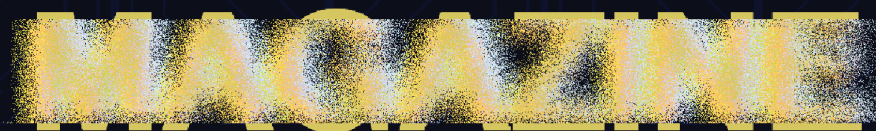


INDIGO



The Mothership Issue

Freedom is Now: A Reading Guide for *The Mothership*

Dear Reader:

The Mothership is the child of our communal imagination, an issue which emerged not from any one of us but from a set of fertile concerns which were circulating through our consciousness, namely: Black motherhood, Black freedom, and Black futurity. Our creative imperative is to make beautiful questions, rather than definitive answers, of these three wonder-filled concerns.

How can a magazine mother? More than mirror Black motherhood, *The Mothership* aims to perform it. It recognizes that the work of motherhood, is, of course, mostly done by biological mothers, yet knows also that, within the Black community, it is common for other kin, whether family by blood or choice, to participate in the rearing of children. It takes a village to raise a child, my mother would say. *The Mothership* chooses to embrace the burden and the bliss of this fictive kinship—to become what Patricia Hill Collins terms an “othermother”—in an effort to raise Black art from the infancy of bitterness into the adulthood of self-esteem.

When is freedom? Black folk have infrequently been allowed the space to imagine what they really want; we’ve been running so hard and so long away from oppression that we often don’t get a chance to ask ourselves where we are going. Freedom, we say, is what we want; but we can’t decide what or when it is—aside from the certainty that it sure ain’t now. We have won freedom dreams, surely, won them in the face of walking nightmares and deferred dreams. But *The Mothership* hopes to infuse our vision of freedom with a fresh sense of play, to allow us the pleasure and reprieve to ask what exactly we are fighting for.

But haven’t we all had enough of Wakanda? I’m afraid, my dear critic, that many of us have not. Yet before you jump ship, you should know that what you hold in your hands is not merely a work of Afrofuturism, but a Black Utopia that both precedes and exceeds the rules of history. In the pages that follow you will encounter the marvels of all time, so slap on your spacesuit and hop on this bootlegged Khufu: For freedom is now.

ALL ABOARD,

Malachi Robinson



GARDENING,

WHICH IS EARTH,

WHICH IS MOTHER:

FROM MOTHER.

**AN INTERVIEW WITH
JAMAICA KINCAID**

conversation by
Emi Cummings, Sterling Bland, and Karson Baldwin

An African and African American Studies professor and the Faculty Advisor of Indigo Magazine, Jamaica Kincaid is known for her thought-provoking work that reflects on the complexities of culture, colonialism, and identity. Her style, as a novelist, essayist, and short story writer, is both beautiful and raw, capturing the essence of the human experience with clarity and vulnerability. Throughout our visit, during which Kincaid excitedly referenced and reached for countless books from the shelves, stacks, and piles all around the room, we discovered that this literary giant is also a remarkable person with an infectious, down-to-earth demeanor that makes her an absolute delight to be with.

Emi: Toni Morrison views motherhood as an act of resistance essential to Black women's fight against racism. Do you agree? How can female contemporary writers use their work to explore the intersection of motherhood and broader social movements?

Kincaid: I'm sure Morrison has a larger point in it, but motherhood as a form of resistance? I wouldn't agree. When you've decided to become a mother, is it a form of resistance or is it because you want to love someone? Let me take my own experience. At some point, it was discovered I had a fibroid, almost a pound growing on a stalk on my uterus. They removed it. Within four months, I got pregnant. But, when I thought I would never get pregnant, it made me very sad that I would never have a child. So when I got pregnant and decided to have a child, it had nothing to do with anyone else or any form of resistance. I think it's cloaked in a larger issue. Morrison must mean, being an African American mother, you participate in resistance, which would make more sense, as you have suddenly entered active political life. So I would say, yes, being an African American mother, you do participate in resistance. You have to. But that's not all of it.

Motherhood is always complicated because first of all society urges you to be a kind of mother. And then you have your own feelings about being a mother. It's not only society, but some biology or

something causes you to be torn and to deal with questions of morality that men don't seem to. Women don't commonly walk away from their children the way men do. Traditionally, you carry this person. They almost kill you coming out. You have them. They're totally dependent on you. And then, they want to be whoever they want to be! They want to be something different from you! It's very complicated. It's so ancient, the mother issue, I mean. I am teaching a course about the Garden. You know, there are no descendants of Eve in the Garden?

Sterling: What about Cain and Abel? And Adam looks at Eve and he looks at her and calls her Eve "the mother of all living", right?

Kincaid: Well, I will use the King James Version: (Grabbing a Bible off her desk, she begins to read) "And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth: And the days of Adam after he had begotten Seth were eight hundred years: and he begat sons and daughters: And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died..." (she read the rest of the chapter)...and you can go on from there."

Sterling: That's crazy.

Kincaid: Yeah. That's the mothers for you. So Eve is the "mother of all living," but she has no name! You see how complicated it is? Motherhood is

the thing that civilization can't begin without but it's the thing civilization will quickly blot out.

Emi: You're talking about the Garden of Eden, which is a good transition. You really like gardening, right?

Kincaid: I do. I bring it up all the time. I don't mean to. But it seems to be something I have in common with these two. We like talking about the Bible. But not because I'm a believer. And not because I'm an atheist. I would be an atheist if it had better literature. It has no good literature.

Karson: Anything you're willing to share about your process or tips you might have for young writers?

Jamaica: No, because they wouldn't work for anybody else. That's one of the troubles with Creative Writing schools. It's not like physics or dentistry or something. It's so chaotic, writing is. It is to go back to the creation story, out of nothing you create something. If I were to say anything, it is just read widely and not necessarily fiction. Read things that have nothing to do with you. Read, and the minute you find yourself stuck in a pattern of liking one kind of reading, read something else.

Karson: Have you always had such a diverse range of interests?

Kincaid: Yes. I don't know how I developed that or what taught me that. My mother, I suppose. Again, the source of everything. I shall never forget her name. My daughter is named after her. She was from Dominica and she read widely. She taught me to read from a biography of Louis Pasteur. What three-year-old understands the life of Pasteur? She never told me there was an alphabet. She just taught me the words until I could recognize

them. And if I got something wrong, she would correct me. So I don't know if that's the beginning of it. I remember her telling me that is why I boil your milk to pasteurize it. And so I became interested in that, and cows. The funny thing is, all the things I've dabbled in eventually make a whole. They come together eventually. So I was interested in astronomy for a while and I'm a dunce at physics, but all of those things somehow intersect around gardening, which is the earth, which is mother.



Untitled
Dumebi Malaika Menayaka
Digital photography
2021

*IN MY
GRANDMOTHER'S
GARDEN*

(i was made in loving memory of You)

poem by
Joi Gonzales

pulling petals
to make myself

wind blows
leaves me
plucking again

twigs, sticks, leaves, pebbles
scavenge
gather

i would rather not hunt
weeping willows
string me
together
pull

there was a splinter in the wood
i unraveled it until
dangling
from my fingers was a string

tied my self up
Gram, can you sew without a needle?

in my Grandmother's garden
She raised greens: collards + mustards
okra

with the same ruby red nails
She raised children
She beat children

with these hands
She fought off men like the devil
She fought the devil, too

tended to pecan trees that lined this house that I have never seen
but, i have felt this house
the wood of its windows
make up my eyes
its doors my mouth
all of its wood
frames me
splintering on its edges

sometimes i chip away at the splinters and use them for fire
but i am left with ashes that do not spark

She tells me

there is no rot within the planks, why are you using splinters?
why are you trying to burn fires that turn to vapors when
My quilts line the walls
there is no rot within the roots
why do you try and gather on shorelines
that are not yours
land that was not tended with you in mind

here there are seeds that are made to nourish you
planted with your name whispered before covered by soil



Grandma's Curtains
Lauren Woodroffe
Digital Photography



THICK LOVE

story by
Sterling Bland

“Too thick?” she said.
“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”

~Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

My grandmother, Cameo, sat at the kitchen table, eating her usual, meager meal, consisting of a slice or two of deli turkey meat, half a slice of whole wheat bread, and a small glass of water. She was wearing a long dress, draped over her petite 5’1” frame, the loose kind of dress that didn’t weigh on her hips or hold them too tightly, the kind residual of a churchy generation that once believed pants were sin. She smiled, telling me all sorts of family stories, how some distant cousin in Denver was related to the one I had recently met in Boston, and how that one had history in California. Connecting the dots of the family tree, she smiled, amused with her own recollection. Her eyes were so big, so full of light: it seemed they glowed.

“Cameo, where does your joy come from?” I asked her, perplexed.

In this particular moment, I felt deprived, robbed. My sister was hospitalized, aspirating both from her jejunostomy tube in her small intestine and from the food she ate by mouth; alien fluids and foods filled her lungs. She entered the hospital a couple of weeks before Christmas, and it was past New Years now. This was likely the last sustained period of time I’d see her before I graduated and shipped out into the real world. I watched as her cheeks swelled from the medication, as her hope for the miraculous thinned.

About a year prior to this moment, our father passed from a combination of Type-II diabetes, Covid-19, and the accumulated trauma of his impoverished, tough upbringing. I remember at his funeral the pastor who eulogized him had grown up in the same hood, made it out, and encountered God. He offered a brutally

honest, cutting eulogy. He couldn’t lie on my Dad’s name. “Anyone who knew Drew knew he was a *complicated* man,” he opened. He then continued to describe how my Dad lived his life wrestling between hope and despair, fighting addiction, attempting to care for others in a way he had never been shown in his upbringing. He was often unsuccessful. “Smiley,” the pastor continued, referring to my Dad by his middle name, “was a hard man.”

Most did not know what to do with his critical eulogy. I appreciated it.

After he concluded, he approached me privately, and advised: “Your task, now, Sterling, is not to harden. Don’t become like your father.”

One night, around Christmas time, feeling the losses so poignantly, I wrote a poem:

Perplexed

Father gone

No one

To hold me

Perplexed

Sister sick

I have no more stories

I have no more Word

Perplexed

I am done

God, take my story

After Cameo had fallen asleep that night, I left the house and drove myself to the nearest nightclub. It was a typical club for Colorado Springs, playing a kind of music that was mildly frustrating. The kind of hip hop that was *it* several years ago, but was popular no more, the sounds reverberating through its walls, humming outside. I waited in line, getting my ID ready, and there she was.

She was wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt, accented by orange Dunks, an orange vest, and an orange cap. A small, gold chain necklace was around her neck. She looked ready to dance, but peered down at her phone as if waiting for friends. No, she was waiting for *me*, a soon-to-be dancing partner like she'd never seen before, I told myself.

I let a few people pass, and finally, she caught up with me in line. I asked for her name.

"I'm Sunny," she said.

"Are you waiting for anyone?" I questioned, a small smile.

"No, not necessarily," she replied, nonchalantly.

"Cool."

We entered the club, and *man*—did we dance. Occasionally, I'd hold her hand, and she'd do a little twirl. Then, she'd break away, and do a little shuffle. I tried my best, the awkward, lanky sort of dancer that I am, to do a little wave, a little footwork, to accent my little two-step. Occasionally, I'd hold her hand, and instead of turning completely, I'd let her stop halfway, her back against me, and I'd hold her there, swaying.

A few songs passed, and Sonny turned to me.

"Oh no—my ID?"

"Did you lose it?"

"No...no. I had a tab open at the club next door. And I think I left it there! Stay *right* here, okay? I'll go get it, and I'll be right back."

"Alright, cool," I responded, hesitantly. Sunny never returned.

Eventually, I anxiously went to the club next door. She was there, her orange cap bobbing, her orange vest popping, her orange shoes stepping. With her were three or four friends. As I watched them dance, a little ways off, I realized that I—my lanky, long arms, and my little two-step—could not have been a part of the group. I was not the kind to dance in that circle, my

blue North Face jacket, regular jeans, my Brooks tennis shoes, an offense to the orange cap, the orange jacket, the orange Dunks, surrounded by their friends: chains glistening and button-up popping off.

I left that night, lonely.

—

"Good morning, Sterling!" Cameo said, delighted as I came upstairs, a little later than usual, a bit groggy. She was drinking a smoothie for breakfast, the one Gramps always made her. It was nutritious and light, just what Cameo needed for her petite appetite.

"Did you have a good night?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Went to bed a bit later. Did I wake you with the alarm? I ended up coming home late."

"Oh no—you didn't. Don't worry about that," she smiled, entirely unaware of the pilgrimage which took place the night before. Or maybe, *aware*, but trusting, unconcerned, secure.

To the question concerning her joy's origins, Cameo's answer never satisfied me. "I don't know. Read the Bible and pray. You just gotta keep living." But there was a certain wisdom in it.

With Sunny, the night before, I had certainly had some fun, however fleeting. But I could not find home. Here was home.

Cameo's love is not sexy. It does not feel like a shuffle, or a little jig or two-step. It is the day-in, day-out commitment of Black motherhood which we so often take for granted, that commitment which makes a home warm. It is embodied in her prayers, her small conversations, her concern for my well being. Her trust that no matter what, I'll make it through. Her love is thick.

NEVERBORN

poem by
Abdul Malik Mohammed

The sun sets on the cusp of mama's breasts;
I know because once upon a time,
my cheeks would shine wet
if not cuddled by the stretching of its rays.
A stream would line beneath my eyes
if days did not end
in the sol-swallowing bend
that crested mama's chest.
Horizons were everpresent
with her presence,
engulfing me whole,
deluging me in a radiant orb,
looming and fully absorbed
with her very love bringing me forth,
like a celestial womb adorned with topaz
tubes
umbilical pumping diamond dreams into me
as I prayed to never be born.
Eternal gestation;
stationed in the nest of the setting sun,
I prayed to the light and its warm,
to forsake the chance of the day I am torn
from the Sun showering-shelter
I find nestled 'twixt the cusp,
and be born.
Vain in supplication,
I deferred, I defer,
and settle for warm
warping my torso
when embracing her.

THERE
IS NO
MOTHER
AFRICA;

words by
CJ Obasi

THERE
NEVER
WAS

“At the Saxon Madiba suite like Mandela
Bumpin’ Fela on the Puma jet, like we from Lagos
Mansa Musa reincarnated, we on our levels...

...Ali bomaye, no kumbaya
Just give me the Sommelier, I’m on La Tâche”

Jay-Z, “Mood 4 Eva”

“The term ‘western culture’ is surprisingly modern – more recent certainly than the phonograph... [and] to be blunt, if western culture were real, we wouldn’t spend so much time talking it up.”

Kwame Anthony Appiah, “There is no such thing as western civilization”¹

We are allowed to laugh at Hoteps, right? In our present-day society, in which Black solidarity is not just highly encouraged but actively necessary for our continued survival and liberation, God has granted to us this peculiar subsection of African-American culture as a near-universal point of humor. Hoteps represent a level of absurdity so grand, so complete in its aesthetic, and so uniquely Black that Darius James probably wished he had invented it. And unlike their counterparts such as the Hebrew Israelites or the Nation of Islam, the Hotep’s unifying philosophy is relatively distinct from the bigotry held by most of its members; they’re almost always bigots, but they were usually bigots before they were Hoteps. Ask a Hotep about their ideas, and at worst, you may find them horrifyingly annoying and bigoted. At best, they are delightfully hilarious. Thank you, Robin Thede, for proving that again² and again.³

The concept of “Hotep culture” is usually tied to two movements originating in the latter half of the 20th century: the dual rise of “Egyptomania”⁴ and Afrocentrism⁵ in the 70s and 80s. Black American society has (mostly) moved on from its obsession with ancient Egypt, partially because social trends come and go, partially because idolizing a society that actively participated in slave labor is more than a little ironic for Black Americans, and probably also because Egypt as a political entity and Egyptians as an ethnicity both still exist and therefore cause problems for the location’s usage as a rallying point. People still love ancient Egypt, but those people are usually under the age of 12. Afrocentrism, however, never really went away. An obsession with Africa—less as a geographical location or a collection of states, and more as a concept, as a way of being—has continued for decades in diasporic art and culture. Lorraine Hansberry’s last

1 Kwame Anthony Appiah, “There Is No Such Thing as Western Civilisation,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, November 9, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture>.

2 HBO, “A Black Lady Sketch Show: Hertep Homecoming.”

3 HBO, “A Black Lady Sketch Show | Dr. Haddassah: Hello Dolly.”

4 Miranda Lovett, “Reflecting on the Rise of the Hoteps,” *SAPIENS*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/hotep/>.

5 Ann-Derrick Gaillot, “The Rise of ‘Hotep,’” *The Outline* (The Outline, April 19, 2017), <https://theoutline.com/post/1412/what-hotep-means>.

play is set in Ztembe—a Southern African nation that is somewhat generalized and that doesn't actually exist—and came out in 1970, and 50 years later, Beyoncé released *Black is King*, a visual album that is as much and as little about any specific part of the African continent as it is about any other.

Just so we're on the same page, I love *The Gift*, and *Les Blancs* is my favorite of Hansberry's plays. But we cannot deny their connection to another part of the African diasporic cultural anatomy that also grew out of late 20th-century Afrocentric ideas but that is significantly more harmful. That is the concept of a "Mother Africa,"—an ancient, historically continuous, culturally unified, racially homogenous locale, regal in its presentation and as old as time immemorial—from which all Black people (and only Black people) were brought forth and to which all Black people can look to as a nurturing place and primordial mother.

My issue precisely is with the construction of "Mother Africa" as a totalizing narrative for Black people. It is from our narratives that we derive our ideals—and vice versa—and it is from both that we call for liberation. Make no mistake: I am, of course, in favor of liberation for Black people and all people, but we must take pains to ensure the manner by which we seek it hurts not ourselves nor other marginalized peoples, lest it becomes liberation only in name and not in deed. The Mother Africa archetype is not just an incorrect narrative, historically; it is a narrative from which ideals and ideas harmful to ourselves and to others may spring forth. We owe it to us, to all of us, to be better than that.

"Mother Africa," like most such constructions, good or bad, requires

its believers to entertain numerous assumptions about the world and the people within it. Some of these assumptions are fine, or, at least, more readily accepted: whether or not "Blackness" exists might be an interesting philosophical question, but, in general, most people agree that it does. However, some of these assumptions are more sinister: that Blackness is not just real but inherent, that Africa is not just a land mass, but a somewhat culturally indistinct and unwaveringly benevolent one, that Africanness and Blackness are synonymous, and so on.

If this is beginning to sound like racially essentialist thinking, it's because the thinking is racially essentialist. Ibram Kendi neatly defines racial essentialism as "the belief that races are biologically distinct groups with defining core "essences." This idea is central to the Mother Africa construction, for it requires one to believe a false narrative that not only sees Blackness as inherent but also the source of a historical unity on the continent in its antiquity that never really existed.

It is a common talking point that the concept of White unity in ancient Europe is ridiculous—ask a Gaul if he sees himself as the same race as a Roman, and you may not survive long enough to tell an anthropologist. For ancient Rome in particular, a concept of race that was based on skin color simply did not exist; the question was not "Black or White," it was "Roman or non-Roman." If we're being honest, no continent really had the level of racial unity we sometimes imagine they had in the far past. Race doesn't actually exist as we know it today until the 15th century, and when it is developed, it is mostly the Europeans, as

6 Adam Hochman, "Fact-Check: The Idea of 'Race' Is Not Modern but Late-Medieval: Aeon Essays," Aeon (Aeon Magazine, March 12, 2020), <https://aeon.co/essays/fact-check-the-idea-of-race-is-not-modern-but-late-medieval>.

unwieldy as that title is, who decide what race is what. Black people are merely told we are Black, and in the same centuries-long breath, we are told that our Blackness is something to be ashamed of.

But that sense of unified Blackness did not exist before this point. It is an identity thrust upon us due to similar outward appearances, not taken on by our own people due to some universal essence. At its most objective, Africa is a land mass more fundamentally connected by the proximity of tectonic plates than by culture. The continent was and is extremely ethnically diverse, and the people who lived on the continent in periods of antiquity were not party to any more of a grand socio-racial unity than any other continent.

That is not to say that there were no pockets of unity within the continent. The occasional confederacy between peoples almost certainly existed. There were, of course, the empires of Egypt, Ghana, the Songhai, and the Ethiopians, among others, and those states did create some sort of mandated cultural unity within their borders by virtue of being an empire. But those empires represented relatively small areas of the continent as a whole, and one can hardly equate the kind of genuine racial solidarity implied by the Mother Africa ideal to the one created by the actions of an imperial state. Even if you don't consider empires to be inherently bad, the politics of identity are fundamentally different; a family isn't really a family if the only reason you stay in it is because of fear. In its essence, to engage with the Mother Africa construction is to ignore the actual reality of Africa as it was in the past: not a unified utopia, but a vast land mass whose cultural disparateness was essential to its character.

Even to argue that Africa was ever racially homogenous is a bit of a stretch. Mother Africa's focus on Blackness, for it is almost always reserved as a Black

paradigm, is not only inaccurate to ourselves; it is actively disenfranchising to others.

However, it is not just the essentialism implicit in the Mother Africa archetype that is problematic. It is also what Mother Africa considers essential. By necessity, proponents of Mother Africa see its ancient form as a nurturing, motherly place. That may be a lovely concept, but it creates the risk of us being unable to properly wrestle with its history. The inhabitants of ancient Africa, like everywhere else, were not all paragons of human virtue. The Songhai empire was notable for its reliance on slavery. Aristotle discusses (and praises) a rigid hereditary caste system in Egyptian society. As in all human cultures, violence as a way to gain power and favor either in this world or the next did occur and still can. Our ancestors were not gods on earth; they were people.

The cultures of ancient Africa are beautiful. They are worth studying and respecting, but not because they were perfect. Similar to problems we see in American historical study, where we excuse the reprehensible actions of our founding fathers as merely "products of their time." We are at risk of excusing the reprehensible actions of Africa's past by refusing to see the continent as anything but nurturing. Any attempt at hagiography—laying on the historical praise a tad too thick—brings with it the opportunity to forget the mistakes of our forefathers for the sake of an easy narrative.

And that easy narrative is more actually confounding than useful, at least with regard to modern Pan-African unity as political action. If we play into the belief that our ancient homeland was even a somewhat unified, nurturing body in which all were cooperative and equal (and we all lived as kings and queens, blah blah blah), then our present pan-African activity, especially our political

endeavors, are just us returning to the past. The signing of the Sirte Declaration, the subsequent foundation of the African Union and the Pan-African Parliament, and more are nostalgic exercises.

This is, as we have established, wrong, and Pan-Africanists know this. More so than any, the majority of Pan-Africanists are acutely aware of African history—they have to be. They are trying to change it. But even more so, the stumble detailed above represents a fundamentally skewed value system that interprets the old as the right and just and the new as unimportant.

We should, at all times, be willing to relish the presentness of the experiment. Political pan-Africanism as it exists today is a dramatic post-colonial commitment to unity that does not require a basis in ancient culture to be valid and respected. It is attempting to do what so many organizations have tried and failed to do before; its newness is its strength, and to ignore that newness in favor of a historical narrative that has no real basis in reality is not only monumentally disingenuous, but it does nothing to help the actual work being done on the ground and throughout the diaspora to make pan-Africanism on the political scale happen.

It is not that ancient Africa was nothing but a Hobbesian dystopia; far from it. But relying too heavily on the Mother Africa construction prevents us from actually engaging in the useful act of wrestling with our ancient pasts in their beautiful and darker moments, in addition to not fulfilling a need as a useful politic. Blackness was an identity thrust—or, more accurately, shoved and shackled—onto us by others; we were told we had a collected history, we didn't choose it for ourselves. To engage with the existence of Blackness today is to construct new ways of looking at ourselves in spite of that fact. One major way, perhaps

our most important, is to look long at our collective past, to recognize and wrestle with it, to take what we need, and to leave behind what we must.



Untitled
Dumebi Malaika Menayaka
Digital photography
2022

THE DAMNED

story by
Victoria Mwaniki Kishoiyan

The fire started long before She moved into our complex. In the eyes of the watchful aunties of Newtown, refugees who learned English through the bible—and, while doing so, memorized the bible—She walked with an aura of apocalypse. She was a flirtatious, teasing transgender sex worker with sharp cheekbones, a decadent wardrobe, and cunning wit; a real “hood queen,” She called herself. And She loved the way She made aunties feel angry and uncles feel confused.

Revelations 17 offered a different title and description for Her: “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of Earth.” “Arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls,” the Whore of Babylon holds “a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication” and rides “a scarlet-colored beast” with “seven heads and ten horns.”

She proudly accepted her biblical title, the epithet which aunties whispered in hushed condemnation, declaring to my sister and I that “John the Apostle wouldna dressed hookers so damn nicely if God didn’t want nuthin to do with us, right?”

My sister suspected that She was right. I thought that She was wrong. I read the rest of the scripture. We were the whores of Newtown and nobody ever considered whores godly including God. Mama told me that pretty penniless Black girls like us were born to be set ablaze, beautifully, silently burned under street lamps and in back seats. We were hated, used, discarded, and found dead—invisibility became us, beauty damned us. For if you were Black and beautiful, you were damned. That’s what I told my sister. I said, Sis, when Mama was pregnant with me, she prayed that I would be ugly, then wept and repented when I grew beautiful.

“It makes no sense that God would make being beautiful a punishment. There ain’t a world where being beautiful could be a bad thing,” remarked Sis, shaking her head in naive disbelief as we talked at the table in the stuffy kitchen of Her small apartment. Sis was fifteen years old, the age at which I started working Newtown, when I was not yet stricken by cynicism. But, still, she was right: God didn’t make being beautiful a punishment. God didn’t have nuthin to do with the kinda life we lived.

“Just you wait and see,” I replied, coolly. I knew I seemed like a bad sister—I was, admittedly, a bad sister, a poor example—but I couldn’t do too much to change her mind, to change our fate. Mama died when I was fourteen and Sis was eleven. Baba, traumatized by the war and addicted to nearly everything, took off a couple years before. At fifteen, I had no money to raise a child and I wasn’t too grown myself. But pretty penniless Black girls like me always had something they could sell. And I sold it. I sold it pretty damn well.

“So you really don’t like being desirable?” asked Sis.

“I’d rather been born ugly.”

Sis let out a cheeky, condescending laugh.

“Talk is damn cheap,” she said.

Indeed, at that moment I was applying bright red lipstick and lining my eyelids with jewels; we were all getting ready to go out. It was true: I loved being beautiful. But what I said was true, too, in intention. There was agency to the beauty I possessed, to the feelings of desire I magnetized—I was wanted, needed, by johns. Even so, I wasn’t sovereign; there was a violent, powerless aspect to this attention, to this work. Sis didn’t realize that this kinda luxury was lethal. John only dressed the Whore of Babylon in scarlet garments to mock her: purple,

“the color commonly worn by persons of rank and wealth” (Mark 15:17), was worn by the whore for a moment, then aggressively removed by the beasts. This taunt—this brief taste of opulence and reverence—cruelly communicated how whores like us were fools for thinking we’d ever win. And now, though some whores, white ones, have gained authority and affluence, pretty penniless Black girls like us remain exiled to Babylon.

“I love to be looked at,” Sis asserted, definitively. “Men linger and women dream.”

Sis shifted her gaze towards Her, stared, then asked, “Would you wanna be ugly?”

“Ugly or not baby all I wanna be is forever free,” She deadpanned while looking at the pocket mirror on the table and masterfully applying fake eyelashes.

“But what other kinda freedom is there for you and me?” Sis replied.

She looked up from her mirror, paralyzed by Sis’ response.

“Oh baby,” She continued, “Freedom is...fleeting. It’s a smile from a beautiful rich boy you long for. It’s when dem aunties forget the scripture long enough to share a laugh with you. It’s a tight hug with your mama. It’s getting looking good, looking damn fine. It’s remembering how beautiful and magical your life has been. It’s thinking ‘bout how happy you once were and how lucky you once felt and trying, trying really hard, to feel that way again and find that hope once more.”

We all stopped putting on makeup and looked out the kitchen window, the only window in Her apartment, and the still sky felt like freedom. We seemed to be looking for a savior, our eyes were perennially searching in every corner and crevice for God’s grace. All we sought was divine refuge—safety, self-determination, and some answers—but the Lord looked the other way. Because ain’t nobody want to be associated with pretty penniless Black girls like us.

Still, we danced carelessly and dressed decadently and derided ugly men and derived pleasure from sex and took delight in each other’s company. We were the beautiful, burning whores of Babylon. And we burned brilliantly.

SHE WILL COME AGAIN

poem by
Vivienne Germain

that round thing called time
laughs
at the flying cars and silver suits
of your imagination.

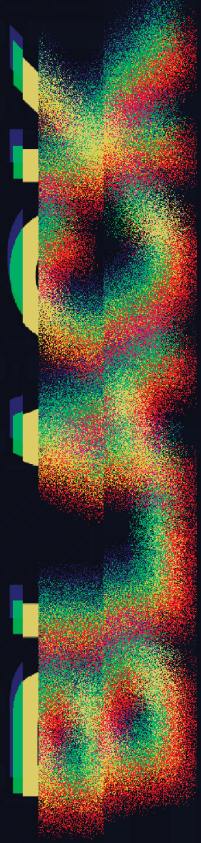
that round thing called time
remembers
your home made you;
your home released you;
your home received you again.

that round thing called time
knows
your grandmother's hands hold your grandchildren's future;
yesterday was tomorrow and she will come again; the world
is not flat, my friend, keep walking forward to return from
whence you came.

that round thing called time
sings
your prologue is epilogue;
your footsteps precede you;
your history will meet you soon.

that round thing called time
wants
the sexy future you desire.
she says you already wrote it.

UTOPIA IN



words by
Trey Sullivan

“They took to the swamp.”¹

This is how Roswell King, an overseer at a nearby Georgia plantation, bluntly described the mass-suicide of 75 captive Africans in his written correspondences. After being captured in modern-day Nigeria and shipped across the Atlantic in a vessel called *Wanderer*, these 75 men, women, and children were auctioned in Savannah and sold to work in the nearby Georgia Sea Islands. However, on their short trek to the nearby isles, the Africans mutinied, drowned their captors, and docked at Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island.²

Upon docking, the captives were rallied together by a man thought to be a high priest, and, still in chains, the Africans marched into the Georgia marsh—drowning themselves. It is alleged that as he led his people into the water, the high priest chanted in his native Igbo: “*Mmụọ mmiri du anyi bịa, mmụọ mmiri ga-edu anyi laghachi*” (the water spirit brought us, the water spirit will take us home).³

This event is now memorialized as the Igbo Landing.

While Roswell King expended little ink on this story, it gained a life of its own in African American oral history and folklore. As this act of resistance in the face of slavery was passed down through the generations, the myths around these 75 Africans grew and Black communities in the South dared to imagine an alternate reality in which the Africans did not perish beneath the murky Georgia waters. From the minds of these Black southerners—deigning to dream—came folktales

claiming that the 75 Africans walked through the marsh and across the Atlantic all the way back to Africa. Other folklore traditions envisaged the Africans taking to the sky and flying back to their homeland. Folktales like these spawned an entire genre of ‘flying African’ stories within the Black oral and literary tradition (see Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*).

But what is particularly moving about these folktales—these exercises in magical realism—is that they force the impossible into the realm of the possible. They present the unimaginable before our very eyes. The folklore spawned from Igbo Landing refuses to believe that the lives of those Africans ended when they walked into the marsh. The stories refuse to postpone the Africans’ peace, rest, and freedom until the afterlife. Rather, out of a historical event so painfully real, it imagines these 75 Africans enjoying freedom in their homeland during their mortal lives—unyoked by the bondage of American chattel slavery.

As I see it, within the Black tradition, there have been two dominant avenues of discourse concerning futurity. The first framework is deeply rooted in the Black Christian tradition, encapsulated in the fervent belief that although our earthly lives may be painful, our future lives in heaven will be filled with peace and joy that surpasses human understanding. The second framework falls under what Mark Dery coined as ‘Afrofuturism’; this framework uses futuristic tropes created in Western science-fiction literature and art, and reimagines it for the Black diaspora.

But the Igbo Landing folktales offer another way to imagine the Black future.

1 Timothy B. Powell, “Ebos Landing,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, June 15, 2004, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ebos-landing/>.

2 “The Water Spirit Will Take Us Home,” *National Museum of African American History & Culture*, <https://www.searchablemuseum.com/the-water-spirit-will-take-us-home>.

3 Jessica Uchechi Nwanguma, “Igbo Landing: The Story of Rebellion and the Choice of Death over Slavery,” *Fun Times Magazine*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.funtimesmagazine.com/2022/02/20/390521/igbo-landing-the-story-of-rebellion-and-the-choice-of-death-over-slavery->

Like the aforementioned frameworks, these folktales are motivated by the same core intuition: to find and/or create space where Black people can exist free from the limitations imposed by white society—in essence, a *Black utopia*. This is exactly what the folktales achieve. The enslaved Africans walk/fly back to a society where they are viewed as full and free people—an ocean away from the dehumanizing conditions of the white supremacist hierarchy. But significantly, the imagineers of these folktales refused to conceive utopia as a Christian Heaven so distant as to only be attainable through death, nor as some European-inspired ultra-modernist commune, but an entirely real and normal place, made special solely by the fact that Black people were unencumbered and free to choose their own destinies. It is from this perspective that we must begin our imaginings of a Black future.

This article, thus, has two projects: first, to problematize key aspects of the two dominant conceptions of Black futurity; and second, to explore how Igbo Landing may be the best lens through which to envision a Black utopia.

While the goals of Afrofuturism are admirable, the aesthetic that it often adopts in popular culture is troubling. It is an aesthetic seemingly predicated upon a Western ideal of advancement (see Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* and *ArchAndroid*, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* series). The valorization of advancement is central to the West's self-conception. Indeed, its scholars and philosophers, like Herder, Kant, and Hegel, have long seen their history—albeit socially-constructed—as one of perpetual improvement towards an eventual utopia, characterized by fully-realized rationality and knowledge.

The word 'utopia' itself was first coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516. Derived from the Greek words *ou* meaning "not" and *topos* meaning "place," utopia literally means "not a place." Sir More used it to describe an idealized society of his own creation that he memorialized in his aptly titled work, *Utopia*. A century later, Francis Bacon published *New Atlantis*, which described a utopian society as one of "intellectual advancement and scientific knowledge."⁴ However, Alex Zamalin, professor of Africana studies at Rutgers, contends that the roots of European utopianism can be traced to "the birth of Western political thought": Plato's *Republic*.⁵ This seminal text teaches that society can be perfected if all of the different classes perform their correct duties. Perfection, achieved through an exacting degree of order, hierarchy, and technological advancement, seems to serve as a path towards utopian societies in the Western conception. And Afrofuturism, with its reliance on technological advancement and the trappings of a highly structured Western society, appears to be envisaged by a Western standard of modernity. Consequently, relying on these tropes to imagine a free Black future is contradictory.

On the other end of the spectrum, for Black people brought to Europe and the Americas as slaves, their conception of utopia was rooted in the only source of hope that they were allowed: religion. Deprived of education and access to almost all literature, enslaved people had no reference to Plato, More, or Bacon. However, through forced conversion, enslaved Africans began to associate Heaven with the idea of utopia. Living through the dehumanizing realities of chattel slavery, they clung to the next

4 Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 3.

5 *Ibid.*

life for the end of their hardships. In his ethnography of the American Negro, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois concludes that “the Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next.” Other scholars, attempting to pathologize Black Americans’ relation to their enslavement, speculate that enslaved peoples reimagined the brutality of slavery as a “purifying process, a process that must be endured like a refiner’s fire’ for ultimate salvation.” This is not to say that Black Christianity was entirely passive: Nat Turner, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and countless others disprove that assumption. However, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that the belief in a utopian here-after allowed enslaved people to reconcile their cruel situation in this life and to be more easily pacified.

Holding these contentions with the existing discourse in mind, the question remains: what do the flying/water-walking African folktales that were birthed by the Igbo Landing offer?

The folktales create a framework where utopia ceases to be European perfection or Christian afterlife, but rather autonomy of the soul, mind, and body. Professor Zamalin traces the origins of this genre of Black utopian thought to Martin L. Delany, a nineteenth century Black nationalist who advocated for Black emigration from the United States in order to form sovereign communities in Latin America and Africa. Here we see Black utopia conceived of as a place where Black people are self-determining. As this small, yet persistent strain of Black utopian thought evolved throughout the centuries, Zamalin argues that it continued to diverge from the European model, becoming “based

less on the notion of perfect mastery and instead on a mixture of pragmatic experimentation and critical reexamination.” Here, pragmatism is not a limiting force, but rather a source of grounding. It grounds theory in reality. Utopia is not a far-off “not-place” that necessitates perfection to be realized; nor is it in life after death. Rather, it is something radically imaginative yet palpably tangible.

Zamalin references Sojourner Truth’s Black feminist advocacy as emblematic of the Black utopian dream. Truth lived in an era when women were viewed as second-class citizens and Black women were viewed as second-class women. Yet, she had the fortitude to imagine a world where Black women were guaranteed the same freedoms as any American citizen. Significantly, she did not wait for all God’s children to be equal in heaven; she did not wait for all elements of society to function in perfect harmony; she acted in the moment. The task seemed impossible, but she believed it possible for *her lifetime* anyway.

Black utopia is the belief in unconditional freedom in *this life*.

The story of the Igbo Landing is so hauntingly beautiful because it resonates on two registers. The mass-suicide speaks to the courage of those 75 men, women, and children to choose death over enslavement. But the folklore surrounding it speaks to a different courage. The courage of Black people living in the South under hellish conditions to create a narrative where their people find freedom, peace, and joy in the here-and-now. These folktales display the courage to hope against hope, the courage to imagine a future where Black people are free.

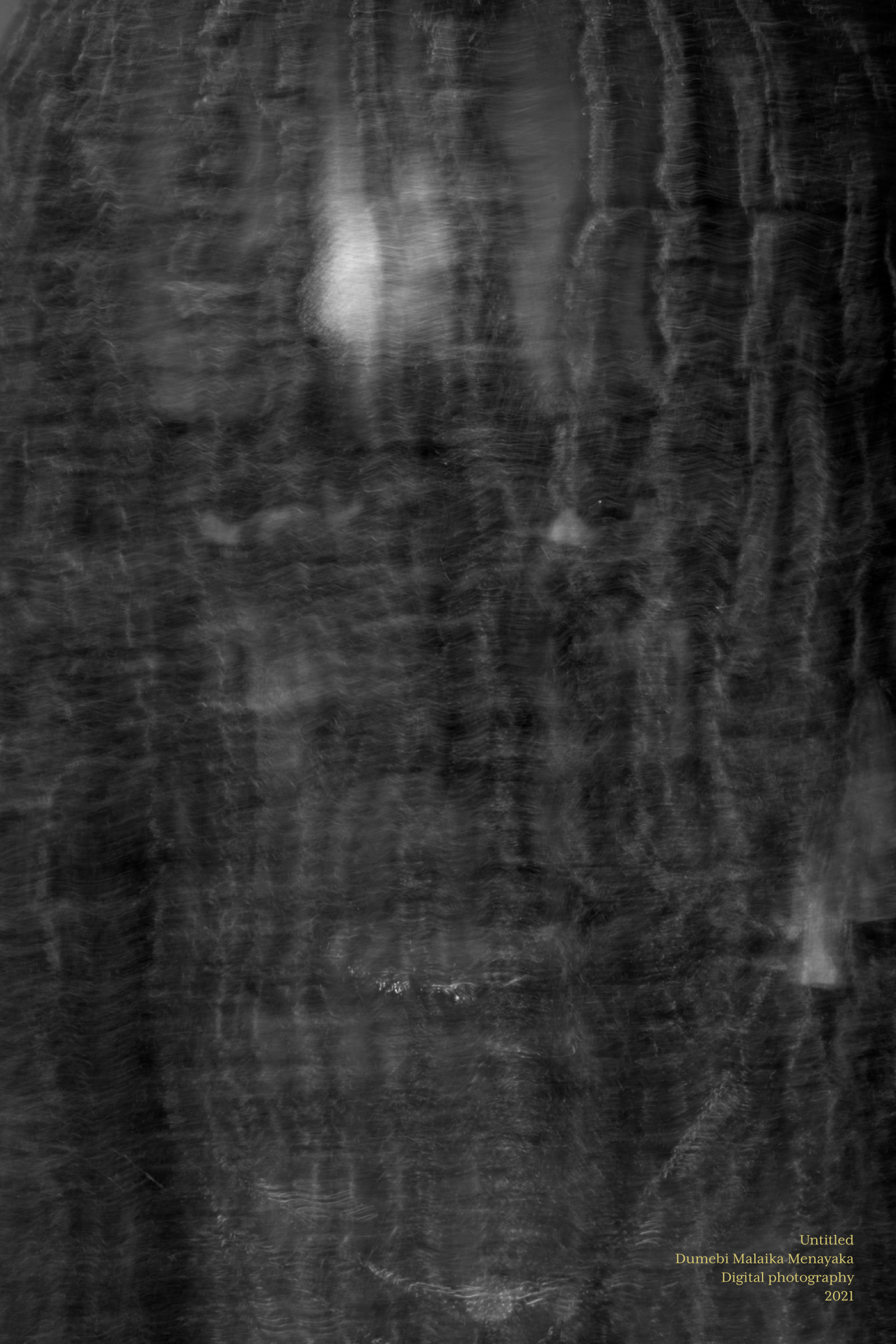
6 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), 202.

7 Kathryn Gin, “The Heavenization of Earth,” *Slavery and Abolition*, no. 2 (June 2010): 210.

8 Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 14.



Untitled
Dumebi Malaika Menayaka
Digital photography
2021



Untitled
Dumebi Malaika Menayaka
Digital photography
2021

ME TO MOTHER

poem by
Imani Fonfield

Well Mama, I'll tell you:
Life for me has been a dare to dream.
I look up,
And I see cosmos,
And comets,
And constellations coloring outside the lines of tribulations—
Bright.
And all the time
I've be a-looking up,
And touchin' stars,
And turnin' pages,
And oftentimes letting the confidence of my curiosities lead me into the light
Where there ain't no more darkness.
So Mama, let the rhythm of your feet drum to the music in your chest.
Celebrate the joyful hum rising about your hips
'Cause you are my queen, Mama.
Look at the place you built for us—
The state of mind made just for us—
For I've see our celestial delight,
And life for me has only just begun to dare to dream.



All Eyes Mom and Daughter
Lauren Woodroffe
Digital Photography

ATLANTA MOTHER SLAPS THE BLACK OFF OF HER SON

story by Dylan Pigott

Atlanta, Georgia (BlackNews) – During an arraignment hearing in Hancock County Court on Tuesday, 45-year-old Amaya Johnson admitted to slapping the black off her 16-year-old son, Chris Jonhson.

The incident took place Monday at Ms. Johnson's home. According to neighbors, it began when Chris left the front door open after watching "Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, and Blonde." Chris had been assigned this movie as part of his cultural studies class, "Mayonnaise in Movies: An Exploration of What White People be Watching." The encounter then became more intense, with Ms. Johnson stating, "I ain't heating the whole neighborhood. Close the door!" It was at this moment prosecutors say Chris "lost his damn mind." Chris yelled "I hate you, mom." This was a phrase he had recently learned at his friend Brad's house. However, Johnson's legal team believes "Legally Blonde 2" may have also played an influencing role due to its innate caucacity. The judge, regardless, agreed Ms. Johnson did not raise Chris that way and waived bail for the 16-year old, who doctors say may be white forever—after having the black slapped off him.

Taking the stand Wednesday, Chris Johnson began his side of the story. The jury, composed largely of black Aunties shaking their heads, was noticeably dismayed. Two jurors even screamed for the electric chair. Unfortunately, Chris Johnson is now legally white following the slap and cannot be subjected to lethal punishment in the state of Georgia. This revelation caused a noticeable outburst from the jury, with many screaming "if that were my child" and "he thinks he's grown." After a brief recess, the jury returned and heard the rest of Chris's testimony.

Chris alleges that he did not yell "I hate you, mom," and instead had only whispered it. Ms. Johnson's legal team replied, "I bet you won't say it again though. See what happens if you say it again." According to legal experts, this was a trap and he absolutely should not have said it again.

As Chris continued his testimony, it became clear losing his blackness was having unintended consequences. "You people need to understand something," Chris yelled, before taking the first of many sunscreen breaks. Once Chris was sufficiently SPFed, he began again. "*You people* need to understand something, my life has been terrible since losing 14 casserole tins of melanin in one day." Chris then detailed the emotional trauma he suffered after the incident. "When she slapped me [Mrs. Johnson] everything suddenly went white...my skin, my brain, everything. I swear I saw every step to the cupid shuffle fly from my being. From that moment on I was changed: I can only wear New Balance, I no longer know how long "it's been a minute" is, and I don't even know who was in Paris." It is believed Chris's blackness was slapped all the way to North Atlanta, where 5 white high schoolers suddenly developed a step-back jump shot.

story by

Rave Andrews



My heart races as I cautiously step outside of the deserted convenience store. *Alright, relax. You got 'em all.* I look down at my shirt, completely shredded and covered in blood. I attempt to steady my breathing and scan the destroyed sidewalk and road around me, the mutilated bodies of *The Chads* are scattered all around. I avoid the pools of blood and make my way into a nearby alleyway.

...

No one really thought it would happen this way. The end of the world, I mean. For starters, the freaky brain-eating fuckers don't even look like the rotting, decomposing zombies we always see in movies. No, these guys look like Chad from Sigma Chi. The white guy with cheap cologne and tacky boat shoes who begs the person on aux to play a Drake song and raps along to every word. Every. Word. (And no, Chad, I don't care if your "homeboy" Travis gave you the pass one night.) Now, how did the world get taken over by a bunch of Chads? Surely we'd have it under control before it could spread, right? Nope. They were always one step ahead. By the time we had detected the first case, they had already started infecting the most susceptible subsets of the population.

They first lured in the desperate housewives: the poor women who hadn't felt pleasure in decades, ever since their husbands either got erectile dysfunction or started fucking their 20-year-old assistants instead. Next, they lured in the frustrated fathers: the pathetic men, neck-deep into a midlife crisis, and in hopes of becoming a father figure to anyone other than their excuse of a son. Next up, the vanilla latte college girls: self-explanatory.

Afterward, they started going for everyone. Each subset of the population was susceptible in some way. Chads have this sort of undeniable universal appeal, with their pearly-white teeth and incredible beer-pong abilities. Yet, there was one group entirely unphased by the charm of a Chad. One group smart and powerful enough not to fall for any of their tricks: Black women.

For a long time we thought we could get through the Chadpocalypse. We created networks amongst ourselves, traded resources, and fought side-by-side. This all changed when the Chads started to evolve. In only a matter of days, hundreds of my sisters were wiped out by the newly emerging Chris Evans variant. Another thousand soon infected by the Timothee Chalamet variant. For the first time in a long time, I was alone.

...

As I creep into an alleyway to reload my gun, I hear a rustling sound behind me. *Fuckfuckfuck.* I don't have many bullets left. I point my gun toward the direction of the sound and start to panic. A shadow emerges from the darkness. I begin to shoot at the dark figure, but he seems to be completely unaffected. *Which variant is this?* He suddenly breaks the silence with the only words that could paralyze me in fear. "Hello, my beautiful milk chocolate mocha caramel black queen." *No. It couldn't have been.* It was the Jack Harlow variant.

He winks and starts to sing a dangerous melody, "I can put you in first class, up in the sky." *Oh man, I sure want him to put me in first class.* I try to fight the urge, but his "respect" for black women is too powerful. He licks his lips and starts to rub his hands together. "Mmm girl. You know I love me some 4C curls." *How does he know my curl pattern?* Before I know it, I soon begin to feel my body approach him. "Come over here witcho mighty fine ass," he laughs. *No. Please. Control yourself.* "Did I mention I'm 6'3?" *Dammit, he's got me.* At this point, I'm only a few feet away from him. He starts to clench his jaw and bare his teeth. But right as he lunges at me, I blow his fucking brains out.



UnderWater
Tenzin Cund-Morrow
Digital Photography

TOMORROW

poem by
Vivienne Germain

tomorrow
we will live in a lush world
we created ourselves
where queens sit atop mountains of more
dripping in decadence
rich as their melanin
rich as their people.
everything glimmers,
it's hot.
we don't wish it was cooler—
we don't wish.

