

Sipping Freedom:

ENGAGING BLACK RADICAL IMAGINATION,
CONFRONTING MIDDLE PASSAGE MEMORY,
EMBODYING THE SACRED

key words

black radical imagination, middle passage memory, embodiment, the sacred, art,
performance, freedom, the trickster, the palimpsest, autopoiesis

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Mosa McNeilly

Honor Ford-Smith

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Steeping in this Infusion

ABSTRACT

How can inherited colonial notions of the “human” be transformed by the assertion of African¹ histories of the present?² My research is driven by an impulse to recover and engage an inheritance of intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies of the African diaspora and with it shape futurist narratives of possibility. This major research portfolio consists of an academic paper and a solo performance art installation in two acts. In this portfolio, I propose that colonial notions of “the human” can be transformed by demonstrating their limitations and by enacting and performing alternatives in the present. The methodologies in this research depend on engaging Black³ radical imagination, confronting Middle Passage memory,⁴ and embodying the Sacred.⁵ I explore this embodiment through hybrid cultural and spiritual practices which I identify as tools for becoming. I propose these methodologies as autopoietic⁶ praxes of freedom.

¹ I unpack the term “African” and its diasporic extensions in Movement One.

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002). For more about my engagement with the notion of “histories of the present” see the Foreword.

³ See Movement One for more about my construction of the term “Black”, and how I use it interchangeably with other terms.

⁴ “Middle Passage” is the term used to name the journey made by European slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean, from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas, transporting captured African people during the period of transatlantic slavery. It is also known as the “Crossing”. See Movement Two.

⁵ I choose to capitalize “the Sacred”, as I do “Spirit”, “Source”, “Ancestors”, “Ancient Ones,” “the Divine” and “the Crossing” to give them the distinction of proper names.

⁶ I delve into my framing of “autopoiesis” in Movement One, and refer to it further in Movements Two and Three.

*Malkah, my love,
I have poured libation,
Come...
Sip ever so slowly from this calabash,
Then, I'll gather up my skirts...
And race you to the sea shore.*

Pouring This Libation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.⁷

We live, work, worship and play on unceded Indigenous land. I acknowledge the absented presence of the peoples of this region. With the Aawandaron, Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Métis, Mississauga of the New Credit, Six Nations, and Wendat peoples and their descendants, I stand as an ally. *Gchi-miigwetch*.⁸

I pour libation⁹ in a symbolic gesture of giving sustenance to my Ancestors before I release this work into the world — to my father, Walter Earle McNeilly, my grandmother, Lila Clarke, and our Middle Passage Ancestors. They came first. They gathered the stones and laid the path on which we now trod. I also acknowledge the cosmological entities of Yemayá, Eshu and Ghédé whose legacies inform this work. While I claim authorship of this work, it is my understanding that it is infused with irrepressible histories that have come through me. In earnest I have done my best to listen and to

⁷ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Illuminated Rumi*, ed. Coleman Barks and Michael Green (New York: Harmony Books, 1997), 31.

⁸ I understand “*gchi-miigwetch*” to mean “thank you” in Ojibwe.

⁹ I understand pouring libation — the act of pouring water or spirits on the earth — as a Pan-African spiritual practice. It is performed as an act of honouring ancestral Spirits and welcoming them to be present at the beginning of ceremonies, rituals and other auspicious events.

receive, to shape and to transmit a work that bears a worthy representation of this informing resource. *Ashé*.¹⁰

Honor Ford-Smith has been a pivotal presence in my life. She has midwived a movement of growth in my arts practice, a deepening of my political analysis, and the cultivation of intellectual and artistic community. Prof. Ford-Smith has brought her intuitive exactitude, her comical wit, her illustrious scholarship and her seasoned artistry to the supervision of this portfolio. *Ke a leboha*.¹¹

M. Jacqui Alexander's scholarship on praxes of the Sacred in her iconic masterwork, *Pedagogies of Crossing*¹² is the touchstone of this research. My experience in residency at The Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality¹³ continues to reverberate through my cultural and spiritual work. M. NourbeSe Philip's epic work of poetry and memorialization, *Zong!*,¹⁴ spoke to me with the consequence of an oracle and anchored my research in Middle Passage memory. *Adupe*.

Of great importance to me is the constellation of colleagues and companions who have gathered into my life and who I have come to cherish. Our autopoietic

¹⁰ I understand "Ashé" in the Yoruba language from Nigeria to be a term which names the cosmic logos of the universe recognizing it as a Sacred force that animates all that is. The utterance of this exclamation is spoken as a reverential, congratulatory and grateful acknowledgement of the omnipresence of Ashé in the world, in each other, and at work in the fruition of all human endeavour.

¹¹ At the end of each paragraph is a word in an African language that means "thank you" — "*ke a leboha*" in Sesotho, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/sesotho.php>; "*adupe*" in Yoruba, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://www.onlinenigeria.com/languages/>; "*asante*" in Kiswahili, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/swahili.php>; "*enkosi*" in Xhosa, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://www.omniglot.com/language/phrases/xhosa.php>; "*matondo*" in Kikongo, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://www.kupsala.net/risto/kongo/kituba-english.html>; and "*tenda iwe*" in Shona, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://vashona.com/translator/>.

¹² M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹³ August 12-29, 2014, Tobago, West Indies.

¹⁴ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

conversations have been the sites of insurgent meaning-making and have provided critical nourishment in the often gruelling effort required to do this work. Charlotte Henay, Charmaine Lurch, Erin Howley, Goldie Sherman, Nicole Angela Williams, Ngozi Obasi Umoya, Ali Garrison, Brandon Hay, Anique J. Jordan, Farrah Miranda, Vero Diaz, Aku Brown, Chelsea Fung, Tina Garnett, Alex Gelis and XxaaLahH — together we are conjuring irresistible futures of great possibility. *Asante.*

Chris Cavanagh, Jin Haritaworn and Kamala Kempadoo are the exceptional professors whose passionate scholarship and breadth of knowledge have provided the ground for this portfolio. Vivian Gladwell and Ali Garrison were my accomplished clown and voice mentors. Alicia Miecznikowski and Andrea Bird granted me many hours of solo movement and encaustic practice in their studios. Greta DeLonghi's and Anne Zbitnew's edits to this paper were invaluable. Anique J. Jordan, Vero Diaz, Alvis Choi and Alex Gelis created outstanding documentation of my work. My sister Laura McNeilly and my cousin Brenda MacDonald generously took my daughter into their care on numerous occasions so that I could concentrate on this work. *Enkosi.*

Priestess M. Jacqui Alexander, Elder Vern Harper, Svikiro Mhondoro Mandaza Kandemwa, Kahontakwas Diane Longboat, and Dagara Elder Malidoma Somé are the Spirit way-makers with whom I have participated in ceremony during the course of this research. *Matondo.*

And for my beloved child, Malkah McNeilly-Abdulhamid, it is my hope that this work, which has taken me from her in so many ways, will one day be meaningful to her. *Tenda iwe.*

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¹⁵ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Opening Scrolls

Standing At These Shores

FOREWORD

How can inherited colonial notions of “the human” be transformed by the assertion of African¹⁹ histories of the present?²⁰ How can engaging Afrodiasporic praxes of freedom²¹ in the present shape the histories of the future?²² These questions inform the impulse in my research to recover and engage an inheritance of intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies²³ of the African diaspora. Through integrating these knowledges²⁴ into my academic, visual art, performance and spiritual work, I seek to develop capacities to shape and live futurist narratives of possibility.

This major research portfolio consists of an academic paper and a diptych — a solo performance art installation in two acts. In this portfolio, I propose that colonial

¹⁹ I unpack the term “African” and its diasporic extensions in Movement One.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Psychology Press, 2002). While I have formulated this question based on Foucault’s trajectory of thought, which I understand to be concerned with identifying how the present is founded in genealogies of European thought, I am not engaging this in depth. Instead I am looking at the notion of African histories of the present through a decolonial lens, proposing the recovery of and engagement with African knowledges and epistemologies in order to confront the dominance of colonial constructions of history and knowledge.

²¹ Anthony Bogues, “And What About the Human?: Freedom, Human Emancipation, and the Radical Imagination” *boundary 2* 39, no. 3 (2012): 29-46, accessed September 8, 2015, <http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/content/39/3/29.short>. In my generation of the idea of “praxes of freedom,” I move from Bogues’s idea of freedom as a practice rather than a state of consciousness to which one may aspire, and I riff on his concepts of “freedom from” and “freedom to.”

²² I borrow the phrase “histories of the future” from Lisa Yaszek’s title, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future” *Socialism and Democracy* Vol. 20, Iss. 3 (November 2006): 41.

²³ I understand epistemology to mean the study or theory of knowledge, knowledge formation and knowledge acquisition; a way of knowing determined by a given construction of socio-cultural norms constituting a distinct worldview.

²⁴ I use the term “knowledges” rather than “knowledge” to convey the spectrum of African intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies which form diverse bodies of knowledge.

notions of “the human” can be transformed by demonstrating their limitations and by showing that they have been enacted by dehumanizing whole groups of people. But this demonstration alone restricts transformation to a dialogue with that which is oppressive, and so risks re-inscribing what it critiques. To transform the colonial requires demonstrating, enacting and performing alternatives in the present. Generating such alternatives suggests a creative methodology of overcoming and becoming. The methodologies in this research involve engaging Black²⁵ radical imagination, confronting Middle Passage memory²⁶ and embodying the Sacred,²⁷ which I identify as autopoietic²⁸ praxes of freedom.

In Movement One I engage critically with the intellectual strands of Black radical thought concerned with Black cultural practices, Western knowledge and power, and Black subjectivities, as sites of Black radical imagination. First, I explore the premise that through theorizing and engaging the everyday cultural practices of Black folks,²⁹ we

²⁵ See Movement One for more about my construction of the term “Black”, and how I use it interchangeably with other terms.

²⁶ “Middle Passage” is the term used to name the journey made by European slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean, from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas, transporting captured African people during the period of transatlantic slavery. It is also known as the “Crossing”. See Movement Two.

²⁷ I choose to capitalize “the Sacred”, as I do “Spirit”, “Source”, “Ancestors”, “Ancient Ones,” “the Divine” and “the Crossing” to give them the distinction of proper names.

²⁸ I delve into my framing of “autopoiesis” in Movement One, and refer to it further in Movements Two and Three.

²⁹ I use the term “Black folks” referencing W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls Of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903). I use it also in a colloquial Black diasporic sense, which suggests a collectivity; a diasporic grouping of people of African descent.

cultivate our own intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies.³⁰ Second, I examine how confronting Western knowledge and power systems exposes their limitations and their colonial legacies.³¹ And third, by transforming Black subjectivities — by which I mean the ways in which we as Black people, understand our histories, live our lives, and imagine ourselves and our futures, we can embrace our own power and notions of being human.³²

In Movement Two, I confront Middle Passage memory, discussing how it haunts us in the present moment and to what effect.³³ I define Middle Passage memory as the collective memory of the diasporic African experience of the Crossing, framing it as a “ruptural historical moment”³⁴ emblematic of the legacies of slavery, colonial power and

³⁰ In Movement One, I begin by putting the ideas of Clyde Woods and Kamau Brathwaite in conversation with my cultural production practice.

Also note that I use the pronouns “we” and “our” throughout this text, speaking in a Black voice to an imagined Black audience. It is a conscious choice to position myself as a member of the group of which and to whom I am speaking. I propose this does not exclude readers of my writing and viewers of my art and performance work who do not identify as Black, nor does it fetishize or objectify Black thought, art and performance in an anthropological sense by speaking about it in a so-called neutral/objective voice to an outside observer audience. I propose that instead it centres Blackness for the purpose of contributing to the development of Black subjective frameworks of thought, cultural production and spiritual practice. Because Western knowledge is represented using universalizing language that overrepresents whiteness as the norm, it becomes useful to identify Black intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies as Black to make visible their erasure from Western representation of all categories of human endeavour, and to make visible the constructed invisibility of whiteness.

³¹ I go on to juxtapose the ideas of Sylvia Wynter with those of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Anthony Bogues.

³² I conclude Movement One by dialoguing with the ideas of Audre Lorde, Suzanne Césaire, and Julie Dash from the position of diasporic African feminist artist, thinker and spiritual practitioner.

³³ In Movement Two, I engage the ideas of M. Jacqui Alexander, Saidiya Hartman, and NourbeSe Philip.

³⁴ Bogues, “And What About the Human?” 41.

genocide. I propose that we live in the afterlife of slavery,³⁵ in that the historical rupture of the Crossing, and the legacies it represents, reverberate into the present moment. I propose that Middle Passage memory acts as an impetus for Black diasporic resiliency, evident in how African and diasporic African cultural production, Black radical thought, and Afrodiasporic spiritual practice take it up.

From there, in Movement Three, I explore tools for becoming. I suggest a symbiosis and a confluence of spiritual and cultural work as a means of cultivating spiritual consciousness and producing cultural work concerned with self-realization. I propose a hybrid of embodied cultural and spiritual methodologies as a critical part of the repertoire of praxes of freedom which I am generating in this work.

I follow, in Movement Four, with a mapping of the creative vocabularies of the performance art installation of this portfolio. I outline: methods of preparing for practice; the languages of performance; witnessing as a dramaturgical approach; an inventory of visual arts traditions; the harvesting of images;³⁶ thematic concepts; and the theoretical sources that inform this work.

Movement Five concludes with a summary of the proposals and arguments I have made in the four Movements of this Manuscript.

³⁵ The term “afterlife of slavery” or “slavery’s afterlife” is used by scholars who write within the tradition of Afropessimism. It describes the similitude between the status of the slave before and after emancipation, and further refers to the modern day continuities of the status of unfreedom of Black bodies in the Western neocolonial nation state. As Tiffany Lethabo King states, “Afropessimism has used Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask*, as their ur-text in order to situate the origin and ongoing formation of the human as a process of negation. The human can only exist through the violent negation and exclusion of the Black from the category of the Human.” She refers to Frank Wilderson’s *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), in “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes” (PhD. diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 5. Afropessimists refer to Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) in the formulation of this concept.

³⁶ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for the term “harvesting of images,” which I use to describe the gathering of images as source material in the research and development of the performance art installation in this portfolio.

Next, following the Bibliography, I present the Artifacts consisting of two scripts representing a diptych — a performance art installation in two acts. Each work is framed individually, and the two are hinged thematically and materially. Act One, *J’AI SOIF*:³⁷ *a venture into middle passage memory*, is represented by the script, the art installation/set, the fluxus³⁸ box/portfolio, a condensed iteration of the live performance within the arc of this larger work, and images of the live performance. Act Two, *SIPPING FREEDOM: a rememory tale of the bones of ubuntu*,³⁹ is represented by the script, the art installation/set, the suitcase/portfolio, the live performance, which includes video, light and sound technologies, and images of the live performance.⁴⁰ I employ the visual arts concept of the diptych in a transdisciplinary gesture of crossing, or overriding, the boundaries between visual art and performance practices and languages. The wax used in vintage diptych artifacts echoes the wax in the encaustic medium that I use in the creation of the installation objects/props and art/set piece in this portfolio. This section is followed by the Archive of Appendices.

As an artist, performer, spiritual practitioner and researcher, I work with interdisciplinary research methodologies that engender a borrowing and hybridizing of methods of production from different disciplines. This portfolio is a pastiche of

³⁷ The title *J’AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³⁸ See Movement Four for more about the “fluxus box”.

³⁹ *Ubuntu* is an African conception of “the human” from the Nguni Bantu intellectual/spiritual legacy of southern Africa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, “*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language [...] It is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.” Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New York: Double Day, 2000) 31. I propose that this relational *ubuntu* is integral to redefining “the human”.

⁴⁰ See Movement Four and Artifacts — A Diptych.

disciplines, including academic research, visual art, installation, performance and ritual. My hybrid approach to this research is informed by my Black Canadian experience of navigating a perpetually shifting and multiply-contested sense of place, belonging and identity within overlapping and interfacing racial, cultural and spiritual spaces in and through which I strive to develop my work.

* * *

Cultivating authentic, eccentric and erotic love of self is a tenacious and tender praxis, one that can foster an inner sense of agency for social change. Inner ecology conjures a notion of an inner wellness that mirrors the beauty, fluidity, vigour and wildness of the natural world. I have explored articulating a Diasporic African feminist epistemology of radical self-love as a healing practice, through interdisciplinary praxes of art, performance and ritual.⁴¹

Tying my Plan of Study to this portfolio, I look here at how the ideas in my Area of Concentration developed into the themes in this paper. In my Plan of Study entitled “Weaving an Inner Ecology of Radical Self-Love: a diasporic African feminist epistemology of self-realization,” three fields converge in the Area of Concentration: cultivating a diasporic African feminist epistemology of radical self-love, exploring Middle Passage memory through cultural production, and challenging the Sacred/secular dichotomy.

The question of cultivating a diasporic African feminist epistemology of radical self-love led me to develop my understanding of the cultivation of spiritual

⁴¹ Mosa McNeilly, “Cultivating an Inner Ecology of Radical Self-Love: a diasporic african feminist epistemology of self-realization,” an excerpt from the author’s Plan of Study, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. Accessed March 31, 2014, https://fes.yorku.ca/dossier/sites/default/files/p_os_documents/user/2039/Mosa%20McNeilly%20MES%20PLAN%20OF%20STUDY%201-2.pdf.

consciousness as a potential praxis within which radical self-love can flourish. The spiritual consciousness I propose is grounded in African and Indigenous cosmologies. I work to integrate these cosmologies into my academic, cultural and spiritual work. The diasporic African feminist thrust of this inquiry led me to situate my research within the tradition of Black radical imagination. I have sought to develop my ideas about Black cultural and spiritual life, Western knowledge and power, and Black subjectivities by engaging the ideas of diasporic African scholars, artists, and spiritual practitioners, and thinking through what I identify as diasporic African feminist frameworks.

Exploring Middle Passage memory through cultural production became the central theme of this portfolio. It led me to create the diptych of a solo performance art installation in two acts, exploring prevalent themes within Middle Passage scholarship and cultural production, such as memory and mourning, fragmentation and indecipherability, rupture and return. I conducted my research through academic and embodied research methodologies — embodied methodologies of visual art production, performance and spiritual practice.

I came to employ the palimpsest⁴² as a grounding metaphor in this portfolio to convey the notion of a multi-coded archive. I understand a palimpsest to be a historical document inscribed on parchment, which, for the purpose of reusing the parchment, was imperfectly erased and overwritten, the previous text remaining partially visible. In the art installation of this portfolio the metaphor of the palimpsest is conveyed by the layering of text photo-transferred onto the surface of flat slabs of slate. In the

⁴² See Movement Four.

performance, the stones are at once a fragmented archive and a path of bones which the protagonist attempts to recover and decipher.

Exploring the question of challenging the Sacred/secular dichotomy led to the work of transforming academic and so-called secular spaces in my presentations, exhibitions and performances throughout the course of this program of study. I have sought to interrupt hegemonic space by inserting and centring African and Black diasporic cultural production, spiritual symbols, concepts and practices.

I found that my notion of “inner ecology” resonates with my growing understanding of M. Jacqui Alexander’s “Sacred interior”.⁴³ This insight led me to work toward weaving my idea of an inner ecology of radical self-love with the notion of cultivating a Sacred interior, and finding the self within a collectivity. I have explored this through the symbiosis and confluence that operate between my cultural and spiritual work. I have come to identify this hybrid as one in a repertoire of autopoietic praxes. I frame the praxis of self-love as one in a repertoire of praxes of individual and collective self-realization. I identify these as praxes of freedom.⁴⁴

* * *

To assist in navigating through this paper, the term “Movement” replaces “Chapter” as a musical metaphor, echoing the integral role that sound — music, voice, breath and silence — plays in the performance in this portfolio, as well as gesturing

⁴³ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 298. See Movement Three for more about my understanding of cultivating a Sacred interior.

⁴⁴ The ideas I am generating in this research about “praxes of freedom” are influenced by Anthony Bogues’s formulation of “the practice of freedom” in “And What About the Human?”

toward the liberationist thrust of this work. The titles of the sections in this paper are names of different forms of historical archives, referencing the archive as the central metaphor in this work. The titles of the subsections in this paper refer to the body's relationship to water, mirroring the body as core to the methodologies of this research, and the Middle Passage, mapped across the Atlantic ocean, as the central theme in this work. I employ interdisciplinary forms of writing that speak to the interdisciplinary methodologies in this research, weaving storytelling, poetry and autoethnographic narrative through the theoretical discourse.

In this paper, I push the boundaries of academic knowledge production, positioning cultural production, spiritual work and academic research as forms of research of equal value. I employ embodied methodologies required to access cultural and spiritual knowledges, which challenges the conventions of privileging intellectual endeavour as the supreme form of knowledge production. I centre African and Afrodiasporic knowledges, in alliance with Indigenous knowledges, for the purposes of enacting praxes of self-realization and of engaging a particular collective political orientation towards freedom. As a result, though not as a primary impetus, I perform a decolonial act of decentring Western European knowledge and power systems.

Gazing Into These Waters

PROLOGUE

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that dignity.⁴⁵

To situate myself in relationship to this research, I offer this foreword in the form of a tale of a Black girl growing up in Canada and what brought her to this research.

* * *

I was born in Canada in the 1960s to a pair of trailblazers: Natalie Seguin, my Jewish Romanian mother with a flair for irreverence, and Dicky McNeilly, my Black Grenadian father with an idealist zeal. From my early childhood, my maternal grandmother, Tutzi Seguin, shaped me into an artist in her image. She responded to inconsolable loss in her life with an insatiable hunger to create, an unstoppable desire to learn, and a luscious perception of beauty. This modelled for me how to navigate a Black Canadian experience of disorientation and erasure through arts practice.

In 1983, when I was 18, I lost my mother to cancer. I became a wild and dislocated diasporic African Soul with no stabilizing familial moorings nor empowering social markers in Canadian representations of Blackness to anchor me. I immersed

⁴⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," accessed July 12, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>.

myself in study and sought out African cultural and spiritual knowledges, which I began to recognize as stolen legacies. I came to understand the absence of connection with these ways of knowing as the cause of an existential void that plagued me.

This calling moved me to join African dance companies in Toronto, to journey to Guinea, to engage in anti-apartheid work, to take a South African name, and to shape what has become a 25-year diasporic African cultural community arts practice. It catalyzed themes of the complexities of intersectional identities, and of reimagining the Black female subject in my art and performance work. It called me to develop a syncretic solo Afrodiasporic spiritual practice. This was the beginning of my agency to heal what I came to understand as the rupture of the Middle Passage, and to embark on cultivating what I have come to identify as praxes of freedom.

In the early 1990s, I reached a tipping point, troubled by how my Blackness was contested by Black folks, hinged on the whims of essentialist inclusions and exclusions. I felt repeatedly bumped out of the Black racial category based on notions of insufficient blood quantum and unBlack place of birth. I was a multiply-inscribed outsider within the predominantly Afro-Caribbean communities I was actively involved in as a budding dancer, artist, activist and feminist, with a yet still developing intersectional analysis. My Blackness is always contested in Canada, complicated by my mixedness and my Indigeneity. My anti-racist, anticolonial, feminist politics are often a source of discomfort for white Canadians. The pervasive violences I experience are the daily micro-aggressions perpetrated against my valorization of and identification with Afrodiasporic and Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies.

Experiencing the invalidation of my Blackness is disorienting and alienating; it is disorienting because it denies my self-identification as a member of the Black group and alienating because there is a simultaneous implied unwelcome in the white group. This invalidation and this unwelcome serve to diffuse the discomfort my presence conjures and to disallow space for my self-actualizing Blackness to exist. The Canadian rhetoric of multicultural harmony and historical benevolence serve to conceal the systemic anti-Black logic embedded in the ethos of empire in Canada. State-sanctioned violence against Black and Indigenous bodies and skewed representations of Black and Indigenous life are evidence of a heteropatriarchal, colonial and white supremacist operating logic in Canada, which underpins the Western project of domination.

In 1993, feeling growing precarity in my sense of belonging, I severed all ties and left Canada. I ended up in Dominica, where I attuned myself to the Caribbean life of my paternal Ancestors. I sought to connect with the Kalinago⁴⁶ community in Dominica which brought me a sense of belonging in Indigeneity that I felt I could not find within Blackness in Canada. This mad odyssey of severance and seeking was an epoch in my life that marked me indelibly. I returned to Canada years later with a sense of amnesia about my life before, and a desire to start over.

At the turn of the century, I found myself a single mother of an African child. In my art and performance work, themes of memory, fragmentation and encoded iconography began to emerge. I immersed myself in a passionate practice of parenting, seeing clearly

⁴⁶ A sector of the Indigenous population of Dominica refer to themselves as “Kalinago” people in defiance of the colonial name, “Carib”. “Carib” was conflated with the Spanish *los caribales* meaning “cannibals”, as a key strategy in the ghastly colonial project of dehumanization and enslavement.

for the first time an epistemology of hybridity at work in my life: making art, making music, making stories, making altars, making a home, and making love to life as best I could; a life for my cherished daughter and myself.

Ten years later, I had become seasoned by the experience of holding it all together on my own, self-employed, raising a young child. I was worn down by a decade of conflict with my daughter's father, managing the repercussions in her emotional life from his neglect and the systemic oppressions at her school. Themes of sorrow, the Sacred, and refiguring the Black female body came to the fore in my work. My hunger for deepening my spiritual life led me to seek out African and Indigenous ceremony and cultivate a more dedicated practice of solo ritual work.

In 2013, I entered the MES program initially seeking a theoretical and historical framework for my 25-year community arts practice, though secretly yearning to buy time to make art, to perform, and to heal. Producing this work has fulfilled these desires in some measure and to varying degrees. This portfolio is informed by my life's work of embodied research through art, performance and spiritual practice. It is a merging of these with academic research and with a deepening engagement with diasporic African and Indigenous knowledges that moves my work forward.

Manuscript

MOVEMENT ONE

Drinking In These Voices

ENGAGING BLACK RADICAL IMAGINATION

Given how the category of the human has been put under the severest pressure by the brutalities of colonialism and imperialism, particularly when these are the forces the first world and its others turn upon themselves, black thought, which is to say, black social life, remains a fruitful site for inhabiting and soliciting the idea of the particularity of human being within the general ecology.⁴⁷

In this Movement, I set out to engage critically with the intellectual strands of Black radical thought concerned with engaging Black cultural practices, exposing Western knowledge and power systems, and transforming Black subjectivities. Drawing on the work of key artists, writers, and scholars, my research moves from three premises: through theorizing and engaging the everyday cultural practices of Black folks, we can cultivate our own intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies; through confronting Western knowledge and power systems, we can expose their limitations and their colonial legacies; and through transforming Black identities and subjectivities, we can embrace our own power and notions of being human. I propose that moving from these premises relies on accessing Black radical imagination.

⁴⁷ Fred Moten, "Fred Moten Talk: Blackness and Poetry" (paper presented at Mixed Blood Project, University of Berkley, March 18, 2015), accessed July 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su7iCumqLvo>.

For the purposes of this research, I use the terms “African”, “Black”, “Afrodiasporic”, “diasporic African”, “Black diasporic”, “Black Canadian”, “African Canadian”, “Indigenous African,” “Afroindigenous” and “mixed” interchangeably, with nuanced distinctions. I use the term “African” to refer to people of African descent born on the continent and as a global signifier for people of African descent born and/or residing in diaspora. I use the term “Black” to identify people of African descent in the North American context, whether by birth or migration.⁴⁸ While recognizing the many differences between and regional variances of African American and African Canadian cultural life, I assert that an entrenched anti-Black logic informs white supremacy that results in commonalities of Black experience in North America and globally for all Afrodiasporic people. “Indigenous African” asserts a rootedness in cultural life permeated with continental African knowledges, while the term “Afroindigenous” or “mixed” acknowledges hybrids of racial and cultural origins as nuances of a broad and inclusive Blackness. I include all people who self-identify using any of these terms.

I choose to capitalize the word “Black” to claim it as a liminal sovereignty, in lieu of a sovereign allegiance to an African nation or to the Canadian nation state.⁴⁹ I use this term to acknowledge the rupture of historical knowledge of ethnic and regional lineages caused by the legacy of slavery, while simultaneously conflating “Black” with “African” to defy notions of severance and to claim allegiance with diasporic African people founded

⁴⁸ I am not engaging the British transracial term “Black”.

⁴⁹ I also note here that I capitalize the term “Indigenous” in a parallel valorization of the resurgence of Indigeneity as a sovereignty that defies allegiance to the neocolonial Canadian state.

in cultural, spiritual, intellectual and political genealogies. This allegiance is not founded in essentialist identities based on blood quantum, or on nationalist identities that privilege continental African birthright over diasporic descent from slaves. Nor does it privilege Caribbean or African American birthright and cultural immersion over Black Canadian birthright and cultural immersion in whiteness. I am arguing throughout this Movement that “Black” is not a phenotypical identity but rather an inclusive political orientation toward emancipation or liberation and freedom.

Diaspora identifies a relational network characteristically produced by forced dispersal and reluctant scattering. It is not just a word of movement, though purposive, urgent movement is integral to it. Under this sign, push factors are a dominant influence. [...] Life itself is at stake in the way the word suggests flight or coerced rather than freely chosen experiences of displacement. Slavery [...] genocide and other unnameable terrors have all figured in the constitution of diasporas and the reproduction of diaspora-consciousness, in which identity is focussed less on common territory and more on memory, or, more accurately, on the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration.⁵⁰

For the purpose of this paper, I limit my formulation of the African diaspora to the global movement of people of African descent from the continent of Africa to the Caribbean, North America and Europe. I frame this movement in the context of the Middle Passage. I understand the experience of diaspora to be one of statelessness, or bewilderment, and fragmentation in Black diasporic life. In the performance in this portfolio, I explore bewilderment⁵¹ through the Clown’s quest to find and decipher the

⁵⁰ Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora” *Edinburgh University Press*, Volume 17, Issue 3, Page 207-212, ISSN 0264-8334, Available Online November 1994. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.207>, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.207?journalCode=para&>.

⁵¹ I am inspired by Fanny Howe’s analysis of bewilderment in this formulation. Fanny Howe, *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 15.

archive. In the installation, I explore fragmentation in the optic of a path of bones on the ocean floor.

the black radical tradition

“an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle”

“an acquired [...] sense of the calculus of oppression as well as its organization and implementation”⁵²

I will first provide a context by looking at Anthony Bogues’s description of major themes of the Black Radical Tradition. I look also at Hazel Carby’s critique of the assumed and privileged discourses of Black masculinity within the tradition, and her assertion of the need to rigorously examine the “epistemological implications and consequences”⁵³ of “gendered structures of thought and feeling.”⁵⁴ I do not discuss the work of Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, or W. E. B. DuBois here, which are obvious omissions as they are considered three of the best known Black radical thinkers. My purpose here is to give a theoretical context within which to take up the ideas of thinkers and artists in relation to the arguments I am developing.

I understand Cedric Robinson’s concise definition of the Black Radical Tradition in the passage above to mean that Black people have been engaged in the work of confronting a distinct genealogy of oppressions over time. Through this engagement, Black people have shaped an understanding that these oppressions are constructed

⁵² Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983) xxx.

⁵³ Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 10, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

systemically and have developed methodologies of survival, resistance and overcoming. And yet, according to David Scott, the very idea of a Black Radical Tradition depends “on how we think of each of the constitutive terms of this formulation” recognizing that “each of these terms is [...] an essentially contested concept. That is to say, they are, each of them, susceptible to widespread disagreement or rival interpretations.” He complicates the formulation by stating that “it is by no means self-evident what identity or what community or what history is covered by the term black. Surely black does not guarantee [...] a unified way of being or seeing.” He confounds the premise further by stating that “[i]f I am black it is because there is an historical tradition in which that identity is constituted partly by a continuous argument over precisely what it means to be black.”⁵⁵

It is useful to contest the constitutive terms Black, radical and tradition, in order to unpack the nuanced definitions of each. It is useful for the purpose of countering notions of homogeneity and for addressing the gendered intellectual frameworks of the Black Radical Tradition, or rather, traditions. Certainly Black feminist thought — its canons, intellectuals, activists and artists — is not necessarily included or implied.

Anthony Bogues identifies four major tenets of the Black Radical Tradition and provides a framework for its epistemology of resistance and overcoming. First, he tells us that “[w]hite racism dehumanizes the black population” and that for Black people to recover our authentic humanity, “acts of political or social resistance are necessary, as

⁵⁵ David Scott, “The Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Platform of Criticism* 17 (2013): 1-4.

well as a redefinition of the self, both collectively and individually.”⁵⁶ I understand this to mean that in order to transform Black subjectivities, we must expose the white supremacist character of Western knowledge and power systems, resist the oppressions inherent in the neocolonial project of domination, and engage in the reimagining of Black collective and individual selfhood.

Second, Bogue states that we must engage in “the construction of a new historical framework which seeks to define the activities of blacks as significant and contributing to social progress.”⁵⁷ In uncovering African and diasporic African histories of the present, we reveal that these knowledges have been erased, stolen, appropriated and denigrated. Through recovering and articulating these knowledges as integral to the genealogy of human evolution, we retell history. Through retelling history, we redefine the present and open the way for African and African diasporic knowledges to contribute to the shaping of the future.

Next, Bogue discusses the “triangle of liberation”, and how “black liberation struggles historically have had a diasporic quality.” He contends that “[i]n the Western world, anticolonial and black freedom was perceived through the lens of Pan-Africanism.”⁵⁸ The Pan-Africanist lens brings into view the colonial foundation of current Western knowledge and power systems, and the perpetuity and global reach of these systems as they continue to impact African and diasporic African lives globally. African liberation struggles — in the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa — continue to

⁵⁶ Anthony Bogue, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James* (London: Pluto Press, 1997) 4-5.

⁵⁷ Bogue, *Caliban's Freedom*, 4-5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

assert Afrodiasporic intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies and pedagogies in the present.

The fourth tenet of the Black Radical Tradition that Bogue notes is its humanist approach.⁵⁹ While there are various schools of humanist thought to which he may be referring, I understand his reference to the humanist approach of the Black Radical Tradition to mean its project to restore the humanity of Black folks and, in so doing, to redeem all of humanity.

To identify that white supremacy dehumanizes Black people, to engage in political and social resistance, to redefine Black selfhood, to reconstruct historical frameworks that include African contributions to human evolution, and to identify that colonial oppressions impact African people on a global scale is to build a framework to restore the humanity of African and diasporic African people. Through this restoration of Black humanity, we expose the ontological wound of the present white supremacist, neocolonial, heteropatriarchal notion of “the human” and therefore rupture it.

What is missing in this analysis of the Black Radical Tradition is a recognition of the need for the close study of patriarchal constructs of thought within the tradition and “the serious intellectual work necessary to understand the processes that gender knowledge.”⁶⁰ In Hazel Carby’s audacious critique of W. E. B. DuBois’ epic intellectual work, *The Souls of Black Folks*,⁶¹ “regarded as a founding text in the study of black

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Carby, *Race Men*, 11.

⁶¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls Of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903)

culture,”⁶² and in the inception of the Black Radical Tradition, she exposes his embedded masculinist framework. She argues that his project suffers from his “complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders,”⁶³ and furthermore that this is not only emblematic of the patriarchal landscape of his time, but that “[i]t is a conceptual and political failure of imagination that remains a characteristic of the work of contemporary African American male intellectuals.”⁶⁴

Carby analyzes DuBois’s gendered theoretical paradigms and considers that he was not able “to imagine a community in which positive intellectual and social transformation could be evoked through female metaphors and tropes.”⁶⁵ I venture to further this proposal by adding that in recognizing the “highly gendered structures of intellectual and political thought and feeling”⁶⁶ embedded in the Black Radical Tradition, we must include contesting the primacy of the intellect as the supreme site of knowledge production. Seeking to develop feminist frameworks of intellectual, cultural and spiritual knowledge-making, I locate my work within the context of Black radical imagination.

black radical imagination

[...] in their own way, the enslaved peoples might have in their own imagination so reordered their reality as to reach beyond the tangible and concrete to acquire a new re-creative sensibility which could aid in the harsh battle for

⁶² Ibid., 12.

⁶³ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

survival. The only thing they could possess (and could not be tampered with) was their imagination and this became the source of their struggle against the cruelty of their condition [...] a counter-culture of imagination [...]⁶⁷

Black radical imagination, like diasporic African feminist thought, “gestures toward what cannot be known, what has been erased, and how.”⁶⁸ Black radical imagination is rooted in a futurist longing for a better world. It relies on, but must reach beyond, an unrelenting and rigorous critique of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonial world view and global capitalism as they structure and operate global power and knowledge systems, and our own thinking. Black radical imagination requires a keen analysis of how we participate in, benefit from, and contribute to the perpetuation of these oppressive systems of domination, and challenges us to untangle ourselves from complicity and unravel the systems in place in real and concrete ways.

When speaking about Black radical imagination, the Black Radical Tradition and Black feminist thought there is a tendency to reify American cultural dominance. Through my choices of scholars and artists whose work I take up in this Movement, I gesture towards global Afrodiasporic genealogies of thought, liberation struggle and emancipatory practices. I understand Black radical imagination to be grounded in diasporic African feminist epistemologies: living and working through ideas of intersectionality; understanding the function of multiple and interlocking oppressions; centring lived experience in our academic and cultural work; and accessing the erotic. In

⁶⁷ J. Michael Dash, “Marvellous Realism — The Way out of Négritude” *Caribbean Studies* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Jan., 1974) 66, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25612571>.

⁶⁸ Grace Kyungwon Hong, “The Future of Our Worlds: Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8(2) (2008): 106.

this formulation, I acknowledge a genealogy of international intellectual currents, including the work of Caribbean feminists. Black radical imagination relies on valuing spiritual and cultural work as equal to political and intellectual work and on politics of allegiance based on relationship to power. It springs forth from recognizing love as a motivating inner resource in the pursuit of freedom. It is cultivated through the valorization of, and engagement with African and Afrodiasporic knowledges, past and present, which propel our ability to imagine and manifest futures that surpass the realities that have and continue to obliterate the flourishing of Black life.

It is a sense of resonance with the Marvellous that compels me to locate my work within the context of Black radical imagination. The Afrodiasporic aesthetic mode of Marvellous Realism⁶⁹ is concerned with “the emancipation of thought.”⁷⁰ I frame engaging the Marvellous as a praxis of freedom. It is futurist in its orientation, opening an “inner corrective”⁷¹ space in which to dream a new world, to imagine the “total transformation of society, not just granting aggrieved populations greater political and economic power.”⁷² In his search for “an even more elaborate, complete dream of freedom,” Robin Kelley discovered “there are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces.”⁷³ I locate my work in that liminal space of the Marvellous, which I posit as

⁶⁹ See more about Marvellous Realism in the “Transforming Black Subjectivities” section of this Movement.

⁷⁰ Dash, “Marvellous Realism,” 66.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002) 5.

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

a site of Black radical imagination, keeping company with the artists who “might be described as modern ancients redefining freedom, imagining a communal future (and present) without exploitation; all-natural, African, barefoot and funky.”⁷⁴

The three intellectual strands of Black radical thought that I will now examine through the lens of Black radical imagination, are concerned with Black cultural life, Western constructs of knowledge and power, and Black subjectivities. As Moten states in the passage at the opening of this Movement, “[g]iven how the category of the human has been put under the severest pressure by the brutalities of colonialism,” Black cultural life, or as Moten refers to it, “black social life remains a fruitful site for [...] soliciting the idea of the particularity of human being [...]”⁷⁵

* * *

the everyday cultural practices of black folks

Now there is a persistent established theory which contends that the Middle Passage destroyed the culture of these people, that it was such a catastrophic definitive experience that none of those transported during the period from 1540 to 1840 escaped trauma. But modern research is pointing to a denial of this, showing that African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁵ Fred Moten, “Fred Moten Talk: Blackness and Poetry” (paper presented at Mixed Blood Project, University of Berkley, March 18, 2015), accessed July 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su7iCumqLvo>.

⁷⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature” *Daedalus* Vol. 103, No. 2, Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism (Spring, 1974): 73-109, accessed August 1, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024205?seq=1#page_thumbnails_tab_contents.

Engaging the ideas of Clyde Woods and Kamau Brathwaite and putting them in conversation with my cultural work, this discussion explores the everyday cultural practices of Black folks. I propose that cultivating knowledge of African and Black diasporic intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies is key to understanding our lives and our cultural development, as Black folks, both historically and in the present. I suggest that, in the present moment, this understanding is critical to African and Black diasporic survival and moves the impetus of overcoming into the realm of becoming.

This discussion focuses on the blues epistemology, as defined by Woods, articulating it as a Black cultural practice that extends beyond the musical genre of the blues and even beyond the scope of music. I understand the blues epistemology “not just as a musical form but as a structure of feeling and a way of bringing about social and political participation, bringing about a call and response between community and the individual.”⁷⁷ Nor is this a universalizing of American culture as definitive of all Black diasporic cultural practice, but an identification of Black cultural resiliency in one of its forms. The African retentions present in the blues and its extensions “not only crossed the Atlantic”, as cited in the passage by Braithwaite above, but also “survived, and creatively adapted [...] to [their] new environment[s].”⁷⁸ This is evidence of the resiliency of Black diasporic social life and cultural development. Through demonstrating how the blues epistemology represents Black diasporic resistance to oppressions and affirms Black humanity, this discussion attempts to show that the blues epistemology, framed

⁷⁷ Honor Ford-Smith, in conversation with the author, November 28, 2015.

⁷⁸ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature.”

as emblematic of everyday cultural practices of Black folks, is an epistemology of survival and overcoming.

the blues epistemology

In the passage above, Brathwaite counters the “persistent established theory”⁷⁹ of rupture with an assertion of continuance. As in his poetry, there is a persistent affirmation of Black ties to Africa across the catastrophe of the Middle Passage. Through the play of tidalectics,⁸⁰ a term he coined that eclipses the three-ness of dialectics, with the ripple and two-ness of tidal movement, he takes us back and forth from the Caribbean, to and from Africa, conveying in the sound-space of his poetry a trance-like state of consciousness dwelling in an unbroken continuum across the Atlantic. Through image, sound, word and rhythm, he defies the notion that all Black historical ties to Africa were erased by the trauma of the Crossing. This assertion and this affirmation of an enduring integrity of African cultural development are tools of resiliency for Black folks.

Clyde Woods shows us that grassroots social movements can best name and mobilize around the problems that affect their own communities. He looks to artists, rappers, poets and blues singers to find “alternative ways of thinking and being in the world” — ways to “unthink the poisoned logic that condemns [...] besieged

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Anna Reckin, “Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite’s Prose/Poetry as Sound-Space” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5 (2003).

communities,” drawing on solutions found within “their disqualified knowledge.”⁸¹ Woods identifies “global legacies of racism, capitalism, colonialism and slavery” as the origins of Western knowledge and power systems, challenging us “to make these histories visible to a world that refuse[s] to see” the impacts of these legacies on people’s lives “as anything but personal deficiencies.”⁸² Woods describes the blues as “a self-referential explanatory tradition among working-class African Americans in which development debates occur.”⁸³ The blues can be considered a methodology toward making sense of the conditions of Black life, of coping and overcoming. Woods calls this “distinct and evolving complex of explanation and social action” a “pillar of African American identity” and identifies it as “the blues epistemology.”⁸⁴

The conditions of Black life from which this epistemology spawns are also present in Canadian urban centres, where Black development debates are also taking place. While Woods references the Mississippi Delta region as the place of origin of the blues and speaks about the blues in relation to African-American life in his discussion, race and economic oppressions also operate north of the border. Though the myths of the absence of racism in Canada still hold sway in the minds of many white Canadians, the recent hyper-visibility in the Canadian media of anti-Black violence is evidence of the highly charged racial tension that exists across North America at this time. With the

⁸¹ Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, ed., *Freedom Now!: Struggles for the Human Right to Housing in LA and Beyond* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), video shown at the book launch dedicated to the memory of Clyde Woods, Grammy Museum, uploaded February 21, 2012, accessed August 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HIBRlg2bvg>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 1998) 25.

⁸⁴ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 29.

recent deaths of Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby at the hands of Toronto police and the targeting of Black folks in Toronto who are unjustly carded, surveilled, assaulted or murdered by police, Black folks on both sides of the border are resisting anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence.⁸⁵

Historically, in the Reconstruction Era in the rural South of the United States (1865-1877), the blues became the vehicle through which that generation “grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it.”⁸⁶ The worldview embedded in the blues bolstered a sense of collective self from which to “oppose and dismantle the American intellectual, cultural and socioeconomic traditions constructed from the raw material of African American exploitation and denigration.”⁸⁷

In many ways the blues offer a multi-ethnic working-class vision of a flawed United States haunted by its own practices of ethnic oppression and enforced poverty. In the face of this reality, the blues and its extensions offer an unapologetic celebration of life, resistance, spiritual affirmation, community [...] and humanity [...]⁸⁸

The blues convey the sorrow of the tragedy of oppression that Black folks are faced with, instill a collective sense of pride, and “channel folk wisdom, descriptions of

⁸⁵ “Black Lives Matter” accessed August 4, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/893870337360405/permalink/899308453483260/>.

In solidarity with Indigenous resurgence, I note here that Indigenous sovereignty debates are taking place in Canada alongside Black development debates, that the hyper-visibility of anti-Indigenous violence is also present in recent Canadian media coverage, and that the epidemic of murdered and disappeared Indigenous women in Canada has been met with Indigenous resistance to genocidal state-sanctioned violence of Indigenous bodies and culture.

⁸⁶ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

life and labour [...] and critiques of individuals and institutions.” The blues are those “songs, music, stories, jokes, dances and other visual and physical practices that raise the spirits of the audience to unimaginable heights.”⁸⁹

Historically, blues performers were not entertainers. They were “sociologists, reporters, counsellors, advocates, preservers of language and customs, summoners of life, love [and] laughter.” They ministered to their audiences with the stories of their individual and collective lives in a vernacular of their own. Black women blues artists have always figured as “independent symbols of authority.”⁹⁰ American singer Bessie Smith (1894-1937) may have been a “Blues Queen” to the broader society, but she was “a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group” and attested to the “ability to deal with chaos”⁹¹ in the Black communities where the blues were embedded.

In understanding the blues as an epistemology I become interested in recognizing the tenets of this epistemology in continental African music calling for change. Acoustic folk music from Congo and Uganda, Zouglou music from Côte d’Ivoire, Mbaqanga and freedom songs from South Africa, *Jeli* music from Mali and Senegal, and Chimerenga and Jiti music from Zimbabwe are equally characterized by the insurgent and celebratory nature of the lyrical content as by the hybrid African/Western instrumentation, the complex acoustic polyrhythms, the distinct vocal melodic and harmonic structures, and the diverse compositional frameworks.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., citing Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

I see resonances of the blues epistemology in the social engagement that has characterized my cultural production over the years. Lamentations of hardship are present in my art and performance production, the calling out of oppressions we are subjected to as Black diasporic peoples, and the emancipatory impulse to resist, to heal and to triumph. I understand improvisation to be a defining element of the blues, reflecting the precarity of ever-shifting subject positions Black folks navigate in daily life. In this portfolio, I engage improvisation in the creation and in the performance of this work.

In this study of the blues epistemology, I do not reify the primacy of American culture, or make the blues the mother of all diasporic African art forms. I understand the blues as one of many Afrodiasporic cultural practices that illustrates the epistemology of coping, of protesting and of overcoming oppression, of explaining the lived experience of those oppressions, and of defying the systemic function of oppression to obliterate the humanity of the oppressed. The blues are a form of resistance through making music, art, spoken word, performance, and poetry that is interventionist and that catalyzes social organization. It is one means of overcoming, of making change, and of celebrating the resiliency and the beauty of Afrodiasporic people and culture.

The blues and blues-influenced genres — such as jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country and western, reggae, soul, funk and rap — have spread across the globe, interfacing with a myriad of Afrodiasporic musical genres driven also

by the impetus of overcoming the unliveable and pursuing freedom, creating a vast cultural geography.⁹²

The African origins and defining tropes of black culture get lost in Western methods of research that privilege the printed word as the primary operative discipline of discourse and research. In recognizing the historical development of Black culture, “[t]he error [...] has been to look to print and to language for evidence of African survivals.”⁹³ Musicologists make note of European-like melodies present in Black music, “but fail to notice that the whole performance context — voicing, rhythmic organization, orchestration — remained essentially African.”⁹⁴ Aaron Copeland, as cited by Woods, notes that “[t]he blue, or flattened note [is] the hallmark of the blues.”⁹⁵ He states that the blues scale is African and is the most unique contribution to American music. The archives of African cultural survivals are not recorded in Western accounts of the development of civilization. The archives of African survivals are indecipherable to Western methods of research. The non-print and non-verbal heritage is overlooked by cultural bias and is, likewise, “through nonverbal and oral channels, out of reach of censorship.”⁹⁶ As Kamau Brathwaite recites

I’m speaking of archives of sound, of memory. Archives of the oral, archives of spirit, the library as mbira, the thumb piano on which you play the travails, travails of your soul [...] The oral moment here as text becoming [...] I mean, the

⁹² Ibid., 36.

⁹³ Ibid., 38, citing Cash McCall.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 38.

slave knows when the slave is free when he or she has reclaimed [their] archives. This is the magic and the mystery of the slave ship, over and across Kalunga,⁹⁷ triumphant passage of the Middle Passage. I mean, we come with freedom archives without the printing block, without the Roman alphabet [...] The arrivant's archive is imminent [...] ⁹⁸

The themes of orality and aurality as defining elements of the Black arts are present in Brathwaite's poem, as is the triumph of the survival of African cultural concepts that came across the Atlantic. The impulse of cultural reclamation and the impetus of resiliency are also evident in the recurrent reference to the living archive. These qualities, along with the defiance of Western cultural domination and the promise of resurgency, are all tenets of the blues epistemology.

The intersection of language, music and performance in the blues can also be understood as informed by African practices. "African non-verbal performance traditions had survived virtually intact in African America and had shaped all its distinctive rhythmic arts." It is this "unwritten but rich African tradition"⁹⁹ that fuels Black art and performance.

The essential nature of communication through rhythm is an unknown quantity, due primarily to a lack of interest on the part of Western science. Rhythm [...] is the cultural catharsis Fanon has suggested is necessary to black culture [...] it

⁹⁷ *Kalunga* is described by Bakôngo teacher, Kia Bunseki Fu-kiau, to M. Jacqui Alexander: "[t]he same force that gave shape to the universe is the same force which resides within us. The force is *Kalunga* [...] the principle of God, the principle of change, vitality, motion, and transformation [...] There was nothingness, into which came this source of life, this energy, expressed as heat, cosmic fire after which there was a cooling that produced rivers, oceans, mountains. The world floated in *Kalunga*, endless water within subcosmic space, half emerging for terrestrial life, half submerging for marine life and the spiritual world. *Kalunga* is the ocean door between two worlds." Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 301.

⁹⁸ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy" *Im Selbstverlag des Museums*, Vol. 25. (1988), (presented at 10th National Black Writers' Conference at Medgar Evers College, Brooklyn, March 25, 2010), accessed August 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZi0Ejh99Qg>.

⁹⁹ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 35.

simultaneously asserts and preserves the oral ontology [...] [I]t is on this basis that black music can be seen [...] as a source of black social organization [...] ¹⁰⁰

The combined orality, aurality, rhythm and physicality of the Black arts suggests that a unique conceptual framework is required to comprehend them. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes the term "orature" as having "been used variously since the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu coined it in the early seventies [...] to counter the tendency to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or a lower rung in the linear development of literature." wa Thiong'o explains that Zirimu was "rejecting the term oral literature" ¹⁰¹ as a hybrid that reinscribes literature as dominant.

South African sculptor Pitika Ntuli developed the term "orature" further, claiming that it is "a fusion of all art forms [that is] the basic characteristic of orature." ¹⁰² Ntuli sees orature as a counter to "the atomization of life and culture" in Western epistemologies, and sees the "oral-aural arts of the African people, [as] a healing opposite, a wholeness." This non-hierarchical hybridity suggests a conception of art forms without rigid disciplinary boundaries, a "fluidity between drama, story, song, discourse and performance." He speaks of an "interconnectedness of phenomena" and of a "central core of fusion and connections of features and elements" ¹⁰³ that make up this wholeness.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., citing Ben Sidran.

¹⁰¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature" *Performance Research* Volume 12, Issue 3 (September 2007): 4-7. DOI: 10.1080/13528160701771253, accessed August 5, 2015, http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/Ngugi_Orature.html.

¹⁰² Ibid., citing Pitika Ntuli, ed., "Orature: A Self-Portrait," *Storms of the Heart* (London: Camden Press, 1988).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Orature understood then as a hybrid art form compels me to rethink my ideas about interdisciplinary arts practice, to consider relinquishing the notion of disciplines altogether. This repudiation of discreet disciplines is compelling because it loosens the prescriptive imperative to classify my cultural production practice and suggests departing from Western notions of the disciplines as the only way to structure and understand intellectual and cultural knowledge production.

Born in passionate revolt against the unliveable, the blues and jazz demand nothing less than a new life.¹⁰⁴

The blues remain “unquestionably oppositional [... an] aggressive and uncompromising assertion of the omnipotence of desire and imagination”¹⁰⁵ in the face of the chaos of relentless oppressions. The blues epistemology defies the pressures of these oppressions with an unstoppable resiliency. This resiliency contains an analysis of the conditions that plague Black life and the expression of sorrow and outrage about these conditions. It is equally driven by the assertion and affirmation of Black humanity in the face of these conditions, and it fuels change-making social and cultural organization and construction.

During the last three hundred years, the African American working class has daily constructed their vision of a non-oppressive society through a variety of cultural practices, institution-building activities and social movements. By doing so, they have created an intellectual and social space in which they could

¹⁰⁴ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 39.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, citing Franklin Rosemont.

discuss, plan and organize this new world. The blues are the cries of this new society being born.¹⁰⁶

In this discussion I have attempted to demonstrate that by recognizing the African culture concepts embedded in the blues and other Afrodiasporic musical approaches we can recognize the resiliency of Black culture and its development. Through understanding how the blues epistemology extends beyond musical expression to inform Black diasporic resistance to oppressions and affirm Black humanity, we can recognize it as an epistemology of survival and overcoming. I frame the blues epistemology as a demonstration of Black radical imagination; as “reach[ing] beyond the tangible and the concrete” to “a counter-culture of imagination.”¹⁰⁷

* * *

confronting western knowledge and power systems

[...] the struggle for our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.¹⁰⁸

Demonstrating the failures of Western representation will challenge it and cause it to fall.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁷ J. Michael Dash, “Marvellous Realism — The Way out of Négritude,” 66.

¹⁰⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, its Overrepresentation — An Argument” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

¹⁰⁹ Honor Ford-Smith, in conversation with the author, July 19, 2015.

The second premise of my research engaging Black radical imagination asserts that by exposing the limitations of contemporary Western knowledge and power systems and by revealing the historical colonial systems of oppression on which the contemporary systems are built, we can rupture the false legacy of their supremacy. Engaging the ideas of Sylvia Wynter and Henry Louis Gates Jr., I focus on exposing the limitations of the embedded “human/other” binary. I propose that this binary is operating out of the Enlightenment’s definition of “Man” and informs the contemporary white supremacist construction of “the human”. Coming out of the intellectual and cultural forces of the time that privileged individual reason and analysis over all other human faculties, the Enlightenment universalized European “Man” as “the human”, evicting all racial “others” to sub-categories. This formulation informed the justification for dehumanizing whole groups of people in the name of colonial expansion.

While my argument is concerned with how Western representations of the “human” inform its technologies of domination, I recognize that this limits my argument to one of representation. If we limit our confrontation of Western knowledge and power systems to discussions of representation we are not addressing the materiality of Western domination. The West’s greed and consumption of the vast majority of the world’s resources must also be taken up in the challenge to Western domination. The argument of representation is moot if it does not also acknowledge the question of redistribution of wealth.

The “Enlightenment Era” was certainly a misnomer for the period in Europe from the 1600s to the 1700s whose theories, beliefs and philosophical formulations were

informed by the institution of colonialism. Colonialism was born in the so-called Age of Discovery in the 1400s, founded in a ghastly calculus¹¹⁰ of dehumanization based on race, justifying the enslavement and genocide of African and Indigenous bodies over the next 400 years.

Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of “genius,” the visible sign of reason itself.¹¹¹

“Without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity [...] could exist.¹¹²

While the Enlightenment privileged “Man’s” ability to reason as paramount, it simultaneously professed the absence of reason in African and Indigenous peoples, justifying the denigration of the humanity of the peoples whom Europeans had been colonizing since the Renaissance. “Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African ‘species of men,’ as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master ‘the arts and sciences.’”¹¹³

The “human/other” binary continues to serve the Western neocolonial appetite for “progress” in modernity and universalizes white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, neocolonial “Man”, overrepresenting him as “the human”. This definition, according to

¹¹⁰ Borrowing from Cedric Robinson’s term, “calculus of oppression,” *Black Marxism*, xxx.

¹¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Editor’s Introduction: Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985): 9, accessed August 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343459>.

¹¹² Gates, “Writing ‘Race,’” 11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

Afropessimist thinkers, can only exist in simultaneity with the negation, and therefore, dehumanization of the racialized “other.”

Sylvia Wynter calls for a new “genre/mode of being human”¹¹⁴ that requires

a reconceptualization by the African intelligentsia around the world and a return to a revalorization of [our] African intellectual heritage [as] a necessary strategy for effecting a move outside our present mode of being human.¹¹⁵

Wynter proposes that, “the task of black studies, together with those of all the other new studies that entered academia in the wake of the 1960s uprisings [... is] of rewriting knowledge.”¹¹⁶ In this discussion, the colonial “Man” is exposed for one of his limitations: the fallacy of white supremacy.

Referencing Sylvia Wynter’s notion of “demonic ground”, Karen Gagne suggests that we must assume “a Jester-like position of ‘external observer’ – that is, liminal-position that would be necessary to make our present epistemology obsolete.”¹¹⁷ This liminal, “Jester-like” position, this “‘demonic ground’ outside of our present governing system of meaning”¹¹⁸ is the space in which I situate my research; it is the liminal space that the Trickster occupies in the performance in this portfolio. Occupying this liminal space serves to displace the overrepresented systems of meaning. By standing outside of the present systems of meaning, we make them visible. By making them visible, we

¹¹⁴ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 329.

¹¹⁵ Sylvia Wynter, cited by Karen M. Gagne in “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines: Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter Propose a New Mode of Being Human” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self- Knowledge* Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 23 (2007): 262.

¹¹⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to my Colleagues” *Voices of the Diaspora* 8:2 (1992):16.

¹¹⁷ Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 259.

¹¹⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Unsilencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of ‘Caliban’s Woman’” *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Lawrenceville: Africa World Press, 1990) 110.

expose the myth of their universality. By exposing the myth of their universality, we make them obsolete and rupture the invisibility of the “human/other” binary.

Gagne goes on, quoting Wynter, to say that we must recognize that the systemic devalorization of Blackness and overvalorization of whiteness are functions of the “encoding of our present hegemonic Western-bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human.”¹¹⁹ This exclusive descriptive statement forms “part of an overall devalorization of the human being itself” in that it is universalized and “overrepresented as if it were that of the human.”¹²⁰ Césaire instructs us, using bracing language, to study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, how it works to

[...] brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism.¹²¹

The legacy of the decivilized colonizer carries forward into the present and is the unexpected by-product of the “human/other” binary. This degraded neocolonial human is masked, however, by the representation of the supremacy of Western knowledge and power and the systemic denigration of African and Indigenous knowledges and bodies.

Wynter further states:

As western man “pacified” New World nature, eliminated the “savage”, penned them up in reservations, he did the same with whole areas of his being. Indeed

¹¹⁹ Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 253, citing Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for Our Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre,” *Not Only The Master’s Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

¹²⁰ Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 253.

¹²¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 35.

it would be difficult to explain the extraordinary nature of his ferocity if we did not see that it was, first of all, a ferocity also wrought, in psychic terms, upon himself.¹²²

Today, Césaire's decivilized colonizer has become Wynter's Euro-American governing system. The Civil Rights Movement set the transformation of this system in motion, but it did not complete it, Wynter says, and she challenges us to recognize why.

[I]n the wake of the 1960s and 1970s social movements, black American intellectuals had been trapped by their refusal to confront a central question [...] that of the systemic nature of the rules which governed their exclusion from the mainstream conception of the United States and erased their centrality to the existential reality of North America.¹²³

Gagne suggests it is a question of representation that Africa and the Black diaspora must challenge.

Given the role of “defective Otherness” that is analogically imposed upon the peoples and countries of Africa and the black diaspora by the representational apparatus of our Western world-system [...] the challenge to be met by the black African, indeed black diaspora [...] for the twenty-first century will be that of deconstructing the present conception of the human.¹²⁴

This call to deconstruct the present conception of “the human” echoes Fanon's caution that “[t]he Third World ought not to be content to define itself in the terms of values which have preceded it.” Taking his counsel and applying it to the contemporary moment, we must continue to “do [our] utmost to find [our] own particular values and

¹²² Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 258.

¹²³ Wynter, “No Humans Involved,” 14.

¹²⁴ Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 260.

methods and a style which shall be peculiar to [us].”¹²⁵ It is through this redefining of values and methods that we are contributing to “reintroducing [hu]mankind into the world, the whole of [hu]mankind.”¹²⁶

Henry Louis Gates Jr. echoes this call by challenging the anglo-African writers of the Black literary tradition “to critique this relation of indenture” by recognizing that we speak in the dominant language that absents Blackness, and by being mindful of how “to speak the other's language without renouncing [our] own.”¹²⁷ He suggests that “we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures;”¹²⁸ we must turn “to the black vernacular tradition [...] to isolate the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other.”¹²⁹

Wynter proposes an inspirational redefinition of “the human” as a bio/logos hybrid. I extend and complicate her hybrid to include pathos, ethos and cosmos, imagining a more multi-faceted and intersectional hybrid that is a fluid and non-hierarchical symbiosis, or “orature” of biology, reason, passion, ethics and cosmology which will more assuredly make “our Enlightenment-to-Darwinian way of being obsolete.”¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth: The Handbook for the Black Revolution that is Changing the World* (Paris: Presence Africaine Editions, 1963) 99.

¹²⁶ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 106. The alterations of the word “mankind” is the author’s.

¹²⁷ Gates, “Writing ‘Race’,” 13, citing Jacques Derrida.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁰ Gagne, “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines,” 258.

When this happens, a new mode of being human [...] will be put forward, one that does not require an “Other” to contrast the “We” of the West. As the hybrid bio-cultural creatures that we are, Sylvia Wynter shows us, we impose a new “autopoiesis”. Our grasping this process will cause a new rupture of a great magnitude, enabling us to leave our present conception of Man [...] [P]oetics would then be [...] regarded as the action by which humans work to create themselves anew. A new “science of the human” [...] would then illuminate this process.¹³¹

This vision of a “new science of the human” that will “narrow the gap between the natural and the human world,”¹³² is certainly futurist in its imagining of a world order not founded in systems of domination, but I ask, is it also reclamatory? Is it a reclaiming of African and Indigenous epistemologies of human integrity with the natural world and spiritual praxes of communion with the Sacred through enactments of ritualized engagement with the natural world?¹³³

Through this discussion, I have attempted to confront Western knowledge and power systems by exposing the limitation of the white supremacist “human/other” binary, and by revealing the historical colonial systems of oppression from which this binary ushers. In so doing, I have attempted to rupture the false legacy of the supremacy of Western knowledge and power systems, to challenge the privileging of individual reason and analysis over all other human faculties, and to expose the myth of the universalized European “Man” as “the human”. By asserting the imperative to valorize

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Wynter, “No Humans Involved,” 16.

¹³³ I use the term praxis (plural: praxes) in reference to research methodologies which operate through a simultaneity of theory and practice, in which practice informs theory informs practice in a circularity, as opposed to the conventional notions of the linearity of theory preceding practice. See Movement Three for more about praxes of the Sacred.

I note here that these epistemologies and spiritual praxes are also characteristic of Indigenous world view and cosmology.

African knowledges in the formulation and reimagination of “the human”, by which I infer, likewise, the revalorization of all subjugated knowledges past and present, I propose that a new definition of “the human” can begin to emerge within the global reach of Western knowledge and power.

* * *

transforming black subjectivities

The third and final premise that I examine in this engagement with Black radical imagination suggests that by transforming the identities and subjectivities of Black folks, we can embrace our own power and notions of being human. Engaging the ideas of Audre Lorde, Suzanne Césaire, and Julie Dash, I propose that this transformation and empowerment can be realized by employing the erotic, enacting Afrofuturist¹³⁴ imaginings, and decolonizing our subjective gaze upon Blackness. Audre Lorde’s pivotal analysis of the erotic grounds my embodied research methodologies of visual art, performance and spiritual practice. Suzanne Césaire takes up Marvellous Realism with an eloquence that I think surpasses Aimé Césaire’s discourse on Surrealism, and I am interested in how her ideas resonate with Afrofuturist ideas in the contemporary moment. Julie Dash’s epic film, *Daughters of the Dust* is groundbreaking in the humanizing of Black female subjectivity.

A call for empowering Black notions of being human and transforming Black subjectivities assumes a premise of dehumanization and maligned Black subjectivities.

¹³⁴ Afrofuturism is an aesthetic genre in African and Afrodiasporic film, music, literary, performance and visual art production. See more about Afrofuturism in the “Négritude meets Afrofuturism” section of this Movement.

Hearing Katherine McKittrick speak at York University, I was struck by her analysis of the “lethal technologies of knowledge construction” in Western culture that stem from, are anchored in, and that normalize white hatred and fear of Blackness. McKittrick identifies the Western, capitalist, neocolonial construction of the Black body as a site of pain and as worthy of violence.¹³⁵

uses of the erotic

Audre Lorde tells us that the practices of recovery from subjugation must be infused with the erotic. She valorizes the erotic as a site of emancipatory embodiment, “the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our living, our work, our lives.”¹³⁶ I posit Lorde’s uses of the erotic as a Black feminist autopoietic¹³⁷ practice, and I will attempt to demonstrate that this praxis is a tool for transforming and empowering Black identities and subjectivities. I propose that the erotic, a “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply [...] spiritual plane”¹³⁸ informs what M. Jacqui Alexander identifies as the praxes of the Sacred¹³⁹ and is

¹³⁵ Katherine McKittrick, “Recursive Racial Codes and the Poetics of Black Science” (lecture presented as part of the Faculty of Environmental Studies “Troubling Territories: Poetics, Politics and the Queerness of Place” seminar, February 25, 2014).

¹³⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essay and Speeches* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984) 55.

¹³⁷ I reflect on Michel Foucault’s “autopoiesis” in “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” *The Foucault Reader* (1984): 340-372, cited by James D. Faubion in “Toward an Anthropology of Ethics: Foucault and the Pedagogies of Autopoiesis” *Representations* 74 (2001): 83-104. “Foucault asserts that ‘from the idea that the self is not given to us, there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.’ Foucault distills the ethical into that rapport soi or “relation of the self to itself” that manifests itself as the ‘considered [reflechie] practice of freedom,’ a practice always analytically distinct from the moral principles and codes to which it has reference.” I engage the term “autopoiesis” in the context of the diasporic African project of cultural recovery and redefinition of individual and collective selfhood. Beyond the self that “is not given to us,” the Black diasporic self is a self that is, in fact, taken from us, which intensifies further the imperative to cultivate the “rapport soi” in the creation of ourselves “as work[s] of art,” through a set of parameters distinct from Western hegemonic “moral principles and codes” that are not relevant to or generative of the cultivation of Black selfhood.

¹³⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53.

¹³⁹ See Movement Three for more about praxes of the Sacred.

integral to the tools for overcoming and becoming, which I am identifying as praxes of freedom.

Lorde describes the erotic as a source of power and information within women's lives — and I would add Black and Indigenous heterosexual, queer, cisgendered¹⁴⁰ and transgendered women's and POC's¹⁴¹ lives — that counters heteropatriarchal notions of power. She calls the erotic “a well of replenishing and provocative force”¹⁴² distinguishing it from its opposite, pornography, which emphasizes sensation without feeling. “The erotic,” she says, “is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.”¹⁴³ Naming that liminal space between the sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings compels us to dwell inwardly in order to inquire into what our sense of self is and what are our strongest feelings. Exploring how the erotic manifests in our interior lives and allowing it to inform our actions cultivates an internal requirement toward excellence and engenders movement from authentic impulses toward freedom. I propose that this inner work is a potent ground for the movement of collective agency toward social change.

Lorde calls us to invest our work with erotic value and critiques ideologies that separate the spiritual from the political, and the spiritual from the erotic. She asserts that the erotic is the site of “those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is

¹⁴⁰ “Cisgender” is a term which refers to those who self-identify with the gender that matches their assigned sex.

¹⁴¹ POC: people of colour

¹⁴² Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 54.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

deepest and strongest and richest within each of us.”¹⁴⁴ Moving our work from this interior site brings a merging of the spiritual, political and erotic dimensions of our lives, which counters the ideologies of separation that truncate the flourishing of our work.

The erotic, she says, is the nurturer of all our deepest knowledge and is our capacity to share deeply any pursuit with another and to express joy openly and fearlessly. “[O]nce we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.” The erotic, then, becomes “a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence.”¹⁴⁵ Lorde states that our deepest cravings — our desires — provide the internal knowledge that tells us what our true needs are. She empowers us to valorize cravings, desires and internal knowledge as central to our authentic humanity and as critical in our emancipatory yearnings and struggles for social change. She counsels that it takes courage to share in the potency of this internal knowledge, but for those of us who do not fear this engagement, it can give us “the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.”¹⁴⁶ Nurturing our deepest internal knowledge, sharing deeply, feeling deeply, expressing joy fearlessly, investing our political and spiritual work with erotic value — I see these uses of the erotic as praxes of freedom that can transform Black subjectivities.

marvellous realism meets afrofuturism

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 55, 56.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 59.

Suzanne Césaire's Surrealism¹⁴⁷ dovetails with Lorde's erotic. One of the founding thinkers of the Négritude literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and Aimé Césaire's life partner, Suzanne Césaire wrote eloquently about Surrealism. She transposed its revolutionary vision of radically transforming all aspects of European society to the Négritudean project and merged the Surrealist mode with Marvellous Realism.¹⁴⁸ An aesthetic mode gaining momentum in the Caribbean at the time, Marvellous Realism was instrumental in the evolution of a distinct decolonial Caribbean identity. Césaire argued that it fortifies the capacity to imagine emancipatory Afrodiasporic futures, instructing us to draw our revolutionary impulses from a wild interior imagination — the domain, I suggest, of Lorde's erotic, and of radical imagination.

Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us [...] Freed from a long benumbing slumber, the most disinherited of all peoples will rise up from plains of ashes [...] Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid dichotomies of the present [...]¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ "Surrealism was an artistic, intellectual, and literary movement led by poet André Breton from 1924 through World War II. The Surrealists sought to overthrow the oppressive rules of modern society by demolishing its backbone of rational thought. To do so, they attempted to tap into the 'superior reality' of the subconscious mind. 'Completely against the tide,' said Breton, 'in a violent reaction against the impoverishment and sterility of thought processes that resulted from centuries of rationalism, we turned toward the marvellous and advocated it unconditionally.'" Accessed August 19, 2015, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism.

¹ André Breton, "Radio Interviews with André Parinaud (1913–1952)" *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* (Paragon House English, 1993) 63.

¹⁴⁸ Alejo Carpentier originated the term "lo real maravilloso," "the Marvellous Real" in 1949. He distinguished it from Frantz Roh's Magic Realism, framing the Marvellous as a product of the varied history, geography, politics, demography, myths, and beliefs of the land of Latin America. Magic Realism, arguably originating in Latin America, can be understood as a continuation of Spanish literary realism. Ángel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish America" *Hispania* (1955): 187-192.

¹⁴⁹ Suzanne Césaire, quoted by Robin Kelly in "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," introduction to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972) 15-16.

Négritude's project was to decolonize diasporic Africans by reclaiming and revalorizing African cultural identity in diaspora, and projecting visions of liberated Afrodiasporic futures. Négritude was, at once, reparative, "future-oriented and modern," according to Robin Kelley; "not an ideology, [but] a state of mind."¹⁵⁰ Suzanne Césaire called this state of mind a

permanent readiness for the Marvellous, the domain of the strange [...] and the fantastic [...] the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected or overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter, the artist, presiding over metamorphoses and inversions of the world.¹⁵¹

While Césaire considered Surrealist imagination to be critical to Négritudean thought, she urged Martiniquans against assimilation with European culture, and challenged them to enact a distinctly Caribbean literature,¹⁵² dwelling in the domain of the Marvellous Real. At the heart of her project are "discussions about identity and cultural phenomena that transform human beings marked by colonialism." Today, her ideas can be "analyzed in light of current debates around postcolonial theories, history, culture, identity and Caribbean literature."¹⁵³

Marvellous Realism, distinct from Magic(al) Realism and Surrealism, traces to "the ancient practices of Maroon societies and shamanism back to the future, to the

¹⁵⁰ Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," 23.

¹⁵¹ Césaire, cited by Kelly, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," 15.

¹⁵² Ivette Romero, "Suzanne Césaire 1915-1966" *Repeating Islands: News and Commentary on Caribbean Culture, Literature, and the Arts*, posted August 11, 2009, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://repeatingislands.com/2009/08/11/suzanne-cesaire-1915-1966/>.

¹⁵³ Ivette Romero, "ICS Lecture : Suzanne Césaire — An Avant-Garde Intellectual Legacy" *Repeating Islands: News and commentary on Caribbean Culture, Literature, and the Arts*, posted October 3, 2013, accessed August 3, 2015, <http://repeatingislands.com/2013/10/03/ics-lecture-suzanne-cesaire-an-avant-garde-intellectual-legacy/>.

metropolises of Europe, to the blues people of North America, to the colonized and semi-colonized world that produced the likes of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and Wifredo Lam”¹⁵⁴ of the Caribbean. To briefly describe the distinction: the Magical Realist mode dwells in the familiar world which blends with the supernatural realm; the Surrealist mode explores the imagination, the mind, and the human inner life; and the Marvellous dwells in a fictional supernatural world, different from the real world, in which anything can happen.¹⁵⁵

The domain of the Marvellous is accessed through deep communion with the universe and the natural world. Through plunging into poetic expression as a means of reclaiming collective memory and rewriting history, Césaire called for the liberation of the Spirit without cutting ties with the past and with an eye to the future:

une vision de l'être "en liaison directe avec les éléments", en communion totale avec l'univers, grâce à la plongée dans "les abîmes de l'inconscient". De cette "vertigineuse descente aux enfers" surgit l'expression poétique, véhicule du recouvrement de la mémoire collective et de la réécriture de l'histoire; elle libère l'esprit [...] lequel renoue "avec la diversité du monde les liens oubliés", et elle opère la synthèse du passé et de l'avenir.¹⁵⁶

I see parallels between the urgency of Césaire's permanent readiness for the Marvellous, and Afrofuturist insurgency. In both, the synthesis of past, present and future

¹⁵⁴ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Clark Zlotchew, *Varieties of Magical Realism* (New Jersey: Academic Press ENE, 2007) 15.

¹⁵⁶ Marie-Agnès Sourieau, "Suzanne Césaire et Tropiques: de la poésie cannibale à une poétique créole" *The French Review* Vol. 68, No. 1 (October, 1994): 72-73, citing Suzanne Césaire, *Tropiques* 3: 33-35, accessed August 3, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/396640?&seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents.

Translation by the author: "A vision of being 'in direct connection with the elements', in total communion with the universe through diving into 'the abyss of the unconscious'. It is from this 'dizzying descent into hell' that poetic expression arises as a means of recovery of collective memory and the rewriting of history; it liberates the spirit, she says, which revives 'the forgotten connections within global diversity', and affects a synthesis of past and future."

is an operative aesthetic formulation — reclaiming lost histories from the past for the purpose of redefining collective selfhood in the present and moving toward freedom in the future. Afrofuturism “encompasses African mythology and cosmology with an aim to connect those from across the Black Diaspora to their forgotten African ancestry.”¹⁵⁷ It simultaneously looks back on the present from the vantage point of the future, to tell the “history of the future.”¹⁵⁸ It is an “aesthetic mode ... projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences”¹⁵⁹ from the past and in the present.

My performance art installation dwells at the interstice between Marvellous Realism and Afrofuturism, occurring in the supernatural site of the ocean deep, and drawing imagery from my subconscious resource of nocturnal dreams and personal memory. I use this hybrid aesthetic mode in the performance, riffing on temporal fluidity and palimpsestic time, to interrupt the convention of seeing history in a chronology of epochal references, and to disrupt the causal assumptions of continuances of the historical and current conditions of Black life into the future. I seek to cultivate an anticipatory state of consciousness, grounded in the recovery of and engagement with an inheritance of African and Afrodiasporic epistemologies, fuelling the tidalectic¹⁶⁰ of rewriting history and imagining liberated futures. I suggest a simultaneity of vision, which,

¹⁵⁷ Chardine Taylor-Stone, “Afrfuturism: Where Space, Pyramids and Politics Collide” *The Guardian*, posted January 7, 2014, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2014/jan/07/afrfuturism-where-space-pyramids-and-politics-collide>.

¹⁵⁸ Yaszek, “Afrfuturism.”

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Anna Reckin, “Tidalectic Lectures.”

according to Tiffany Lethabo King, “enables [us] to apprehend and understand the complex relationships that often occur beyond the field of vision.”¹⁶¹

decolonizing sight

Once you feel de rhythm, you mind tell you how to see.¹⁶²

Julie Dash’s cinematic eye in her epic film *Daughters of the Dust*¹⁶³ is distinct in its lush and loving gaze upon the Black female subject. Her long, luxurious shots, panning across the exquisite landscapes of Black women’s bodies in intimate community with each other, recalibrate our vision. Her cinematic eye teaches us how to look upon Blackness with benevolence, with the expectation of finding a distinct humanity there, and with the polyvalence required to understand the multiple levels and layers of meaning intrinsic to Black diasporic life. By constructing a Black feminist subjective gaze upon Blackness, full of nuance, symmetry and complexity, she decolonizes sight.¹⁶⁴

The slowness of the action of her film demands that her audience dare not turn away as her multiply-encoded gaze supersedes the West’s pathologizing gaze upon Black life. She offers her audience an intimate portrait of the nuances of Black beauty: the hues of our skin, the textures of our hair, the timbre of our voices, and the cadence

¹⁶¹ Tiffany Lethabo King, “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes” (PhD. diss., University of Maryland, 2013) 83.

¹⁶² Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 1997) 165, cited by King, “In the Clearing,” 30.

¹⁶³ Julie Dash, Cora Lee Day, and Alva Rogers, *Daughters of the Dust*, Film (1992, New York: Kino International).

¹⁶⁴ King, “In the Clearing,” 31.

of our vernaculars. She offers an intimate portrait of a range of aspects of Black diasporic life — our communal sharing and preparing of soul food, our haunted memory of the Middle Passage, our elemental engagement with the Sacred, our mystic communication with Spirits, and our non-conforming sexualities. The film demands that we look bravely, and with compassion at what we have amputated from our Black selfhoods, where vestiges of self-loathing and self-annihilation still linger, inculcated by Western representations of our bodies, our histories, our cultures, and our spiritual practices.

She ministers to us through a Lordean erotic lens the medicine of gazing lovingly upon ourselves and each other as Black people. Through her eyes, we learn to revel in the hybridity of our complex identities and drink in the beauty, integrity and distinct multiplicities of Blackness, recognizing these, as the Caribbean Marvellous gaze shows us, as sources of our immense and unstoppable vitality and creative genius. *Daughters of the Dust* models and instigates a life-affirming and recuperative practice of regaining individual and collective selfhood by decolonizing our gaze upon Blackness. In the decolonial depiction of the Black female subject, this film takes up the politics of Black beauty in North America by countering the disparagement of Black women in dominant cultural images, by challenging the Black discourse on race and respectability, and by responding with loving attention to theories of Black self-hatred.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 18. I draw from the socio-cultural contexts she outlines discussing the politics of Black female beauty, though she does not discuss Julie Dash's film in her critique.

In “Reading Nana Peazant’s Palms: Seeing the Settlement-Plantation,” Chapter 2 in Tiffany Lethabo King’s dissertation, “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes,”¹⁶⁶ King theorizes Dash’s “simultaneous and contradictory form of sight” suggesting that it gives her a “range of optic power” to move in and out of the “colonial epistemology of sight.” This “decolonizing sight”¹⁶⁷ shows us simultaneously the violences of colonialism, the epistemologies of Yoruba cosmology, time past, present and future, and the human and Spirit realms.

King reads Dash’s figuring of indigo through multiple lenses. Dash uses the optic of indigo-stained hands to represent the markings left on the Black female body from the violences of slavery, showing her body’s forced merging with the *indican* plant in the poisonous process of producing indigo during slavery. Dash also encodes the multivalent figuring of indigo in Yoruba cosmology: the colour blue representing the symmetry of life, mourning and joy; the sacred and erotic constructions of women’s work with indigo; and as King explores, indigo as a portal into visual chaos through its attribute of opacity.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, in the performance in this portfolio, I employ the optic of a path of bones on the ocean floor as a palimpsestic symbol of fragmentation caused by the Middle Passage. Inscribed upon the surface of the stones/bones is a multiply-encoded archive — the colonial archive overwritten with diasporic African and Abolitionist emancipatory narratives. It is an archive of futures of possibility constructed from fragments of the past.

¹⁶⁶ King, “In the Clearing,” 30-85.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 69, 74, 75, 82.

Dash, and other cultural producers, present new epistemologies, in fact create sight and knowledge where there was not any before [... she] invents a new optic [...] that enables one to see what the limits of modernity's privileged epistemology of sight hides.¹⁶⁹

Dash's Black feminist and decolonial cinematic eye that uses sight as a mode of knowledge making also pushes back against sight as a site of epistemic truth.¹⁷⁰

King quotes Renee Paulina Louis's ideas about decolonizing sight, stating that it "is not about the total rejection of Western theory, research or knowledge. It's about changing focus."¹⁷¹ King speaks about the passive eye as opposed to the active eye, describing another aspect of the decolonizing gaze as penetrable, not inviolate and all-knowing. "[I]n Yoruba cosmology the senses work together. Sight is not privileged as the site of knowledge, rather it is a complex array of the senses that need to be marshalled in order to make sense of the social world."¹⁷²

Dash's subjective gaze upon Blackness signals an epistemology of decolonizing sight. Constructing simultaneous and contradictory forms of sight that push back against Western constructs of the primacy of sight over the other senses, changing focus, employing the passive gaze, and multiply coding women's work with indigo, are all methods within this epistemology. I propose that decolonizing the way we look upon ourselves and upon African and Black diasporic life can transform Black subjectivities and empower our own definitions of being human.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷² Ibid., 71.

I focus on the power of the erotic to take us into spaces of chaos because chaos radically disorients us.¹⁷³

Lorde's uses of the erotic, Césaire's readiness for the Marvellous,¹⁷⁴ and Dash's decolonizing sight, which I have proposed here as tools with which to transform Black subjectivities, are praxes I seek to enact in this research. As an artist, I see my role as one of modelling these praxes of freedom in my work as a means of generating alternative modes of Black selfhood. Through embodying the erotic, we can live our lives in distinct and authentic ways, discover alternatives to oppression and find the courage and strength to enact them. Through cultivating a readiness for the Marvellous, we can enable ourselves to imagine futures of possibility and be inspired to work towards them. Through decolonizing our gaze upon ourselves, we can disrupt hegemonic representations of African and Black diasporic life, and replace them with subjective representations reflecting African knowledges, epistemologies and cosmologies.

* * *

To conclude, this Movement has engaged the strands of Black radical thought concerned with Black cultural practices, Western knowledge and power systems, and Black subjectivities. Through the lens of Black radical imagination I have attempted to demonstrate that through understanding the blues epistemology, through exposing the Western epistemic "human/other" binary, through engaging uses of the erotic, accessing

¹⁷³ Ibid., 77.

¹⁷⁴ Césaire, cited by Kelly, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," 15.

Marvellous imagination, and decolonizing the Black subjective gaze, we can cultivate Black diasporic epistemologies, and embrace our own notions of being human. In the next Movement, I look at Middle Passage memory, exploring what it is, how it haunts us, and to what effect.

MOVEMENT TWO

Wading Into This Passage

CONFRONTING MIDDLE PASSAGE MEMORY

We lay in a dungeon. Many more of us lying in death, 21 times 21 times 21 and more. Crossing water on backs with sores and bellies empty except for those filled with air or swollen with child. Lying in rot and moon blood with skinless ankles and wrists, black skins turned yellow from chains acting like saws on our fearful flesh. Rocking [...] Back then we crossed the horizon over and over again [...] Some refused the Crossing, deciding instead to use their arms as wings, thousands of winged creatures flying free. Others simply kept each other's company at the bottom of the Sea, becoming messengers from the spirits of the deep whose Souls had plunged there from the voyage before and the one before that and the one before that. O Yemayá [...] Amongst your treasures rest the captives shuffled through the door of no return [...] No one knows the mysteries at the bottom of the Ocean. Crossing the line, the Kalunga line.¹⁷⁵

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
 Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
 in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
 has locked them up. The sea is History.¹⁷⁶

Coming to this topic required a surrendering, a giving in to the sorrow and horror of the Middle Passage. And yet, I felt a pull of inevitability to dare to descend and attempt to retrieve something there. I had not realized, however, that in confronting Middle Passage memory, as M. Jacqui Alexander puts it, "it would require such

¹⁷⁵ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 288-289.

¹⁷⁶ Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History" *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986) 364-367.

excavation, such a rememory¹⁷⁷ of deep forgettings, of feeding hungry ghosts.”¹⁷⁸ I knew it meant I had to undergo a Crossing of my own. I knew I had to succumb to “the mysteries at the bottom of the ocean [...] gesturing to me about a forgetting so deep that I had even forgotten what I had forgotten.”¹⁷⁹

I was haunted by the ghost of my father. I had a series of poignant dreams: of swimming in dark oceanic realms, of a plane crash in a toy airplane, of a beached whale on a flatbed truck, of a lush forest on the roof of my childhood house, of lifting a house off the ground with sheer will, and of my father’s corpse falling into my arms. I felt called to advocate relentlessly for my daughter, in the face of the micro-aggressions and violences of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and colonialism, that became glaring daily occurrences in our lives. I was overtaken by the surfacing and resurfacing of racial neuroses that have plagued my life: feelings of unworthiness, as a person of mixed race, to take on such a subject; fear of ostracism from the fold of Black community, of expulsion from Black cultural life, and of public shame. And finally, I experienced this descent in the form of writer’s block, brought on, I believe in part, by the great trepidation I felt in embarking on this daunting topic.

In short I had to begin to inhabit that unstable space of not knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know. Divested of the usual way of posing questions, I became vulnerable and experienced the kind of crisis that is named “writer’s block.” It was this that led me to examine the recalcitrance that masked an unacknowledged yearning for Spirit.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ I discuss Toni Morrison’s term “rememory” in the “Middle Passage Memory” section of this Movement.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 278.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

I finally surrendered. I waded in, knowing and not knowing that what I was surrendering to was an ocean of sorrow. I have striven to mitigate the chaos of this grief, this rage and terror through tenacity, surrender and embodiment: tenacity in facing the relentless obstacles that have threatened to sabotage this work; surrender to trusting the volition of this work; and embodied cultural/spiritual work in receiving and transmitting the material that has ushered forth from this autopoietic research. This striving mitigation has produced this Afrodiasporic art, performance and methodology toward the cultivation of a future-oriented integrated and collective selfhood.

In this Movement, I confront Middle Passage¹⁸¹ memory, discussing how it haunts us in the present moment of “colonial modernity” and to what effect. I understand Middle Passage memory as the social memory of the diasporic African collective experience of the “historical catastrophe” of the Crossing, and frame the Crossing as a “ruptural historical moment.”¹⁸² I propose that we live in the afterlife of slavery,¹⁸³ in that the historical catastrophe of the Crossing, and the legacies it

¹⁸¹ “Middle Passage” is the term used to name the journey made by European slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean, from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas, transporting captured African peoples during the period of transatlantic slavery. It is also known as the “Crossing”.

¹⁸² Bogue, “And What About the Human?,” 37, 41. Bogue’s term “colonial modernity” proposes that we cannot think of modernity without acknowledging the centrality of its historical colonial foundations and its current neocolonial structures. Referring to the Middle Passage as a “historical catastrophe” “reach[es] for a way to both describe and name a human experience that cannot simply be understood as political domination or various forms of labour exploitation,” but “as specific forms of domination in which power pressed flesh, in which the spectacle of violence was the everyday ordinary [...] existence” of the Black body, or what Bogue calls the “living corpse.”

¹⁸³ The term “slavery’s afterlife” or the “afterlife of slavery” is used by scholars who write within the tradition of Afropessimism. It describes the similitude between the status of the slave before and after emancipation, and further refers to the modern day continuities of the status of unfreedom of Black bodies in the Western neocolonial nation state. As defined by Frank Wilderson, Afropessimism “situates the origin and ongoing formation of the human as a process of negation. The human can only exist through the violent negation and exclusion of the Black from the category of the Human,” in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), cited by Tiffany Lethabo King in “In the Clearing,” 5. Afropessimists refer to Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) in the formulation of this concept.

represents reverberate into the present moment. I identify these reverberations in the continuities of oppression in the current systems of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and global capitalism, which perpetrate the ongoing social, political and economic construction of Black and Indigenous bodies as fungible, enslaveable, genocidable, and exiled from the category of human.¹⁸⁴

I make a distinction between individual and social memory in this discussion, and I am interested in how collective memory of a mass historical violence is sustained in a present social order which systematically “deprive[s] its citizens of their memory,” and inculcates “a state of collective amnesia.” How does “[t]he existence of past injustice and the continued memory of that injustice” take up “the question of the rectification of those injustices[?]”¹⁸⁵

I propose that Middle Passage memory acts as an impetus for Afrodiasporic resiliency evident in how Afrodiasporic thought, cultural production and spiritual practice take it up, and in the generative work this engagement produces. I see the knowledge production ushering from Middle Passage Memory as part of a larger project, what Bogues calls “an intellectual tradition which has emerged out of the historical human experience of Africans and the African Diaspora.”¹⁸⁶ He calls it a Black intellectual tradition — which I would enlarge to include cultural and spiritual traditions — that is not

¹⁸⁴ King’s “In the Clearing” introduced me to the idea of the inseparability of European colonialism from settlement, made me aware of the terms “settler colonialism” and “fungibility.” She further iterates the inseparability of settler colonialism from the slavery of African bodies and the genocide and clearing of Indigenous bodies.

While the focus of this paper is engaging Black diasporic cultural, spiritual and intellectual epistemologies, I acknowledge, in tandem, Indigenous legacies of resiliency and resurgency.

¹⁸⁵ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989) 9, 14, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Bogues, “And What About the Human?,” 34.

essentialist, but “rather one that has produced a specific series of questions about human life precisely because of a set of human experiences and circumstances.”¹⁸⁷

I frame Middle Passage memory as a catalyst for resiliency, not as a pathology suggesting that African peoples carry a wound in our genetic codes, or that we are predisposed to subjugation, echoing the egregious premises of eugenics. If so, there would be no need for the global powers to maintain systems of oppression in order to hold the power differentials in place between white and racialized groups of people. The oppressive systems have always been and continue to be challenged and confronted by resistance.

I engage the ideas of M. Jacqui Alexander, NourbeSe Philip and Saidiya Hartman in exploring the themes of memory and rememory, haunting and sorrow, fragmentation and indecipherability, rupture and return. I propose that the symbolic act of gathering fragments, an endemic metaphor of Middle Passage memory, stems from a yearning for wholeness.

* * *

the middle passage

“Given the high mortality rate aboard slave ships, the Middle Passage was known as the ‘voyage of death’.”¹⁸⁸ It was the transatlantic Crossing made by tens of

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ramesh Mallipeddi, “‘A Fixed Melancholy’: Migration, Memory, and the Middle Passage” *The Eighteenth Century* Volume 55, Numbers 2-3, (Summer/Fall 2014): 235-253, accessed August 6, 2015, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_eighteenth_century/summary/v055/55.2-3.mallipeddi.html.

thousands of European slave ships from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean transporting millions of captured African bodies, as human cargo, in the most massive forced migration and the longest and most sustained assault on human life in history.¹⁸⁹ This experience of dispossession caused what was read as a psychosomatic disease, termed “fixed melancholy”, which was “thought to be endemic to Africans” during the Crossing. “Fixed melancholy” can be understood as “a form of nostalgia, an affective attempt at return that is simultaneously a symptom of the emotional distress produced by dislocation and a mechanism for slaves to resist their conditions of servitude.”¹⁹⁰

The Middle Passage was central to the lethal technologies¹⁹¹ of slavery geared to obliterate African humanity. It enforced the erasure and prohibition of African intellectual, cultural and spiritual epistemologies. It marked the passage from African personhood to Negro chattel and death.

The “Negro,” that is, the color black, was both a negation of Africa and a unity of opposition to white. The construct of the Negro, unlike the terms, “African,” “Moor,” and “Ethiophe,” suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity that might command consideration.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ “In Motion: The African Migration Experience” *The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture*, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.inmotionaame.org/print.cfm?migration=1&bhcp=1>.

¹⁹⁰ Mallipeddi, “‘A Fixed Melancholy’.”

¹⁹¹ I borrow the term “lethal technologies” from McKittrick’s “Recursive Racial Codes.”

¹⁹² Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 81.

“Historians still debate whether twelve million or sixty million”¹⁹³ African captives made the Crossing in over thirty-five thousand journeys between 1514-1866.¹⁹⁴ The Middle Passage effected the genocide of two million captives:¹⁹⁵ those that did not survive, who died of illness, thirst, starvation, unnameable brutalities, murders and massacres; and those who took their own lives rather than bear the agonies of captivity. Also known as *Maafa*,¹⁹⁶ meaning holocaust, disaster or terrible occurrence in Kiswahili, the term aptly conveys the veritable African holocaust that transatlantic slavery was. Naming it such counters the Western neocolonial imperative to disallow this acknowledgement.

I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it.¹⁹⁷

The monumental breadth of this *Maafa* is erased from the Western narrative of a history of progress. This erasure is imperative for the preservation and perpetuation of the hegemonic dominance of Western systems of knowledge and power. It serves to keep the operating system intact into perpetuity.

¹⁹³ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) 31.

¹⁹⁴ “Voyages Database”, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, accessed August 7, 2015, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/index.faces>.

¹⁹⁵ “In Motion,” *The Schomburg Centre*.

¹⁹⁶ “African Holocaust: Not Just History, But Legacy,” accessed August 19, 2015, http://www.africanholocaust.net/html_ah/holocaustspecial.htm.

¹⁹⁷ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133.

This erasure serves to conceal the inseparability of the legacies of European colonialism and slavery¹⁹⁸ and that the Industrial Revolution was financed by the commerce of African bodies. It buries the heinous truth that the colonial settlement was, and continues to be, built on the slave labour and death of African bodies, on land cleared of the presence of genocided¹⁹⁹ Indigenous bodies. This whitewashing serves to sanitize the bloody truth of the origins of present day Western global capitalist systems of knowledge and power.

An we help each other as we begin dis passage
 weak an tattered
 cold and afraid [...]
 an we love each other
 we gentle wid each other as we continue di journey
 An Africa still wailin
 an we still crossin
 no jobs here in babylon
 is jus pure batterayshan
 our men led like sheep into prison an our sons lost in whiteness
 Africa still wailin
 for her children
 scattered on white shores
 wanderin in di triangle
 tryin to find their way home [...] ²⁰⁰

The impacts of this historical trauma are evident in the global conditions of Black life in the present. As David Olusoga puts it, in “[t]he disadvantage and discrimination that disfigures the lives and limits the life chances of so many African-Americans is the

¹⁹⁸ King, “In the Clearing,” 3.

¹⁹⁹ The term “genocided” is borrowed from Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), cited by King in “In the Clearing,” 51.

²⁰⁰ Afua Cooper, “Africa Wailin” *Copperwoman: and Other Poems* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007) 67.

bitter legacy of the slave system and the racism that underwrote and outlasted it.”²⁰¹ I argue that the repercussions still reverberate globally in the present moment, not just in the United States; we are living the afterlife of slavery.

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.²⁰²

middle passage memory

Yemayá
Mami Wata
Orisha of the deep unknown
Take us down into Olokún's depths
Remind us how to breathe through our gills

Iemanjá
Mami Wata
Walk with us along Olokún's ocean floor
Leave us there to steep in the horror
That answers the ache we have always felt in our bones

Oh, Yeye Omo Eja
Mami Wata
Take us to Olokún's site of the rupture that caused this fragmentation
That we have been gathering back together all our lives

We have enshrined the fragment
We have bundled and treasured it
We have enrobed it in beeswax
We have smudged and anointed it

We have mournfully and painstakingly held it broken to our hearts
We are the mortar holding together this unmendable brokenness

²⁰¹ David Olusoga, “The history of British slave ownership has been buried: now its scale can be revealed” *The Guardian*, posted July 12, 2015, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed>.

²⁰² Hartman, *Lose You Mother*, 6.

We do not lay them down
 We hold them together
 And we hold together still the numberless pieces
 Of our Ancestors' stories and of ourselves

We are the traces of their utterances
 Still sounding through the oceanic register
 The ever-reverberating watery soundscape
 The haunting bellow and holler

We are the cadence and dissidence of their screams
 Echoing through liquid time
 From their aquatic graves²⁰³

Grief is bitter nourishment
 That the sad organs of our bodies thirst for
 And so we drink
 Such ravenous thirst, parched, we drink

We lament their pain in repetitious refrain
 To hydrate their dislocated Souls
 To give their roving, thirsting Souls sustenance and burial

I can no longer bear to remember them as wretched passive victims
 We can reimagine our Ancestors in the ways that our Spirits need
 And so instead we reimagine them with agency and idiosyncrasy

We reimagine diviners, and medicine women aboard those ships
 Their communion with Yemayá in the holds
 Their transcendence

Transcendence for those who refused captivity
 Winged ones who took to the sky
 Finned ones who dove down to the ocean floor
 Who still make the path of bones for us to find our way

There and back, there and forward
 Through oceanic memory and palimpsestic time.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ The phrase "aquatic graves" is inspired by Elicia Brown Lathon's "liquid grave" in "I Cried Out and None but Jesus Heard" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2005), as cited by Philip in *Zong!*, 201.

²⁰⁴ Mosa McNeilly, "Yemayá," 2015.

haunting, sorrow and rememory

The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our apparently well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way [...] The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.²⁰⁵

Avery Gordon asks “[h]ow do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?”²⁰⁶ Toni Morrison argues that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there.”²⁰⁷ Gordon describes haunting as the “seething presence” of that which appears not to be there “acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.”²⁰⁸ This “meddling with taken-for-granted realities” Gordon speaks of gestures toward unresolved social and political issues. I do not believe she is speaking of the Occult, or of real ghosts, but is referring to the hauntology of the legacy of slavery.

Middle Passage memory is a haunting filled with great sorrow and horror. It is hauntological²⁰⁹ in that it “longs for, mourns for, and seeks a return of”²¹⁰ that which cannot be retrieved. It is a visceral memory of a historical rupture we did not experience,

²⁰⁵ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting And The Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 8.

²⁰⁶ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 18.

²⁰⁷ Toni Morrison quoted by Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.

²⁰⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

²⁰⁹ Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 44. Jacques Derrida’s term, hauntology, according to Mark Fisher, is “the metaphysics of presence rest[ing] in part on the notion that meaning could be secured and settled via an anchoring to a body.” The concept of “hauntology” was a play on “ontology”, stating that “‘being’ is not equivalent to presence”. It suggests that there is “no point of origin, only the time of the ‘always-already,’” accessed August 6, 2015, <https://dj.dancecult.net/index.php/dancecult/article/viewFile/378/391>.

²¹⁰ Fisher, “DOCH Lectures: Mark Fisher 29-30 May 2011 #1,” accessed August 6, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/29620959>.

yet that reverberates in our lives in the present moment; a stunning loss of an existential anchor we ourselves never had and know we cannot retrieve, yet long for. What of this craving to tattoo ruptured stories on our flesh? What of this yearning labour of gathering together shattered fragments and watering them with our redemptive tears?

“But what, if anything, could I remember after hundreds of years of forgetting?”²¹¹

In African cosmologies, memory can be understood as a phenomenon of ancestral presence — as information that is ministered to us from a dynamic spiritual dimension.²¹² This harkens to Toni Morrison’s “rememory,”²¹³ which she calls “the continued presence of that which has disappeared or been forgotten.”²¹⁴

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* powerfully evokes a past which African-Americans as well as white Americans have found too painful to remember but which needs to be remembered by what she calls “re-memory” if that society is to reorient itself in such a way that it can come to terms with its own raced history. If such memories are not “re-membered” then they will haunt the social imagination and disrupt the present.²¹⁵

I employ Morrison’s rememory here to imagine the enduring presence of that which seems to have disappeared yet is still present, its absence a presence that haunts us. I understand rememory as a collective “remembering” of a shared history of mass

²¹¹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 157.

²¹² I draw this understanding of memory from teachings I have learned in my spiritual work with African and Indigenous spiritual teachers.

²¹³ Toni Morrison coined the term “rememory” in her novel, *Beloved* (New York: Plume 1988).

²¹⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 61.

²¹⁵ Catherine Hall, “Histories, Empires and the Post-colonial Moment” *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 66.

violence which we carry in the social narratives we have internalized and we tell about ourselves. Like so many ghosts, Middle Passage memory is a mournful chorus, carrying the achings of truncated life stories longing still to be told. I understand it as a cyclical mode, a remembering of memories, as a form of accompaniment by an ever-present, ever-moving reservoir of memories and rememories rippling through time.

Mojuba: an expansive memory refusing to be housed in any single place [...] A refusal that takes its inheritance from the Crossing, which earlier prophets had been forced to undertake from the overcrowded passageways in a place called Gorée, the door of no return, still packed centuries later with the scent of jostled grief so thick that no passage of human time could absorb it. It hangs there, this grief, until today, an indelible imprint of the Crossing, fastened by a pool of tears, below, constantly replenished by the tremors of human living.²¹⁶

“[T]remors of human living”²¹⁷ from different times and places, Middle Passage rememories emerge and re-emerge like melancholic phantoms in a temporal landscape, layered thousands upon millions. Whispers, wails and chants sounding through the oceanic register of memory, return and return as though of their own volition. It is a “kind of chorus”²¹⁸ hovering in the shadowy recesses, where memory and imagination mingle and blend, echoing residual vestiges of image, texture and sound, haunting us with their elusive and persistent presence; with their barely graspable and ungraspable appearance and disappearance. As NourbeSe Philip states, “Our entrance to the past is through memory [...] And water. [...] as the ocean [...] is constantly in motion [...] so too

²¹⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 288.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ I borrow from the subtitle of Danielle Skeehan’s “Deadly Notes: Atlantic Soundscapes and the Writing of the Middle Passage Slave Ships; A Kind of Chorus” *The Appendix*, Vol. 1 No. 3, 2013, accessed August 17, 2015, <http://theappendix.net/issues/2013/7/deadly-notes-atlantic-soundscapes-and-the-writing-of-the-middle-passage#supernotes-paragraph-1>.

this memory [...] is shifting always. [...] becoming a haunting, becoming spectral in its nature.”²¹⁹

Ocean will reveal the secrets that lie at the bottom of its silted deep. She requires no name before her [...] she is simply her watery translucent self, reaching without need of compass for her sisters whomever and wherever they are. She will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers.²²⁰

Malidoma Somé speaks about mourning in Indigenous African culture, saying that “grief is seen as food for the psyche. Just as the body needs food, the psyche needs grief to maintain its own healthy balance.” And he adds that, in service of the Ancestors, when we grieve, our “[t]ears carry the dead home.”²²¹

Not only humans made the Crossing, traveling only in one direction through Ocean given the name Atlantic. Grief traveled as well.²²²

[I]s longing or melancholy what define[s] the tribe of the Middle Passage?²²³

fragmentation and indecipherability, rupture and return

²¹⁹ Philip, *Zong!*, 201.

²²⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 285.

²²¹ Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 73, 75.

²²² Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289.

²²³ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 106.

M. NourbeSe Philip's poetic opus *Zong!* haunted me, pulling me into the Middle Passage in the spaces between the sparse, fragmented text on the pages, where I encountered "the untold story [that] cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling."²²⁴ I was drawn into the horror of the slave ship, conveyed so vividly in Philip's poetry that "escapes the net of complete understanding [... and] is shot through with glimmers of meaning."²²⁵ The fractured words scattered across the pages demand of the reader to struggle in the effort to grasp those "glimmers of meaning".

And, in its fragmentation and brokenness the fragment becomes mine.
Becomes me. Is me.²²⁶

My discomfort with the fragmentation and the indecipherability of the text is integral to the experience of reading this text "forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray."²²⁷ The indecipherability prohibits the commission of a second violence in the retelling of an untellable story, yet speaks so poignantly in its untelling.²²⁸

I realized that I went willingly with Philip into the watery realms of the Atlantic where the "echoes of my ancestors"²²⁹ "rise from the ocean floor."²³⁰ I immersed myself in the imagination of "the shit, the blood, the stench, the sick bodies, the brutal violence,

²²⁴ Philip, *Zong!*, 207.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

²²⁹ Somé, *Ritual*, 97.

²³⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 203.

rape and death,”²³¹ compelled to remember, as though these were lost fragments of myself. Like M. Jacqui Alexander describes, I feel the surging insistence “of the disembodied and the stories those who forcibly undertook the Middle Passage are still yearning to tell.”²³²

“I, too, want the bones,” as Philip declares. This “work of haunting”²³³ waters a parched thirst in me. My diasporic Soul drinks in this funereal work. The call of the Ancestors pulls us, like a strong undertow, into the work of undergoing our own experience of Crossing.²³⁴ We wade into the salty brine, not knowing whether this rite can assuage the ruptured histories we carry, but yearning for something like return, something like rememberment.²³⁵

The hope is that return could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you.²³⁶ Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home.²³⁷

“For me,” explains Hartman, “the rupture was the story.”²³⁸ Micol Seigel’s states that “Hartman rejects wholeness, opening her travel memoir with a classic voyage to

²³¹ Honor Ford-Smith, in conversation with the author, October, 2013.

²³² Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 6.

²³³ Philip, *Zong!* 201, 202.

²³⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 2.

²³⁵ I delve into the ideas I am generating about what I call “rememberment” in more depth later in this Movement.

²³⁶ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 247, citing Judith Butler.

²³⁷ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 100.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

Africa but crafting in the end a devastating meditation on the impossibility of return.”²³⁹

What is it we hope to retrieve, returning to the site of rupture?

a gathering together of fragments

Diverse, dispersed, diaspora
 Gathering together the forgotten fragments
 Patching, puzzling, piece by piece
 Collect, collage, connect, recollect
 Interweave, mend
 Heal those ancient wounds [...] ²⁴⁰

Themes of gathering, assembling and repurposing are emblematic of Afrodiasporic art and performance work, as metaphors for recovery, reparation and reconciliation. Gathering fragments is a metaphorical recuperative practice of reclaiming the ruptured and subjugated knowledges that form our intellectual, cultural and spiritual geographies.

The artistic means of her cultural practice is the distinct process of gathering and reusing by means of which the diasporic experience is reflected through a literal patchwork of experiences, cultures, and histories.²⁴¹

I pair Morrison's rememory with the concept of rememberment that I am generating. Rememberment suggests a prior dismemberment and a putting of

²³⁹ Micol Seigel, "Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship*" *Hemispheric Institute*, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-52/siegel>.

²⁴⁰ Mosa McNeilly, excerpt from poem, "Mosaic," 1994.

²⁴¹ Pamela Edmonds, "Soulful Communion: Artist's Poetic Handiwork Explores Elemental Powers of Nature, Community and Spirit," review of the author's art exhibition, "The Journey Begins: 15-Year Retrospective Exhibition 1987-2002," 2004, accessed October 2013, <http://www.mosamcneilly.com/articles-reviews.php>.

dismembered parts back together. Rememberment suggests the hopeful work of reparation and the radical work of futurist imagining. It conjures an autopoietic metaphor of collective self-making through memorializing dismembered histories and reassembling ruptured archives toward the shaping of a future wholeness. Rememberment is a key impulse in this work, a central action in the performance, and is called for by the optic of fragmentation in the installation's path of bones.

Gathering and re-using is like poetry, a gathering of words, sounds, rhythms and a re-using of them in a unique order [...] Gathering and re-using takes time, measurable in hours certainly but also a sense of time having passed before, a sense of history and most importantly a sense of survival.²⁴²

Rememberment suggests a gathering together of fragments into a reconstructed whole, and an imbuing of a sense of cherishing into the tender gathered fragments. We enshrine the fragment in our artworks, on our altars, and in the songs we sing, often knowing not entirely the meaning of the words in Bambara, Malinke, Yoruba, or Xhosa, though knowing surely that they compel us and speak to our Souls. We adorn our bodies with treasured fragments steeped in insurgent longing for connection.

"Authenticating a voice comes through rediscovery of the underbelly, literally unearthing and piecing together the fragmented members of existence."²⁴³

By reclaiming our stolen intellectual, cultural and spiritual legacies, by gathering the fragmented members back into ourselves, by piecing ourselves back together, we

²⁴² Lubaina Himid, "Fragments" *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 240.

²⁴³ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 279.

seek to regain our capacities to produce knowledges through our own epistemologies of living, working, worshipping and playing. We seek to repair a brokenness.

[T]he fragment appears more precious, more beautiful than the whole, if only for its brokenness. Perhaps, the fragment allows for the imagination to complete the missing aspects – we can talk, therefore, of the poetics of fragmentation.²⁴⁴

The fragment is the core symbol in this work. The fragment is a palimpsestic talisman of becoming: it contains at once the catastrophe of past rupture, the metamorphology of the present, and the radical imagination of collective futures of possibility.

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. [...] It is such a love that reassembles our African [...] fragments, [...] [t]his gathering of broken pieces [...] and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.²⁴⁵

If past injustices are unrectified and systemically erased, the social group carrying the memory of those injustices is thrown into a perpetual state of melancholy, unable to mourn. Mourning is the way to overcome this melancholy and overcome being stuck in Middle Passage memory.²⁴⁶ The performance *SIPPING FREEDOM & J'AI SOIF*,²⁴⁷ is an

²⁴⁴ Philip, *Zong!* 201-202.

²⁴⁵ Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory: The Nobel Lecture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).

²⁴⁶ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for helping me to formulate this idea about mourning and melancholy.

²⁴⁷ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

act of mourning. Caught in a state of melancholic bewilderment, the Clown fails to decipher the archive. Likewise, Mínkísí's amnesia prevents her from decoding the bones. Their reparative impulses of deciphering and decoding are thwarted because they cannot mourn.

Mínkísí's transformation is catalyzed by her communion with the Ancestor. It is her relationship with her Ancestor that rescues her from the abstraction of historical melancholy and opens the way for her to mourn. She erects a burial ground of tombstones in an act of memorialization. Once she mourns, she can move on.

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment.²⁴⁸

To conclude, I have considered "memory [as] an antidote to alienation, separation and the amnesia that domination produces"²⁴⁹ and I have engaged "memory not as a secular but as a sacred dimension of the self,"²⁵⁰ proposing that returning to the site of dismemberment can be a rite of rememberment. In this Movement I have attempted to gather together and repurpose the archive of bones toward a realignment of the self with the Sacred.²⁵¹ I have confronted Middle Passage memory, discussing how it haunts us

²⁴⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 281.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

in the present moment, and to what effect. I have explored themes emblematic of Middle Passage memory: haunting and sorrow, fragmentation and indecipherability, memory and rememory, rupture and return. In the next Movement, I explore a repertoire of praxes of the Sacred, framing them as tools for becoming. I discuss a symbiosis between spiritual and cultural work within this repertoire, and explore how they inform each other.

MOVEMENT THREE

Becoming This Elixir

TOOLS FOR BECOMING, PRAXES OF FREEDOM

Once they crossed, they graced all things with the wisdom of Ashé. Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder [...] For once they intuited that the human will was long intent on capture, they all conspired to rest their Truth everywhere [...] so that Truth and Beauty would not be strangers to one another, but would rely one on the other to guide the footprints of the displaced [...]²⁵²

In this Movement, I wish to move the discussion beyond one of overcoming to one of becoming. In a methodology of becoming, overcoming is implicit, but not prescriptive of the scope of praxis. Overcoming is not enough, because it risks reinscribing the dominance of the oppressive systems it seeks to overcome, and operates from a premise of agreement with the definitive parameters of those systems. Though the Black diasporic experience in North America can be understood as one of being “exiled on the spot where one is born” where “[w]e have grown up metabolizing exile, feeding on its main by-products — alienation and separation,”²⁵³ this discussion is not concerned with countering, but with communing. I propose that structuring our lives with daily rituals of communion and bringing our attention to impeccability, humility and generosity of spirit²⁵⁴ in our academic, cultural and spiritual work make what I

²⁵² Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 289.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁵⁴ Thank you to Prof. Alexander for modelling these values, which inform this insight.

understand as the Sacred palpable, and steer our work towards an ethic of embodied praxes of freedom.

What we have devised as an oppositional politic has been necessary, but it will never sustain us, for while it may give us some temporary gains [...] it can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the Soul, that space of the Divine.²⁵⁵

In this Movement, through engaging the ideas of M. Jacqui Alexander, through referring autoethnographically to my spiritual work, and through discussing the Sacred dimensions of my art and performance practices, I will attempt to demonstrate that praxes of the Sacred are tools for becoming and form a critical part of the repertoire of praxes of freedom which I am generating in this work. I delve into “Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible,” Chapter 7 of Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*²⁵⁶ to inquire into what it means to rewire the senses,²⁵⁷ what work is required to cultivate a Sacred interior,²⁵⁸ and what compels the yearning to give oneself over to communion with the Divine. I end this chapter with a reflection on the expansion of time from my experience in residency with Prof. Alexander at the Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality.²⁵⁹

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²⁵⁵ Ibid., 282.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 287-332.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 308.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 298.

²⁵⁹ I did a field placement with Prof. Alexander which I entitled, “Embodying the Sacred: engaging in ethical practice of Indigenous Spirituality.” We engaged in the work of cultivating medicinal plants and daily spiritual practice, August 12-29, 2014.

desire

The desire to become, in the context of Black radical imagination, is a decolonial impulse. In order for the decolonial work of becoming to be transformative, I propose that it must be infused with a yearning for communion, and with radical imaginings of freedom. Transformative becoming is then determined by the practices of aligning ourselves and our work with that which sustains and promotes evolutionary growth. It surpasses the gains of oppositional politics in its desire to “feed that deep place within us.”²⁶⁰ It shifts the fulcrum from the struggle to overcome to the desire to become, enabling us to enact in the present that which we imagine we can become in the future.

Desire is expressed most fundamentally where change takes place, at the root of our very Souls, the base of the internal source of our power, the internal source of our yearning — the yearning and power we have been taught so much to fear. So when Gloria Anzaldúa asks us to commune with the Soul, or Audre Lorde urges us to find something that our Soul craves and do it, our first task is to become attentive to the desire of the Soul and to place ourselves in its service.²⁶¹

I embark here on discussing the work of becoming aligned with our inner callings as Black diasporic artists and spiritual practitioners, of becoming “attentive to the desire of the Soul”²⁶² through enacting praxes of the Sacred. Within African cosmological epistemologies are the pedagogies that have always served to instruct and guide the spiritual and cultural lives of African and Afrodiasporic people. Can praxes of the Sacred act as epistemological tools to cultivate erotic and soulful selfhood? Can grounding our

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 284.

²⁶² Ibid.

academic, cultural and spiritual work in the desire for communion radically shape how our work interfaces with the world?

the sacred

In the realms of the Sacred [...] the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is.²⁶³

I understand the Sacred to be an ever-evolving cosmological dynamism animated by a “multiply manifested or multidimensional”²⁶⁴ force I will call *Ashé*. I understand *Ashé*, from the Yoruba, Lucumí, Vodou and Candomblé cosmologies, to be the life force, the logos of the cosmos, the cosmic energetic principle of the unseen world that animates all that is and that manifests in human experience as palpable forces, as entities and avatars, as Orishas and Lwas in the African cosmologies, and as Ancestors who serve to “make the Sacred tangible.”²⁶⁵

According to African and Indigenous cosmologies, the tangibility of *Ashé*, or Spirit, or Source, is experienced in human life through the practiced enactment of ritual and the capacity to commune with the natural world through “the power of spoken medicine, the power of utterance, [...] as well as [through] the Sacred healing power of physical elements such as water, fire, and [...] forest-bearing medicinal plants.”²⁶⁶ This

²⁶³ Ibid., 307.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 299.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 299.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

understanding of the Sacred informs an epistemology that “uses Spirit knowledge/ knowing as the medium through which a great number of women in the world make their lives intelligible [...] instruct[ing] us in the complicated undertaking of Divine self-invention.”²⁶⁷

Historically, and in the present, African and Afrodiasporic cosmologies demonstrate a comprehensive phenomenological knowledge and proficiency to collaborate with this cosmic momentum. I understand this momentum to gather force through a collectivity of practice and accompany the evolutionary movement of groups of people who practice, and have practiced, and possess expertise in communion and in collaboration with cosmic forces, over time, through time, over Millenia.

The Yoruba, Dagara, Shona and Rastafari cosmologies I have learned from share the tenet of “an intimate and personal relationship between human beings and the spirit world.” In these worldviews “everything [is] essence — a force or energy which permeates the world, [...] all essence is sacred” and “human beings have the responsibility to remain in right relationship to this creation.”²⁶⁸ I understand the momentum of the Sacred to be always moving toward an inevitable integrity, moving through and beyond the human idiom of time,²⁶⁹ moving of its own volition in intimate concert with sentient life on earth; as a realm of multiply responsive cosmic momentum flowing directionally and inextricably bound up in life on the planet.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 299-300.

²⁶⁸ Jeanne Christensen. *Rastafari Reasoning and the Rastawoman: Gender Constructions in the Shaping of Rastafari Livity* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014) 2.

²⁶⁹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 309.

There is an inevitability [...] in this movement toward wholeness, this work of the spirit and the journey of the Soul in its vocation to reunite us with the erotic and the Divine [...] The question is whether we dare intentionally to undertake this task of recognition as self-reflexive human beings, open at the very core to a foundational truth: we are connected to the Divine through our connections with each other.²⁷⁰

rewiring the senses

I work to develop a consciousness of “livity” and “upfullness”, borrowing these terms from Rastafari cosmology. Rastafari was born out of a movement to erode oppressive structures of social control in Jamaica in 1865. Grounded in the reclamation of African epistemologies and cosmologies and in radical anticolonial politics, Rastafari confronts the centuries-old anti-African biases in the Caribbean by embodying and celebrating our African roots and reversing internalized racism.²⁷¹

I understand “livity” to be an inner state of consciousness practiced by attuning oneself to the Sacred through cultivating oneself as a vessel of the logos of the Sacred — making of oneself a living altar worthy of the indwelling of Spirit.²⁷² It is my experience that we cultivate this attunement through daily rituals and practices of embodying the “upful” spiritual values of gratitude, love, joy, discipline, vigilance and inspiration. This attention to honing our spiritual consciousness nurtures our connection with Source, develops our expertise in reading the signs of Sacred accompaniment and recognizing

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 282-283.

²⁷¹ Christensen. *Rastafari Reasoning and the Rastawoman*, 1-3.

²⁷² The notion of making of oneself a living altar worthy of the indwelling of Spirit is a teaching I learned from spiritual teacher, Mandaza Kandemwa, “a Svikiro (traditional healer) and Mhondoro (one in constant prayer for others) in the Shona and Ndebele traditions from Zimbabwe who carries with great heart the Central African tradition of healing and peacemaking.” I participated in “The Way of Heart and Soul” retreats, 1 and 2, hosted by Leslie Fell of Living Ways, Castleton, Ontario, July 2013 and 2014. Accessed October 31, 2015, <http://livingways.org/event-view/event-1/>.

the spiritual forces that move in, through and with our lives. Through the practice of communion, we tune our intuitive and receptive capacities to tap into the Sacred.²⁷³

I propose that cultivating this consciousness requires daily diligence in a repertoire of practices. We work to liberate our minds from the mire of habitual unconscious patterns of thinking and the pathologizing narratives of white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy and capitalism. We work to cleanse the body and maintain health through wholesome diet, fasting and exercise. We work to hone our capacity to love through vigilant and fluid practices of gratitude, generosity and grief. We work to cultivate our faculties of intuitive receptivity and communion through daily practices of devotion and ceremony.

The work of rewiring the senses is neither a single nor individual event. Practitioners have to be present and participating in a community; they must show up, in other words, for the appointment, to the ceremonies that rehearse over and over again the meaning of Sacred accompaniment [...]²⁷⁴

I propose that these disciplines, over time, yield a shift in consciousness, a rewiring of the senses that attunes the consciousness to communion with the Sacred, to feeling and therefore knowing that we are always accompanied²⁷⁵ through consistent practice of “bringing the self into intimate proximity with the domain of Spirit.”²⁷⁶

²⁷³ I use the terms the Sacred, the Divine, Spirit, and Source interchangeably.

²⁷⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 310.

²⁷⁵ Drawn from the inscription Prof. Alexander wrote in my copy of *Pedagogies of Crossing* — “For Mosa, That you come to feel and therefore know that you are always accompanied,” August 29, 2014.

²⁷⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 295.

sentience

Housed in the memory of those enslaved, yet not circumscribed by it these Sacred energies made the Crossing. But they did not require the Crossing in order to express beingness. They required embodied beings and things to come into sentience [...]²⁷⁷

This sentience is more than the ability to feel, to perceive, or experience subjectively. I see it as a phenomenological state of consciousness, of “beingness”, that dwells in all sentient beings; but, as humans, it is for us to attune ourselves to perceive and embody the Sacred through this sentience. Through this sentience we can engage intimately with Sacred energies. “Sentience soaks all things. Caresses all things. Enlivens all things. Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory.”²⁷⁸

I have witnessed the well-practiced touching down to sentience in the African and Indigenous spiritual teachers I have studied with during the course of this research. Through the daily bringing of attention to communion with the elemental world, and through recognizing and honouring sentience as a consciousness in all living beings, and as the portal through which the Sacred enters the world, a practiced intimate connection to the Sacred through one’s sentience is cultivated.

[...] we see that these are forces of nature, the metaphysic of that which is elemental. Wind. Water. Fire. Thunder. Lightning. Volcano. The cosmic

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 292.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 290.

geography of Sky. Earth. Trees. Forest. Park. Mountain. River. Ocean. Rocks. Stones. They each have their own consciousness.²⁷⁹

Through our bodies, we cultivate this relationship — with our hands we pour libation upon the *otanes*,²⁸⁰ the stone beings, gather and make *minkisi*,²⁸¹ plant medicines, and offer sage, tobacco, cedar and sweetgrass to the Sacred fire; with our voices we enact “the power of spoken medicine, the power of utterance”²⁸² when we speak and sing to the Sacred entities whose names we call or yearn to know; with our bodies we do the meticulous and arduous labour of preparing for ceremony, participating in ceremony, purifying the body through fasting, dancing and sweating; with our hearts we feel the exaltation of the presence of Spirit, and we weep in awe of its power and beauty.

a sacred interior

How is a Sacred interior cultivated, and how does it assist practitioners in the task of making themselves intelligible to themselves? How does spiritual work produce the conditions that bring about the realignment of self with self, which is simultaneously a realignment of oneself with the Divine through a collectivity?²⁸³

I have learned that spiritual work demands of the practitioner an ethic of perpetual surrender: a surrendering of the ego to the guidance of the spiritual teacher; a

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 289.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 291. *Minkisi* are medicines of Kôngo Angola spiritual systems of Brazil.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 298.

relinquishing of the privileging of the intellect as the sole means of knowledge acquisition and production; and a yearning to give oneself over to a metaphysical momentum so that it may animate one's life. As makers of art, as performers, as vessels and mediums of the Sacred, it is through the receptive intelligence of the self, of the Soul, housed in the body, that we know, that we remember, that we feel, and that we imagine.

“The desire to cultivate this interior figure[s] prominently among practitioners” and is evident in our recognition that “openness, poise, balance, alignment, clarity, humility, honesty, and respectfulness” are “some of the spiritual principles and desirable inner states on which meaningfully living one's life and learning from life's lessons [are] predicated.”²⁸⁴

In practice, the daily living of the Sacred idea in action occurs in the most simple acts of recognition, such as pouring libation for and greeting the Lwa²⁸⁵ [...] feeding ancestors first with the same meal before we ourselves as a way of placing the purpose of our existence back with its source, as a gesture of mutual exchange and as a way of giving thanks and asking to be sustained; building an altar to mark Sacred ground and focus energies within the home, constructing a place to work, to touch down, discard and pull in, and practice reciprocity; and participating in collective ceremony. It is in this dailiness that instigates the necessary shifts in consciousness, which are being produced because each act, and each moment of reflection of that act, brings anew a deepened meaning of self in intimate concert with the Sacred.²⁸⁶

I have come to believe that it is only through the dailiness of practice fuelled by a thirst for communion that a Sacred interior is cultivated. I do not believe there is any way

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 310, citing Ella Shohat, *Talking visions: Multicultural feminism in a transnational age*. Vol. 5. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 20.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 291. The “Lwa” and the “Orishas” are the pantheon of spiritual entities “of the territories of West Africa, Dahomey, Yorubaland, Ghana, and Benin” which migrated and transformed into “the varied and related spiritual lineage observed” in Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad, Brazil, Suriname, New Orleans and the southern United States.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 307.

around the incremental imperative of shaping one's interior life through daily sipping from the calabash of devotion and surrender. There are no shortcuts. There is no fast track. So I practice as consistently as I can, and I long to feel and then to know that I am always accompanied.²⁸⁷

spiritual consciousness

Intimate in their engagement with the elemental world and in their requirements of the physical body, these spiritual practices cultivate within one a keen observation of the signs of the workings of the Sacred in the natural world, otherwise invisible to the secular consciousness. This form of research requires a giving over of oneself to a yearning for guidance from and communion with the dimension of the Sacred. If we are capable of surrendering our secular habits of perception and notions of knowledge, we can practice an interior receptivity that grants us access to realms beyond the scope of the human idiom of time,²⁸⁸ and then return to recount mystic tales received from the Ancients.

Still, the capacity to operate outside of human time does not mean that Divine energy has no facility within it. In this sense, there is no absolute transcendence — no transcendence, in fact — for if there were, there would be no intervention in, and no relationship with, the material, the quotidian, the very bodies through which divinity breathes life. Indeed the Divine knits together the quotidian in a way that compels attunement to its vagaries, making the very process through which we come to know its existence.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ I refer here to the inscription Prof. Alexander wrote in my copy of her book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

²⁸⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 309.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

I have found spiritual community within Indigenous ceremony here in Canada. Politically, I engage and ally myself with Indigenous culture as an act of solidarity with the first peoples of my land of birth and as a denial of allegiance with the Canadian nation state. I embrace the core principles of and recognize the resonances between the teachings I have learned in my engagement with Turtle Island²⁹⁰ and African Indigenous spiritual practice. I value the intimate engagement with the elemental worlds, and recognize it as imbued with the Sacred. I practice reverence for the sentience and consciousness of “all our relations”²⁹¹ including those of the human, animal, plant and mineral worlds. I value the rigorous protocols of ceremony we observe to create the hermetically sealed ritual spaces in which we practice our ceremonies. I am transported by the communal singing and drumming around the Sacred fire and by the teachings of the pantheon of Spirit entities that populate the Spirit world. These practices quench my Kalinago²⁹² Soul; but still my Bakôngo, my Shona, my Sesotho, my Dagara, my Yoruba²⁹³ Soul yearns for sustenance in African cosmologies and spiritual community.

sacred dimensions of art and performance practice

“[...] it is not surprising that [...] many Santería practitioners [...] were artists, for in a large sense there is no dimension of the Sacred that does not yearn for the making of beauty, an outer social aesthetic of expression whether in written or

²⁹⁰ Turtle Island is the Indigenous name for the continent of North America.

²⁹¹ In the Lakota language, “*mitakuye oyansin*” means “all my relations,” acknowledging the consciousness of all sentient beings — human, animal, plant and mineral.

²⁹² The Indigenous people of Dominica, who originally migrated to the Caribbean from the Orinoco River Basin region of Venezuela, name themselves “Kalinago”, rather than the colonial term “Carib”.

²⁹³ I declare my spiritual allegiance to these African ethnic groups in the absence of concrete genealogical knowledge of the specificity of my ancestral origins.

spoken word, the rhythm of the drum, the fashioning of an altar, or any of the visual arts. The Sacred is inconceivable without an aesthetic.”²⁹⁴

Altar-making, enacting rituals, and participating in ceremony are central to my spiritual practice; and art-making, installation construction and performance are integral to my cultural production practices. I recognize spiritual practice and cultural production both as embodied praxes, and the body as both the vessel or receptor of inspiration, and the medium or transmitter of that inspiration. These are simultaneous realms of work in my life that I approach with equal attention. I dwell always in the interstices between them.

Referring to a performance I co-created with colleague Charmaine Lurch,²⁹⁵ I reflect on how the agency of Black women’s embodied practices of art and performance can be integral to spiritual work. In three performances of *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility: The Black Female Body in Flux*,²⁹⁶ Lurch and I were impacted by the

²⁹⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 323.

²⁹⁵ Charmaine Lurch is a visual artist, educator and researcher in Toronto. Accessed October 31, 2015, <http://www.charmainelurch.ca/index.html>.

²⁹⁶ The first performance was a culminating course project for Prof. Jin Haritaworn’s “Feminist Perspectives in Environmental Studies” course at Crossroads, York University, December 2014. As part of a panel with three PhD students from the Graduate Program in Social and Political Thought — Evelyn Amponsah, Jan-Therese Mendes, and Ola Mohammed — and one PhD student from the Department of Sociology — Sam Tecele — and with encouragement from Prof. Kamala Kempadoo (York University), we presented at the *2nd Biennial Black Canadian Studies Association Conference 2015: Community, Empowerment & Leadership in Black Canada*, on May 24, 2015, at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia; chaired by Dr. Afua Cooper, James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies. Our panel was entitled, “Being Black: Re-Imagining Subversion in/through Black Graduate Scholarship at York”. It was comprised of four papers and our interdisciplinary performance. The panel was invited by Prof. Handel Kashope Wright (University of British Columbia) to present at *Congress 2015* at the University of Ottawa, on June 4, 2015, at an event entitled, “Black Café”. With support from Prof. Joy Manette (York University), we presented an altered version of our panel under a new title, “Unknowable, Unintelligible, Unreadable Blackness: Approaches to Black Studies in Canada”. This event was hosted by Prof. Wright, Prof. Awad Ibrahim (University of Ottawa) and Prof. Tamari Kitossa (Brock University). These professors are currently co-editing an anthology entitled *Nuances of Blackness*, to which we have contributed a chapter as a collective. This group of Black graduate students, initiated by Evelyn Amponsah, went on to form the Black Graduate Student Collective (BGSC), to be formally launched at York University in February 2016.

See appendix for theoretical framework of *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility*.

responses from Black women in the audience — tears, expressions of resonance and heartfelt gratitude. A catharsis occurred for them. We reflected on how the agency of Black women’s embodied practices of art and performance within the context of academia can counter violences of erasure and catalyze the spiritual work of healing. Black women’s responses reveal that this work speaks to those who possess a “hunger for transcendence;”²⁹⁷ those who recognize the oppressions and thirst for freedom. By modelling the centring of Black female subjectivity, by reorienting the representation of our knowledges and our bodies, we move from the margins of “modernity’s secularized episteme”²⁹⁸ to the centre of the discourse and praxes that our work engages. Working through embodied research methodologies to reframe a humanizing imaginary of Black female subjectivity suggests a palimpsestic repertoire of praxes geared towards freedom.

spiritual work

Framing these praxes of the Sacred as tools for becoming suggests an autopoietic repertoire of methodologies drawing upon oneself as a resource: moving from a desire for communion with the Sacred; working to rewire one’s senses and cultivate a Sacred interior; developing the capacity for attunement to the Sacred through honing one’s intuitive receptivity to sentience. Framing this autopoietic repertoire as praxes of freedom moves the site of knowledge production into an interstitial space

²⁹⁷ Somé, *Ritual*, 18.

²⁹⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 7.

between the political and the spiritual, requiring the development of methods of surrender, communion and embodiment to affect social change.

Spirit work does not conform to the dictates of human time, but it needs our courage, revolutionary patience, and intentional shifts in consciousness so that we can anchor the struggle for social justice within the ample space of the erotic.²⁹⁹

I have endeavoured to foster a spiritual integrity in this research process. To the many different kinds of labour that produced this portfolio, I have brought praxes of the Sacred. I have employed spiritual and aesthetic tools to ritualize the work of the movement, voice and encaustic studio practices. I have treated the spiritual preparation of performance and exhibition spaces as equivalent to the preparatory work of installation, rehearsal, and technical set up of light, sound and video elements. I have transformed space in my presentations in the academe, interrupting the dominant institutional codes of how we occupy and utilize space. By imbuing spaces with beauty, by centring Black presence, by burning sacrament and pouring libation, I have interrupted the conventions of academic learning with Black diasporic ritual, performance and visual art.

Thus, the cycle of action, reflection, and practice as Sacred praxis embodied marks an important reversal of thinking as knowledge paradigm.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 283, citing Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," in *Sister Outsider*, 58.

³⁰⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 307.

I have engaged in spiritual work throughout the two-year time period, not as a separate and parallel strand in my otherwise secular academic or artistic life, but as integral to how I live and intrinsic to this research. I have received teachings from Elder Vern Harper, Svikiro Mhondoro Mandaza Kademwa, Dagara Elder Malidoma Patrice Somé, Kahontakwas Diane Longboat, and Priestess M. Jacqui Alexander. I have lead private ceremonies honouring rites of passage in the lives of my daughter and myself.

Knowledge cannot always be gained through systemic reasoning.³⁰¹

This work takes on the task of recovering and making visible ruptured historical memory. Afua Cooper holds that “research has a spiritual component when it has to do with recovery, remembering, and healing. While it is intellectually stimulating and exciting, it is also Sacred knowledge.”³⁰² As Camille Turner suggests, “Sometimes you don’t know what’s coming through you. We carry the seeds, [...] we are the vessels.”³⁰³ I have reflected with great interest on Alexander’s receiving of Kitsimba’s ancestral voice in *Pedagogies of Crossing*,³⁰⁴ and Philip’s inscription on the cover of *Zong!*, “As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng,”³⁰⁵ who I understand also to be a spiritual entity. I work to the depth that I am able with the capacities of surrender, receptivity and embodiment that I have developed thus far. It is my understanding that there is no way I

³⁰¹ King, “In the Clearing,” 178.

³⁰² Afua Cooper, in conversation with the author, February 20, 2015.

³⁰³ Camille Turner, in conversation with the author, February 20, 2015.

³⁰⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 294-295.

³⁰⁵ Philip, *Zong!*.

could have accomplished the monumental endeavour of completing this work without the sustenance and way-making that has been offered to me from spiritual teachers and from the continuum of the Sacred, from the burbling realm of the cosmos, as I have come to know it, and which I articulate as best I can, in this moment in time.

a reflection on the expansion of time

I am learning that the embodiment of the Sacred dislocates [...] time, meaning linearity [...]

Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom [...] already having inhabited different moments [...]

Thus, linear time does not exist because energy simply does not obey the human idiom of time.³⁰⁶

This is important. Make note, Mosa. We have evidence. We have experienced the expansion of time.³⁰⁷

I close with a reflection on the expansion of time. This is from a journal entry I wrote while in residency with Prof. Alexander at the Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality. More of a praise-song than a reflection, launching from the experience of a shift in the calibration of time, it spills into the lavish sentience of the Sacred, in forest form, in expanded time.³⁰⁸

* * *

³⁰⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 309.

³⁰⁷ Prof. Alexander, in conversation with the author, Tobago, August 19, 2014.

³⁰⁸ Many thanks to Prof. Alexander for her close editing of this reflection.

Expanded time. Constricted time. Are these subjective perceptions, or is time variable and unfixed in its cycling? Though there is universal agreement on the duration of the incremental units we count in the measurement of time, are these increments absolute? Does time move differently in different spaces and places? Depending on what conditions?

In the span of one day, we experienced what felt distinctly like time cycling differently in the lush environment of the forest than it did when we returned to the realm of the linear organization of time in society. It seemed to expand on the Land³⁰⁹ and constrict in the village. I experienced a palpable sense of fullness in our endeavours on the Land at the Tobago Centre, as though there was a widening of the cycles of time and a recalibration of my cellular response to the blooming movement of time. I experienced what felt more like a circularity than a linearity; as though time was rippling out from a centre, not moving forward in a chronological motion.

Later that day, as we reviewed our first four days of work on the Land, we marvelled at how much we had accomplished in so little time. We were struck with a visceral perception that we had experienced the expansion of time.

Day five, when we returned to the Tobago Centre in the forest, this insight was vivid in my mind. As we stepped off the main road at the entrance to the Land, I strove to tune my senses to capture the sensation of the recalibration of time. As I stepped over the chain and onto the bridge, I stood close to Prof. Alexander as she whispered

³⁰⁹ I choose to capitalize the word "Land" and later "River" in this passage, as an acknowledgement of nature's saturation with the sentience of the Sacred.

incantations, poured libations, and uttered melodic and adoring promises to do our utmost to caretake the Land and to heal the River. Giving thanks to the Orishas Eshu, and Oshun, we stepped onto the land beyond the concrete bridge over the devastatingly polluted River. I closed my eyes and tuned my awareness to the hum of my breath, my heartbeat, to the sound of my footsteps upon Mama La Terre.

I marvelled at the stillness teeming with vibrant life, the silence replete with sounds of wind, insect and birdsong, the heady fragrance of the forest. In the time it took to climb the winding road up the mountainside, in the distance we covered each day on foot, I came to perceive, in fleeting glimpses, the veils of time parting like the layers and folds in Mama Oya's skirts, yawning open in the unctuous air, undulating open in the caressing motion of the sensuous breeze, then rippling open in the swift dance of the suddenly lively wind. Lizard and hummingbird, caiman and bachac greeted us each day — the gatekeepers, the timekeepers — skittering across the leaf strewn ground; hovering and whizzing through living air; posing motionless in the muck and reed of the choked and forlorn River; marching relentlessly in the collaborative clockwork of the colony. These totems, they came to greet us, each day, one or the other, or two, or all, at the entrance to the Land framed by an archway of towering bamboo; they met us on the curve of the ascending road, ensconced in the cacophony of verdant vegetation, at the threshold of timeless time.

They, the timekeepers, time givers away, time tricksters, time masterful makers; and we, the welcome visitors, the dutiful stewards, the prayer makers and fire keepers, the labourers of love. Devoted makers of love offered to the Land, to ourselves upon the

Land, through adoringly sewing tiny and robust seeds, gingerly watering tender and astonishing seedlings, reverently gathering soil, prayerfully weeding, carefully transplanting, singing all the while. We, the celebrants of miraculous seed life emergence, of bursting forth ecstatic convergence, of miracles ministered by caretaking, by cherishing making of ceremony, making of our presence on the Land a ceremony each time. In this naming and calling in of Spirits who inhabit the Land, in this giving thanks and praises to the Orishas who permeate the elements in each trod upon the Land, in this Sacred communing, this daily honing of spiritual consciousness, I beheld in Prof. Alexander, the cultivation of oneself as a potent being, as a vessel of Sacred communion. We, her students, my daughter and myself, were her witnesses and her apprentices. She, Priest, servant, living altar, all at once and over time, at the crossroads of linear and timeless time.

The potency of the Land made me feel vulnerable, as though I could only succumb to her preeminence and be absorbed into the web of the forest. Her irresistible pull aroused in me a sensual viscerality, an enlivened sentience. My senses heightened and I was struck by the insight that when timeless time opens her veils, if we are practiced in capacities of receptivity and surrender, and through conscious sentience, we can perceive her invitation, and enter her realm.

As I continued to make my way up to the plateau, I passed through what I imagined were her veils. I noticed my breath become deeper, my heartbeat become slower. Did my pores open wider? Were my pupils expanding? When we reached the Centre, we were astounded to find that the Yam had grown so remarkably over night! I

do believe, if I could have stayed, and been still enough, and watched long enough, I could have seen those leaves form before my eyes. It brought to mind the seeds we had poured with such care into the palms of our hands only days ago. They had emitted an urgency that we could only obey, as though we were fulfilling their dizzying desire to be planted with the full moon, pushing them gently into the luscious soil. Our timely work was saturated with their desire, and with a palpable sense of such rewarding purpose. Incredulous and overjoyed, reading and re-reading packages saying three months, six weeks, we rejoiced in our seeds germinating within days!

I reflect now on what I identify as a mystic experience of expanded time. I felt time cycling of her own volition, expanded time defying linear measurement, refusing the constraint of clocks that conspire in the deceptive marking of time that mars our spacious melding with timelessness. Like practices of meditation, like gazing into the eyes of the beloved, like deep reflection, rapture, or creating a work of art, communing with the Land rescues us from the tyranny of constricted time. It returns us to our birthright: to an expansive resonance with the realm of the Sacred; to an indwelling of enlivened sentience; to the embodiment of timeless time.

* * *

Perpetual gratitude to our ancestors [...] and to all our relations [...] in whose footsteps we walk and who provide the spiritual grounding that makes this work possible. May we be consistent in attuning ourselves to the teachings of Mother Earth and to the rhythms of Her breathing.³¹⁰

³¹⁰ Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality, accessed August 10, 2015, <http://latierraspirit.org/programs/>.

MOVEMENT FOUR

Charting This Way

CREATIVE VOCABULARIES

[...] a performance bringing together ideas of clown and middle passage. Embodying the encounter with that which is “not I” as elaborated in Salverson’s piece on witnessing,³¹¹ McNeilly [...] creates a series of actions of encounter with middle passage memory, the colonial archive and the question of reparation of social injury. Working in silence, drawing on hybrid iconographies from Yoruba, Vodou, underground railroad, Jonkonnu and ship’s inventories, McNeilly creates a compelling meditation on loss and disorientation, assembling and destroying, creation and endurance.³¹²

In this Movement, I seek to map out the creative vocabularies of the performance art installation of this portfolio. I outline: methods of preparing for practice; the languages of performance; witnessing as a dramaturgical approach; an inventory of visual arts traditions; the harvesting of images;³¹³ thematic concepts; and the theoretical sources that inform this work.

This portfolio contains a diptych of a solo performance art installation in two acts. The first act is entitled *J’AI SOIF*:³¹⁴ *a venture into middle passage memory*, and the

³¹¹ Julie Salverson, “Witnessing Subjects” *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics* (2005): 146.

³¹² Honor Ford-Smith, from an evaluation of *J’AI SOIF*:* *a venture into middle passage memory*, the author’s culminating portfolio in course work for “Cultural Production Workshop — Performance-based Practice,” December, 2013.

* The title *J’AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³¹³ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for the term “harvesting of images,” which I use to describe the gathering of images as source material in the research and development of the performance art installation in this portfolio.

³¹⁴ The title *J’AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74. *J’ai soif* means “I thirst” in French.

second *SIPPING FREEDOM: a rememory tale of the bones of ubuntu*. Each is represented by a script, an installation, a live performance, and a fluxus box.³¹⁵ This portfolio is a workshop production of this work. I will develop it further in the future with the resources required to mount it with full production values.

Preparing for Practice

I approach the creative process and prepare the space and myself each time I work with ritual protocols of laying out an altar, prayer and song, smudging and pouring libation. I make an effort to bring values of impeccability, generosity of spirit and humility to my consciousness,³¹⁶ and always relish in a heartfull³¹⁷ reverence for play, intuitive receptivity, lavish expression and the erotic.

Languages of Performance

In this solo performance, I work with performance languages of clown, movement, object, improvisation, voice, music, drum and mask. I combine these languages into an episodic narrative utilizing theatrical tools of conflict, expectation, action, obstacle and objective. A cast of nine characters carry the arc of the narrative. I work with a dramaturgical method of witnessing in the development of the performance.

³¹⁵ "Fluxus was an avant-garde art movement that emerged in the late 1950s as a group of artists who had become disenchanted with the elitist attitude they perceived in the art world at the time. These artists looked to Futurists and Dadaists for inspiration, focusing especially on performance aspects of the movements. The Dadaist use of humor in art was also definitive in the formation of the Fluxus ethos. The two most dominant forces on Fluxus artists were Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, who championed the use of everyday objects and the element of chance in art, which became the fundamental attitude and practice of all Fluxus artists." "The Art Story: Modern Art Insight," accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-fluxus.htm>.

³¹⁶ Thank you to M Jacqui Alexander for elucidating these values by example.

³¹⁷ This word and its spelling are invented by the author.

the clown

The Bataclown tradition that informs my approach to Clowning moves from the premise that the Clown's innocence and vulnerability can reveal us to ourselves and can trick us into discovering our authentic humanity. The essence of the Clown in this work is her bewilderment and vulnerability. I work with the Clown's vulnerability because I think it has the power to subversively teach about the rehumanization of Black life. Bringing the European red nose into an African narrative of rupture and mourning complicates the reading of the Clown, and speaks to the bewilderment of the experience of diaspora.

movement

This work is grounded in movement; it is not a text-based work. I bring a background in Modern and West African dance to the work. The expressive and gestural movement modes of Clowning also inform its physicality. It is beneficial to maintain a regime of stretching, strengthening and cardiovascular exercise throughout the development process.

object

The art objects, props, set pieces and costumes in this performance are hand-crafted or carefully selected over time as symbolic representations of themes of memory, mourning and memorialization. Each object has a story of sorrow embedded in it. My interaction with the objects in the performance are central to the movement of the narrative.

improvisation

I work with improvisation as a creative methodology in the conceptual and material development of the work, as well as a dynamic element of the live performance. I understand improvisation to be emblematic of Black diasporic life,³¹⁸ carrying within its logos the “revolt against the unlivable,” demanding “nothing less than a new life.”³¹⁹

Improvisation demands an acumen of intuitive receptivity in the moment: to the music, to the action unfolding, to the underlying conceptual framework. In the development of the visual art and performance elements of the work, I have crafted material through a capricious dance between the force of my will and the giving over of myself to the volition of the modalities with which I work; and between willfully moving the conceptual framework and allowing my art forms to inform it.

In each rehearsal, I developed improvisational movement to music, allowing the music to guide my movements. Once my body was in motion the concepts emerged, drawn out from my mind through the movement. This was a central part of my methodology and much of the narrative that eventually took shape came from this improvisational process.

voice

I bring a background in spoken word, storytelling and jazz vocals, West African traditional songs, South African freedom songs, Indigenous ceremonial songs and African American spirituals to this work. I worked on two songs throughout the process.

³¹⁸ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black, Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 31.

³¹⁹ Woods, *Development Arrested*, 39.

Just two. I came to know them inside out. This was an anchor in the process for me, and though I only ended up including one of them in the performance, they are both thoroughly ensconced in the work. The practice of singing two songs for ten months became a form of meditation. They became emblems of my relationship with the music that carried this project from beginning to end.

Silence and breath are elements of voice that offer compelling entry points into the narrative. Silence in Act One demonstrates the eloquence of movement as a narrative tool. The sound of the performer's breath and non-verbal utterances in that soundscape of silence makes an unapologetic statement about viscerality, embodiment and the erotic.

music

Music served as a portal to intuitive receptivity in my creative process. It was key to the chaptering and steeping of this work. I have worked and lived with a compilation of twenty-five songs which have thoroughly saturated the development of this work throughout the evolution of this project. Though only four of them made it into the final performance, all of these songs are the sonic field of this portfolio.³²⁰

drum

The ocean drum offers a sonic representation of the ocean in the opening prologue in Act One. It summons the audience into an immersive experience of the ebb and flow of sound accompanied by the projections of underwater moving image and

³²⁰ See "Aquatic Register: sonic field of portfolio" in Archive of Appendices.

vivid colour that fill the stage.

mask

I use the mask in this work to convey the obscuration of the mythic realm from plain view, suggesting the requirement of a different way of seeing to decipher mystic knowledges. Each of the cosmological characters wears a mask.

Witnessing

In the final stages of development of the performance, I carefully select a dramaturgical team of witnesses based on their investment in my work, their artistry and their analysis of the material. The improvisational nature of my creative process, and the interactive genre of clowning I work with, demand the participation of witnesses. Through responding and documenting as the material unfolds in rehearsal, they play a critical role in moving the work forward from the intuitive generation of raw material toward the shaping of a work that communicates with an audience.

Inventory of Visual Traditions

In this installation/set design, I work with visual traditions of encaustic, found object installation, glyphing, digital projections and mask. I combine these traditions into an interactive assemblage of art and found objects that act as elements of the installation as well as props and set pieces.

encaustic

In *J'AI SOIF*,³²¹ an encaustic mixed media assemblage entitled *Olokún*³²² stands as the centerpiece of the installation/set. Depicting the Orisha of the deep ocean waters, it incorporates ceramic sculpture, found object assemblage, encaustic painting and collage. The palette evokes the ocean, and the reclaimed, weathered wood adhering to the surface suggests the remains of a shipwreck. The art object/prop, the Archive, is also treated with encaustic medium.

Encaustic³²³ is an art form that I feel lends itself to the metaphor of the palimpsest which is central to the optics in this work. The surfaces of over two hundred stones are treated with encaustic medium employing the techniques of painting, photo-transfer, layering, gouging, and *sgraffito*.³²⁴ The photo-transferring of excerpts of text from diverse archival sources onto the surface of the stones represents the recovery of fragmented histories. The layering of the text represents the palimpsestic effect of erasure — one narrative overlaying and obscuring another. It also speaks to the notion of haunting, with the simultaneous visibility of different epochs in the present. Gouging down to the stone through layers of medium and words suggests actions of slashing, scraping and cutting — violences emblematic of the Middle Passage. *Sgraffito*, or

³²¹ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³²² *Olokún*, Mosa McNeilly, 2013. Encaustic mixed media assemblage, 47" x 72".

³²³ "Encaustic uses wax, heat, and usually pigment to create a work of art or to varnish a work of art or sculpture. The term is derived from the Greek 'enkaustikos', meaning [...] to 'burn in'; thus encaustic is marked by the use of heat to melt and fuse layers of beeswax." "The origins of encaustic are unknown, though the Greeks may have learned [it] from the Egyptians, only to pass it down to the Romans." Kristen Gallagher, "Discoveries in Encaustic: A Look through History," citing Agneta Freccero, *Encausto and Ganosis: Beeswax as Paint and Coating during the Roman Era and its Applicability in Modern Art, Craft, and Conservation* (Sweden: ACG, 2002) 5, and Frances Pratt and Becca Fazel, *Encaustic Materials and Methods* (New York: Lear, 1949) 10, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://uncw.edu/csulf/Explorations/documents/gallagerkristen.pdf>.

³²⁴ "*Sgraffito* is a painting technique where the artist scratches into the top layer of the paint to reveal areas of the surface underneath." "Art terms.com," accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.artisterms.com/sgraffito.htm>.

scratching into the surface of the medium affects an obscuration conveying indecipherability and the passage of time.

found object installation

The stones used in the installations are discarded shards of slate from a neighbour's flooring project. Working with found materials is a trope of Black diasporic cultural production. In my work, it represents the scavenging through capitalist refuse, making meaning from the waste that is produced which is often what we have at our disposal as materials for creating our lives. Repurposing and reusing found materials represents a frugality imposed by poverty and an anticapitalist critique of consumerism.

Reclaimed wood plinths stand at skewed angles suggesting the ruins of a sunken ship. Hundreds of cowrie shells are scattered across the floor of this submarine burialscape, echoing their historical use as currency in the slave trade, as well as tools for divination in African spiritual traditions.

Je bâtis à roches mon langage. (I build my language with rocks)³²⁵

The stones form a double-coded metaphor — representing the fragmented archive, while simultaneously forming the optic of a path of bones on the ocean floor. I chose to work with stones to represent bones because it was important to me to work with a natural material with weight and integrity. In the Dagara spiritual system, stones and bones are from the same elemental realm of minerals. Stones are the bones of the earth. The stones are very heavy. Transporting them to and from rehearsals, and to and

³²⁵ Edouard Glissant, Edouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) xi.

from the encaustic studio was very laborious and time-consuming, and became a real challenge. It brought a realness to the gravity of the thematic content this work carries.

glyphing

This, then, is the existential message of the Crossing — to apprehend how it might instruct us in the urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity.³²⁶

Act Two ends with the construction of an autotopographic glyph from the bones. Autotopography, like autobiography, represents “a practice of claiming ontological rights through the preservation and display of personal objects: the right to exist, the right to a story and the right to a territory whether imaginary or actual, where the psyche of the subject dwells and leaves behind a trace.”³²⁷ I borrow from Karyn Recollet’s concept of glyphing³²⁸ in the action in performance of forming a path of bones, a burial ground, and an African cosmological symbol with the stones/bones. I assert Black presence by inscribing the space with diasporic African iconographies. Recollet speaks of glyphing as a mode of Indigenous resurgency. By inscribing Indigenous Sacred symbols and signs on the earth with Indigenous bodies and their allies, by forming massive petroglyphs, and retracing historical routes, through performance, and ceremony, we reinscribe

³²⁶ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 7-8.

³²⁷ Jennifer Gonzalez, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008) 19, discussing Amalia Mesa-Bains’s altar/installation work.

³²⁸ Karyn Recollet is an Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies, University of Toronto, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://www.wgsi.utoronto.ca/person/karyn-recollet>.

Indigenous presence onto the land and we signal the dawn of an era of decolonial love of the earth and of resurgent Indigeneity.

digital projections

Staging the performance in an intimate space aids in offering the audience an immersive experience. Digital projections covering the entire upstage wall, augmented by coloured light and sound filling the space, serve to immerse the audience in a Marvellous real landscape of subaquatic and iconographic imagery.

mask

Ghédé's mask was donated to my project. Initially I worked with it as an Ancestral character before Ghédé emerged in the rehearsal process. I altered the structure of the mask, painted it, made another half-mask, and attached them together. The double masking of Ghédé is a symbolic decision I have yet to unpack.

***A Harvesting of Images*³²⁹**

In my creative process I engage in the gathering of images throughout. The texts I read are sources of theoretical ideas that I seek to translate into images. I develop a library of source images that I work with and play with, and from which I choose the ones that speak most clearly and eloquently to the proposals I am making with the scenarios on stage. I put the images into action in rehearsal, I layer and juxtapose them,

³²⁹ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for the term “harvesting of images,” which I use to describe the gathering of images as source material in the research and development of the performance art installation in this portfolio.

I sequence them and use them as metaphors. I refine them, reorganize them and edit them.

The Crossing³³⁰ is also meant to evoke/invoke the crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary.³³¹

path of bones

The optic of the path of bones on the ocean floor is an image that has haunted me for decades, and first appeared in my work in the artwork *Sapelo* (1995) that is featured in one of the videos in the portfolio. The path of bones emerged as the central optic of *SIPPING FREEDOM* in an installation I showed at Crossroads, Oct. 2014, entitled *Yemayá's Tides Meet Sapelo's Shores*. I consider that installation the first draft of the *SIPPING FREEDOM* installation, as it was instrumental in moving this work forward.³³²

the crossing

The image of Minkísí making the Crossing, walking blindfolded across the path of bones emerged as a representation of the collective amnesia caused by historical trauma. I convey her vulnerability by performing it truly blindfolded, with a mask that echoes the violences of slavery. It is critical that the performer feel disoriented by the

³³⁰ This is a reference to the title of Alexander's book *Pedagogies of Crossing*, meaning the crossing of the Atlantic; the Middle Passage.

³³¹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 8.

³³² Thank you to Charmaine Lurch for her artistic support in developing the first installation of *Path of Bones*.

masking of her vision, and experience the corporeal contact between her bare feet and the ancestral bones, reading the bones with her feet as a catharsis of grounding.

the house

I sourced the image of the house in the digital projections from my nocturnal resource of dream images. During this project, I had a series of vivid dreams, one of which was a dream of raising a house off the ground with my sheer will. The character of Ghédé lifts the house with his supernatural force. The sequence of images in the video of the house — the hybrid iconographies, the moon and the house — form a Marvellous Real dreamscape. I constructed these images from my archive of photographs and used computer technologies to alter the images and create the videos.

hybrid iconographies

The luminous blue drawings on black backgrounds reference Haitian Vodou symbols, or *vévé*, which are beacons for Eshu and Ghédé.

the falling ancestor

The image of the falling Ancestor is also drawn from my nocturnal resource of dreams. Working with the archival photos of my father and my grandma brought a personal catharsis to the work for me, and made the memorializing of our Middle Passage Ancestors more immediate and real.

yemayá

With the image of Yemayá I seek to convey the omnipresence of water as the aquatic primordial source of all life, pregnant with the harrowing Middle Passage history that the ocean holds.

Thematic Concepts

the palimpsest

[...] a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining and therefore still partially visible. [...] The idea of the “new” structured through the “old” scrambled, palimpsestic character of time [...] jettisons the truncated distance of linear time [...]³³³

The palimpsest is the core metaphor in this work conveyed visually on the surface of the stones/bones, in the layering of image in the digital projections, and in the multiplicity of characters in the performance. The palimpsest became integral to my experience of creating this work, in the scraping back and overwriting I enacted in the creation of the bones, as well as in the layers and layers of material that I developed that didn't make it to the stage. For example, I wrote pages of dialogue that I developed in improvisation in rehearsals in the last weeks before the performance, and then Prof. Ford-Smith recommended I take all the dialogue out and return to movement as the core language of the work. Though the dialogue is unseen, it is embedded in the scenes because it was part of the process of developing the characters and the narrative arc of the performance.

³³³ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190-191.

the black female body as the site of encounter

This solo performance investigates the Black female body as the site of encounter with the Middle Passage. The performer summons the audience to a path of bones on the ocean floor where she enacts a repertoire of encoded knowledge brought across the Atlantic. While there are objective accounts of this forced migration, there is very little first person account. In the absence of this qualitative memory, I bring Black radical imagination to Middle Passage memory.

hybridity and orature

The question arises: does positioning one's work as interdisciplinary risk reinscribing the primacy of the individual disciplines? Does crossing the boundaries actually act to conform to their prescribed Western definitions and delineation of their scope of knowledge? I consider that orature³³⁴ may be a more fitting term to describe the non-hierarchical hybridity of modes of expression in Black diasporic cultural production, and it certainly characterizing my practice. Orature, understood as a hybrid art form, challenges us to consider relinquishing the notion of disciplines altogether, loosening the imperative to classify Black diasporic cultural production according to Western definitions.

liminality

This performance dwells in the interstices between the otherworldly and the real, between the mythic and the mundane. In Act One, the character is in a Marvellous Real

³³⁴ See the "Blues Epistemology" section of Movement One for more about orature.

world, a singular phantasmagorical world the audience is asked to accept as the character's reality. In Act Two, the character moves between the mythic spaces of her inner life and the realm of cosmological entities, and the mundane world of the everyday in a triple-reality.

The proximity between spectator and performer blurs that division drawn in conventional theatre settings. With the sound of the performer's breath and the scent of sacraments³³⁵ used to prepare the space, I hope to move the audience from the position of objective spectators to one of invested witnesses. If I can make them implicit they may be compelled to find agency in response to the testimony.

metaphor and motif

Metaphor, like irony, is one of a repertoire of rhetorical tropes subsumed under the trope of tropes of Black vernacular — signifyin(g). “Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetoric play in the black vernacular.”³³⁶ Through the use of metaphor in this work, meaning “is not proffered, it is deferred,”³³⁷ demanding of the audience to interpret and decode the ambiguity of the play of doubles in the Black appropriation and obscuration of Western modes of interpretation.

I use metaphor and motif, as aesthetic tools, in the structuring of the performance. A concept such as fragmentation becomes the image of the scattered

³³⁵ Sage and rum are substances used in Indigenous and African spiritual practices which are used in this work to prepare the installation and performance space before the audience enters. Ritualizing the space in this way is a Sacred praxis I engage in this work.

³³⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William John Thomas Mitchell, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory Of African American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 53.

³³⁷ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 53.

bones on the ocean floor; Middle Passage memory became the action of attempting to decipher the ruptured archive of bones. I worked with motif to convey the cyclical nature of memory, the recurrence of memories, the hauntology of memory. Motifs repeat. Repetition also conveys the passage of time, from then to now and back to then, as memory circuitously routes through time, defying chronology.

indigo bones

In the film *Daughters of the Dust*,³³⁸ director Julie Dash uses the optic of indigo-stained hands to represent both the violence of slavery inscribed on the African body, as well as African women's sacred practices of working with indigo. Inspired by this multiple encoding of the sign of indigo, I likewise call in the *minkisi*, or medicine, of the *indican* plant³³⁹ with the blue palette of this work. I employ a multiply-coded optic of a path of bones to convey the violence of slavery, the ruptured archive and the material with which to create our futures.

aquatic motifs

"In one sense the body's water composition seals our aquatic affinity with the Divine."³⁴⁰

Motifs such as floating, drowning, swimming, sipping, sobbing, and bathing, steep the work in the element of water and suggest the aquatic nature of memory. The

³³⁸ Julie Dash, Cora Lee Day, and Alva Rogers, *Daughters of the Dust*. Film, 1991 (New York: Kino International).

³³⁹ Indigo dye is derived from the *indican* plant.

³⁴⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 301.

element of water is the existential ground of this piece. All distance is covered, all memory is mediated through the aquatic register of the ocean.

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MOVEMENT FIVE

Brewing this Decoction

CONCLUSION

In this portfolio I have proposed that colonial notions of “the human” can be transformed by African histories of the present and that engaging Afrodiasporic praxes of freedom in the present can shape the histories of the future. I have attempted to demonstrate that the colonial can be transformed by exposing its limitations. I proposed a creative methodology of becoming which depends on engaging Black radical imagination, confronting Middle Passage memory, and embodying the Sacred. I have framed these as praxes of freedom. I have attempted to demonstrate how these praxes of freedom engage us in the present in the embodiment and the imagining of futures of possibility.

In Movement One, I began by engaging with the ideas of Anthony Bogues and Hazel Carby, contextualizing Black radical imagination within the Black Radical Tradition. I outlined four major tenets of the Black Radical Tradition, as Bogues identifies them. I complicated his analysis by drawing on Hazel Carby's critique of masculinist notions of struggle and freedom in the Black Radical Tradition. From there I went on to frame Black radical imagination as “a counter-culture of imagination.”³⁴¹ I proposed that Black radical imagination is grounded in diasporic African feminist thought. I proposed that engaging

³⁴¹ Dash, “Marvellous Realism — The Way out of Négritude,” 66.

Black radical imagination requires a balance between vigilant critique of oppressive systems of domination and capacities to imagine futures that surpass the conditions that continue to obliterate the flourishing of Black life. I proposed that it is futurist in its orientation to imagine the “total transformation of society.”³⁴²

Through the lens of Black radical imagination, I went on to engage the strands of Black radical thought concerned with Black cultural practices, Western knowledge and power systems, and Black subjectivities. I took up Clyde Woods’s blues epistemology, understanding his formulation of the blues “not just as a musical form but as a structure of feeling.”³⁴³ I engaged the ideas of Kamau Brathwaite to demonstrate that by recognizing the African cultural concepts embedded in the blues we can recognize the resiliency of Black culture. I went on to confront Western knowledge and power systems by exposing the limitation of the white supremacist “human/other” binary in dialogue with the ideas of Sylvia Wynter and Henry Louis Gates Jr. I noted that the problem also lies at the level of Western consumption and the question of the redistribution of wealth. In my performance of the Colonial Mimic in *SIPPING FREEDOM* I demonstrated how the legacy of colonialism pervades the discipline of archaeology and dehumanizes African bodies through propriety and cataloguing of human remains. I went on to propose Audre Lorde’s uses of the erotic, Suzanne Césaire’s readiness for the Marvellous, and Julie Dash’s decolonizing sight as tools with which to transform Black subjectivities.

³⁴² Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 5.

³⁴³ Honor Ford-Smith, in conversation with the author, November 28, 2015.

In Movement Two, I confronted Middle Passage memory discussing how mourning acts as an impetus for Black diasporic resiliency. Thinking through Toni Morrison's "rememory," engaging the ideas of M. Jacqui Alexander, drawing on the ideas of Saidiya Hartman, and reflecting on the work of NourbeSe Philip I explored themes of haunting and sorrow, rupture and return, and fragmentation and indecipherability.

In Movement Three, I proposed a repertoire of tools for becoming. Inquiring deeply into M. Jacqui Alexander's praxes of the Sacred and putting them in conversation with my hybrid spiritual/cultural work I sought to articulate what it means to embody the Sacred. I proposed that a yearning for communion informs autopoietic evolution, and is nurtured by daily practices of devotion.

In Movement Four, I sought to map out the creative vocabularies of the performance art installation of this portfolio. I outlined: methods of preparing for practice; the languages of performance; witnessing as a dramaturgical approach; an inventory of visual arts traditions; the harvesting of images;³⁴⁴ thematic concepts; and the theoretical sources that inform this work.

In this portfolio I have framed engaging Black radical imagination, confronting Middle Passage memory and embodying the Sacred as praxes of freedom. Inspired by Anthony Bogues's proposal of freedom as a practice rather than a state of consciousness to which to aspire, I have proposed that through the living, breathing praxes we engage in the present we generate our futures. Bogues's formulation of

³⁴⁴ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for the term "harvesting of images," which I use to describe the gathering of images as source material in the research and development of the performance art installation in this portfolio.

“freedom from” and “freedom to” is also integral to my proposal.³⁴⁵ Confronting Middle Passage memory is a sorrowful praxis of freedom responding to rupture and fragmentation. I have proposed that through confronting it, we can properly mourn and memorialize this *Maafa*. This is “freedom from,” or overcoming. Embodying the Sacred is a hopeful praxis of freedom that moves toward an integrated wholeness. It is a cultivating of spiritual and artistic disciplines and practices in the present that shape an interior life that we pour into the world and that determine the way we move into the future. This is “freedom to,” or becoming. Practicing “freedom from” and “freedom to” requires an accessing of a future-oriented radical imagination that carves out spaces in the present for imagining futures that surpass the realities of the present. These are praxes of freedom; an ebb and flow, ebb... and flow... a tidalectic of collective self-realization.

³⁴⁵ Bogue, "And What About the Human?" 29-46, accessed September 8, 2015, <http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/content/39/3/29.short>.

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Artifacts — A Diptych

SIPPING FREEDOM & J'AI SOIF³⁴⁶

a solo performance art installation in two acts

Background

Theory of Blackness is theory of the surreal presence.

But in the meantime, in the improvisation of beginnings and ends, way on the outskirts of town, in the blur, over the edge, critique and redemption submit to a poetics of condensation and displacement when Blackness, which already was and was always moving and being moved stakes its claim as normativity's condition.

To refuse what is normatively desired, and to claim what is normatively disavowed is our lot; our performative repertoire. What it is to enact and to inhabit that repertoire is all but unfathomable. [...] Deviance is not opposed to the norm. It comes before it [...]³⁴⁷

Preparing the Space

This performance art installation may be set in a theatre, gallery, outdoor or ceremonial setting. It dwells in the interstices between ritual and performance and between altar and installation. The work is executed with attention to intention throughout and is carried out with shared conviction that it is a work of mourning and memorialization.

The space is prepared in the same manner in which the development of the work is carried out, with African and Indigenous spiritual practices which acknowledge and call on the presence of cosmological entities. Prior to working in the space and prior to the

¹ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³⁴⁷ Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance," AFTERLIVES, Museum of Modern Art. Accessed November 24, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leIFByllg>.

audience entering the space, it is smudged with burnt sacraments and anointed with libations of water and spirits. A private altar, not visible to the audience, is installed and attended throughout the duration of the production.

theatre setting

The piece is set in an intimate theatre with light, sound and video technologies, seating twenty-five to fifty people. The upstage wall is white. A black dance floor, or sprung wood floor, is optimal. The seats are set in curved rows filling half the space, suggesting the tide on the shore.

Technical Requirements

lights

stage lights, floor lights, shin lights, spot light

blue, green, yellow, amber, pink, orange, purple

sound

sound board or laptop (USB & headphone inputs)

two speakers

two monitors (optional)

video

one video projector (with sound)

laptop (compatible with Apple technologies)

Cast of Characters

The performer is a Black woman of mixed race in her 50s; she is of medium build with a background in dance, voice and spoken word. She plays a cast of nine characters: Yemayá, the Ocean Orisha; Eshu, the Trickster and Guardian of the Crossroads; The Clown; Child, Teenage and Adult Minkísí; Grandma Itáo, the Keeper of the Bones; Dr. Eleanor Sinclair, the Colonial Mimic; and Ghédé, the Guardian of the Burial Ground.

yemayá, the ocean orisha

Yemayá is the cosmic entity presiding over the oceanic realm. She is the guardian of the Souls of those who perished in the Atlantic Crossing. She is one of the pantheon of Orishas of the Yoruba cosmology. “[A] richly lyrical and densely metaphorical system” that “the Yoruba in Nigeria have consulted for centuries,”³⁴⁸ the Yoruban praxis of Sacred communion and intervention thrives in its myriad adaptive traditions in diaspora. I offer here a poetic reflection on Yemayá, by M. Jacqui Alexander.

[...] Mother/Teacher
 I learn how to caress from the cadence of waves
 Supple
 Gentle
 Tumultuous Enveloping
 In the vastness of Ocean surrounded by your treasures
 Which passion alone can coax you to reveal [...]
 Wash me [...] mother of life
 Of water
 One in the beginning when there was no beginning
 No time [...]

³⁴⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William John Thomas Mitchell. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory Of African American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 9.

In the last cycle of Moon
 We come paying homage
 Gifts of Seven
 No one mistakes your calm for weakness
 When you tumble foam
 Spew turquoise rage [...]

O Achaba, Peligrosísima
 Haunting Sweet Verbena
 Wise one
 Hiding your age within the soft folds of waves [...]

Bathe me Goddess of Salt
 Protector of the salt eaters [...]

Heal our wounds³⁴⁹

eshu, the trickster, guardian of the crossroads

Not paradoxically within Vodou, Lucumí and Candomblé is retained the manifest energies of Eshu/Papa Legba/Elegba/Elegbara, guardian of Divine energy and communication, guardian of the crossroads, the force that makes things happen, the codification of potentiality and its indispensable tool, choice, which is multiplied at the crossroads — the place where judicious vigilance needs always to be exercised.³⁵⁰

Eshu is the Trickster.³⁵¹ They³⁵² are imagined in this work with references to their transatlantic North American counterpart the Signifying Monkey. They navigate the interstices, the in-between places, and are the guardian of the Crossroads, where lies the path of bones on the ocean floor. Eshu is the interpreter, “the one who translates, who explains, or ‘who loosens knowledge.’”³⁵³

³⁴⁹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005) 330-331.

³⁵⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 292.

³⁵¹ Eshu is another of the Orishas from the Yoruba Ifá Orisha cosmology from Nigeria.

³⁵² I choose the pronoun “they” for Eshu to distinguish their gender-nonconforming identity.

³⁵³ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 9.

Esu is the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic, and “*Esu-tufunaalo*” is the study of methodological principles of interpretation itself [...]”³⁵⁴

Eshu is an African controlling principle which governs both representation and interpretation. Through this repertoire of attributes, they govern the enactment of overwriting the colonial archive, of interpreting the fragmented African archive, and opening the way for Minkísi’s tale to unfold. In *J’AI SOIF*³⁵⁵ the bewildered Clown portrays one aspect of the trickster as the unlikely enactor of Middle Passage memory. In *SIPPING FREEDOM* the red nose of the Clown is replaced by the gas mask, and Eshu becomes an ambiguous trickster/narrator, a human-monkey hybrid, a deep sea diver, and the harbinger of the zeitgeist of an apocalyptic now.

The figure of writing appears to be peculiar to the myth of Esu, while the figure of speaking, or oral discourse densely structured rhetorically, is peculiar to the myth of the Signifying Monkey.³⁵⁶

The oral elements of the performance are the Colonial Mimic’s speech, Adult Minkísi’s song, and the utterances, sputterances, gasps and whimpers of the Clown. These, with the aural elements of the bones as the performer works with them and of the recorded music, form the sonic archive that is unlocked by the Signifying Monkey.

the clown

³⁵⁴ Ibid. Note, Gates uses a different spelling of Eshu’s name.

³⁵⁵ The title *J’AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³⁵⁶ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 21.

[...] bewilderment begins to form, for me, [as] more than an attitude — but as an actual approach, a way — to settle the unresolvable. In the dictionary to bewilder is “to cause to lose one’s sense of where one is.” [...] Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability.³⁵⁷

The tragic absurdity of the Clown on the slave ship in Act One evokes contradictory emotional responses and interrupts conventional narratives of the Middle Passage. The essence of the Clown in this work is her bewilderment and her vulnerability. Her bewilderment endears us to her. Though she never figures it out, fails to decipher the archive and doesn’t complete the repatriation of the bones, she possesses a resiliency emblematic of Black diasporic life. Though her childlike jubilation and wonder is ruptured by the catastrophe of her capture, she still seeks and still hopes, once washed upon the shore in diaspora, laying the ground for the redemptive acts of mourning and memorialization Mínkísí carries out in Act Two.

child, teenage and adult mínkísí

Adult Mínkísí is the unknowing carrier of memories, the confounded modern day mystic who yearns for the ancient ways, echoing the Clown’s bewilderment. The rupture that occurs in her own life echoes that of the Middle Passage, and severs her from the vibrancy of who she was as a child and the power of insurgency she possessed as a teenager. Though she resonates with the frequency of the mineral world, and carries the

³⁵⁷ Fanny Howe, *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 15.

name, Mínkísí, meaning plant Spirit medicine in Kikôngo cosmology,³⁵⁸ is caught between the mythic and the mundane, in the continuum of the aquatic realm of memory, to/from the present moment, to/from the Middle Passage. Her catharsis of communion with the Ancestor, rescues her from perpetual melancholy, and opens the way for mourning and memorialization.³⁵⁹ But this is not complete resolution. It is a pause in the tidalectic³⁶⁰ of her self-realization. At the end she continues to build the cosmogram as the lights fade to black. Her work is not done.

grandma itáo, the keeper of the bones

Thank you for clearing the path for us all again. Lifting the rocks and awakening the traditions.³⁶¹

Grandma Itáo is the keeper of the bones, the keeper of the Sacred knowledge that survived the Crossing. She knows, she remembers, she communes and she carries the order of the cosmos according to the Ancient Ones who walk with her and speak to her through the bones.

dr. eleanor sinclair, the colonial mimic

The Colonial Mimic is a farcical parody on the colonial violences of archaeology. Through

³⁵⁸ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 312. Alexander discusses healing as “at the very heart of spiritual labor explaining why the healing instruments in Kikôngo are called *minkisi*, medicines [and] why *fey*, leaves, in Vodou are also called *medicaments*, medicine [...]” Mínkísí’s yearning for communion signals a need for healing work, which Alexander formulates as “the antidote to oppression.” The diacritic markings on Mínkísí’s name are the author’s.

³⁵⁹ Thank you to Honor Ford-Smith for elucidating how the catharsis of communion with the Ancestor catalyzes an evolution from melancholy to mourning and opens the way for memorialization.

³⁶⁰ Anna Reckin, “Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite’s Prose/Poetry as Sound-Space” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5 (2003).

³⁶¹ Nicole Angela Williams, in an e-mail to the author, August 3, 2015.

the caricature of her strident and scholarly demeanour and the comedic preposterousness of the language of domination which she spouts and touts, she shines a glaring light on the ravages of colonialism. Though she horrifies with her unabashed and zealous proprietorship of the so-called artifacts, and glosses over the violence of erasure with her fetishizing taxonomies, she is imperfect in her mimicry of the colonial and she unravels as the scene progresses. Unable to carry out the ghastly and failed project of colonial domination, she comes apart at the seams by the end of the scene, and is vanquished by Ghédé.

ghédé, the guardian of the burial ground

Ghédé, one of the Lwa in Haitian Vodou cosmology, is the intermediary between the living and the dead. Also known as “Baron Samedi” he is the patron of those who died violently. He is the guardian of the dead whose bodies have not been found, of those who have not been reclaimed from the Middle Passage. He is vulgar, obscene and subversive, and provokes those who are possessed by his Spirit in the ecstasy of ceremony or carnival to perform grotesque erotic dances. In this sense, the space of the dead becomes a dual carnivalesque space.³⁶²

³⁶² Randy Conner, David Hatfield Sparks and Mariya Sparks, *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Gender Lore* (Herdon, VA: Cassell 1997), accessed November 29, 2015.

Corinne Duboin, "After the Dance d'Edwidge Danticat: Visions carnavalesques de l'espace haïtien" *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines: American Studies Journal* 2 (2007), accessed November 29, 2015.

"Ghédé," Accessed November 1, 2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guédé>.

Act One

J'AI SOIF³⁶³

a venture into middle passage memory

Script

Mise en Scène

The stage is dimly lit with blue light. A large circular art/set piece depicting the Orisha of the deep ocean waters, Olokún,³⁶⁴ stands USC³⁶⁵ on a large wooden easel. Hanging on hooks on the back of Olokún are the costumes for Act Two: Mínkísí's blue silk dress, the Colonial Mimic's white lab coat, and Ghédé's mask and cloak. A large rectangular piece of blue silk lays on the floor in a diagonal orientation from the USR corner to CS, representing the Middle Passage. On it lies a smaller rectangular piece of beige net representing the slave ship. Two hundred and twenty shards of slate treated with encaustic medium are concealed under the perimeter of the blue silk representing

³⁶³ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³⁶⁴ See Sources for all visual art, photo, video and audio recording credits in this script.

³⁶⁵ BLOCKING: I use abbreviations in this script to indicate the blocking, meaning the positioning of the actor, set pieces and props and their movement on the stage. Left and right are determined from the vantage point of the performer on stage facing the audience. Upstage is the area between centre stage and the wall furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area between centre stage and the edge of the stage or performance space closest to the audience. CS - centre stage; USC - upstage centre; DSC - downstage centre; SL - stage left; SR - stage right; USL - upstage left; DSL - downstage left; CSL - centre stage left; USR - upstage right; DSR - downstage right; CSR - centre stage right.

LIGHTING: The abbreviation "LED" stands for "light emitting diode." The lighting design in this script is particular to the presentation of this work in the Aluna Theatre, Friday November 20, 2015.

LEDs: high in the USR and DSL corners of the stage; Shin: at chest level DSR; Foot: on the floor DSL; DSC light: high downstage centre of the stage; Tips: high in the DSL and DSR corners of the stage; Spot: centre stage.

bones. A round straw African bag, red, black and beige with cowrie shells sewn on, stands on the floor DS of the easel USC. A round straw mat with cowrie shells sewn around the edge, and a calabash with a blue and white silk scarf in it, are inside the bag. On the floor is a line of small pieces of white coral (USC to DSC) and a line of red and black “jumbie beads” (CSR to CSL) representing Eshu’s crossroads. Reclaimed wooden plinths stand askew along the US wall. A wooden chair with a lime green vinyl seat and a low back stands in the USL quadrant of the stage.

Costume: The performer wears a sleeveless, tailored, turquoise and royal blue batik dress with gathers and ruffles around the shoulders and edging (Yemayá’s costume). She wears a white silk head wrap and a white lace veil with delicate embroidery covers her face, hanging down to her waist in front and behind, draped loosely over her head. Under her dress she wears black yoga pants and a black fitted tank top with a string of red waist beads (Eshu’s costume for the next scene).

Prologue YEMAYÁ SOUNDS THE BONES

Yemayá enters SR in the black with an ocean drum in hand. She steps up onto chair in the USL quadrant of the stage and begins to play the drum. She starts with very gentle sound suggesting the ebb and flow of waves lapping on the shore.

Video begins. Spotlight fades up.

Slide 1

Video: *Under Currents*, Mosa McNeilly

Lighting: Spot light (cerulean blue)

She continues to play as the light and video fade up. The sound of the ocean drum intensifies suggesting a storm brewing and intensifies further to suggest a raging storm. The intensity diminishes slowly, suggesting the storm is subsiding.

Video fades to black. Spotlight fades to black.

She continues to play in the black, the gentle sound of the drum suggesting the prolonged ebb and flow of gentle waves lapping the shore until there is silence. She slowly tips the drum to a vertical position to bring the sound to resolution. As the sound resolves to silence, she steps down from the chair and exits SR.

Costume Change: The performer removes veil, head wrap and dress. She puts on gas mask and puts the Archive (art object/prop) under her arm. The Archive is a found object, worn and weathered, made of two thick pieces of plywood attached by two cloth straps stapled on. The inside surfaces are treated with encaustic medium with fragments of original poetry and text, and an archival photograph of a female Caribbean Ancestor photo-transferred on. The art object/prop is the palimpsestic archive. As Eshu, the performer enters stage SR, travels down past the DSR edge of the stage and takes their place beside the first row of seats in the audience area.

Cameo ESHU SETS THE SCENE

Audio begins in the black. Lights fade up to intense blue wash.

Slide 2

Audio: *Morning Light*, Fode Musa Suso

Lights: LEDs (blue)

Eshu stands facing US close to the first row of seats. They turn sharply and gaze mischievously at the audience. They approach the audience at close proximity. Their movement accents are in time with the music, though their movement does not mark the rhythm successively. They survey the audience at close range, gliding whimsically across the stage to DSL. They open the Archive and cross back to DSR with it open for the audience to see the markings inscribed on its inner surface. They spin and twirl onto the stage and reveal the sites of action in Act One: where the Clown will sit before the altar (USC), where she will undergo the Middle Passage Crossing on the blue silk (USR), where she will be washed ashore at the Crossroads (CS), where she will experience pain and sorrow (SR), and where she will find the Archive (SL). They place the Archive SL intersecting the line of jumbie beads, its spine in the air, perched in a triangular shape. They make a flourishing gesture in time with the music, and freeze.

Audio fades out. Lights fade to black.

Eshu exits SR in the black out.

Entracte

Audio/video begins. Lights fade up to dim blue wash.

Slide 3

Video:	<i>Surfaces</i> , Mosa McNeilly
Audio:	<i>Liteya</i> , Lokua Kanza
Lights:	LEDs (blue)

Costume Change: The performer changes from Eshu's costume to the Clown's costume. She removes the gas mask, puts on, in this order, the African green, black and white pants, white belt, African turquoise fitted top, red nose, African turquoise head tie.

Video ends. Lights fade to black.**Sc 1:** AT THE ALTAR

The Clown enters in the black and sits USC facing US.

Lights fade up to dawn light.

Lights: LEDs (red, green), DSR & DSL tips (white)

She sits on her haunches before the art/set piece and the African bag which together represent the altar. She takes the round straw mat out of the bag and puts it on the floor before the bag. She takes out the calabash with the silk scarf in it and places it on the mat.

Sc 2: THE REVEAL

The Clown turns slowly to her right to face the audience revealing her red nose for the first time. She peers out at the audience with childlike expectancy and delight and playfully turns back. She turns around to look at audience from the other side and again turns back, suggesting a playful game of hide and seek.

Sc 3: THIRST

The Clown picks up the calabash and rushes DS to CS gesturing toward the audience, offering a drink from her calabash. She drinks thirstily.

Sc 4: WATER PLAY

The Clown swirls playfully to SR and crouches at the water's edge (blue silk, USR). With the calabash and silk in hand, she mimes playing with water. She mimes the action of

eagerly scooping water into the calabash and pouring it out, taking great delight in the pouring. She holds the corner of the silk scarf, and as she pours the silk tumbles out like water. She gathers the silk back up into calabash and repeats this action five times. She replaces the calabash on the altar.

Sc 5: APHASIA

The Clown briskly stands up and returns to CS facing the audience expectantly as though wanting to say something. She takes an intake of breath as though about to speak, raising her hands in a gesture of expressive communication, but can't find the words. She repeats this action again, but can't find the words. And again.

Lights snap to black.

Sc 6: RUPTURE MOTIF

She travels in the black to stand on the beige net on the blue cloth USR.

Lights snap up.

Lights: DSR shin (blue), USR tip (white), LEDS (blue)

The Clown finds herself in the hold of the slave ship. In a panic, she looks upward as though trying to decipher the space she is shocked to find herself in. She looks left and right and is struck by a terrible suffocating stench. She looks down on the floor all around her and an expression of horror spreads over her face. With dread, as though in great danger, she braces herself for an explosive movement sequence representing violence: she swings her right leg straight forward and her left arm overhead; she pulls her left arm into her torso suggesting a blow to the abdomen; she reaches desperately

with right arm to the right; and she falls in a forward fold with right arm stretched straight up above. She pauses and slowly stands up. She repeats the movement sequence five times with variances in the pacing of the movements. She stops, in shock from the trauma, catches her breath and rocks side to side on straight legs (representing the rocking of the ship), her body unclenching in relief. Dread spreads over her face once again, and she repeats the rupture motif five more times. Again she rocks, eyes closed, catching her breath.

Sc 7: DROWNING MOTIF

The Clown comes to stillness. She looks down and slowly crouches to begin the drowning motif of six movements, which she repeats three times travelling from USR to CS: bent forward at the hips, she raises her left leg to the side and her arms in a wide wing-like shape; she steps her left foot forward and swings her arms folded with elbows high; she circles her arms down and back around to overhead making claw-like shapes with her hands and a silent scream expression on her face; she puffs her cheeks as though holding her breath and undulates her arms and body awkwardly; she raises up on her toes with straight legs, her arms hinged aggressively upward at the elbows, a grotesque death-like expression on her face; and she drops forward and hangs from the hips as though floating dead in the water.

Sc 8: AT THE CROSSROADS

She arrives at the Crossroads. She is thoroughly bewildered about where she is and how she got there. She discovers she has a choice of which direction to go, looking at the intersecting lines of beads and coral underfoot. She chooses to travel SR.

Lights fade to warm wash, midday.

Lights: DSR shin (blue), USR tip (white) remain
LEDs (red, green), tips (white)

Sc 9: PAIN AND SORROW MOTIFS

The Clown travels SR cautiously, tentatively walking along the path of jumbie beads. When she arrives, she takes a position with courage and expectancy, waiting for something good to happen in this new place that she has found. She is suddenly stung by a sharp pain. She sucks her breath in as her hand shoots to her chin. She makes five actions conveying sudden pain, her hands shooting to each site of pain — chin; left shoulder; left thigh; right knee; right breast. She is stunned by the sudden pain, panting, fearful. She slowly begin to cry. She makes four actions conveying sorrow — index fingertips tracing tears on her cheeks; fists rubbing her eyes; hands to her forehead; and hands to her heart. She vocalizes with mournful and whimpering sounds accompanying the gestures and looks plaintively at the audience while she mourns. She repeats the four actions.

Sc 10: SEARCHING

The Clown looks down, still full of sadness. She notices the red and black jumbie beads on the floor. She slowly lowers down to take a closer look. She picks one up and rolls it

with her fingertips in the palm of her hand. She picks up another. She presses the palm of her hand down onto the line of seeds on the floor and is delighted to see how they stick to her hand. She looks at the audience to include them in her delight. She picks up some more. And then more. She begins to pick them up more and more quickly, with a sense of urgency as she progresses across the stage travelling from SR to SL on hands and knees.

Sc 11: FINDING THE ARCHIVE

The Clown suddenly notices the Archive before her on the floor SL. She is bewildered by it. She is very cautious about touching it. She slowly peers through the hole on one side. She balances comically on her head and toes as she hovers over the Archive to peer into the hole on the other side. She looks under it from one end, all the while, she keeps checking in with audience as she investigates this most puzzling object. She finally gets up the courage to try and touch it. She slowly reaches her finger toward the spine of the book. After a prolonged moment of great anticipation, she touches it and pulls her hand back. She touches it again with her fingertip and again, and then begins to rub it with some erotic pleasure. She sits down and pulls it toward her.

Foot light fades up.

Lights: DSR shin (blue) USR tip (white) remain
LEDs (red, green), tips (white) remain
Foot (orange)

Sc 12: FAILURE TO DECIPHER THE ARCHIVE

The Clown attempts to read the Archive but fails. She traces the words with her finger. She thinks she understands and then realizes she does not. She looks at the audience and shrugs her shoulders conveying that she has no idea. She has an insight — maybe it's upside-down? With some comic relief, she turns the Archive around, but still fails to decipher it.

Sc 13: COVETING THE ARCHIVE

The Clown suddenly becomes aware that there is some danger of the Archive being taken from her. She conveys this growing awareness in spurts of hesitant movement. She backs up clutching the Archive to her chest. She stands up and hides it behind her back, backing further US. In a sudden flurry of great haste, she pulls the head tie from her head, pushes the end of the cloth through the holes in the Archive's two covers and ties the object to her waist. Feeling confident now that she has the Archive safe and secure, she walks DSL with a swagger, posturing and puffing up her chest. She catches sight of someone in the audience who appears to be drawing her attention back to the Middle Passage. Her expression takes on an air of defiance. She glares back and forth between the audience and the site of rupture.

Sc 14: CONFRONTING THE SITE OF RUPTURE

The Clown purposefully crosses USR to the blue silk.

LEDS fade to blue wash. Foot light fades out.

Lights: DSR Shin (blue), USR tip (white) remain
LEDS (blue)

She looks at the audience conveying that she is ready for this confrontation. She steps onto the cloth with great courage and stands with fists clenched, feet in a strong wide stance. She grasps the ends of the net and pulls it from under her feet with great effort, backing up gradually as she pulls it further and further up. When she succeeds in getting it completely out from underfoot, she holds it for a moment not sure what to do with it. She turns it into a weapon, holding it like a long-barrel gun and crouches, aiming the gun directly at the audience. She trembles with fury and terror, her breath audible through clenched teeth. She releases the posture of aiming the gun and throws the net with disgust to the ground.

Sc 15: REVELLING IN THE FLOW OF WATER

The Clown steps off the blue silk and walks to the US edge of it. She sees the ocean anew, now no longer fettered by the presence of the slave ship. She crouches in the USR corner of the stage, takes the ends of the blue silk in her hands, and ripples it once, twice, three times with pauses between, revelling in the experience of flowing water. She then ripples the silk continuously, slowly at first, and then more and more vigorously, thoroughly enjoying the vivacious play of the rippling water. The bones under the silk are revealed.

Sc 16: FINDING THE BONES

Foot light fades up.

Lights: DSR Shin (blue), USR tip (white), LEDs (blue) remain
Foot (orange)

The Clown stops rippling the silk and in astonishment gazes DS at the bones now exposed. She stands and walks to the DSR corner of the rectangular formation of the bones. She slowly crouches, reaches out and picks one up. She lovingly rubs it and holds it to her heart. She picks up another and another, increasing the speed with which she gathers as many bones as she can to her chest from the SR side of the rectangular formation of bones. She carries them DSL, encumbered by the heavy load she carries, gasping and panting with the sheer urgency of her task. She lays them down forming the path of bones, joining the path with the SL side of the rectangular formation of bones already in place. She travels back and forth from USR to DSL gathering as many bones as she can each time, frantically, with exclamations of awe, marvel, passion and disbelief, the bones spilling from her arms as she forms the path. She continues this labour as the lights fade to black.

Lights fade to black.

Entracte SET CHANGE

Video begins. Lights fade up to dim blue wash.

Slide 4

Video: *Textures of Blue*, Mosa McNeilly

Audio: *Makombo*, Geoffrey Oryema

Lights: LEDS (blue)

Costume Change: The performer changes costumes, from the Clown to Eshu. She removes the Archive from her waist and the red nose and hands them both to the stage assistant. She removes the African top and pants. She puts on the gas mask.

Set Change: Three stage assistants enter SR and perform the set change

- put beige net, calabash, silk scarf, and straw mat into African bag
- remove African bag from stage
- remove ceramic mask from art/set piece
- move art/set piece on easel to USL corner facing DSR
- put ceramic mask back on art/set piece
- drape blue silk over chair and place lace veil under chair
- place plastic water jug (with water in it) on floor SR of chair
- place plastic dust pan and hand broom on floor CSR
- place lid of plastic cup (with straw in it) on floor in USR corner
- place plastic cup (full of cowrie shells) on floor in USL corner
- stand Archive, open on shelf of easel, markings facing out
- stand iPad and place red nose on shelf concealed behind Archive

Video ends. Lights fade to black out.

Act Two

SIPPING FREEDOM

a rememory tale of the bones of ubuntu³⁶⁶

Script

Mise en Scène

The stage is bathed in dim blue light. The formation of a path of bones stretches from the USR to the DSL corners of the stage. The chair in the USL quadrant of the stage is covered with the blue silk of the Middle Passage, with Yemayá's white lace veil concealed under the chair. The art/set piece is in the USL corner facing DSR, with Minkísi's silk dress, the Colonial Mimic's lab coat, and Ghédé's mask and cloak concealed behind it. On the shelf of the easel stands the Archive with the iPad and the red nose concealed behind it. The blue plastic water jug, with approximately three litres of water in it, stands on the floor SR of the chair. The blue plastic dust pan and hand broom are on the floor CSR. Minkísi's plastic cup full of cowrie shells is on the floor in the USL corner and the lid with the straw in it is on the floor in the USR corner of the stage.

Prologue ESHU MAKES THE CROSSROADS

**Video begins. Lights fade up to intense blue wash.
Slide 5**

³⁶⁶ *Ubuntu* is an African conception of "the human" from the Nguni Bantu intellectual/spiritual legacy of southern Africa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said, "*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language [...] It is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours" Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New York: Double Day, 2000) 31. I propose that this relational *ubuntu* is integral to redefining "the human".

Video: *Ocean Floor*, Mosa McNeilly
Audio: *Under The Tree*, Fode Musa Suso
Lights: LEDs (blue)

Eshu enters in the black and crouches in the USL corner. They move to the music, with spider-like/monkey-like gestures. They move with bent arms and legs, flexed feet and hands open wide, with rhythmical, repetitive gestures low to the ground, travelling from USL to CS. They rise to standing in percussive movements of alternate shoulders and elbows raising upward. They make three long vigorous strokes, doing the breast stroke, swimming to DSC. There, they interact with the audience, first making provocative rhythmical movement keeping in time with the music. They twirl and spin US and pick up a handful of bones. They bring them DS and offer them to an audience member. Just as the audience member reaches to take it, Eshu pulls them away. They make the action of laughing hysterically. They offer the bones again to the same person and pull them away again. They offer them to another person and instruct that one to pass them along. They get another handful of bones and give them to another person to pass along. They cross to the USL corner, marking the steady percussive rhythm with stamping feet with the music, and pick up the plastic cup of cowrie shells, holding them to the heavens in a gesture of acknowledging Spirit. They pour shells on the USL to DSR diagonal, then cross DSR to DSL making provocative rhythmic movements with hips and shaking the shells in the cup. They pour shells from the DSL corner to the USR corner where they screw the lid with the straw onto the cup and put it down on the floor. They do a cartwheel to CS, make three flourishing gestures in time with the music and freeze.

Audio ends. Lights fade to black.

Costume Change: In the black, the performer removes the mask, puts it under the chair and travels USL to behind the art/set piece. She puts Mínkísí's dress on and crosses to stand with her back to the audience in USR corner.

Sc 1: CHILD MÍNKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP

Lights fade up to morning light.

Lights: LEDs (red, green), USL & USR tips (white)

Mínkísí spins around to face the audience. She stands twirling her dress with her fingers, clearly up to mischief. She's about 5 years old. She looks left and right and then mimes the turning of the doorknob, opens the door and enters Grandma's workshop. She steps into the room and closes the door behind her. She is delighted, knowing that she should not be there by herself. She hops and skips DSR. She kicks the bones gently as though she knows it is forbidden to do such a thing. She scoops up a handful of cowrie shells and plays jacks. She hops and twirls to the DSL corner. She picks up a bone and tosses it on the diagonal, along the path of bones, USR. She plays hopscotch. She throws the bone DSL from CS and jumps in the hopscotch again. Suddenly, she freezes and turns quickly to face the mimed door. Grandma is coming! Mínkísí runs and hides beside the chair under the blue silk. She crouches under the cloth SL of the chair for a still moment.

Costume/Character Change: The performer picks up the white lace veil under the chair and shifts energetically from Child Mínkísí to Grandma Itáo.

Sc 2: GRANDMA ITÁO WORKS WITH THE BONES

Grandma Itáo emerges from under the blue silk with the white lace veil in hand, SR of chair. She puts her hand to her lower back as she stands, indicating that she feels pain. She slowly puts the white lace veil on as a shawl. Her posture is bent, and her gait is slow. She notices the mess Mínkísí made and makes gestures conveying her upset. She then smiles knowingly and gestures to the chair, conveying that she knows Mínkísí is hiding there. She tidies up and begins to reveal to the audience the encoded knowledge within the bones. She demonstrates that the blue bones go here, DSL, the white ones go here, DSR, and the slashed ones go way over here separate from the others, CSR. She gathers a stack of big heavy bones and gives it to an audience member, making a gesture of respectful thanks after placing it in their lap. She does the same with another member of the audience. She knows the bones are heavy, but that is part of the work. She gets the water jug and the bone with the photocopy burnished onto it and sits on the chair. She removes her shawl and drapes it on the chair, preparing to get down to work. She pours water into her hand and wets the bone. She proceeds to demonstrate how a photo-transfer is done. As she rubs the wet bone, it produces a squeaky sound. She makes a sly expression, conveying that the sound has a sexual connotation. She laughs and continues, enjoying the rudeness of what is implied. When she finishes the photo-transfer, she shows the audience what she has done, nodding her head knowingly, imparting important knowledge. She instructs the audience members holding the stacks of bones to place them on the stage, and she makes gestures of respectful thanks as they assist her once again. She walks toward the mimed door USR, slowly

and steadily, turns the knob and opens the door. She looks back once more, warmly acknowledging the audience and exits, closing the door behind her.

Sc 3: TEENAGE MÍNÍKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP

Character Change: The performer stands with her back to the audience USR. She erects her posture and energetically shifts from Grandma Itáo to Teenage Mínikísí. She picks up the plastic cup. All of her movement in this scene is choreographed with instrumental and vocal cues in the music.

Audio begins.

Slide 6

Audio: *Q.U.E.E.N.*, Janelle Monáe (excerpt)

Mínikísí turns with the music to face the audience. She sips from her cup, the straw in the side of her mouth, and stands there moving her hips audaciously to the beat. She looks left then right, mimes the action of opening the door and slams it with the drumroll in the music. She catwalks DSC, and marks the beat with her hips again, snapping her fingers, the straw in her mouth. She looks left and right, mouths the words in the music while making flourishing gestures with her hands, and marks the drumroll with percussive hips thrusts as she lowers and slams the cup down on the floor. She picks up two bones, and uses one as a lighter to light the other one as a spliff. She takes a long draw from the spliff and mimes raucous laughter as she rolls SL on her back. She picks up another bone and gnaws on it like a chicken bone. She stands up and does a sequence of dance movement including a wave, repeating it twice. She jives on over to CS, picks up a couple bones and stuffs them in her bra — one side and then the other

— and observes herself in profile, pushing her bust up, looking at the audience as though looking in the mirror. She picks up two long bones, flat irons her hair with them and then plays the drumroll in the music with them as drumsticks. She picks up a small bone DSL and uses it as lipstick. She struts to the chair and steps up on, strikes a pose, then jumps down in time with the rhythm, one foot then the other, grabs the chair, swirls it around, straddles it, and gyrates. She steps over the chair, travels DS, winds her hips to the floor, and stands up. She does some hip hop steps and suddenly she freezes. She looks slowly USR where she sees Grandma standing there. She tip toes across the stage, DSL to DSR with caricature stealth. She nervously bites her nails watching as Grandma enters the room, walking down the path of bones. She faces the invisible Grandma Itáo standing DSL who is telling her off. Mínkísí rolls her neck, rolls her eyes and shrugs her shoulders. She confronts Grandma Itáo, walking to DSC, gesticulating disrespectfully. She turns her back and saunters US to CS. She turns to face the audience, steps to the chair, does gestures of boxing, and throws the chair down. She turns her back again and dances to USC, really getting down.

Audio fades out.

Mínkísí slowly stops dancing and is slowly overcome with remorse for what she has done. She walks slowly with trepidation to the chair. She crouches and slowly touches Grandma's white veil. She puts her head in her hand.

Sc 4: ADULT MÍNKÍSÍ MAKES THE CROSSING

Audio/video begins. Lights fade to intense blue wash.

Slide 7

Video: *Minkísí's Feet*, Mosa McNeilly
 Audio: *Breathscape*, Mosa McNeilly
 Lights: LEDs (blue)

Character Change: The performer shifts energetically from Teenage to Adult Minkísí.

Minkísí removes the bones from her bra as though she has given up on who she once was. Eshu's mask lies exposed, no longer hidden under the chair. As though succumbing to a fate she cannot deny, she picks up the mask and walks slowly to the USR corner putting the mask on backwards. She turns and faces the audience with the mask on, blindly groping the air. The mask resembles an instrument of torture from the times of slavery. She steps onto the path of bones and travels from USR to DSL walking on the bones blindfolded. She reaches the DSL end of the path and crouches down, jolting with each percussive echo in the soundscape, turning her head in the direction from which it came. She crouches, hunched over, trembling.

Sc 5: AMNESIA

Lights fade to daylight.

Lights: LEDS (red, green), DSR & DSL tips (white)

Adult Minkísí turns away from the audience, as though ashamed, and removes the mask. She rights the chair and hides the mask under it. She straightens the blue silk and Grandma's white lace fastidiously on the chair and places and replaces the water jug beside it. She looks at the mess of bones and shells scattered on the floor, quite overwhelmed. She crosses to SR and picks up the dustpan and hand broom. She sweeps up Eshu's cowrie shells as though they are rubbish, oblivious to their oracular encoding. She looks down at the bones, bewildered, shaking her head, running her

hands through her hair. She picks up and places bones on the floor, rearranging their placement, clearly confused, having forgotten Grandma Itáo's teachings. She places them, changes her mind and moves them, then reconsiders and puts them back. She continues this confused attempt to decode the fragmented Archive as the lights fade to black.

Lights fade to black.

Costume Change: In the black out, the performer travels USL, steps behind the art/set piece, and changes into the Colonial Mimic's costume. She tucks Mínkísí's dress in pulling the hem down through the neckline. She puts on the white lab coat. She steps in front of the art/set piece, takes the nose from behind the Archive, puts it on, and picks up the iPad.

Sc 6: THE COLONIAL MIMIC

Lights fade up, museum light.

Lights: DSR & DSL tips (white), DSC light (white)

The Colonial Mimic, Dr. Eleanor Sinclair, stands USC with her back to audience, fussing with her iPad. She turns to face the audience, surprised and somewhat unprepared. She delivers a speech about the bones. She walks DS to CS as she begins with a bit of an arrogant swagger, though a bit frayed at the edges. She does not seem to have it all together.

“Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Eleanor Sinclair from the British
Imperialist Underwater Subaquatic Archaeological Society. Today I will

discuss these artifacts before us, stunning in their textural surface composition, dazzling in their diversity of taxonomical categories and sub-categorical groupings.

(She makes a sweeping gesture referring to the bones all over the stage)

You will see their varying states of astonishing decay representing the four hundred year period roughly from the mid 1400s to the mid 1800s during which these b-, b-, b-...

(She searches for the word, doesn't want to say bones)

...skeletal fragments sifted down to the dark world of the ocean floor more than 3,339 metres — that's 1,826 fathoms; 10,955 ft, that's 0.6009179 nautical leagues — below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

(She walks DSL and gestures toward a group of blue bones)

Here we see the exotic array of colourful sea life adhered to the porous surface of these thousands of, of, of — osseous artifacts we have exhu-, exhu-, exhu-...

(She searches for the word and finds it)

... excavated from the oceanic depths. Never, in history has there been such a comprehensive discovery of such an extensive historical (she searches for

the words, unsure of their proper meaning) periodic tabula rasa, in the terra nullius of the ocean deep.

(She makes her way USR to a grouping of bones and crouches down to point them out at closer range)

Here, we have archived, ordered and categorized these cartilaginous shards and shattered bits of ossein in a variety of taxonomic schemes, according to the age of the tissue at the moment of demise, uh, uh, (euphemizing the actuality of violent death) from the, uh, intact state of the, uh, skeletal integrity from which these artifacts originate.

(She walks DSC to point out a grouping of long white bones)

Also ordered according to anatomical groupings — such as the femurs here, the tibias here, and the fibulas there. And we can determine with great accuracy the geographical regionality of originality of the ethnographical anthropologicality of the remains — to be seen — in African historiography of the osseographicality of these fragmentalizations of the ossificationality of these specimens.

(She crouches DSL referring to another group of bones)

These, we know. We know, because we know. We know because we wrote it, and it is known that what we know is written, and what we write is known and therefore known to be written.

We know, based on their dimensions, their colour and their subaquatic site of discovery, that these date back to the early to mid-1600s and originated in the region along the Atlantic coast of Africa reaching from what is now known as the Republic of Congo to the modern day Angola —

(She stands and addresses the audience as though in an aside)

... and both of which, mind you, made pleas to Portugal to invade to bring some semblance of order to the madness of civil war in the 1620s to 40s — precisely matching with the chronologicality of these specimens. And that is but one of the spectacular specificizations of ethnic taxonomonomies we have in our possession at the British Imperialist Subaquatic Despotic Archaeological Society.

(She approaches the audience again as though in an aside)

I would be remiss if not to mention, that this momentous discovery that we have made, is considered somewhat contentious, and has been referred to as so-called “entrenched in neo-colonial bias,”

(She rolls her eyes and shrugs dismissively)

... amongst certain circles, namely the “Black Studies” scholars...

(She makes a gesture with her one free hand of “air quotes” as though inferring “so-called” Black Studies scholars)

...Transnational African and Black Diaspora Studies scholars, the Black Atlantic and Middle Passage scholars, the Black Radical Tradition scholars the critical race theorists, the Anticolonial, Black feminist and (air quote) “Pan-Africanist” thinkers, scholars, professors, doctors, activists (accelerating and becoming breathless) — and the list goes on, but (stops and speaks emphatically) — their covetous fervour, and their romantic overtures about the (air quotes) “materiality of memory” betray that they are equally enthralled with our discovery. (dismissive) Whether we call these artifacts or Ancestors becomes irrelevant, when we all must agree, in fact, no one can deny that this treasury of osseous relics provides such rich data for the analogalogous analogs and annals of archaeologilogical historicizationality and deserve to be properly preserved and catalogued, displayed and archivally stored in the safe keeping of the reputable and unrivalled BISADAS.

(She slips into gibberish here, with recognizable words interspersed)

... addendum ... cranium ... Africa ... Yoruba ... Bakôngo ... Tobago ... Grenada ... 1781 ... *osanyin* ... oscilococcinum ... Yemayá ... Eshu ...

Ancestor ... memory ... palimpsest ... erasure ... *minkisi* ... Mojuba ... Ibo
landing ... Gullah ... Geechie ... genocide ... bones.

(She gasps and covers her mouth realizing that she accidentally said the
word “bones”. She begins to really unravel, her voice becoming shrill and
quite hysterical. She travels toward the chair, frantic to change the subject
and refers to the blue plastic water jug)

Next, here, we have a most remarkable exhibit of a living specimen whose
neither species nor genus ranking have we yet determined with absolute
certainty.

(She picks up the jug)

Its gender presents as male, though it shifts and does not conform to stable
generalizations, though it is evident that it is not human. Our team of world
class British antediluvian anthropologists on site in Haiti, experts on archaic
ritual practices, inform us that there is a phenomenological slime of
plasmodic composition found smeared on the tombstones erected for the
dead whose remains cannot be found. Remarkably we found traces of this
very same substance in the min- min- minera-

(She stumbles and stutters over the word “mineralogical”)

... mineralogical flakes we carefully scraped from the surface of some of the more puzzling of the artifacts — and we found the same plasmodic mucilagenous goop in the crevasses of the genitalia of this next exhibit. So, we give an old-world nod to the antiquarian cosmological customs of Haiti by naming this exhibit — Ghédé ... ”

Audio/video begins.

Slide 8

Video: *Hybrid Iconographies*, Mosa McNeilly
 Audio: *African Cookbook*, Randy Weston (excerpt)
 Lights: DSC light dims (white), tips fade to black (white)

Timed with the music, she unscrews the mimed cap on the jug and tosses it over her shoulder. She holds out the jug with both hands looking expectantly at the audience as though something is meant to happen — but nothing happens. She nervously shoots a sideways glance at the jug and reiterates the movement of presenting it, like “Ta-da!” — but still nothing happens. She looks into the opening of the jug and the Spirit of Ghédé suddenly shoots out in time with the music. She throws her head back, holding the jug in one hand, and follows the spirit of Ghédé with her gaze as he slowly flies around the room. She puts down the jug and follows Ghédé with her gaze for one more revolution around the room. Then, the Spirit of Ghédé enters her body, and her body jerks as she becomes possessed. A struggle ensues in which the Colonial Mimic transforms into Ghédé. She grabs her own lab coat by the lapel and yanks herself SR, SL, upward, downward, and turns to face US. She repeats the yanking motions until she tears her lab coat off, and runs depraved behind the art/set piece USL.

Costume Change: Behind the art/set piece, the performer takes off the red nose, puts

on Ghédé's cloak and then his double mask.

Sc 7: GHÉDÉ RUPTURES THE COLONIAL

Slide 8 continues

Video: *Hybrid Iconographies*, Mosa McNeilly
 Audio: *African Cookbook*, Randy Weston
 Lights: DSC light dims (white)

As the tempo in the music changes and as the moon appears in the video, Ghédé appears from behind the art/set piece. He makes a series of extremely percussive jolting movements — his hands, claw-like, his shoulders alternately jerking up to his ears — in time with the drums as he progresses from USC to CS. He performs a vulgar dance CS, with his hands clasped and poking from behind the cloak, suggesting a penis as he makes percussive pelvic thrusts. He picks up bones and wields them as daggers. He gesticulates in an irate rant directed at the audience. He backs up and thrusts his back against the US wall as the projected image of the house begins to rise. He stretches out his arms and exerts great effort to raise the house off the ground.

Audio/video blacks out (though is still running).

Lights fade to black.

Costume Change: The performer goes USL behind the art/set piece, removes Ghédé's mask and cloak and untucks Mínkísí dress. She crosses to the DSR quadrant of the stage and crouches facing US staring intently as the projected image fades up.

Sc 8: THE ANCESTOR

Slide 8 continues

Video: *Hybrid Iconographies*, Mosa McNeilly

In silence, Adult Mínkísí watches as the Ancestor appears in the projection. She stands as the face transforms from male to female. As the Ancestor's face pans down to the lower SR corner of the frame, Mínkísí rushes USR to catch the image. She stands expectantly with arms outstretched as the image fades to black.

Sc 9: MÍNKÍSÍ'S COMMUNION

Lights fade up to night time.

Song: *Gift of Love, Sweet Honey in the Rock*
(performed live, a capella)

Lights: DSR shin (blue), ESL foot (orange)

Adult Mínkísí draws her outstretched arms into her body as she leans her back against the US wall and slides down to sit on the floor leaning against the wall between two wooden plinths. She takes a few deep breaths and relishes in a moment of stillness and silence. She sings a song.

You are the gift of love to me and I will love you as I love you
All the ways
My door is open and you have the key, come in
Spread your magic all around
Move my house to where you like it, handle my flowers, taste my night
I'm only seconds from the point of no return, here I come, here I want to stay
The world forever breathes a warm and luscious view
I welcome the sun, I can't wait for the moon
Dawns early rain recalls the times when I'm like dew
Tell me, what does it do for you?
Does it wet your dreams to sunrise, sprinkle your fancy, or storm your release?
Or does a hurricane become a drizzling cloud?
Make the thunder quiet, sky blue
Here's my heart, wrapped up just for you
Keep it safe and warm, don't let the cold get in
We will never ever have to part

Keep on lovin' and lovin' forever and evermore
 You are the gift of love to me and I will love you as I love you³⁶⁷

Sc 10: MÍNKÍSÍ BUILDS THE BURIAL GROUND

Audio/video begins.

Slide 9

Video: *Encounter*, Mosa McNeilly
 Audio: *Still Moment*, Tunde Jegede
 Lights: DSR shin (blue), ESL foot (orange) remain
 LEDS (purple)

Mínkísí stands and tenderly makes her way around the stage standing the large rectangular bones up two at a time, leaning them against each other balanced in triangular formations. These are tombstones. This is an act of memorialization. She erects five tombstones, then crouches CS with the water jug and bathes her whole body with actual water from the jug, wetting her arms, her face, her dress in an act of purification.

Sc 11: MÍNKÍSÍ'S MAKES THE COSMOGRAM

Lights: DSR shin (blue), ESL foot (orange) remain
 LEDS (purple) remain
 DSR & DSL tips (white)

Mínkísí stands, replete, at peace, and gazes at the burial ground she has just built. An insight washes over her. She begins to build a Kikôngo cosmogram out of the bones on the floor. She makes the cross at the centre and then begins to describe the curve of the circle with small bones. She gathers a handful of bones and offers them to an audience member. She offers bones to two more audience members, and invites them to assist in

³⁶⁷ Evelyn M. Harris. *Gift of Love*. Sweet Honey in the Rock. 1985 by Flying Fish. FF 366. Vinyl.

the building of the cosmogram. When they return to their seats, she continues to work on her own.

Lights fade to black.

Stage lights and house lights snap up for bow.

Lights: DSC light (white)

Act One

J'AI SOIF³⁶⁸

a venture into middle passage memory

Performance Images

Photographs by Alvis Choi, Vero Diaz and Anique J. Jordan
Aluna Theatre, Toronto, Nov. 19 and 20, 2015

Mise en Scène

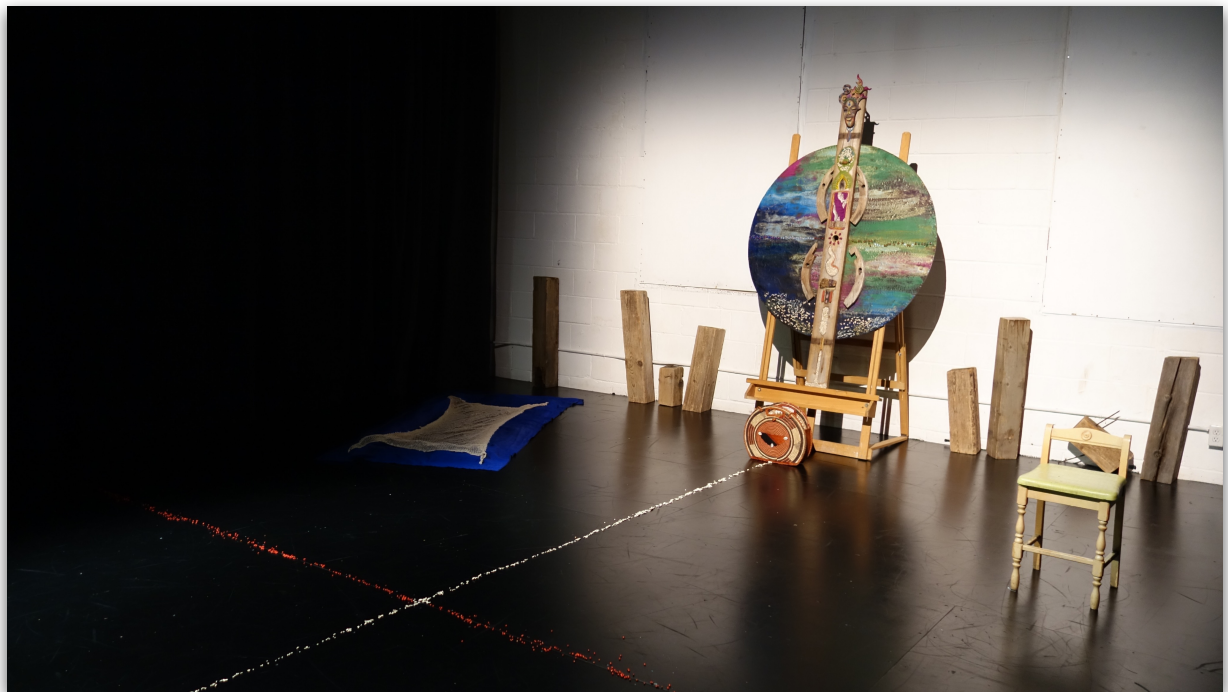


Photo by Alvis Choi, 2015.

³⁶⁸ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.



Olokún, Mosa McNeilly, 2015. Encaustic Mixed Media Assemblage, 47" x 72". Altered photo by Mosa McNeilly.

Prologue YEMAYÁ SOUNDS THE BONES

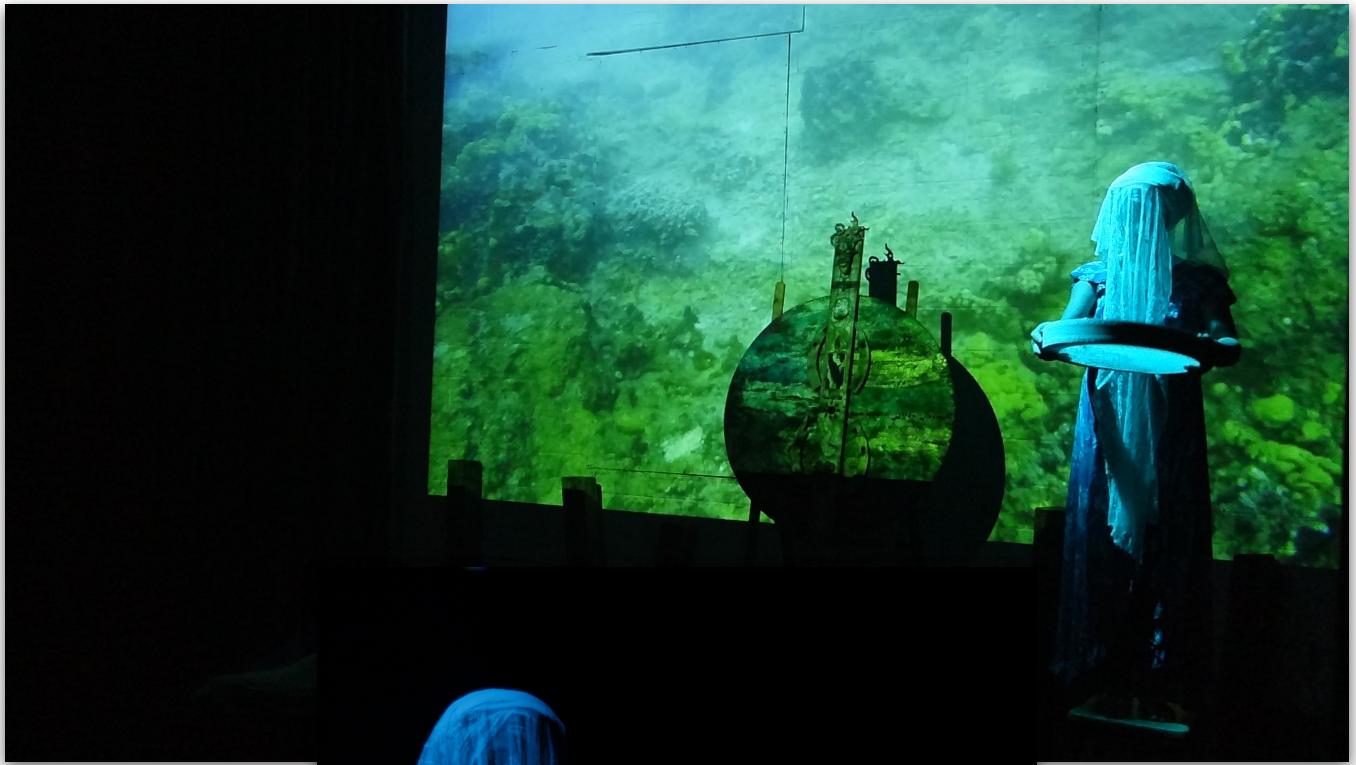


Photo by Alvis Choi, 2015.



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Cameo ESHU SETS THE SCENE



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 1: AT THE ALTAR



Sc 2: THE REVEAL



Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 3: THIRST



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 4: WATER PLAY



Mosa McNeilly

Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Sc 5: APHASIA



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Mosa McNeilly

Sc 6: RUPTURE MOTIF

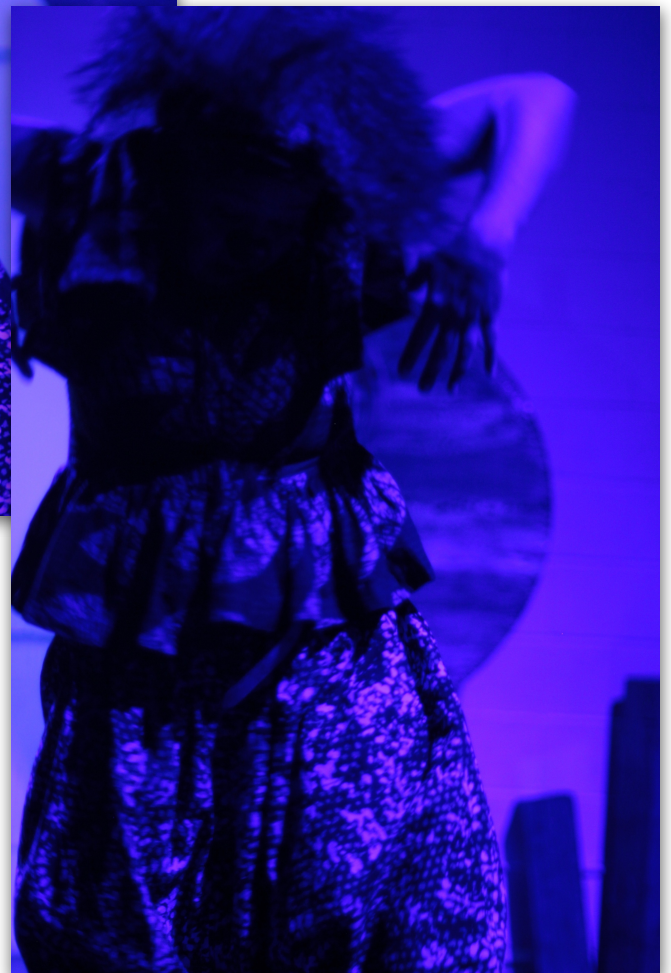


Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 7: DROWNING MOTIF



Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Sc 8: AT THE CROSSROADS

Sc 9: PAIN AND SORROW MOTIFS



Photos by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Sc 10: SEARCHING



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 11: FINDING THE ARCHIVE

Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Sc 12: FAILURE TO DECIPHER THE ARCHIVE



Photo by Alvis Choi, 2015.

Sc 13: COVETING THE ARCHIVE



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 14: CONFRONTING THE SITE OF RUPTURE



Photos by Vero Diaz, 2015.



Sc 15: REVELLING IN THE FLOW OF WATER



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Sc 16: FINDING THE BONES



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Act Two

SIPPING FREEDOM

a rememory tale of the bones of ubuntu

Performance Images

Photographs by Alvis Choi, Vero Diaz and Anique J. Jordan
Aluna Theatre, Toronto, Nov. 19 and 20, 2015

Mise en Scène



Prologue ESHU MAKES THE CROSSROADS



Photo by Alvis Choi, 2015.



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.



Sc 1: CHILD MÍNÍKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 2: GRANDMA ITÁO WORKS WITH THE BONES





Photos by Alvis Choi, 2015.

Sc 3: TEENAGE MÍNÍKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP



Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.





Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 4: ADULT MÍNKÍŚÍ MAKES THE CROSSING



Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.





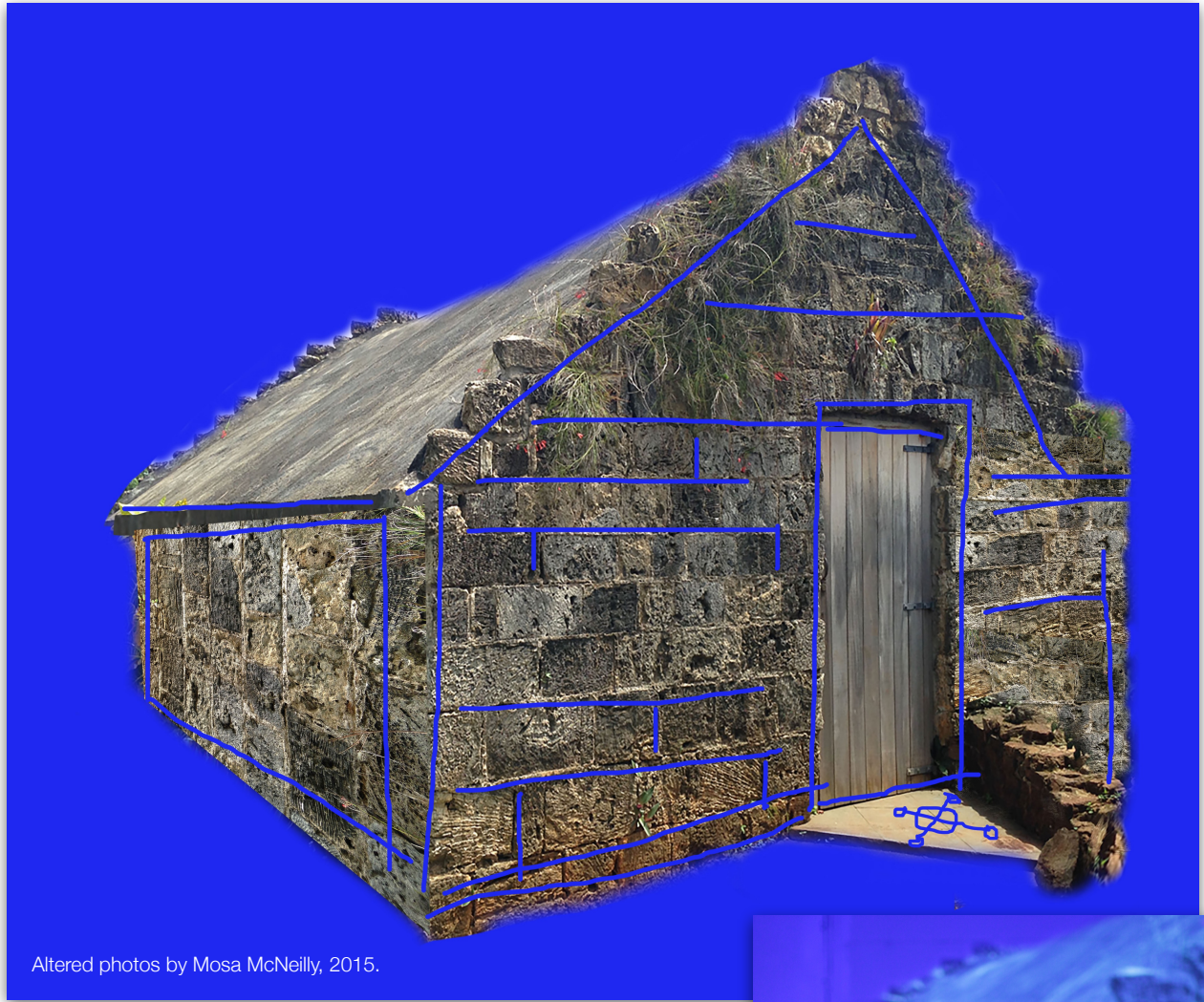
Photos by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 5: AMNESIA

Sc 6: THE COLONIAL MIMIC



Sc 7: GHÉDÉ RUPTURES THE COLONIAL



Altered photos by Mosa McNeilly, 2015.



Mosa McNeilly

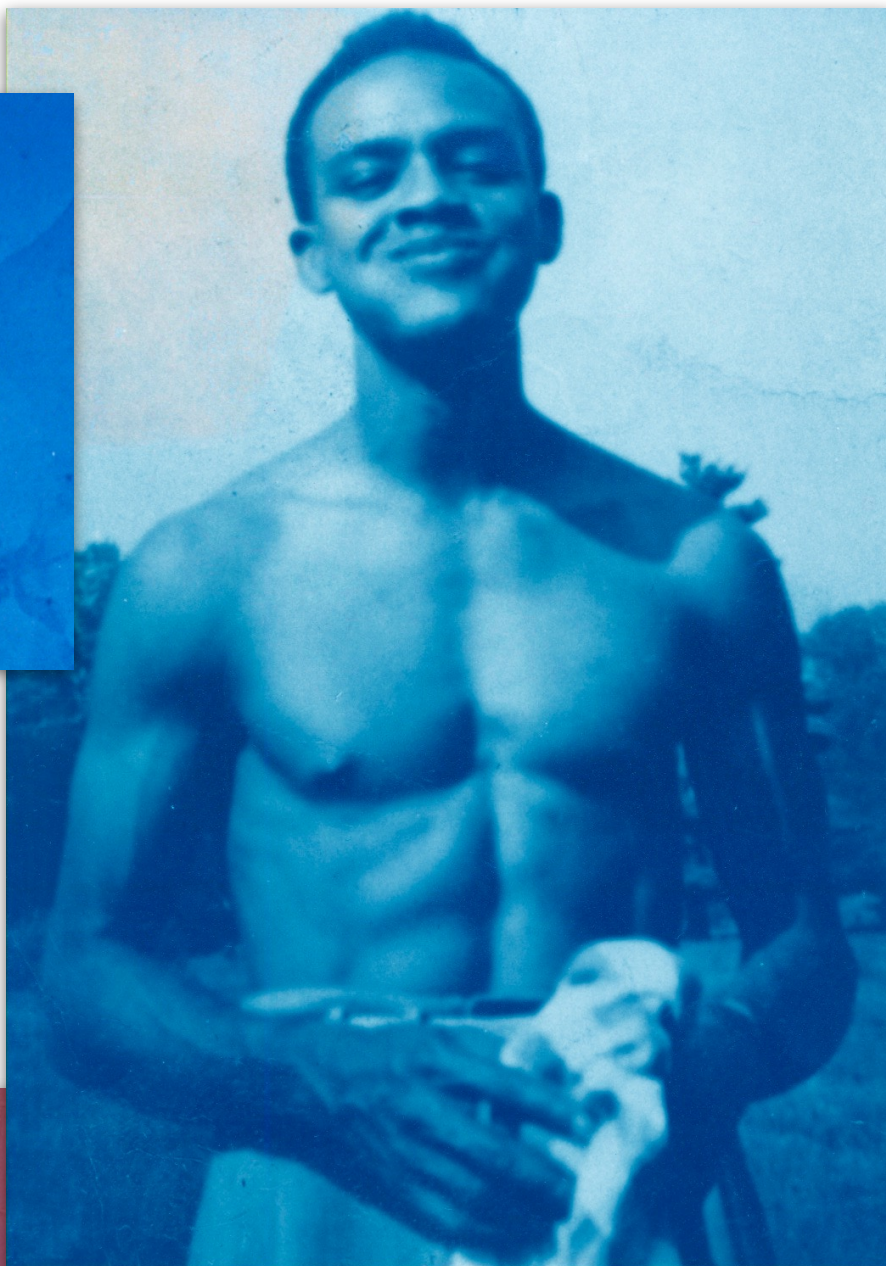


Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Sc 8: THE ANCESTOR



Photo of Lila Clarke, photographer and date unknown.



Sc 9:

MÍNKÍSÍ'S COMMUNION

Photo by Alvis Choi, 2015.



Photo of Walter E. McNeilly, photographer and date unknown.

Sc 10: MÍNÍKÍÍ BUILDS THE BURIAL GROUND



Photo by Vero Diaz, 2015.

Sc 11: MÍNÍKÍÍ MAKES THE COSMOGRAM



Photo by Anique J. Jordan, 2015.

Path Of Bones

INSTALLATION IMAGES

Photographs of work-in-progress by Mosa McNeilly
The Hive Studio, Alton, Ontario and Bones Studio, Guelph, Ontario
May to October, 2015



















Sources

Discography

Harris, Evelyn M. *Gift of Love*. Sweet Honey in the Rock. 1985 by Flying Fish. FF 366. Vinyl.

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Compact disc.

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Compact disc.

Weston, Randy. *African Cookbook*. Tenor Saxophone — Pharaoh Saunders. 1992 by
Verve Records. 511 857-2. Compact disc.

Photography

Choi, Alvis. Photographs of live performance of *Sipping Freedom & J'ai Soif*,³⁷⁴ Aluna
Theatre, November 20, 2015.

Diaz, Vero. Photographs of dress rehearsal of *Sipping Freedom & J'ai Soif*,³⁷⁵ Aluna
Theatre, November 19, 2015.

Jordan, Anique J. Photographs of live performance of *Sipping Freedom & J'ai Soif*,³⁷⁶
Aluna Theatre, November 20, 2015.

Videography

³⁷⁴ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Under Currents*, 2015. Video. Footage by Alex Gelis.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Ocean Floor*, 2015. Video. Footage by Alex Gelis.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Surfaces*, 2015. Video. Source photographs by Mosa McNeilly.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Textures of Blue*, 2015. Video. Source photographs by Mosa McNeilly.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Mínkísí's Crossing*, 2015. Video. Source photographs by Mosa McNeilly.

Archival photographs of Walter E. McNeilly, Clement McNeilly and Lila Clarke, date and photographer unknown.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Hybrid Iconographies*, 2015. Video. Source images and photograph of Fort James in Plymouth, Tobago by Mosa McNeilly. Archival photographs of Walter E. McNeilly and Lila Clarke, date and photographer unknown.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Encounter*, 2015. Video. Source photographs by Vero Diaz (of performance *In the Realms of Olokún*), and by Mosa McNeilly. Artwork in video by Mosa McNeilly, *Sapelo*, 1995. Mixed media assemblage, 134" x 61".

Visual Art

McNeilly, Mosa. *Olokún*, 2013. Encaustic mixed media assemblage, 47" x 72".

McNeilly, Mosa. *Path Of Bones*, 2015. Encaustic mixed media installation.

McNeilly, Mosa. *Sapelo*, 1995. Mixed media assemblage, 134" x 61".

Archive of Appendices



Mosa McNeilly presents

SIPPING FREEDOM & J'AI SOIF

a performance art installation in two acts

FRI. NOV. 20. 2015

6.30PM DOORS OPEN

7.00PM PERFORMANCE

ARTIST TALK & INSTALLATION

ALUNA THEATRE
1 WILTSHIRE AVE. #124
DUPONT AND LANDSDOWNE

\$10 IN ADVANCE \$15 AT DOOR

VISIT: TINYURL.COM/MOSAPERFORMANCE

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*I dedicate this work
To my Father, Walter Earle McNeilly,
To my Grandmother, Lila Clarke,
And to our Middle Passage Ancestors.*

Mosa McNeilly

presents

SIPPING FREEDOM & J'AI SOIF*

a solo performance art installation in two acts

This workshop production is the culmination of Mosa's major research portfolio, completing her Masters of Environmental Studies at York University. In this work-in-progress, she works through hybrid cultural/spiritual practices which she identifies as tools for becoming. The methodologies in her research depend on engaging Black radical imagination, confronting Middle Passage memory, and embodying the Sacred. She proposes these methodologies as praxes of freedom.

The Production Team

Creator, Director, Producer:	Mosa McNeilly
Dramaturge:	Honor Ford-Smith
Dramaturgical Team:	Erin Howley Anique J. Jordan Farrah Miranda
Dramaturgical Support:	Ali Garrison Goldie Sherman Charmaine Lurch
Sound, Lighting & Video Technician:	Gordon Foster
Lighting Design Assistant:	Trevor Schwellnus
Stage Assistants:	Erin Howley Chelsea Fung Kelsey Rideout
Photo Documentation:	Anique J. Jordan Vero Diaz Alvis Choi

* The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

Video Documentation:	Alex Gelis Alvis Choi
Publicity design:	Anique J. Jordan
Publicity photos:	Anique J. Jordan, Vero Diaz
Artwork in photo:	Mosa McNeilly, "Sapelo," 1995. Mixed media assemblage, 134" x 61".
Refreshments:	Chelsea Fung Farrah Miranda

Cast Of Characters

Mosa McNeilly	Yemayá, Ocean Orisha The Clown Eshu, Trickster & Guardian of the Crossroads Child, Teenage & Adult Mínkísí Grandma Itáo, Keeper of the Bones Dr. Eleanor Sinclair, Colonial Mimic Ghédé, Guardian of the Burial Ground
---------------	--

SIPPING FREEDOM & J'AI SOIF*

a solo performance art installation in two acts

Act One

J'AI SOIF:* a venture into middle passage memory

Bringing clown, movement and installation together, and working in silence, this act is a meditation on loss, disorientation and reparation, drawing on hybrid Yoruba and Vodou iconographies.

Prologue	YEMAYÁ SOUNDS THE BONES
Video:	<i>Under Currents</i>
Video Footage:	Alex Gelis

Cameo	ESHU SETS THE SCENE
--------------	---------------------

* The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

Audio: *Morning Light*, Fode Musa Suso (excerpt)

Entracte Video: *Surfaces*
Audio: *Liteya*, Lokua Kanza

Sc 1: AT THE ALTAR

Sc 2: THE REVEAL

Sc 3: THIRST

Sc 4: WATER PLAY

Sc 5: APHASIA

Sc 6: RUPTURE MOTIF

Sc 7: DROWNING MOTIF

Sc 8: AT THE CROSSROADS

Sc 9: PAIN & SORROW MOTIFS

Sc 10: SEARCHING

Sc 11: FAILURE TO DECIPHER THE
ARCHIVE

Sc 12: COVETING THE ARCHIVE

Sc 13: CONFRONTING THE SITE OF
RUPTURE

Sc 14: REVELLING IN THE FLOW OF
WATER

Sc 15: FINDING THE BONES

Entracte Video: *Textures of Blue*
Audio: *Makombo*, Geoffrey Oryema

OLOKÚN, 2013. Encaustic mixed media assemblage, 47" x 72"; stands as a set piece in the *J'AI SOIF** and the *SIPPING FREEDOM* art installations.

Act Two

SIPPING FREEDOM: a rememory tale of the bones of ubuntu

Bringing mask, audio, video and voice into the mix, this act dwells in the liminal space between the mythic and the mundane, and reflects on indecipherability, mourning and becoming.

Prologue ESHU MAKES THE CROSSROADS
Video: *Ocean Floor*
Video Footage: Alex Gelis
Audio: *Under The Tree*, Fode Musa Suso (excerpt)

Sc 1: YOUNG MÍNÍKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP

- Sc 2:** GRANDMA WORKS WITH THE BONES
- Sc 3:** TEENAGE MÍNÍKÍSÍ IN GRANDMA'S WORKSHOP
Audio: *Q.U.E.E.N.*, Janelle Monáe (excerpt)
- Sc 4:** ADULT MÍNÍKÍSÍ MAKES THE CROSSING
Video: *Mínkísí's Crossing*
Archival Photos: Photographer Unknown
Audio: *Breathscape*
- Sc 5:** AMNESIA
- Sc 6:** THE COLONIAL MIMIC
Video: *Hybrid Iconographies*
Audio: *African Cookbook*, Randy Weston (excerpt)
- Sc 7:** GHÉDÉ RUPTURES THE COLONIAL
Video: *Hybrid Iconographies* (continued)
Altered photo in video: Fort James in Plymouth, Tobago
Audio: *African Cookbook*, Randy Weston (continued)
- Sc 8:** THE ANCESTOR
Video: *Hybrid Iconographies* (continued)
- Sc 9:** MÍNÍKÍSÍ'S COMMUNION
Song: *Gift of Love*, Sweet Honey in the Rock
- Sc 10:** MÍNÍKÍSÍ BUILDS THE BURIAL GROUND
Video: *Encounter*
Photographs: Vero Diaz
Artwork in video: *Sapelo*, 1995. Mixed media assemblage, 134" x 61".
Audio: *Still Moment*, Tunde Jegede
- Sc 11:** MÍNÍKÍSÍ MAKES THE COSMOGRAM

Audio recording, *Breathscape*, engineered by Jeff Bird.

PATH OF BONES, 2015. Encaustic mixed media installation.

This art installation is comprised of over 200 pieces of slate, eight reclaimed wooden plinths, 500 cowrie shells, digital image projections and sound. It serves as the set within

which the performance *SIPPING FREEDOM* occurs. Treating the surfaces of the stones with the encaustic techniques of painting, photo-transfer, layering, gouging, and *sgraffito*, this work conveys concepts of fragmentation, indecipherability, violence and erasure. The stones form a double-coded metaphor, simultaneously representing the palimpsestic archive and the optic of a path of bones on the ocean floor. The metaphor of the palimpsest conveys the decolonial work of rewriting colonial history by overwriting it with recovered historical archives and futurist narratives of possibility.

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs of the artist's father Walter E. McNeilly, and her grandparents Lila Clarke and Clement McNeilly are photo-transferred onto the stones and incorporated into images in the videos. These images come from the artist's personal archive — dates unknown, photographer/s unknown.

ARCHIVAL TEXTUAL SOURCES

Text photo-transferred on the stones comes from varied sources:

Helen Bannerman, *The Story Of Little Black Sambo* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC) 1966.

Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: New American Library) 1987.

Mosa McNeilly, excerpts from major research proposal, 2015, and from hand-written journal entries, 2014.

Walter E. McNeilly, excerpts from hand-written notes, 1954, from the artist's personal archive.

Nathan Thomas, excerpts from a copy of a hand-written letter, circa 1830s to 1840s; included courtesy of his direct descendant, Ali Garrison.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We live, work, worship and play on unceded Indigenous land, and I acknowledge the absented presence of the peoples of this region. With the Aawandaron, Anishnabe, Haudenosaunee, Métis, Mississauga of the New Credit, Six Nations, and Wendat peoples and their descendants, I stand as an ally. I am grateful for Indigenous teachings about how to live a life imbued with Spirit in harmony with this land. *Gchi-miigwetch*.

I pour libation in a symbolic gesture of giving sustenance to my Ancestors before I release this work into the world. As the Yoruba proverb declares, “If we stand tall, it is because we stand on the shoulders of many Ancestors.” They came first. They gathered the stones and laid the path on which we now trod. I salute the cosmological entities of Yemayá, Eshu and Ghédé who open the way for this work to manifest. My thirst for communion with the Sacred is always answered with ambrosia from the Ancient Ones from which I have sipped and sipped throughout. While I claim authorship, it is my understanding that my work is infused with irrepressible histories that come through me. In earnest I have done my best to listen and to receive, to shape and to transmit a work that bears a worthy representation of this informing resource. *Ashé.*

M. Jacqui Alexander entered my life through her iconic masterwork, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.^{*} Her groundbreaking scholarship on praxes of the Sacred is the touchstone of my research on embodying the Sacred. The profound impact of my experience, with my daughter, in residency with Prof. Alexander at The Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality continues to reverberate through my cultural and spiritual work.

M. NourbeSe Philip’s epic work of poetry and memorialization, *Zong!*,^{**} spoke to me with the consequence of an oracle and anchored my research in Middle Passage memory. Her attendance at an early iteration of Act One of this performance art installation and my participation in two of her commemorative durational readings of *Zong!* have moved my work in meaningful ways.

SPECIAL THANKS

I know I am not alone in declaring that Honor Ford-Smith’s course, “Cultural Production Workshop — Performance-based Practice”, was a pivotal event in my life. It initiated a movement of growth in my arts practice, a deepening of my political analysis, and the cultivation of intellectual and artistic community. Prof. Ford-Smith brought her intuitive exactitude, her comical wit, her illustrious scholarship and her seasoned artistry to the supervision of this portfolio and this performance art installation. She has midwived, from the often unwieldy breadth of my vision, kernels of glimmering lucidity.

Of great importance to me is the constellation of remarkable colleagues and companions who have gathered into my life and I have come to cherish. Through the course of this graduate studies odyssey, our conversations have been the site of insurgent meaning-making. Together, we have poured autopoietic ambrosia into one another which has rescued and sustained us. Aku Brown, Vero Diaz, Chelsea Fung, Tina Garnett, Ali Garrison, Alex Gelis, Brandon Hay, Charlotte Henay, Erin Howley, Anique J. Jordan, Charmaine Lurch, Farrah Miranda, Goldie Sherman, Ngozi Obasi Umoya, Xxaalhh, and Anne Zbitnew — together, we are conjuring an irresistible future.

Vivian Gladwell and Ali Garrison were my accomplished mentors in the clown and voice work that I did in the development of this portfolio. Andrea Bird and Alicia Miecznikowski's generously opened their studios to me for the development of the encaustic and movement work. My sister Laura McNeilly and my cousin Brenda MacDonald willingly took my daughter into their care on so many occasions so that I could concentrate on this work.

And for my daughter, Malkah McNeilly-Abdulhamid, who beckons me to bring the best of myself to everything I endeavour to do, it is my hope that this work, which has taken me from her in so many ways, will one day be meaningful to her.

SPONSORS

I wish to thank the generous sponsors of this workshop production.

Alex Gelis
Charlotte Henay

Bushra Junaid
John Leacock

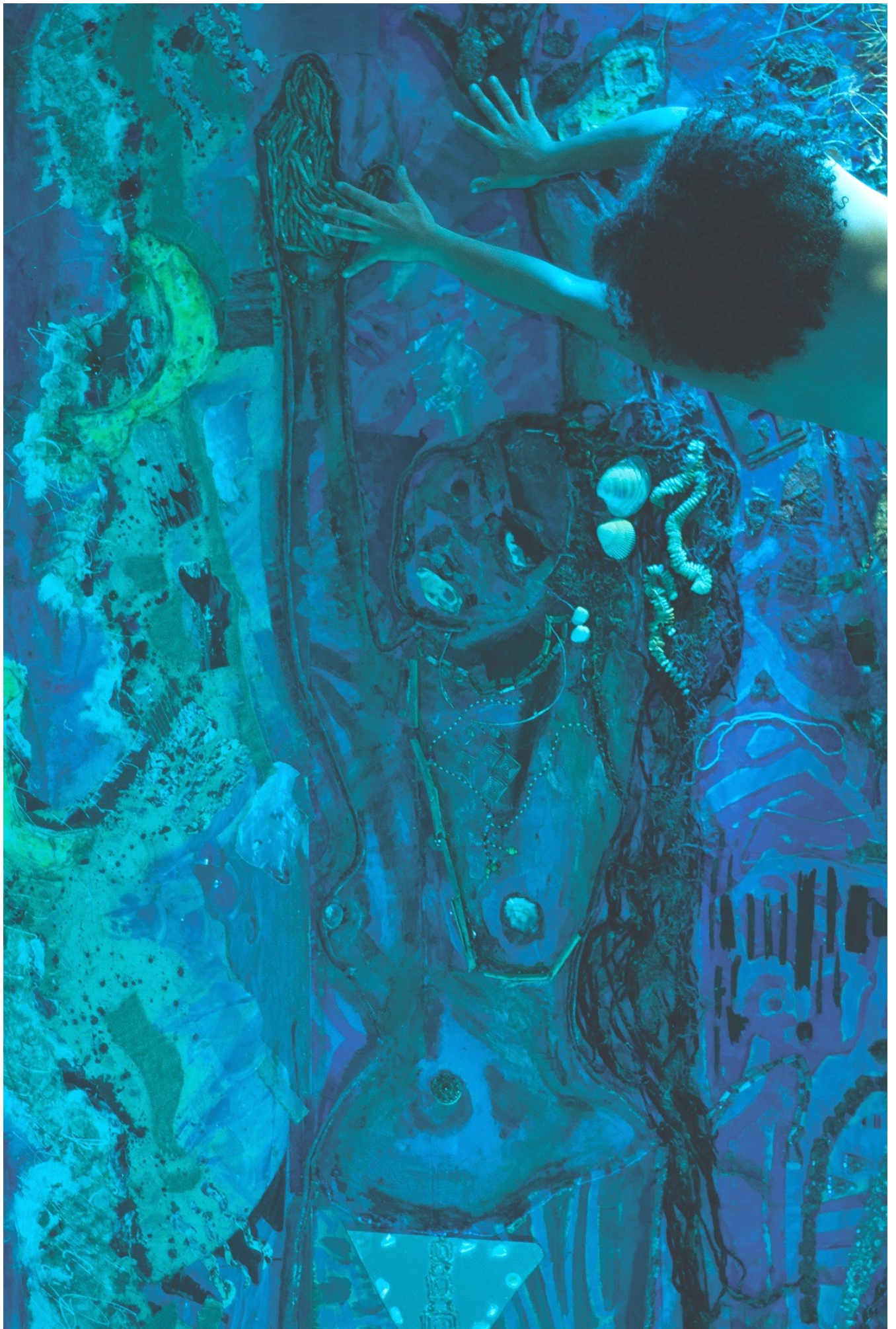
ALUNA THEATRE

The artistic mission of Aluna Theatre is to embrace the myriad of voices, cultures, and stories of our population, which are transforming the landscape of Canadian theatre. We encourage new hybrids of theatre evolved from a rich collaboration of experiences, performance traditions and media by engaging both emerging and established theatre professionals.

BIO

MOSA MCNEILLY is a visual artist, performer, researcher and educator. Working through interdisciplinary research methodologies she investigates themes of Black radical imagination, Middle Passage memory and embodying the Sacred as creative praxes of freedom and self realization. In her twenty-five year career, Mosa's art and performance works have been exhibited, published and performed extensively, she has lectured and spoken on panels in universities and has received numerous arts and academic awards. She has delivered hundreds of performances and community arts and arts education projects in elementary, intermediate, secondary and post-secondary schools, reaching thousands of learners. Her work has been featured in publications such as Canadian Women Studies, Revue Noire, American Psychologist, and Borderlines, has been shown in galleries such as A Space, Harbourfront Centre, Galerie Céline Allard in Toronto, and Pier 21 in Halifax. She has performed in such venues as Royal Ontario Museum, Ontario Place in Toronto, Dalhousie University in Halifax, and Lloyd Best Institute in Trinidad. She

has made lecture presentations at such institutions as York University, University of Waterloo, and OCAD University; Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Hamilton, and the Ontario Black History Society. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design and The School of the Toronto Dance Theatre, with studies at the Parsons School of Design and the Royal Conservatory of Music, she is currently completing her graduate studies in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies.



Aquatic Register

SONIC FIELD OF PORTFOLIO

1. Still Moment	5:43	Tunde Jegede
2. Liteya	2:47	Lokua Kanza
3. Makombo	5:01	Geoffrey Oryema
4. Where Are You, Oh Mother	3:17	Isabel Bayrakdarian
5. Issa	3:10	Dobet Gnahoré
6. Khabone-n'daw	3:51	Dobet Gnahoré
7. Common Threads	4:15	Bobby McFerrin
8. 23rd Psalm	3:07	Bobby McFerrin
9. Exala	3:26	Sara Tavares
10. Minino	3:24	Sara Tavares
11. One Quiet Night	5:02	Pat Metheny
12. Touma	5:45	Diabate, Mamadou
13. Tajabone	4:01	Ismael Lo
14. Ana Na Ming	6:17	Salif Keita
15. Iniagige	4:33	Salif Keita
16. Gift of Love	3:38	Sweet Honey In the Rock
17. Jeito Faceiro	3:59	Virgínia Rodrigues
18. Depois Que O Ilê Passar	4:08	Virgínia Rodrigues
19. Deus De Fogo E Da Justiça	5:12	Virgínia Rodrigues
20. Morning Light	6:40	Foday Musa Suso
21. Under The Tree	6:31	Foday Musa Suso
22. Bones Breathscape	4:17	Mosa McNeilly
23. Healers	10:49	Randy Weston
24. African Cookbook	17:17	Randy Weston
25. Fly Like an Eagle	4:15	Seal

Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility

the black female body in flux

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Incorporating visual art, installation and movement, Charmaine Lurch and I co-created and mounted a collaborative performance that speaks to the construct of the Black female body as fungible. In this work we respond to Tiffany Lethabo King's dissertation, "In the Clearing,"³⁷⁹ and pay homage to Julie Dash's lush cinematic masterpiece, *Daughters of the Dust*³⁸⁰. We offer our audience a glimpse of the decolonized Black female body through the eyes of two Black women artists gazing upon one another.

Contrapuntal,³⁸¹ embodied and improvisational, this performance integrates drawing, movement and installation. Banners hung from the ceiling represent the optic of simultaneous vision, in which we explore visual representations of disappearance and emergence, presence and absence. The present absence of "the Native" and the absent presence of the Settler are represented by objects and their placement on the stage. We represent the disappeared Indigenous presence with two ceremonial shakers resting

³⁷⁹ Tiffany Lethabo King, "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes" (PhD. diss., University of Maryland, 2013).

³⁸⁰ Julie Dash, Cora Lee Day, and Alva Rogers, *Daughters of the Dust*, Film (1991. New York: Kino International).

³⁸¹ Contrapuntal: of or in counterpoint. [O]f a piece of music with two or more independent melodic lines. Accessed December 12, 2014. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/contrapuntal.

upon a piece of deer hide, reminiscent of an altar, and echoing the Indigenous cosmologies of ceremony and communion with the land. A sterling silver tea set filled to overflowing with soil represents the Settler's consumption of the land which he exploits, and the imposing presence of the settlement, even in the absence of the Settler himself. A long piece of white paper with drawing materials suggests this is a site of imminent cultural production.



Digital still of Charmaine Lurch from film, *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility: the Black Female Body in Flux* by Charmaine Lurch and Mosa McNeilly, footage by Kim Abis, performed at Crossroads, York University, December 2014.

The action begins with repetitive movement motifs symbolic of the toil of Black female labour on the plantation — scooping, lifting, digging, planting, washing clothes, sweeping and stirring the cauldron. We take turns replacing each other and imitating each other's movements. As each one is replaced, she disappears and re-emerges from behind the banners in a cyclical flow representing flux.

As the piece progresses, we set out to transform fungibility into solidarity. We attempt to do this by overwriting the dehumanization of the Black female body with sensuality and transformed vision. Unravelling the motifs of repetitive movement we begin to occupy and define space in individual irreplicable ways. By shifting into moving in simultaneity rather than sequentially, and then by allowing our movements to interact

with each other, we trouble fungibility and re-imagine it as solidarity. By taking turns draping each other in cloth and drawing one another, and by virtue of the stillness that this engenders, we draw the audience into contemplating the transformation of the Black female body into an embodied subject. We re-imagine the Black female body as a site of humanity worthy and capable of tenderness and love.

Each time we performed *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility*, Lurch and I were impacted by the responses from Black women in the audience — tears, experiences of resonance and heartfelt gratitude. We reflected on how the agency of Black women’s embodied practices of art and performance within the context of academia can counter the violences of erasure and catalyze the spiritual work of healing. Black women’s responses



Digital still of Mosa McNeilly from film, *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility: the Black Female Body in Flux* by Charmaine Lurch and Mosa McNeilly, footage by Kim Abis, performed at Crossroads, York University, December 2014.

reveal that this work speaks to those who possess a “hunger for transcendence;”³⁸² those who recognize the oppressions and thirst for freedom. By modelling the centring of Black female subjectivity and by reorienting the representation of our knowledges and

³⁸² Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, healing and community* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 18.

our bodies, we move from the margins of “modernity’s secularized episteme”³⁸³ to the centre of the discourse and praxes that our work engages. Working through embodied research methodologies to reframe a humanizing imaginary of Black female subjectivity suggests a palimpsestic repertoire of praxes geared towards freedom.



Digital still of Mosa McNeilly and Charmaine Lurch from film, *Refusing the Imaginary of Fungibility: the Black Female Body in Flux* by Charmaine Lurch and Mosa McNeilly, footage by Kim Abis, performed at Crossroads, York University, December 2014.

³⁸³ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 7.

Yemayá's Tides Meet Sapelo's Shores

IN THE REALMS OF OLOKÚN³⁸⁴

How is a sacred interior cultivated, and how does it assist practitioners in the task of making themselves intelligible to themselves?

M. Jacqui Alexander

And, in its fragmentation and brokenness the fragment becomes mine.
Becomes me. Is me.

M. NourbeSe Philip

This exhibition is a meditation on accompaniment; on yearning to feel the palpability of Spirit; on longing to know the viscosity of embodying the Sacred. Come, and contemplate. Can we make of the heart a portal through which the Divine may inhabit the body? Come underwater and walk this path of bones. Can we, in revisiting this site of dismemberment, open the way for re-memberment? Come and behold Yemayá at the crossroads, where water meets earth. Can we, in this encounter with the intricate labour of her rendering, and the vastness of her presence in this small room, come to know Sacred accompaniment?

Profoundly affected by M. Jacqui Alexander's epic masterwork, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, I reflect on the epochs of origin, migration, and diasporic location as

³⁸⁴ This art installation, *Yemayá's Tides Meet Sapelo's Shores*, formed the first iteration of what was to become the *SIPPING FREEDOM* art installation and marked a breakthrough in my artistic vision and aesthetic approach to this work. Drawing from photo documentation of the performance, *In the Realms of Olokún*, I created the imagery for the video, *Encounter*, in *SIPPING FREEDOM*, Scene 10, "Minkisi Builds the Burial Ground." This appendix represents the exhibition notes, artist statement and title cards.

temporally simultaneous; on notions of self, community and Ancestor as interchangeable; and on concepts of the Sacred, the erotic and the political as intertwined. Deeply impacted by M. NourbeSe Philip's poetic opus, *Zong!*, I inquire, how does ritualized arts practice speak to historical trauma? Can embodied ancestral memory, expressed through cultural production, suture the rupture caused thereby? What medicine does this particular interdisciplinary practice of visual art, installation and performance carry into the future?

YEMAYÁ'S TIDES MEET SAPELO'S SHORES

2014
17' x 24'

Found Object Installation: Slate, wood, rusted metal, light.

Here is the path of bones on the ocean floor. This is not a metaphor, nor is it poetic imagination, for millions of our Ancestors, over four hundred years of forced migration, sifted down through the depths to this aquatic grave. This pathway dwells vividly in my consciousness, and creates within me an insatiable thirst to gather those bones into myself, and recover what was torn from us there. Where does this path lead? To and from the door of no return. To and from the shores of Sapelo. To Eshu's crossroads. From Mojuba crossing. Across Kalunga line.

SAPELO

1995

134" x 61"

Mixed Media Assemblage: Acrylic, bamboo, bone, burlap, coral, dried fish, found objects, gauze, glass, ink, leather, metal jewelry, metallic pigment, mirror, moss, paper, plaster, rusted metal, seaweed, shells, velour, wire, wool.

From the amniotic brine of the sea, Yemayá carries forth the ever-reverberating voices and disintegrating bones of our Ancestors. She brings this archive to the surface, to the shore, to today. A member of the pantheon of sacred forces who accompanied us during the numberless crossings, Yemayá accompanies us still. She brings to consciousness, all harrowing and ecstatic textures of that passage, she hollers centuries of sorrow and rage into churning tides, and chants exhumed narratives into the present.

SHIMMERING FRONDS OF YEARNING

2010
26" x 22"

Mixed Media: Acrylic, birch bark, fabric, glue, leaves, metallic pigment, ribbon, sand.

Communing with the primordial hum of the earth, we reorder ourselves at a cellular level and our frequency aligns with her vibration. The earth wants this of us now. She beckons us to listen deeply to her wisdom: to meet her in the forests and by the rivers to receive her teachings; to come back to the land, each of us, and know her intimately. Some of us yearn for this communion. We long to feel her accompaniment. We know she is a portal through which we may enter the realm of the Sacred.

IN THE REALMS OF OLOKÚN

2014

Performance

Inspired by Prof. Ford-Smith's improvised performative engagement with the installation, *Yemayá's Tides Meet Sapelo's Shores*, I explore the erotic poetics of grief in a nude performance for an audience of one.

MOSA NESHAMÁ MCNEILLY

I am a celebrant and conjurer of beauty in a thirsty world. I engage in the slow, incremental practice of cultivating spiritual consciousness, by bringing my attention to embodying the Sacred in all aspects of daily life. I allow resonance, love and outrage to guide my artistic, political and academic work. The creative process is sometimes one of visitation, of being possessed all at once with a vision that I must race to capture before it dissipates. Or it is sometimes a more capricious inspiration, flickering in and out of visibility. My task is then to render what I strive to decipher. I have much to learn about the principle of less is more. So I have listened gratefully to the recommendations of my professor, Honor Ford-Smith, and fellow artist, Charmaine Lurch. They saw beyond what I saw, and challenged me to clarify my intent, my message, and what I want my audience to experience. I am learning to bring my inner process to a clearer external purpose.

Sea Scrolls

CHRONICLE OF SEMINAL WORKS

weaving an inner ecology of radical self-love: A DIASPORIC AFRICAN FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY OF RADICAL SELF-LOVE Plan of Study Proposal, November 2013

j'ai soif:³⁸⁵ A VENTURE INTO MIDDLE PASSAGE MEMORY Performance, Installation
Reflection Paper, December 2013

olokún Encaustic Mixed Media Assemblage, December 2013

yemayá Poem, December 2013

the jubilant cry of an intersectional dame: FALLING IN LOVE WITH NUANCED LANGUAGE THAT GIVES VOICE TO COMPLEX LIVED EXPERIENCE Research Paper,
February 2014

all that we touch is more beautiful: EMANCIPATORY BLACK FEMINIST ARTS PRACTICE AS A LIBERATIONIST POLITIC Research Paper, Photo Montage, April 2014

ecstatic crossing: VISIONING CROSSING OVER AS A WORK OF ART Performance,
Installation, Reflection Paper, April 2014

manifesto Poem, April 2014

³⁸⁵ The title *J'AI SOIF* is sourced from *Zong!* by NourbeSe Philip. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 74.

black radical love: LOVE AS THE MOTIVATING INNER RESOURCE IN THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM Research Paper, July 2014

reflections on the expansion of time: IN RESIDENCY AT THE TOBAGO CENTRE FOR THE STUDY AND PRACTICE OF INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY Reflection Paper, September 2014

yemayá's tides meet sapelo's shores: IN THE REALMS OF OLOKÚN Installation, Performance, October 2014

re-imagining the black female body: DECOLONIAL SPACES OF BEAUTY, VISION & THE EROTIC Research Paper, December 2014

refusing the imaginary of fungibility: THE BLACK FEMALE BODY IN FLUX Performance, Installation, Film, Co-Created with Charmaine Lurch, December 2014

islands of refuge: DECOLONIAL LOVE IN THE SETTLER COLONIAL LANDSCAPE Draft Book Review proposed for *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, December 2014

absence as omission as erasure: REIMAGINING BLACK PRESENCE AT FES Panel Presentation Paper, January 2015

sipping from the sacred: EMANCIPATORY ACTS OF EMBODIMENT Major Research Portfolio Proposal, February 2015



All that we touch is more beautiful
 Emancipatory black feminist arts practice as liberationist politics



"I BELIEVE IN THE
 FIRE OF LOVE
 AND THE SWEAT
 OF TRUTH"

"I freed a thousand
 slaves. I could have
 freed a thousand
 more if only
 they knew
 they were
 slaves."

WHEN I
 DARE TO BE
 POWERFUL
 TO USE MY STRENGTH
 IN THE SERVICE
 OF MY VISION
 THEN IT BECOMES
 LESS AND LESS IMPORTANT
 WHETHER I AM
 AFRAID

IF ART
 DOESN'T MAKE
 US BETTER,
 THEN WHAT
 ON EARTH IS
 IT FOR?

RADICAL
 SIMPLY
 MEANS
 GRASPING
 THINGS
 AT THE
 ROOT

narratives of
 erasure

black canadian
 geographies
 displace and fracture
 normalized place-meanings

reveling in a state of love,
 livity & upfulness

For me,
 personally and
 politically, there
 is no separating my
 womanness
 my blackness
 my transness
 from my
 me-ness

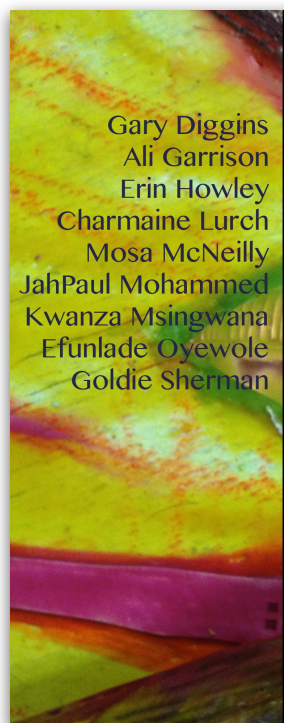
Knowing how to be solitary
 is central to the art of loving.

"We embody MULTISITED resistance
 to dominant constructions of race and gender."



ecstatic crossing
 visioning crossing over as a work of art
 ritual-performance altar-installation

T Crossroads
u Studio
e Gallery
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A HNES
p Building
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1 York
 University
2 4700
0 Keele
1 St.
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5 mosa
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3 @
0 rogers.com
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m 519-803-0499

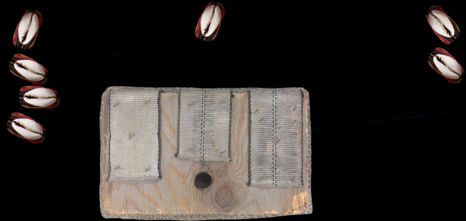


ecstatic crossing

Gary Diggins
 Ali Garrison
 Erin Howley
 Charmaine Lurch
 Mosa McNeilly
 JahPaul Mohammed
 Kwanza Msingwana
 Efunlade Oyewole
 Goldie Sherman

“I want to make decisions about setting the stage for my ecstatic departure, and in so doing, transform my current relationship to my mortality from one that contains some measure of distant estrangement, anxiety and fear, to one of creative imagining and visceral acceptance. As an act of radical reframing, I vision my end of life as a work of art. Through doing this work and facing my mortality in this way, I hope to transform how I live my life to some degree - to shed my attachment to habitual behaviours that are not life-loving, to galvanize and sustain an unwavering commitment to living life to the fullest, to dwell more and more in the cherishing of my child, and to develop a constancy in reveling in the state of love, livity and upfulness.”

This work is a meditation on preparing to die well - on putting one’s estate in order, on crafting end of life rituals, and on expressing gratitude to the beloveds one will leave behind. It asserts a counter-narrative to the hegemonic construct of the racialized body as a site of pain and as worthy of violence. This is a diasporic African contemplation on transitioning to the Spirit realm, on making sacred the Black body and on cultivating love.



j'ai soif

a venture into middle passage memory

MOSA MCNEILLY



Olokun, M. N. McNeilly. Encaustic mixed media assemblage, 47" x 72", 2013.

j'ai soif

a venture into middle passage memory

Deeply impacted by NourbeSe Philip's poetic opus, *Zong!* I venture into the Middle Passage in search of my Ancestors' bones. Working with the trickster archetype, I explore how ritual speaks to trauma, and how embodied memory is expressed through art, installation and performance.

On November 29th, 2013, I participated in a durational reading of *Zong!* marking the anniversary of the 1781 massacre of 150 enslaved Africans aboard the slave ship *Zong*. I found a child's voice in the text that night, that resonates with the clown character I am developing. Text from Philip's book is spoken in this performance, and is featured, photo transferred, in the set piece I call the mariner's log book.

I enter this exploration reflecting on the notion of what I am calling the triple-coded trickster standing at the crossroads of intersectionality - the intersection of the European clown, the African Orisha, Esu, and the Indigenous North American Coyote. I embark on this inner journey of healing historical trauma, reclaiming humanity and visioning transformation through improvisation, vulnerability and play.

519-803-0499

mosamcneilly@me.com mosamcneilly.com

(front cover) Tender Fragments of Woe Gathered to my Singing Heart, M. N. McNeilly. Encaustic mixed media assemblage, 40" x 41.5", 2012.



j'ai joie

a venture into middle passage memory

MOsa McNEILLY

Exhibition
Oct 1-17, 2014
Opening **Thurs Oct 9 4pm**
Performance **Thurs Oct 16 4pm**

XROADS/CROSSROADS HNES 283 YORK UNIVERSITY

photography by vero diaz & mosa mc neilly

List of Informants

I have cited the words of colleagues and professors from informal conversations we have had in person and on the telephone, from e-mail communications and from an inscription written by the author in my copy of her book. I have cited their words in the footnotes of this paper according to the Chicago citation style protocol for personal communications. I have received e-mail consent from all of the individuals on this list to reference their words and ideas in the manner in which I have done in this portfolio.

M. Jacqui Alexander

Afua Cooper

Honor Ford-Smith

Charmaine Lurch

Camille Turner

Nicole Angela Williams