a great deal of shame over the youthful sexuality that led her to marry young into a disastrous union. There was little room in her world for placing that blame where it belonged – squarely in the lap of her abuser. And so, as a perceived safeguard, she became just as much Nanny or Ella as she ever was Janie or Baby Suggs. Maybe this is why I missed certain hints at Janie’s physical appearance.

I can remember skimming whole passages of text that detailed a warped kind of love between Nanny and Janie that allowed the old woman to marry off her only grandchild to “some ole skullhead in de grave yard” as retribution for her daring to kiss “trashy nigger” Johnny Taylor across the gatepost. Even now, part of me cringes in vicarious angst when Nanny slaps Janie once, prepares to slap her a second time, and then pivots to a sudden request that the girl come sit on her lap and listen to explanations about how much she really loves her. The scene has always felt like an unnamed form of manipulation and gaslighting, often overlooked in relationships between women and girls, that I struggle to bear. In the midst of this moment, though, Hurston has buried several key references to Janie’s family lineage. When I finally did more than just skim those uncomfortable parts, I learned that high yellow Nanny, her yellow haired daughter Leafy, and ‘real dark’ Janie are all products of rape – the first two by white slaveholders and Janie by a Black schoolteacher.¹⁵ So when Nanny later tells Janie that she “can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa [her],” this does not negate the harsh violence of Janie’s forced marriage to Logan Killicks but Nanny is revealing an inconvenient truth that bears equal consideration.

Likewise, there is room for critique of Hurston’s decision to only engage with Nanny’s colorist tendencies, and to some degree Janie’s as well, in the shared context of violence they both face at the hands of men. This is a decidedly softer approach than how she addresses the internalized colorism of the darker characters in the book and it would seem to falsely imply that Nanny’s and Janie’s traumas somehow cancel out their anti-Blackness. But when I reappropriate the latent messaging of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* back onto the real-life expe-

¹⁴ Muddy Waters, “My John the Conqueror Root” [Bonus Track] featured on *Folk Singer* (Chess Records, BMG Rights Management, LLC, 1964). When Chicago bluesman, Muddy Waters, sings “My pistol may snap. My mojo is frail. But I rub my root, my luck will never fail” the undercurrent of wisdom he offers to those in-the-know is that masturbation and a virulent sex life can act as a cure-all.

¹⁵ There is an alternate, yet persistent, theory that the schoolteacher who raped Leafy is also white. For the purposes of this article I choose to engage with that idea as a misunderstanding of Hurston’s decidedly ambivalent text.

rience of the dark-skinned Black woman that was my grandmother, I am able to get at a more complete truth. What is the cost of a generational relationship to sexual violence? Or, in the case of my Bernice, a generational relationship to young arduous single motherhood. Bernice was born to a 17-year-old unwed mother who died two years later due to complications from her second pregnancy. Though Betty tried to safeguard my grandmother from a similar fate, she too fell headlong into an abusive marriage and motherhood at only 17 years old. Her first child, my oldest aunt, then became a single mom when she was 18. The census records are murky, but I think my twice great grandma Betty may have been the only exception to this repeating cycle by holding off marriage and motherhood until she was at least 19 or 20. I do not list these figures to imply that marriage and children are the inherent problem in this equation – that title falls to patriarchy and anti-Blackness. But how does repeated abuse and becoming a grandparent at 35 change a person’s relationship to motherhood, hardship, stigma, and their own sexuality? What generational traumas are tied up in that legacy?

Poet and miracle worker, Joy Tabernacle KMT, writes at length about the particular violences enacted against young Black mothers via the socially accepted practices of sex shaming, abuse, setting unachievable standards of class/respectability, and a constant grappling with the surveillance state.¹⁶ Viewed through this lens, I can make out a hazy bridge connecting the sexually and politically liberated Bernice of my imaginings with the more reserved and rigid Bernice of my lived experience. Both women come to me regularly across this bridge from their place among the ancestors. One from the rough terrain of who she actually was, the other from the far-off shores of who she could have been. But how are these two, and more broadly speaking, how are Black mothers, parents, and birthing people in general able to realign their most rooted, liberated, High John the Conquering selves in defiance of those who would claim otherwise? Tabernacle KMT would suggest doing this through a process of “rewilding” both the motherhood and childhood experiences.

Perhaps that’s what Baby Suggs did each time she stepped into the Clearing and preached a sermon that claimed all the congregants as her new adopted children after the loss of her biological eight and the loss of their own mothers too. Or maybe rewilding is what Sethe’s unnamed mother and the disabled laundry woman, Nan,¹⁷ collectively did by coparenting Sethe, making sure she saw the circle and cross brand of motherhood under one breast,

¹⁶ Joy Tabernacle KMT, “Free Mama.” Online Workshop. www.Tabernacle.Life.

¹⁷ Many interpretations consider Nan, the disabled laundry woman, to be Toni Morrison’s nod to the Zora Neale Hurston character, Nanny, from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

and likewise by making sure Sethe knew that “she threw them all away but you” (72-74) – a preparation for the grim choice she would later make for her own crawling already daughter. And regarding that daughter, perhaps rewilding is what Beloved did in the shed with Paul D. in order to become pregnant with the unborn baby of all their shared traumas, taking it with her when she returned to the dead and leaving room for healing in her wake. When I think of it this way, I recognize my own responsibility to rewild my relationships to daughterhood and granddaughterhood as well – not just for me but for Bernice and her mother and grandmother Betty too.

fullup
of such drought
from mouths foreign to our lovely, we water ourselves
whole.

I’ve spent much of the past four years, since the onset of my Jesus Year, establishing a deeper connection to Spirit by way of ancestral guidance and a polyamorous relationship to Black faith tradition. Among the litany of roots in my current pot are now a burgeoning hoodoo practice, regular altar veneration, and dedicated tarot and oracle decks to keep me closely aligned with both my forebears and my most divine self. Some would call this a very woowoo new-age approach to healing but I reject the misnomer of labeling any practice “new” that so often predates most Western understandings of faith and spirituality. I received the height of affirmation recently when I pulled a card from my oracle deck and the answer to my question of stepping into greater personal power included the image of industrial chemist, Dr. Bettye [Washington] Greene, along with the heading “Temporal Disruption.”¹⁸ I am aware that this Bettye Greene is not *my* Betty Greene, twice removed great grandmother, but there’s something about the notion of temporal disruption – the opening of a portal to past or future dimensions – that sticks with me. Or, as with neurodivergent understandings of the term, the opening of cortical pathways counter to those typically associated with mental stability. What is synesthesia at its core if not a hoodoo-ification of our more stagnant perceptions? And what if our perception of the ancestor-descendant relationship has grown stale with well worn reference to a deceased who hold endless supplies of wisdom for the benefit of we good respectful living who need only listen carefully? What if we descendants bear equal responsibility to offer something in return to those who guide us so well? Spiritual offerings, yes, but is it wrong to suggest that we also

18 Black Quantum Futurism and Sydney Cain, “Temporal Disruption.” BQF Oracle Deck. www.BlackQuantumFuturism.com

have a very particular 21st century brand of wisdom to offer to those who came before us which they might be eager to receive? This is not meant as a repackaging of the dreaded “I am not my ancestors” narrative but a deeper leaning into reciprocity with those forebears whose shoes we have a mandate to fill.

I choose to engage with this idea through daily practice of what sex theorist and self-described thotscholar, femi babylon, refers to as proheauxism.¹⁹ This goes beyond what I previously named as merely a craving for more palpable sexuality (at times also labeled sex positivity) and instead enters the realm of those material concerns so many of our elders have had to navigate under even greater strictures than we continue to face today. This is not to say that a more pansexual, color-minded understanding of sexuality and liberation did not exist before the present. My “unloosed woman” playlist could equally gain a boost from the sounds of the late Nashville-born, Toronto-based 1960’s soul singer, Jackie Shane, who passed away in 2019.²⁰

But if I am both honest about the many erasures of this existence and intentional within my current practice, what I am able to offer to myself, my community, and those who have come before me is an empathetic understanding of the ways we may have previously been confined but also the keys to a newer liberation. As femi babylon calls it, a commitment “to collective and personal justice, not just sexually, but through recognition of labor and physical security... A rejection of antiheaux sentiments as well as respectability, racial capitalism, and whore hierarchies. Rejects (trans-)misogynoir. Does not accept nor engage in active or passive transphobia, homophobia, colorism, xenophobia, classism, or antiblackness.” Then, my appreciation for grandma Bernice as High John the Conqueror expands to encompass its full potential via lyrics of affirmation, “Got a new way of lovin’ babe, I wanna teach it to you. Everything you want me to do. I’ve got a new way of lovin’ babe, yeah, I wanna teach it to you. What you want me to do? The way I wanna love you babe, I know you got to love me too.”²¹

19 For a full breakdown of femi babylon’s five-part “working theory of proheauxism,” last updated March 2020, visit www.thotscholar.com

20 Max Mertens, “Jackie Shane ‘Any Other Way’” Pitchfork, 13, August 2017. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/jackie-shane-any-other-way/>

21 Jackie Shane, “New Way of Lovin” featured on 7” Vinyl Release, 1970 + Any Other Way Album Re-release, 2017. (Canada: Paragon 10, 1970; Chicago: The Numero Group, 2017).

Gardens, Chapter 2

Everyone and everything is dying right now. But everyone and everything is growing too. Potted plants. Kitchen counter herbs. Mason jars full of dirt. Lately, every Black person I know has formed some kind of home garden. These earthen altars are nothing fancy. It would seem that we're all just craving a little green. Some homemade version of the "wide-open place cut deep in the woods" (102) into which Cincinnati townfolk were known to follow Baby Suggs, holy, on a warm weather Saturday afternoon. Maybe we're trying to bring indoors some daily bit of that "green blessed place" of Sethe's memory and Baby Suggs' healing. If so, the concept of surrender seems to me to be at the heart of it. I recently moved to a neighborhood called

Audobon Forest and increasingly find myself negotiating the Nikki Giovanni "Allowables" of shared space with house spiders, garden snakes, rainy day snails, rabbits, and whole families of deer. A contraband bird's nest sits in my bedroom window where five baby sparrows were born last Spring during the early weeks of churning Black protest. Each one exists in complete defiance of my so-called boundaries – a fact irreverently proven by my torn window screen. I've never known myself to be capable of so completely releasing my grip on the false security of the urbane.

Sage * Basil * Chives * Thyme * Parsley * Cilantro * Oregano * Rosemary * Peppermint

Compared to Baby Suggs' relationship with the Clearing, I imagine myself a more likely example of that ill-informed Northern sibling whom Alice Walker mentions as having never lived "at the end of a long road in a house that was faced by the edge of the world on one side and nobody for miles on the other."²² Of course, Atlanta, where I've now lived for the past fourteen years, is not exactly the end of the world – being, itself, a major metropolis. But it is a unique city devoured by a skyline of equal parts rolling hills, mammoth trees, overrun shrubbery, and towering buildings. My new home sits squarely in the middle of those most rolling, mammoth, overrun places. I love it and am equally terrified of the creature it has made of me. If surrender is at the heart of my desire for this place, I suspect that the ocean is at the core of my fear. Yes, I am still talking about the wooded terrain around my house, but is one force of nature really all that different from the other? There are days when it feels like one false step could see me swept away in the undertow of a seaweed green current beyond my control. When I have

²² Alice Walker, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983), 20.

trouble finding a lawn service for a few months during rainy season, that same green is quick to reclaim my front yard as ceded territory in a battle I never knew we were fighting. But nature is wont to reclaim its own. So am I being dramatic to read Walker's next sentences as both wildly inviting and a threat to my personal autonomy? "Learn[ing] forever that water is the essence of all life... that [I am] a creature of the earth... loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does." (Walker, 20-21)

Okra * Corn * Garlic * Celery * Ginger * Onions * Squash * Carrots * Arugula * Spinach * Zucchini * Turmeric

I am of two minds. Old enough to remember my grandmother's stories of pregnant women eating dirt in South Carolina when they were iron deficient (or otherwise craving some nutrient to which they had no access), I do not envy the loss of control their circumstances – both pregnancy and rural living – seemed to bring upon them. But I am also young enough to know that there are likewise pictures of one of my cousins in the Bronx, pregnant and late night eating raw flour from the bag for similar reasons beyond her control. The obvious question nags at me: Were any of them made into such hungry mawing things because of the green of their surroundings, or merely the same old medical racism so many Black birthing people face? In which case, have I ever really been safe either? When 26-year-old Amber Isaac had trouble getting her prenatal doctor's attention during the height of the pandemic in New York, the waves were quick to reclaim her as ceded territory also. She died in childbirth at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx.²³ I spend a few weeks mounting wallpaper in my bedroom to look like the woods outside, almost inviting them in, before a new thought occurs: If we are not safe, not in control, then why I am I wasting time with my hands in the dirt instead of rising up in revolt? Such questions haunt but they offer few solutions.

Scallions * Sweet Potatoes * Tomatoes * Jalapeños * Asparagus * Cucumbers * Lima Beans * Bell Peppers * Jalap Root

A few weeks before Jamaica Kincaid reprised her "In the Garden" column for *The New Yorker*, I stumbled onto the 1990's iteration and quickly devoured her every entry – she seemed to un-

²³ Alexandra Villarreal, "New York Mother Dies After Raising Alarm on Hospital Neglect." *The Guardian*, 02, May, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/02/amber-rose-isaac-new-york-childbirth-death>.

derstand my conundrum. In one dispatch, Kincaid describes a painting of a European garden as “rich, rich, rich...” and the author of a subsequent quote referencing that painting as “a person who comes from a place where the wealth of the world is like a skin, a natural part of the body, a right, assumed, like having two hands and on them five fingers each.”²⁴ Something in this phrasing strikes me. Having never had access to wealth, and minimal claim to anything resembling rights, part of me feels ill-equipped to manage such excess. I am also unsure if I want to. Thoughts swirl in my head about the latest celebrity activist boarding a multi-million dollar private jet to attend some soiree where they might virtue signal at their efforts to save the planet by “going green.” This particular shade of the color is almost emerald – definitely rich, rich, rich – and it feels frivolous at best. At worst, it is a recreation of the very systems that deny my own communities access and care.

Brussel Sprouts * Kale * Collards * Mustards * Turnip Greens

Of course, excess is not the only way to build a relationship with the earth – a fact routinely demonstrated by Baby Suggs, Alice Walker, and my own neighbors. But when extreme wealth comes with the power to do irreparable harm, and those living more simply are left to suffer the consequences, where is the space to view time spent in a garden as anything other than whimsy and a dangerous distraction from the real work to be done? Ms. Kincaid gets at the root of this too when, later in the same article, she writes:

“And what is the relationship between gardening and conquest? Is the conqueror a gardener and the conquered the person who works in the field? ... At what moment is the germ of possession lodged in the heart? When another Spanish marauder, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, was within sight of the Pacific Ocean, he made his army stay behind him, so that he could be the first person like himself (a European person) to see this ocean; it is likely that could this ocean have been taken up and removed to somewhere else (Spain, Portugal, England), the people for whom it had become a spiritual fixture would long for it and at the same time not even know what it was they were missing. And so the dahlia: Who first saw it and longed for it so deeply that it was removed from the place where it had always been, and transformed (hybridized), and renamed?” (Kincaid, 154-55)

Echeverria * Sweetgrass * Golden Pothos * Snake * Rubber * Fig * Aloe * String of Pearls

²⁴ Jamaica Kincaid, “Flowers of Evil,” written for *In the Garden* (The New Yorker, October 5, 1992), 154.

I feel seen. So much of my angst and simultaneous craving is tied up in questions of consent versus invasion; self-possession versus an unhealthy desire for control. This anxiety only increases whenever Black people are being murdered in the streets with relative impunity – an almost everyday occurrence in the wake. Then, guilt washes over me like the “hot thing” (248) that surrounded Beloved in her crouching. I am not doing enough. None of this is enough. Everyone is dying now. Maybe I will die (soon?) too. When news breaks of yet another officer involved shooting, the peace lily in my entryway goes unwatered for weeks. My own hydration levels are not much better. What good are a few [stolen] callas or dahlias or fluffy blue hydrangeas like the ones my aunt Angela used to grow, if everyone is dying? Kincaid understands all of this. She even seems to understand the psychic connection I have made between land and sea. Does she know that some kelp can grow as big as trees and form underwater “forests”? Does she too miss them without knowing why?

Rice Grass * Hanging Fern * Tuna Cactus * Haworthia * Bamboo * Indigofera * Gossypium

Whatever the motivation, she does not stop gardening or writing about that gardening. She has made a small resistance of the habit. I try to do (and believe) the same. Maybe, if I water this one plant, I can water myself too. If I talk softly to a single velvet-stemmed leaf on the verge of wither, I can make room for tenderness toward myself too. If I can keep this boring mundane habit going, I can reject the chaos that those who hate us would make of our lives. And in rejecting their hoped-for destruction, isn't that too a kind of survival, a kind of living?

Sunflower * Peony * Lilac * White Calla * Hydrangea * Gerbera * Dahlia * Baby's Breath * Wisteria

When I am unable to sleep for an entire week during the month of April, I tell my therapist about my current late-night obsession: Internet researching schematics for a landscaped crop and flower garden in my wooded backyard. I half expect her to laugh or berate me for the scale and frivolous nature of this new pet project. Instead, she suggests that maybe some part of me needs it. Yes, there is the consumptive practice of Going Green as part of a surface aesthetic; meant only to assuage the guilt of society's many petty violences. But, there is also this: A desire to nurture some life beyond our own as proof we too are still alive and able to grow. I bought a house in the forest and the green of it consumes me daily. I am learning not to complain.

Painted monstera leaves dance along wallpapered walls and at night I often wake to the bleary-eyed vision of shadowy verdant figures standing watch over my bed. Perhaps, they are our many Black dead.

SOUNDS

It's the first piano chord that always drowns me. Dares me to start on one in spite of those who would map our sonic by even numbers. I am talking about a kind of literacy. Musical literacy. Or, more accurately, an illiteracy of that music which inhabits me.

I am telling you that I cannot read notes on paper. And I have no well-paced two four dancing rhythm in my bones – my feet preferring to slippery fin their way in and out of the beat. But I can listen (and I can count) and so something in the underwater warble of Nina Simone's raspy voice, and her first single piano chord, calls out to me anyway. I hear the four, distorted by waves, and recognize their story immediately. Aunt Sarah is Baby Suggs, body broken down to all but her great big heart. Beloved, of course, the bitter peach. Ripe and underwater wet with the ramifications of her parents enslavement, she holds no infant sweetness but plenty venom.

swallow salt
til their petty
hurts fail against the tide,
then learn to breathe
again

I know these women like I know myself. I do not read them in song notes but I can hear them. Feel them. Count them. The musically literate would call each one a quarter note among the larger whole. I hear simply the metronome of Black time clicking on.

Click. the pain, again & again. *Click.* between two worlds, I do belong. *Click Click.* Hips invite. Lips like wine. *Click.* I'll kill the first mutha I see. *Click.*²⁵

Can you hear it? The resistance, the legacies of survival, the Black enslaved person's refusal to be commodified. All tied up in Baby Suggs' insistence on naming herself; and Sethe's refusal to apologize for killing a child to spare her enslavement (followed by her own sex work to pay for that dead child's headstone); and Denver's nursing on that dead sister's shed blood because blood, too, is water; and finally, finally, Beloved's refusal to be so easily exorcised from

²⁵ Nina Simone, "Four Women," featured on *Wild Is the Wind* (New York: Philips Records, 1966).

family memory for something so frivolous as the fact of her death. *We carry our dead with us.*

Part of the reason Nina is so good at painting this surreal history into her songs is because the willfully contrary nature of its women relate a history not so far off from her own: A classically trained pianist, denied entry to the Curtis Institute of Music because of her race, afforded entry to the commercial music industry as merely an "entertainer" – another silky voiced Black commodity meant to make money for her superiors. The gag is how she too resists such easy packaging. Opting instead for a harsh guttural quality to her voice, she really starts to fuck with your head when she leans on those not-quite-quarter-note piano keys she knows so well. Classical, she tells us, yes. Easily translated, never.

In this way, I am talking about *Four Women*, the 1966 song, and its prophetic relationship to *Beloved*, the 1987 masterpiece. But really, I am citing something timeless like 1870 and 1960 and 2020 rolled into one. If I'm doing this right, I am telling you a thing that cannot be transcribed in music notes or melody or a chronology of lyric. A thing only communicated through "unintelligible sound." Roxanne R. Reed describes this familiar knowing-without knowing as a type of catharsis and restoration when she writes:

"The click anticipates the discernible melody that comes later. The anticipation, or, more commonly, the pick-up, as it is called, functions as a preparatory beat before the crucial downbeat ... In effect, it already communicates something to the listener about the music and the melody: mood, tempo, style. The click in African click speaking languages, or more precisely the click consonant, communicates by anticipating a word or replacing a word altogether ... The click accompanied by an intimate visceral recognition (re-memory) acknowledges the familial relationship and creates [a] pivotal point of restoration for the individual and the collective."²⁶

If such restoration is to be found in an off-meter sonic, the click is most prominent in Miriam Makeba's 1967 de-translation of *Qongqothwane aka Click Song Number 1*.²⁷ When I first came across this version, from her Pata Pata album, the number one in the title suggested that it must be the original, but that is not the case. Ms. Makeba first released The Click Song on her

²⁶ Roxanne R. Reed, "The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2007, pp. 55–71. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20487887.

²⁷ Miriam Makeba, "Qongqothwane" featured on *Miriam Makeba, 1960 + Pata Pata, 1967*. (United States: RCA Victor, 1960; New Jersey: Reprise, 1967).

1960 self-titled debut. That version featured a thirty second soft-spoken introduction during which Makeba patiently explains the history of the song and its importance within her village, then the instrumentation drifts in to set the tone and melody, and finally she joins her own voice with that melody at which point we hear the infamous click for the first time. If that first album took its time offering a foreign audience room to adjust to the music of a Xhosa woman, there is no such hand holding on the *Pata Pata* album's rendition of the song.

learn to let go
that which does not serve,
learn to carry under each arm
a jug,

For one thing, Makeba is no longer singing to that foreign audience but directly to her own people. She removes the spoken introduction, leapfrogs ahead of the instrumentation, and declares that the click itself will set the tone and melody. The musicians will just have to keep up with her frenetic pace – if they can manage. Also here, the slowed-down tempo from her first album, which simulated a hybrid kind of Negro-Spiritual-meets-Calypso quality and placed its emphasis on the twos and fours, is replaced with a sped up, significantly less accessible, but more authentic melody that follows an odd-numbered system of timekeeping. Led by the Xhosa consonant, Makeba's 135 rhythm becomes just as spiteful toward the western/English-speaking outsider as 124 ever was to those living outside the tiny home on Bluestone Road. Thus the guttural and the glottal become bedfellows. But why does this matter? Because we are counting.

I associate this counting with our steady march toward that new ark, the better gourd, into which we might pour ourselves. If the biblical ark of Noah's day called for a two-by-two counting of its inhabitants, we are no longer those beasts of burden (or, at least, we are engaged in a continued moving away from such status) meaning we have greater recourse to count ourselves as we see fit. This is not to say that the classic two four rhythm of African-American notoriety, especially, is no longer viable. But I do mean to say that sound, light, and water each operate across a continuum of wave lengths – the rainbow that appears when the ark relinquishes its position as the singular means for survival – where those waves meet, for the Black diasporic modern, is in our ability to count, color, and current ourselves in several multiplicitous directions at once. The Black symphony of foot-stomping church ladies can still slow clap in my face from time to time while scolding, "Come on, baby, you off count. You got to get on the beat. Who raised you? A pack of heathens?"

But there is also room to acknowledge the ways that other Black sonic traditions – by

way of their multilingualism, the popularity of afrobeat throughout continental Africa and beyond, the emergence of various rap/trap(s) across diaspora, and the lasting legacy of scat and improvisation throughout jazz – may also have some subversive quality that we might make use of. Can you hear it? The resistance, the legacies of survival, the Black refusal to be so easily quantified in even numbers.

fullup is what I am
&
in the stillness&
in the silence&
in the hush²⁸

MIRRORS X | X

If I say that Black is a mirror, I do so with very particular focus on the power of our collective lived experience as a fluid, ever evolving, technology for healing. This belief is fueled in part by my own pulsing need but also by something made tangible in the creative works of Ebony Noelle Golden – most recently with her black/water²⁹ curation project via Jupiter Performance Studio – and the writing of Rachel Eliza Griffiths. Griffiths has said that "when we look in the mirror, there's always the possibility that we can be shattered. That we can give back the image we want or don't want. That we can be reinvented. And yet mirrors also connect us to our past in a way. They show us a map not only of our moods but our genealogy, our lineage."³⁰

This idea speaks to me of a curiosity that transcends whatever might exist on the other side of any exploration. Hard set answers may be helpful but they are largely beside the point. Conversation and personal engagement and rigor and community are what's most important. Golden describes her womanist performance practice similarly:

"Think of [it] as a stew, a gumbo if you will—a good hearty soup that heals and sustains you and your community... The performance of gumbo mirrors the stew you eat. It is most often experienced when a large group of people are together and multiple conversations hap-

28 An ekphrastic in conversation/continuation with Lorna Simpson's Waterbearer, (1986).

29 Ebony Noelle Golden, et al., "black/water." Betty's Daughter Arts Collaborative / Jupiter Performance Studio. <https://www.bettysdaughterarts.com/jupiter-performance-studio>.

30 Ben Purkert and Rachel Eliza Griffiths, "Back Draft: Rachel Eliza Griffiths." Guernica, 03, August, 2020. <https://www.guernicamag.com/back-draft-rachel-eliza-griffiths/>.

pen simultaneously. People pop in and out of dialogue, criss-crossing conversations effortlessly. Everyone knows what is being said and everyone is heard... People on the outside may look at the process and have no idea what is happening. However, those of us dedicated to the process are inspired and plugged in to the electric energy generated when we engage gumbo yaya with fervor, rigor, fearlessness and creativity.”

In this way, I have tried to shape my own understanding of how Baby Sugg’s colors and Beloved’s water are able to offer healing. Less as the answer to a single question and more as the opening up of an ongoing dialogue.

What if the ocean... what if we won’t always... what if the deep... knows ... sees... receives... misses us too... what if the question is the answer... what if the tangle is... the body... what if this is not real... what if conjure is container is... conjure... are you hungry... is your hunger like my thirst... what if thirst is the only thing that’s real... what if there’s no such thing as forgetting... what if yellow is a good color... what is the taste of freedom... what if it’s only a feeling... what if faith is not enough... what if it is... what if god walks underwater... not on it... what if our dead are the only true living... what if the water is ceremony... is church... is blood... is cycle... is spokes on wheel... is now... is then... is tomorrow... is arm flap... is head tilt... is eye roll... is blink and we gone... til we back... is we never left... what if we go... what if we went... what if we seeds... green... more like maroon... what if we be loved... what if we remembered who... we were... what if we remembered who... we are... what if we healed... what if we already did... what if we looked away... what if we didn’t... what if we owe debt to water... what if it pay with interest... what if we touched (each other)... what if I touched (myself)... what if we talked... what if I told you... what if I told me (the truth)... first... what if you gave me your tongue... what if we gave each other permission... what if I am bitter... what if they took all our milk... what is your milk... what if they came in my yard... what if I need you... what if the root ain’t a thing to be held... but a place to be reached... what if our dead are right now doing a three card spread to get answers (from us)... what if healing is grown folks business... what if we grown... what if we safe... whole... home... beloved... what if wide hips and a big belly the answer to everything... what if it’s wild... what if turbulence is the body seeking warmth... what if we let go the conquest... what if I stopped performing... what if we turned off the show... what if we swallowed every drop of the Atlantic... what if it didn’t quench our thirst... what if Black [] is god... what if we human... what if we stuck our hands in some dirt... what if fluffy blue clouds... like hydrangeas... what if the answer is Spirit... what if the spirit is Color... what if

Black time is every and all time(s)... what if fucking is how we stop time... what if we listened... what if I heard you... what if we can’t go back... what if we never went back... what if we go on forever?

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s start over. In the beginning, Black was a mirror. What if we looked?

SHAKIRAH PETERSON

I'm a MFA student in creative writing at Louisiana State University. My work centers archival art that sheds light on the intricacies of Black life. I am constantly searching for artists/art that my work speaks with/to. I am submitting to this journal with hopes of gaining a space in a community who love, values, and appreciates Black lives as much as I do.



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river roots



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SANNII CRESPINA-FLORES

Sannii Crespina-Flores is a teaching artist, advocate and activist for youth and women. She is the founder of the Un-Inhibited Muse Film Festival, the global youth initiative Do Remember Me and the art collaborative Yram Collective. She is the author of the audio book ‘Conversations with my Conscience’ that debuted in South Africa and London and the forthcoming e-book “Machetes are forged in Soft Rivers”. She has screened work at the 60th Cannes and was awarded the grand prize for the short story challenge at the 15th Sundance Film Festivals. Her work has been on exhibit in Budapest, Colombia, South Africa, London, Italy, the United Nations (NY) as well local galleries. She has received grants to create works for independent television and cultural organizations. She is the board chair of the Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation and a member of the Writers Guild of America(East) Indie Caucus. She has also contributed to academic publications and created learning guides for TED Ed, National Geographic and the Hip Hop Education Center.

An Acceptable Sacrifice

We arrived with our gods, walked them into the soil and braided totems into our hair. Distance and time made memory a myth. The wind sang a lullaby that brought to mind lavender and lemons but the words were a mystery. She could feel the words pressing against her lips begging her to remember. She could not, not now. The only tide rising now, right now had been ‘hushed’ by the women preparing the way with wax, water, rum and fire.

The women sang too, some forked tongue melody of moon goddesses and warriors that were birthed by the ocean. New land words mixed with what was left of homeland words. It was no longer comforting.

Her small frame erupted in violent waves. She just wanted to rest, be soft like the doll she made for her sister from a long ago discarded dress. This last wave pulled her under the memory of

water. She was ready to break the surface of the water. She needed to breathe. Again. She held a whole ocean between her teeth and it was hungry to be free. She wanted to scream.

Her screams beat against her teeth in a futile effort to escape so she sounded like she was instead struggling to keep a secret. A low dull moan was what was given permission to escape. She heard ‘push’.

And her trembling 12 year old legs gave way to a life.

The women moved as one toward the new child whispering prayers to a God they were sure had not forgotten them in this new land. Sure they had planted the seeds when they arrived and they were faithful.

*“Ala, Ala, we are here in a new land
your daughters, faithful and present
born in the divine light of the moon
Lend you voice to this child”*

As they created a small circle around mother and child to bear witness to the birth, a small moon faced life lay silent on a blanket of soft dried grass. It was a girl. She opened her almond shaped eyes and she

and she

and she before her lived in the marrow of her bones. The weight of all that filled her tiny eyes with saltwater. The ocean that was not able to escape her mother’s lips. Baby girl felt her mother’s breath on her belly and noticed the smell, warmth and heaviness of it. This was the first feeling of separation. It was different than the vibration and scent of her recently abandoned home. The inhale, exhale of her mother moved her, lulled her, created a hymn. The ripple of her words tickling her ribs. These words would become her baptism and she would be reminded of them every time she inhaled, exhaled. A tickle becomes a tattoo. A prayer becomes a promise.

It was those conversations between God and her mother heard and felt while waiting to arrive. Soft whispers from her mother. A mother’s plea for this new life and her name. A name is the first offering, the first sacrifice. The weight of it, the expectation to become someone not of your own choosing. Mother named her Sochi- only God. Only God could have given her this task,

this heavy journey. She was tasked with unraveling the voices in her bones from the she and the she before her. All the blood of her ancestors bubbling with memory and she had not yet created one memory of her own. She enjoyed their company but not their wanting to be free through her. A sacrifice no child should bear but it was hers like her mother and all the first born girl children before her.

Sochi was created because her mother, Awah, stopped remembering, stopped speaking aloud, stopped singing the signs and ways of the people. Awah, her name means “let us rest”, wanted to rest, be still, be a child. She no longer wanted to be a bridge between this world and the world of the ancestors. Awah was becoming a ghost after living with spirits for so long. It was intoxicating until it felt like drowning. The drowning in voices that were not her own. She began to forget the sound of her own voice. She decided to give birth to her freedom. A new sacrifice, a new offering that would allow her to live. God would understand. She heard her prayers. No one had asked God before her.

Sochi’s tongue was tied by infancy so instead she clenched her tiny fists opening and closing them slowly and purposefully conjuring the energy for the announcement of her arrival. A hush fell over the woman as they waited for the first sound the child would make. She felt their anticipation, their need and want.

Sochi made them wait.



AN INTERVIEW WITH JOY PRIEST

Joy Priest is the author of *HORSEPOWER* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2020), winner of the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. She is the recipient of a 2021 NEA fellowship and a 2019-2020 Fine Arts Work Center fellowship, and has won the 2020 Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize from APR, and the Gearhart Poetry Prize from *The Southeast Review*. Her poems have appeared in the *Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day*, *The Atlantic*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among others. Her essays have appeared in *The Bitter Southerner*, *Poets & Writers*, *ESPN*, and *The Undeclared*, and her work has been anthologized in *Breakbeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, *The Louisville Anthology*, *A Measure of Belonging: Writers of Color on the New American South*, and *Best New Poets 2014, 2016 and 2019*. Joy received her M.F.A. in poetry, with a certificate in Women & Gender Studies from the University of South Carolina. She is currently a doctoral student in Literature & Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

For many writers, a debut collection is really a culmination of years spent on a specific project and their immediate obsessions, while still leading full lives. What was life like in the process of making this book for you? What aspects of your writing and personal life have been altered since its debut?

I wouldn't describe my experience writing *Horsepower* as "years spent on a specific project" because I didn't know I was working on a specific project until very late. I spent years writing poems. The oldest two poems in *Horsepower* are 10 years old. So, I can say, retrospectively, that in the span of the last 10 years I wrote poems that would end up in *Horsepower*, but I also wrote many that would not.

Similarly, I can't really answer "what life was like" because across those 10 years, which

spanned my twenties—a very dynamic period in anyone's life—what my life was like changed mercurially. I wrote through college, depression, eviction, 9-5s, reporting beats, artist collectives, music journalism, waiting tables, obsessions, short-lived romantic entanglements, heartbreak, loss, grief, suicidal periods, depression meds, as well as several geographical relocations, people, body sizes, spirits, dispositions, and identities.

I started submitting the manuscript to first book prizes the penultimate semester of my MFA. I didn't even have a title when I began to submit. It was toward the end of that semester that I wrote the title poem, "Horsepower," and realized that was the title of the book. It encompassed all of the book's major conceits. Now, I finally saw a book. Now, I could curate the experience of a book around this concept.

That next summer the manuscript won the Donald Hall Prize—the only prize, coincidentally, that wasn't a first book prize, but which invited manuscripts from poets at all stages (let the record reflect). The book then wasn't published until over a year later, this past September (2020). So, in the time between finishing a manuscript, and going through the publication process of a book, you know, I'm in a much different place than when I was writing the book across my twenties. I hardly think of the poems therein, anymore.

The reception of the book exceeded expectations, selling out of its first run before its release date, and yet the book was also left off all the year-end lists. The demand for new poems from various journals was overwhelming when the book came out, I was doing several virtual readings on Zoom a week. So, in terms of my personal life, I've really had to figure out how to enforce boundaries that protect my writing process so that I'm not just writing on-demand or writing a new poem to answer a solicitation. I don't like that. I put myself on a submission/publishing moratorium after the book came out. So, what changed? The release of any new material as I try to figure out how to write poems again—how to write new individual poems again, as opposed to composing material or revising poems for a manuscript or work-in-progress. Which, I think, involves not writing very much at all, but reading as much as possible. That's how writing—making something out of nothing—always begins for me. Attention and absorption.

Kentucky, as I've famously heard you say, is known for horses, bourbon, and basketball (I hope I got this right!). All of which tend to lean more toward a more masculine state of socializing or entertainment. What impact might the designation "Tomboy" have on your speaker? How might that particular designation lend itself to your speaker's relationship to gender?

That's interesting. I've never really thought about it quite like that: "masculine state(s) of socializing or entertainment" as particularly characteristic of Kentucky. Growing up, the main sources of entertainment were horses, basketball, boxing, muscle cars, and martial arts films. Also, playing outside, video games, etc. That pretty much sums up my main interests, lol. Maybe it's because my caretaker was a southern man in his sixties, then seventies. Maybe it was my own impulses, which therefore define my Kentucky and the Kentucky of my childhood. I keep trying to write this short story about a girl mechanic. Lol, that's all I got. I don't have a plot or conflict, just like, "I wanna write a story about a Black, southern, female mechanic who only works on cars that were made pre-fuel injection."

Obviously, when it comes to writing a collection of poems that could be described as "narrative"—in that it follows a specific speaker and the events of her trajectory throughout—I don't want to impact her with any easily summed up designations. I hope I wrote a speaker so complex she, instead, requires the reader to understand her without any designations or to understand, newly, those who we designate as such. I guess what I'm saying is, I hope that my speaker complicates gender, and a reader's understanding of who a Black "girl" is, and what her relationship to gender is, particularly in southern spaces that are sort of ruled by the masculine as your question points out—hunting, fishing, guns. I think of Nikky Finney's poem, "Negroes with Guns":

*At the knotty rusty screen, the mother who
can shoot the first and second s from out
the middle of grasshopper, without browning
the grass or decapitating the hop hop, stares
out into the field of yellowing pine for sign
of insect life or other other.*

*The trees unwrap. Gunpowder lifts every leaf
into air. . .*

*just behind her
the pig iron smokes.*

Throughout *Horsepower*, we see the speaker engage both the sacred and the profane within the poems. This duality never seems to be outside the scope of the speaker or the lyric. How might this duality be specific to a wayward speaker?

Well, I'm interested in how you see the speaker engaging "both the sacred and the profane within the poems." Examples? How do you see it within the scope of the lyric (in the book)? These are the kind of things that readers see in the work that a writer wasn't explicitly thinking in the poems' construction. I think, what I've come to realize as a debut poet, is that I really want interviewers to point to a poem, a line or two in the poem, and point something like this out and then ask me about it: "See this right here? What were you doing? What were you thinking about?" I've just realized this in the process of being interviewed and thought it might be useful to put forth. The craft of interviewing. . .

I suppose what I can say is, rather than a duality, there are just different, perhaps conflicting, ways of looking at *wayward*.

"That girl is wayward," you might hear someone say about a girl who isn't following a Western colonial sense of etiquette and decorum, which calls for chastity, restraint, and delicateness.

One thing I was interested in with this collection, once I understood the cinematic narrative experience I was trying to curate, was ordering a composition that would capture the Black girl speaker being wayward so as to imply a kind of aspiration—literally, in refusing to stay home and take care of everyone, sacrificing her hopes and desires and dreams in the process, and figuratively, in terms of the fugitivity that Moten and Hartman and Campt and, very specifically for me, Kara Keeling write about. To me, what might be profane in the Enlightenment philosophy that produced the organizing sensibilities of our society (dark = evil; light = innocent) is intentionally made sacred in this book. I was greatly influenced, too, by Keeling's "black femme

figure” in her book *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*.

Whose common sense are we following?

Keeling writes, “the black femme is a figure that exists on the edge line, that is, the shore line between the visible and the invisible. . . . Because she often is invisible (but nonetheless present), when she becomes visible, her appearance stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different or differently” (2). So, in a Western colonial common sense, the black femme figure might appear fugitive in her necessary acts of survival. In fact, this is an idea foundational to the country’s Constitution. But, in the common sense of my collection I wanted to work toward a different common sense—the idea that it is okay to be wayward, in fact, in a black femme common sense, it is sacred. Keeling goes on: “Attending to the lines of flight set in motion by (un)successful attempts to contain or circumscribe the black femme within existing epistemological categories provides an opportunity to elucidate the workings of the cinematic and the cinematic processes integral to contemporary racism, sexism, and homophobic violence,” and hopefully by attending to those lines I can also avoid, and produce something other than, those racist archetypes inherent in the cinematic and literary tradition of the U.S. Hopefully, I produced a Black femme figure that is visible in her flight, and whose visibility allows us to perceive her waywardness differently.



DONNIE MORELAND

Donnie Denkins Moreland Jr is a Minnesota based health educator and writer. Donnie has contributed to Black Youth Project, A Gathering of the Tribes, RaceBaitr, Black Humanist Agenda and Sage Group Publishing. Donnie hopes that by contributing to such a journal, he'll continue to be in communion with others dedicated to memorializing the wonder of our ancestry, so that we may properly imagine our futures.

Memories of Men

How do we live?

Suspended against the tide until they became us.

The tracker, the hunter, the chieftain, the shepherd, their children, their boys and their confidants.

But how do we live?

How do we confess the faces we've taken to avoid the slaver's net?

Like mud, we deform into their visions of the most trifling.

Their crook, their puppeteer, their preacher and their sick.

How we've lived.

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Root Work Journal
Vol- 1 Issue- 2

We kept our torso's above water, toes pushing into others too proud to shape, proper.

We drowned them.

Those women, and our brothers.

We drowned them.

And we stood tall, in that slipstream, praying the next ship continued course without reservation of what we were.

And at night, we sought our old faces.

We hoped that on bare, gaping waters given favor by the moon, we'd greet.... ..those Igbo

eyes.

That Ashanti nose.

Those Akan lips.

That Amalu scar.

But all that shown was our contrition. And as morning comes, we float still. Too prideful, and too violent to sink.

Too frightful to swim ahead.

That would require another turn of form.

One bend, more.

With new lines.

Newer angles.

And then it happens.

Beneath our feet, there is nothing to hold up our fat.

The others.

New lines.

Newer angles,

despite our brutality.

Patterns like what was stolen, ashore.

What we shed, to subdue the slaver's hunger.

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Root Work Journal
Vol- 1 Issue- 2

So how do we live, with what is left?

With what still hides, below the peak?

Maybe, we might do well to follow the one's ahead.

But to gain favor...

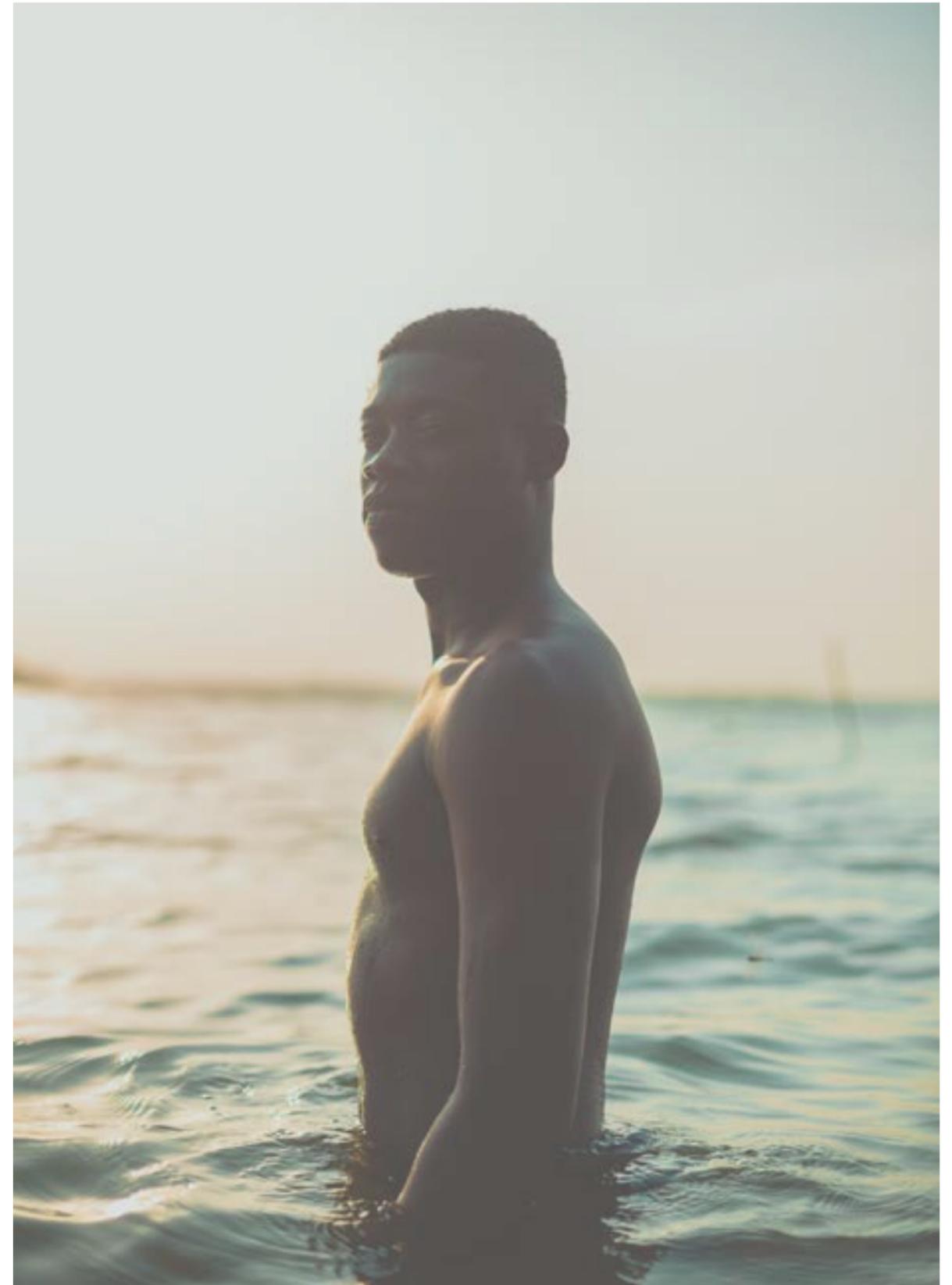
Atonement....

....resolution....

*....the tracker, the hunter,
the chieftain,
the shepherd
and their children.....*

....in the mouths of the boys we used to be.

Somewhere before the wake.



JOSHUA MERCHANT

Native of East Oakland. Black. Queer. Has had the privilege to be published as a Qnalist for the June Jordan Poetry Prize anthology 'In These Streets' as well as the literary journal Eleven Eleven.

Distilled

a boy walks home alone at night
carrying a 12 pack of water.
in the south, at this hour
he is one of the few walking.
and cars drive by. one of them honks
who's to say it's not at him.

a girl drives home alone at night.
blunt in hand. half a liter of water
on the passenger side. who's
to say what's healthier for her -
sedation or hydration. and the boys
wait at the bus stop. who's to say
the wheels on her car aren't records
she refuses to scratch.

a man is home alone at night
a bottle of hawaiian punch
in the fridge. he's praying
to god. who's to say he isn't
one on his knees in remembrance
of his name. his tears aren't red
nor sweet and the water
from the tap is questionable.

a woman is home at night.
can only swallow if thickener
is placed in her water. who's
to say she should still be here
swallowing what feels like syrup
in a crowded hall of wheel chairs
and dateline tv. a man is telling

a boy that his views on water
are dated. that the government
puts things we don't want into
things we need. the boy tells
the man the government can
also make your water brown
and charge you for the bill.

the boy then turns to the girl
asking to hit the blunt. the
girl replies *why are we always
so thirsty.* the boy says
you right. lemme get a swig.
she says *that's not for you*
and drives away to visit
her mother. the woman

who's raising her hand
to grab her cup is being
told to slow down with
the liquor cuz it's not
going anywhere. noone
wants to say that she might.

until a girl walks in
with half a liter water
and says *here ma. drink
this instead.*

BRIANNA PERRY

Brianna Perry is a visual artist, writer, and poet, originally born in Chicago, Illinois. She is interested in the intersection between studying and practicing black cultural production. By submitting to this journal, she hopes to be in conversation with a larger community of thinkers who are reckoning with blackness in their creative and scholarly practices.

If You're Woke You Dig It

Contrary to the general consensus that the origins of “woke” lie in the 2008 Erykah Badu song “Master Teacher”, the genesis of “woke” can be traced to the ending of the Civil Rights Movement and the seeds sown for Black militancy. In 1962, Black novelist William Melvin Kelley penned a New York Times article “If You’re Woke You Dig It.” Kelley’s editorial is captioned: “No mickey mouse can be expected to follow today’s Negro idiom without a hip assist.” Kelley’s op-ed begins with him riding a subway train in New York City, reading the various advertisements plastered on the train. One of the advertisements issues from New York Transit Authority, featuring “This is your train, take care of it” in 21 languages. One of the languages is “Beatnik”, which puts the following spin on the NYCTA’s slogan: “Hey cats this is your swinging-wheels, so *dig it* and keep it boss.” Kelley takes time to note that this language is not Beatnik, but what we have decidedly come to call Black Vernacular English (BVE), the language of Black people from New York City’s “No Strings” area to Chicago’s South Side. What white and non-Black “users” of Black Vernacular English miss about this variety of English is that it is far from simple. It is about context and inflection, or as Kelley says, “what it means depends on who and what a person is talking about.” It hardly be claimed or definite that Kelley’s use of “woke” is its genesis; it probably flew from the lips of any anonymous Harlemitte. But the importance of “woke” and “stay woke”, both as a call for critical consciousness among Black people, and the political purposes of Black speech and utterance, have been missed. Black speech itself is always a form of political consciousness, the counter-hegemonic approach to language which renders its use and dissemination pertinent to calls for Black liberation.

Kelley’s article brings the idiom “woke” to print several decades before Badu’s song and Childish Gambino’s “Redbone.” The late writer’s definition of “woke” calls for Black political con-

sciousness congeals with its use among 21st century Black musicians and activists. After the Badu track, ‘woke’ experienced a resurgence in the rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. Just as “I have a dream” and gospel lyrics carried the charge of the Civil Rights era, “All Power to the People” bore the militancy of Black Power, “Stay Woke” became aligned with BLM. Beginning with the 2014 murder of Ferguson, Missouri resident Michael Brown, BLM activists began to warn each other to “stay woke.” Before its mainstream dilution, “stay woke” has a history in the rhetoric of Black political organizing and expressive culture. In 1923, President of the United Negro Improvement Association Marcus Garvey harangued his audience with “Wake up, Ethiopia! Wake up, Africa!” Blues musician Lead Belly released a protest song in 1938 titled “Scottsboro Boys” recounting the accusation of rape against nine African American boys in Alabama in 1931. Towards the end of the song Lead Belly sings, “I advise everybody to be a little careful when they go along through there, stay woke, keep their eyes open.” African American educator J Saunders Redding takes record of a black United Mines Worker official stating “Let me tell you buddy. Waking up is a damn sight harder than going to sleep, but we’ll stay woke up longer” in 1940. These uses predate Kelley’s 1962 opinion editorial, and while differing in style, they generally conform to a transnational, Black call-and-response between major Black figures in arts and politics to the broader community of people of African descent. Nevertheless, Kelley’s piece and usage of “woke” is notably prescient in his prediction of the absorption and co-optation of Black vernacular into American popular culture. He acknowledges the constant process of transforming the meanings and connotations of Black Vernacular English to keep pace with the culture vultures. And very often, it will be the very same culture vultures calling the death knell on words like “woke.” Black breath will distort and contort colonial English into its revolutionary form, and it takes only one ofay to dilute the semantic power of a word. Take for example, columnist David Brooks’ 2018 article “The Problem with Wokeness.” Then fast forward a few months to NPR contributor Sam Sanders’ “Opinion: It’s Time to Put ‘Woke’ to Sleep.” Sanders’ article notes that MTV told people to stop using it in 2016. SNL parodied the slang term’s death in 2017. Green Party candidate Jill Stein sent a tweet out to her followers in 2016, accompanied by a graphic reading “Get Woke, Stay Woke.” Key to Kelley’s article is the function of Black Vernacular Englishes (as well as creoles along with French and Spanish pidgins, etc): We are speaking code. The field slave smiling singing what were later called work songs is speaking code. Code functions both to shield the speaker from the judgment of native speakers of colonial languages, like the phenomenon of code switching, but also as a key to Black sociality. In “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words”, bell hooks

riffs upon African slaves' transformation of linguistic matter. Throughout the text, she repeats this line from Adrienne Rich's poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children:" "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you." As peoples belonging to the transnational African diaspora, we have been subject to learning colonial tongues. Standard English, bell hooks notes, is not the speech of exile, of a dispossessed and displaced people, but the language of conquest and domination. Conversely, we can say that neither French, Spanish, and Portuguese are the languages of exile. But their re-wording/re-worlding by colonized and/or displaced African peoples results in Black Vernacular Englishes, pidgins, and creoles. Before we visit African slaves' linguistic adaptations to a hostile environment of chattel slavery, we must also account for the *loss* of language. That is, before people from sub-Saharan Africa were racialized as Black, they were apart of distinct ethnic groups indigenous to continental Africa. The loss of a mother tongue meant the rupture of kinship systems and the disintegration of social identities. hooks provokes us to think about the difficulty of not hearing the "sound of slaughter and conquest" in standard English. The very sound of English itself, she argues, must have been terrifying. The disruption of deep social bonds forged through shared speech was inevitable to the process of transporting Africans to the New World. When we think about how we, as Black people, speak to each other, we imagine new intimacies. hooks argues that Africans must have realized that standard English was a site for possession, using the language to claim a space of resistance. hooks writes, "In the mouths of black Africans in the so-called "New World," English was altered, transformed, and became a *different* speech. Enslaved black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language" ("Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words", 1994; emphasis mine). The alchemy of Black Vernacular, in this case applied to standard English, occurs through the mutation of a colonial language into different speech. We see this taking place in the phrase "stay woke": "woke" undergoes resemanticization, in which "new meanings have been attached to pre-existing morphs" ("Theorizing African American Women's Language: GIRL as a Discourse Marker", 2009) and "stay" implying some form of performativity, or a condition of political consciousness. Diving deeper into the grammatical aspects of Black Vernacular English, "stay woke" embodies the habitual and intensified continuative aspect of BVE. "Stay woke" evokes a habitual and intensified continuative grammatical aspect, meaning that "stay" acts as an adverbial phrase which strengthens the meaning of "woke", that is, being "woke" represents an action that is ongoing. The grammars of BVE point to the timelessness of anti-blackness, the notion that we are still in the hold of the ship be it on street corners or at Ivy League universities.

We can understand the statement "stay woke" as an alternative temporal state, in which Black people are perpetually aware of the state of the world – localized in the American settler-colonial state wherein the condition of Black social death is always already reality. The potency of Black Vernacular English does not merely lie in its ability to enable resistance to white supremacy, but "that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and *alternative epistemologies* – different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview" ("Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words", 1994; emphasis mine) It is fruitful to elevate being woke, or "wokeness" to the level of an different way of thinking and knowing the world. If you're woke, you dig it. Emblematic of most black cultural production, however, non-Black people began to use woke. The term is another tragedy of digital blackface: everyone "sounds black" online. As Black radicals continue to fight for our liberation, the value of trying to keep Black cultural production and BVE from use by non-Black people may seem futile and insignificant. But how will we, as Black people, talk to each other? What potential kinship structures and intimacies are disrupted when it is easy for anyone to sound and talk black? I have come to this determination: Black vernacular English should be our property. But it is difficult for the descendants of slaves, who were considered property, to now claim any property. From ridicule over a perceived corruption of colonial languages by Black Americans, to the now popular blaccent occurring IRL and in digital spaces, we may wonder if imitation is the highest form of flattery. Imagine an effective Underground Railroad where all the slavemasters knew exactly what "stations" meant. You would still be on that plantation. Now, we face the unlimited access to Black cultural production, the bodies of Black people, and the representation of the Black image. In 2014, hosted by Critical Resistance, Robin D.G. Kelley and Fred Moten convened over the topic "Do Black Lives Matter?" As with any discussion of Black Lives Matter, Moten begins with a list of Black people that were then lost to police violence: Eric, Garner, Michael Brown. Knowing that Eric Garner sold "loosies", and that his engagement in this activity was why NYPD approached him in the first place, Moten argues that [Garner] "initiated a new kind of marketplace and another mode of social life." To Moten, it is the *alternative mode of social life* which was killed, not restricted to Garner's individual tale. Black social life is a threat to the very order that murderers such as Darren Wilson swear to protect. Beginning with a recall of the black deaths which preceded the talk, Fred Moten turns our attention away from the phrase "Black Lives Matter" to the nominative "Black Life." Moten notes that Black life is distinguished by its openness and unfixity – "it can claim anybody." This is true in that Blackness *happens* to someone, and as the phenomenon of Blackfishing tells us, white people are choosing to hap-

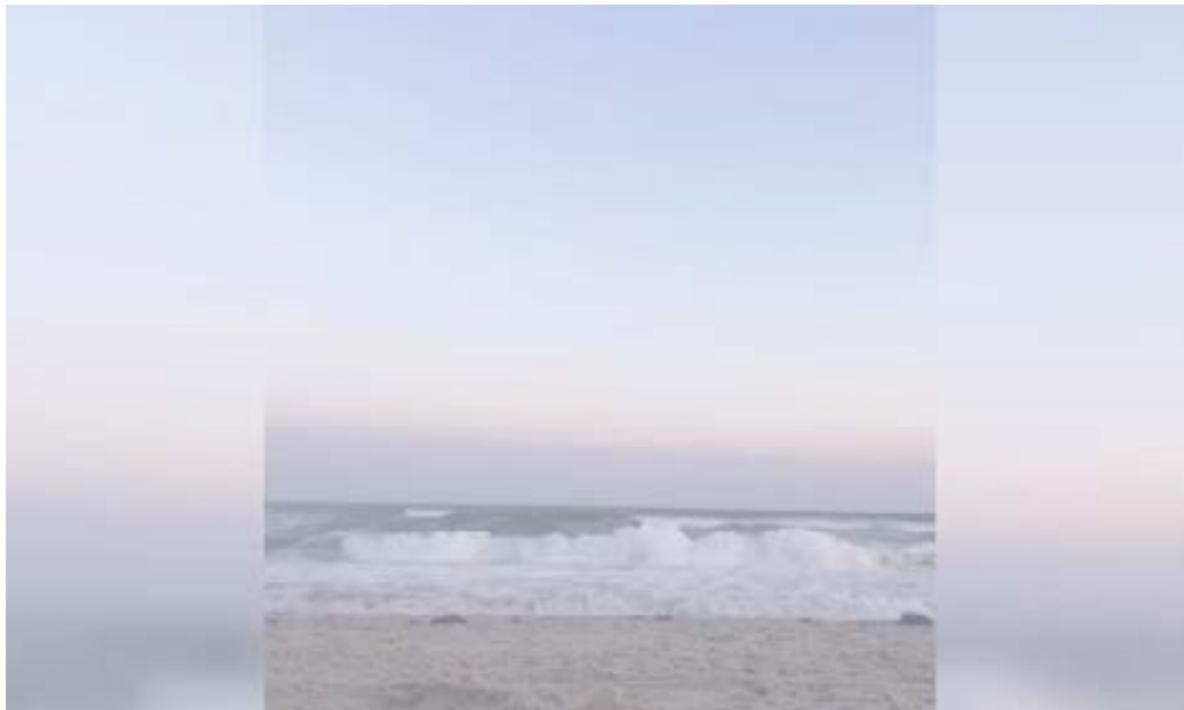
pen to be Black. Rachel Dolezal, Jessica Krug, other white women whose names I can't remember but whose actions will always be salient. I would have never known that this fiction I live would be so palatable to white women. Nevertheless, the fact that Black social life can claim anybody does not mean it can claim those who are not racialized as Black. Black social life, or Black sociality, has been the historical phenomenon of enacting an alternative way of life, with BVE asking us to imagine new ways of life through language. As Robin D.G. Kelley puts it, the psychic life of America is dependent on Black labor even if it does not value Black life. This reverberates, I think, with this summer's calls to consume the work of Black intellectuals through following anti-racist reading lists, and to buy Black. Only by continuing to produce are Black people valuable, even if our value is not possessed by us. So, black (intellectual) (economic) (entrepreneurial) labor matters, but not necessarily Black life. If you're woke, you can dig it. So, here we are, it is 2020, I am at an American academic institution whose valuing of Black life extends to an essentially accumulative process, following chattel slavery. The university needs more diversity, therefore more Black bodies. Mo Black Bodies, Mo Problems. Mo Money, Mo Problems. You walk past a car with a BLM bumper sticker. You scroll through Twitter and Instagram, peeping bios newly adorned with "BLM. ACAB." White people are still afraid to make eye contact with you. You wonder at what point you became a person of color instead of a Black person. You yearn for that comfort of being around a bunch of Black people, maybe woke, maybe not, but at least they know the disruption of space the Black body causes somewhere inside of them. It is the mass of Black people that is exactly what threatens the order police protect. We, are on the corners, we, are up to no good, we, were seen fleeing from this crime scene, we, gathered together in that neighborhood. Preaching to the converted, you notice that everyone is woke now. Neologisms such as "woke culture" and "wokedopians" have been touted out by the Right and Left alike. "Stay woke" has been used ironically, referring to things of minor consequence to Black political consciousness. It is now a term of derision, subject to memeification. Maybe we will create another word signifying Black political awareness, maybe it will be adopted by nonBlack people in a series of weeks. Everyone is woke now, they have read Audre Lorde and "White Fragility" and they know the minute a spectacular black death occurs. We have completed a lesson in morality maybe, or an exercise of empathy. The goal could be just recognizing that Black people are human. Again, I ask and will probably receive no response: what does it mean to be human? Do we want to be assimilated into human rights discourse? Do we want to settle for being human? Fred says Black social life imagines and enacts another future. I have no interest in being absorbed into America or following Sylvia Wynter, proving

that Black people can embody the economic principles that govern the current genre of human. As we scramble for the crumbs of BVE after it has been digested by global consciousness, plot to be included in the definition of human, and hope to be the beneficiaries of anti-racist action, what is salvageable? Not my life. Before I live, I am dead. In the case of "stay woke", BVE points to the ontological condition of the Black diaspora: If one isn't sleeping, are they dead? If you're woke, you can dig it.

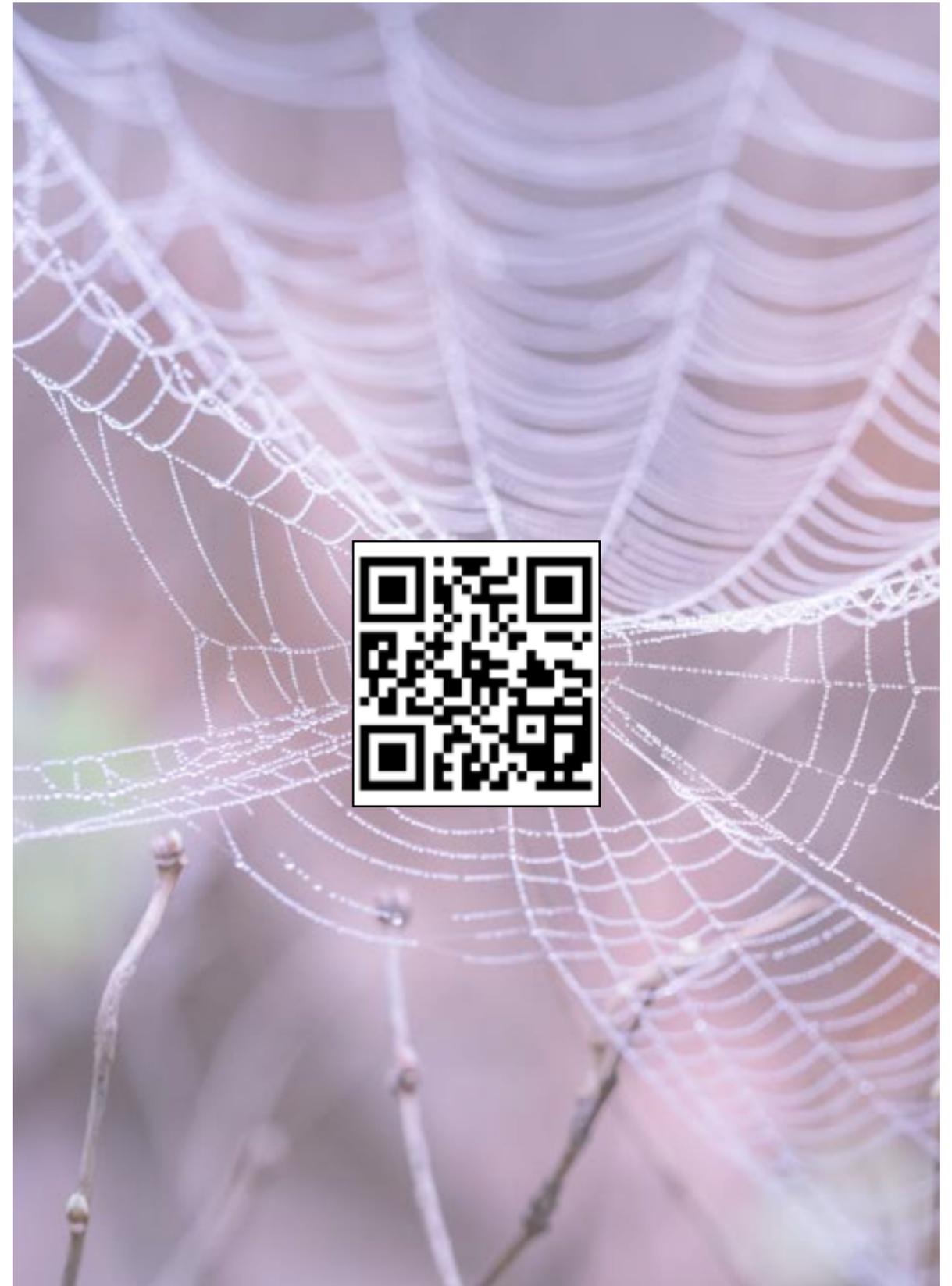
ANANSE & THE TRICKSTERS

Allen Kwabena Frimpong otherwise known as ananse & the tricksters is a conceptual and performance artist. ananse & the tricksters body of work serves as a reprisal of the infamous folklore tales of Ananse the Spider from the Akan-Asante people in West Africa, the Caribbean and in North America. Ananse and the tricksters' work serves as a ritual rooted in the Akan cosmology from the area known as Ghana in West Africa. Ananse invites the energy of the tricksters who are cunning, savvy, adaptive and spiritual beings in West African cosmologies. He focuses on spiritual and physical constellations of the universe as a web of conceptual connections that weave stories of liberation from the spiritual bankruptcy of capitalism and creating an abundant life. Our hope through this submission is to contribute to the theme as a representation of play, relaxation, and rest for Black bodies.

Waves and Beats in Sankofa



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KISAYE NATSUKI

I am an author, a life and leadership coach, a lecturer, mother, grandmother and a survivor, who was born in Trinidad and migrated to Canada at 15. I have worked to understand and integrate my family's generational experiences of violence, migration & transformation. From doing this, I have worked in communities to help heal and grow African peoples generational experiences of pain, loss and change, using and reclaiming silenced and sometimes forgotten ways of seeing and feeling our world.

Full

The absence of home feels like an absence,
not a temporary passage through which gifts of discovery lie, but an
absence, marked
by an ocean unsettled
casting unfettered ship in violent motion back and forth on fitful seas
never reaching land
though disembarking
to shore
Heart embedded like feet sinking into dirt,
Body adrift, sailing without mast and sails,
following a
compass mismatched
to the weather and these stars

Eyes close as night draws near
fatigued by the billow of emerald blue
waters, and
torrid
winds, always beneath
a howling moon

seeking a plot of land chosen by my desire that
welcomes me and
says
this is home,
whether people or place
indistinguishable both from
hearth and fire tending
the hot coca
before bedtime of my
childhood signaling
refuge
like a flag planted on ground
in my
soul
reaching land

This absence
not empty
not hollow, not shallow from unfilled excavation, but
full
An absence full
of stories of changing lands, bodies written upon by
history's fountain pens
blackened
with calligrapher's ink spanning centuries
Tales of flesh and meaning transcribed
into footprints
constantly moving as labor
and reproducing bellies
in
always-foreign spaces, made alien
by
ancient pains sung through conquests

under which my
sepia and amber canvas is dictated
to stay
in places
I renounce
full of affirmation of
self

This absence of home
whether people or place
marked by broad, loud strokes on almost-white acid-free cotton, red on sable hairs mast cells
healing wound, defending petition for safety, strengthening
soul
is full of
stories
of
self
love
manning uncharted ships sovereign to heart
in changing seas
biding tides of
generation's
struggle
to wield a freedom
amidst inscription and instructions
to walk slowly backwards in assigned garb knowing
the pace of each footstep, until door is reached exiting to one's command
permanent
place

Home
is missing
But not lost or empty

This absence
is
full

Stories, love, transgressions that speak clarity,
actions that fum serenity, quiet that
bows
to passion
charting course beneath this
ship
compass mismatched
current forceful
leading as mast
and sail
the journey
and destination

home.

CHRISTOPHER A. LANG

Christopher A Lang: I am 4th year PhD student in Environmental Studies. My doctoral research aims to reframe notions sustainability by intersecting food and waste studies, environmental justice, consumer behavior, and critical race and ethnic studies. As a Black/biracial scholar-activist and (former) marine biologist, I was deeply excited to receive notice of this particular call for submissions that interrogates power, Blackness, ocean health, and more. I have a wide net of interests and passions connecting human and non-human eco-social relations that span water and land.

In the Waste: On Blackness and (Being) Plastic

Abstract: “In the Waste: On Blackness and (Being) Plastic” is an homage and response to Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe proposes wake work as an analytic to methodologically reorient Black living in the afterlife of slavery, a “past that is not yet past.”¹ Waste work here enters to explore the continuities of slave 1 ships and plantations, genocidal clearings, toxic wastes, objects, and disposable bodies, providing an opening to re/consider the relationship between Blackness, animals and (other) objects, namely plastic. If objects can co-conspire in one another’s disposability, how can these fraught relations of ejection be re-configured on new terms? By tending to the multifold deaths and disposals that exist along the subject-eject-object continuum in the wake of the slave ship and the extractive, settler colonial state, I argue that otherwise ways of living and dying emerge beyond the linear ecocidal model, perhaps ones that refuse disposability altogether.

Keywords: Blackness, Indigeneity, plastic, waste, environmental justice, disposability

Part I | A Preamble to Pollution

“plas·tic /plastik

noun

1) A synthetic material made from a wide range of organic polymers such as polyethylene, PVC, nylon, etc., that can be molded into shape while soft and then set into a rigid or slightly elastic

¹ Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press. Page 15. Sharpe explains that “in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”

form.

adjective

1) Made of plastic. “plastic bottles;” 1.1) Not genuine; artificial or unnatural. 2) (Of a substance or material) easily shaped or molded; 2.1) *Offering scope for creativity;* 2.2) *Exhibiting adaptability to change or variety in the environment.*²

On a Bahamian beach, I watched the ocean regurgitate what had been plundered and reconfigured. Errant, weathered objects migrating at the whims of wind and water, destined for shorelines or the ocean floor. Balloons, toy soldiers, buoys, solo cups, fishing nets. All waywardly adrift. Bobbing on the littoral, unsure if of the land or the sea. Is it gravity that pulls them to the depths or their longing for return to the belly of the world?³ The bottom of the ocean from where they were extracted. The position of the unthought and unseen.

Founder of the Bahamas Plastic Movement, Kristal Ambrose, notes the ruinous impacts of plastic on island nations, whose geographic orientation amidst ocean currents renders them a sink for marine pollution.⁴ In the case of the Bahamas, both the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic Gyre serve as conveyors of plastic deposition. My sensitivities to waste were heightened during a year and a half when I lived in Bimini, Bahamas as a media manager for a shark research field station. The South Island served as the open-air, unlined landfill for both the North and South Bimini populations. Whenever it overflowed, someone would burn it to make more space, sending a massive plume of black and brown smoke that could be seen for miles, and, depending on the wind speed and direction, smelled too. The vast majority of Bimini’s inhabitants lived on the North Island out of the smoke’s trajectory, but the surplus of waste served as a constant reminder; not just of the inevitability of toxic plumes, but in the everyday and everywhere evidence of a tourist-tailored dependency on styrofoam and PET containers, cups, chip bags, wrappers, and straws. One could see such items, persistent in existence, both shiny and dull, entangled in mangrove roots, squashed alongside the road, half-buried under beach sand, and buoyantly bobbing on the water’s surface. Plastic pollution was so prevailing that the number one complaint from tourists exiting Bimini according to the Ministry of the Bahamas was

² Oxford Dictionary. (2020). Plastic. In Lexico. Lexico. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/plastic>. Emphasis mine.

³ Hartman, S. (2016). The belly of the world: A note on Black women’s labors. *Souls*, 18(1), 166-173.

⁴ Ambrose, K. K., Box, C., Boxall, J., Brooks, A., Eriksen, M., Fabres, J., ... & Walker, T. R. (2019). Spatial trends and drivers of marine debris accumulation on shorelines in South Eleuthera, The Bahamas using citizen science. *Marine pollution bulletin*, 142, 145-154.

“litter.”⁵ Tourists, in other words, complained about the very plastics that the tourist economy created. Plastics that underwrote and ensured their pleasure. Of the sixty-six thousand visitors to Bimini in 2013, nearly ninety percent came from the United States; seventy-six percent of these identified as white, thirteen percent as Hispanic, and just two percent of island tourists were Black.⁶

Plastic facilitated the tourist economy for locals and outsiders alike, serving as a short-term fix even while its post-transactional surplus undermined the very sustainability (meaning both existence and environmental impacts) of the tourist industry itself. Krelling et al surveyed tourists and beach users in Brazil’s southern coast, concluding that stranded beach litter could reduce local income by as much as forty percent.⁷ In Bimini, waste arrived both consensually, through taxed imported goods, and uninvited, via ocean currents and cooler-stocked fishing yachts crossing the Gulf Stream from the US, culminating in a plastic paradise. It was in the absence of excess land, in an inability to maintain distance from waste nor the toxic fumes it creates, that I would become politicized into anti-plastic activism.

I write this as someone who had the privilege to grow up neither beside a toxic landfill nor a refinery linked to our global oil dependency, but rather in an area designated as “clean,” wooded, suburban, affluent. I write this as an Afro-European-descended (Black, biracial) someone who entered a hegemonically white field of Marine Biology (and Environmental Studies at large), only to realize the tools it provided were wholly inadequate to match the monumental eco-social challenges we face today⁸, for the people and places and species I care about. (I care about them all). I would need to unlearn environmentalism’s overemphasis on conservation and find enough ballast within me to question an overconfident, Western scientific method

5 Bahamas Ministry of Tourism. (2013). Bimini Island Exit Survey [Brochure]. Retrieved from <https://www.tourismtoday.com/sites/default/files/docs/stats/Bimini%20Brochure%202013.pdf>. Page 11.

6 Ibid. Page 12.

7 Krelling, A. P., Williams, A. T., & Turra, A. (2017). Differences in perception and reaction of tourist groups to beach marine debris that can influence a loss of tourism revenue in coastal areas. *Marine Policy*, 85, 87-99.

8 To name a few, such eco-social challenges could be listed as: runaway climate change and exacerbated hurricane, wild-fire, and flooding events; unrelenting plastic proliferation; the sixth mass extinction and threats to global biodiversity; the racial-gender-regional wealth gap; unprecedented wealth inequality since the Great Depression; racialized mass incarceration; racialized police brutality; military violence and nuclear bombs; sea level rise; environmental injustice; commercial overfishing, ghost nets, and habitat degradation; deforestation and clearcutting for monocrop economies; and cultural addiction and exportation of ecocidal consumer-producer complexes.

that seeks solutions while asking all of the wrong questions. I would strive to peel back layer after layer of my colonized mind and develop a Black sense of place. The waste currently strangling the islands in the Caribbean is inseparable from the waste that smothers other Black and Indigenous lives in the United States and elsewhere, such as those in Cancer Alley. This is the afterlife of slavery. It is from a place of both privilege and pain, and of continual learning, that I write this.

Borders Across Beings and Things

“What are the distances we need and what are the walls that will isolate and destroy us? How can we discern the differences between generative boundaries and destructive borders?”⁹ -Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons 9 from Marine Mammals*

Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks us these important questions in her latest offering to the world. Her love letters to orcas, manatees, spinner dolphins, vaquitas and so many others join a chorus of critical scholars who interrogate the persistent partition wedged between humans and animals set forth by colonization, genocide, and enslavement, a re-ordering of global socio-ecological significance existing along a racialized, speciesed, and gendered spectrum with many intersections.¹⁰¹¹¹² Gumbs traces the overlapping geographies of whale exterminations and enslaved human trafficking, of Caribbean monk seal genocide and the lubrication of plantation machinery with their blubber.¹³ Her lessons are a reminder that the rupture of the settlement-plantation¹⁴ was and still is wholly ecological, that the “ecological” was and will always be social. Undrowned adjoins Blackness to its mammalian, oceanic, womb-like origins of connect-

9 Gumbs, A. P. (2020). *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press. Page 87.

10 Ko, A., & Ko, S. (2017). *Aphro-ism: Essays on pop culture, feminism, and black veganism from two sisters*. Lantern Books.

11 Adams, C. J. (2015). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

12 Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257-337.

13 Gumbs, A. P. (2020). *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press. Page 139.

14 King, T. J. (2013). In the clearing: Black female bodies, space and settler colonial landscapes (Doctoral dissertation). Page 47. King writes, “The settlement-plantation simultaneously functions as a space that eliminates Native existence and produces the slave as non-human property. The settlement-plantation functions as a spatial unit that turns Black bodies into non-human bodies. The settlement-plantation also turns Black non-human bodies into property and into forms of space or spatial potential.”

edness, necessarily unsettling the stepping stones that underwrote the hierarchical formation of Humanity, which is at its core, eco-socially extractive.

Alice Walker asks us in the preface of Marjorie Spiegel's *Dreaded Comparison*, a book on the continuities of cruelty across species: "What do we do with our heightened consciousness" in recognizing "the pain felt by human animals who are abused and the pain felt by non-human animals who are abused...as the same pain[?]"¹⁵ *Dreaded comparison* because white veganism claimed to care about animals while overlooking a system that built itself by oppressing Black human-animal life in parallel ways. Because white veganism wedded the painful atrocity of African enslavement to animal slaughter in hopes to usher an agenda of animal liberation as detachable from Black abolition. Because in the amnesia of privilege, white veganism did not consider that there are humans who will never quite be Human enough. Because white veganism paid little regard to white supremacy-turned-white-privilege, systemic anti-Blackness, and the racist-speciesist order that both established since colonizing the Americas.¹⁶¹⁷ Because white veganism does not understand "how important blackness is to the libidinal economy of white institutionality."¹⁸ Or does it? Meanwhile, Black human mammals fall into the black void between cares of the Human and for the animal under white supremacist supervision. Critical, decolonial, and Black geographic scholarship are making strides to undo this racial human-animal categorization.

But what are we to do with the category of the object as it relates to this human-animal under scrutiny? Objects who/that become agents of death in an era when human-made materials now outweigh the entirety of Earth's biomass, when global plastic makes up roughly double the aggregate weight of all terrestrial and marine animals.¹⁹ Objects who/that are never in isolation but forever entangled with biota, with ourselves, accumulating in bloodstreams and

15 Spiegel, M. (1996). *The dreaded comparison: Human and animal slavery*.

16 Harper, B. A. (2011). Phenomenology of race and whiteness: Knowing, feeling, and experiencing the vegan 'exotic.' *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, 221-238.

17 Harper, A. B. (2016). Doing veganism differently: Racialized trauma and the personal journey towards vegan healing. In *Doing Nutrition Differently* (pp. 151-168). Routledge.

18 Hartman, S. V., & Wilderson, F. B. (2003). The position of the unthought. *Qui Parle*, 13(2), 183-201. Page 17.

19 Elhacham, E., Ben-Uri, L., Grozovski, J., Bar-On, Y. M., & Milo, R. (2020). Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass. *Nature*, 1-3. See chart on page 444.

stomachs and bellies of the Earth.²⁰²¹²²²³ Such theoretical and material progress interrogating human-animal injustices--one might see this expressed in Black veganism and animal rights efforts--can not yet be said for the human-object interface as depicted in the circular economy and zero-waste movements, despite the ubiquity of commodification, the apocalyptic futurity of plastic, and the necropolitical implications of oil-based environmental injustice. As such, I aim to stretch this dreaded comparison and ask: what is the relation between Blackness and plastic? Such a reading of Blackness alongside disposable plastic objects may incite some well-deserved backlash, but I fear and feel this human-object wedge, too, is a "destructive border" we must unsettle to live and die and refuse and reuse as the times increasingly compel us. My hope is that we, Black people, melanated people, colonized and mimetically colonizing people²⁴, can see ourselves across the numbed pain of the inanimate, the always-already wasted and deathbound, and adapt accordingly in true plastic fashion.

Part II | Blackness and Plastic: Unpacking Human-Animal-Object-Abject Relations of Waste

"[Aereile] Jackson wasn't ejected from the system: she is the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through, which the system reimagines, and reconstitutes itself."²⁵ -Christina Sharpe, *In the*

20 Goodyear, S. (2020, December 16). 'It's a slow death': Camels are dying with masses of plastic in their bellies, study finds. CBC Radio. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-wednesday-edition-1.5844355/it-s-a-slow-death-c-amels-are-dying-with-masses-of-plastic-in-their-bellies-study-finds>. Camels in the United Arab Emirates

21 De Stephanis, R., Giménez, J., Carpinelli, E., Gutierrez-Exposito, C., & Cañadas, A. (2013). As main meal for sperm whales: Plastics debris. *Marine pollution bulletin*, 69(1-2), 206-214.

22 Galloway, T. S. (2015). Micro-and nano-plastics and human health. In *Marine anthropogenic litter* (pp. 343-366). Springer, Cham. Galloway describes the health ramifications of micro- and nano-plastics increasingly found in human tissue.

23 Cressey, D. (2016). The plastic ocean. *Nature*, 536(7616), 263-265.

24 Wynter, S., & McKittrick, K. (2015). Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations. Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis, 9-89. Page 21. In conversation with Katherin McKittrick, Sylvia Wynter says: "[The Time report] thinks the causes of global warming are human activities, but they are not! The Masai who were (and are) being displaced have nothing to do with global warming! It's all of us--the Western and mimetically Westernized middle classes--after we fell into the trap of modeling ourselves on the mimetic model of the Western bourgeoisie's liberal monohumanist Man2."

25 Ibid. Page 29. Sharpe analyzes a scene in *The Forgotten Space--A Film Essay Seeking to Understand the Contem-*

Waste literature, often focusing on producer or consumer outcomes, fails to analyze the deluge of disposable, commodified objects alongside or enmeshed into the objectified, fungible Black human slaves and extirpated Native “savages.” Conversely; biopolitical and Marxian critiques of capitalism often deploy humans-as-waste rhetoric with little engagement of the materiality of waste itself, foreclosing important possibilities that invoke consumer behavior and collective action.²⁶²⁷ In the following sections, I attempt to read Blackness, Indigeneity, animality, and plastic objects as constitutive to one another and merge them through the material-symbolic axis of abjection.

Is plastic Black? And is Blackness plastic? Is plastic an accomplice in the subscription of premature Black death, and is Blackness, are Black people, complicit in the disposability of plastic that dispossesses ourselves? While Blackness and plastic both constitute a continual ejection in the construction of a “clean, white, male, Human” world, both plastic and Black people perform acts of ejecting one another through this very subject-eject-object engagement. Ejection yokes the Manichean subject-object grammar of Blackness²⁸ to the objectified plastics-

porary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic Legacy of the Sea (2010), a film on global capital. She unpacks the existential, ongoing violences experienced by Aereile Jackson, as well as her uncared-for portrayal in the film, depicted as a ‘former mother’ who had lost her children to the state. Sharpe notes the glaring absence of Black people, of Africa, the Caribbean, and the rest of the African diaspora within the film, with the exception of Jackson, as well as the film’s failure to “locate that trade [of abducted Africans] as the key point in the beginning of global capital.”

26 See Yates, M. (2011). The human-as-waste, the labor theory of value and disposability in contemporary capitalism. *Antipode*, 43(5), 1679-1695.

27 Mbembe, A. (2011). “Democracy as a Community of Life.” In *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, ed. John W De Gruchy, 187-194. Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sun Press. Page 188. In critiquing South Africa’s post-apartheid rhetoric of a pacifying humanism, Achille Mbembe describes the Black, Native equivalent of ejection on African soil: “Race in particular did not simply become a crucial, pervasive dimension of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. Turned into law, it was also used as a privileged mechanism for turning black life into waste - a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection, and servitude.” Mbembe connects the Black Indigenous struggle beyond the framings of United States-centered enslavement and genocide. But Mbembe, like many who invoke the humans-as-waste rhetoric, does not further engage this metonymic, metaphoric comparison between Blackness and waste.

28 Opperman, R. (2019). A Permanent Struggle Against an Omnipresent Death: Revisiting Environmental Racism with Frantz Fanon. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 7(1), 57-80. Page 12. She writes: “The conclusion Fanon suggests is that it is impossible to achieve Black disalienation or decolonization without addressing the interlocking set of dualisms that structure the Manichean world.”

-we can call their alterable, relational co-condition blacksticity--in such a way that dissolves their dyadic relationship by creating a subject-eject-object²⁹ grammatical refrain that speaks to their naturalized, relational affinity through dispossession. Black life becomes tethered to the inanimate oil byproduct, in myriad ways, forming an *intimate monstrosity*. Thus, I want to sit with plastic and Blackness and this relationship, plastic in Black spaces, the always already-ness of oil-soon-to-be-plastic-soon-to-be-landfill-soon-to-be-intoxicating and Blackness, their ubiquity, and Black plasticity. How does the figure of the Negro, in being placed at the nadir of the “Chain of Being,”³⁰ in being/having been both subject and object, interact with, compare and relate to, shape, consume, and be determined by the *objects* that are plastic? When posing similarities and very clear distinguishing qualities between, I ask if plastic and Blackness are of the same stuff? These repeating, circular questions guide my movements in navigating a Black ocean filled with plastics, as well as the on-land relations that make this so.

Enslaved and Exterminated: Human-Objects and Disposals of Coloniality

Tiffany King explores the unstable categorizability of the Black enslaved woman in her doctoral dissertation. She writes, “the Settler-Master is able to imagine the Black female form as land, property and sexual/reproductive capacity which denote spatial expansion.”³¹ While Black women occupy a very specific, heightened experience of intersectional dehumanization, Black and Native humans more broadly have been uniquely positioned to straddle the line of human-animal-object-ject.³² Deemed as property (like objects), reduced to reproductive and laboring capacity (like animals), and considered impediments to settlement (like disposables), Black and Native counterparts were respectively and uniquely objectified as valuable-fungible and exterminatable. “Essentially, [Achille Mbembe] says, the slave is the object to whom any-

29 I would like to shout out UCSC Anthropology and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies Professor Dr. Savannah Shange for giving me this useful feedback to incorporate after my symposium presentation during her seminar class, the Afterlife of Slavery. This refrain is substitutable, and I will continue to insert new words into it throughout the piece.

30 Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257-337. Page 46. Wynter says, “it would be the “Negros” who would be consigned to the pre-Darwinian last link in the Chain of Being.

31 King, T. J. (2013). *In the clearing: Black female bodies, space and settler colonial landscapes* (Doctoral dissertation). Page 56.

32 Using animal/object/human/ject is merely a syntactical choice to destabilize the rigidity of each category, allowing for their substitutability.

thing can be done, whose life can be squandered with impunity,”³³ Saidiya Hartman explains. By collapsing the human category as is oft-done in race-averse analyses of plastic waste,^{34,35} we miss a crucial opportunity to interrogate the violent birthings of the Human as an exclusive and yet malleable category that parasitized Black life and ensured Indigenous death through the logic of wealth-procurement and commodification, marrying both Blackness and Indigeneity to disposable, object-like status in order to realize itself as white, male, rational, and perpetually secure.^{36,37} In violently rolling out such a culture of valued objecthood, this overrepresented genre of Humanity commandeered global eco-socio-political power, enabling the proliferation of *literal* waste, as well. Max Liboiron deftly notes that “plastic is a function of colonialism.”³⁸

Where does our household trash go every week? Society’s understanding gap³⁹ of individual and collective wastes created⁴⁰, and the impacts of such habituated discarding behavior, exists because of a buffered distancing, or invisibility, that ensures racial capitalism’s continuation. Distanced for whom? Such invisibility obscures the slow violence of chronic poisoning and inundation experienced by all fenceline (and island) communities that bear the disproportional

33 Hartman, S. V., & Wilderson, F. B. (2003). The position of the unthought. *Qui Parle*, 13(2), 183-201. Page 188.

34 Cressey, D. (2016). The plastic ocean. *Nature*, 536(7616), 263-265. While providing a noteworthy noteworthy synopsis of plastic waste, Cressey fails to complicate the story of plastic waste by referencing a universalized humanity: “[Kamilo beach (on the tip of Hawaii’s big island)] has been called the dirtiest beach in the world, and is a startling and visible demonstration of how much plastic detritus humanity has dumped into the world’s oceans.”

35 MacArthur, E. (2017). Beyond plastic waste. Even the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, who receives my gold star for helping change paradigms from a linear, disposable economy to a circular, reusable one, references a wide-sweeping humanity, eliding the nuance of unevenly responsible and empowered genres within humanity in addressing wasteful transformation: “With more than 8 million tons of plastic entering the ocean each year, humanity must urgently rethink the way we make and use plastics, so that they do not become waste in the first place.”

36 Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257-337.

37 King, T. L. (2019). *The Black shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Duke University Press. Page 21.

38 Liboiron, M. (2018). How plastic is a function of colonialism. *Teen Vogue*, 21.

39 Clapp, J. (2002). The distancing of waste: Overconsumption in a global economy. *Confronting consumption*, 155-176. Page 3. Clapp describes the understanding gap as a mental distance, “a gulf of information, awareness, and responsibility between consumers and wastes. It is also interesting to consider the (social) distancing of waste and how COVID-19 adds new layers of analysis to disposability culture.

40 Wastes in this sense are not limited to mere trash, but extend to include the wastedness of what-/who-ever else is entangled in the supply chain of commodification, including animals, slaughterhouse workers, field workers, waste workers, etc.

tionate burdens of business as usual commerce. This invisibility also mirrors the erased atrocity of Indigenous genocide from the United States’ public memory, and the ongoing erasure of Indigenous body-thought-behavior as a means of continuing the settler state and the ecocidal systems it produces as prerequisites for livelihood. As the United States incrementally expanded into unceded Indigenous territory to cement its existence, such unilateral cultural suppression and attempted annihilation propelled a rupturous transformation in worldview relating to land, “clearing”⁴¹ the stage for these multifold disposals to concentrate and accumulate in the subsequent centuries. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us that “once in the hands of settlers, the land itself was no longer sacred, as it had been for the Indigenous. Rather, it was private property, a commodity to be acquired and sold.”⁴² The genocidal clearing works lock-in step with the slave plantation to ensure a wholesale desecration of land (and beings on the land) in the name of racially-extracted profit maximization via commodification. It is here where subhuman-animal-object-objects collide into an entanglement of death, marking the beginnings of the era of called by many names: the Anthropocene,⁴³ the Racial Capitalocene,⁴⁴ the Plantationocene⁴⁵ --all pointing to a door of no return.⁴⁶

Plantation Proliferation, Petrochemical Pesticides, and Human-Animal-Objects

Clyde Woods documents the metamorphic continuity from the sugar- and cotton-producing slave plantations to the waste-producing petrochemical plantations in the Deep South. The plantation bloc, who were beneficiaries of the settlement-plantation⁴⁷ and the planta-

41 Tiffany King discusses the strategic deployment of the noun “clearing” in US historical annals to manifest the myth of *terra nullius*, or unoccupied land, rendering the historical genocide (perhaps, “cleansing”) that took place more palatable. Here, I am re-purposing the verb form of “clearing.”

42 Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2014). *An indigenous peoples’ history of the United States* (Vol. 3). Beacon Press. Page 55.

43 Crutzen, P. J. (2006). The “anthropocene”. In *Earth system science in the anthropocene* (pp. 13-18). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

44 Vergès, F. (2017). Racial capitalocene. *Futures of black radicalism*, 72-82.

45 Mitman, G. (2019, October 12). Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing. *Edge Effects*. <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>

46 King, T. L. (2019). *The Black shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Duke University Press. Page 9.

47 Tiffany King uses this grammatical refrain in her dissertation to intertwine Black and Native apocalyptic fates vis-à-vis white Humanity’s self-actualizing parasitism.

tion-turned-prison⁴⁸ and the sharecropping-derived surplus, organized annual policy, agronomy, and chemistry conferences for the southern elite through the National Cotton Council⁴⁹ and the Delta Council organizations to spearhead agricultural biointensification. These annual gatherings of the plantation bloc elite ushered in the petrochemical turn⁵⁰, an industrial-agricultural plantation model that would metastasize into monstrous neo-plantations worldwide via the Green Revolution, undoubtedly adding to an increasing tally of multi-scalar, multi-speciesed assemblages of subject-eject-objects, a global network of disposals.⁵¹

Pesticides and herbicides served as central technologies to replace labor; the plantation elite used these chemical fixes to bypass their addressing the racial and economic justice demands of the Black freedom struggles in the Mississippi Delta in the mid 20th century.⁵² Furthermore, such pesticide and herbicide drift resulting from the region's rapidly increased reliance on chemical agriculture threatened Black farmers' food sovereignty and ability to self-sustain, contributing both to their toxicity exposure and dispossession.⁵³ Romy Opperman's

analysis of Frantz Fanon's oeuvre is useful here: "Fanon names DDT⁵⁴ in the context of the

48 Woods, C. A. (1998). *Development arrested: The blues and plantation power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso. Page 129.

Woods explains, "much of the Delta (cotton) production complex was physically constructed, sustained, and subsidized by thousands of imprisoned African American men and women."

49 *NCC Officers, Board of Directors and Advisors*. (n.d.). National Cotton Council of America. Retrieved September 3, 2020, from <http://www.cotton.org/about/leadership/index.cfm>. One needs not look much further than the present, exclusively-white Board of Director profiles for the National Cotton Council to consider their racist 1938 origins in ensuring white male wealth accumulation and regional dominance at the exclusion and expense of the Black/Native/land/other/poor.

50 Woods, C. A. (1998). *Development arrested: The blues and plantation power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso. See chapter on Green Revolution.

51 Weir, D., & Schapiro, M. (1981). *Circle of poison: pesticides and people in a hungry world*. Food First Books. On page 3, Weir and Schapiro begin the book by saying, "Massive advertising campaigns by multinational pesticide corporations---Dow, Shell, Chevron--have turned the third world into not only a booming growth market for pesticides, but also a dumping ground."

52 Williams, B. (2018). "That we may live": Pesticides, plantations, and environmental racism in the United States South. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1-2), 243-267. Page 4

53 Ibid. Page 5.

54 DDT - A Brief History and Status. (2020, July 13). US EPA.

<https://www.epa.gov/ingredients-used-pesticide-products/ddt-brief-history-and-status>. According to the EPA, "DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) was developed as the first of the modern synthetic insecticides in the 1940s. It was initially used with great effect to combat malaria, typhus, and the other insect-borne human diseases among both

French colonial government's attitude toward the colonized as a kind of contaminant or disease."⁵⁵ Here, the colonized humans and the unwanted insect "pests" exist coterminously as abjects in the eyes of the colonizer. Opperman weds Fanon's astutely termed "atmosphere of violence" (atmospheric racism) in *Wretched of the Earth* to his description of colonized people living in "a permanent struggle against omnipresent death" in *Dying Colonialism*.^{56,57}

This petrochemical turn through industrial agriculture via fertilizers and pesticides leaps out of the plantation model to reinscribe waste on a macrological scale, continually blurring the lines of human-animal-object-abject. Cleared land in the Midwest underwent iterations of removal (of Indigenous people, of native flora and fauna, of small-scale settler farmers, of soil microbes) over the centuries to eventually settle into this present moment of monocropped and genetically modified corn and soy pervasion. Soil erosion, resulting from cleared native habitats and decades of relentless, extractive land management methods, combines with excess fertilizer nutrient and pesticide pollutant run-off to threaten Gulf of Mexico communities, economies, and ecologies downstream, positioned at the sink of the greater Mississippi River watershed.⁵⁸ Nancy Rabalais et al note this expanding "dead zone" in their longitudinal research studying coastal hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico each summer.⁵⁹ While not explicitly plastic, this agro-petrochemical waste that flows into the Gulf Coast's coastal oceanic waters is manufactured using the same petroleum ingredients, by the same petrochemical conglomerates, and often in the same locations like Cancer Alley.⁶⁰ Before the 2015 and 2016 mergers of the top six global agro-chemical and seed corporations, Monsanto, Dow Chemical, DuPont, Syngenta, and Bayer all operated facilities in the 85-mile stretch of Louisiana between Baton Rouge and New

military and civilian populations. It also was effective for insect control in crop and livestock production, institutions, homes, and gardens. DDT's quick success as a pesticide and broad use in the United States and other countries led to the development of resistance by many insect pest species."

55 Opperman, R. (2019). A Permanent Struggle Against an Omnipresent Death: Revisiting Environmental Racism with Frantz Fanon. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 7(1), 57-80. Page 59.

56 Fanon, F. (2007). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Page 71

57 Fanon, F. (1994). *A dying colonialism*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Page 128.

58 Pereira, W. E., & Rostad, C. E. (1990). Occurrence, distributions, and transport of herbicides and their degradation products in the lower Mississippi River and its tributaries. *Environmental science & technology*, 24(9), 1400-1406.

59 Rabalais, N. N., Turner, R. E., & Wiseman Jr, W. J. (2002). Gulf of Mexico hypoxia, aka "The dead zone". *Annual Review of ecology and Systematics*, 33(1), 235-263.

60 Allen, B. L. (2003). *Uneasy alchemy: citizens and experts in Louisiana's chemical corridor disputes*. MIT Press. Page 168.

Orleans.⁶¹ This concentrated 61 region was formerly called ‘America’s Ruhr’ (after Germany’s infamous petrochemical district) up until the 1970s as it allegedly produced sixty percent of the nation’s fertilizer and vinyl chloride supply.⁶² The South holds fifty-five percent of the nation’s Black population, and as a watershed, the Gulf of Mexico region incurs nearly triple the rate of toxic disposal release as the next most-concentrated region with pollution, the Great Lakes (respectively, the regions release 3,402 and 1,225 pounds of toxic waste per square mile).⁶³ Eight of the nation’s ten most-productive oil refineries exist in the Gulf South,⁶⁵ and the Gulf South Petroleum Administration Defense District (PADD) supplies and distributes 1286 of 1644 (78.2%) total million barrels of petroleum to the other four PADDs across the country, and 446 of 604 (73.8%) total million barrels of crude oil.⁶⁶ The disproportionate regional crude oil extraction, petroleum production, and distribution based in the Gulf South renders majority low income, Black communities vulnerable to petrochemical pollution. Thomas Davies considers this an example of slow violence, “a form of late-modern necropolitics, where communities are exposed to the power of death-in-life.”⁶⁷ One might also consider the catastrophe of the 2010

61 MacDonald, J. (2019, February 15). *Mergers in Seeds and Agricultural Chemicals: What Happened?* United States Department of Agriculture.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/february/mergers-in-seeds-and-agricultural-chemicals-what-happened/>.

62 Pasley, J. (2020, April 10). *Inside Louisiana’s horrifying “Cancer Alley,” an 85-mile stretch of pollution and environmental racism that’s now dealing with some of the highest coronavirus death rates in the country.* Business Insider Nederland. <https://www.businessinsider.nl/louisiana-cancer-alley-photos-oil-refineries-chemicals-pollution-2019-11?international=true&r=US#in-the-1970s-the-area-became-known-as-americas-ruhr-because-it-produced-60-of-americas-nitrogen-fertilizers-and-vinyl-chloride-and-a-quarter-of-americas-chlorine-22>

63 US Department of Commerce, Rastogi, S., Johnson, T., Hoeffel, E., & Drewery, M. (2011, September). *The Black Population: 2010* (No. C2010BR-06). United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>

64 *TRI National Analysis: Watersheds.* (2020, February 12). US EPA.

<https://www.epa.gov/trinationalanalysis/watersheds>. According to the 2018 TRI dataset, the Gulf of Mexico watershed region released 367 million pounds of toxic waste as compared to the Great Lakes watershed region, which released 218 million pounds of pollutants.

65 Energy Information Association. (2020, January). *Table 5. Refiners’ Total Operable Atmospheric Crude Oil Distillation Capacity* (Form EIA-820). <https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/refinerycapacity/table5.pdf>

66 *PADD regions enable regional analysis of petroleum product supply and movements.* (2012, February 7). US Energy Information Administration (EIA). <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=4890>

67 Davies, T. (2018). Toxic space and time: Slow violence, necropolitics, and petrochemical pollution. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108(6), 1537-1553. Page 1540. Davies explores how petrochemical pollution brings “death-in-life,” mirroring Achille Mbembe’s description of colonized people who were “kept alive but in a state

BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, resulting in over 113,000 tons of solid waste and 1,408,000 barrels of liquid waste that exposed Gulf Coast residents to adverse health outcomes from sea-food consumption, increased air pollution, and contaminants on the beach and in the water.⁶⁸

Such omnipresent, environmental, and social death exists at the nexus of racial capitalism, colonialism, and petrochemical plantations. Dale Pfeiffer describes the increasing and overlapping continuities of oil and agricultural industries in *Eating Fossil Fuels*.⁶⁹ Buttressed by petrochemical refineries arising out of slave plantations, our modern food system cannot be analyzed without considering the multifaceted pollutions that co-constitute human-object-objects. It is worth mentioning that nearly half of domestic corn, and more than seventy percent of soybean meal, production goes directly into feeding livestock for industrial animal agriculture.⁷⁰ Only one-hundred thirty thousand out of seventy six million acres, or 0.17 percent, of the total soybean acres planted in 2015 were organically grown.⁷¹ Carol Adams underscores the objectification of animals not only by death-dealing technologies of mass slaughter, but also by “innocuous phrases such as ‘food producing unit,’ ‘protein harvester,’ ‘converting machine,’ ‘crops,’ and biomachines” used regularly in the livestock industry.⁷² Livestock animals, once living, are physically and metaphorically rendered into animal-objects through the logic of property, the absent referent of “meat”, and the fragmentation of their bodies: “After death, cows become roast beef, steak, hamburger; pigs become pork, bacon, sausage.”⁷³ Of course, these animal products are packaged in plastic and transported domestically and globally using the same petrochemicals that permitted their existence in the first place via chemical-intensively-produced food grains. Human-subject-objects, as slaughterhouse workers, as proximate Black victims of environmental injustice from industrial animal agriculture and petrochemical production, and as consumers, are woven into the commodifying grammatical refrain of subject-eject-object-ab-

of injury.”

68 Osofsky, H. M., Baxter-Kauf, K., Hammer, B., & Mailander, A. (2012). Environmental Justice and the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. *NYU Env'tl. LJ*, 20, 99.

69 Pfeiffer, D. A. (2006). *Eating fossil fuels: oil, food, and the coming crisis in agriculture.* New Society Publishers.

70 Office of Communications. (2015, February). USDA Coexistence Fact Sheets: Corn. United States Department of Agriculture. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/coexistence-corn-factsheet.pdf>

71 Office of Communications. (2015, February). USDA Coexistence Fact Sheets: Soybeans. United States Department of Agriculture. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/coexistence-soybeans-factsheet.pdf>

72 Adams, C. J. (2015). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory.* Bloomsbury Publishing USA. Page 47.

73 Ibid. Page 47.

ject that is also entangled with notions of animality.⁷⁴

Always Already Humans-As-Wastes: Alterable Human-Materialities

In critiquing South Africa's post-apartheid rhetoric of a pacifying humanism, Achille Mbembe describes the Black, Native equivalent of ejection on African soil: "Race in particular did not simply become a crucial, pervasive dimension of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. Turned into law, it was also used as a privileged mechanism for turning black life into waste - a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection, and servitude."⁷⁵

Membe connects the Black Indigenous struggle beyond the framings of United States-centered enslavement and genocide. But Membe, like many who invoke the humans-as-waste rhetoric, does not further engage this metonymic, metaphoric comparison between Blackness and waste.

In most waste discourses, the human-nonhuman boundary is too readily bisected through waste, not tending to the tenuous and blurry container of the Human and its Black/Indigenous "Others" as structurally wasted and disposable beings-things themselves. Early environmental justice literature disproportionately poses positivistic understandings of waste as contaminant, filth, and actants that penetrate and disturb bodily and community functioning. Benjamin Chavis expounds on the national predisposition for toxic waste dumps to exist alongside African American, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, and Robert Bullard traces how African Americans in Houston are subject to disproportionate petrochemical toxin and hazardous waste exposure.⁷⁶⁷⁷ Similarly, Tracy Volyes recounts the ways that the rhetoric of "barrenness" had been strategically emplaced on the desert land upon which Diné Nation reservation exists, justifying the arrival of uranium mining sites that compromised native tribal community

74 Herring, Elsie [Elsie Herring]. (2014, December 17). Spy Drones Expose Smithfield Foods Factory Farms. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayGJ1YSfDXs>. Steven Wing describes the prevalence of environmental racism in hog farm distribution. Elsie Herring [2:46] explains the recurring injustices her family and community experiences living beside a hog farm manure lagoon.

75 Mbembe, A. (2011). "Democracy as a Community of Life." In *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, ed. John W De Gruchy, 187-194. Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sun Press. Page 188.

76 Bullard, R. D., Mohai, P., Saha, R., & Wright, B. (2008). Toxic wastes and race at twenty: Why race still matters after all of these years. *Environmental Law*, 371-411.

77 Bullard, R. D. (1987). *Invisible Houston: The black experience in boom and bust* (No. 6). Texas A&M University Press.

health.⁷⁸ Others, like Thomas Davies who was mentioned in the preceding section, point to less explicit forms of waste that operate insidiously via state and corporate collusion, perpetuating a *longue durée* of necropolitical, slow violence.⁷⁹ While waste and bodies interact permeably in these analyses to produce despair, disease, and early death for impacted communities, this approach prematurely assumes waste to be an external hazard separate from the bodies that it continues to dispose of and the bodies that dispose of it, rather than inherently fused through the magnetizing socio-spatial forces of abjection. I argue that focusing on the material disposable commodity through the lens of its comparable Black, fungible subject-object-eject provides possible openings and pathways of disavowal.

The categorization of waste is a contestable, social project as waste can take many shapes, forms, and meanings. To use the words of Sarah Moore, "waste is what is 'managed as waste.'"⁸⁰ Inversely, material waste is physically produced through social, racialized relations of labor, commodification, and uneven consumption. Given capitalism is a racial project, labor itself is fundamentally linked to racialized notions of humanness.⁸¹ This section draws from scholars who theorize the abjection of Blackness and Indigeneity from humanity and situate this ongoing predicament alongside materialities of inanimate and animate wastes, understanding that particular bodies are disposed of well before "contamination" itself transpires. Through this process, "racism is rendered atmospheric (Fanon, 2004), 'an all-encompassing and dynamic force field that distributes life and death unevenly' (Mawani, 2015, 3), producing racialised populations as surplus."⁸² As repeatedly stated, Black and Indigenous populations have long been the ontological sink and site of (non)human disposability: as the nadir of the "Chain of being," the embodiment of simultaneous personhood, animality, and property; also as "political orders" opposing the imperial project of modernity and the settler colonial apparatus, who, as such,

78 Volyes, T. B. (2015). *Wastelanding: Legacies of uranium mining in Navajo country*. U of Minnesota Press.

79 Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press. Page 60.

80 Moore, S. A. (2011). Global garbage: waste, trash trading, and local garbage politics. *Global political ecology*, 133-144.

81 Robinson, C. J. (2000). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. Univ of North Carolina Press. Page 14. In the forward of this book, Robin D.G. Kelley writes, "capitalism emerged within the feudal order and grew in fits and starts, flowering in the cultural soil of the West--most notably in the racialism that has come to characterize European society. Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of 'racial capitalism' dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide."

82 Vasudevan, P. (2019). An intimate inventory of race and waste. *Antipode*. This quotation includes the in-text citations directly from the text of her article.

must be either assimilated or eliminated.⁸³⁸⁴

McKittrick dislodges the naturalization of Black humans existing as the “dysselect-ed”--ones marked inferior in the struggle for existence--nadir in the afterlife of slavery. De-positioning the lowest link on the chain of humanity’s construction, the Negro slave, necessarily reconstitutes our imagination of all of humanity that has placed itself above this bottom rung. She insists that through living as human, one comes to revision this previously fixed socio-lo-cation “as verb, as alterable, as relational.”⁸⁵ Métis scholar Michelle Murphy gestures toward this altered human state by exploring the “alterlife”⁸⁶ of chemical violences ushered in through settler colonial, plantation economies. This alterlife, she insists, “indexes collectivities of life recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism in our pasts and the pasts of our ances-tors, as well as into the future.”⁸⁷ Such a recomposition gestures to a hybrid being that mo-lecularly is both human and waste, living and dead, biotic and synthetic. Describing the high concentrations of PCBs in contemporary human blood, urine, and breastmilk, she asserts that “industrially produced chemicals like PCBs have become a part of human living-being.”⁸⁸

Informed by the Indigenous worldview of relationality, Murphy asserts, “We are part of the water. We are part of its tributaries. And, since the mid-twentieth century, we have become a part of PCBs too.” This dialectical fusion of humans and wastes--humans as chemically-wasted, and waste as human-bound and human-created--blurs the boundary between human/object, creating an alterable human condition that can perhaps unsettle the overdetermined Human

83 Simpson, L. B. (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. U of Minnesota Press.

Leanne Simpson describes Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous woman and two-spirit/queer people as political orders who “reproduce and amplify Indigeneity” (Page 41). In a similar manner to Saidiya Hartman, who expounds on Black exposure to premature death via state apparatus, Simpson provides an Indigenous accounting to premature death via the settler colonial nation state: “the bodies of women and 2SQ people as well as men are attacked through outright murder, imposed poverty, criminalization, assimilation, addictions, physical and mental illness, legislative disappear-ance, ongoing cognitive imperialism, racisms, and heteropatriarchy of Canadian society” (Page 42).

84 See *Wastelanding* by Tracey Voyles and *The River Is In Us*, by Elizabeth Hoover.

85 McKittrick, K (Ed.). (2015). *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*. Duke University Press. Page 8. Emphasis mine.

86 Murphy’s *alterlife* seems to play off the word afterlife (often used as the “afterlife of slavery”), but weaves in the chemical alterations to the human DNA and physiology.

87 Murphy, M. (2017). Alterlife and decolonial chemical relations. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(4), 494-503.

88 Ibid. Page 495. PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyls) are a wide range of industrial pollutant that were heavily used from the 1920s until they were banned in 1979. According to EPA.gov, PCBs were used in electrical, heat transfer, generator equipment, and were plasticizers in paints, plastics, and rubber products.

that reproduces multiple objects and subjects of waste as outside itself. Black and Native bod-ies are “recomposed” by these synthetic chemical productions in a similar way that slavery and genocide altered their bodily and social arrangements. Murphy moves us beyond Eurocentric understandings of time, drawing our attention to a continuum that connects the past, present, and future altered humanities brought by iterations of settler coloniality. Humans-as-waste, in this instance, is simultaneously inevitable, predetermined, *and* alterable.

By exploring the precarity of Blackness in relation to aluminum as a manufactured com-modity, Pavithra Vasudevan argues that the atmospheric racism of industrial toxicity “produces an intimate monstrosity that complicates⁸⁹ the subject’s relationship to racial oppression.”⁹⁰ Her research tracks predominantly African American workers in the Alcoa aluminum manufacturing facility in Badin, North Carolina, tracing the impossible conundrum they face: while working at the Alcoa plant allows them to create a livelihood for their families, in doing so, they bring the chemical toxins from work to home, endangering their loved ones, thus rendering them “inti-mately monstrous.” Vasudevan and Murphy’s respective contributions of intimate monstrosities and humans-as-PBCs metonymically relate to one another. In both accounts,

Indigenous and Black disposabilities are complicatedly entangled with commodity-related toxins; these fusions birth alternative, or otherwise, possibilities of humanness in relation to the synthetic, chemically violent “productions of capitalism.” The after-/alter-life⁹¹ frameworks of Black and Native (sub)human disposability provide 91 living examples that can bypass rigid, dualistic delineations of waste-vs-human which prevail in environmental justice scholarship’s often damage-centered framework,⁹² giving us new modes of existing in this waste-deluged era of racial capitalism overrepresented as the Anthropocene.⁹³ Early environmental justice as-

89 Macroscopically, this complication arises in a society’s paradoxical petro-dependence for business as usual survival and the impending ecological death (dioxins and climate change) brought by such petro-dependence. On a micro-scale, this complication exists in the bodies and households of Black workers in industrial plants like Alcoa, who work in order to feed their families (survive), but in working also bring toxins home via their skin and clothes in higher concen-trations than the ambient atmospheric racism, and thus perpetuate this danger.

90 Vasudevan, P. (2019). An intimate inventory of race and waste. *Antipode*. Page 3.

91 This is a grammatical overture towards bridging Black and Indigenous alterability through Humanist relations under the anti-Black, settler colonial United States.

92 Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-428.

93 Vergès, F. (2017). Racial capitalocene. *Futures of black radicalism*, 72-82. Vergès writes, “ The notion of the Anthro-pocene is ‘de-historicizing, universalizing, eternalizing, naturalizing a mode of production specific to a certain time and place,’ a strategy of ideological legitimation that blocks off any prospect of change.”

sertions assume 93 waste to be an external imposition on communities of color rather than an intimately concurrent deathdance of always-already disposals algorithmically fused into white supremacist commodification of everyone/thing unevenly. Perhaps in refusing this distinction between subject-object-eject, we can lay crucial groundwork to escape socio-material disposability altogether. What collective, caring interventions might we conjure up?

Part III | Defending the Dead, Refusing Omnipresent Death: Waste Work (in the Wake)

“What could I tell you that would help you remember how necessary you are in the time of disposability?”⁹⁴ -Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons on Marine Mammals*

An aspirational reimagining of Black disposability will require a greater attention to Black death and life alongside material wastes in the past, present, future. In reference to NourbeSe Philip’s poem *Zong #15*, Christina Sharpe asks: “What does it mean to defend the dead?”⁹⁵ To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death?⁹⁶ Sharpe proposes wake work, an unstopping practice of otherwise care that tends to, and extends beyond, the ongoing death of Black people preceding, (en)during, and after(living) the slave ship. Sharpe evokes multiple meanings of the word wake, though its most poignant use to me is its reference to the “132 (or 140 or 142)”⁹⁷ slaves⁹⁸ drowning in the wake of a slave ship named *Zong* after being jettisoned overboard. In the wake of the *Zong*, fungible, overthrown African slaves bobbed and thrashed before drowning into the abyss of the Atlantic, unlikely to reach the bottom intact.⁹⁹ Sharpe explains that,

94 Gumbs, A. P. (2020). *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press. Page 59.

95 Philip, M. N., & Boateng, S. A. (2008). *Zong!*. Wesleyan University Press. Page 200. Emphasis mine. NourbeSe Philip writes, “‘Defend the dead.’ The Africans on board the *Zong* must be named. They will be ghostly footnotes floating below the text--‘underwater...a place of consequence.’”

96 Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press. Page 10.

97 Sharpe’s nonspecific numbering of jettisoned slaves speaks to the nonchalant nature at which their masters deemed them disposable. What does a specific number mean when archiving any quantity of objects/objects/non-humans deemed disposable?

98 I will alternate between using “slaves” and “enslaved people” to gesture to the flexible categorization of Black subject-eject-objects living and dying in the wake.

99 Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press. Pages 40-41. Christina Sharpe offers us insight from her colleague, Anne Gardulski. Gardulski explains to Sharpe that the ocean has a voracious appetite that scientists call “nutrient cycling,” making it unlikely any overthrown bodies would have made it intact to the ocean floor.

despite their ongoing metabolization via continual nutrient cycling, sodium in human blood has a residence time-- “the amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean”--of 260 million years. Of the approximated 14.65 million enslaved people who were packed like cargo during the 400 years of the transatlantic slave trade, a range of twelve to thirty percent are estimated to have died during this Middle Passage.¹⁰⁰ Millions of dead and dying African captives were tossed overboard in these centuries, now existing in the residence time of oceanic Blackness. NourbeSe Philip preempts Christina Sharpe’s wake work, compelled to “bring the stories of these murdered Africans to light--above the surface of the water--to ‘ex-aqua’ them from their ‘liquid graves.’”¹⁰¹

An estimated four billion plastic microfibers per square kilometer coat the deep sea floor.¹⁰² Reading Philip’s aspirations to defend the dead through waste studies, I ask: what are the implications of Blackness, metaphorically sited at the bottom of the ocean in the afterlife of slavery, being shrouded by throwaway plastic in such an unceasing manner? Do they cohabitate, conspire? Are they one and the same? Or is plastic choking the belly of the world, the Black positions of the unthought, thrown overboard, forgotten, and unseen?

Before it became plastic, it was oil. And before that, the matter of life. Algae. Plankton. Plantlife. Drowned detritus. Sunken biological bodies, decomposed, layered one after another, for millennia. There is a reason we call oil a fossil fuel. Oil is ancestral and ancestrally Black. Does that make plastic Black, at least in part? In 2010, the world produced over 235 million metric tons of it, and estimated 4.8 to 12.7 million entered the ocean.¹⁰³ National Geographic reports that 269 thousand tons of it floats on the surface via ocean gyres in countless forms--

Sharpe also mentions that slave ships were commonly stalked by pelagic sharks.

100 Curtin, P. D. (1972). *The Atlantic slave trade: a census*. Univ of Wisconsin Press. Page 275. Curtin writes, “Many of the trading records have been lost or destroyed, but enough has survived to permit at least an estimate of the percentage of slaves who died during the rigorous ocean voyage: about 12 per cent in French ships, contrasted with 17 per cent in Dutch and British ships; Portuguese losses in the early centuries ran about 15 per cent, but when the nineteenth-century abolitionists pressure forced the slave traders to take chances, the casualty rate rose to 25 to 30 per cent.”

101 Philip, M. N., & Boateng, S. A. (2008). *Zong!*. Wesleyan University Press. Page 202. The vast ocean of dumped Africans becomes a liquid grave.

102 Parker, L. (2015, January 11). *Ocean Trash: 5.25 Trillion Pieces and Counting, but Big Questions Remain*. National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/1/150109-oceans-plastic-sea-trash-science-marine-debris/#close>

103 Jambeck, J. R., Geyer, R., Wilcox, C., Siegler, T. R., Perryman, M., Andrady, A., ... & Law, K. L. (2015). Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean. *Science*, 347(6223), 768-771.

nylon fishing nets, children's toys, rubber tires, etc¹⁰⁴--but the buoyancy of oil in water is eventually counterbalanced by accumulating biofowl that gradually increases the debris' density. Much of the flotsam sinks below the surface into the abyss, soon to be forgotten by those who call themselves humans.

Beneath the ocean's weight exists a pressure so immense that it can reconstitute solid into liquid.¹⁰⁵ The earth and water's compression eventually melt and mold this sedimented detritus to form oil, a liquid grave in the most literal sense. How might one "exaqua" or "bring light to" this multimodal liquid grave of subject-object-eject-jects, as Sharpe and Philip prompt us to consider?

Plastic, a primary and diversely toxic constituent of the landfill, becomes an agent of anti-Blackness and premature death. The landfill, plastic, and its chemical soup concentrate (known as leachate) are disposing forces for Black, Latinx, Native, and low income people who live in its afterlife.¹⁰⁶ In such a way, landfills and the objects within them are not mere passive dumping grounds but rather subject-like actants in their porous mobility to contaminate beyond rigid confines.¹⁰⁷ After the plunder of oil extraction and refining, plastic lubricates our transactional economy (and widespread petro-dependency¹⁰⁸) before being wasted in an analogous way that Blackness is the omni-parasitized ejection, like Aereile Jackson, needed by racial capitalism through chattel slavery, cultural extraction, modern prison labor, and more recent marketing strategies for a lucrative, cosmetic diversity.^{109,110} "We [black people] give the nation

104 I was a citizen scientist on The Ocean Cleanup Mega-expedition back in 2015. I personally saw these items and more floating in the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles from any land mass.

105 National Geographic Society. (2013, January 14). *Petroleum*. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/petroleum/>

106 Chavis, B., & Lee, C. (1987). Toxic waste and race in the United States of America. *Commission on Racial Justice, UCC*. New York: Public Data Access.

107 Hoornweg, D., & Bhada-Tata, P. (2012). What a waste: a global review of solid waste management. Furthermore, landfills are infamous contributors to climate change--anaerobic decomposition of organic material within them releases a conservative estimate of five percent of global methane and other greenhouse gas emissions.

108 Williams, B. (2018). "That we may live": Pesticides, plantations, and environmental racism in the United States South. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1-2), 243-267. Brian Williams argues that anti-Black racism shaped the politics of pesticide (a first cousin of plastic) intensification in the Deep South as extensions of the plantation system.

109 Summers, B. T. (2017). Race as Aesthetic: The Politics of Vision, Visibility, and Visuality in Vogue Italia's "A Black Issue". QED: *A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 4(3), 81-108.

110 Summers, B. T. (2019). *Black in place: The spatial aesthetics of race in a post-chocolate city*. UNC Press Books.

its coherence because we're its underbelly," says Frank Wilderson.¹¹¹

And just as dysselected humans are deemed wasteable (as human-objects), wasted plastics are imbued with life-like agency (as object-subjects). With biopolitical implications, nutritional and material sustenance is distributed unevenly through a global supply chain of plastic-packaged goods that are fated to become waste. Plastic, in this way, can bring both life and death. During COVID-19, Instacart, DoorDash, and Amazon deliveries uphold a racial caste according to algorithms that prioritize particular Humans' survival needs despite the disposal of every-thing/-one else.¹¹² Blackness, positionally unique as ancestrally person and property, subject and object, disposable and also disposing, has a common cause with plastic. With only an eight percent recycling rate in the United States in 2017, plastic is the nadir of all consumable objects, the quintessential throwaway.¹¹³

I argue that, due to the evident entanglements of Blackness and plastic, using both terms somewhat expansively, the need for waste work, a corollary from Sharpe's wake work, now surfaces in a dire manner. What does it mean to defend the dead? And how might the *human-vs-waste* binary prevalent in waste literature foreclose a complicated kinship that exists between Blackness and Indigeneity and all other disposable subject-object-jects?

In *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany King deploys the shoal, a transient mixing of oceanic water and shifty sandbars, as an analytic that historically challenged slaves ships from navigating and anchoring along the littoral shores of West Africa and the Americas. The shoal, constantly in movement, comprising both water and land, quite naturally resists settlement: "[it] forces a vessel to remain off shore—off the littoral—impeding it from reaching its intended destination."¹¹⁴ The shoal becomes useful here to consider how prevailing waste discourse frames have "settled" rigid delineations between humans, nonhumans, and objects rather than offer a fluid continuum that threads through Blackness, Indigeneity, animality, plastic, and abjection, one that might open alternative possibilities of freedom from naturalized dysselection and ubiquitous commodification. I am reminded of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' thought-provoking questions:

What are the distances we need and what are the walls that will isolate and destroy us? How can we

111 Hartman, S.V., & Wilderson, F. B. (2003). The position of the unthought. *Qui Parle*, 13 (2), 183-201. Page 187.

112 Alimahomed-Wilson, J., & Reese, E. (2020, October 13). *It's a Prime Day for Resistance To Amazon's Ruthless Exploitation of Its Workers*. Jacobin. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/jeff-bezos-prime-day-amazon-warehouse-workers>

113 *Plastics: Material-Specific Data*. (2020, October 26). US EPA. <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/plastics-material-specific-data>

114 King, T. L. (2019). Off Littorality (Shoal 1.0): Black Study Off the Shores of "the Black Body". *Propter Nos*, 40. Page 40.

discern the differences between generative boundaries and destructive borders? King argues that a continental theory-bounded settler colonial studies breaks open when it crashes into the “rock, coral, and sandbank of the shoal” of Black thought.¹¹⁵ Similarly, I propose that race-averse, human-universalizing waste studies could meet their landfill doom when contending with the alterable, fungible, disposable Black and Indigenous Other.

King’s shoal here also alludes to archipelagic thought and adaptability, to an island epistemology that interrupts the hegemonies of the United States and Canada.¹¹⁶ Perhaps we can learn from our youthful kin at the Bahamas Plastic Movement, positioned at the shoal of water and land, who under the vision and mentorship of Kristal Ambrose and William Simmons have mobilized collective, creative refusal to enact national policy changes that ban single use disposals.^{117 118}

Waste work in the wake of the settlement-plantation seeks to flesh out the relation between extraction and ejection. It prompts us to eschew dualistic reductions of waste as non-living hazard and instead resurrect care for the always already deathbound Black-Indigenous-bject-animal-plastic-object, intimately informing praxes to unmake racial capitalism and the numerous forms of disposability it necessarily predetermines through the condition I call blacksticity.

Can the plasticity of time, the timelessness of plastic in its failure to decompose, the elasticity of Blackness, the violent processes of both embodiments’ transformations, and the comparable residence times of Black human flesh and ocean-deposited plastic in the wakes of the slave ship and the petrochemical plantation suffice to construct a troubled kinship? One might intuitively call plastic “white” rather than Black--something that is unnatural, imperiling the earth, out of rhythm with the rest of biota, running desperately from death and biodegradability, a creation for and by people who extract, consume, dispose, repeat, perpetually displacing externalities onto others while reaping the monetary profits. But I aim for something else in making this dreaded comparison.

What does it mean to defend the dead? What if, by defending the dead, we can care for

115 King, T. L. (2019). *The Black shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Duke University Press. Page 19.

116 Ibid. Page 196.

117 *Breaking Plastic Dependency*. (2020). Bahamas Plastic Movement. <https://www.bahamasplasticmovement.org>

118 *About the Ban*. (n.d.). The Government of the Bahamas. Retrieved December 31, 2020, from <https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/portal/public/about%20the%20ban/>

those living who are already on the verge of immi/a/nent death-by-design?¹¹⁹ What if, by defending the dead, we can care for all of the necropolitically-overdetermined subject-eject-object-jects and breathe in them chances for existing as being-things on new terms? How else can we “shoal” shale?¹²⁰ Can we interrupt their inevitable disposal in our unmaking of *homo oeconomicus*¹²¹ imposed by capitalistic individualism? In the wake of racial toxicity, in tending to *blacksticity*--the fusion of Black Trash¹²² --waste work may provide a flightpath of collective care, refuse-al, and re-use out of the racist, cannibalistic, eco-cidal linear consumption pattern enlaced by a liberal humanism that insatiably devours, even while under the pretense of sustainability. What collective emergences can be birthed by such a refuse value? Waste work acknowledges the continuum of commodification birthed in genocide and slavery and privatized land, now seen through a supply chain of *intimate* monstrosities and racializing consequences via resource extraction, production, consumption, and deposition. When we contend with blacksticity as a relational framework, we may come to shoal or unsettle our own complicity in the inevitable disposal-making that exists along a continuum from object to abject to animal to sub-non-other-than-human to earth under racial capitalism. We shoal our own complicity in falling into the consumer trap laid out by an individualist, liberal humanism. We see through the guise of green capitalistic efforts that merely displace responsibility on individuals while also holding ourselves, individuals and communities, accountable to the wastes we perpetuate. They may not be of our making, but we refuse them nevertheless and take to this task of building otherwise lives.

Concluding Capitalism with Circularity

When we unveil the anti-Blackness and Native genocide that is embedded into and enmeshed inseparably from the plastic-packaged commodity and all other commodified disposals,

119 Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press. Page 17. Christina Sharpe refers to Blackness as a sign of immi/a/nent death in the afterlife of slavery.

120 *Shale Gas Is Driving New Chemical Industry Investment in the U.S.* (2020, February). American Chemistry Council. <https://www.americanchemistry.com/policy/energy/shale-gas/fact-sheet-us-chemical-investment-linked-to-shale-gas.pdf>. An estimated \$203 billion investments in infrastructure projects have been implemented in the shale gas industry, according to reports of the American Chemistry Council.

121 McKittrick, K (Ed.). (2015). *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*. Duke University Press. Page 19. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick use this term to describe the new order of a wage-laboring Man as opposed to the native savage: “the virtuous breadwinner, the stable job holder, the taxpayer, the savvy investor, the master of natural scarcity.”

122 Mills, C. W. (2001). Black trash. In *Faces of environmental racism* (pp. 73-91). Rowman & Littlefield.

we can never unsee this. Our sub-non-other-than-human state is *altered*. And so, accordingly, we salvage our wasted and wasteful selves, internalizing our wasted- and wasteful-ness. When we willingly look through the framings of alterable humans-as-wastes, we see ourselves as the sacred waste¹²³ that/who we always already are/were. We commit to defending the dead, these multifold disposals, as a defense strategy to resuscitate all subject-eject-objects' death into new life. We recognize the death pre-/over-determined onto Black-Native-animal-poor-womxn-product-object-plastic life and the earth as singular. I contend that when we defend the dead, when we perform this waste work (in the wake), we actually reinscribe a circular relationship to life and death that precedes and will supersede the Western myopic lens of the visible, provable livability. Waste work can help us account for and tend to the continuum of each commodity and its/her/his/their/our rapacious disposability enfolding by internalizing the undeniable truth of relationality. We see ourselves in the waste, and the waste in us. We “trust that all water touches all water everywhere.”¹²⁴ And water is an ancestor.¹²⁵ (Did you know that plastic is made of water, too?) Plastic carries trauma. Plastic is of the Earth. And plastic also has spirit.¹²⁶

In defending the dead, we may *die living* while *living to die*¹²⁷, and in doing so, perhaps engage in a process of neuro(noir-o)plasticity that can tend to the past, present, and future trauma of (after)living the wake of waste and waste from the wake of the slave ship in the non-event of emancipation. More importantly, this waste work physio-spiritually evokes a linkage between land and water and body and commodity to harness the linear momentum of extractive colonialism and racial capitalism, lasooing them back into circular return. Perhaps, in embracing the framing of Black/Native-as-waste, rather than fleeing its inevitability, we can find

123 McDonald, B. (2015). Sacred Waste: Performance Pedagogy, Plastic Shamanism, and Ten Thousand Pieces of Trash. *Liminalities*, 11(4), 1.

124 Gumbs, A. P. (2020). *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press. Page 40.

125 Nelson, Melissa. [Melissa Nelson]. (2014, May 15). *Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89fsH20Bh44&t=932s>

126 Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony. Indigenous Research Methods*. Winnipeg: Fernwood. Page 90. Shawn Wilson's friend talks about a malfunctioning computer: “This machine here is made from mother earth. It has a spirit of its own. This spirit probably hasn't been recognized, and given the right respect that it should. When we work in a world of automated things, we forget that...everything is sacred, and that includes what we make.”

127 Somé, M. P. (1994). *Of water and the spirit: Ritual, magic, and initiation in the life of an African shaman*. New York: Putnam. Page 66. “Death is life and life is death. The dead live while the living die. Living or dying, we have joy.” Priest Malidoma Somé shared these words on his recounting the mystic rituals and wisdom of the Dagara people in *Of Water and the Spirit*.

a temporary loophole of retreat, a garretting of consciousness.¹²⁸ Doing so, we foreground our kinship with all other deathbounds:¹²⁹ the incarcerated animals in zoos, slaughterhouses, experimental laboratories (the ghost sacrifices, the absented disposals of Western educational, agricultural, and medicinal tyranny);¹³⁰ the tossed electronics comprised of polycarbonate plastic, cobalt extracted via coerced child labor in Congo, and Malian gold;¹³¹ the forgotten plastic bags shrouding the bottom of the Atlantic in the afterlife of their short-lived use; the desecrated rivers contaminated with industrial effluent from paper bleaching mills and agricultural run-off; the exploded mountaintops as consequential damage for cheap energy; the melanated island communities suffocating in tourist-and-ocean-brought plastic, adapting to rapid climate precarity; the melting glaciers as earth heats from our tampering with the “liquid grave,” that Black Gold¹³² that will imminently become Black Trash. In embracing all of their death as our own, can an otherwise verb of altered humanning emerge to move us beyond a calculus that reproduces innumerable intimate monstrosities and “now collectively threaten[s] the planetary environment...”?¹³³

The grammatical shoal of the subject-eject-object concept lies in the liminal space of

128 McKittrick, K. (2006). *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. U of Minnesota Press. Page 41. Katherine McKittrick traces the narratives of an enslaved African woman, Linda Brent, who hides in the 9'x7'x3' attic of her slave master's home for seven years: “She claims that in the garret she is not enslaved and that her loophole of retreat is a retreat to emancipation.”

129 Ko, A., & Ko, S. (2017). *Aphro-ism: Essays on pop culture, feminism, and black veganism from two sisters*. Lantern Books. I tip my hat here to Aph and Syl Ko, whose contributions to Black Feminist Vegan theory in *Aphro-ism* deeply influence my work. They wrestle with Wynter's interrogations of Humanity, pushing us theoretically and ethically (re)extend Black beingness into the social construct of Animality.

130 Coe, S. (2018). *Zoicide: Seeing Cruelty, Demanding Abolition*. AK Press.

131 Amnesty International. (2017). Time to Recharge: Corporate Action and Inaction to Tackle Abuses in the Cobalt Supply Chain. Page 5.

132 Marrin, A. (2013). *Black Gold: The Story of Oil in Our Lives*. Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers. I aim here to wed the liquid grave referenced earlier in NourbeSe Philip's Zong to crude oil extraction, connecting the Zong slave ship that jettisoned slaves into the Atlantic to the petrochemical practices of extraction and deposition. Black Gold references the lucrative and racializing interplay between Black enslaved people as value-producing property and Black oil as a profit-amassing resource with immense geopolitical stakes. The liquid grave, in this sense, gestures to the infamous BP Oil Spill of 2010 that devastated human and nonhuman life throughout the Gulf Coast. Additionally, it gestures to an ocean floor increasingly littered with death-dealing plastic. The liquid grave, Black Gold, and Black Trash can be materially and metaphorically woven together.

133 Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its over-representation—An argument. *CR: The new centennial review*, 3(3), 257-337. Page 270.

simultaneous refusal and acceptance of sub/non/more-than-humans-as-waste. “*What do we do with our heightened consciousness?*” Alice Water asks. No more arithmetic of linearity and disposability. No more desecrating plastic, an ancestor who/that is millions of years old but is routinely disposed of in a matter of seconds or minutes. No more slaughter behind closed walls in the dark. No more complicity in animal sacrifice for “meats” and “milks” and medicines and other plastic-wrapped products that render extensions of earth into mere fungible commodities. As Syl Ko powerfully iterates:

“when we say that ‘basically, we are animals,’ we feel what it means for racial ideology to implement the colonial concept of ‘the animal’ in order to bring destruction to beings all over the planet, human and otherwise. Our feeling is an epistemic resource. In Black veganism, we learn to trust that feeling and use it as a launching pad to theorize how the colonial tool of animality affects animals. The discovery is monumental: animals did not inform our notion of ‘animality’.

‘Animality’ informed our notions of animals.”¹³⁴

Black veganism alone does not unsettle the coloniality of commodification, the racial wealth gap, nor the onslaught of plastics. But when the human-animal-object finds solidarity with the object-object, one’s orientation to racial capitalism is inherently altered. *What do we do with our heightened consciousness?* No more plastic purchases (balloons, flowers, any of them) for holiday traditions that further instill the racial(ly toxic) wealth gap. No more Black Friday death-deals that temporarily assimilate “American” Black folks into the “consumer human” category at the expense of Black and Indigenous people domestically and globally. No more casting away to the landfill, the ejection we/they always already are. Synthetics accumulate from this Human illusion; the Humanistic grasp for instant convenience and perpetual security comes at the expense of future survivability.¹³⁵ Blacksticity is a *reclamation*, but not a repetition, of our Black Trash, our Black Gold, as well as the possibilities of turning trash into treasure. My hope is that it can seed visions of living and dying on one’s own terms. Blacksticity might look like anti-consumer boycotts of divestment. Or Afro-socialist farms, markets, and cooperatives that support local veganic food producers. Or values-based infrastructures that incentivize zero waste sup-

134 Ko, A., & Ko, S. (2017). *Aphro-ism: Essays on pop culture, feminism, and black veganism from two sisters*. Lantern Books. Page 124.

135 Hovecar, J., & Sherman, J. (2020, August 30). *The plastics industry has exploited fears around COVID-19*. Hartford Courant. <https://www.courant.com/opinion/op-ed/hc-op-sherman-hovecar-greenpeace-ppe-plastic-0830-20200830-b35lu5aaxfhphe3v5z3gawpjli-story.html?fbclid=IwAR3srsb7E0B0i5PvEIVU4Beukxe-bl9g3nP0DtXORWjC MDMVLQu-jT8ayks>. John Hovecar and Jodi Sherman say, “we must not ignore the long-term impacts of single-use plastics on our health for a false sense of short-term safety pushed by polluters.”

ply chains and cultures of reuse, politicizing the public in the direction of holistic community health and liberation. Or a collective movement that teaches how to care for and repair broken beings-things in an era of omnipresent disposability, cheapened products, and planned obsolescence. Or maybe it’s folks stepping on the accelerator of death-dealing wastes to clog and break open the gears in the engine of racial capitalism and then salvage the parts as centuries’ overdue reparations. I do not know how this plays out, but find myself in this moment responding to Christina Sharpe’s invitation into wake work.¹³⁶

Christof Mauch argues that “like archeology, [garbology] tells stories that would otherwise be forgotten.”¹³⁷ Our deathbound ancestors are speaking, “a mess with a message,”¹³⁸ perhaps awakening us, perhaps haunting us with their unresolved disposal, perhaps whispering louder and louder until we no longer look away from the mummified tombs.¹³⁹ Katherine McKittrick describes a burial ground of enslaved Africans found in Lower Manhattan in 1991: “[it] tells us that the legacy of slavery and the labor of the unfree both shape and are part of the environment we presently inhabit.”¹⁴⁰ These buried ejections, the dead and the wasted, the Blackness and the plastic, are the absented presences who/that can no longer be unseen. ABC news reported on the controversial \$9.4 billion Formosa Plastics Inc. project receiving a construction permit to build a state-of-the-art plastic fabric and antifreeze production facility, despite being on top of several slave burial grounds in the African American community of St. James Parish, Louisiana.¹⁴¹ There is an ancestral relationship between Blackness and plastic, ¹⁴¹ however disharmonious, and we must listen for it to discover a care across/despite death. Interviewed in the above article, Sharon Lavigne of the environmental justice organization RISE St. James,

136 Sharpe concludes the introduction of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. “...it is also my hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work might have enough capaciousness to travel and do work that I have not here been able to imagine or anticipate” (page 22). She also writes, “We must become undisciplined” (page 13).

137 Mauch, C. (2016). Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Page 6. Garbology, meaning the study of garbage.

138 Yaeger, P. (2003). Trash as archive, trash as enlightenment. *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, 103-115.

139 Boetzkes, A. (2016). Plastic, Oil Culture, and the Ethics of Waste. *RCC Perspectives*, (1), 51-58. Page 56. Amanda Boetzkes explains that a landfill is not a composter, but a mummifier, in such a way that garbage remains preserved indefinitely.

140 McKittrick, K. (2013). Plantation futures. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 17(3 (42)), 1-15. Page 2.

141 Carrega, C. (2020, March 15). *\$9.4 billion plastics facility to be built on slave burial grounds, report says*. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/94-billion-plastics-facility-built-slave-burial-grounds/story?id=69555811>. I would like to thank my friend, Joan Katherine Garner, for bringing this news to my attention.

says: “Our ancestors are crying out to us from their graves -- they are telling us to not let the industry disturb their burial sites. Formosa Plastics...don’t care, they just want to profit from St. James Parish.” In more recent news, social pressures, combined with grassroots litigation efforts, successfully lobbied the Army Corp of Engineers to pause and review the permitting process for this Formosa facility.¹⁴² The buried slaves, dead and disposed of, are now speaking, inserting their power through the living to shoal settlement of yet another necropolitical, death-dealing reproducer of waste. This is but one of many iterations that Tiffany King might describe as the “surplus of Black livingness—that exceeds black death, black suffering, and the black body.”¹⁴³ The settler colonial landscape is a massive grave site of omnipresent death for First Nation peoples, for formerly enslaved Black peoples, for microbial communities, for roaming bison, for throwaway objects in and beyond landfills, for all extensions of the living earth that temporarily became inert commodity from this centuries-long demographic transition and transfer of land-power into European hands. *What does it mean to defend the dead?*

This decision to emphasize a commonality between Blackness and plastic through abjection is intentionally provocative; it may unintendedly reify the rampant disposable conceptions and experiences of Blackness and Indigeneity, hypervisibly extracted and/or invisibly neglected. But joining the human to the animal to the object to the abject invokes a powerful spirit of relationality that implicates ourselves in extending empathy and respect or apathy and desecration to everything and everyone around us, rekindling Blackness to Indigeneity to all of Earth at a time when boundary-policing has failed over and over. Alexis Pauline Gumbs compels our un-humaning through a deeper knowing of self/other. “I want to dwell on the difference between being (dis)placed, or what I am calling being mistaken for an ocean, and being ocean as praxis,”¹⁴⁴ she says. In a similar manner, I hope this piece can underscore the difference between being disposed of, or being mistaken as object-abject, and being plastic as praxis. Being plastic as praxis, or leaning into one’s blacksticity, or performing this waste work in the wake of the slave ship, is not a call to apoptosis nor to self-ejection in the ways one may think, that revolutionary suicide marching in the inevitable and yet alterable fate of her-their-his-its-our-my

142 Dermansky, J. (2020, November 5). *Anti-pollution Advocates Cheer as Army Corps Reviews Formosa Plastic Permit in Louisiana*. DeSmog. <https://www.desmogblog.com/2020/11/05/army-corps-reviews-formosa-plastics-permit-louisiana>. Fortunately, this massive construction project has been placed on pause for the interim by the US Army Corps of Engineers.

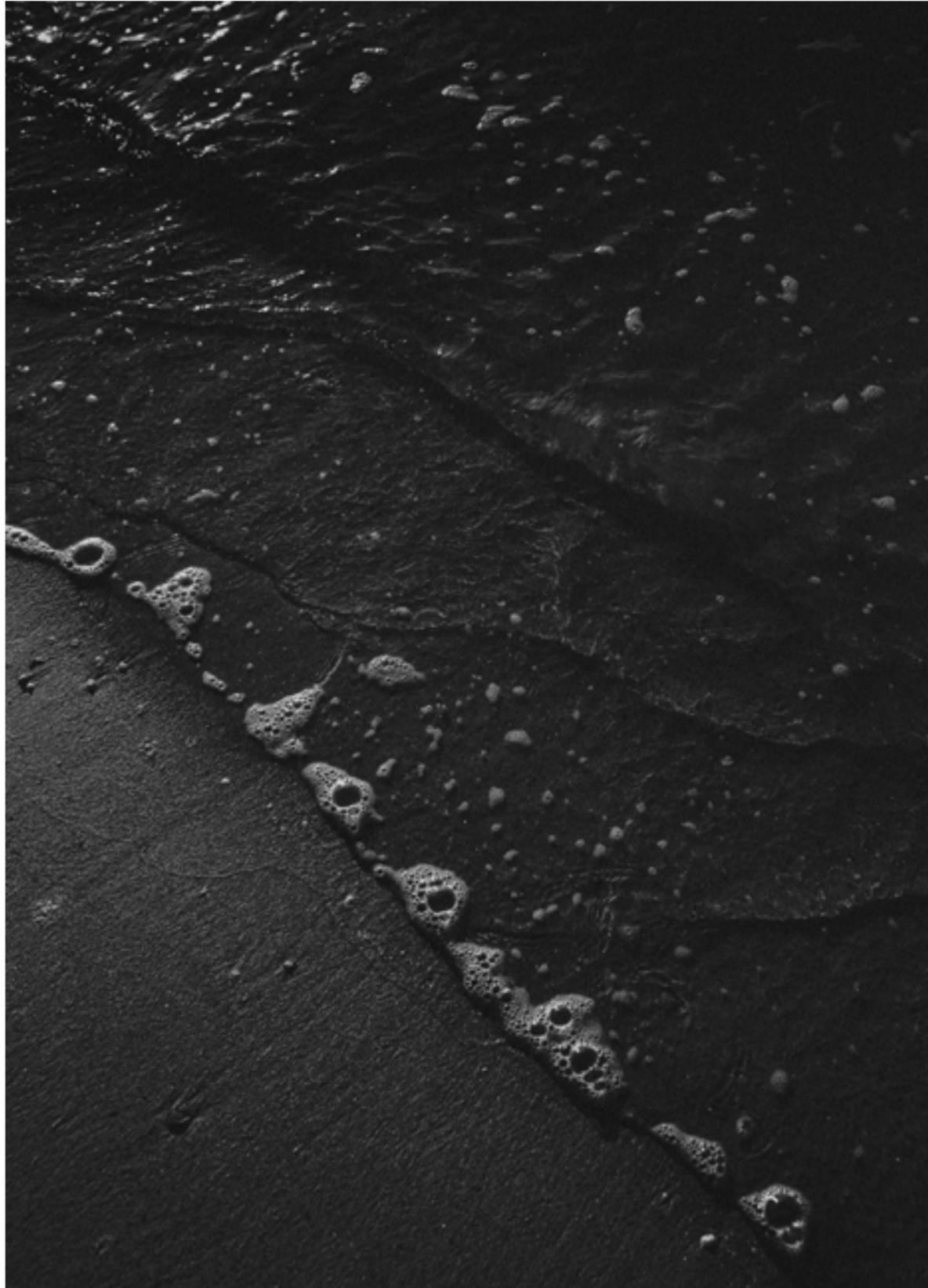
143 King, T. L. (2019). Off Littorality (Shoal 1.0): Black Study Off the Shores of “the Black Body”. *Propter Nos*, 40. Page 41.

144 Gumbs, A. P. (2019). Being Ocean as Praxis: Depth Humanisms and Dark Sciences. *Qui Parle*, 28(2), 335-352. Page 336.

wastedness. Rather, this waste work might be a subtle shoal, an internal loophole of retreat to unsettle the current logics that fix outcomes of racialized disposability and an ecocidal, individualist mass consumerism. Maybe if we call the names of the dead¹⁴⁵ and collectively care for the discards, they will remind us how to refuse, how to die, and how to live and die otherwise. “What is possible if we cease to seem natural to ourselves?”¹⁴⁶ Are we plastic enough?

145 McDonald, B. (2015). Sacred Waste: Performance Pedagogy, Plastic Shamanism, and Ten Thousand Pieces of Trash. *Liminalities*, 11(4), 1. Page 16. Bonny McDonald writes, “In a manic and celebratory tone, another plastic shaman¹³ instructs the audience to listen to the shadow people, those the dragon honors with work and with death in his great factories producing sacred waste. Dancers spin out into the audience proudly whispering names of the dead and at the same time handing out “sacred rattles” to each audience member.”

146 Gumbs, A. P. (2019). Being Ocean as Praxis: Depth Humanisms and Dark Sciences. *Qui Parle*, 28(2), 335-352. Page 336.



J A H L A N I

jahlani is an artist, a writer, a lover, a yogini, a reiki healer, a dancer, a goddess, a fairy dragon, a mermaid, a person, and a sovereign being... more than anything she is curious and she flows in her ocean of love, compassion, and patience. She advocates for mental health care to help people learn to overcome childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect. She teaches people breathwork and sensual movement for the purpose of their soul's growth. She believes in the power of dance and music to help bring us into the here and now to truly honor the sacredness of all life with reverence

I represent those who went through life experiences and trials that they thought they wouldn't ever overcome yet miraculously did through Ancestral veneration, gratitude, prayer, and joy.

I hope to honor my Ancestors by submitting my piece to this journal and share my gift with others in my community.

UnChartered Waters: Universal Womb, Blackness, and Alchemizing Shit To Gold

C U N T is derived from 'Kunda' or 'Cunti', a Hindu Goddess who represented the power and beauty of the female body. This word symbolizes the Yoni (Vagina) of the Universe, The Universal Womb, from whence we all came and to which we will all return for regeneration and rebirth. From this same root, the words 'Country', 'Kin', and 'Kind' are derived. The Universal Womb is the dark, wet space where we are all born. The place where our energetic frequencies come into alignment with destiny to bring us out of The Void of Darkness.

The Eternal Life Bringer of Unconditional Love from Mama Earth, the Moon, the Ocean, the female principle, the receptive force, the nourishing waters. Negative, silent, wise, solace from harsh conditions, a sweet reminder of Divinity, a force to be reckoned with, yet a reprieve from the onslaught of life... In our country, something that all of us have in common, alllll of our kin, all of our relations, is that we have been birthed forth from the Cunt, from the Universal Womb.

We all have splashed forth from the dark, chaotic waters of the Universal Mother's oceans. She is dark destructress, tearing away that which has held us back or threatened our capacity for joy. She asks that we sacrifice our ego in order to live in love. Love which sometimes tough, which is discipline, which is self-control. She is light goddess, bringing forth that which births our creations into the world. She tends the soil. She pulls the weeds. She creates gold from shit. She is kind mother and fierce protectress of her children. She is the Alchemist in the greatest sense. In the huge, unmarked grave of the Atlantic Ocean where our Ancestors were meant to die an undignified death, with their lives unimportant and their stories untold, by the power of remembrance, the power of reverence, they pulled forth more life, more traditions, more stories to tell.

These gifts were passed on to our Ancestors by spirits greater than them yet these energies exist inside and alongside them. In times when we were told we weren't human, we learned that that was OK. We didn't need to be human. We don't need to be colonized. We didn't need to be civilized, crunched down into a viewpoint, a box of who they say we should be. We became something else. We became channels and vessels of the Most High Creator. We became magicians, witches, warlocks, and wizards. We became scientists, mathematicians, and chefs.

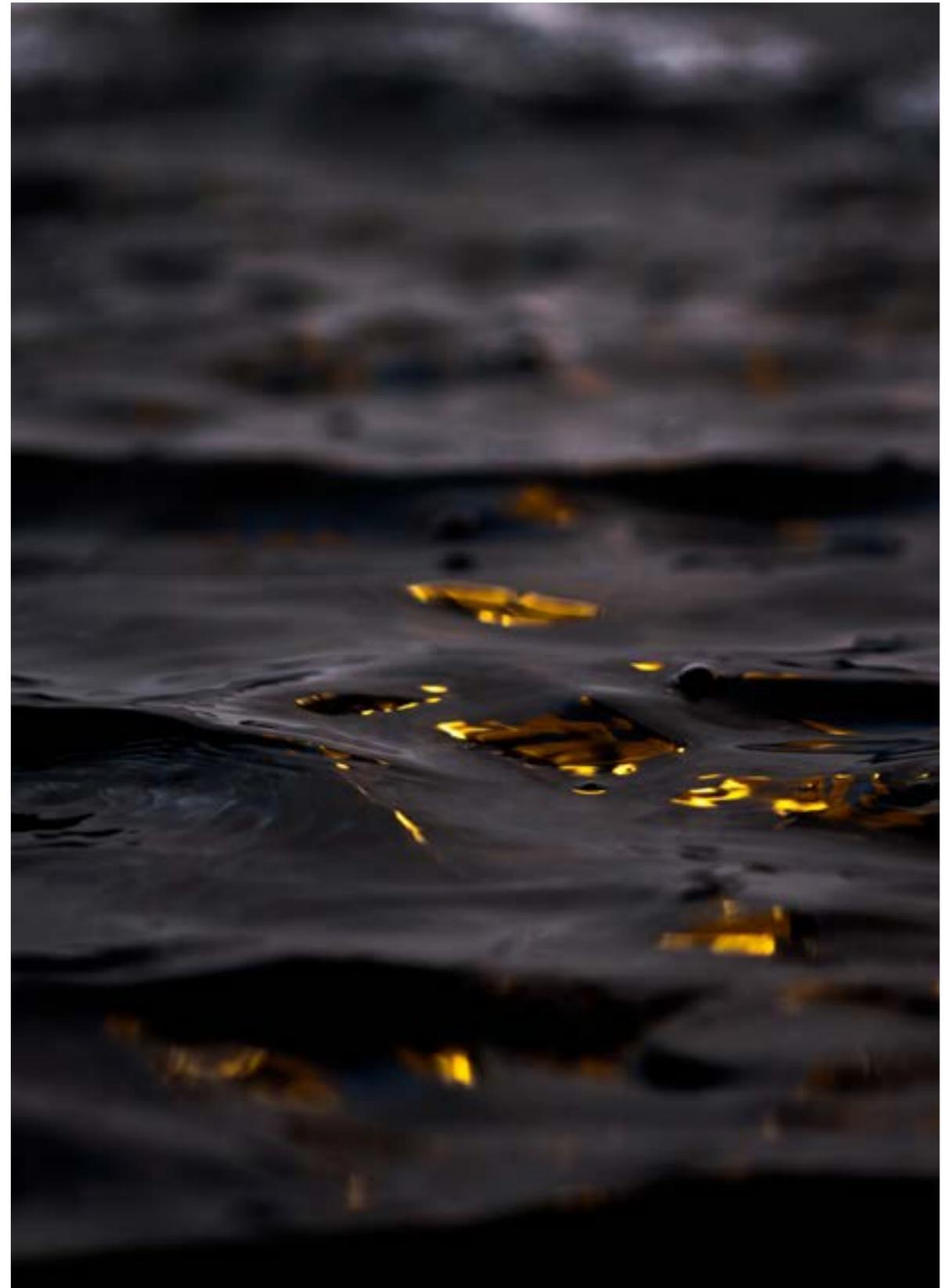
We allowed our Souls to pour fully into our bodies to bring forth majesty and wonder. In the bleakest of situations, the darkest of times, when the rain was hailing into those slaves ships, when there was the heaviest of fogs and we were unable to see 10 feet ahead, we learned to inhabit the realm of the Spirits. We learned to take on forces and energies greater than human, in order to live to see another day. In order for our children to be able to live in liberation from the bondage of slavery, degradation, and colonization. In order for our children to feel as Sovereign beings in this world, able to create that which only existed in their imaginations before.

We learned how to create good food, edible food from the shit they gave us. We learned how to clean water and how to be water. We learned how to dance when our foot was caught in the trap. We learned how to swim when they pushed our heads underneath the cool, dark water to drown us. We learned how to see, blindfolded and hear what was unsaid. When we were placed in the cage of animal and then the cage of human, our Ancestors asked us to open ourselves to the possibility of Us being something Greater, something Else, an encompassment of Everything... to break past limitations placed over our eyes, to write with our hand cut off, to fly with broken wing...

We are the Ocean, infinitely abundant and full of life yet able to bring death and destruction in the storm. Able to become still in the Eye of the Storm. We are the Moon... cool, soothing, and nourishing. We are the Stars, chaos burning bright in the dark night. We are the Rhythm of the Drum, dancing as the Dirt between our bare feet. We are the Sun in the Sky making its way around the Earth which we also Are. We are each as a precious drop of sweat or blood, unique with special DNA properties which allows us to exist beyond the lens that has been placed upon us.

Our Ancestors asked us to step up and show up. We learned to walk as Gods and Goddesses on this Earth. We learned to flow into Divinity, not denying the resilience of our Souls. This is a Truth we all hold, that we sometimes forget, lost in the collective amnesia, in hypnotized agendas, in Ancient wars between Powers that we cannot fully comprehend. Still, our Ancestors ask of us to hold our heavy heads up, to fill our expansive hearts with love vibrations, and BE. To accept ourselves in the fullness of who we are. Benevolent, giving, loving, rising. Fighting, rebelling, overcoming.

We are the Dualistic Nature of the Universe, coming Together in Unity. We are Darkness. We Bad. We Black. We are Light. We Good. We Are. I Am. The Great I Am. In these Uncharted Waters we swim, giving thanks for keeping the fire burning through lessons learned. Born from the primordial mother, out of the darkness of her womb we came forth to share our gifts, our light with our community, our country, our kind, our kin...



MATAM PAGES

Writer, Performer, Pleasure activist. I write stories for all Black people who love all Black people, centering Liberation and creating the world we want to see. The Root Work Journal is part of this mission, and I seek to learn all the ways to reimagine Black life and actualizing its breath on the page, and beyond.

Tongues as Casting Net

There are 16 different stages of life found in shrimp from egg to adult

Egg

15th-century Portugese explorer Fernando Po & I have one thing in common: we both love shrimp.

when my country emerged from the mesh of his mouth - tongue a casting net - he called it Camarões, after the abundance of shrimp found in the River Wouri

i.

in 1884 Kamerun was first colonized by the germans

ii.

War gives so many bodies

example: in 1916, germany lost the 1st world war, Cameroun was placed as a mandated territory, given to france and britain to rule

iii.

They gave us two new languages & an anthem Chant de Ralliement / The Rallying Cry of a country lost in translation

iv.

Language gives so many bodies

example: in 2018, the english-speaking regions of Cameroon were deserted after bloody conflicts between the French speaking military & armed separatists

Nauplius

When you eat shrimp you have to separate the shell from the meat - pick it apart, carefully, from the head
example: Mile 16, once a thriving neighborhood in the capital now littered with shell casings, a country picked apart from the head - shots

ii.

When I eat shrimp I always eat it whole,
I've never known how to pick myself apart.

Zoea.

There are two times more indigenous languages in my country than there are species of shrimp

yet we are fighting over what has never belonged to the land
colonization leaves everything only as a shell of themselves.

ii.

Fact: the pistol shrimp can deliver an explosive attack from its claws snapping, hotter than the surface of the sun, louder than a gunshot

iii.

if a bullet has not penetrated a body's internal organ or caused infection, doctors will leave it in rather than risk

surgery. The surrounding tissue encapsulates the bullet, preventing it from dissolving and leaching into the blood.

Mysis.

Camarões is the bullet
Kamerun is the body, Cameroun is the doctor
Cameroon is the surrounding tissue,

ii.

language is the defiant blood still learning how to survive
despite any of their gun

iii.

there is a war leaching inside of me everytime
I speak in the tongues fluent in lonely
spliced in grief

Postlarva

I wonder what my home was called before the kiss
between shore & wooden ships turned us into a chorus
of hives & a body losing its breaths.

I found a new home now. Built on centuries of brave
but so many of us are still living in fear. Still surviving.
Caught in the undertow of the proud waving flag

the great american cleansing, come hell or high water
And suddenly my tongue has become a shell of itself.

Juvenile

Food gives us so many bodies

example: the woman I love is allergic to all shellfish
I wonder whose language our children's blood will inherit?
I kiss her gently, like I know I have something to lose
like she is home, & I know what a fishing mouth is capable of

example: mama says tchaseu si ne zeuzo zou
she implores to always bless your food before you eat.
Some people pray for country; Some people become prey, for country
Amen before the feast. Hallelujah before the blood.

Adult

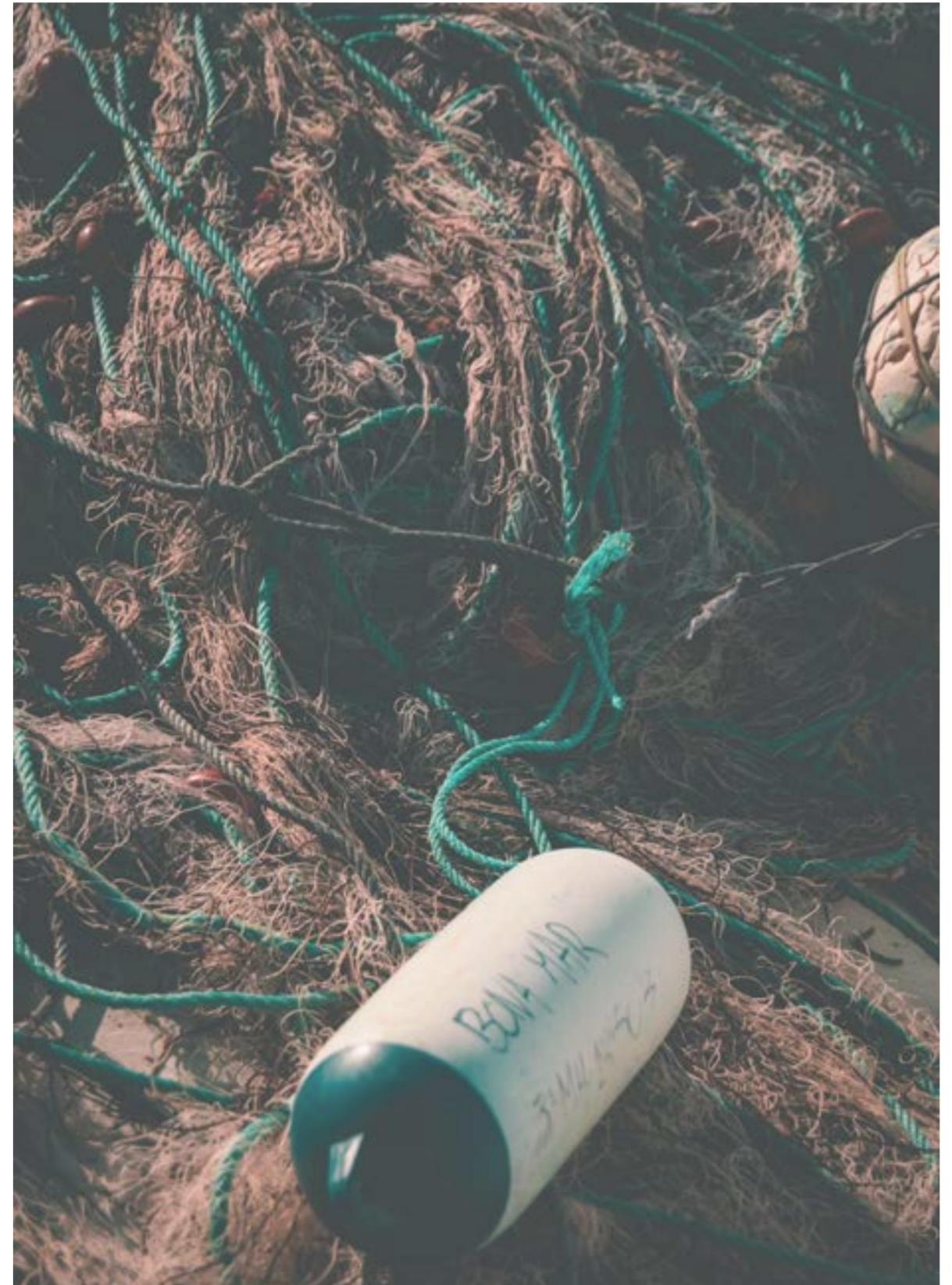
My country is a foster child, still trying to find itself

in blood & osso

in name & in leiden

in paix / travaille / patrie

in the boy & his will to be better for all our Wouri children
washing ashore.



MILISA COLEMAN

I am a Black gender non-conforming poet, writer, and visual storyteller based in Oakland, CA. I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Digital Media from Cleveland State University; minoring in Sociology and Black Studies. Throughout my life, writing has served as a creative outlet along with visual media. My work illustrates overlapping themes in nature, the human condition, and transcendence; working in tandem with my vegan and minimalist lifestyle. I completed the Baldwin House Urban Writing Residency through Twelve Literary Arts. My [rst publication is in the forthcoming issue of Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora. In submitting to the Root Work Journal, I am contributing to the genre of ecopoetry by Black authors. Based on the call, I can learn approaches of incorporating theory from editors and featured poets.

Insurgent Being *After Langston Hughes*

an ecotone
of sea
and Black -- germane to the plot

a myth
ascribed by the colonial
the material reality for this basin of

flesh *i lost my trees*

adam's hand of dominion marked

purpose *i lost my silver moons*

existential ranking
beget

Blackness -- a site of non-location

caged in this circus of civilization
caged in this circus of civilization
caged in this circus of civilization

the classified/the imagined/the
non-self could never lay claim to the
human

a fable
siphoned unabridged sentience
to a relegated domain of the other

Black -- liminal and
seismic

slip toppled vitrine of an identity
complex beget
a spring

Sources:

Hughes, Langston. "Lament for Dark Peoples." (lines 7-8, 12). *black nature:Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille T. Dungy, The University of Georgia Press, 2009, p. 154.

Wilderson III, Frank B. "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation." (Black as a site of non-location).. *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, racked & dispatched, 2017.

Ko, Aph; Ko, Syl. (Concept The Other/The Human binary). *Aphro-IsM: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, And Black Veganism from Two Sisters*. Lante

ALIYAH SHABAZZ

Born and raised in Philadelphia, aliyah_shabazz (Aliyah West) is a full-time creator and writer, who does some teaching and mothering on the side. Her writing focuses on gender, race, class, and the supernatural. When she is not writing, she teaches high school literature while raising, supporting and learning from her teenage daughter. Aliyah has always felt a connection with water as it is a focal point of her forthcoming collection of short stories. She is inspired to go deeper into the world of black resistance and how we, as a people, engage in large and small acts of resistance everyday. This is what sustains and nourishes us. I look forward to joining a larger community of writers and artists who exist to fight, love, and thrive.

We out here...

There are rivers that join us. Together. Separates us. From our pain.

We just out here surviving, moving, bathing our babies in the river. To bless them, we must get them ready for, they are prisoners of a silent war. A cold war, a spiritual war, a virtual war, an invisible one.

We just out here walking through rivers, trying to get this rent paid, or pay a mortgage, to a life where no matter where you lay your head you will be overworked and underused, under the weight of a carefully crafted message. The message reads: you can never be fully human, fully yourself. You must be magical or invisible, threatening, sassy, scary, ghetto, humble, not like those others, animalistic, well-spoken, uneducated, dangerous, professional, exciting, sexy, strong, forgiving, an example, full of hope, spiritual. All of these identities assigned to us to wilt the spirit. A wilted people who still keep at it, reimagine it, pull it from the ashes and work our magic. We do it out of necessity and make it style, every time, every. fucking. time. The waters protect us when we are expected to pander or prove, explain or change. The world is on fire and they say our own oppression doesn't exist.

We really just out here sitting by rivers, trying so hard to not acknowledge that it was

there; it was taboo, for us to touch, speak, or see it; essential to our very survival that we not look our trauma in the eyes. Knowing that it's depravity would turn us to salt, to stone, petrified by the evidence that such an evil could exist. No, we are water, we create new realities, we move intuitively.

We out here surviving, laughing, dancing, creating. Worn bodies and assaulted minds swim in the river to be restored. Brutality of black bodies, criminality on cell phone cameras. Their phones are not waterproof. Swim deeper because an image could never define us, who we are. Never tell them. Where our rivers lead.



KAREN ANDERSON

Karen J. Anderson is an artist, writer, photographer, publisher and filmmaker. She believes stories can be told in many ways and uses a variety of methods to uplift, inform and educate African American and people of color. She has a Master of Arts in New Art Journalism from the School of the Arts Institute in Chicago. Her artwork has shown in a group exhibition on Domestic Violence at the School of the Art Institute in 2018 and an online gallery for Shanti Arts in the group exhibition, Phenomenal Woman in 2019. Her artwork has been published in a group anthology of artists in the Genre Urban Arts No. 8 Print and WORDPEACE's Winter Spring Issue. Her work is also included Amuse Bouche in 2020. Her artwork can also be seen on her Instagram page BlackGyrlArt. In 2019 she founded a magazine, Fill In The Gap Magazine to help tell the stories and share information with marginalized individuals.

More Than A Color: the Marginalization of African American Beauty

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of requirements for the degree of
Master of Art
By
Karen Jennice Anderson
Department/Program New Arts Journalism
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Spring 2020

Thesis Committee:

Primary Advisor/1st Reader: Margaret Hawkins, Senior Lecturer, School of the Art Institute of

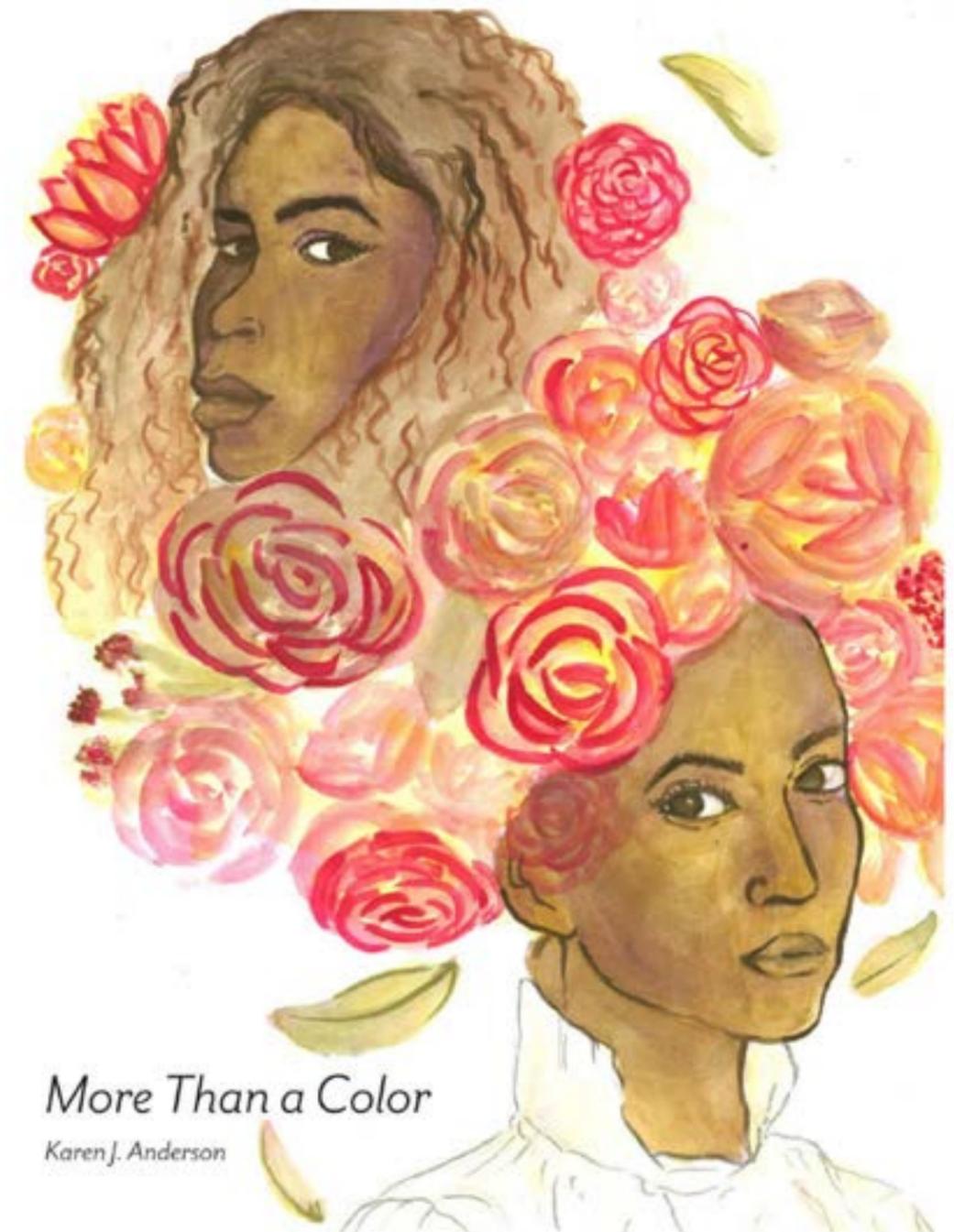
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Chicago

2nd Reader: Delinda Collier,

Associate Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago



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Root Work Journal
Vol- 1 Issue- 2



Thesis

Beyoncé Knowles Carter had editorial power over the cover and content of her own story on a major mainstream magazine. Serena Williams did the same on the cover and content of another one. The names of the magazines are not important because they didn't even respond to my inquiry. Brown became beautiful in 2018 when major fashion magazines showcased it on their covers. Where were brown skinned people on the beauty spectrum before then? I mean I had heard the statement "Black is Beautiful" but was it really? This sent me on a journey which led to libraries and internet searches, but also contacting industry professionals to talk about their experiences with this. For this project I interviewed four men to talk about the beauty found in African American women along with researching different moments in history that stood out as defining. All four men worked in the fashion and design industry on projects that featured beautiful women by their industry standards. Three, I chatted with on the phone and transcribed the conversations, while with the fourth I exchanged emails. I learned that men are very

dominant in this field and the way they see beauty determines how we see beauty.

Introduction

When I was about 7-years-old and my sister was 5, I remember leading her down our dirt streets to the pave cement of Rosedale Fort Worth, Texas during the mid-1970s, which seemed to me like a big highway. We would watch for oncoming cars and when it was clear would run across as fast as we could. Then we went down the hill past old shack houses, empty rundown buildings and Reverend Ranger's large church building. Then we went up another hill pass more rundown houses to Miss Ofelia's beauty shop, which was an old smoke-filled shack cluttered with all kinds of things.

Miss Ofelia, a thin little black woman, had one chair in the room, but you couldn't see anything from the smoke of the cigarette hanging from her lip and smoke coming from the hot comb in her hand. Sometimes there would be other ladies there so we would play outside until she was ready to do our hair. Sometimes we would have to sit in there and talk to her which was almost as painful as getting our hair done.

Most of the time all she had to do was press it, because Mom would wash our hair and send us to get a good firm pressing for Easter or Christmas or some occasion. Live flames would heat the comb that would straighten young heads with a sizzle with an occasional ear or neck getting burned.

"Are you tender headed?" Miss Ofelia would ask my sister.

Her painfilled face was a yes as the older woman pulled the hot comb sizzling and crackling through my sister's hair.

So we learned very young that beauty was associated with pain. This story will examine the beauty and pain surrounding African American images in the media.

Many young African American girls learned this process in the name of beauty, respectability and uplifting the race. Over and over history tells the story of African Americans believing that how they look to others will determine how they are treated. And to some extent it is true.

Traditionally, beauty is the qualities of something, shape, color or form that pleases the senses, especially sight. Africans brought to the new world had to define and redefine their view of what was beautiful because of the restrictions they constantly had to endure. They couldn't wear the clothes that were beautiful, they couldn't wear their hair in a beautiful manner, they couldn't even clean themselves. So this idea was something that developed over time using what was available.

Blain Roberts wrote that blackness was more than just the opposite of whiteness. It represented the negative qualities associated with civilization, morality, and beauty. (page 3-4, *Pageants, Parlors and Pretty Women*, Blain Roberts) African slaves were behind the eight ball, so to speak, as they were the opposite of beautiful.

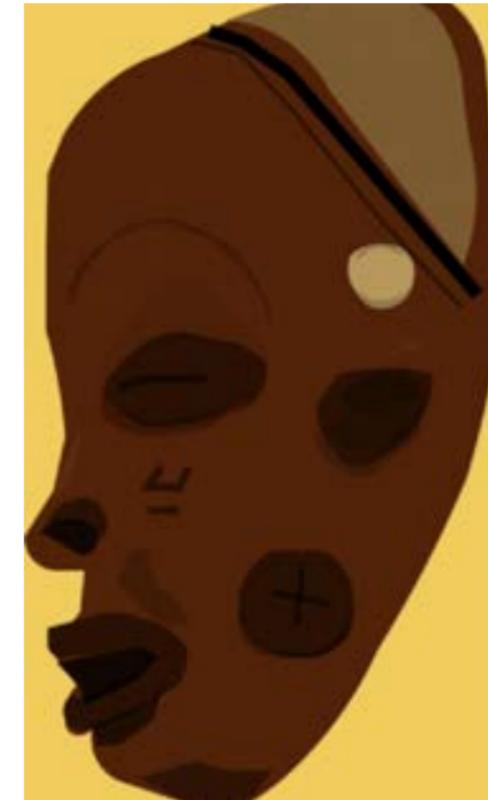
This theory persisted for centuries. In Margo Jefferson's *Negroland*, she describes a standard for beauty for African Americans in the 1950s that was quantifiable. Even though women could not control things like their skin color or the grade of their hair, how you looked determined everything about your life. If a woman had a skin tone between beige and honey with "decent to good hair" they would find themselves attractive. "Dark skin often suggests aggressive, indiscriminate sexual readiness. At the very least it calls attention to your race and can incite demeaning associations."¹

Jefferson goes on to explain that nappy hair, curly kinky hair that is tightly coiled, required heavy cream and a hot comb to manage. Because of this strenuous process the hair seldom grew passed the neck or shoulders.

This hot comb and skin lightning cream helped African American women take on some of the aesthetics of Anglo women. Was this enough to help others see the beauty in them and appreciate what they really brought to the table?

Let's look at three images that I believe are iconic not only because of the women, but the story the photos tell.

¹ Margo Jefferson, *Negroland*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2015), 53.



It Is Art

In the first work of art, a honey brown skinned young woman sits on an invisible throne crowned with a lovely array of flowers that has started to fade. The full blooms are reds, pinks, yellows and off whites. Her headdress conceals her hair but connects her with everything that is real and shiny and fake all at the same time.

Her body angle is away from the viewer, but a tiny turn of her head gives the viewer enough to know she sees them.

Her thick arched brows betray her hair color while her pointed nose flairs out on the ends signaling her heritage. Her eyes catch you out of the corner letting you know whatever she has to say you better listen. The story in those brown pools are serious and her lips are ready to command.

Her natural looking face is facing the light

She looks confident, self-assured and serious. The high white cotton collar almost cloaks her

neck, while the lace of the dress fades in with the light. Her image casts a shadow on the white behind her.

This is no tragic mulatto with a whore in need of redemption vibe. She sits like a woman of authority poised to give orders and take what is rightfully hers.

Like her ancestors, she tells the world she is worthy of everything she wants and our attention. In the second image, her coco brown skinned cousin stands facing a gold wall with her arms by her side draped in a shiny gold fabric that catches the light like her skin. Kinky waves of hair flow down her back but encircle her face like a well-groomed lion's mane. The dark roots of her hair freely fan out to bronzish brown getting lighter the farther away it moves.

Full dark eyebrows arch over the full features of her face. Her eyes stare out of the corner directly at the viewer with her muted color lips about to speak. The look comes over her shoulder as an afterthought, but with a firm glance so they know she means it.

The tense muscles in her arm relax at her side, while the gold robe reveals her legs and left butt cheek. Her stance is firm and intentional.

Now the viewer sees the smile that says kiss my fine ass as she stands confidently.

She is not a mammy or someone to serve up whatever concoction that is needed for the moment. She is royalty and has placed past behind her and she is going forward, showing resilience in her tough times

In the final image, a sophisticated darker skinned woman with kinky hair.

The third and final image, a black and white image is of dark-skinned woman staring directly at the viewer. Her natural kinky hair is gathered to a large evenly shaped Afro puff on top of her head like a crown, with a glimpse of light coming from behind her. Her forehead is clean and clear with the lines of both brows angled toward her full nose. The eyeliner draws a contrast to the whites of her eyes, but also allows her lips to remain neutral. Her eyes say see me for who I am.

Her face ignores the well-groomed hand that balances a cigarette in a holder with 1960s sophistication in front of it. She is draped in a white piece that has small triangles in a pattern all over it.

These three images reveal strong beautiful women of color telling a story that had needed to be told for centuries.

Why do images like these need to be made and why?

What value can images of African American women bring to the world?

What is the impact of not having images like this?

Who creates images like this and why would they?

Can an ordinary photoshoot changes the way the world sees something?



Our Crown

He thought it would be lucky if his work got into the magazine at all, but he was determined not to compromise himself. He wanted to prove himself as a maker, artist and designer.

This type of design work started off as a way to make money, but Phil John Perry soon found a new way of creative expression. He worked day jobs to help finance his art, so that he didn't compromise his artwork.

Born in Manchester England the 32-year old designer found the work was useful to the companies he worked for because they got normal floral and event expertise, and someone who could deliver a concept and create in a different way.

"The inclusion of my own true creative thoughts into the world of flowers made it one of my ways to personally express myself."

He submitted ideas to a magazine and was happy when he got the call to create a floral design for a photoshoot.

His assistant Jemeka and he arrived at 5am to the flower market, then the countryside shoot and began working.

"It was baking hot which is very unlike Britain and very hard with fresh florals."

He said the team from Vogue was overwhelmingly kind and thoughtful, the stylists' were professional and personable. The morning was spent getting everything ready, it was busy and stressful.

He said they struggled initially with the structure of the headdress and making it stable on her head.

"I like a touch of anarchy, irreverence and mischief in my design."

The team liked it too. Perry said the team asked him to create a second floral headdress, which he did on the fly.

The best of his day was when he met Beyoncé in the second headdress.

"I never thought I'd actually see Beyoncé but was lucky enough to meet her and see her in my work that was the best part of the day by far. Especially when she said "Phil it's beautiful"

"I have no idea how far the image would go or know that it would make the cover and the image end up in a fine art museum. For a true representation of my work to be linked with such an icon is an achievement that I didn't see coming."

Historically, Neither did some other people.

The newly freed African women made beautiful dresses from the finest fabrics in celebration of their new positions. Not only were they released from bondage of slavery, but they had business that afforded them the luxury of wearing jewels in their hair.

These women from the Senegal and Gambia regions of Africa used the French legal system in the French colonies which allowed enslaved Africans to get a fair market value for themselves, and with funds they earned from their labor, purchase their freedom.

The system was designed for older slaves to buy their freedom when they were not worth much to their masters anymore, but more younger women used the process. Not only did they free themselves, but they freed other women.

This new skilled labor opened businesses that gave them this newfound wealth. But Caucasian women became wary of these independent women with funds for fear they would take their husbands. So the Caucasians contacted their legislature.

After being petitioned by the local women, French American Governor Don Miro created the Tignon Law in 1786 that handle the situation. The law required all Africans to dress like a slave class of people which meant no wearing fancy dresses or jewelry on the streets. They would also have to wrap their hair in a handkerchief.

Angry, the former slaves tied their hair up with some of the most elaborate beautiful scarves and cloths they could find creating their own version of anarchy.

Even in the British colonies there were laws that had requirements about how African slaves

dress. But more interesting, were the laws that restricted the purchase of slaves from French America or the Islands. It was quite revealing that it was illegal to bring in slaves who once lived in French America or where owned by French Americans. The colonies did not want the intelligent thinking Slaves walking along their roads.

The South Carolina colony created laws to keep the slave population in line such as all slaves had to have the proper attire. The Negro Act of 1735 required slaves wear clothing made from the cheapest fabrics with designated colors such as checked patterns or blue, coarse cloth. If the sheriff or any of his patrol caught slaves in any other type of clothing, like hand me downs from the master, they could be taken from them.

I find it ironic that the people who had to wash, sew and make the clothes for the masters, were charged to wear something less. The hands that created the beauty that adorned the master's body were made by people from whom it was legally restricted. And through the process of creating things for others, they established themselves as true artists.

Nothing elaborate, yet.



Our Other Crown: The Hair

“It’s about accepting yourself for who you are and working with, not against what you were born with” British celebrity hairdresser Vernon François.

“So often women, men and kids will tell me about how a negative relationship with their hair has been transformed by something they’ve seen, heard or read relating to my work.”

François believes beauty comes from within.

François says helping others to understand and embrace their hair’s true texture it is what motivates him to keep pushing boundaries; with new hairstyles, product innovations and most importantly, education.

The North England native started braiding hair when he was young because he grew tired of his mother doing his hair. Once he learned the process, he braided everything he got his hands on, according to The Dispatch Weekly.

At the age of 14, François took a job at a salon and by 17 won his first industry award. As he built his career and brand, he styled celebrities like Lupita Nyong’o, Tracee Ellis Ross and Kerry Washington.

His work has been featured in Vogue, Vanity Fair and Harper’s Bazaar. More importantly, he has created shampoo, conditioners, and finishing products for all types of textured hair. Like others who have spent time learning about hair, he has created learning tools to help everyone on their hair journey.

“It’s linked with confidence, self-expression and individuality. Your hair’s true texture is as unique as you are and one of many magical ways of expressing parts of your identity.”

He has styled all types of hair for celebrities and non-celebrities. When things don’t go as he plans them, he adapts.

“That’s an important point for anyone whose styling either their own or someone else’s hair; remember, don’t be too rigid in your approach. Hair behaves differently on different days, because of things like when it was washed, the style it was most recently worn in and what kind of

products have been used in it.”

“Put on some music, do your hair when you’re in a good mood, and if something’s not working, change it. Don’t be afraid to try something new.”

This is a practice he uses in his own life, which is filled with all kinds of moments, big and small. He was the hair stylist on a project that created beautiful photographs.

“This shoot was different because (Serena) made a bold statement that was very personal to her.” He wrote, “she was putting her most authentic self in the spotlight via the written word as well as visually.”

It was his job to make sure that the visual met the boldness of the words.

“I was excited that she was doing an unretouched feature.” He had worked with Serena before, but this shoot was different because she made a bold statement that was very personal to her. The best part of the day for him was seeing the finished result, all parts of her look complementing each other perfectly, he said.

“Serena looked stunning.”

“I hope that people will remember the images as being iconic, strong and inspiring.”

François says he is driven to make a positive difference.

When the Civil War ended African Americans were set on a journey to heal and learn to see good and beauty in themselves. They would learn what they could accomplish, but the heart to uplift others would be the key.

At end of the Nineteenth Century, African American women like Sarah Breedlove had a difficult time managing their hair. She found that she like many women in her position, had a scalp disease and her hair was falling out leaving patches of bald spots. They had a poor diet which lacked protein, and limited ability to wash their hair often. With no running water in their homes, they had to carry water from a well or creek which made regular care impossible. They may have washed their bodies once a week, and their hair once a month if that often.

If these women saw images of women in newspapers or books, the women were probably white with flowing straight hair, something they could not have. Being considered beautiful was probably a dream because Caucasian society told them often they were ugly because of the color of their skin.

There were not many images of African Americans with great hairstyles to set an example. One of the most prominent images of an African American woman in the late 19th Century was that of Aunt Jemima. A caricature of a slave mammy, Aunt Jemima was a character in a minstrel show.

Nancy Green, a former slave, was hired by two Caucasian men to play the character in state and county fairs to sell their pancake flour. Green who was born in 1834 in Kentucky, served pancakes to thousands of people until her death in 1923.

She is the face of the African American woman that mainstream America became familiar with.

Her hair was wrapped with an old kerchief and none of the adornments of modern beauty. But her job was not to be beautiful, it was to sell pancake flour. She did such a good job selling this product at county fairs that they signed her to a lifetime contract.

After a couple of failed marriages and working as a laundry woman, Breedlove developed a business from her own problems as she started the adventure in hair. She went to work for an African American woman who sold hair care products to other African Americans and found some success with the products.

I am sure Breedlove found that African Americans had a wide variety of hair textures and the products did not do the same thing to all types of hair. Yet the products and system did enough to stop the damage and grow her hair. She thought it could do more.

By this time, Breedlove had married Charles Joseph Walker, an African American man who worked in advertising, and continued to experiment with the products to see if she could make them better. She experienced firsthand what it did for women to take care of their hair and how it gave them confidence.

She created a new product under her name, Madam CJ Walker, traveled the country and taught women how to take care of their hair. The budding entrepreneur enabled these women to start their own businesses that catered to African American women.

Her products were sold door to door by women who were trained by her company. She had a workforce that distributed and sold her products.

Madam CJ Walker became not only a millionaire but also a philanthropist because her goals were to uplift the race. There were other companies trying to sell products to African American women, but usually the companies owned by Caucasian people used products like alcohol that were harmful to African American hair. Soon women would look at a product and ask who the product was made by to determine if it was harmful or not. This is a practice that still continues today when it comes to products for people of color and ensuring that those products have the best in mind for the intended purchaser.

Even though Walker was a philanthropist contributing to things causes like the NAACP, her image was not popular in mainstream America, even though a photo of an African American was on the product.

The African American image that was popular in mainstream America was the Mammy, which Aunt Jemima personified. Even though Walker was making millions helping African Americans grow confident in their appearances, the image of the kerchief headed mammy still dominated.

In 1939, the first African American woman to win an Academy Award was Hattie McDaniel for the role of Mammy in *Gone With The Wind*. She represented her people well despite being cast for the rest of her career as maids and servants. She lived an amazing life, integrating neighborhoods and supporting the NAACP. But Hollywood wanted little colored girls to know they could be maids; they could not be Vivien Leigh.



Pushing the Limits

Hattie McDaniel said she would rather play a maid than be one. She created a beautiful example of how to work with the limits given her. As she played servants, no one thought she was beautiful enough to put her on the cover of a magazine. Historically African American female faces were not represented in movies, magazines or anywhere else as attractive.

Portrayed in the media as something to be loathed, African Americans had an uphill battle when it came to being seen as beautiful or even bringing something good to a situation. The racial climate in the United States did not help.

Until 1915 most motion pictures were two to three-reelers lasting about 10 minutes. With *Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith, the experience was a three-hour film filled with hatred and *fear toward Africans*. This created an environment that fostered Jim Crow Laws and segregation which was designed to keep African Americans in sub servant positions.

These limits were not just in the 1920s and 30s. It was not just in movies, but in magazines, newspapers and advertising. It lasted for decades.

It was difficult for African American women to get work outside of domestic skillsets. McDaniel knew this and took the acting roles that were offered her. Other actresses chose to push the limit, and some found success, while others did not.

Beautiful and talented dancers and singers with light brown skin and some European features did not fit the role of the mammy. Women like Josephine Baker, Nina Mae McKinney and Dorothy Dandridge did not want to play servants but wanted roles that showcased their talent. They wanted to be stars like their Caucasian counterparts, but they would be cornered by another racial stereotype.

Donald Bogle referred to this type as the tragic mulatto. This person was usually female and the product of a Caucasian father and African American mother. This woman is usually doomed in life because they have a drop of African American blood.²

² Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, (New York: Continuum, 1994) 144.

A mixture of African and European America heritage, Josephine Baker had some success on Broadway as a dancer and performing in clubs around the city. Born in St. Louis Missouri in 1906, Baker grew up poor and hard but moved to New York City in her late teens in 1915. She performed in clubs around the city and made it into several Broadway shows.

Mary McAuliffe wrote that all black musical Paris revue could not afford Ethel Waters who was an African American star at the time, so they hired a 19-year-old Baker, who moved to France. In France, Baker opened in *La Revue Negre* with the comedic dancing that garnered her fame in the US. She knew this was the opportunity to get all she wanted from show business. In the act finale, “She made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the split on the shoulder of a black giant.”³

Baker displayed that the tragic mulatto could be a person of joy who is comfortable in her skin. She took their stereotype and made her own rules. Later she became so successful that she became known for her performance almost in the nude with a banana girdle. In 1927 she became the first African American to star in an international motion picture, *La Sirene Des tropiques*, a role that would catapult her to stardom.

Yet the thing that sold her on Paris, was not the fame, but the chance to sit at tables and eat with white people.⁴ The segregation that bound African Americans in the US was not visible in France.

Baker’s honey brown skin and ample body proportions made her the target of racists in the United States. In an announcement of the 1936 Ziegfeld Follies with Josephine Baker *Time* magazine referred to her as a “Negro wench with underwhelming talent and performances who was slightly bucked tooth,” according to Kimberly Brown. It also read she was a common woman who “was essentially lucky to earn attention in Paris.”⁵

Racism blinded them to Baker’s exquisiteness, but it freed her to become part of the French

³Mary McAuliffe, *When Paris Sizzles*, (Maryland: Rowman Littlefield, 2016) 175

⁴ Ibid, 175

⁵ Kimberly Brown, “In the Eye of the Beholders” In *Soul Thieves*, ed. Tamara L and Baruti N. Kopano, (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 77

Resistance during World War II and becoming a civil right activist supporting the cause in the United States. Baker used her fame and power to bolster the things she believed in.

Not so successful was the African American woman who found fame in the US but was not able to leverage it for her causes or even her own life.

Dorothy Dandridge was also considered very successful for an African American actress, as the first African American on the cover of *Life*, a mainstream magazine, for the role of Carmen Jones, which she also received an Academy Award Best Actress Nomination.

Dandridge started in show business early because her mother, Ruby was an actress. Dorothy and her sister performed on the *Chitlin' Circuit*, a group of African American venues, until the depression got worst. She had nice small roles working with big movie stars like Bill Bojangles Robinson and the Marx Brothers.

Her major breakthrough role came in *Carmen Jones* (1954), written by Oscar Hammerstein taken from the opera *Carmen*. Dandridge was the lead in an all African American cast, directed by Otto Preminger, an Austrian, who would decide how African Americans would be portrayed. She would be a sexy factory worker who lures away the good guy, but deserts him for a prize fighter and unhappy ending.

She made several movies playing roles that were not servants. In one of her key roles, she played a young wife, and in another a teacher, but Carmen put her in front of the nation. Bogle said that even though she attempted to be contemporary and daring, she still played a doomed, unfulfilled woman.⁶

The audience could not see Dorothy Dandridge the way she wanted to be seen. She did not have control of her sexuality like Baker did. She was not telling her story and what she had been through. Bogle said she was not able to affect or touch the lives of the public and sweep the audience off its feet.

That is the rub. Dandridge's sexuality was portrayed through the eyes of a Caucasian male. It

⁶ Bogle, Toms, 149.

used sensuality to cheapen her beauty. It did not value her brownness, or the texture of her hair. These women were judged by standards of beauty that they could not meet.

“We love this girl but she's a little too dark for the story. Or we love this girl but she's too big or her hair is too frizzy or she's too freckly. It was always too something,” said the photographer. “And all of these girls would get knocked off the list and I would be left with the bottom two girls, who would be the typical blonde-haired famous models.”

A season photographer Alexi Lubomirski grew frustrated with the lack of diversity in his photo-shoots. He had established himself in the fashion industry shooting for publications like Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, and GQ around the world.

But he saw that he was shooting some of the same type of models over and over but knew that the world was much broader than that.

Lubomirski was born in England in 1975, his mother and stepfather moved to Botswana when was young. After finishing a degree in the UK, at the University of Brighton, he went to work for famous photographer Mario Testino as an assistant.

“In the late 90s, early 2000, beauty was all about what you saw on the fashion pages of Vogue. It was like a 6-foot Amazonian girl, not too ethnic, not too this, not too that, just safe in the middle,” He said explaining how it was when he started.

“Now beauty to me has nothing to do with looks and it is to do about the way people hold themselves, it is about confidence, its about joy, its about taking ownership of everything, owning your look and just living it.”

He has done some inspiring photo shoots for people like Scarlett Johansson, Jennifer Lopez, Selma Hayek and more recently wedding photographer Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. But there is also a fun side of him reflected in the tutorials on his website where he coaches new photographers in everything from how to plan a photoshoot to sending their portfolio out to get work. He tells stories allowing others to learn from his adventures.

Lubomirski learned that photographing an individual, famous or not requires a connection with

that person.

“Authenticity is beautiful. So, if you come into set, I want to find the real you. I want to talk to you and get to know you.”

He said he makes real connections because once he finds that point he can do his job. “Connection can be the fact that you have listen to them and they feel heard.”

He said he builds trust which helps a person give something of themselves to the process. But he also understood that he needed to become whatever his photo client needed.

“...if they need a best friend, I become a best friend, If they need to be the Queen of England, I become subservient.”

When he remembered photographing Serena Williams for Harper’s Bazaar in 2019, he said she arrived that morning and he allowed her to settle and get ready.

“It was about celebrating her beauty. It was an unretouched shoot. She’s a force.”

Serena wore gold, which was many of the things worked out before they got to this point. He said when celebrities do those kinds of shoots, they like to come in, work and go. Many of the decisions had been made before they got to that point.

So when the time came for the revealing images. The image where the dress would flow away from her body and reveal her toned legs leading up to her bare rear end.

“Now, when we shot it,” he said of the images of Serena revealing her rear end. “I am respectful. It is a very fine line between empowering somebody and objectifying somebody.”

He said there were frames before that and frames after where we showed too much or not enough.

“So I showed her every frame and she chose the one she was comfortable with.” The ones she chose were sent to the magazine.

Williams was a woman in charge of her body.

Lubomirski is the kind of artist that uses his platform for change, like his initiative to make fashion and entertainment industry more ethical, compassionate and moral by saying no to using fur, feathers, and exotic skins in their work. It is called Creatives4Change.

Lubomirski believes in using what he has to change the world around him to make it a better place, and a few minutes chatting with him reveals that. Another one of his projects was the Diverse Beauty book.

He understands the impact of imagery in the mainstream and wanted his project to reflect that any young girl can feel a part of the gang. He wanted any type of girl to be able to see her type in a high fashion image, so he found women of all shapes and sizes to feature in his book.

He even interviewed a diversity professor who suggested each model give five words that describe themselves.

“You will see on each page how everybody defines themselves in five words.”

Lubomirski felt that just because you see a model one way, doesn’t mean that is the way they see themselves. It was important to understand how the person saw themselves.

“My idea was twofold, one was that I realized that if you were an alien and you came down and looked at fashion magazines to try and find out what beauty was, you would think that beauty ranged from one to five. But if you actually go out on the street and you look out at the world, you will realize that beauty ranges from one to thousand and that what was not being represented in magazines.”



Black Is Beautiful

Tanisha Ford points out that everyday women began wearing wigs, not to be white, but to be seen as sophisticated and on trend in her book, *Liberated Threads*. Most of the trends for beauty and fashion were set by Caucasian people, which meant most of the African American models in both industries were fair skinned and straight hair, like Dorothy Dandridge. The industries seem to become racially tolerant of those who could look a tinted shade of white.

This happened around the same time as white companies began to realize that there was some money to be made in the African American community wrote Tanisha Ford, an associate professor of history at the Graduate Center, CUNY. The companies would advertise in the African American newspapers, using images that had thin white features, with the skin darkened to represent African Americans.⁷

It was on the way to being the norm for beauty in the African American community. But they weren't the only ones to notice a need in the African American community. *Ebony Fashion Fair*, started by Eunice Johnson of Johnson Publishing Company began doing fashion events with models who had fair skin and straight hair in 1958 in Chicago. It traveled to several cities annually and provided exclusive clothing.

In New York City, every August, Mr. Carlos Cook with the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement would celebrate Marcus Garvey's birthday with a festival. Garvey was a central figure in New York City in the 1910s and 20s starting an organization for the improvement of African Americans that united them with their African ancestry.

Cook continued to promote the philosophy of Marcus Garvey who always emphasized the beauty of black people their hair, their complexion, as well as their history.

Cook started a beauty contest in 1959 that he called the Miss Natural Standard of Beauty show and began to do it annually. It was a pageant to showcase African American women with their hair in its natural state. The winner of this contest would receive a prize sometimes up to \$100.⁸

⁷ Tanisha Ford, *Liberated Threads*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 44

⁸ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 51.

When the **African Jazz-Art Society** went to see Mr. Cook's show *Miss Natural Standard of Beauty*, it gave them an idea.

AJAS was formed in 1956 by **Elombe Brath, Kwame Brathwaite, Frank Adu, Ernest Baxter, Chris Hall, David Ward, Jimmy Abu** and **Robert Gumbs** as a collective of artists and creatives around jazz and uplifting the race. They produced jazz concerts, art exhibitions and cultural events.⁹ These men formed a group that would change the way the community thought about being beautiful.

"The president of AJASS one day after going to one of these beauty contests called me and said. 'Robert I've got an idea. We should produce a series of fashion shows with women wearing their hair in its natural state. I said, Wow that is a great idea."

Robert Gumbs said because at that time there were very few women wearing their hair not pressed. The New York City native, was born in Harlem in 1939, but raised in the Bronx and went to school with other members of the group.

One of the few remaining members of the society, Gumbs remembered the first show, which was January 28, 1962 at a small club in Harlem.

"Originally we had planned to just do one show," said Gumbs.

The AJAS held a hair fashion show promoting African American women wearing their hair in its natural state and promoting fashion representing African ideas. During a time when protests were hot, these men decided on another way to get their message of black pride across.¹⁰

Gumbs said they were fortunate that singer actress Abby Lincoln was interested in their project and participated. Lincoln, who was married to Max Roach, the famous drummer, held a promising career ahead of her as an actress. She would go on to co star with Ivan Dixon in *Nothing But A Man* (1964) and later Sidney Poitier in *For Love of Ivy* (1968)

Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln release the album *We Insist for the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and the new African Independence Movement*. Harlem was a perfect place for it.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandassa_Models, accessed May , 2020.

¹⁰ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 52

"She was part of the first show."

AJAS started the first show with 8 women who were not trained as models, but they had Abbey who as a celebrity. They also had Frank Abu who was a choreographer.

Gumbs said Lincoln began wearing her hair in its natural state.

"To our amazement and surprise, outside of the club there were lines of people."

"We said wow, This is something. We had no idea. We were touching a nerve among black women at that time who were looking to change in how they were perceived."

AJAS had planned one show, but there were so many people they had to do a second show.

"And from then on, the momentum built," Gumbs said.

"Women came to the shows, they saw how professionally it was done. Keep in mind they were not professionals these were everyday women who decided they wanted a new look and identity."

The idea took off, so the men created a modeling group.

Grandassa Models

Gumbs said they named the modeling group the Grandassa Models because it was a term that was used by Mr. Cook to define the "lush beauty of African landscape."¹¹

AJAS began by asking the winners of Mr. Cook's contest the *Miss Natural Standard of Beauty* contests to be models. But some women who attended the shows would join and start modeling. When the shows started, they featured hair, but soon local fashion designers wanted to participate also.

"It became not just a hair show, but a hair and fashion show. It really began to take off."

The show was also produced in Detroit and Chicago in 1963. Gumbs said it was the beginning of the whole Black Arts Movement.

"When you came to the show you thought you were attending an *Ebony Fashion Fair*."

¹¹ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 52

Original models were Clara Lewis, Black Rose, Nomsa Brath, Priscilla Bardonille, Mari Tous-saint, Esther Davenport, Wanda Sims, and Beatrice Cramston.¹²

Gumbs said these women were pioneers who had inner strength and commitment. He said the women would walk down the street and be ridiculed by strangers. These women had to face pressure from their family and friends, but also could lose their jobs for wearing their hair in a manner that was not acceptable to the current standard.

“When you came to a Naturally show what you saw where women who were predominately of a darker complexion, natural hair and full features. That was counter to what was existing in the fashion world at that time.”

Historically

The concept of brown skinned people being beautiful or even pleasing to look at was something difficult for European artists. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby examined work by Edouard Manet

¹² We started the Trend, <https://helloworldbeautiful.com/3052073/grandassa-models-and-rihanna/>, Accessed May 4, 2020.



that included a woman of African descent in his work, *Olympia's Maid* (1863). Manet's prejudice affected his work leaving the image of the dark maid less defined and put together as Olympia, the Caucasian focus of the painting. Grigsby pointed out that the history of artists in France at the time referred to Africans as ugly and unfit for paintings.¹³

Trapped with the predominant image of people of color being those of unkempt slaves, African Americans had to create their own standards of beauty and acceptability. Several women did the same as Madam CJ Walker when it came to creating hair and beauty products, but the thing that created Walker's legacy was the idea of uplifting the race. Even Margo Jefferson mentioned the need to uplift the race being one of the main purposes of African Americans.

Even with the wrapped head, Aunt Jemima was a dominant force in mainstream America. Women of color went from slavery to a generation or two later setting the hairstyles that most Americans wanted. Abena Lewis-Mhoon wrote that in the early 1920s hairstyles started in Harlem, spread across New York City, then to the rest of American. “Marcel waves started with black people in Harlem.”¹⁴

A coalition of Dove, National Urban League, Color of Change and Western Center of Law and Poverty lead the campaign for the Crown Act that wants to end discrimination in workplaces and schools over hair styles. Legislation started regulating the way people of color should look centuries ago, and they are looking to legislation to change that now.

Even though slaves had been charged with wearing something less, with being something less, they turned it into something more that they passed down for generations. Headdresses and wraps have become a powerful statement in African American culture. It has become something that is not only by and for African Americans, but it is something that is taught and shared.

Tanisha Ford talks about the love of bright colors. She said during slavery “vibrant colors and prints were part of the rural southern black style tradition, as they were in Africa.”¹⁵ Even in the early 20th Century African Americans began creating style innovations because they enjoyed

¹³ Grigsby, Darcy Grimaldo, Still thinking About Olympia's Maid, *The Art Bulletin*, Dec 2015, 434.

¹⁴ *Soul Thieves*, ed Brown and Kopano, Foraging Fashion (Palgrave MacMillan2014) 67.

¹⁵ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 54.

the fashion parade and the style shows they had on Sundays.¹⁶

Women, like Josephine Baker who took charge of her own sexuality and how it was to be portrayed, did not allow it to define her. Their beauty does not come from something that is an aesthetic attribute but comes from what they do and how it impacts others.

Through tremendous obstacles African Americans have taken a carving knife and created patterns for their lives that leave others envious. As a community, African Americans have moved past the periods of hot combs and skin lightning into a time of free for all. We have learned to celebrate the dark-skinned sisters with kinky curly hair, while still loving our fair skinned ones with European features.

Centuries later African Americans have slowly learned to redefine beauty by adding deeper skin tones, hair texture and not altering full features to images of themselves.

Even though we have made great strides with the mainstream which is beginning to share those beliefs.

There was an amazing moment in time in September of 2018 when several women of color were on the cover of mainstream magazines which included, Elle UK, Marie Claire, Porter, British Vogue, Glamour, Hollywood Reporter. These magazines featured Tiffany Haddish, Zendaya, Lupita Nyong'o, Tracee Ellis Ross, Slick Woods, Adwoa Aboah, Naomi Campbell, Issa Rae, Beyoncé, Rihanna and others were featured that month. The September issue is often twice as large with advertisements and is considered the premiere issue for showcasing trends. It was a once in a lifetime experience, but looking deeper, valuable stories are told in these images.

We are fortunate that there will be artist working to tell the story of beauty in a culture that is surrounded by pain. They will continue to celebrate the things that make them stand out.

Phil John Perry worked on the headdress for the image of Beyoncé Knowles Carter which was featured on the cover of Vogue magazine in 2018. This was the first image described. Vernon François was the hair stylist and Alexi Lubomirski was the photographer of the image of Serena Williams which was on the cover of Harper's Bazaar in 2019. Kwame Brathwaite was the photographer of Priscilla Bardonille from the Black Is Beautiful movement with the African

¹⁶ Ibid.

Jazz-Art Society and Studio (AJASS) in Harlem in 1962.

The men and women who work to represent the culture hold a powerful tool in their hands. They can impact the way generations see themselves. We seem to have moved past the day of reminding people to uplift the African American race to days of demonstrating what it looks like to each individual.

In the Golden Age of the African American image society is no longer limited to Caucasian men defining African American women's sexuality because these women do it themselves. These women chose for themselves how they will be defined in mainstream media by championing the things they like.

Yet this isn't an overnight process. Many women have been fighting for this a mighty long time in order to be comfortable in our own brown skin. This is a good thing because it gives beauty depth and width making it fuller and encompassing. Without different types of beauty, it is very one sided and doesn't reflect the entire world that it represents.

Rihanna launched her Fenty fashion¹⁷ using images from Kwame Brathwaite's Black is Beautiful movement as inspiration. She stood on the shoulders of women who were ridiculed for their beliefs.

"Sometimes it takes the seed that you plant many years to germinate and sink in and blossom. I think what we are seeing is to an extent, the seeds that we planted in the 60s," said Bob Grumbs.

In the shadows of the Josephine Bakers, the Beyonces, Rihannas and Serenas have learned to sweep the audience off its feet and take them to any place they please.

Cover artwork by Natashna Anderson. Interior artwork by Karen J Anderson

¹⁷ <https://helloworldbeautiful.com/3052073/grandassa-models-and-rihanna/>, Accessed May 4, 2020

PENDA SMITH

My name is Penda Smith and I am a First Wave graduate who is now an MFA Candidate for Poetry at Louisiana State University. I submit to this journal because of its reach past this world in search of a world where Black folks survive, while interrogating structural institutions that necessitate Black death.

what the ship could not hold

we are talking about love & its relation to possession;
you read me an excerpt from a book; love is not possessed
nor is it possession; is love then dispossession; an act of
refusal; a refusing of ownership, property, cargo;
enslaved africans held inside

of the ship's hold; feeling touch and touching feeling;
the creole word for women lovers is mati; she who
survived the middle passage with me; she who rollicked
who bled who oozed who moaned; but can
property exchange a quick glance; can property
swelter in heat with other property; can property
desire another property

she who refused with me; can property refuse;
then there is no property; then there are holes
inside of the hold; there is a refusal happening,
i say, as you hold me; space is realizing me,
i whisper; the liquid in me reaches the liquid in you;
there is a resistance against subjectivity;
i moan, my mouth refusing yours;



STEPHANIE JOY TISDALE

Stephanie Joy Tisdale is an educator, writer, and vocalist. Born and raised in Philly, she attended Howard University and Lincoln University where she studied literature and education. She is currently a PhD student at Temple and spends her time cooking, reading, practicing yoga, listening to music, and studying nature. She hopes to give voice to the experiences of her Ancestors and would like to learn from and collaborate with other writers in this journal. The call for submissions for Root Work was so compelling that she knew she owed it to herself and her people to offer a potential contribution.

Uncaptured

Abstract: Enslavement and freedom are sometimes waves in the very same ocean. Titi, Ma, and NaNa are “swimmers” whose powers go beyond the confines of the world designed to control them. They create freedom for themselves by way of their magical abilities: ebbing and flowing like the river stream.

“How do it feel?”

“How do what feel?” Ma replied.

“It” she asked shyly. She kept shucking the corn and never looked up but could feel Ma’s eyes on her.

“Hmmm” Ma stopped moving her hands and got real quiet like she always did when she was thinking.

“It be kinda like when ya go for a swim ‘cept you never rise up for more air. You just stays there. You let the bubbles mix with the water and breathe on through it.” Ma picked up another piece of corn and began pulling the green layers away. She threw down the husks but the silky shreds underneath seemed to sparkle as they floated towards the pile below.

“Tha’s when ya use ya magic” Ma whispered. “You swim wid all da life ya have inside a you.”

She turned towards Titi and grabbed her face in her hands. “Wid all da life ya have, hear me?” a leaned closer, connecting her daughter’s forehead with her own. Quiet tears streamed down her face and Titi closed her eyes.

It sounded like a whistle, the whip. It was quick, moving faster than the two had time to separate.

“What I tell ya ‘bout all that whisperin?” paul said. He wobbled towards them smelling like rum and damnation. “Ya sposed to be shuckin this here corn. Not whisperin bout foolishness.” He cracked the whip again. This time Titi sat a little straighter. Ma reached up to pat the blood trickling from her head, trying to find where the whip split open her skin.

paul walked in front of them and looked at the barrel of unfinished corn. “I ‘spect this to be finished ‘fore the missus get home, ya hear?” Ma nodded, catching the blood with a piece of green husk. Titi’s tears boiled inside her eyelids, but she wouldn’t let them fall.

Not long after they sold Ma away. Titi heard NaNa say that the missus complained about how close Ma was to Titi. And that the old man do anything to keep her mouth shut so he got rid of Ma.

NaNa worked in the kitchen and heard lots of things that would whisper themselves out of the house, down the road, and into the field.

It all happened so fast, but NaNa made sure Ma knew before it was time to go.

One night Titi woke up to hear Ma whispering with NaNa in the cabin.

“I ain’t goin” Ma said bitterly.

“So wha’ ya do?” NaNa whispered back. “You is dead woman fa sure.”

“Who gonna tend to my Titi?”

“Same one tend to you. NaNa.”

“NaNa you in the house most of the time they don’t ‘llow no field chillun.” Ma was sobbing now.

“I took da whip mo’ times I can even count. Got scars up and down, rings on my wrist from da iron.”

“Been starved. Snatched from the field by a gang of ‘em and thrown back with blood pouring from ‘tween my legs.”

“Hush, Fola” NaNa got up from her place on the floor and moved closer to Ma. She reached down to wipe the tears from Ma’s face.

“This..” Ma’s chest heaved as she tried to push the words out.

“Be the thang...” she gasped.

“That take me outside myself.”

“Ssshhh” NaNa said more forcefully.

“I been where you be now” she whispered. “I see ting that stay in ma mind night and day. Ting that are sobad bad” NaNa whispered.

“Titi mine NaNa.” Ma’s voice softened. Her body was exhausted from the field and the heart-break.

“When you tink bout it, really tink. She be mine too ” NaNa replied. She continued to rub Ma’s head as Ma drifted to sleep. “Just like you, Fo-lá-sa-dé.” NaNa sounded out every syllable of Ma’s real name.

NaNa came over from the Great Land with Titi’s Grandma on a boat and she knew Ma since before she was born. According to NaNa, Grandma wasn’t ever able to adjust to the cruel new world. She transitioned into the spirit realm leaving Ma and her brother Ògúndé in NaNa’s care.

NaNa had country marks on her face from her own home and sometimes sang songs around the cabin in her mother’s tongue.

The next night, the one before Ma left, the fog was thick. The cabin was empty as some of the others stayed elsewhere to give Ma her time with Titi.

“Titíladé, come” Ma said. Ma never used Titi’s real name out loud much. Mostly out of fear. But today was different.

She pulled Titi close to her and their foreheads touched. Titi could see flashes of Ma’s smile as the slivers from the full moon’s light danced across her face.

“You is mine” Ma said. “And we is forever” she reached out her right hand and placed it on Titi’s heart.

“Who you is and who I be is one. Since before there was a me or you, we was us.”

“I got thangs I know I how to do. An you got that same gift too” Ma said.

“But I knows that today ain’t da day, nor will tomorrow be the day I use ‘em.”

Tears streamed down Titi’s face.

“Just ‘member like I said. Let the bubbles mix with the water and breathe on through.” Ma wiped the tears from Titi’s warm face.

“Yo job is to find out what this world be all about. Not what da missus or da old man or crazy paul say it is.

They just likey to fall off the face of the earth for how evil they be to the bone.”

“That ain’t none of yo’ concern. If they do or don’t. Will or if dey won’t. You don’t answer to them cuz you ain’t come from ‘em. And when ya old and gray you won’t return to ‘em neither.”

“The Great Land is your start. Thousands and thousands of years ago is when life all began right there.

It’s where my Ma come from too. Used to call her ‘eeeyaah.’ I was lil one just like you when she mix the plants with the water and went to sleep for the last time.”

Titi had heard this story before but this time was different.

Ma grabbed Titi in her arms. “This ain’t the battle...this ain’t the fight. There be war soon enough and I can’t risk messin’ thangs up for all the sistren and brothers.” She squeezed Titi tight.

“You and I is sworn in. Blood in to the secrecy. So I’s got to hold on ‘til it’s done. Ya understand me?”

Titi nodded afraid to say any words at all. She wanted Ma's voice to be the only sound in her mind. She laid in Ma's arms that night but couldn't sleep. Before the sun rose, Ma got up to head to the house.

NaNa gave her a small packet filled with special herbs and told Ma to hold on to it with her life. "Blood in to da secret" NaNa said, placing her forehead to Ma's.

"Blood in" Ma replied.

After a while Titi gave up on ever seeing Ma again. NaNa heard she was sent so far from the grapevine the messages couldn't whisper to her. One day as the sun was setting NaNa asked Titi to go to the river with her. Titi thought that was odd because NaNa never let her tag along so close to night.

NaNa packed her basket with the stick and string she used to fish. "Let us go catch us something" she said as she grabbed Titi's hand.

They walked past the other cabins, where other people from the field lived. There was Rome and his wife Queen who came from the same place as NaNa. She stopped to talk to them in her mother's tongue.

After hugging them and saying goodbye, NaNa grabbed Titi's hand and they entered the woods. Titi had been this way many times before with Ma and Uncle Ògúndé. As they walked closer to the river's edge, the trees seemed to close the path behind them. Titi looked back but could no longer see the cabins.

"NaNa..."

"Hush" NaNa whispered sharply.

As they came to the riverbank, NaNa began humming a song from the Great Land. She sat the basket on the rocks, took out the stick and string and attached the bait. Titi stood close beside her as she dipped the fish string in the water.

There was a woman on the other side of the bank washing clothes. And a man further down

who was also fishing.

"Hol' this. I go to the bush" NaNa said, handing Titi the stick. "Go close to the edge so you can catch the fish."

Titi did as she was told and waited for NaNa to relieve herself.

Somewhere between the string pulling her in and NaNa pushing her from behind, Titi ended up in the water.

Submerged, she felt something, someone, grab both her arms and pull her even lower.

She could hear NaNa screaming above the surface but the noise underwater was louder. When Titi opened her eyes she saw Ma's face in front her. Ma motioned for Titi to inhale and breathe the water in.

Titi began to inhale the water. As it filled her lungs, she felt lighter, freer. Ma wiggled the stick out of Titi's hand and let it float to the surface. She turned, wrapped Titi's arms around her waist, and began to swim.

Ma swam quickly and effortlessly. Titi drifted in and out of consciousness. She was in another world, or seemed to be, and could do nothing else but surrender to the current.

When Titi woke up she was lying on the riverbank in Ma's arms.

"Maaa" she croaked as tears rolled down her face.

"Ah yes my own Titi" Ma said, rubbing her face. "Ssshhhh. Don't you worry. You is alright"

"But how...and what about...what about..NaNa" Titi began to cry.

"NaNa fine as fine can be. She say she too 'ol to be takin the swim no more but she knowed they believe it if she say you drowned" Ma said. "They know NaNa love you bout as much as me and she won't never let nothin happen to ya."

“I done run with a group of peoples” Ma said proudly. “Some from our field, some from other places but we all here for the same thang” Ma said. “Freedom.

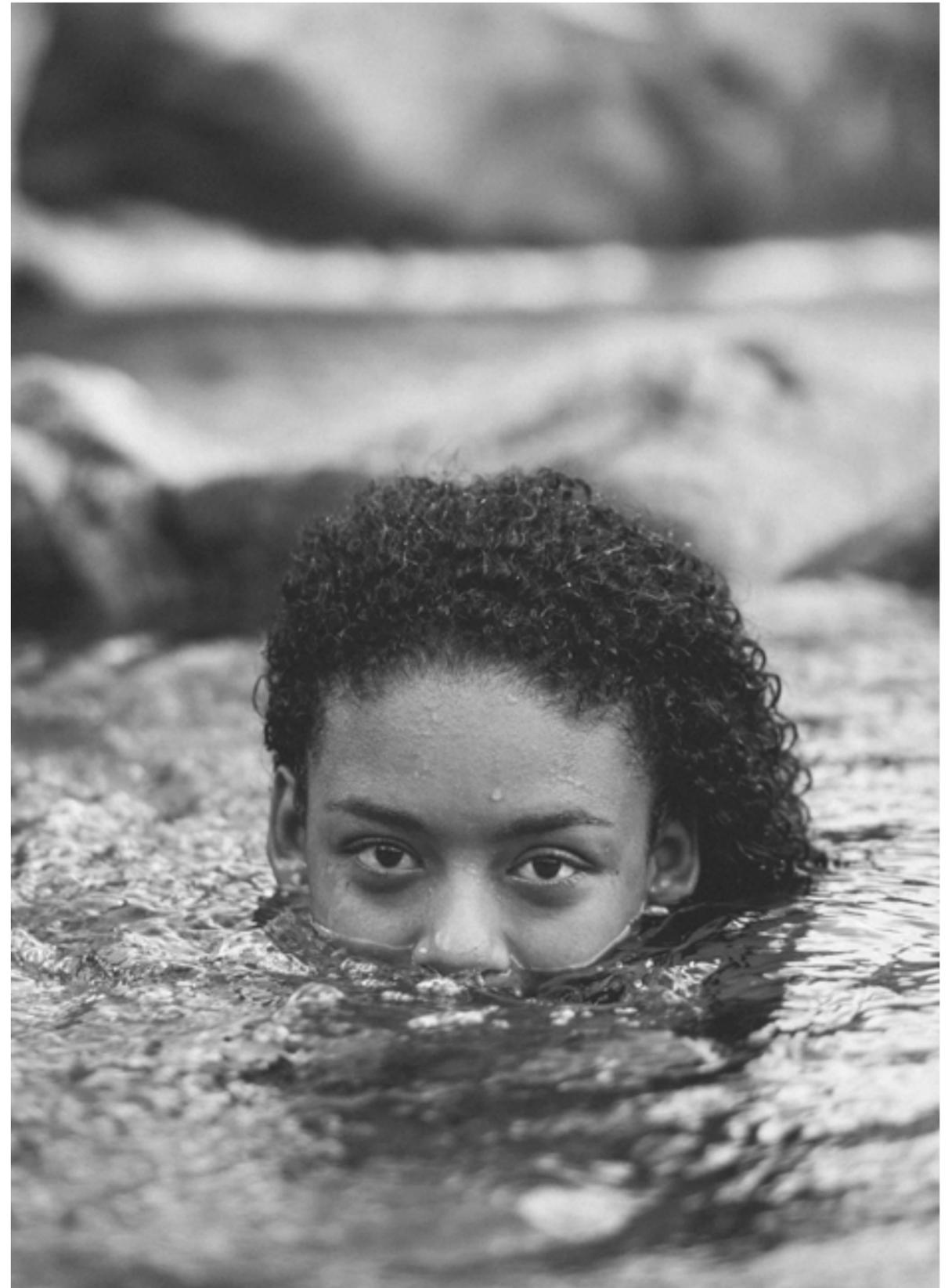
“I knew I had to come for you and I had to figure the best way to do it. So this time, I decided to use my power and take the swim. I know you know how, ‘cause ya mine. But when ya asked me I figure that mean you be ready soon enough” Ma explained, hugging her tightly.

“First time’s always a lil hard but you just hold on and breathe, let ya lungs and ya memory do the rest.”

As Titi sat up, silhouettes emerged from behind the trees near the river’s edge. The silhouettes turned into clearer shapes and the clearer shapes turned into people. As they came closer to Titi, they each took turns to kneel down and touch foreheads with Titi.

“Blood in to the secrecy” Ma said.

“Blood in” each one replied.



TAFARI MELISIZWE

Tafari Melisizwe is a freelance photographer primarily based in Chicago, IL and Atlanta, GA. He curates “Motherland People,” a digital platform that explores the lives, experiences, and stories of America’s African-descendant community. Through photojournalistic-style portrait photography, Melisizwe explores historical and contemporary relationships between people of African ancestry in an effort to forge meaningful understandings and connections along the continuing lines of language, geography, culture, and history. I hope to meaningfully contribute to our healing; fighting and building. I hope to connect with good folks who love African people and endeavor to bring us closer to the freedom we rightfully deserve.

The Water (A Series)



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A GROUNDING FROM OUR CURATORS

As a collective, community, and journal we thank you for bringing your attention and spirit to the reflections on the vast uncertainties of our ocean. The bloodlines of Black people are interconnected at the roots of our spiritual perceptions. These spiritual processes are based upon ancient paradigms of laws that allow us to tap into our innate abilities grounded in ancestral power. We envision this root-work as a way for us to gather, meditate, grieve and manifest together as a way to carry on the joys and wisdom of our ancestors. We are the voices of Sankofa. Join us in sacred acts of remembering our futures.

Axé.

A special note of gratitude for our current curators: Jari Bradley, Nina Monet Reynoso, Tonesha Russell, Deaidre White, and Antoní Trochez for the dedication and love poured into this meditation.

