

SPACESUIT ON THE LEFT...

*An Improvised Archival Mixtape-Manifesto by an Artist F.K.A Negro (Dead)
conjured by Nia O. Witherspoon*

I had a dream.
I'm trying to remember.

How the hell did we get here, how the hell/Christmas Eve last year.¹

But I will speak of a different we.
A Black We.
Weeeeeeeeeee!²

Set/Directives/When and Where I Enter³

Imagine my body before you. I have many accoutrements for my spell of blackness. I have technology. I have turntables, and many other flashing machines. I have tarot cards and amethyst, tourmaline, and blue agate, and 6-inch metallic + studded acrylic nails. And a space helmet, but my lashes are so long you can see them through the helmet. And a pony-tail on the crown of my head with neon microbraids that trail over all the equipment like octopus tentacles.

Imagine you saw me and you were like, Whoa.

And now imagine there is no other way I can tell you this story.

And now imagine you never heard this story before.

1.

Points of arrival. 1619 when the first African enslaved people arrived on these shores before they were violently renamed America by Europeans who wanted money, power, and land. And before the African people who previously called themselves Yoruba, Wolof, Hausa, Ibo, Dogon, Bantu-Kongo, Dagara--were violently (un)named "slave" and every other name Black people have ever been given on this place. Before Black was a We.

[Cue Mos Def: "Sex/love/sex, love, and money" underscore]⁴

¹ Mark asks this question at the beginning of RENT by Jonathan Larson. It seems we like to ask this question as humans when we are inside of chaotic or terrifying or heartbreaking circumstances. Just an observation. We have always desperately longed for a point of origin and causality, and we will continue to long.

² My friend James by way of my friend Toya. As in "here the fuck we go!"

³ Paula Giddings, Black Feminist Goddess

⁴ "Sex, Love, and Money," The New Danger, 2004.

*[cue Hortense Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” read in grainy gramophone voice as an offering for the soundtrack to the (un)gendering Middle Passage journey]*⁵

*[cue ‘Aunt Hester’s scream’ as read through the sieve of Fred Moten’s In the Break]*⁶
*[cue breakdance and vogue floor work and capoeira]*⁷

Imagine all our multiple voices and bodies. A constellation that shrinks and expands--sometimes by force (natural and unnatural), sometimes by will. Imagine us a dot, a break, a blip, a life, a wormhole, a many-headed monster, a many-armed being, a many-hearted angel. A many-hated angel. A May Day devil. Multi-lingual, multi-modal, multi-phonetic.

[Fade out]

2.

And so [bodies bound as they were] we had to work with groundedness and flight across time and space, and this is a spell we’re still working (our freedom spell, aesthetics of fugitivity, practiced by a long line of revolutionaries).

They say there are some things you will only see on the continent, far from the cities, far even from the villages, far from the entrance to the bush. Malidoma Somé speaks of pots full of stew hanging upside-down from the ceiling and stirring themselves.⁸ And the Dogon knew about the invisible star Sirius B long before it was visible to European astrologers with their clumsy telescopes.

And here,

we can let our imaginations run wild,
knowing that Wakanda is real.....

.....
.....

⁵ Spillers argues, in this foundational essay for Black Studies and Black Feminist Studies that Black people were (un)gendered in the journey of the Middle Passage. That the terms “female” and “male” lost all meaning and importance in light of the violent discommodulations we were subjected to. Black Americans, in this way, are beyond Western gendered constructs and limitations (for better and worse)--Black women cannot be protected, Men cannot protect (this is one easy-to-understand example). I do not wish to naturalize this, and I don’t believe Spillers does either. Sometimes I want us to get our genders back. Which are actually much more expansive than the Western monarchical genders we have inherited that have nothing to do with us.

⁶ Here we have another point of origin for blackness in America. Aunt Hester’s scream is inside our soundtrack. What if we read, or better yet hear America through the scream of Frederick Douglass’ aunt as she is being beaten? Is this what Langston Hughes means when he “sings” America? If America were to be sung by a Black woman, what would it sound like? Aunt Hester’s scream is in the DNA. Is what I’m saying.

⁷ In *Dreaming Through Darkness*, Charlie Morley says that a nightmare is the brain’s “creative response” to trauma. I like to think about the art forms birthed out of Blackness in the Americas too as creative responses to trauma. Art forms birthed during the pandemic, birthed out of this particular phase of late capitalism, this particular phase of our revolutionary process. Perhaps this means that in some way, this art is a nightmare. Morley goes on to write that nightmares are a critical part of healing from trauma because trauma *must* be metabolized in order to be released. We see here, in more ways than one that, nightmares are dreams.

⁸ See the first chapter of *Of Water and the Spirit* by Malidoma Somé, and imagine what else is possible.

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.....
.....
We need not, in fact, call it fantasy or fiction or Marvel.
Instead we can marvel. That we have not yet been destroyed.⁹
Because our magic is strong.

[Image: Marie Laveau walking into the St. Johns Bayou, a candle balanced on the crown of her head, and one in each hand. She will not be seen for 3 days. This is a point of origin ¹⁰ for our aesthetics of disappearance. Assata, of course, has inherited this legacy. And so too have all of our “fallen” that I would ask we re-name our “risen,” Philando, Tony, Breyona, Sandra, Trayvon, Islan, Alton, Eric, Nina, George...]

Yangalala [Kongo graphic writing glyph]



This X our bodies make in holy communion is living evidence of time/space travel. It is written on caves in Central Africa with ink made of berries and burnt charcoal. And it is written on grave-stones in Louisiana and South Carolina and Haiti and Brazil. And it is written in my grandmother’s body every Sunday at Millenium Baptist Church in Philadelphia. It is us extended as rocket-ship, taking off, reaching them, our fingertips touching the stars.

“It was always about being free,” says Castor Semanya while they scrutinize her beautiful, strong, Black body. Being free in a Black body is an existential question.

I imagine a cosmology of fugitivity in my own work. Inspired by Kongo graphic writing systems, and the work done on them by Afro-Cuban scholar Barbaro Martínez-Ruiz,

⁹ Audre Lorde said “We were not meant to survive.”

¹⁰ A point of origin, not THE point of origin.

I invent my own glyphs: doors, windows, ladders, cars, rockets, planes, trains, buses, cell phones, laptops.¹¹

They are spells for freedom.¹²

They are clearings to shed the pre-supposed oppressive relationship with travel and technology that we carry as Black bodies (fungible/ourselves having been and still being a commodity + trapped in time/space/ship-hold/plantation/cell).

They help us imagine what our possibilities are and always have been for multi-dimensional travel, hyperspace,¹³ and extra-terrestrial existence.¹⁴

*[“We couldn’t have no master unless we agreed to be slaves”--The Damned]*¹⁵

They insist upon our agency with our bodies. Our preciousness with our bodies, our slowness with our bodies, our navigation of the disappearance of our bodies, which is to say the opposite of the disposability of our bodies, and the hyper-productivity of our bodies, and the hyper-visibility of our bodies that racial capitalism demands.¹⁶

¹¹ For more on the genealogy of the symbols and their sacred use/context, see the brilliant *Kongo Graphic Writing* by Martínez-Ruiz. Also shouts out to Nina Angela Mercer, a sangoma in the Bantu-Kongo tradition who, in advising me in a spiritual dramaturgy session discussed coming up with my own system inspired by the ethos and methodology of the indigeneous system, but not utilizing those symbols as a non-initiate out of respect. This is a critical gesture and conversation that I want to continue taking up elsewhere, and I encourage others to do the same, thinking about what a true practice of respect for indigenous traditions would be even as we are inheritors working with and creatively re-inventing.

¹² It matters to mention that many of these things are under the purview of Yoruba *orisha* Ogun, bringer and shaper of technology. I invoke technology to remember that it, like futurity, is not mutually exclusive from Blackness. That we have shaped, and are shaped by technology. And that many of the most important minerals for the functioning of our most advanced technology is violently extracted from the African continent. It is critical that we get in right relationship with these energies, minerals, materials. It is critical that we get in right relationship with Africa. And it is critical that we reclaim technology as African. This was a part of the paradigm-shifting work of *Black Panther*, the film. We see our renewed interest in futures invigorated by Alicia Garza’s organization, Black Futures Lab and the recent publication of Jenna Wortham and Kimberley Drew’s *Black Futures* anthology, in addition to the renewed interest in Octavia Butler’s work, with *Parable of the Sower* becoming a “New York Times” bestseller in the summer of 2020, thanks, no doubt to the popularity and ground-breaking work of her disciple Adrienne Maree Brown among many others working to uplift her legacy. And despite my obsession with Black Futures, I intentionally don’t identify as an Afrofuturist (despite deeply vibing with folks who identify and are identified as Afrofuturists). But ultimately, like other terms--post-colonial for example--the term is submissive to a Western rationalist linear timeline that, in fact, we are beyond and must dismantle if we are to manifest the liberation we seek.

¹³ For more on “hyperspace” see Reginald Crosley’s *The Vodou Quantum Leap*, but the concept as I am using it here refers to all of the ways in which our consciousness exceeds our bodies as a location, because we are both wave and particle.

¹⁴ Here I will simply mention that indigenous peoples both on the continent and in the Americas have included extra-terrestrial life in their cosmologies, origin stories, and present day practices. I’m thinking about the peoples of the Peruvian Amazon, the Maya, and the Lakota of the Americas and the Dogon of West Africa specifically, but there are many more that have not yet crossed my path in as much detail. For the former from the perspective of a Western anthropologist who is open about his journey of recovering from rationalist myopia, see Jeremy Narby’s *The Great Cosmic Serpent*.

¹⁵ *Lessons from the Damned*, an incredible Black Feminist historical document which you can find here: <https://black-ink.info/2020/03/28/lessons-from-the-damned/>

¹⁶ I repeat “our bodies” here in homage to Ta-nehisi Coates’ refocalizing attention and care on “our bodies” in this way in *Between the World and Me*.

We get caught in shorthands that make us smaller than we are. Or that insist upon our finiteness. But we are infinite.

Breathe.

Infinite. See?

I can breathe better when I say that.

Can we breathe?

[Cue "Can I Live" by Jay-Z]¹⁷

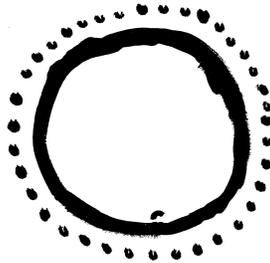
Freddie Gray and George Floyd say:

"I can't breathe."

Language too, performs chokeholds.

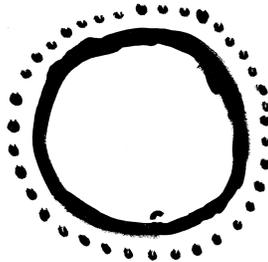
¹⁷ *Reasonable Doubt*, Roc-A-Fella Records, 1996

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ÁFÉFÉÁFÉFÉ
ÁFÉFÉ¹⁸



19

*[We must insert our own breath]
[Always]
[In all ways]*



WE ARE INNOCENT.
WE ARE INNOCENT.²⁰

¹⁸ Wind/Breath in Yoruba

¹⁹ Kongo Graphic: On this moon, the full moon, it is not possible to hunt. There will be no murder during this moon. 2. The number of bullets that went into Philando Castile's heart. Philando means loving.

²⁰ Diamond Reynolds, Facebook Live, July 6, 2016. The day she and Philando Castile were pulled over for a broken tail light and Philando was shot by a police officer in St. Paul, MN. 7. a) the month of his birth and death b) the number of times he was shot. This spell untethers those 7 holes that desecrated his sacred Black body, and sutures them with thread of golden light.

3.

Now now now means a crystallizing burgeoning revolutionary consciousness that was somehow present in the initial originating moment. The Big Bang, when all of this was dreamed and built and imagined in the scaffolding of Olodumaré's dream. It is important to remember that there is no more and no less matter "now" than there was "then."

[How can this remembering reconfigure our imaginings of "now" and "then?"]

It's a question of expansion and perception.

Now is the point in linear time where we have expanded enough to perceive *this* much. And the perception is uneven. Not all of us perceive as much as others, not all of us are in right relationship with perception, and we are in different evolutionary moments inside our own humanity. We might think of white supremacist patriarchal heterosexist and transphobic perception, for example, as stunted in evolutionary terms. Yoruba philosophy too, understands evolution to be uneven. Even once we, as individuals, have completed our highest manifestation in the evolutionary journey, we must keep reincarnating until the whole species is evolved (lest it self-destruct). Imagine a world that understood and believed this to be true--that we were bound together in this way, no matter what. Inside this philosophical proposition, evolution feels like quite a burden to carry.

In the throes of a mismanaged pandemic, white supremacist coup, new liberal presidential administration, and now, severe human rights crisis with power outages in a snowing Texas (can we say "Revelations?") we arrive at yet another crossroads. Arhundati Roy has called it a portal.²¹ And the X elders²² that have come before us have prophesied a time when humanity would be on the brink of destruction, and need to choose between living in harmony with life or living in harmony with death. Grace Lee Boggs asks us what time it is on the clock of history. And the Bantu-Kongo cosmology represent the body/spirit life-cycle in two halves of a circle, divided by a river. I see this Kongo cosmogram as a clock of history at large, but also a clock of Blackness. Elsewhere I write about how we are moving out of a state of death and into a state of birth (and that we will continue to cycle through all of these) as we spiral toward our ultimate evolutionary destiny, which is the unknown. Perhaps it is Nirvana. Reunion with Bliss and the Creator. Still, heaven or not, Audre Lorde insists that we find heaven in the erotic capacities of own bodies, and that means insisting on justice in the *now*.²³

I wonder, when Olódumare/God was dreaming, whether they dreamed of state violence against a people that came to be called Black. Whether they dreamed all the suffering caused by greed and violence and the oppressive systems "now" and "then." Whether they

²¹ "The Pandemic is a Portal," available here <https://www.globalgoals.org/news/the-pandemic-is-a-portal>

²² I have started using (and am proposing we consider) the word X instead of/in addition to "indigenous" because of the ways in which that word is also stuck inside colonial paradigms.

²³ Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power, available here:

<https://liberationspring.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/the-uses-of-the-erotic-the-erotic-as-power.pdf>

dreamed the solution. Whether they dreamed up this moment, or whether this was just the moment that came, and things are now out of control, and that we are too far gone.
I wonder how much choice we have in our evolutionary journey.
I know that They/We is binaristic thinking, and that binaristic thinking is colonial thinking.
I know that We are God, and we are the dream.
I know that the power is in our collective hands.

I also know that humans have evolutionary leaps in the way of religion and philosophy during times of great crisis (*vodou*, Ghost Dance, Cargo Cults, pre-Roman Christianity, Buddhism).

I wonder how many times humanity will have to learn the same lessons.
I wonder how many more times those lessons will be articulated by the blood of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, trans people, women, queers, and all the other undesireables, exiles, and damned.
I wonder about retribution, and remember the Biblical Egyptians experiencing plagues for enslaving the Hebrews.

Turning water to blood.
Frogs.
Lice.
Flies.
Pestilence.
Boils.
Storms.
Locusts.
3 days of Dark.
Death of Firstborn.

As a child I resonated so much with this sense of divine retribution. I refused (and still refuse) to believe that anyone was “meant to be” a slave so they could learn a lesson [i.e. humility/patience]. Or that someone was “meant to be” a slaveholder so that *the world* could learn a lesson at the expense of the slave [i.e. we are all equal]. I am admittedly still so deeply, so desperately, troubled that all pandemics and plagues don’t target the primary oppressors/beneficiaries of oppression. And that they instead target the most oppressed. Where is the divine justice in that? Where is the divine? Where are you God, it’s me, Nia. How am I supposed to believe?

[Cue: “Is my waiting in vain?” The Clark Sisters]

I'm tired of not understanding. I'm tired of never asking why.²⁴ I'm tired of trusting God's plan and "mysterious ways."

[Cue: "Don't judge me, take care of me," FKA Twigs]

[Cue: "I am the monster you made," Burna Boy]

So what does that leave me with?

4.

As a child, I resonated with the sense of divine retribution, but as an adult I believe we are being asked to emerge with another answer, and that THIS is the evolutionary question. How can love be the message like Larry Levan said? I realize how much as humans--and even perhaps moreso as Black folks who suffer so much at the hands of others--we rely on stories like this, so we can rest assured that evil will be punished, if not by society, then by God. We need, desperately, to know that the buck stops somewhere, even if the punishment reifies the same acts of violence that made the thing wrong in the first place. There is a story in the Ifa corpus of Yoruba sacred literature where in Olokun (they/them), orisha of the deep sea threatens to drown the world in its entirety because their daughter was violated. And whenever I encounter this story, there is a part of me that is always rooting for Olokun. What world deserves to exist wherein the vulnerable can be violated without punishment?

Still, Olodumaré's instructions to the other orisha help them stop Olokun before the world can be destroyed. It is hard for me to to reckon with this halting, especially because it means that Olokun, who was fighting for justice, was imprisoned at the bottom of the ocean. And yet, we can see that many innocent would have suffered at Olokun's hands had they not been physically stopped. We can also see that this logic of punishment creates an impossible cycle. If acts of violence are wrong, and a breach of divine ethics, but the divine uses acts of violence to teach lessons, why are the same deeds not punishable? Who punishes the punisher?²⁵

²⁴ When I asked my grandmother why she thought, from a faith-perspective, Black folks suffer so much, she told me to "Never ask why."

²⁵ I have a lot more to say about this story and the analysis of it; in fact, I have, in collaboration with Linda Labeija, dedicated one of the plays in *The Dark Girl Chronicles* cycle to re-imagining this story in response to the murder of Islan Nettles and the violence against women of trans experience. Olokun's unwavering commitment to their daughter is the inspiration for Islan's mother who, along with Islan's community, "drowned" the world in protests, public outcries, and demands that she receive justice, pushing the case to trial. So if we understand the threat of drowning symbolically and not literally (and remembering that all of the Ifa stories are symbolic), we can go on a much more expanded journey. Also, I want to make a distinction between physical force in the moment vs. continued violence. Perhaps Olokun needed to be stopped physically in order to prevent the drowning of the world, but what about the continued imprisonment at the bottom of the ocean? Are they still incarcerated? Or has this become their voluntary home? How long did that process take, and what was involved in the healing? Are they allowed to leave? This set of questions is definitely on my list the next time I talk to one of the Iyas in my circle, and it is especially compelling to me because Olokun is the keeper of the third eye, visions,

I don't believe in an omnipotent God because my God would not allow any of this. Hence and therefore, my God is a single Black mom who is overworked and overwhelmed. Brilliant and imaginative and incredibly powerful, but all this is beyond her/them, and she can't fight the AXIS OF EVIL alone while continuing to maintain the perfect balance of CO2, H2O, soil balance, atmosphere, creating hella sunsets and sunrises, and really doing the DAM THING FOR US EVERY DAM DAY, and so we gotta figure this out on our own. In fact, SHE/THEY NEED US.

The buck stops with us.

There is no Savior.

We are God. (Sometimes we have to personify the best part of us as outside of us, but we can't get stuck there).

God is Change (Ancestor Octavia)

May we imagine the kind of God/Change/Us that expands the possibilities of joy, full-manifestation, and pleasure for all living and non-living beings.

Know what I'm saying?

[Cue: "No justice no peace, but we in pieces," Headie One]

I had a dream about a poem.

Transformative justice is the future from the smallest to the biggest. ²⁶

I'm thinking a lot about the carceral state, and how we have internalized carceral mindsets in relationship to the way we are inside our own bodies, inside our own days. The hundreds of mico-choices we make that move us closer to liberation, health, healing, sovereignty, imagination, curiosity vs. shuttling ourselves back into oppressive structures. And how we're always having to balance our dreams with what is "practical," and "reasonable" even knowing that it was not so long ago that chattel slavery was practical, reasonable and lawful; that beating ones wife was practical, reasonable, and lawful, and that murdering queer and transfolks on the streets is still, in fact, considered practical, reasonable, and lawful, as is incarcerating 25% of the population, as is depending on profit-based systems that is quite literally killing all of us, some of us more quickly, but all of us nonetheless.

I had a dream that poetry was the answer.

In my friend Ryan's panel on Black Queer and Trans Futures on Clubhouse last week, we were asked what we would be bring to the moon after all the Black folk decided we were truly over Earth, and the humans' fundamental inability to recognize our humanity/divinity/liveness. `

imagination, intuition, and deep wealth. If, indeed, they are still imprisoned, what do we/they need to do to be released? For that energy to release inside ourselves?

²⁶ Shouts out to the X elders of the Americas who use this framing in and as prayer.

People took the most wonderful things: farming equipment, Atlanta strip clubs, storytelling skills, various kinds of weed smoking devices. Talk about a Black Joy time capsule.

[Cue "Buss It" Erica Banks, "I don't never be on no Tinder/and/I don't never be on no Date-line", and understand it to be another permutation of the aesthetics of disappearance, embodied by Marie Lavea and Assata Shakur]

I long to disappear
I long to be useless.
I long to float
[mars/moon/venus/comet/sirius b]
I remember--
it was a space suit
[the dream]
I remember.
it was a bubble.
I remember.
I believed myself.
I remember.
I didn't panic.
And I built (remembered? breathed?) a river
from a drop of water
in my left hand

That's what it was
floating
then a river
I wasn't free yet
but almost
--together
--i want more
--together
--so
--can we just
--go

?