

alexis pauline gumbs

DUB

FINDING CEREMONY



dub

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for all
(my relations)

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*After and with published uncollected essays
and one interview with Sylvia Wynter.*

a note

So I have to be realistic and say how can I expect people whose *discipline is their identity* to accept this hybrid model? When what they/we are being faced with is the total removal of their discipline as an autonomous field of inquiry? But then think of the dazzling creativity of the alternative challenge that would be opened up?

—Sylvia Wynter, speaking to Katherine McKittrick in “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (emphasis in the original)

Sylvia Wynter learned every colonial language. She studied the philosophical and theological patterns in the understanding of life, personhood, and environment leading up to colonialism based on a core proposition: if the ways of thinking, being, and understanding that made colonialism and slavery imaginable were constructed over time, and heretical to the ways of thinking, being, and understanding that came before them, it must be possible to understand life, being, and place differently by now.

Throughout her prolific career, Wynter has used theory, fiction, drama, and continual critical conversations to get at the underside of the stories so core to our existence that we don't even track them as stories. As a participant in multiple social movements, and as a key part of the transformation of the humanities and social sciences in the US academy (while also critiquing the scope of both the political movements and the academic tendencies of her time), Wynter has

argued that scholars in the humanities, and cultural workers more generally, have a responsibility for what is and is not imaginable in their lifetimes. Police brutality, the destruction of the physical environment, the theft of resources from the so-called developing world, and every other horror of our time are based on a dominant and now-totalizing understanding of what life is, a poetics of the possible.

I wrote this book based on moments of emphasis in essays and one interview with Wynter over several decades. Each source text was written at a different time, spoken in a different place and for different people. And though the emphasis is different based on the audience, and though the way *in* may be different depending on where she is standing, she tells us over and over again how we got *here*. The inhumane history of man. The violent imposition of a supposedly universal humanism on variably dispossessed communities. And she implores us, at this moment, when, because of the planetary scale of communication, she believes there is actually a chance for a real universalism or a real species-level interaction with the universe, to tell a different story. As she says over and over again, *all of our lives depend on it*.

It never came linearly. It tends to come the way a flower blooms. It comes unexpectedly; and it has nothing to do with “genius.” It has to do with this beginning to question your own “consciousness.” It’s the idea of *poesis*, again; there is also *a poesis of thought; a new poesis of being human*. These concepts don’t come in a linear fashion. They build up. They build up, you know? So as you’re talking they build up and they build up the way music builds up and up and up until you get that sudden. . . .

—Sylvia Wynter in an interview with *Proud Flesh* magazine

It can be dangerous to investigate what our lives depend on, to recognize that freedom requires a species-scale betrayal of our founding mythologies. I should have known that sitting with Wynter’s demand for heretical poetic action against our deepest beliefs every morning would prompt me to unlearn myself. And though I wanted intimacy with her ideas, I didn’t realize how close to home this unlearning

would be. If *Spill* took me to the contemporary afterlives of slavery and *M Archive* took me to the postdated evidence of our imminent apocalypse, *Dub* eviscerated me of my own origin stories, the fragmentary resources I had used to make sense of my own life.

In my sci-fi short story “Evidence” and on the last page of *M Archive: After the End of the World*, there is a woman in a cave writing a record with her menstrual blood, as a message that will live beyond her time. In her recent writing and conversations, Sylvia Wynter talks about a cave too, found in South Africa and called “Blombos Cave.” It dates back 100,000 years, and the ochre writing on the wall is not blood, it’s paint, made to look like blood, one hundred millennia ago. Sylvia Wynter’s challenge to the species is this: what if what we think is blood, is just paint? What if what we believe is required of humans by nature is just a story that we told ourselves about what being human is and what nature is? What if who we think we are, what we believe at a gut level about our kinship loyalty and our perceived survival needs are responses to a story we made up and told ourselves was written by our genes? And what if one group of people colonized the whole world with a story that survival meant destroying life on earth? What then? And by then, Sylvia Wynter means now. She does not identify as a science fiction writer. Instead she argues what the humanities have been relating to as the history of the human has all been insidious science fiction, a fiction about what science is, written deep in our neurological responses, science fiction at best, horror fantasy at worst.

Wynter says we are not *Homo sapiens*, we are *Homo narrans*, not the ones who know, but the ones who tell ourselves that we know. She says we therefore have the capacity to know differently. We are word made flesh. But we make words. So we can make ourselves anew. Inspired by Wynter, I conducted an experiment on the scale of one life connected to all other lives, on the scale of three hundred individual mornings connected to every dawn of existence. I made myself a dare. What if I go to my own veins, the origin stories that I think precede me, what if I go there and say that all the blood that ever spilled can now become paint. What then? And by then I mean now.

As I started doing the daily writing that would become this book, I started to hear from the perspective of my ancestors from the Ca-

ribbean region. And then my Irish ancestors who shipwrecked into the Caribbean and stayed. And then beyond the Caribbean region. My coastal whale-listening Shinnecock ancestors. My untraceable Arawak ancestors. My Ashanti ancestors who survived the Middle Passage. And then the ocean itself. In each case, I found myself confronting stories that I had been told, or that had been told around me, or that had been silently providing the context for my racial, national, and cultural existence. But these stories emerged in different voices, from submerged perspectives. And as I opened to a new and threatening listening (that often left me sitting at my computer in shock), my sense of who were and were not my ancestors shifted.

Relatives outside what we understand to be the human species had some storytelling and untelling to do as well. And as I sought to understand the species of whales, coral, barnacles, bacteria, and so forth, that were speaking from the bottom and the surface of the ocean, I began to understand that the scientific taxonomy of what constituted a species or which family, phyla, genus, in some cases even kingdom and domain, a particular form of life was, was as debatable and discursively unstable as the narratives within my family of who was an inside or an outside child, and who was related and why and how, and certainly as complex as what Wynter teaches us about: the discursive construction of man.

I had to understand that when I reached out for my ancestors I couldn't (like population geneticists do) just stop at some point of relation that would be marketably salient to my ego's prior understanding of who I am now. My listening began to include speakers who have never been considered human. And while that category of the never-considered-human tragically includes my enslaved ancestors, my disabled ancestors, my queer and indigenous ancestors, and everyone subject to the police radio codes Wynter writes about in *No Humans Involved*, it also generatively includes whales, corals, barnacles, bacteria, and more. Kindred beyond taxonomy.

This writing, and Wynter's rigor, required me to let go of my voice and to surrender to language practices outside my memory and education. It required study into the political content and context of places I have never lived and during times that I have not been alive. It required repetition and giving over to the timing and rhythm of prayer, it has required me to read each page aloud at least a dozen

times and to know that I am not the same person and the room is not the same place when these words have been spoken. It has required me to trust and know myself intimately and in the same moment to stop knowing who I am.

PROUD FLESH: “So we can make the connection between what you call poesis, the breaking down of the status-quo order of ‘Man’ and something like dub poetry, for example.”

SYLVIA WYNTER: “Exactly! The whole world is organized about this aesthetics of rhythm, you know?”

Dub is a poetic work made from the doubling journey of a queer Caribbean diasporic Black feminist writer. I am sampling the emphasis and breaks of Wynter, a world historical Caribbean theorist who is about my grandmother’s age. Influenced by the promiscuity and prolificity of dub music, the confrontational homegrown intimacy of dub poetry, and the descendants thereof (especially D’bi Young Anitafrika’s sorplusi method, which I write about elsewhere), this work depends on and disrupts rhythm and riddim, the impact of repetition and the incantatory power of the spoken broken word.

This project is an artifact and tool for breath retraining and inter-species ancestral listening. It is structured to ask, what if you could breathe like whales who sing underwater and recycle air to sing again before coming up for air? What if you could breathe like coral from a multitude of simultaneous openings connected to one source built upon the bones of all your dead? What if you could breathe like cyanobacteria who made the sky into oxygen millions of years ago and sent their contemporaries to a world of sulfur deep under ocean and ground? What then? And by then I mean now. These are the ceremonies I found. You will find, especially if you read aloud, but even if you don’t, that many of these passages ask of you what my ancestors are asking of me. When you think it’s time to come up for air, go deeper. When you think your heart will break, stay there, stay with it. But at the same time, when you think you gotta hold onto something (like who you think you are), let go.

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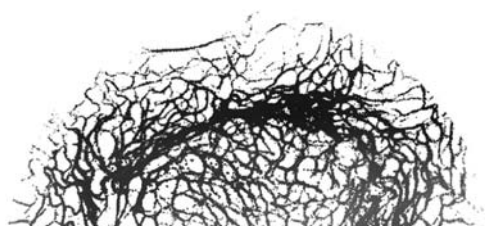
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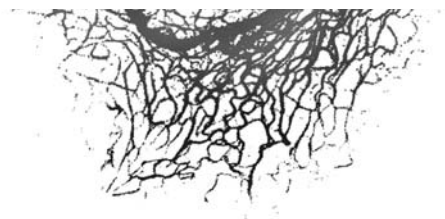
we would like it if you wrote us poems. we would like it if you wrote us long life sentences. we would like it if you broke sentences and gave us more life than you or we were told could be contained. we would like it if you remained. we would like it if you showed up every day. we would like it if you drank water. we would love it if you would turn off your phone. we would sincerely appreciate it if you stopped pretending to be alone.¹



we promise to wake you up if we think you won't get the point of the dream. we promise to show up if you show up. every day. we promise to make you feel sick when you lie to yourself. we promise to let love through if it's love you came to do. we promise to make time flexible if you give us all your time. we promise to think of you more often than you think of us. we promise to remember you when you forget. we promise to be wherever and in everything you haven't noticed yet. we promise to be we, even one by one. we promise to outsmart your mind. we promise to overlove your heart. we promise to echo over your voice. we promise you everything. everything. all we ask.¹



instructions



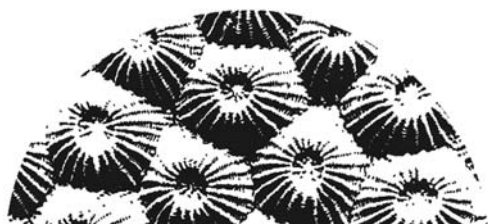
tell them about the eastern shore and running. tell them about underneath the boat. the hard shell breaking open. the land so wet it's water. the water so hard we live on it most the day. tell them how we left and how we stayed.

tell them about the whales. but tell them using the oyster shells. tell them about wampum and waiting. tell them about the salted dirt within you. tell them how we found each other again.

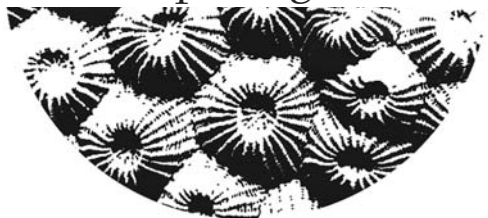
tell them about the shells. tell them about the giant turtle shells. tell them about the soup we made in shells when we needed armor. tell them why we needed armor and what we did before the harm. tell them about flint, magic, coral, god, and fire. and what we left to tell the tale.

tell them about the whales. and how they swam next to us singing. how they breathed sometimes bigger than the boats. what they taught us about evolution. how they clicked sometimes louder than the chains. how they taught us to make time out of salt. how they deepened our lungs. opened the top of our heads. how they made their whole bodies into drums to show us how it would be.

tell them who taught you to dream. to stay. to breathe. and then show them who taught you to leave.¹



opening



if you gathered them they would be everyone.

gather them.

recognize in them your jawline, your wet eyes, your long-fingered hands, seeking what but this multitude. if you gathered them they would not fit on this island. they would spill back into the ocean whence they came. when you gather them they will have fins and claws and names you do not know.

gather them anyway.

some will look you in the eye, some are too microscopic to see. if you don't gather them all you will never be free. if you gathered them you could not hold them, scold them, demand back what you think is lost. gather them today or your soul is the cost. gather the ones who sold and who bought and who tossed overboard. gather the erstwhile children in the name of the lord. gather the unclaimed fathers, the ones with guns and with swords. gather them up. with your hands. with your relationship to land. with your chin set. you are not done yet. you never will.

gather them more. gather them still.

they will unfound you and surround you unfind you and unwind you travel to you unravel through your own needle. gather the thread. collect your dead.¹

put yourself in the center and draw them in. stand where you standing which is not under and not over. you. not gonna get over it. and where you stand is not always standing either, is it? sometimes quicksand sometimes bended knee, very often that cross-legged thing you do, sitting on the floor or hugging your own legs like they were people. be where you are and draw them to you. you might need to move your hands, one of those legs or a book from blocking your heart. that would be a good start. put your arms out like if you were floating in water. daughter. they know where to find you.²

this is what we did. we put everything where it needed to go. we knew about need by intuition. we knew about need by experience. we knew about need by not needing what we thought we needed. we needed you to know something else. so this is what we did. we knotted up our knowing with our needing. we kneaded back our needing into notthisnotthennotagain and we knew the net of our needing, the need of our knowing would wander and would wait. we knew it like we knew salt. we knew it like we knew bait. we know it like we know you. don't hesitate.³

first, the sound. you hear it even if no one else does. even if you wake and already don't remember. second, the seconds. you feel the up-tick in your heart bringing you back into time. third, the rise. as if you are pulled vertical across the floor and before you know it you have taken several steps. it is a minute or so before you are you as you know you. in the rising you could be any of us.⁴

save the top of your head for the water. don't let the nonsense burn it out. cleanse with salt and coolness. thousands of years ago it was a spout. place your head in places worthy. place your hands over your heart. bless yourself with generations. that's a start.⁵

what the coral said:

breathe. breathe. breathe. sing. let that water move within you. let it be you. let your every cilia dance you into healing. let the warm salt water brighten you. your tears. sleep. and when you dream of working, sleep again. sleep until you dream of floating. dream until your edges soft. dream until you birth yourself in water singing with the bones of all your lost. dream until you breathe not from your mouth, not from your nose but through your hair and through your skin. dream until you claim the ocean. breathe until you feel no need to swim. breathe until your dreams flow out your brain. breathe and let them in your heart. breathe and we will call you again. that's a start.⁶

there are very few things that you must do. this is one. this will show you the others. there is a difference between assignment and need.⁷



whale chorus

