

**When Palm Trees Break:
the Fractured Horizons of Black Caribbean World-Making
in the Midst of Crisis**

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Abstract

For communities pressed to the margins of society and the globe, particularly those who are poor, racialized or of the Global South, ecological crisis is not some unimaginable elsewhere but rather an omnipresent, pervasive reality. In the Caribbean basin, the increasingly powerful storms brewing in the warming waters of the Atlantic decimate various parts of the region yearly; volcanic activity darkens the sky and earth; landslides reconfigure geographies; drought and pestilence breed scarcity; and now pandemic wreaks havoc in spectacular fashion. My research explores the space that crisis takes up in the social and political imagination and material conditions of life, particularly in the context of the Caribbean diaspora. Via a theoretical and artistic conceptualization of “fracture”, I think through the ways Caribbean life and living may act as openings or cracks: quotidian practices that call up the tensions and possibilities of an unknown/otherwise/elsewhere, or that may tear, rupture and destabilize the catastrophic structures and conditions that mark our current world. The entrances and exits charted by a Caribbean radical imagination present portals to or from other worlds, windows into (un)imaginable ecologies of life and living, and alternate horizons of being. Using found images and text, I discuss the ways archives capture and preserve crises, and the ways artistic traditions may be used to ‘fracture’ this presumed coherency by offering new ways of imaging and imagining past, present and future.

Keywords: fracture, crisis, climate change, Caribbean, cultural production, artistic methodologies

Forward

a stirring in the belly

The heat and the stillness warn you long before a dark cloud ever appears on the horizon. Even the air holds its breath when time careens around the corner into summer and waters and winds begin coalescing off the west coast of Africa, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean sea. One Recording Breaking Storm after another. Growing up in the Caribbean, on the island of Antigua, hurricane season came with the promise of anticipation, anxiety, grief and loss. Through family, friendships and social media, the impacts of the ever-unfolding climate crisis on the Caribbean and African diaspora continue to haunt me. The anticipation and/or loss persists, is passed down through generations. The devastating storms I have witnessed echo the memories my mother and grandmother share. There seems to be something omnipresent about apocalypse here, and yet there is, simultaneously, a stunning resistance to the inscription of absolute annihilation.

These memories and questions animate my program of study into Black geographies and ecologies of desires which spawned a deeper meditation on the Caribbean as a site of vital political inquiry and imaginative theorizing on crisis, particularly the ecological crisis of colonization, imperialism and racial capitalism consolidated under the term climate change. The portfolio I present here is anchored by three areas of concentration. (1) Black Caribbean feminist geographies take up Caribbean thought and a black feminist lens to examine the ways human relations inform and are informed by built, felt and imagined landscapes; how histories, whether dominant or subversive, shape the land and our perceptions of it. (2) Black queer ecology considers critical questions at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and environment; offering alternative, nuanced ways of thinking the surrounding world; disrupting and reimagining notions of death and desire, longing and belonging, crisis and catastrophe. And finally, (3) a politics of visibility illuminates the ways the colonial project of imagine-making influences, appropriates and/or apprehends perceptions of and relationships to ecological crisis, specifically to ask questions about: the nature and use of the archive; the role of the colonized body in the historical-political project of looking and being looked at; and the ways African diasporic cultural production maps a different set of human and beyond-human relations.

This portfolio is divided into three sections or what I am calling *rif/ts*, referencing the geological ‘rift’ used to describe tectonic shifts that pull the earth apart, leaving space for a plethora of new activity; and the musical ‘riff’ which points to improvisation and repetition. Through these *rif/ts*, I use an

interdisciplinary approach to weave together theoretical and artistic considerations into the interstices that Black Caribbean intellectual, cultural and vernacular practices take up, move through and create in the face of crisis. *Rif/t* (i) is a collection of ‘brief doors’ into my thinking. *Rif/t* (ii) introduces these meditations through my conceptualization of fracture while *rif/t* (iii) examines the potentiality of fracture as both genre and methodology as well as presenting my own artistic experimentations with fracture using the mediums of collage, cyanotype and textiles. Descriptions of my methodology, including my use of materials, introduces these works.

Acknowledgements

I begin with the water, the land, the air. And the mountain of violent histories, the ongoing conflicts and contradictions, that mark the place from which I write and offer up this portfolio. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Anishinaabe, the Mississaugas of the Credit River and the nations of the Haudenosaunee.

These Americas are built on violence and erasure, and I bring these histories with me: the many arrivals and returns of my family, indigenous to one territory, making home in another, dis/placed by the forces of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and the ongoing war that is anti-Blackness. Wherever I enter, I must bring these histories into view. With this knowledge, this collective responsibility and struggle, I enter here in the hopes of making a different world.

My offering to this common vision of new world building would not be possible without the chorus of those that came before me, those who walk and struggle alongside me, those still to come.

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To the Black and Caribbean artists, poets, writers, thinkers — past and present, known and unknown — whose words and perspectives are sugar, water and machete.

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RIF/T i

“look ah watah...”

There’s flooding in Antigua. In Jamaica. In Central America. My social media feeds are inundated with images, videos, calls for supplies, social commentary, disbelief, rage, laughter.

—

Young boys dance and dive off the rocks of a waterfall in Christian Valley.
A waterfall that only appears when the island floods.

—

The street is now a sea, waves lapping against fences and verandahs. Suddenly, a jet ski comes whizzing around the corner, almost running into a partially submerged car. A flurry of laughter from all the houses.

A voice says, “tek ya time.”

—

An entire village flooded, stars glistening above and below.

The land is ocean is sky is ocean is land.

—

A young man records as the mud comes sliding down the hill above his neighbourhood, peeling back the land like a wound opening. The water stampedes towards him, jumps the fence, lays claim to the house. It moved so fast, as if it has always belonged, as if it is coming home. He closes the doors to the bedrooms, the bathroom, trying to corral the flood in a single area. As the water swallows the couch, the knick knacks, their legs, his mother says, “mi done, mi done, mi done, mi done, mi done.”

Her words sound like a prayer, a chant, a simultaneous declaration of refusal and a wail of despair. Perhaps it is both.

—

A brutal yet beautiful nature.

—

In *Poetics of Relation*, Martinician poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant, says, “over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse” (6). More eternal than apocalypse. These words made it clear to me: Caribbean thought and poetics are so crucial for the way forward/through because the present/future ecological apocalypse is already our past.

What is a rising sea to a people who so intimately know what it means to drown, to be drowned?

on fracture

Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none?

—SAIDIYA HARTMAN, *Loose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*

Water come inna mi room

Huh huh!

Mi sweep out some with mi broom

Di likkle dog laugh to see such fun

And di dish run away with the spoon...

—Lloyd Lovindeer, *Wild Gilbert* (1988).

In 1988, hurricane Gilbert devastated Jamaica.

Making landfall on September 12th, the cyclone spanned the entirety of the island, levelling the land, the economy and life as many knew it. Today, it is still known as one of the largest and strongest storms to rip through the region, claiming the lives of 318 souls across the Caribbean, Latin America and the southern United States. After the winds had passed, Prime Minister Edward Seaga told the Associated Press that Jamaica looked “like Hiroshima after the atom bomb.” In the wake of such extraordinary death and destruction, Jamaican reggae artist, Lloyd Lovindeer, wrote the deceptively funny tune “Wild Gilbert”.

The lyrics and video Lovindeer produced for *Wild Gilbert* contend with immense loss through humour, a common strategy of resistance and self-making used by communities and cultures made

vulnerable to numerous violences (Vasquez; Seshadri-Crooks; Butler, J:2003). The characters and scenes he paints play out the desperation and grief of near annihilation with a satirical flare that, rather than conceal injury, exposes the repeating, quotidian nature of crisis while breaking apart the normality of the event itself. In taking advantage of the scientific norm of naming Atlantic (sub)tropical storms, Lovindeer further personifies Gilbert as a conscious actor, not simply a benign system. This gestures to critical discourse that looks at Crisis of weather, climate, atmosphere and landscape as part of the political apparatus of dispossession and dislocation, forged and maintained by the machinations of empire, colonialism, capital and the ecological exploitation these processes necessitate (Glissant:1997, 1999; Sharpe:2016; DeLoughrey:2019; Yusoff). Yet, such discourses, like Glissant's reading of "landscape as a full character," see these phenomena of catastrophe not only as events and sites of exclusion but also of potential resistance, of world-building and of relation: "the individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history" (Glissant:1999, 105). When Lovindeer opens with, "well Gilbert... / now we can chat behind yuh back," he is resisting the absolute dominance of both the storm and the often accompanying narrative of (near) eradication and anonymity, instead offering up an alternative history, one marked by dispossession, yes, but, also, by agency, longing and desire.

Mi a look somewhere safe, dry and warm

Di youth dem a loot in di raging storm

We thank di Lord we never get hurt

Dem seh thank yuh lord for Mr. Gilbert

Cause! yuh si mi fridge? A Gilbert gimme

The tensions Lovindeer imaginatively captures here illustrate the way ecological crisis begets disparate vulnerabilities ("mi a look somewhere safe, dry and warm"), as well as opportunity for different arrangements of the socio-political economy ("di youth dem a loot in di raging storm"). The mechanism of humour allows for a different set of human and non-human relations ("yuh si mi fridge? A Gilbert gimme") to appear, signalling a potentiality within crisis that goes beyond the banality of loss and everyday atrocity experienced in the Caribbean, gesturing to new ways of making meaning and articulating existence.

I begin with Lovindeer's move to lyrically crack jokes in the face of environmental devastation as a way of naming and examining the intervening spaces Black, Caribbean imaginative and cultural practices take up, move through and create in the face of "imminent and immanent" death (Sharpe:2016, 13). This work follows Edouard Glissant's notion of history as scenes of rupture and

sudden emergence. Ruptures such as the “the belly of the boat”, “the depths of the sea”, and the unknown abyss laying “far ahead of the slave ship’s bow” (6).

I think of Lovindeer’s lyrical humour as a response to the ruptures of hurricane Gilbert, of displacement, trauma, poverty, a response that unsettles and breaks apart the totalizing narrative of catastrophe. I ponder these cracks - the crack of a joke, the crack of a whip, the crack in the hull of a ship through which the damned and dispossessed may “see beyond the end of the world and...imagine living and breathing again” - to discuss what I am calling “fracture”: a theoretical and artistic meditation on all the tension and possibility of an unknown/otherwise/elsewhere that exists in even the smallest of ruptures (Hartman: 2007). Of particular interest are the ways ecological crises impact and inform Black life and living in the Caribbean and related diaspora, and the myriad of ways communities have and are “picking a way through, round and over... the rubble... and the debris of daily lives” (Berger, 23) apprehended by racial capital, settler-colonialism, imperialism and anti-blackness.

Fracture

According to Merriam-Webster, ‘fracture’, from the Latin ‘frangere’ meaning “to break or shatter,” has many linguistic relations:

“dishes that are ‘fragile’ can break easily. A person whose health is easily broken might be described as ‘frail’. A ‘fraction’ is one of the many pieces into which a whole can be broken. But ‘fraction’ also once meant ‘disharmony’ or ‘discord’ - that is, a rupture in relations. From this sense came the adjective ‘fractious’, meaning ‘unruly’ or ‘quarrelsome’.”

Fracture also means “to cause great disorder in,” “to tear,” “to go beyond the limits of something such as a rule,” or “to cause to laugh heartily, so much as to “split one’s side.”

Fractured language is faltering and imperfect in its writing or speech, a fractured society is “split into so many parts that it no longer functions or exists.” In geology, fracture describes a fault in a rock, the way all minerals tend to break or the characteristic features of their freshly cracked surface.

With this fluidity of language, ‘fracture’ may be understood as both genre and methodology, offering a rich ground to examine - without prescription - the already fractured ways Black, Caribbean communities, and their diaspora, see, feel, perceive and articulate crisis, and live life under and through crisis. I hope to explore how ‘fracture’ may break open or push me beyond the limits of my own thinking and artistic practice. In this way, I seek the potentialities of making “common cause

with the brokenness of being” by sitting with the visual, textual and aesthetic realities of brokenness and all it may elaborate (Halberstan in Harney and Moten, 4).

By paying closer attention to fractures, can we find new or differing insights into the conditions, consequences and possibilities ecological crisis opens up? Is there something useful to be found in the rupture, the wound, the split - or whatever form the break might take - that fracture opens up? What do we make of the fractured histories, geographies and relations formed by and within the breadth and breathlessness of trans-Atlantic slavery and plantation ecologies? What knowledge do the various fractions offer that the promise or pursuit of wholeness, of repair, may occlude? What does it look like to practice refusal and choose differently, to choose difference, to choose disorder, to choose the inevitable chaos of crafting a new world, or, at least, interrupting this one? Can fracture hold and elaborate the chaotic, unruly, faltering and even fragile ways survival takes shape? How might Caribbean ways of living with, in and through crisis offer insight into the aesthetic and material practices that stretch out before and beyond our fractured horizons? Finally, how might artistic methodologies work to reveal and elaborate the textured unruly landscapes of a wild beyond?

Despite its significance in the social, economic and political structuring of the New World, the Caribbean is often under-considered, or thought of as too niche to warrant full inquiry. Once regarded as the crossroads of the world, a passageway to racial capitalism’s supremacy in modern human, and beyond human, relations, the archipelago has been rendered peripheral - “a slice of a slice,” as Thomas Glave says - by those very (neo)colonial forces (2008: 4). Yet, in the obscure(d) afterlife of plantation and property, a radical Caribbean imagination persists, offering rich ground to consider some of the most crucial concerns of the contemporary world. As such, Black Caribbean life and living, with all of its mundanities, urgencies and conjurings, anchor my curiosities. Caribbean thinkers, and the critical subaltern scholars who are in conversation with them, form the foundation of my research into the potentialities of ‘fracture’ as an orienting principle and methodology to explore the aesthetics of Black life and living, in the wake of ecological disaster, experienced across the African diaspora.

“Fracture” as Vietnamese poet, Ocean Vuong, meditates, “reveal[s] the briefest of doors.” (17). There, even in the smallest of cracks, lies all the tension and possibility of an unknown/otherwise/elsewhere. The crack, the split, the break, can act as an entrance or an exit, a portal to or from another world, a window into (un)imaginable ecologies of life and living, an alternative horizon of being. These “brief doors” - or what I am calling fractures - may materialize in quotidian acts of refusal and disorder that tear, rupture, or otherwise destabilize, the catastrophic

structures and conditions that mark our current moment. I see these fractures in the crack of a voice as it screams or sings or laughs, the space between one unruly, gyrating body and another, the silences that shape noise, the noises that shape silence, the shadows that shatter light. Here, I think along with Sylvia Wynter's (in Alagraa) prompt to enact a break and excise "our previous or pre-nuclear way of thinking, [that] is causing us to drift towards unparalleled catastrophe;" and Fred Moten's call "to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls." (4). This 'being in the break' that Moten and Wynter tend to in their own ways has occupied my imagination. Yet I reach for fracture not as a slight of hand or contrary move, but because of what I see as its hopefully generative mapping of the ecological and the geographic together; to think through both physical and affective structures, to attend to the whole composition and the fractions that both hold it together and belie its collectivity, or what Édouard Glissant refers to as "knowing ourselves as part and as crowd." (9).

For communities pressed to the margins of society and the globe, particularly those who are poor, racialized or of the Global South, ecological crisis is not some unimaginable elsewhere but rather an omnipresent, pervasive reality. In the Caribbean basin, the increasingly powerful storms brewing in the warming waters of the Atlantic decimate various parts of the region yearly; volcanic activity darkens the sky and earth; landslides reconfigure geographies; drought and pestilence breed scarcity; and now pandemic wreaks havoc in spectacular fashion before leaving the brutally sluggish processes of displacement, degradation, and debt to fester and flourish. Exploring the space that crisis takes up in the social and political imagination and material conditions of Caribbean life, is central to my research project. The theoretical atmosphere of my thinking is shaped in part by Bedour Alagraa's (2021) analysis of catastrophe, and Christina Sharpe's (2016, 104) meditations of weather as "the totality of our environments... the total climate" and that, "that climate is antiblack."

In her upcoming book, *Interminable Catastrophe*, Alagraa - drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott - (re)thinks catastrophe as political concept and category, not just as a singular or series of disastrous events. By analysing and expanding the epistemologies of catastrophe, Alagraa works to, following Spillers (in Alagraa 2021, talk), "build an adequate grammar" for apprehending our current planetary relations, strengthening our understandings of how catastrophe - as a tool of domination - actively structures social and political life. This theoretical work exposes the repeating contradictions of catastrophe, how it "signals The End" yet "fails to bring about The End" (Alagraa 2021, talk). This tension of immanence and imminence also echoes through the work of Sharpe, whose conceptualizations of Black being, in the wake of racial slavery and

plantation economies, contends with “the total climate of anti-Blackness” that punctures and frames the everyday. In the wake, Black death is both always on the horizon and already here.

Fracture, for me, does not exemplify the catastrophic per se, but, I believe, may be one way immanent and imminent catastrophe makes itself known in less spectacular ways: the fissures in a building along which it collapses, the cracks in a landscape parched by relentless heat, the many tiny ruptures, the sometimes imperceptible breaks that contour Black geographies. While signalling the catastrophic, fracture, by its nature, also betrays catastrophe’s frailty. Fracture: the way all minerals tend to break. It is in and along these fault lines that, I believe, the radical imagination, the stance of undefeated despair, the ordinary ways of living amongst unliveable conditions, take root, grow and render the entire structure untenable (Wynter; Berger; Sharpe; Butler, O.). This is where the contradictions and potentialities of fracture live: the crevices of air that form between walls collapsed by an earthquake, offering protection - however slight - from the crush; the fissures in the rock that hold enough moisture to sustain trees through a drought; the “brief doors” that are made and open up, that interrupt the continuity, institution and inevitability of catastrophe.

Carefully, my interest in ‘fracture’ is not one of monumentalizing or romanticizing injury, but instead exploring fracture as a possible aesthetic/vocabulary to think through “the problem” and “the potential break from the problem” in ways that contend with a socio-political economy that routinely and necessarily begets the rubble of “dispossession, debt, dislocation and violence” (Alagaa; Wynter; Berger; Harney and Moten, 1). Put another way, ‘fracture’ is an attempt to grapple with the order of our current world by telling the truth about this world and its everyday atrocities. Sylvia Wynter proposes a way through this dilemma via a new genre of the Human, that is, by harnessing our capacity to tell a different story, one that calls up a “nonhierarchical we” (Alagaa:2018, 164) and draws on a radical imaginary to lead “a way out” (Alagaa:2018, 165) of the “narratively condemned status” of non-Being (Wynter:1994, 70; Fanon). Further, Saidiya Hartman calls for “another arrangement of the possible,” to consider other modes of living, “new imaginaries” in response to quotidian cruelties of the catastrophic. It is in this tradition, I explore the many fractures that a radical Caribbean imagination makes along the horizon of non/Being.

In this research, I see fracture as an aesthetic consideration and possible methodology, a way to signal the breach and the way out of the breach of ubiquitous violence and loss. I believe the fluidity of fracture may create a space for me to think through and visualize the multiple ways Black life, particularly the radical Caribbean imagination that punctuates life in the tropics, ruptures the brutal cycle of overlapping and compounding crises that structure these societies. I think of the ways the

Caribbean harnesses humour to push the limits of a 'right' response to unlivable conditions, disorienting the normality of the event itself; how our dialects make clear the ways that dominant "grammars and tenses" falter at carefully and adequately holding social worlds (Sharpe:2018, 171); or the ways our bodies, locked in the ritual and raucousness of carnival, enact a call and response that brings up past and present protest; I think of all the ways the subaltern make a break for it, it being the anything and everything of another place, another way of being, of freedom, with all the "undefeated despair" - as Berger intones - these ways of knowing and seeing encompass and entail. Utilizing creation-research methods I seek to enter fracture, think with it, and explore its potential to, as Sylvia Wynter urges, tell a different story of the Human, disrupting the "previous... way of thinking [that] is causing us to drift towards unparalleled catastrophe" (Wynter; Alagraa). Drawing on this literature will ground my creative experimentations with 'fracture' and its usefulness in exploring the fugitive geographies of Black Caribbean life, living and longing. Ultimately, I seek not remedy or prescription, but, by "sitting in the room" with fracture (Brand, 19), hope to fracture the aesthetic itself, to reveal even the briefest path to world-making, to leave the conversation, as Sylvia Wynter's work urges and exemplifies, ajar.

portfolio: fractured horizons

The misery of our lands is not only present, obvious. It contains a historical dimension (of not obvious history) that realism alone cannot account for.

—ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*

Somewhere, somehow something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full "recovery" is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.

—JUDITH BUTLER, "Afterward," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*

The archive hosts a litany of breaks: occlusions, erasures and omissions necessitated by the use of various modes of documentation to produce "particular "types" of regulated and regulatable subjects" (Campt, 8). For example, the way ethnographic photography has been used to classify colonial figures into "a set of visual indices" (Campt, 55), or the way the ship's ledger rendered abducted Africans as unnamed, un-gendered measures of cargo (Spillers). Archival processes temporally, historically, geographically apprehend the marginalized and dispossessed in fixed states of non-being/non-citizen/non-human. In their own interrogation of the archive, Tina M. Campt asks, "how do we contend with images intended not to figure black subjects" (3), while Christina Sharpe considers "new ways of entering and leaving the archives" that do not "reinscribe our own annihilation" (2016, 13).

In this context, I think of fracture as both a method of encountering the archive and a way of perceiving its contents, where the "accumulated erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings" (Sharpe:2016, 12) register as cracks that make themselves visually, audibly and affectively known. I think, for example, of encounters with my own family's archives - boxes full of photographs, mouths

full of stories, strewn across the Atlantic from Antigua to Canada, Florida to New York, Jamaica to Scotland - visual and oral narratives full of thick black lines of redaction; the sound of torn pages; the subtle peaks and valleys a pen makes on paper as it tries to capture the joys, griefs and fantasies scattered across generations. I imagine running a finger along an unfolding landscape of history, of collective memory, and finding a series of pressure points, fissures and already obliterated ruins. For the archive, in Glissant's formulation, with its "uncertain evidence," is always already fragile, and, through the lens of fracture, we know things that are fragile *tend to break easily*. But who, if anyone, does the breaking, who is broken? It might be seductive to think only in terms of the ways the dispossessed are acted upon, cast as the ethnographic still image or apprehended cargo, but what of Spiller's "agents buried beneath" (65), or Glissant's "trace[s] on the underside" (1997, 11)? I argue that history of/for the subaltern is an event of untold tectonic activity, where fractures or absences in the archive continuously collides with the already fracturing acts of resistance, refusal and self-making. Thinking of history and its archive as simultaneously fractured/fracturing, that is, as a series of omissive breaks along the surface which, when seen, heard or felt another way may become a network of narrow openings through/in which the unknowable resides. These narrow openings, while produced by injury, loss, crisis, mark spaces where black communities across the diaspora host a multitude of cultural, material and narrative practices that contend with these exigencies while also moving with, beyond and outside of them.

In this portfolio, I explore fracture and its narrow openings, its brief doors, through a discussion of my artistic practice and the artworks produced during my program of study. I use photographic archives of injury, dispossession and disaster, such as National Geographic, as a primary material in order to explore the fractures of crisis and to fracture crisis itself, break it open to map new imaginative ecologies and alternate visuals/vocabularies of black life lived along the precipice of annihilation, apocalypse and the abyss. As Judith Butler poignantly articulates, "loss fractures representation itself *and* loss precipitates its own modes of expression" (467, emphasis mine). Using the mixed-media such as collage, cyanotype and wax-resist dyeing, I seek to contend with the everyday atrocities that mark black life and living in the diaspora as well as artistic practices that craft new horizons, as fractured and disparate as they may sometimes be.

The Archive

The photographic archives collected in the pages of National Geographic may be understood as a series of "absented presences," what Katherine McKittrick - writing at the encounter of black studies

and human geography - describes as the “seeable and unseeable”, the “hidden and on display” subjection of the Other. In its own attempt at reckoning with a deeply racist historical and present practice of picturing the world, National Geographic published a special issue on race in 2018, in which, John Edward Mason, historian of art and Africa, said of the publication’s archival methods: “it’s possible to say that a magazine can open people’s eyes at the same time it closes them.” This longtime practice of seeing and unseeing, of knowing and unknowing, of capturing and re-presenting subaltern communities across the globe, works to disappear particular histories and knowledge practices, reinforcing dominant narratives that continuously (re)define the category of the Other.

Images abound of the exotic islander, the savage, the refugee, the illegal alien, the immigrant, the docile, the dispossessed, the damned, narratives that cast black and brown bodies as always already at the edge of crisis. Indeed, as Ariella Azoulay points out, the “substantial and ongoing presence of cameras in a particular region...indicate an area where a disaster is occurring” or “prone” to occur (699). A constant state of violation and being poised for violation animate the frames of the images regularly found within the pages of National Geography and other such archives. But, as I argued above, this unfolding archive also activates a counter-narration of resistance and refusal if looked at or listened to another way (Azoulay; Camp). In her philosophical consideration of photography, Azoulay asserts that “the information registered therein always exceeds the specific intentions and interests that those involved in the act of photography wish to register in it.” For Azoulay, a photograph documenting the horrors of violence, atrocity or disaster escapes any attempt at total control, where the grievances and rights of the photographed continuously pierce the frame in some way, making themselves known, continuously fracturing the narrative.

If I trace these images, attending to the fissures, the crevices, the narrow openings texturing the surface, is it possible to build a cartography of the dispossessed that blows up the normative geographies of domination while rendering a black(ened) topography of quotidian refusal, longing and desire? What pathways might emerge if the frayed edges of the old maps are tugged on, torn apart? There is always more beneath the frame, on the underside, spaces that evade neat categorizations or attempts at domination. And so, I read the terrors of the archive, the absent presences, alongside the tensions and possibilities of fracture, exploring the simultaneous enclosure and emergence the photographic frame might provide.

Methods and Materials

Collage

As an artistic method, collage is a taking-apart and a putting-together, a repeating principle of deconstruction and assemblage that echoes through the first cut to the final composition. This process can be seen as fractured and fractal in nature, where the cut edges of each constituent image intentionally reveals the fault lines and the constructed pattern of the greater whole. And, like fractures, collage is part of our everyday life, images organically being cut and pasted together in our digital spaces, thoughts and dreams. More than a desire to create something new and different from the existing, collage is ripe with Harney and Moten's politics of refusal, revelling in improvisation, discordance and cacophony. This medium resists the demand to settle neatly into place, having the ability to articulate Moten's call "to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls." (4). This act of refusal paves the way to horizons that lie beyond the quest for representation, respectability and repair, and instead holds fast to fugitivity (Harney and Moten; Camp).

As such, collage is a visual method that sits with the inevitability of chaos - a certain level of "dystopian consideration" - adrienne maree brown (by way of Octavia E. Butler) challenges us to accept (58). It leans into the 'noise' Harney and Moten describe as an indication of a "wild beyond," a space where subaltern subjectivities may "see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming" (4). Collage provokes a breaking-open and tearing-apart of conventional ways of seeing, rigid ways of being in relation. Following thinkers like Harney and Moten, I explore how mixed-media such as collage compels us to radically imagine within, around and beyond crisis to "reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility" (Harney and Moten, 7).

I used collage to examine the crisis of climate change through visual narratives of social movement, environmental destruction, and the visioning of new worlds. I created seven (7) collages with extracted and reappropriated images from National Geographic magazine to construct new visual ecosystems that investigate the impact of ecological catastrophe on marginalized bodies, while seeking to "gesture to another place" (Harney and Moten, 5). This process allowed me to play with the ubiquitous nature of racial and environmental violence portrayed in mass media. It further allowed me to question the ways mass produced and consumed images of globalized poverty, police brutality, devastated habitats, and the racialized bodies caught in the crossfire, work to aestheticize and in turn neutralize and obscure the violence creeping through the lives, across the flesh and into the very air of vulnerable communities (Groys, Krohn, Nixon). Pulling apart images of quiet cityscapes and picturesque skies, and juxtaposing these seemingly benign landscapes with raging

fires, militarized policing, refugee camps and images of Black subjectivity, illuminates the interconnected nature of these conditions and the role mass media plays in obfuscating this reality. Deconstructing these violent geographies to present alternate questions, connections and ways of seeing, I sought to construct divergent horizons - not as prescription but as a process deliberately unfinished and always fracturing.

Embedded in these collages are emotional landscapes, undulating with rage, fear, despair and defiance, cut from scenes of everyday culture, society and environment. This sensuous approach seeks to eschew precise representational form and rather explore the ways abstraction “registers that which crucially and meaningfully exists but that, nonetheless, exceeds, obscures, or defies... capture” (Abdur-Rahman, 346). For instance, Figures 6 work within the realms of surrealism and speculative fiction, depicting a cosmos borne of a liberatory imagination, and drawing on the concept of prefiguration (Camp; brown). Working to visibilize such desires, these collages again juxtapose images of Black youth with varying landscapes. From refugee camps to the red sands of planet Mars, these collages contrast the forgotten, the far away and the unseen, placing Black bodies in conversation with the possibilities of new ways of encountering past, present and future.

Figure 6 imagines Black youth at play in the beautiful, yet unpredictable, waves of the sea. Above them looms a deep blue ocean where the sky should be, pointing in part to the vastness and precarity of the earth's waters and the ever-present disaster of mass flooding faced by the world's most vulnerable and disproportionately Black and racialized nations. In the midst of this, an ancestor stands at the horizon, pulling a blazing sun from the depths of the ocean, offering a glimpse of hope or of escape to a new star. This sentiment, further reflected in the Martian landscape sprawled out beyond the shoreline, is referenced from the work of Black speculative writer Octavia E. Butler and her fictional religion, Earthseed, which centers on the inescapable truth of change and the necessity of adaptation. In the book, *Parable of the Sower*, Butler writes of a dystopian United States plagued by fascist leaders, economic decline, and deteriorating natural resources. In response to a world descending into extinction, Butler imagines, “the Destiny of Earthseed / is to take root amongst the stars;” a prophetic meditation on humanity's absolute consumption and virulent outgrowing of life on earth. The distorted, fantastic worlds within these collages offer fractured horizons that stretch out beyond the seemingly impenetrable atmosphere of the here and now of unjust society (Abdur-Rahman).

On January 12, 2010 a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti near the capital city of Port-au-Prince. An already disenfranchised nation - made vulnerable to political, economic and environmental devastation by decades of retributive extraction and exploitation by France and its (neo)colonial allies - Haiti suffered immense loss. In the wake of this atrocity, *National Geographic* published an editorial on the disaster that pictured the desolation and desperation of the Haitian people at the forefront. As I flipped through the pages of the report, one image in particular grabbed me. The photograph, sepia-toned and grainy, focused on a cluster of people gathering before what appears to be a supply truck. Curiously shot above the heads of the crowd, the image is framed in such a way that you cannot see any faces, no defining characteristics whatsoever, only the outstretched hands of the group clamouring for aid. These conspicuously black hands almost bleed together, none particularly discernible from the other, as they all reach together toward a singular extended arm hovering above them, clutching a parcel (of food perhaps, maybe medicine or some other desperately needed thing). These photographic choices create an image that feels far less spectacular than the circumstances that brought photographer and photographed together in the first place. But as Rob Nixon explains through his conceptualization of “slow violence”, a lack of spectacle is not the absence of violence, the captivating minimalism and discomfiting quiet of the photography belies a “hushed havoc and injurious invisibility” (6) that still deserves inquiry. What lies beneath this image, on the underside of those palms? What crackles in the interstices of those intertwined hands, in the divide between those hands and the singular extended arm, in the rift between this image and my own perception?

I continue with Azoulay’s assertion: “the photograph is out there, an object in the world, and anyone, always (at least in principle), can pull at one of its threads and trace it in such a way as to reopen the image and renegotiate what it shows, possibly even completely overturning what was seen in it before” (13). In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay purposefully highlights the role of the spectator in this process of making meaning from the photographic image and engaging with the grievance of the photographed. I read this reopening and renegotiating through the lens of fracture. The original image registers for me as a break, a violent collapsing of experiences into a disembodied monolith of black suffering. The image, discernible only by its inclusion in an editorial on the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, is otherwise wholly indistinguishable from any other disaster from any other time or place. This double fracture - the collapse of the earthquake and the archives collapse of identity - relegates this community to the familiar “pattern of being on the verge of catastrophe” (Azoulay, 67). The pattern of these hands hold in frame the normalized economies of debt, dependency and displacement that the climate crisis foregrounds. The motif of blackness as broken, hands forever outstretched, calloused from relentless labouring yet incapable and helpless,

wanting, greedily, repeats and repeats across time and space from the legacies of Trans-Atlantic slavery to the frontlines of the environmental disasters ravaging the Global South, and the parasitic practices of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank that proceed in the wake of crisis. But is it possible to look and listen differently, to trouble these fractures and see what else might emerge?

In working with this image, my first instinct was to remove the hand hovering above the bedlam, holding onto the vital life force of food. I sought to sever the relationship, to incise the symbol of the benevolent benefactor, to dissent from dependency and disparate power-relations, to “refuse the choices as offered” (Harney and Moten: 5). With the cluster of hands released from this context, something else became possible. I saw a different type of horizon, one undulating with longing and desire, pregnant with the possibility of building beyond “the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us” (Harney and Moten: 5). What could these hands be reaching for now? What lay beyond the tips of these fingers? I magnified the image and multiplied it several times, allowing the hands to connect, overlap, obscure and meet each other in alternate ways (Figure 8a). To choose a different pattern, to refuse the order and the call to be ordered, to let the shadows of unseen longings take shape, to focus not on ending the trouble but “to end the world that created those particular troubles” (brown; Harney and Moten:6).

Working with the process of cyanotype, I utilized the natural elements of sunlight and water to expose this reconstructed image, this new gesture. Here, this photographic process is used to juxtapose a racist history of ethnographic surveillance of Blackness, and the ways Black communities subvert and co-create new patterns for survival and existence.

Text(iles)

I also explored textiles using wax-resist indigo dyeing, beading and embroidery. Here I was thinking about the ways textiles have traditionally been used in African cultures as texts where different weavings, patterns and prints hold certain meanings and stories. Earlier this year, various countries in the Caribbean experienced record rainfall that led to immense flooding and mudslides. I saw various videos circulating amongst my friends that showed both a despair for the destruction but also an unabashed levity. It is not unusual for Caribbean people to respond to devastation with humour, unruliness, a certain kind of talking that may be eligible to others. The text of these responses really grabbed me. My first experiment was with “see you there in the free,” a phrase that plays on “see

you” which can mean an acknowledgment or a goodbye in Antiguan dialect. The sentence structure also conceals its tense, as ‘see’ can exist in both present and future. As well, it speaks to Hall’s important observation:

“it would be strange to describe the thematics of Caribbean vernacular culture without also including the notions of trauma, rupture and catastrophe: the violence of being torn from one’s historic resting place, the brutal abruptly truncated violence in which the different cultures were forced to coexist in the plantation system, the requirement to bend and incline to the unequal hegemony of the Other, the dehumanization, the loss of freedom” (19).

In this textile work, I use intricate wax patterns and indigo to play with ‘revealing’ and ‘concealing’ the text in the linen fabric. Using beads and embroidery, I also experiment with texture, contours and the concept of text as map-making.

Fractured Horizons

Working in a variety of mediums, my artistic practice often emerges from an intuitive space. Reflecting on this interiority - the emotions, memories, questions and desires that stir within - forms the beginning stages of research, experimentation and initial production. Leaning into the emotional, the sensuous, and the imaginative possibilities of art allows me to illuminate the lived experiences of my intersecting identities, explore current socio-political landscapes, and excavate new possibilities and imaginings. My interest in a multi-disciplinary approach stems from a belief in the complexity of life and the multiplicity of being, and so I often find myself reaching for materials and mediums that speak best to the narrative at hand. This has led to experimentation with textiles, clay, paint and ink, and explorations through graphic illustration and printmaking, photography and collage, stop-motion animation, performance and installation.

As I explore the textures and tensions of marginalized life in a world predicated on the enslavement of Black communities and extraction of their labour for capitalist venture, the genocide of Indigenous peoples in execution of the colonial project, and the construction of exotic ‘Elsewheres’ and ‘Others’ permanently cast as threatening to the pursuits of Western empire, I recognize the ways these overlapping communities continuously fight the realities of being swallowed up by white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist empire. Here, creation becomes a central weapon and means of survival. From the curation of direct action and political theatre, to prefigurative organizing, to science fiction writing and Afrofuturism, to political posters, art is a lens through which

marginalized communities distill collective histories of trauma, multiply healing and desire, and envision new worlds and ways of being. Across our fractured horizons - from the smallest patterns of refusal of what is and hope for what could be, to ever expanding compositions of a more just world - radical (re)imagining creates spaces for us to sit with chaos, crisis and change and reach for a wild beyond.

Images



Figure 1: somewhere in the distant, collage on paper



Figure 2: mudbound, collage on paper

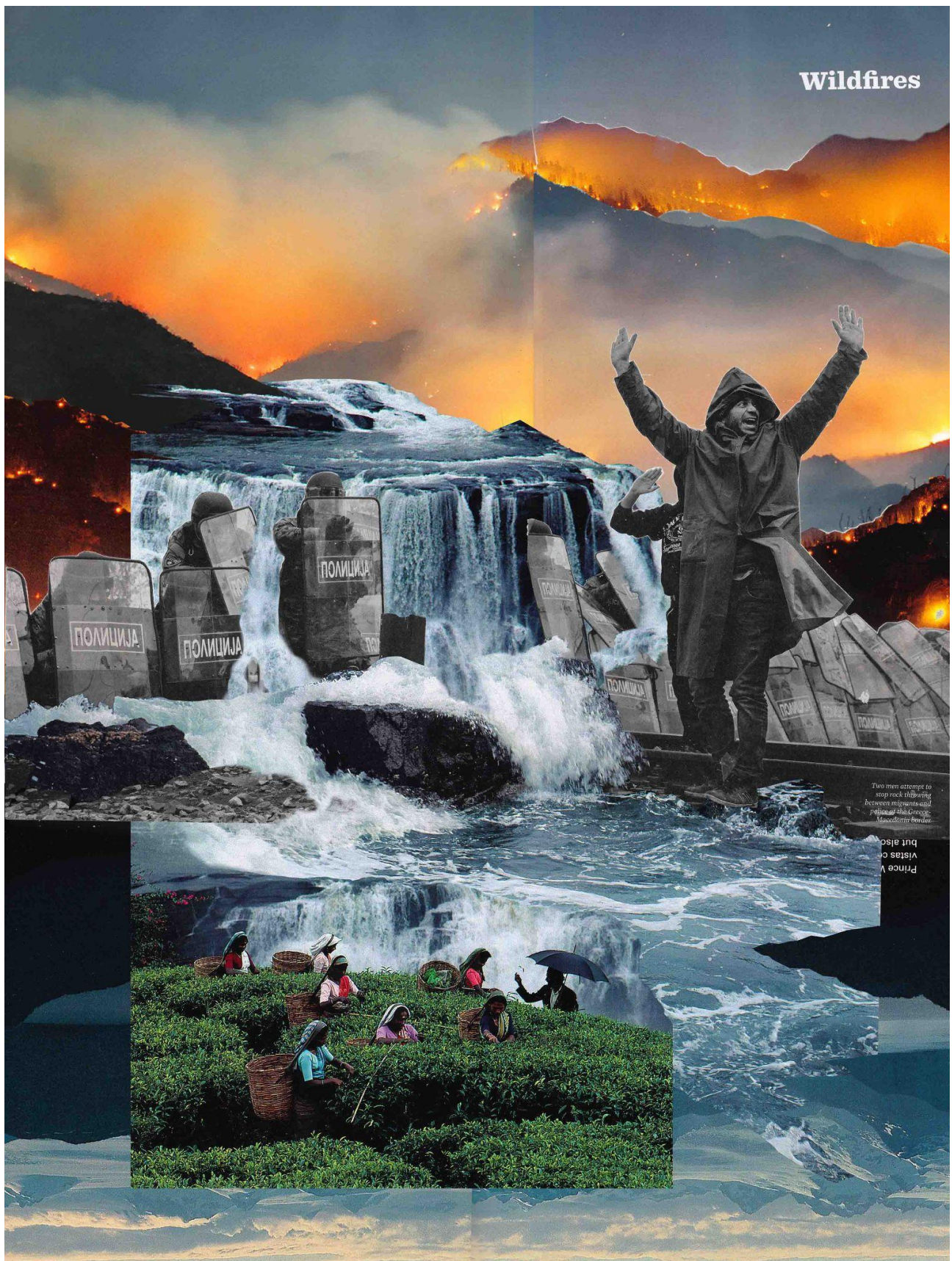


Figure 3: a wall is just a wall, collage on paper

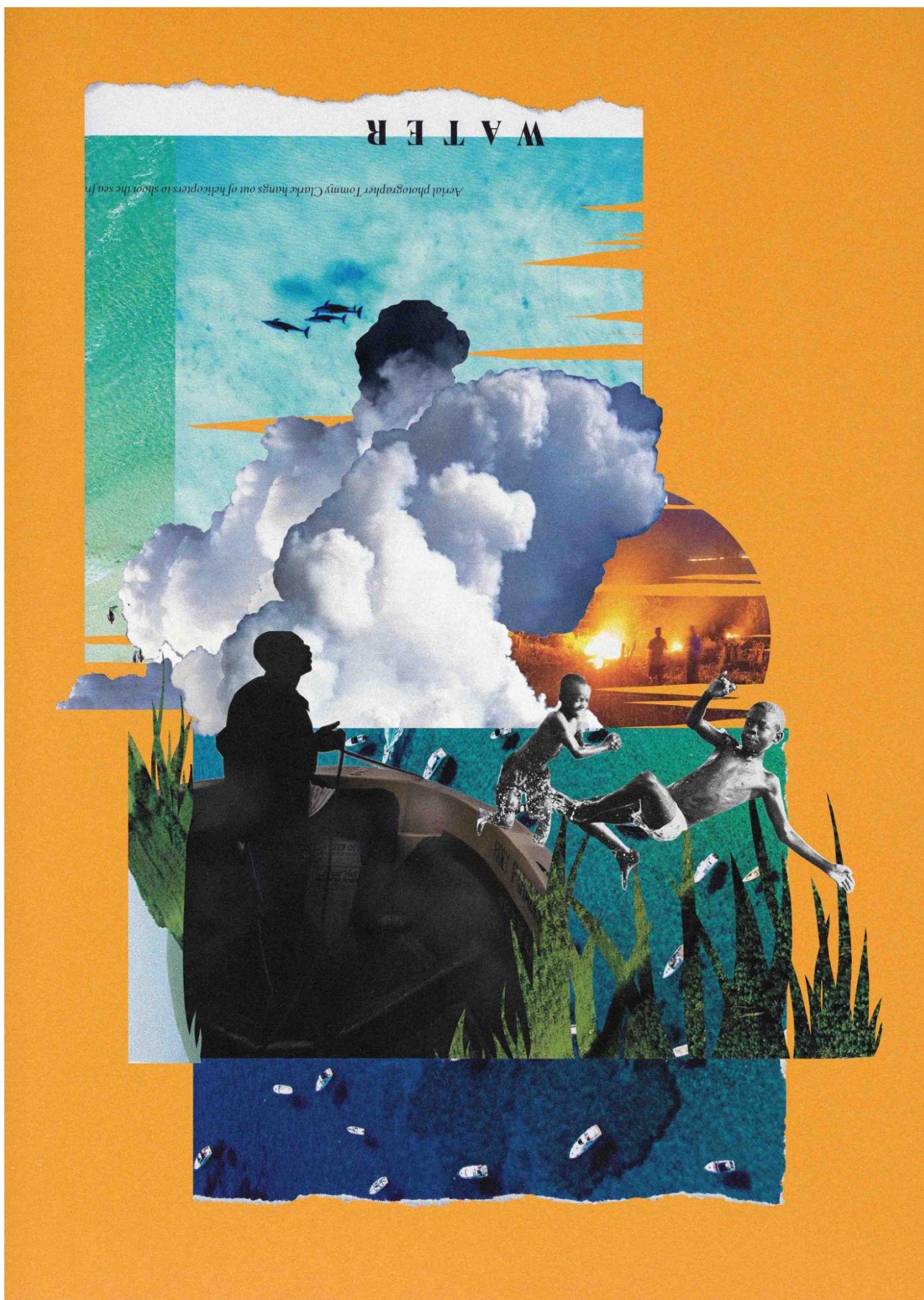


Figure 4: i go to prepare a place..., collage on paper

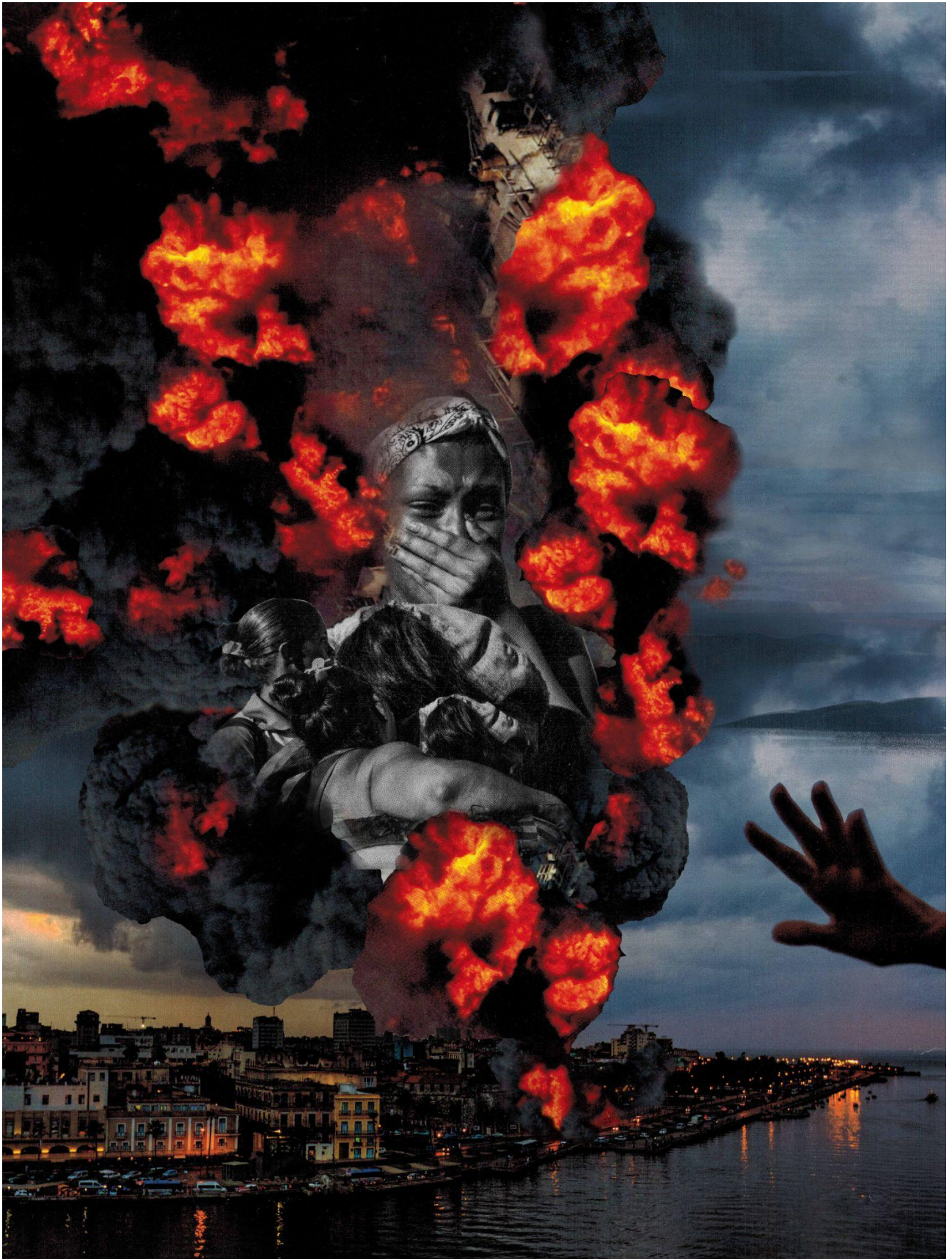


Figure 5: burn, collage on paper

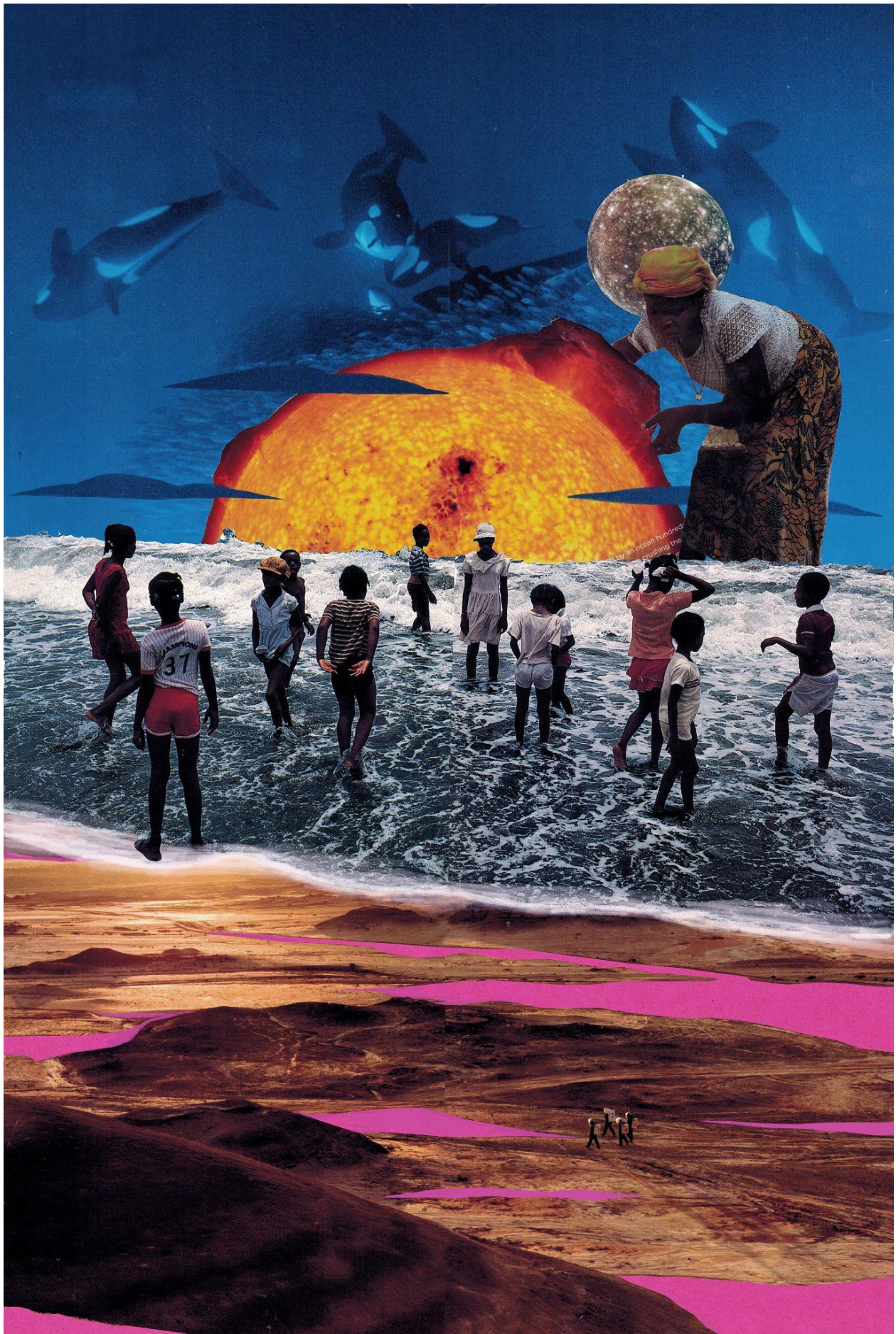


Figure 6: but there are new suns, collage on paper

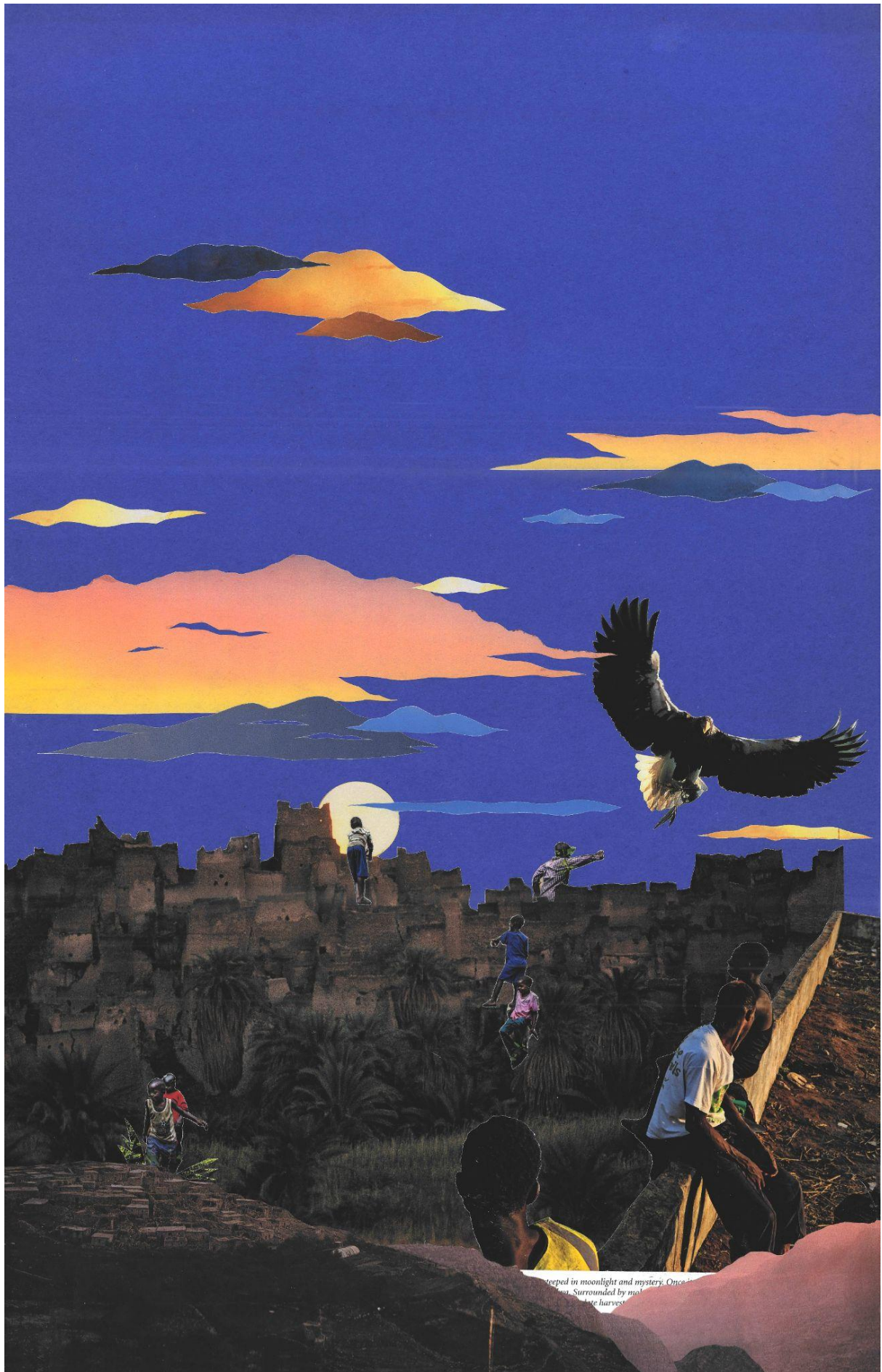


Figure 7: moonlight and mystery, collage on paper

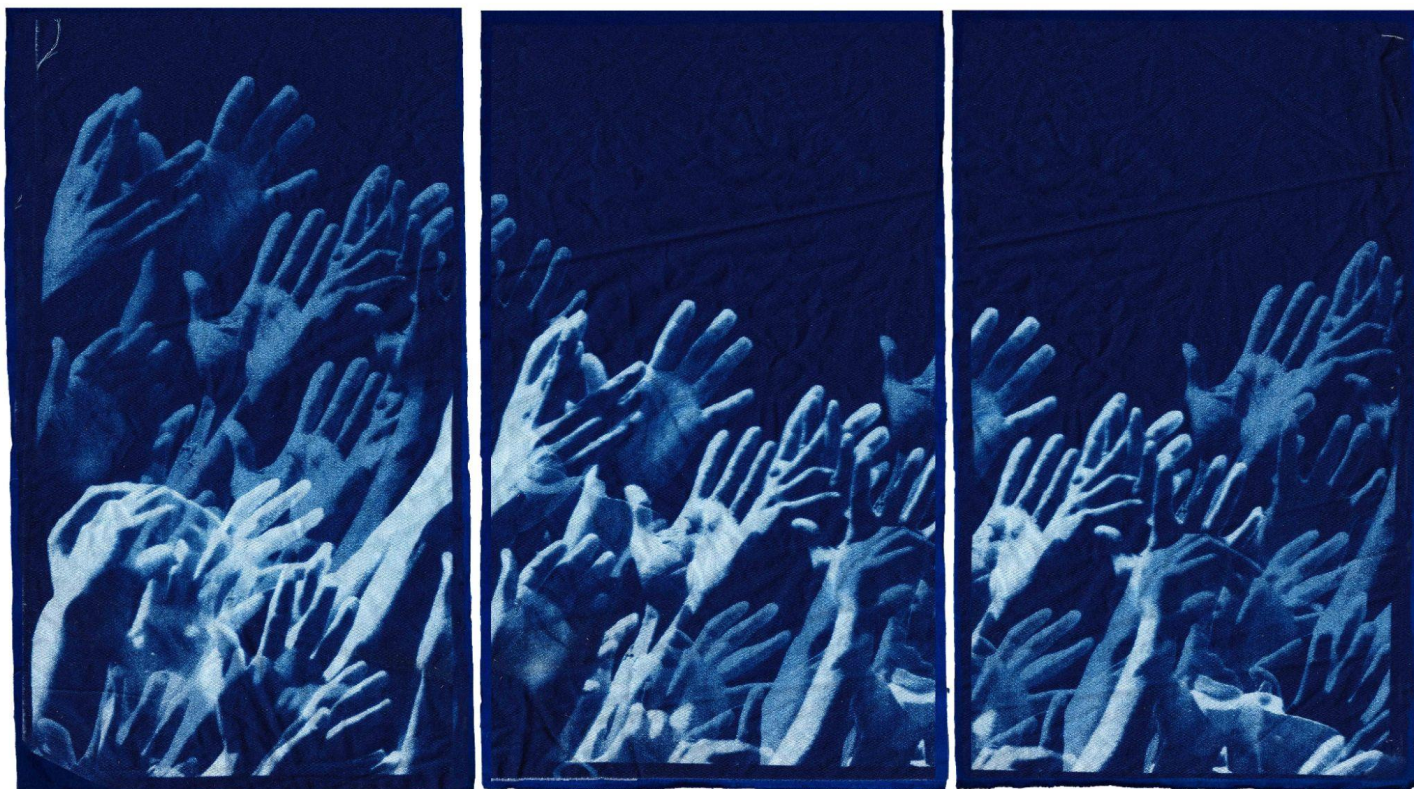


Figure 8a: (untitled) hands, cyanotype print on cotton

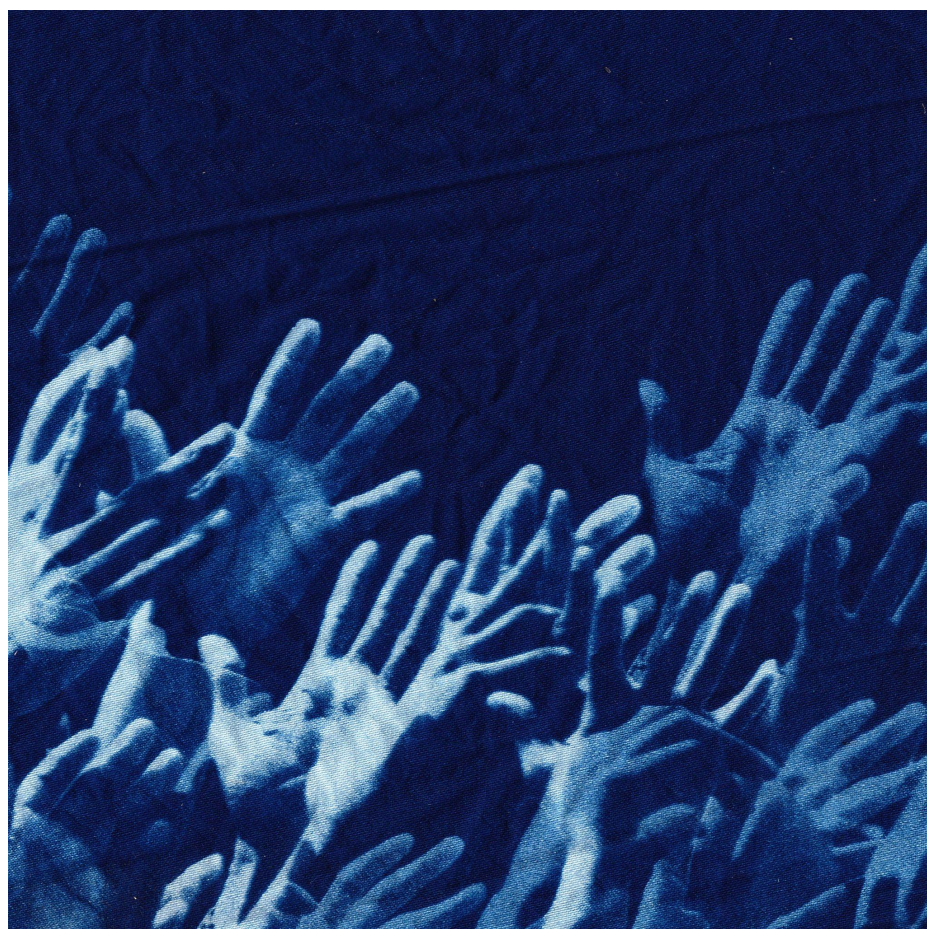


Figure 8b: (untitled) hands, detail view



Figure 9: see you there in the free, wax resist indigo dye on linen, beading and embroidery

Afterword

you were born in a hurricane

The waters are coming; eating away at the edges of the land, swallowing so slowly we can barely see it. The waters are coming; rivers bulging, streams swelling, oceans reaching wave over wave towards the centre of the earth. The waters are coming; up to our waists now, over our shoulders, crashing through the doors, rushing up stairs, pushing us out onto zinc roofs scattered like lily pads amongst the waves.

When we were little girls, my sister and I used to watch with awe through the bedroom window as the wind wrapped galvanize around tree trunks like pieces of ribbon. We played relentlessly, darting from bed to mattress to mattress to bed over and around the bodies of sleepless relatives and villagers, all taking shelter in our house on the hill. We laughed and cuddled and told stories as granny fried sardines over candle-flame and mommy rushed back and forth with towels and kerosene, fiddling with the antenna of her little radio, searching for the weatherman's voice through endless static. Then, my sister and I were too naive to understand the consequences of those lashing winds, too little to know it was just a glimpse of what was possible. We were too far away from the industries belching gasses into the air, churning up the seas, scorching the earth to know what was to come. But here it is, island after island disappearing beneath the surface.

But if the waters come for us tonight, where will they be in the morning?

My heart clenches like a fist everytime I think about what air we will breathe, how much fresh water may cost, how the heat will wrap around us like a weighted blanket, so heavy we may hardly move. Even now, this is life for so many. What will the skies look like? How far will the buildings and greed of our world stretch? Will we create a new way? Or will we ride a star across the galaxy to another beginning?

I don't know what lies ahead. There are no promises. But there are the stories we tell ourselves.

When I was little, hiding from the pounding rain, the haunting wind, the incessant thunder, my mother would tell me, "you were born in a hurricane, so what is there to be afraid of? When the waters come, let them bring you home."

Let the water bring you home.

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