Recipe For Resurrection

by

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For Thomas Thurmond and Elizabeth Doolittle

For NGOZI Lumumba McDuffie-Thurmond
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Constructing Theoretical & Methodological Frameworks In 
*Recipe For Resurrection*

**Introduction**

At its core, *Recipe For Resurrection* is a poetry project born from a deep personal and theoretical critique of the violent archives of enslavement\(^1\) I've encountered during the course of my research. The vast majority of this content that I've analyzed within these archives is derived from personal family documents and entries found in *Slave Records of Edgefield County, South Carolina* by Gloria Ramsey Lucas. Lucas’ book is a thorough collection of records from the Edgefield County Archives that refer to the selling and purchasing of enslaved Africans within the regional borders of antebellum Edgefield county. The records in this book include appraisals, deed transfers, inventories, estate records, sheriff sales, wills, and dozens of other miscellaneous records that contain approximately 29,000 listings and mention the names of almost 58,000 enslaved people.\(^2\)

For this project, the scope of my research has been narrowed to focus on documents specifically pertaining to three slave owning families in Edgefield: the Doolittles, the Thurmonds, and the Jennings; all of whom are of particular interest because of their familial relation to me through either blood or marriage. When placed in conversation with

\(^1\) I use the term “violent archives of enslavement” throughout this paper to refer to a collection of primary sources (mostly documents) that commodify the bodies of my enslaved ancestors and render them as property.

each other, these documents construct an archive of slavery that reinforces the dehumanization of the enslaved people contained within them. The various structures and contents of these documents either position enslaved Africans within the margins of an Anglo-American family narrative (Wills), visually render enslaved Africans as items of property through equating their “worth” to numerical sums (Bills of Sale), or almost entirely erase the presence of enslaved Africans as human beings (Slave Logs). Through these three types of documents, this archive consequently functions as an extension of the corporeal bondage of enslavement through a violent negation of the personhood of the enslaved ancestors contained within the brackets of the text.

In recent years I’ve noticed that many “mainstream” visual depictions of enslavement like Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* or Steve McQueen’s *12 Years A Slave* have, despite their critical acclaim, often functioned as harmful portrayals of slavery because of the ways in which they sensationalize the corporeal violence enacted upon enslaved Africans and turn it into a form of spectacle. With this in mind, a personal concern over navigating the complexities of representation has been crucial to the development of this project across its many iterations. Initially, my research objective was to use these archival documents to assist a micro-historical exploration centered around my African ancestors who were enslaved in Edgefield, South Carolina and my European blood relatives who participated in the colonization of Middletown, Connecticut before relocating to Edgefield generations later and establishing the property that my ancestors were enslaved on. Through this family narrative, I would reconstruct a narrative of American chattel
slavery that applied a critical lens to the dynamics that allowed the institution to flourish in both the Northern and Southern regions of the United States. Through grounding my analysis in a family narrative, I also hoped to combat the desensitization to the loss of human life that often accompanies discourses of American chattel slavery that primarily rely upon statistical figures to emphasize the scale of violence enacted upon Africans. However, this pursuit was complicated by a realization that while the archival documents from Edgefield sufficiently constructed a narrative about my European blood relatives, they also relegated my African ancestors to a position of ongoing commodification. Through a blatant negation of various markers of personhood and identity, the ledgers, wills, and bills of sale left no room for an engagement with the enslaved ancestors beyond a narrative centered around their exposure and vulnerability to white supremacist violence. I determined that a project that would require a heavy reliance on the utilization of these documents in their original form would ultimately reproduce the same representational violence that I was attempting to resist and undermine.

As a scholar who is a descendant of enslaved Africans, I am invested in engaging with these ancestors in a way that is informed, but not solely defined, by the violence they were subjected to. My work aims to bear witness to the traces of them which linger within this archive and find creative ways to utilize it as a device through which I can explore the connective space between these ancestors and myself in the afterlives of slavery. The “ancestors” I refer to in this paper and project are the 38 enslaved people mentioned in the documents within this archive: Black Lize, Lizzie, Laura, Len, Nace, Biddy, Elsey, Harriet,
Mark, James, Jim, John, Suck, Selah, Leticia, Barbara, Solomon, Martha, Stephen, Leannah, Thomas, Liz, George, Lee, Mima, Edmond, Ned, Amy, Will, Hannar, Cherry, Fanny, Lucey, Bill, Rachel, Lize\(^3\), David, and Lucy. I also use the term “ancestors” to honor the host of enslaved people whose names I was unable to find in my research. *Recipe For Resurrection* is my attempt to conjure a creative a space of reckoning, listening, remembering, and longing for them. It aims to make room for a form of processing to happen through a two part critical engagement with the notion of the archive. The first section challenges the idea of the archive as a text focused entity through positing the Atlantic and my Black body as archival sites of ancestral knowledge. The second section builds upon this notion and utilizes it to combat the visual and linguistic manifestations of anti-blackness within primary documents from Edgefield county archives. Through this work my hope is that the content of my poetry effectively explores “the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption...and irreparability.”\(^4\) In this paper I will discuss the ways in which my poetry has sought to contend with this dehumanizing archive through a review of the theoretical influences and methodological practices that have informed the creation of *Recipe For Resurrection* and my process of writing it.

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\(^3\) Note: The name “Lize” was given to multiple women

“Why Poetry Is Not A Luxury”

The conceptual reorientation of my project that inspired a shift towards poetry as the principal tool employed to contest dehumanizing representations of enslaved ancestors was, in part, catalyzed by Hortense Spillers and her seminal essay “Mama’s Baby (Papa’s Maybe).” Through her discussion of the role that conditions of chattel slavery and the notions of personhood/humanness that accompanied them played on constructions of gender for enslaved African women, men, and their Black descendants, Spillers mounts a critique of a dominant “American Grammar” that reifies notions of anti-blackness. She writes “the problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms enclosed in quotation marks in the preceding paragraph [“Black women”], isolate overdetermined nominative properties. Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus.”5 Here Spillers notes that the terms “Black” and “woman,” as utilized within an American Grammar, are markers of difference from the “human” that are understood and often defined by a white supremacist and patriarchal imagining of Black life. Dependent upon a lexicon of categorization that became institutionalized as a result of the trans-atlantic trafficking of Africans, the violent implications of these terms within a broader American Grammar are

on full display in a number of archival records from Edgefield, SC. From the erasure of names through omission on slave logs to the commodification of enslaved peoples in bills of sale, these documents employ this American Grammar to implicitly and explicitly insist upon the inferiority of people of African descent.

As a response to the imposed weight of these terms when their definitions are claimed by anti-blackness and misogyny, Spillers declares that

“in order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function.”

Here, it appears that Spillers is signaling two things. The first concerns an issue of temporality. If these terms have gained power through the passage of time and the establishment of a white supremacist historical order, then it is essential to disrupt these notions to consequently engage with the roots of definitions within our popularized American Grammar. Spillers is perhaps urging us to disrupt conceptualizations of linear time and movement as we attempt to strip away anti-blackness and misogynoir from the terms “Black” and “Woman” and move beyond the confines of an American Grammar. This creates a space of blur between notions of pastness, the present, and futurity (a site of possibility that I will address further alongside Christina Sharpe’s work in In The Wake: On Blackness and Being in a later section). The second signal directly emphasizes the

6 Spillers, p.65
significance of reformulating the “grammar” itself. In her project of stripping through layers of meaning codified by dehumanizing logics to make space for “marvels of my own inventiveness,” Spillers describes a process of re/creating language in order to contest these dehumanizing and anti-Black connotations. She offers a simple yet radical solution to the violence of an American Grammar: reassemble the language. Poetry is one linguistic medium that affords ample room for a project of re-assemblage and radical creation to transpire.

This sentiment and the exploration of poetry as a site of possibility are two significant points of focus for Audre Lorde in her 1985 essay “Why Poetry Is Not A Luxury.” Contesting the popularized image of poetry as a leisurely pastime to be enjoyed by white men, Lorde describes the act of writing poetry as “a revelatory distillation of experience” when aligned with a black feminist and womanist praxis. When used in the pursuit of self definition and providing a critical gaze to dominant structures of power, poetry can function as more than a medium for entertainment or removed contemplation. It can be a tool for liberation. Lorde emphasizes this notion when she writes “poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.” With an expressed focus on the personal experiences that inform one’s “daily lives,” Lorde further emphasizes the accessibility of this liberatory practice and reminds us as readers

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8 Lorde, p.37
that the agency to mold and self define language resides within us, not the larger institutional or structural forces that seek to exert control over our corporeal existence. This orientation directly contests the authority and validity of the American Grammar created by the “white fathers” to dictate notions of personhood and logic. Instead, Lorde insists that poetry “coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.” For Lorde, poetry functions as a radical landscape in which people can create new language for themselves to contest the weight of dehumanizing terms that were not born from their own self perception or understanding of the world around them. This positions the creative process of writing poetry as an especially generative site of possibility for enslaved Africans and their descendants who have engaged in practices of self-definition despite the establishment of institutional oppression.

Like Lorde, the discursive work of Fred Moten also tends to the notion of poetry as a site of possibility and refusal of the logic imposed by an “American Grammar.” This is one of the core preoccupations of his lecture "Manic Depression: A Poetics of Hesitant Sociology" in which he asks “what happens when we think of the psychic in relation to this problematic of indigestion where identity is not formed so much as consumed as an endless problem? Black poetry might be...might be said to constitute the refusal of the imposition of identity as well as the refusal of the denial of the right to identity.” Moten

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9 Lorde, p.38
10 Lorde, p.38
positions black poetry as a practice capable of resisting displays of anti-blackness and trite racial essentialism. For him, it is a linguistic and embodied setting in which Blackness is understood as human and consequently defines what it is for itself. It highlights why Moten refuses to further define what constitutes “Black poetry” at various points throughout the lecture. For him, it is an expansive and self determined definition that resists the imposition of an external subject or their efforts to define it. In employing the assertions of Lorde and Moten, my project positions Black poetry as a device that can refute colonial logics that equate Black life with chattel property.

While poetry is not the only literary medium with the potential to do this work, it is uniquely positioned to engage in a refusal of an American Grammar because of its non-reliance on more conventional narrative based structures and forms. Unlike novels that engage with the forced passage of Africans across the Atlantic and chattel enslavement (like Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi or Someone Knows My Name by Lawrence Hill for example) poetry is an effective medium for this project because of its ability to engage with the unknown elements that cannot be recovered in narrative form. My work doesn’t seek to undo the rupturing that took place with the forced passage of Africans across the Atlantic and it is not a linear reconstructive project, something that has already been done effectively by authors like Hill and Gyasi. Instead, I aim to situate myself within a space of ongoing rupturing and explore what moves within it. Poetry, perhaps more than other literary traditions, affords an expansive creative approach toward contesting lexical forms of anti-Blackness and developing grammars to subvert the colonial violence in the
linguistic practices of these archives of enslavement. However, similarly to other forms of writing that are engaged in reconstructing narratives through conventional uses of plot and linear development, the imaginative work of utilizing the “fictive” is a crucial component of the poetry in this project. The importance of this imaginative work is described by Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley in her essay “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic” when she quotes Professor M. Jacqui Alexander in saying that

“to uncover submerged histories— particularly those stories of Africans’ forced ocean crossings that traditional historiography cannot validate—Alexander eloquently argues that searchers must explore outside narrow conceptions of the ‘factual’ to get there. Such explorations would involve muddying divisions between documented and intuited, material and metaphoric, past and present so that ‘who is remembered — and how — is continually being transformed through a web of interpretive systems . . . collapsing, ultimately, the demarcation of the prescriptive past, present, and future of linear time.’”

Tinsley and Alexander’s particular emphasis on the deconstruction of linearity and time is an important component in many of the sources that I’ve consulted throughout my research to construct a theoretical framework for the poetry in Recipe For Resurrection.

The Theory Employed In Recipe For Resurrection

One of the most foundational theoretical premises that I engage with in this project derives from the concept of “the wake” and “wake work” that Christina Sharpe presents in her book In The Wake: On Blackness and Being. Sharpe’s notion of the wake defines slavery

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as an ongoing event and positions us within the same temporal space as ancestors who have lived and died in chattel slavery. She refutes arguments of linear progression by asserting the idea that to be in our contemporary moment is to exist in a present that is continually ruptured by a reappearing “past” of enslavement. To be here and in the wake is “to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.”\textsuperscript{12} Sharpe’s conceptualization of the wake is also marked by the necessity of an attendance to that unfolding, a point that is emphasized through the use of her definition of “wake” as “a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking”\textsuperscript{13} to situate the reader within the landscape of her project. The action of bearing witness is deeply present in the notion of “wake work” that Sharpe presents in the first chapter of the book, describing it as “a practice that attends both to the social, physical, and figurative death, as well as the expansiveness of Black life, Black life ‘insisted from death’.... in short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.”\textsuperscript{14}

This positing of wake work as a practice that engages a holistic experience of Blackness to both process and “rupture” the colonial frameworks that seek to define it has deeply influenced my thinking around the content and form of my poems, and the ways in

\textsuperscript{12} Sharpe, Christina. In the Wake: on Blackness and Being. Duke University Press, 2016, p.14
\textsuperscript{13} Sharpe, p.10
\textsuperscript{14} Sharpe, p.17-18
which they can function to hold space for this type of reckoning. Following the example set by Sharpe, I’ve attempted to craft poems that do a sort of wake work through forms of “ritual observance” guided by a practice of deep listening to bear witness to the humanity of enslaved ancestors held within the documents of a dehumanizing archive. By viewing my writing of these poems as enacting of Sharpe’s wake work, I aim to shift the focus of these documents from the power held by Edgefield’s plantation elite and instead begin to consider the embodied memories, lingering traumas, and unstifled dreams held within the emotional landscapes of both myself and those enslaved ancestors who were held in bondage.

This action of refocusing the gaze of the reader and challenging them to engage with these ancestors in ways that are not entirely transfixed on the violence they endured is especially significant given the particular history of Edgefield, South Carolina. During the Antebellum period in the U.S., Edgefield was the largest political district in South Carolina and had the second largest total population in the state.\(^\text{15}\) In a similar fashion to the rest of South Carolina, Edgefield engaged in a capitalistic economic system that was almost entirely dependent upon the free labor of enslaved people. In Edgefield, the vast majority of the produce that provided a significant amount of revenue for the county, specifically cotton and rice, was cultivated by enslaved Afro-Africans. We can see the significance and

importance of their labor reflected in Edgefield’s population demographics. Historian Lacy Ford Jr. writes that, by 1860, 60% of Edgefield’s population was comprised of enslaved Africans. These were the people who were producing the economic capital that enriched the county. This capital was controlled by the wealthiest 10% of families who controlled 73% of the county's wealth. This extreme wealth disparity between the white plantation elite and the working class white laborers maintained an economic system in which the white lower class lived in destitute conditions that were more similar to that of the enslaved Africans of Edgefield than other members of Edgefield’s white society. In this context, the dominant factor which distinguished lower class whites from enslaved people was their “whiteness” and consequently the fundamental impossibility of being seen as chattel. As a result of this, the enslaved body became a site upon which their power and personhood was affirmed and reinforced through acts of violence.

While the origins of Edgefield’s bloody history can be tied to the colonization and displacement of Indigenous Americans, a consequence of the Anglo-Cherokee war of 1758 – 1761, the scale of violence in the region during the Antebellum period is clearly illustrated by Edgefield’s murder rate. According to author Fox Butterfield, Edgefield had an annual murder rate of 18 murders per 100,000 inhabitants from 1844-1858. The only homicide rate that rivals this in recorded U.S. history was Louisiana in 1992 when there were 17.4 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. This figure becomes more startling when

16 Ford Jr, p.332
paired with the knowledge that only white victims were considered murdered, the statistics don’t even chronicle the violence enacted on people who weren’t considered human. An example of how this climate of violence impacted Edgefield’s most vulnerable population can be found in the story of Randal, an enslaved person who lived in Edgefield during the mid-1800s. As recounted by Butterfield in his book titled *All God’s Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence*, Randal was riding a mule through a field when Seabourn Randolph, the overseer of the plantation he was on, spontaneously began to chase him on horseback. After catching up to Randal and knocking him off of the mule, Randolph proceeded to strike Randal repeatedly in the face, tie him up, and administer 500 lashes. After inflicting the blows, Randolph and another overseer washed the wound with salt. Butterfield notes that “a doctor who performed a postmortem examination reported that Randal had been ‘severely whipped and bruised, the bruises extending to the depth of, from half an inch to three quarters of an inch deep, and extending generally over the whole surface of his body.’”

The flippant disregard for Randal’s life is one harrowing example of the disposability of black life in Antebellum Edgefield, and it doesn’t even begin to account for the forms of violence that were less public or visible. Historian Brenda E. Stevenson discusses the ways in which rape and sexual assault were also prevalent in settings like Edgefield, noting that “most enslaved women and girls were, at some time during their

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18 Butterfield, p.30
working lives, destined to at least experience some sexual harassment, if not an outright sexual assault, from a male authority figure. Oftentimes being white was the only badge of authority necessary, but this pressure also emanated from male drivers, white overseers, and others with a modicum of power.”

Enslaved people’s heightened vulnerability to physical, sexual, and psychological trauma and violence was a direct result of the fact that enslaved Africans were not regarded or respected as humans by the white residents of Edgefield. This sentiment was blatantly reflected in Edgefield’s written law which stated that enslaved people were deemed “chattels personal in the hands of their owners...they are, generally speaking, not considered as persons but as things.” This reduction of enslaved humans to objects reinforced a violent social structure that made white humanity dependent upon black subjugation and dehumanization, a notion that is clearly illustrated in a segment from the Edgefield Advertiser, a popular newspaper in Edgefield during the Antebellum period. In an issue of the paper published in December of 1850, a contributing writer declared that “It is African slavery that makes every white man in some sense a lord...Here the division is between white free men and Black slaves, and every white is, and feels that he is a MAN.”

This socio-political regulation of Black people as non-human coupled with the common presence of physical brutality and an economic system that profited from it resulted in a

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20 Butterfield, p.6
21 Butterfield, p.6
climate and culture of violence that deeply defined the lived experiences of both free whites, enslaved Afro-Americans, and justified the county’s moniker “Bloody Edgefield.”

In the midst of this specific legacy of violence, I attempt to embody a praxis of wake work in my poetry that contends with jarring manifestations of anti-Blackness while also engages with enslaved ancestors as figures who were not solely defined by their exposure to brutal forms of dehumanization and attack. I aim to conjure a space of intimacy between myself and these ancestors in order to “to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction”22 and reiterate Sharpe’s declaration that, while enslaved Africans and their Black descendants were (and are) exposed to a host of violent atrocities, that is not the only way in which they were known to themselves, each other, and us.23

Edouard Glissant’s notion of opacity was a theoretical premise that assisted me in my attempt to effectively illustrate this through poetry. In his book Poetics of Relation Glissant writes

“the thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. Far from cornering me within futility and inactivity, by making me sensitive to the limits of every method, it relativizes every possibility of every action within me. Whether this consists of spreading overarching general ideas or hanging on to the concrete, the law of facts, the precision of details, or sacrificing some apparently less important thing in the name of efficacy, the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices.”24

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22 Sharpe, p.8
23 Sharpe, p.16
Opacity, as Glissant presents it, affords me space to engage with the violence of enslavement in my poems without an explicit rehashing of trauma or an embellishment of details and events in the lives of ancestors whom I do not know. The application of opacity to my analysis of a dehumanizing archive which only illuminates a fraction of the experiences lived by the ancestors held within it also prevents my work from making a generalized, cliche claim about the nature of enslavement. Instead, I’m forced to lean deeper into the forms of embodied knowledge and memory held within me. In doing so with Glissant’s notion of opacity in mind, the confines of the archive and the irretrievability of the enslaved narratives within it become sites of possibility. It shifts the focus from being unable to locate Black Lize’s place of birth or find Eliza’s parents to connecting with the places where the legacies of their lives reside in my body and the physical landscapes that surround me. Opacity allows us to (re)discover each other in the wake of slavery through an emphasis on our emotional connections and refutes the conception that I have the authority to speak for the dead.

For descendants of enslaved Africans who do not have access to documents which provide details about their enslaved ancestors, Glissant’s notion of opacity can be utilized to serve as a reminder that there are still ways in which those ancestors can be known and felt to them. I mainly employ opacity as a poetic device in the first section of the manuscript through poems that grapple with the loss and retention of life in the trafficking of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic ocean. In this section I work with the unknowns held within the Atlantic and attempt to hold space for the names and histories of the bodies that it
swallowed by writing with a collective “you” that is representative of those ancestors. I address them through poems that attempt to bear witness to the fact of their death and life, and use a series of metaphors and comparisons between the Atlantic and my anatomy in order to situate my body as a site in which a channel of communication is made possible while also making clear distinctions between our different positions within the wake. In doing so, I am able to “conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other nor to ‘make’ him in my image.”

To balance the use of Glissant’s interpretation of opacity in my work and ensure that the poems still resist the specific forms of violence manifested in the archival documents from Edgefield, the second section of the manuscript is deeply informed by an interpretation of the term Afro-Alienation that Daphne Brooks presents in her book Bodies In Dissent. Brooks analyses the work of 19th and 20th century Black performers such as Pauline Hopkins, Adah Isaacs Menken, and Bert Williams to explore the ways in which they and others utilized various forms of artistic expression to resist denigrating stereotypes of Blackness and consequently engage in a practice of active self-expression. Brooks grounds the book in the central argument that through “wedding social estrangement with aesthetic experimentalism and political marginalization with cultural innovation these resourceful cultural workers envisioned a way to transform the uncertainties of (Black) self-knowledge

25 Glissant, p.193
directly into literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation.” 26 Brooks offers the term “Afro-alienation” to name these acts of self-affirmation that were accessed through creative performance and aesthetic choices, and notes that these artists defied dehumanizing racialized and gendered categorizations that were imposed upon them by “imagining ways to perform their heavily contested bodies in different registers...” 27 I interpret Brooks’ use of “alienation” here as an attempt to reappropriate the connotations of the term that positions Blackness as a condition of abjection. In theorizing alienation as a zone in which these artists have the space to realize “literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation,” Brooks puts forth a framework that is able to address the limits of confinement and the pockets of agency that can be found within it. In this space of Afro-Alienation the subjects are neither fully free nor fully captive, rather they manifest a space that is that is approximate to both conditions. Through a range of creative expressions, Brooks argues that Hopkins, Menken, Williams, and others are able to construct a liminal space that affords forms of freedom for those who are not fully free.

Drawing on Brooks’ notion of Afro-Alienation, the poems in the second section of the manuscript heavily emphasize the names of the ancestors that appear in the Edgefield archives and erode the presence of white “ownership” in order to make the enslaved unrecognizable as forms of chattel or property in the archive. Through reshaping

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27 Brooks, p.12
the original archival documents by repeatedly invoking the names of these ancestors and redacting markers of their condition of bondage (how much they were sold for, the names of the Edgefield residents who purported to own them, etc.), the poems attempt to muddle the white supremacist equations of Blackness as chattel that the documents uphold in their original form. In foregrounding their names in my poetry, a practice that can be read as a “literal and figurative act of self-affirmation,” the ancestors consequently exist outside of the dehumanizing gaze of the slaveowners who attempted to codify their beings within the brackets of wills, ledgers, and bills of sale. This is exemplified in the poem *Bill of Sale, December 14 1841*, which is directly inspired by an auction that took place on that date. While the original record details the sale of five enslaved people named Harriet, Jim, John, Leticia, and Martha, the poem omits all details pertaining to the sums of money exchanged and the names of the enslavers. Built around the names of Harriet, Jim, John, Leticia, and Martha, the poem uses the repetition of these names to direct the focus of the reader towards the *humanity* of these ancestors and resists the intrinsic anti-Black logic of the wills, ledgers, and bills of sale from antebellum Edgefield that impose dehumanizing categorizations upon the bodies of the enslaved ancestors referenced in those documents. In the action of reiterating the names of these ancestors and crafting the poems around the utterance of them, I attempt to centralize their *lives* and combat the violence of erasure in the Edgefield archives of enslavement. The omission of their names in various slave logs, and the equation between black life and property value are intentional actions employed to assert a logic that renders people of African descent as the inherent property of white
Anglo-Americans. Brooks’ concept of Afro-Alienation has been a helpful framework to employ in my attempt to disrupt the legibility of this anti-Blackness through poetry because of the ways in which it highlights the radical potential of aesthetic experimentalism and creative redefinition; it provides examples of other artists who have used creative methods to articulate and actualize their own self image, and reifies the potent power of something as simple as a name.

Yet, as I focus on the significance of these names, the poems throughout the manuscript also attempt to conceptualize the vast breadth of knowledge that is held outside of a name. The notion of quiet that professor Kevin Quashie discusses in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* has deeply guided this process of conceptualization in my research. In the book, Quashie argues that the emotional landscape of Black subjects is often overlooked in academic discourse and advocates for scholars to apply a practice of deep listening in order to hold space for the voices and experiences that manifest themselves within that space. My project draws on his conceptualization of “quiet” and “interior” to help guide the way I engage with the enslaved figures who I encounter in the margins of these archival documents and prevent a manifestation of violent voyeurism in my poetry. Quashie describes these terms in his introduction to the book when he writes:

“The idea of quiet is compelling because the term is not fancy-- it is an everyday word-- but it is also conceptual. Quiet is often used interchangeably with stillness or silence, but the notion of quiet in the pages that follow is neither motionless nor without sound. Quiet, instead, is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life -- one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it
determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior -- dynamic and ravishing -- is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet. In humanity, quiet is inevitable, essential. It is a simple, beautiful part of what it means to be alive. It is already there, if one is looking to understand it. An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way.”

Quashie continues to argue that a significant amount of the discourse around Blackness merely imagines Black people as public subjects with identities that are principally formed, articulated and resisted within the sphere of the public. Consequently, Blackness is only engaged with how it is imagined publicly, often by a dominant white society. Quashie claims that the belief in this lens as the only way to view Blackness is an extension of white supremacist thought and a reduction of the expansiveness of Black life. The idea of quiet aims to decentralize the white subject position from narratives and representations of Blackness and “shift attention to what is interior.” My poems seek to enact this shift of attention by inviting the reader into that space of the interior and allowing them to bear witness to parts of it, to breathe inside of it, to listen to and with it, while also sitting with the unavoidable illegibility that is tied to forms of embodied logic. There are some spaces of the interior that words can’t necessarily grasp, and that’s also critically important to the work of my project. Some things in the sphere of grief, longing, sorrow, and rage are felt in a space beyond words, and my project doesn’t aim to make all

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of those things legible for the reader. My refusal to do so is a refusal of the colonial notion that every facet of Black life needs to be open for ontological dissection. With a recognition of the limits of legibility, the poems in Recipe For Resurrection draw on Quashie’s understanding of quiet and interiority with the aim of empowering and protecting the voices of those who were enslaved and encouraging readers to sit in moments of stillness and listen for all that is not named in the archive.

**Methodology of Recipe For Resurrection**

While Quashie’s notion of quiet is deeply helpful in centering the emotional landscapes of the enslaved ancestors held in these archives of enslavement, the concept itself does not provide a framework for that “quiet” to materialize in poetry, a form that requires a certain level of vocality and sound. To manifest this “quiet” in my work, I utilized elements of a listening praxis presented by the BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP in their book *The Work-Shy*. In a section titled *The Book Of Listening*, the collective thinks through listening as an active exercise with the potential of drawing forth voices that institutional structures have attempted to silence, submerge, or mitigate, and openly wonders if speech could function as a site of active listening. Similarly to the concept of quiet, listening is often misleadingly portrayed as a passive action. I believe that poetic work principally oriented through listening, as opposed to analyzing or dissecting, aids my project of reaffirming the humanity of the enslaved ancestors and refuting the “logic” of an archive that positions
them as chattel. Through listening, the group wonders if “perhaps we could sound the lost words of others by using a device made of words...not a prayer exactly...summoning a ‘translation’ from the other side.”29 My project asserts the belief that in this liminal space between prayer and translation, the poems can be agents in the projection of the voices of these ancestors in the archive alongside my own voice, and function as a form of channeling.

The methodological practices of listening and channeling voices of ancestors that I employed to construct many of the poems in my manuscript are deeply informed by notions of divination, ancestor communion, and ritual in the Yoruba religion of Ifa. One of the most emphasized components of Ifa is the importance of a maintained relationship between the living and the dead and communicating with those who have passed on. Author Philip John Neimark makes note of this in The Way of The Orisa when he writes that “Ifa encourages us to be in constant communication with our egungun [ancestors].”30 Ifa also encourages interaction between the living and Orisas, deified forces that are representative of various aspects of nature. With both ancestors and Orisas, the living communicate through two mediums: divination and/or sacrifice. According to Neimark, the act of sacrifice allows one to directly appeal to Orisa/ancestors and open the channel for communication through divination. The widespread emphasis on divination within

29 BLUNT RESEARCH GROUP. WORK-SHY. WESLEYAN UNIV PRESS, 2018, p.68
spiritual practices of Ifa are based around the fundamental belief in Ifa that our destiny and life journey is established prior to our entry into this world. Similar to Christina Sharpe’s notion of the “wake” as a temporal space, Ifa traditional understandings position the living and the ancestors as co-occupants of the present moment. Divination equips the living with tools to heal past traumas and gain access to information that will help them successfully live out their destiny on Earth. Divination also gives one access to the past experiences of ancestors and offers the ability to “improve upon these life patterns with proper offerings and devotions.” Neimark also notes that the action of divining can materialize in many forms, from an ancestor explicitly appearing in a dream to a seemingly random intuitive thought that may arise days after a divination ceremony was performed.

Neimark describes the act of sacrifice to ancestors and Orisas as a fairly simple process often involving an offering of water, food, and an expression of love and gratitude towards them before putting forth a prayer or request unto them. Using Neimark’s work as a prescriptive framework, I enacted a series of rituals throughout the process of creating this manuscript. From preparing an offering of food for the ancestors in this archive and inviting them into space at the beginning of my writing process to traveling to Rockaway beach in New York and giving an offering while standing in the Atlantic ocean, ritual/ceremony has been a significant component of my methodological practice. Ceremony and ritual are often evoked in the poems of this project, the first poem of the

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31 Neimark, p.15
manuscript functions as an offering to Yemanja/Olokun\textsuperscript{32} for permission to enact ritual through the poems and guidance through the spaces it leads me.

Through processes of ritual, the methodological premise of listening becomes an embodied action that deeply informs the construction of the poems and orients my project as an “ancestrally co written text,” that “works to create textual possibilities for inquiry beyond individual scholarly authority.”\textsuperscript{33} While skepticism about the legitimacy of divination as a methodology could be used as a critique of the work, I see a critical engagement with traditional African systems of knowledge production as a crucial component of academic work within the field of African-American Studies and agree with Fred Moten’s assertion that “…Black study is a practice of non-neurotypicality that tends towards the cenobitic even when its ways of knowing that sociality are constrained.”\textsuperscript{34}

Establishing a channel of communication between ancestors was only one focus of my methodological practice utilized in my creative process of writing poetry. As mentioned throughout this paper, an additional focus of mine throughout this project has been to disrupt the legibility of white supremacist logic that appears in the wills, ledgers, and text based documents that constitute the violent archive of slavery which I seek to negate. To successfully do this, I employed a series of redactive poetic devices outlined by M. NourbeSe Philip in her book \textit{Zong!}. In describing one of her tactics, she states that in order

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{32} An Orisa representative of water, motherhood, and mystery
\item\textsuperscript{33} Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. \textit{M Archive: after the End of the World}. Duke University Press, 2018, p.ix
\item\textsuperscript{34} Moten, Fred. “‘Manic Depression: A Poetics of Hesitant Sociology.’” University of Toronto Centre For Comparative Literature Public Lecture. 4 Apr. 2017, min 46:06
\end{itemize}
“to not tell the story that must be told I employ a variety of techniques: I white out and black out words (is there a difference?). I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women, and children were mutilated. I murder the text...”

In turning of the violence of the archive on itself and using the repurposing of violent language to undercut its function and meaning, Philip transforms these documents into refusals of violence. I attempt a similar feat in a poem titled “A Palimpsest for Jumoke.”

Based on chapter 14 of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, it is the only poem in the collection that is not directly related to the archives of Edgefield or the forced passage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. Arguably the most evident example of anti-Black racism in Jefferson’s literary canon, chapter 14 is an attempt to exemplify the ways in which people of African descent are inferior to Europeans and Euro-Americans. Jefferson evokes a range of pseudo scientific observations to justify the dehumanization and enslavement of the “black race” and argues that black people are essentially incapable of producing anything significant to civilization. He specifically makes claims about the inability of black people to contribute to literary traditions through his critique of Phillis Wheatley and belief that, while Christianity made her literate, the very nature of her Blackness “could not produce a poet.”

To combat this notion and refute his logic, the poem erases most of the chapter and leaves the reader with a reconfiguration of

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Jefferson’s words that refute his white supremacist claims of knowledge and citizenship and invests enslaved people with the power to define themselves. As the culminating poem of the manuscript, “A Palimpsest for Jumoke” encapsulates the vision of the project through its attempt to defy the violence of an American Grammar and offer a new imagining through poetry.
II.
Adura/Prayer.

Catch me Yemonja. Hold me Olokun. Don't let me fragment into the vastness of time. I cannot call my brothers and sisters from there. I cannot hear my mothers from there. I cannot remember the taste of home from that place beyond the sea.

Red grapes
Fried Fish
Watermelon
Rum

Teach me to live between the swell and the crash. Teach me to hold time between the current and yesterday so that I can sing to my daughter before she falls asleep. Teach me to listen for the sunrise.

Kola nuts
Palm Wine
Coral
Pigeon

Give me the tools to catch fire, to stalk pallid nightmares in their dreams To sing in harmony with the dead that are still living.

Squash
Guinea Fowl
Sweet Cakes
Gin

Catch me Yemonja. Hold me Olokun. Show me how to lace the edges of the Atlantic and the womb.
200 Years Later

The Atlantic is surging in these lungs which refuse to synchronize with colonial history. Drowning is an intergenerational process.
On Being Brought To Edgefield, To Harlem, To Brooklyn

Here is
Before the storm.
Before the fury.
Before the break, the rupture, the crumbling.

Before the ghosts.
Before the thunder.

Before the break, the rupture, the crumbling.

Here is before the hold.

Here.
After the journey
After the silence

After being scattered to the infinite corners of the Diaspora.

Afterlife.
After the water.
After the toil
-- foiled dreams deferred bubbling in the glow of another setting sun.

After falling through
the horizon line.

After convergence on a new shore.

Here.
There's one oxygen molecule in the chemical formula for water, I wonder, did the ancestors search for it as they sank to the bottom? Baba Fu-Kiau used to tell us that death is a homecoming And that while we weep on Earth, The ancestors celebrate the return of the one who has passed. Does that make drowning a form of ascension? How were they welcomed when they arrived back home? Do the names that their mothers gave them Susurrate at the bottom of the Atlantic?
Our drowning did not erase us.

We Drowned,

Sank,

Became the marrow of your bones.
To the Drowned Who Were Lost and Yet Remain,

I call out to you from this place with gargled dreams hummin in my throat.

Do not resist the urge to swell the brim,
I will not choke on your vibrations.

I call out to you so that you may see me here, even if only for a moment.

Come and let the pools of my iris cradle your head.

Rest your legs and warm yourself beside the fireplace that sits beneath my tongue.

Wade into my veins and bathe until you forget the weight of iron.

Dance within the meter of my heartbeat and see that we are still alive.

The surging force that compressed your light could not hold it captive beneath the sea.

How could it?

How could it uproot your rhythm while it expands within the cadence of my breath? How could it silence the melody of an echo?
Colonizers sought finality through the break
but failed to see that there is eternity
folded between the margins of fragments.

We have not lost you.

The ossuary is also an umbilical cord and

We,

The children of your children

are still

*alive.*
Who can take me home?

When I called out for answers
   \textit{Lizzie} placed an echo in my ear.

   It was only when
   I
   Listened to the drumming

That I heard
   her dancing
   in the vibrations of my own name.

\textit{A Poem For The Children of Slaves}
Recipe For Resurrection

I step into the Atlantic
and wait
until I cannot feel the difference between
my ankles and the tide.

I ask those who have drowned to tell me of their death
So that I might mourn them fully.
They speak of life.

Of collard greens that melt in your mouth
the moment they slide off the fork.

Of cornbread that sparkles against your tongue
like the sunlight
that percolates through my mothers’ kitchen windows on Sunday afternoons.

Of sweet yams and Gods that reimagined themselves
In the baseline of a James Brown song.

Of tempting fate —
bolting across dimly lit tracks
that throb with the impatience of a city in labor
and daring the MTA to follow.

Of sirens that discharge exorcisms and lullabies into the night.
Of little black boys playing wiffle ball through oncoming traffic.
Of fire hydrants that unfastened the locks on their cocoons to become oases.

Do you remember how the Niger flowed down Saint James Place?
When I ask Sango to protect me from death,
he places four kola nuts in the palm of my hand and speaks of life.

Of carrying gargled voices
and planting them in clouds
so that those who have been
lost
can return
   home with the rain.

Of the tenderness held in the spaces
between thunder
   chuckling
and catching
   its breath.

Of incantations sung by congas.
   Of eons suspended
between goatskin and wood
   that swell with the tempo of the dundun.

Of dancing with embers of unhampered joy
   held in my pupils for safe keeping.

Of voices that visit rhythms with the eagerness
   of aunties I haven’t seen since the last Gathering.

Of muffled laughter that sketches stardust across the walls of aging brownstones.
When I ask Esu to hide me from death,  
He places a bowl of red palm oil at my feet and speaks of life.

Of ice cream that glimmers in streams  
against the crust of warm apple pie.  
Of exasperated lectures adorned with conspicuous snickers.  
Of tag in department stores.  
Of continents forged from bed sheets and twilight.  
   Of discerning elders and futilely rehearsed “I don't know's.  
   Of one pun too many.  
   Of cinnamon and sugar cane.  
Of machetes held in the shape of Sanité Bélair.  
   Of rivers that whisper my name as they trace the spaces in between my toes.  
Of roots that invite ancestors up from the earth to dance in my aorta.

   When I ask Oshun to take my fear of death away,  
She places a cowrie shell beneath my tongue and speaks of life.

   Of songs that beckon the sun back from the sea.  
Of revival in briny springs.  
   Of baths in lavender and primordial waters.  

Of mangos and dried cranberries.  
   Of leave in conditioner and cornrows at midnight.  
Of durags wrapped too tight.  
   Of bedtime stories with Queen Nzinga and Winnie The Pooh.  

Of planting fortune and nurturing it to fruition.

   Of recipes for resurrection:
Take a burdock root and chop it into small pieces.

Mix it in bowl with a handful of rose petals.

Boil them in a pot of water and call the names of your mothers until it cools.

Crack a coconut and let the brew cool in its shell.

Place a drop of honey on your index finger and stir until you feel light flood through the space between your doubt and your destiny.

Drink daily until colonial logic has completely passed through the bowels of your dreaming.

Before going to sleep, light a candle and place it at the foot of your bed.

Wrap your fear in coca leaves and burn it.

When you wake, place new dreams beneath the pile of ash and speak life until it blossoms in the shape of you.
After The Wake

Come to me when the moon sets into the sea.

I shall be buried on the shore

Waiting for you.

I will fry fish for us to eat while you sing me the songs of our mothers.

And we shall be together,
And we shall never be lonely again.
You must remember that you are a miracle.

You carry sunlight in the roots of your hair and
the wisdom of your mothers in the lines of your feet.

Remember this when they claim that you are ugly.

Do not plant your joy in the pupils of hollow eyes
or relinquish the tenor of your laughter,
there is space for dreams to bloom the base of your spine.

Those who revile you do not matter,
the world was not made for them alone.

Say your name
until it takes the shape of your tongue

Place it on your scalp every
night before bed
and
Massage it
into the fibers
of your spirit.

It is your gift to the world and it
will always shield you
from the glare of unforgiving suns.

When you wake in the morning,
breathe deeply
and speak life into the pores of your lungs.
Bathe daily in yourself and revel in all that you are.

Remember that you were prayed for,

And celebrated,
And LOVED

long before you came into this world.

Gently hold the warmth of faces you do not remember seeing,
The melodies of voices you do not remember hearing,

They will protect you when
you call out to them with love.

Adorn the space between us with questions
Especially the ones that you are afraid to ask.

It is important for us
to
splash
our way
down the streams that descend
to the base of
my palm.

It is important that you know me,

Even when you cannot use your finger to trace

the years on my forehead
or remember
the clamor of my joy.
Know that I too have blossomed on the continent
    held between salt water and an inexhaustible thirst for life.

Know that I too will walk to the banks of the river
    and kneel at the feet of Oya.

Know that your first breath shook with the remnants of resolution and brine
    and we cried because we were both still alive.
Hereafter

To the Drowned,

To the Living,

To the Yet Born,

What remains after the break is the foundation.

These are our bones that I move

This body makes pathways
to the sea.

The Atlantic is a calling,

an altar,

an extension of those who have never left you,

those who know that death is as static as life.

Seek us in the patterns.

Your breath,

the tempo of your pulse,

the textures of your sorrow and your joy.
Hold me
Us
between your teeth and your tongue when you are met with pain
Even when it feels as if it will last forever
the pain will pass and it shall not take you with it.

Light gives birth inside the corridors of our cells — our blackness has never been a curse.

We speak with tongues that predate and outlive us, silence has never been a choice.

Sea salt cannot erode the spirit, we did not begin there so how could it mark our end?

You could not lose us in the sea, we are the sea.
The foundations remain after the end of the world.
There’s a thread between the Atlantic and the womb, if you grasp it you will feel us.

_The Drowned_  
_The Living_  
_and the Yet Born._
III.
**Statement of Purpose**

I use these words to pull limbs from archives of erasure.
   To bring tongues back to their home.
   To dance with shadows, reflections of my own blackness.

To take back the stolen dreams of
   *Lizzie & Laura & Len.*

To tell them they are loved
To take them by their hands

Trace seams of life in the creases of our palms and shout

“I am here and you are not lost. You are not lost and I am here.”

Here:
   a space between the tempo of our heartbeats
   a breath between reentrance and break
   a reminder that essence is something “owners” cannot take.

I use these words to pull limbs from the archive.
   To undo colonial curses mistaken for reality.
   To blacken truth, blacken logic, blacken life.

To release souls shackled by numbers and take back the edges of black skin.
   To call bullshit
   On blackness as sin,
   On the laws of Europe and their children of empire.

To show them that flesh begets flesh begets something stronger than death.
I use these words to pull limbs from the archive.

To remind me that these lives are a birthright,
an inheritance

to feel
to remember
to love
to mourn
to howl as I grasp elusiveness closer to my breast
to hold
to pray on
to sing with

to remind ourselves that the dead don’t live in the morgues of imperial fantasies.

So I am taking back the dead
And we are coming to tear them down.
Recipe For Reclaiming Language

The space that you are in may not offer that which you need, but take what you can from it nonetheless.

Start with water. Boil two cups of it along with a cup of sugar and let the water simmer until the sugar and your stress begin to dissolve.

While the water cools, take six handfuls of dried sorrel leaves, hold each one over the center of your chest, and give them thanks before placing them in a large bowl.

Hum the melody of the last song that made you smile as you cut ¼ cup of ginger, 1 lime, and 9 pimentos into pieces no larger than your fingernail. Once the hum can no longer contain the movement of the melody, sing as you pour them into the large bowl along with a cinnamon stick.

Bring the water to a boil for a second time. Let it submerge the edges of your fear before gently pouring it into the large bowl.

Let it steep for 45 minutes. Imagine the faces of ancestors whose names you do not know. When the images become clear, place the bowl in a refrigerator to cool overnight.

Wait until the following evening before taking the bowl out of the refrigerator. You may not have an àgéré Ifá, but a glass or plastic cup will do just fine. Take a ladle and pour the drink into the cup of your choosing.

Bring it to your lips and sip.

As you swallow, return to the faces of those ancestors and let the taste of those places that you thought were lost come rushing in.
For The Next Time They Kill A Child In Cold Blood ('Cuz There's Always A Next Time)

*take a breath to collect yourself before exasperation solidifies in your windpipe*

Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
Where do black souls go to be free?
How many generations have asked you this question?
Birthright.

I dreamed once

that the creator

molded

my fingernails

in

the

shape

of tears

from women

whose names

I will never know.

This too is an inheritance of sorts.
Elegy For Black Lize

I weep for you Black Lize,
I weep and hope that tears can descend
through the melancholy of the Wake,
Can restore vital air to a muted voice that maybe rang
with laughter in another time.
I weep and try to trace your shadow in the twilight,
Reminding myself that the chamber of brackets is not your sole
place of dwelling.
The weeping does not soothe the pity
The rage
The hunger for revenge
But in weeping I sit in awe with you

Draw splendor in darkness
Deface fugitive slave laws.

Black Lize,

Every time I say your name my mouth becomes alit
With music
Lightning
A vapor of strength inhaled to caress my own panting heart.

In stormy visions suspended between sleep
dreams of life

I invoke you in song.
Black Lize,

I hope you are far from the trembling throng

Resting somewhere in the earth

Held in invulnerable peace.
How I Was Taught To Listen

The syntax of visions lies in the fragment.

The blur.

The melody
and light
that burst

through once quiet places in my body
to show muscles how to remember
when they were matter of a different vessel.

The refusal of silence,
its rupturing in the corridors of my temples.
I am there, which has always been here, and yet is not.

Perhaps there is not yet language for the longings I hold within me.
**Longing**

Longing (noun/adj.)
1. That which lingers after submersion beneath vellum folds of silence.
2. Dreams in shades of black suspended between the gravity of necropower and the magic I inherited from my mothers womb.
3. The oxygen in my blood cells; the persistence of breath that could not be extinguished.
There is a quiet space that rests within the syntax of my flesh,

This body is what’s left:

Is what remains after shallow whispers and prayers

that taste of something stronger than death

when they hover on the edge of your tongue.

These lungs bear the tempest of a song left unsung and awake,

Awaiting the tender touch of the young.

The children are here,

And at night I cradle them in my voice
Rock them to sleep with smooth melodies of Beres Hammond,

\textit{Re member}

\textit{those}

\textit{songs used}

\textit{to make you rock}

\textit{Away.}
And watch them as they dream of freedoms they may never live to see.

The children are here.

And before they wake I take a knife in the shape of my grandmothers and scrape fear from the balls of my feet

I walk to the kitchen and

wait

and listen

And once the gentle stirring starts I’ll look into a mirror and greet them with the coming of a new day.
*Clairvoyance*

*Elsey* cracked the brackets that were hooked around their name

Rid themself of sums to weigh anchor

Fashioned a ladder from the letters that remained

Climbed until they reached my Ori

And wove instructions into my cerebrum.

*Plant the dead in the tips of your toes so they can kiss the earth again.*

*Plant the dead in your name,*

*in your fists,*

*in the velocity of your gaze.*
Part of a poem titled "Translating Ledgers" by an unknown author.

The passage reads:

Of brine
Of dislocation in waves

A finding of here:
Here is where I walk alongside many shores that do not bring me home.

I cannot swallow the sum in these quantitative rivers

And the absence of nouns leaves a bitter aftertaste.

Do not ask me to speak for the dead,

At best this tongue

can trace the saline

Echoes

of a continent howling.
March 24th, 1800

And what did the Negroes say to you as they were swallowed by the Sea?

For cowrie shells?
For gunpowder?
For rice?
For tobacco?
For indigo?
For gold?
For sugar?
For rubber?
For rum?
For molasses?
For cotton?
**Bill of Sale, December 14th 1841**

Hungry money
Drunk money guzzling rows of

Harriet
Jim
John
Leticia
Martha

The page parades people as bodies
As dollars as cents
Until sense is abandoned for
Bloody stupor.
It demands we take them blindly
Stuff our mouths full
While silently hoping we don’t choke
On that which we cannot swallow

Harriet
Jim
John
Leticia
Martha

Look again.
Make columns catch a fire,
Kill the colonial want and wanting
And what remains in larynx?
Harriet

Jim

John

Leticia

Martha
Larynx

Larynx ( )

Harriet

Leannah & Thomas Liz & George

Lize

Lee & Mima

Amy Will & Cherry

Fanny Bill & Lucy

And all those who did not concede the liberty of their spirits to William Thurmond Sr. or his descendants.


Mpemba

Our love will never pass,

into nothingness we,

A quiet bower,

Us,

a sleep full of sweet dreams,

and health,

and quiet breathing.

We wreathing
    A flowery bind to the earth,

In spite of the inhuman death:

    yes, in spite of all,

    Some shape of beauty moves from our dark spirits.

Imagine for the mighty dead;

    love

An endless immortal fountain

    Pouring unto us from heaven’s brink.
Emancipation Proclamation

I Samuel Doolittle Sr. of Edgefield County and State of South Carolina being weak in body though of perfect mind and memory, doth dispose of what it hath pleased God to bless me with in manner and form following Vis.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Son Benjamin Doolittle one negro boy named Mark one negro girle named Biddy they and their increase to him and this theirs forever.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Son Samuel Doolittle one negro boy named Stephen one negro girle named Selah, they and their increase to him and this theirs forever.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Sarah Adams one negro boy named James and one negro girle named Suck which the S. Adams has no in Peaceable profession that I bought and gave to her they and their increase to she and her theirs forever.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Betsey Sullivan one negro boy named Edmond and one negro girle named Barbra they and their increase to she and her theirs forever.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Nancy Doolittle one negro boy named Solomon and one negro girle named Hannar they and their increase to she and her theirs forever.

Item - I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Amia Doolittle one negro boy named David and one negro girle named Lucey they and their increase to she and her Heirs forever.

All the Rest of my Estate not here to fore disposed of after my wife’s death To be Equally divided Between my six Children above mentioned but my will and desire is that if any one of my Children Should lose their negroes before they are Possessed with them, that they shall be made Equal with the Rest.
A Palimpsest For Jumoke

I.

a nation in open war
   becomes naturalized by
Removing a native.
Citizen no longer,
   Conveyances of land
   of slaves
   of lies in republican assemblies
are registered in the court of the county
   wherein Solomon protested dominion
   wherein Rachel protested dominion
   wherein Ned protested dominion
   wherein Nace protested dominion
   wherein no slave is
   Tobacco,
   Flour,
       Beef, Pork,
Tar, Pitch,

   and Turpentine.
II.

Reduce it to a text
Collect the bodies retained in the British statutes, in the acts of assembly
Change the rules of law so that no person shall be
divisible

Let slaves establish freedom
    Assist their emancipation
Make up an amendment that bears arms against the vacancies of white settlers
    Offer seeds crafted by words rooted in ten thousand recollections
that will probably never end.
III.

After this hard labour
sit presently with the
first dawn of morning and
the tender disposition of this
delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.
Consider the many millions who have been
brought
to and born
in America. Consider faculties of
memory reason investigation
Consider imagination as a sphere
of mercy and wrath.

Consider these poems as plants or a country.

Consider your existence:

all those who,
brought hither from Africa,
have lived Black,

and produced a poet.
The notion of “Mpemba” comes from the Kikongo understanding of “Kalunga” which roughly translates to “threshold between worlds.” Within religious traditions in the Congo region, the Kalunga line represents a watery boundary between the world of the living and the dead. Professor Nettrice Gaskins describes this space “as a site where supernatural spirits can be contacted and paranormal events can take place. Symbolically, it can mean a locality where two realms – Nseke (land of the living) and Mpemba (land of the dead)– touch and, therefore, it represents liminality, or a place literally ‘neither here nor there.”

Mpemba is an erasure poem drawn from an excerpt of John Keats’ *Endymion*.

*Elegy For Black Lize* is an erasure poem drawn from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*.

*Emancipation Proclamation* is a redaction poem drawn from the Last Will and Testament of an Edgefield slaveowner named Samuel Doolittle in which the enslaved ancestors Mark, Biddy, Selah, Stephen, James, Suck, Edmond, Barbara, Solomon, Hannar, David and their descendants are bequeathed unto Doolittle’s children and their heirs forever.

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*A Palimpsest For Jumoke* is an erasure poem drawn from Chapter 14 of Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on The State of Virginia*, in which Jefferson seeks to explain the ways in which people of African descent are intellectually inferior to Anglo Americans and Anglo Europeans.
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