CONSTANCE COLLIER-MERCADO

Constance Collier-Mercado is an experimental writer and artist whose work examines nuance within Black dialectical, multilingual, and equivocal spaces. Consumed by ideas of global Blackness as polyamorous Church, she weaves this aesthetic into her practice via an irreverent Black feminine divine. Born in Chicago and raised in the Bronx, her writing takes on a broad range of styles but is especially influenced by the formally and politically innovative poetry of the Black Arts Movement, the Beat Poets, cycles of repetition and revision, and the romantic yet fierce lyricism of certain modern poetics. Published in FIYAH-Magazine, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, The Auburn Avenue, Kweli Journal, The Believer, and elsewhere, her writing typically embodies some aspect of womanist thought and/or the Black spiritual-fantastic-ecstatic. Constance lives in Atlanta and views the attached submission as a culmination (and continuation) of time spent over the past year trying to capture some rooted thing among a constantly shapeshifting Black existence. Her hope is that it might offer a lifeline for herself and others.

Waterbearer: A Reading from the Book of...

Abstract: In the following piece (Wordcount: 11,046), I examine the relationship between color and water – Baby Suggs and Beloved – in Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved, as a type of synesthetic coping mechanism meant to disrupt the encroaching normalization of an anti-Black world postslavery. Early in the text I posit two questions:

What if Baby Suggs' appetites shifted, not as some kind of woeful trauma response but as a very deliberate solution to the problem of a world where everyone else's senses lie askew?

What if Beloved likewise rose up from the water, not as a vengeful haunting but a haintful reminder for those living who had lost their way?

Building upon this theory, I expand its reach to establish a continued relationship to water and the sensory which Black people have inherited today as our own surreal legacy - one which requires a constant mental reorientation toward freedom. In constructing my thesis, I reference *Beloved* but also several other critical works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, visual art, film, and sound, each framed as meditation on a particular color and liturgical text ("a reading from the book of... "). My goal is to create a mixed media ekphrasis that mimics the surreal in both citation and physical form. The finished product can be described, at its simplest, as a braided creative nonfiction essay or, at its most complex, as a hybrid blend of cultural commentary, personal essay, poetry, and scholarly article.

But I am beyond myself. Let us go back. Begin again. Black is a mirror, capable of reflecting our many oceans. What if we dared to look? Dared to live. What if? What if? What if? What if? What if? What if? What if? What if? What if? Whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whati f,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,what if,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,whatif,wha

fullup is what I am
when it comes
for me, when it makes of me
this vessel that
I desire.

full as rising water
then sudden rush...

What if I told you the ocean is not blue, neither green, nor some cerulean shade between the two but a kaleidoscope of many colors, and none, filtered through a watery caul of salt and sunlight? Would you recognize yourself among its deep? We have not always been fugitive. Our existence is an ocean wave that ebbs and flows with time. Black people have thrived as

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

The 1441 kidnap and enslavement of 12 West African people – by Portuguese "explorers" Antão Gonçalves and Nuno Tristão off the coast of what is today Ras Nouadhibou, Mauritania – did spark the storm of chattel slavery, terror, and anti-Blackness from which ripple effects are still felt almost 600 years later[1]. As Christina Sharpe explains it, "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[2] In this sense, the question of Black fugitivity is an ever-present tangle of contradicting realities to be unraveled. What does it mean that the large body of water which is Blackness could be irrevocably marred by the far inferior body of a fledgling boat? What sorcery must be this so-called ark, to contain our vastness, both as structure from which we seek to escape and as shelter when we are in need of asylum? How best to throw off such confines and conjure a new vessel, a better gourd, into which we might pour ourselves?

Beloved, 1:4 - An Appetite for Color

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

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

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

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

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

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

…in ears&

nose&

cunt&

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N E X T, 12:26

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

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

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

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

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

In many ways, I watched the film as an outsider, an interloper, lurking upon the hard wrought peace Labeija has clearly carved out for herself. But this limited, and somewhat limiting, gaze was not allowed to go on for long. What Jamal makes clear, as does the general arc of the film, is that these women are not the ones who need a healing. We are. The "we" here being the Black cisgender imagination[7]. *seabed they call it.*

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

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

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

7 Fatima Jamal, "The Thrill and Fear of 'Hey, Beautiful'." The New York Times, 30, June, 2017. https://www.nytimes-com/2017/06/30/opinion/trans-sexual-assault-black women.html?referer=https://t.co/KSvYhoinGN%3famp=1.

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

Annie Mae Stewart

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

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

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

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

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

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

slick cankered tooth-
-lick wielding wordspell
&wither.
--- a demand for memory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bernice Greene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

heaving thrash of me
grown root&
tail&
rut&
I am all young buck, prancing
isles of lush green though I strut ocean floor.

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

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

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

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

Likewise, there is room for critique of Hurston's decision to only engage with Nanny's colorist tendencies, and to some degree Janie's as well, in the shared context of violence they both face at the hands of men. This is a decidedly softer approach than how she addresses the internalized colorism of the darker characters in the book and it would seem to falsely imply that Nanny's and Janie's traumas somehow cancel out their anti-Blackness. But when I reappropriate the latent messaging of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* back onto the real-life experience of the dark-skinned Black woman that was my grandmother, I am able to get at a more complete truth. What is the cost of a generational relationship to sexual violence? Or, in the case of my Bernice, a generational relationship to young arduous single motherhood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fullup

of such drought

from mouths foreign to our lovely, we water ourselves

whole.

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

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

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

I choose to engage with this idea through daily practice of what sex theorist and self described thotscholar, femi babylon, refers to as proheauxism.[19] This goes beyond what I previously named as merely a craving for more palpable sexuality (at times also labeled sex positivity) and instead enters the realm of those material concerns so many of our elders have had to navigate under even greater strictures than we continue to face today. This is not to say that a more pansexual, color-minded understanding of sexuality and liberation did not exist before the present. My "unloosed woman" playlist could equally gain a boost from the sounds of the late Nashville-born, Toronto-based 1960's soul singer, Jackie Shane, who passed away in 2019.[20]

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

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

20 Max Mertens, "Jackie Shane 'Any Other Way' " Pitchfork, 13, August 2017. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/jackie-shane-any-other-way/

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

Gardens, Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brussel Sprouts * Kale * Collards * Mustards * Turnip Greens

Of course, excess is not the only way to build a relationship with the earth – a fact routinely demonstrated by Baby Suggs, Alice Walker, and my own neighbors. But when extreme wealth comes with the power to do irreparable harm, and those living more simply are left to suffer the consequences, where is the space to view time spent in a garden as anything other than whimsy and a dangerous distraction from the real work to be done? Ms. Kincaid gets at the root of this too when, later in the same article, she writes:
"And what is the relationship between gardening and conquest? Is the conqueror a gardener and the conquered the person who works in the field? … At what moment is the germ of possession lodged in the heart? When another Spanish marauder, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, was within sight of the Pacific Ocean, he made his army stay behind him, so that he could be the first person like himself (a European person) to see this ocean; it is likely that could this ocean have been taken up and removed to somewhere else (Spain, Portugal, England), the people for whom it had become a spiritual fixture would long for it and at the same time not even know what it was they were missing. And so the dahlia: Who first saw it and longed for it so deeply that it was removed from the place where it had always been, and transformed (hybridized), and renamed?" (Kincaid, 154-55)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SOUNDS

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

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

swallow salt

til their petty

hurts fail against the tide,

then learn to breathe

again

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

learn to let go

that which does not serve,

learn to carry under each arm

a jug,

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

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

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

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

fullup is what I am

&

in the stillness&

in the silence&

in the hush[28]

MIRRORS X| |X

If I say that Black is a mirror, I do so with very particular focus on the power of our collective lived experience as a fluid, ever evolving, technology for healing. This belief is fueled in part by my own pulsing need but also by something made tangible in the creative works of Ebony Noelle Golden – most recently with her black/water[29] curation project via Jupiter Performance Studio – and the writing of Rachel Eliza Griffiths. Griffiths has said that "when we look in the mirror, there's always the possibility that we can be shattered. That we can give back the image we want or don't want. That we can be reinvented. And yet mirrors also connect us to our past in a way. They show us a map not only of our moods but our genealogy, our lineage."[30]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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