

My Gender is Marronage

A Revisitation

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30 June 2021

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“History isn’t something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities.” - often attributed to Marsha P Johnson

The following is a series of reflections based off a coming out letter I wrote to my family in 2017. It aims to outline a Black revolutionary anarcha-transfeminist project known as “Gender Marronage.” The purpose of this document is to revisit themes of the original letter I wrote to my family in the spirit of what I have grown to understand about myself and my history since then. Ultimately, I would like to invite others to reframe their African-trans and African-queer identities beyond liberal understanding. Gender is a question of self-determination.

1. Kala (Saturday, 19th June)

African traditions say that when we are born, a vague sense of who we are to become, or what we are meant to do in this world, sits in our heads, guiding us. We make choices, we lean toward certain things, we express certain personality traits, because there is an anointing on our metaphysical head pointing us to a sacred role in history or society which those things help us get toward.

Think of it like in that cartoon *Avatar the Last Airbender*: when Aang was tiny, the elders held a few toys in front of him. Each toy represented one of the four nations and elements, water, earth, fire, air. Aang immediately gravitated toward the toy that was associated with fire, which allowed the Air Nomad elders to know that in a past life, Aang was not an Airbender but a Firebender (the preceding element in the cycle). It was his impulse which indicated to the elders that Aang’s destiny was that of the Avatar, who gets reincarnated as a member in each nation to restore balance in the world through mastery of all four elements.

Now, in our ancestral practices, a child would be born, and the elders would observe certain habits, likes, inclinations, and responses to their environment. They knew based on sacred teachings that these traits and behaviors and impulses were indicators of what divine calling the kid might have had upon their head. So they provide the ritualized pathways for one to begin to step into this personal truth, and journey toward their higher self. Then, the devotee would live out a spiritual walk, contemplating myths woven around natural phenomena and human activity, with each ritual and meditation and magical working as a touchstone for becoming clearer on the destiny that one either chose or was given by God upon entrance to this reality.

In the Black church, when folk go off to fast, or to seek (for the Gullah) or tarry (for the Pentecostal) or mourn (for the Spiritual Baptist) and when they interpret dreams or visions or the Scriptures or everyday life moments, with a focus on trying to discern (or divine) God’s will for one’s life in particular, this is an expression of the African mystical complex. For Black trans folk in particular, however, I think our ritual is the act of flight.

I remember my first time flying. There wasn’t elders to guide me. I was often on my lonely as a little kid. My mother always thought I could handle being by myself a little more than my brother. How I remember it, I was in the living room one day, by myself, just walking, quietly, reflecting, soaking in. And the sweetest light was pouring in from the fire escape window, a golden drip from the sky. And the house is vibrating with the thronging voices of a choir that played from the radio. I was caught up that day. I started shuffling in a circle, going around and around, looking up at the ceiling, as the gospel praising was pouring into my skin like the rhythms our ancestors

would stomp into the wood floor of the praise houses. And I saw a vision in those days: I saw a black expanse, vast yet endearing, deep as the dark shrouds in the sea where no human has gone but those who jumped over. And scattered all throughout this canopy of cosmic shadows, there were versicolor shards, flecks of blue and green and yellow and purple and pink and orange and red light hanging like angels around, carrying the chorus into the presence of God. This is how I conceived of the sacred.

“Oh yonder come day,
Yes I heard em say
Yonder come day
Oh I heard em say
Yonder come day
Yeah, I heard them say
Day has broken into my soul
Yonder come day
I was on my knees
Yonder come day
I was on my knees
Yonder come day
I was on my knees
Day has broken into my soul
Yonder come day...”

2. Tukula (Sunday, 20th June)

I aint learn til much later in my life that what I experienced in the living room that day as a youngin was not just me contemplating the freedom in the gospel message. I was engaging in a form of ancestral remembrance.

See, long ago, when African people were brought here in chains, they used to sneak away from their captors. Go into the woods, the shadows, to shuffle in a circle too. They were tracing the four points of the Sun, from when it rose, to when it was high in the air, to when it set, and then to when it was at rest on the other side. They let the mysteries of this cycle shine into their consciousness. They created a worship and praise experience, and invoked wonders from nature and the afterlife that allowed them to understand their suffering. These were traditions brought over from the Motherland.

Many of them sang spiritual songs that helped them store these meditations in their hearts and minds. They would reflect on God and the message of Christ from this lens, with a focus on both liberation and salvation. Others used this as a way to pray in a more Islamic fashion, placing an altar before them to circumambulate or go around it while meditating, still with the same liberating objective.

Or pots would be placed at the center of the ring, to collect the sounds of these chants, so that the master couldn't hear what was going on, but also so that they could capture the miraculous energies they were shaking up into a vessel, like a charm. Those who had canes or walking sticks would use them to beat the ground, while others were stomping or clapping or miming and using hand signs. They would dance and be quickened by an ancestral power, manifesting the promise

of the world on the other side of the water – Africa, but also, more symbolically, the realm of the dead, and those who were considered closer to the Divine, those who were at the origin of humanity.

They had dreams and visions of resistance because of this Afrocentric religious complex. It was known at times as a “Hush Harbor.” Some of them, like Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner, allowed these unctons to guide them while they resisted slavery, planning rebellions and acts of escape through it. And many of our modern Black artistic creations – including non-religious creations like the blues, jazz, hip hop, etc. ... all of it was made because of these secret ritual spaces.

Those who were most committed to this mysticism were called “the people who could fly.” They were respected, revered, held in high regard. They were demonized, though, and to this day, white Man religion calls African faiths, music, culture, healing practices demonic. This is because it is all associated with those who were most likely to rebel: the runaway slaves, the ones who “hit flight” and got off the plantation, who could no longer be held as property and have their labor forced out of them.

One of the most well known “people could fly” stories is traced back to the Georgia coast, which was where a huge number of the enslaved Africans brought to the United States were dropped off. In this particular event, it was a crew of Igbo captives from Nigeria, who decided they would rather drown than be slaves. The enslaved Igbos fought the masters and then dove into the sea, hoping to return to the ancestors, and therefore, back to Africa. The legend has it that as their bodies sank beneath the surface of the ocean, they were turned into Buzzards and flew away.

My first time hearing about these “people can fly” stories was from a little children’s book we had lying around when I was small. There were these beautiful illustrations inside, of Black folk rising into the sky off plantations. There was an elder; his name was Tobi, which is short for a word meaning “God is great” in the Yoruba language of West Africa. He would go to the other enslaved people and whisper a proverb in their ears from the Luba people of Central Africa: “*kum bumba yali, kum bumba tambe. Kum kunka yali, kum kunka tambe.*” It meant, “if the master gon fool us, we gon fool the master. If they gon play our heads, we gon play theirs too.” This idea of trickery was always a reference to African spiritual practices: Hoodoo, rootwork, and conjure. I would later learn from one of my trans sibs that back in Africa, there were spiritual leaders called *chibados* who were what today would be called transgender. My sib let me know that the *chibados* came from Central Africa, which happens to be where a lot of the beliefs and practices in Hoodoo come from. And then my sib let me know this: basically trans and other gender variant Black folk who were reconnecting to our ancestors, we were like the inheritors of a legacy from these ancient African priests. In other words, as Black trans and queer folk, we are the people who can fly.

“Sister, sister, you come down
Down to the mire
Come on down, down to the mire.
Lower, lower, in the mire.
Low, chile, in the mire
Down, chile, to the mire
When you bow, in the mire.
Then you rise, from the mire.
Higher, higher, in the mire.
You shout around, in the mire.”

3. Luvemba (Monday 21st June)

That day in my living room as a kid, shuffling in praise, stands out in my memory because it remains a classic example of how I once lived my life. There was a sense of elevation or uplift at work inside me all the time. I was always waiting on the Divine, and mounting up as if on eagle’s wings. And the furthest thing from my mind was the idea that my body had any limitations attached to me just based off how I looked, how I was shaped. I was fluid and free and fabulous and fierce, and I didn’t live with much fear at all.

The shuffle dance is known as a Shout, by the way. It’s not about yelling. The name is based off an Arabic word because some Africans were Muslim when they got brought here in chains. The tradition comes from indigenous African religions, though, old old *old practices*, deep in Bantu-Congo cultures at the heart of the Motherland. In these lifeways, the people would gather together under the guidance of ritual leaders known as *ngangas*, and through movement they would meditate to get in touch with their higher self. Sometimes they would consume herbs to help induce this state of contemplation or trance, and it would allow them to receive messages from the ancestors in their journey of self-discovery.

A large percentage of the Africans brought to the Americas as enslaved people come from Congo/Angola heritage. This is why a lot of Black folk here, while they are Christian, will dance in church and still call it a “Shout.” And during these ceremonies, they will encourage each other to “think about” (or meditate) on “what God is doing” for them. And it’s usually presented as a mystical quest for personal fulfillment, an “offering of praise” in order for “the blessings to come down” in terms of their hopes and dreams for healing or financial security or more.

The Congo/Angola region was once the center of a powerful network of kingdoms in ancient Africa. But in the 1600s, right around when the Europeans from Portugal came through with Christianity and slavery, the region was divided within itself and at war. In the midst of the turmoil, there was a *nganga* who warned that if the people converted to white Man religion they would be enslaved. Her name was Kimpa Vita. She was one of the first people to teach that Jesus was Black, and to redefine the Bible in light of Black history. She called for unity in her kingdom, and so the idea that Black people deserved to assert a collective self-determination over our societal history, on our terms, was pioneered by Kimpa Vita. You wouldn’t have modern Black nationalism if not for her.

The church didn’t like her doctrines. They didn’t like her campaign against European authority. They claimed that she was possessed by the devil. What is interesting to me is that part of

why they demonized her is because she claimed to be possessed by a *male* Saint. This Saint was the patron of lost things. Kimpa Vita had fallen sick and underwent rituals, and in that process she received visions from this Saint, and supposedly she died and came back to life with his spirit and power having filled her up. This was what inspired her to try to regain the lost sovereignty of the kingdom and attack the church. And she asked her followers to venerate the Saint who inhabited her body, so that they could fight with her to regain the lost kingdom.

I learned about Kimpa Vita from an old trans homie. They taught me that Kimpa Vita wasn't the first or last person from Africa that claimed to be possessed by a spirit from another gender. In fact, my sib told me other stories of Africans who didn't exactly fit the standards of today about manhood, womanhood, and sexuality. I began to learn that there was a long history of gender/sexual variance in Africa, and it was often connected to either spiritual traditions or histories of resistance or both. Oftentimes, gender/sexual diversity was seen in the myths and rituals related to deities. For example, the rainbow was seen associated with a gender variant *orisa* known as Osumare. The wind was associated with *Iansa*, who was a woman but also seen as masculine. Whenever people would venerate these and other deities, sometimes they would come and inhabit the people momentarily, regardless of gender. And the ritual leaders would actually dress the possessed devotees up as these divinities, regardless of gender! Men with womanly spirits; women with manly spirits; and folks who didn't fit either category being inhabited by spirits that were also not held to those categories.

The church, unsurprisingly, called all of these entities "demonic." And attacked African faiths because of it. I remember learning about how when they would translate the Bible into local African languages, they would intentionally use the names of important deities as an equivalent of "Satan," in order to delegitimize them. For example, *Exu*, who is a trickster. In many African traditions, tricksters were understood as a gateway between humanity and the Divine. They were basically like Jacob's Ladder. They opened up the pathways for human consciousness to access spiritual knowledge, and for spiritual power to enter human consciousness. Interestingly, they were connected to gender/sexual fluidity, seen as what today would be called androgynous, intersex, or even transgender, queer, bisexual, etc. *Exu* for example is said to be gender variant. Of course, when translating the Bible into Yoruba, "*Exu*" was used for "Satan." Now the trickster becomes evil, rather than a holy messenger like before.

The situation facing us as Black trans queers today is connected to all of this. The general society sees us as tricksters, as people who tryna fool them and play them. But they don't respect the higher truths we help usher into this reality. They don't want to hear us when we reveal what Africans used to know well: that biological sex is an illusion and that both humanity and deity exist along a spectrum. And they especially don't like to see that so many of us are involved in Black rebellion. Like Romaine-La-Prophetess, another gender variant priest. He claimed to be possessed by a female Saint, and was a central figure in the history of the Haitian Revolution, which was the world's first successful slave revolt, and which kicked off the First Great Upheaval against chattel slavery worldwide, striking fear into the hearts of the Man to this day.

So we have Black gender/sexually variant people involved in anti-colonial and anti-slavery movements. Black queer/trans folk have also been involved in the socialist and anarchist and feminist movements as well. First we challenge white Man religion, then we challenge white Man science and its medical institutions; now many of us are challenging the government, challenging the capitalist system, challenging hierarchical kinship structures like our families, and other forms of domination. This, quite unsurprisingly, makes us a threat in this society. And that

is why we get treated the way we do. It is not merely hatred of our identities but rather an insistence on the world order that has forced a good number us to fight back both for ourselves and Black people as a whole.

“What did the giant said?
Oh David!
Send me an upright man,
Oh David!
A man not afraid to die,
Oh David!
A man that’s fit for war,
Oh David!
I think I’ll go back home
Oh David!
Think I’ll go back home
Oh David!”

4. Musoni (Tuesday 22nd June)

I remember being tiny and coasting through my life like a lil “flutterby.” The looseness in my hips, the relaxedness in my wrists, a prance here, a skip there, gliding with an angel’s sway. I had no labels to describe myself then; I was just me, with no reason to hate myself. And as for God? I felt God whispering liberty in my heart.

God was so close inside me that whenever I saw other people praying or acknowledging God, I used to gasp and chuckle out of surprise at the fact that someone else had a relationship to God too. It was like realizing other people were in on the best secret the universe could offer. Sometimes people would see me in these moments and think I was laughing or making a mockery of religion, but really it was me responding with a sense of awe. There was not an irreverent bone in my body. I used to be the one kid who never fell asleep in church, who sat at the edge of my seat while the preacher talked, and who took in every minute detail of doctrine and Scripture that I could. I remember when kids would come to me to get a better understanding of the Bible. And my mom says that I “accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” as a toddler. This was all while seeing myself in the girl characters on television. Not one part of me was convinced that God hated me for being who I was at that time.

It was the bigotry that made me hate and doubt myself, not God. When the yelling started. And the criticism. And the name calling. And the scrutiny. That really fucked my shit up. I quickly realized that my every act made me suspicious in the eyes of men. The world was a dangerous place at that point, where if I was not extremely cautious and vigilant, someone would come for my whole life. And often times, they did it anyway, no matter what I did. If I put on music, my brothers would say “you like girl songs.” I was into Miss Lauryn Hill, for example, real bad. Cuz my mother played her a lot when I was just born. One time, I was wearing a GAP shirt and then my brothers came out of nowhere talkin bout some “*that stands for Gay American People! Gay American People! Gay American People!*” Taunting me. Laughing. There was always so much laughter.

There was a kid in school who would always come up in my face and flick his neck around and his wrist in “effeminate” ways, in order to tease me. Everywhere I went, he was there like an overseer, to keep me in line. On top of that, there was the outright harassment. The threat of physical violence and the actual experience thereof. I remember my first time being followed into the bathroom. Elementary school. Some boys were trying to chase me down and beat me up, and one of them climbed on top of the stall, saying “*Don’t worry, I’m here to watch you*” while I was in it. He made it seem like he was doing it to protect me. It creeped me out and I can’t stand public bathrooms to this day. There was another time a group of boys followed me into the changing room, just to see what I had between my legs, and then went off laughing and bullying me afterwards. Finally, there was me being touched in ways I neither comprehended nor agreed to... The first time that happened, I was told “this is what boys do,” while my body was used for someone else’s pleasure and I had to sit there confused.

I think the most memorable time some annoying ass gender shit hit me hard as a kid was from my stepfather. It was early in the morning. I can’t remember what was happening, I just know he was helping me get dressed and cleaned up. I was pretty close to him in those days. I remember him rocking me to sleep and stuff. This particular day, I think he was trying to put a shirt on me when he got odeed mad and just yelled “You have girl shoulders!” I remember it being said with such disapproval. My own family. My father. Those words still haunt me to this day. They landed with such rancor, like shears that dug right into my back. I think I stopped trusting him, feeling comfortable with him right around that time. He started justifying the things my brothers would say and do to me then too. Like they would bully me and then I would run crying to my father, asking him to make them stop and he would just tell me that they were doing it because I “bobbed” my head “like a girl” or because I “pronounced” vowels “like a girl.” Shit was disappointing. And heartbreaking.

I talk about flying as a symbol for what it meant to align my inner head, to embrace my truth, to walk in my calling, to stand in my higher self as a young Afro-transfeminine person. I had that power as a tiny tiny kid. And then people came along, and they saw me riding high, and they snatched me out the air just like the slavemasters had done to our ancestors back in Africa. And they ripped my wings out my back. Now, my shoulders feel heavy, my body feels weighted down to the ground, and I feel ugly, and every day I question who I am, and whether I deserve to be here or if I deserve hellfire, deserve death, deserve destitution. And this shit is so hard that my mind literally starts to feel like it is split into pieces. And I try to close my eyes, and I breathe in through my nose, and I count to nine, and I meditate on what it means to ascend again, and I let the air fill my belly, and I try to imagine myself rising in the wind, and then I exhale, and I count to nine, and I try to relax into the wind, and let it lift me up, breathing out through my mouth, trying to relax, and feel free, not like a beast of burden.

I think of flying in the wind, because Marcus Garvey once spoke of a wind. It represented African liberation, and the ancestors. The Black Panther Party used to speak of the wind too, to represent liberation and reverence for the dead. Malcolm X says he heard his family talking about the revolution using the symbol of a wind. In African spirituality, *Iansa*, the *orisa* of winds, who is regarded as a masculine woman, gender variant, her other name is *Oya*, “the tearer,” and they say she represents change, revolution as well. With these things in mind, I try to remind myself that I don’t have to bend my knee and submit to anybody’s authority, because I fly up in the whirlwind: which means that I get to define myself, and I get to determine my destiny, and I get to free myself, and to govern myself, and to defend myself, and to understand myself on my

own terms and by any means necessary. It is sad that right in our own homes, in our families, in places that are supposed to be sites of safety and assurance and nurturance, our own people cannot see that for us. A family should be supportive, not destructive.

“Oh, hold the baby,
Hold em
Hold the baby,
Hold em
Hold the baby,
Hold em, Lawd rock that have
Oh what’s the matter?
Hold em
What’s the matter?
Hold em
What’s the matter?
Hold em Lawd rock that babe.”

5. Kala (Wednesday 23rd June)

So, I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: “*Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.*” I start to think about how Toni Morrison said that the “people could fly” stories were a “psychological trick” that enslaved folk used whenever they were asked about their spirituality. It was a symbol for the runaways. Stories are such powerful things. They might be false as hell, but people will hold onto them because they reinforce an understanding that serves whatever agenda they want to get done. To say that some of us could fly was to uphold the agenda for Black freedom.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: “*Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.*”

I start to recall an old dream I had, long long ago, when I was super super small. I don’t really understand or remember the dream too well, but I know how it felt. I felt a thick, warm air surrounding me, that seemed to lift me up, and it was so cozy there, and dark like sunset, and I could hear something like water in the distance, and something like laughter somewhere. Whoever was there with me, we had gone off somewhere secret, and we were doing something serious, something important, something that was gonna change the world. And I felt so free. So connected. So loved. So held. I didn’t have any of that in the waking world, though. I was alone and cold and afraid of the arrows flying at me throughout the day, and it was like the world could not be changed. It was hostile. There was no escape.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: “*Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.*”

That song from Solange begins to play now. Where she talks about tryna drink it away, dance it away, change it with her hair, work it away, sex it away, sleep it away, read it away, cry it away. I remember trying to do these things too. And I remember trying to pray it away. I remember thinking that if I Bible-thumped properly, or if I befriended the right people, or if I berated and bullied those who were like me, that would help me deal. I also thought it would clear my head, but it actually knocked me further out of alignment. Who I truly was became invisible and unrecognizable to me as I locked myself in the prayer Closet.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: *“Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.”*

African traditions say that when you not listening to your inner head, things start to fall out of balance for you. Ask anyone who knows me well, and they will tell you over time, I really started falling apart. I was all over the place, anxious and restless, and then I developed anger issues, and I could not understand why. I would think that I was being attacked by spirits, and then if not, I just thought it was because something was wrong with me. That my life was gonna end. That I deserved to die. And I actually started to look forward to the day I would meet my demise. I was tired. And ready to go. And sometimes I intentionally put myself in harm’s way, hoping that I would go out with a bang.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: *“Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.”*

I remember when it hit a point where people started telling me I seriously needed help. They kept encouraging me to start trying to take care of myself, to love myself more, to honor myself. But I did not listen to them. I could not even understand what that meant. It made no sense to me. But my inner head knew. A mentor of mine at the time would tell me about Black queer/trans history, about where terms like “shade” and “reading” came from; and some of the kids around me taught me about voguing and ballroom history, about Willie Ninja, and the Xtravaganzas, and Crystal LaBeija who pioneered the first house. And something bloomed inside me: such utter joy and excitement. It exploded, and I adopted everything I heard and internalized everything I saw, even while I was still telling people that I was “straight.” Not too long after, I made out with a guy for the first time, an old friend. And then a few months later, I was out with some old homies on a boat. And we were having fun, and some of the girls started picking flowers and putting it in their hair, and for some reason I felt inclined to put some pink petals right into my high top fade, with no thought. And we snapped a photo together, three girls: one of them trans, me. Although I did not have that terminology to describe myself at that time.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: *“Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.”*

The ridicule that came about soon as those flowers wound themselves into my nappy head surprised me. People who had insisted that I needed to find love for myself, were suddenly upset. My parents kept bothering me about it, folks around me were all curious and questioning me. There were stares and comments; but, for some reason, my response was different. I felt like

nobody could touch me. I had disappeared, into a whirlwind or storm, into a secret and shadowy place, into the world of my dreams and visions. And because of that, I remember when folks started asking if I thought I was a “boy or a girl” because “only girls can wear flowers” and I just shook my head and I said “Im just lost in the wild.” None of them understood what I meant. But I knew. I was reclaiming the tradition of the maroons and runaways. I was learning to fly.

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I think my parents thought the flowers thing was a momentary thing at first, but as I kept it up, the angrier they got. I was buying new flowers, wearing different kinds. My head became a garden, an arboretum, or a hush harbor of its own. I disappeared into that ancestral communion. This is what I explained to my stepfather when he insisted on asking me about it. I would show him pictures of people in Africa who wore floral headdresses and decorated themselves with things from nature. I reminded him that whenever our ancestors escaped the plantation, they would establish Maroon communities, where they would reclaim their African culture and spirituality, fight back against the master, and build new societies in the swamps, woods, forests, jungles, and the mountains. He kept asking me what that had to do with gender and I could not even fully answer the question myself at the time because I did not have the words for it. All I knew was that it was connected, somehow.

Neither my mother nor my father was hearing what I was saying. They tried to snatch me out the air like when I was younger, but it did not work this time. The more flowers I found, the more my wings grew in, and the bigger they got, the more they stretched out and shone, and now petals and feathers were falling around wherever I went. My shoulders felt light again, dainty; I began to feel fluid and flowy inside, once again, like I had when I was really small. Each new crown of flowers was like ceremonial attire, and then I started wearing feminine jewelry and more feminine clothes, and eventually dresses, and it all felt like I was channeling a divine energy. I was transforming and I felt like cosmic effluvia. I was a star, a vibe, a baddie.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: “*Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.*”

The word “domesticate” means to tame a wild animal. It also means to colonize. It is connected to the word “domestic” which refers to the home, and both of them are related to the word “dominion” or “dominate” which means to rule or control. I mention these things because as I was beginning to transition into a little wild thing, my parents was not having that up under their roof, and they did everything to preach against and suppress me because of that. My mother told me that I was lying on God and tried to lay hands on me and called me heathen, said I was giving glory to the creation rather than the creator. She even told me that me and her were “on opposing sides.” My father was always trying to flex his age and authority over me, and would threaten me physically if I challenged it, and even tell me that “the Bible says that you should honor your mother and father and your days will go well with you because your parents have the power to make your life a living hell if you dont.” He more than once threatened my peace and financial safety, and eventually I was forced to leave.

I remember what finally sparked my stepfather's decision to send me packing. We were having an argument about politics and religion. We had never agreed on these things, because my stepfather is a right-winger, and so we often debated each other, and this time around it got really really really heated and my stepfather started telling me that I did not have the Spirit of God because of my gender variance. I kept trying to stress to him that that could not be true because God wanted Black people to free ourselves. My father kept trying to use Scriptures that told people to obey their masters, and started saying that "government exists for the lawless and insubordinate." And so now I was letting him know that this government and its police was a tool of the colonizer and slavemaster, and that nothing about me and what I was saying was unholy. This is when my mother started speaking in tongues and trying to exorcise me. That night they both backed me into a wall, and I exploded with rage, and I said some hurtful things, and it got so bad one of my brothers stood up ready to defend me because he thought I was gonna get hurt by our father.

I breathe. In through my nose. I count to nine. I let the air fill my belly. I breathe. Out through my mouth. I count to nine. I let my body relax into the wind. I try to release my shoulders, especially. That is where I hold the weight. I inhale again. And then I exhale. Counting to nine. I whisper to myself: "*Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.*"

The wild thing was now unhoused, and had to pack their bags and find a new place to go. Couches, cars, small rooms, crossing state lines by bus, I started to live that street queer life then, which so many other Afro-trans and Afro-queer folk know too well, especially us trans gurls and trans fems.

The wild thing then turned to political theory to better understand herself, like *Senzala o Quilombo* from Pedro Ribeiro:

"[E]very once in a while, a laborious and dedicated group of slaves would defect from the generosity of the slave master's whips and chains and senzalas, and go into the jungle. They would run, day after night after day after night, into the mata, deeper into the forest; away from the treacherous Capitaes to Mato, the black or mulatos overseers responsible for capturing escaped slaves. In the jungle, they looked for hope. In the jungle, they looked for freedom. In the jungle, away from the white man, they looked for the Quilombo.

Quilombos were city-states created in the heart of the mata by escaped slaves. The most famous - the largest and the one whose name was whispered in secret in the dark by those in search of freedom - that was Palmares. Palmares had a estimated population of twenty to thirty thousand, structured in eleven different villages. In Palmares, as in other Quilombos escaped slaves held the majority. Natives and poor whites were also accepted into the Quilombo, with and shared the same rights and duties as anyone else. Decisions were made by village assemblies, in which every adult, man or woman, of every race, could (and most would) participate.

No, Palmares was no utopia. It was no communist society in which the decisions were as horizontal as possible and in which all were seen as equal. Palmares had chiefs, one for each village. The chief of the capital, Macacos, was the king of Palmares. But this is neither here nor now. The now is the quilombo as opposed to the senzala.

Palmares died in flames. It fought until the last person was dead. It had been fighting for its sovereignty and independence for over one hundred years. It gave its blood to defend what it cherished most – its freedom and its self-determination.

Whatever drove the Palmarinos to fight is what I am interested in talking about. A friend of mine said something that struck a cord in me. He said: ‘People are always talking about dying for this or that. You gotta die for the cause if you are militant enough, if you are really bad ass you should die for your beliefs. But nobody asks, what are you living for? Not dying, but living – what is your life for?’

The Palmarinos were living for something. They were living for their freedom and their collective autonomy. They were living for their right of self-determination, to do away with the chains that held them slaves in the past and to decide by themselves the path of their life. If they died fighting for that, they died for what they were living for. They died the death of free people.”

My father thought things would turn into a “prodigal son” story and I would run back to his threshold, knees bent, asking for forgiveness, promising to obey him and obey his god and ultimately align with the white social standards and backward political opinions he and my mother held to so deeply. But I was fully committed to running as far away from all that shit as possible. Aint nobody or nothing was gon hold me down, cuz I was fierce and I was proud.

My life did not get any easier from that point at all whatsoever, but there is nothing quite like the bravery and confidence to face struggle that you get when you listen to who you truly are within and against it.

“Foot bone, shin bone
These bones gon rise again.
Shin bone, knee bone
These bones gon rise again
Knee bone, thigh bone
These bones gon rise again
Tailbone, back bone
These bones gon rise again
Back bone, neck bone
These bones gon rise again.
Neck bone, head bone.
These bones gon rise again.”

6. Tukula (Thursday 24th June)

There was an Afro-Caribbean revolutionary named Frantz Fanon who once said that each generation, out of relative obscurity, must discover its mission, fulfill or betray it. Self discovery is not just a spiritual journey, but a scientific one. The Man knows this, that is why they always use religious narratives or narratives derived from studies of nature to make us align our inner heads with their bullshit.

Narrative is powerful because the brain has behavior regulatory mechanisms, which produce chemicals that we fill in with symbolic meaning about what is right and what is wrong. These

symbols and their ethical content are based around the historical experience of what activities meet our culture's basic metabolic needs, and what activities may not help us do so. When tied together, they create neurochemically salient narratives that consciously reinforce the behaviors which a culture defines as necessary for it to reproduce itself in its given environment. We depend on nature, and we have to find ways to transform our relations to it in order to get food, water, safety, shelter, and more; but the actions it takes to do this may or may not be beneficial, and even if it is valuable to one person, it might not be to others. Some way, people have to create a mutual agreed upon set of understandings about what works and doesn't work, in order to sustain socio-ecological interrelations over times, and this is why every culture develops myths that have two traits. They are often based on observations of natural phenomena, animals, plants, etc and they convey *moral* lessons. This same impulse doesn't just happen when the narratives are spiritual either; it also happens in the sciences, and it is why scientists often talk about "nature" as a way to explain societal relations, politics and economic issues. We are nature and nurture beings, and narratives, both spiritual and secular, are used to encourage the actions, behaviors, and divisions of labor and skill which serve a particular culture's ecogenic (environment-inhabiting or "world developing") structures.

However, some cultures or people in power can come along and impose their specific systems onto another people, in order to achieve their own selfish, destructive material interests, like stealing land and owning folk as slaves. Their labor is exploited, and the web of interrelations they share with each other and nature is disrupted, and this causes a metabolic rift; and it is bad for the environment because we become subordinate to the master's interests in profit over life and sustainability. This process also has a cultural effect too. They will completely rewrite that subordinated culture's narrative, and make them believe and follow something that is foreign to them and that serves their own domination. These imperial cultures use religion or science to make it seem like both the coercive narrative and the systems they reinforce cannot be changed. Everything becomes fixed. It is black-and-white. The Word becomes flesh. Right is right, wrong is wrong. You are sexually immoral: you deserve slavery. This is the situation facing Black trans people.

We either internalize the curses they put on us, or we follow the destiny laid upon our inner head, which we chose, which we define. Oftentimes, the enslaved and colonized ends up doing both simultaneously, believing one thing about ourselves and believing another all at once. A double consciousness. For Black trans people in particular, it feels like dysphoria in our head. It's like there is a veil between us and the rest of the world; we try to struggle against it to get to what we need so we can live out who we are. But the world that is forced onto us makes us feel lesser, and they alienate us and seek to control us, and will redefine how we understand ourselves so we will be too scared to act on our own interests. We end up striving against their narratives because the inner head is tryna get us to our higher, truer selves. But, the world that is imposed on us says something is wrong with us as individuals. There is nothing wrong with the system, and the world they created; it's just we who are bugging, and our brain is warped. They blame it on "phylogeny" or "ontogeny." They try to lay hands on us, or run tests on us, to measure and "cure" us of a distinct wavelength in our brains.

But, we are not broken. We are responding naturally to hostile conditions, by trying to nurture a new way of inhabiting the planet. It is a problem of "sociogeny." Our brains are trying to implement an alternate set of mythically reinforced instructions than the ones pushed onto us. Those other instructions: the living legacy, the ancestral power, things that African human

beings have been doing since before colonization and enslavement, things which call for a more egalitarian mode of existence, such as Black trans folk determining our own genders. Our inner head remembers and contains these alternative understandings, even if it is not that conscious to us at first.

Sylvia Wynter is an Afro-Caribbean woman scholar who theorizes the scientific side of self-discovery. She says that the way a people becomes more conscious of their symbolic affirmation is through rituals. She points to indigenous Kongo societies in Africa as an example of how this is done. Whenever the community was under threat, she said they would use initiation ceremonies to reinforce themselves. So while mystically speaking they would align their inner head with their destiny, scientifically speaking they would immerse themselves in the truths of their societies that were developed to uphold their culture's ecogenic (environment-inhabiting) structures. Kimpa Vita did this and that was why she ended up pioneering an African sovereignty movement through appeals to the Saint Antony of Padua. The conjurers and rootworkers in the Hush Harbor did this and that is how forms of anti-slavery resistance got developed in their sacred spaces. In Haiti, a prayer ceremony was held at Bois Kayiman, conducted under the guidance of vodun priests, one of whom encouraged the Africans gathered there to turn away from the Man's god and "listen to the voice of liberty in your hearts." This helped spark the Haitian Revolution, the world's first ever successful slave revolt, and established the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere.

Ashanti Alston, a Black revolutionary, observes that in the Yoruba religious context, rituals devoted to deities like Ogun teach our people:

“‘automatically, you have the right to rebel,’ and second, ‘you must now prepare and transit through an unavoidable hell to acquire the powers, insights, skills, and unities necessary for you and the community to move to the ‘liberation Hilltop.’”

Then, there were some Africans who, as they became enslaved, turned stories about the trickster into ways for our ancestors to critique the Man in secret. The trickster was a doorway to higher truths, remember, and that included the right to rebel. For example, there's a ring shout song called "Move, Daniel," that is a trickster tale disguised as a praise song. In this story, Daniel goes to steal food from the master's house. The other enslaved folk noticed that the slavecatchers are coming for Daniel, so they start singing instructions to him on how to escape. They use the song so that it can be assumed by the slavecatchers that they were just worshipping.

Enslaved people would then use this ring shout song to commemorate that story, but more importantly, to reinforce their right to rebel, to steal if necessary, in order to get what we need.

I believe that Black trans people deserve to create our own ways to affirm ourselves, on our own terms. When we dress as we please, and shape ourselves as we please, when we name ourselves as we please, those to me are all ceremonial acts. It's the way we breathe life into ourselves, get in touch with ourselves how we see fit.

But we also need to grasp this reality at its root, to transform it. Fannie Lou Hamer once said that this is the technical meaning of "radical." As the people who can fly, we are not just descendants from *spiritual* rootworkers; we must use the people can fly myth to remind ourselves about what it means to be *political* rootgraspers. More than just an ancestral connection to the wilderness, we need a material connection to nature to get free. We must transform our ecogeny, by transforming the mode of material provisioning through transforming the mode of production,

which is a question of class. All our ancient rituals and spiritualities were in some way eco-centric, because of a connection to more communalistic modes of production. Kwame Nkrumah once said the task today is to harness the spirit of those traditions into a revolutionary project. We must look to power not just from sacred forces in the earth, but build power from below and through the margins and in self determination based on revolutionary mode of inhabiting this planet and using its resources. It's in these two things, both myth and matter, that we will most fully determine ourselves by our authority, in order to resist the Man and these coon ass straight and cis people (even our families) who wanna keep us bound.

“Rest, believer, rest
Daniel
Rest, believer, rest
Daniel
Fly, believer, fly
Daniel
Fly, believer, fly
Daniel
On the eagle wing,
Daniel
On the eagle, wing
Daniel.”

7. Luvemba (Friday 25th June)

I remember there was a girl in elementary school who started a whole trend with the other girls where they would say “stop lying,” but in a very nasal, sassy way, and drag their vowels with it. And I remember following right along, no question about it. It was fun to do, especially when we'd all wag our head at somebody, cut them off while talking. But unlike the other girls, it was an issue if I did it. Someone like me wasn't supposed to enjoy feminine stuff. For one, the teachers didn't like the ratchetness anyway; but now you have to add a queer into the equation? Straight people can't tolerate having another reason for the whole collective to be seen as wrong. Society already said God was punishing us for being criminals and having broken families and apparently the “gay agenda” was making it worse for us. That is how the oldheads put it.

But being told I was “gay” was confusing. I mean, yes I liked men but I also liked girls. I also realized, however, that I found myself drawn to anyone: I liked tomboys and masculine women, tomgirls and feminine men, and people who didn't seem to fit any of these things. My attractions were not necessarily romantic or sexual though. I remember there was this girl who lived next door to me and we used to hang out and play together all the time. My parents suggested I had a crush on her. Then there was this boy I went to school with, and same thing. I always wanted to be around him. Somebody in my class accused me of having a crush on him. In my head, though, I just liked being near them. There was an attraction, but it didn't really have a name. I used to get compared to SpongeBob. He was technically asexual, being a sponge, but everything about him was gender and sexual fluidity. Whenever kids would talk shit about the show I found myself feeling like I used to have to defend SpongeBob, and really I was trying to defend myself. Even when I was in relationships with girls, I found myself being scrutinized, because I didn't

feel straight. But I also didn't feel "gay." I didn't have any terminology like "bisexual" or "nonbinary," or "transfeminine" at the time. Everything was just "gay." I remember one time this teacher deadass pointed to me in the middle of class and tried to out me in front of all my classmates. Any time I tried to be like "no, I'm not," it wouldn't work because people felt like I was lying or being inauthentic. And in some ways they were right: saying I wasn't "gay" wasn't exactly true. It was so confusing.

One time, my mother told me that what would save me from all of this was if I just learned to "man up." I think that was when I realized how wide the chasm between me and my mom was. Prior to that, I had felt an affinity with her, a unique closeness that was more like I saw myself in her. We were already so similar: same music taste, mannerisms, likes and dislikes, and even now we relate on a number of things. But she doesn't accept that resonance as valid now just like back then she didn't seem to fathom that what I was facing was wrong on part of everyone else.

My brothers tried to teach me how to "man up": for example, pressuring me into doing shit like catcalling or running game. I felt so out of place, so weird, so uncomfortable, and so anxious in those moments. It was like I wanted to climb out of my skin and just have my soul shot away into a black hole or something. I liked girls, but not in a manly way, and definitely not on some player shit; and yes I liked other genders, I was realizing, but again, I didn't feel like a man in liking men. I couldn't quite name what it was. In actuality, I didn't feel like anything. It was neutral inside, so much so that there would be times when my peers would say or do things and literally have to explain to me that gender was the reason why they did it. Those rules didn't click in my head; they felt foreign, alien, beyond me.

Some of the double standards I heard growing up were also just down right goofy. "Boys can't use straws," was something my grandmother once said. And then, all the stuff people said "boys" could do just so happened to be racial stuff. That was what really started making me question gender. I peeped how race was shaping the way people talked about it, and that shit ain't make no sense. How one day we talking about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and slavery and how Black people had to fight against Jim Crow, and how wrong that was, but then the next thing you know, folks are laughing at the way white men walk or don't walk compared to Black men, and then saying that white men were less masculine. Or they were saying that white women were more feminine than Black women.

Then after saying this, folk would turn around and tell me that because I was Black, and not white, I wasn't supposed to be feminine. Literally. It dawned on me that white people were literally allowed to explore gender and sexuality in ways Black people could not. And that's what I saw in the media: white folks, doing "gay" things. Society legit felt like Black people were only allowed a rigid standard of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine. I swear, it was only because of this realization that I came to know my African culture and dark brown skin as "Black," (which is to say, that there was any stigma attached to my body and being as an African person). The color line was first etched into my awareness only because of gender.

I remember feeling like Jim Crow did not end for me then. I still had to endure being called "boy" even when I didn't want to. I had to endure being called a government name I wanted to reject. I had to watch how I walked, how I talked, how I held my eyes or my wrist, to keep myself from being bullied or even attacked. There was a constant anxiety and heaviness in my body and made me feel like my consciousness was starting to split up. I found myself compartmentalized, just to cope, shrinking myself into shards.

Especially because there was always the threat of Divine judgements too. Hellfire. I constantly felt like I was battling spirits, when really I was suppressing myself. Prayer felt like warfare and it was laborious and terrifying. They called me a “travailer” in church because of how heavy I prayed, how my tears would fall like blood. There’s no way to express how pained my chest would be coming “out of the Spirit.” How many nights I woke up in fits and fear, quaking and babbling in tongues trying to pray away what I thought was tormenting me.

One time my mother explained it to me like this: that gender variance and sexual variance was demonized in the Bible because of an association with heathen cultures. The people of God were chosen to be “set apart” from such cultures, and therefore this meant prohibitions against homosexuality and effeminacy as part of their spiritual devotion.

The problem is, as I eventually learned, heathen and its association with “sexual immorality” always meant “African.” See, long ago when the Bible was written, a story was recorded from the Hebrew people about Noah, the man who built an ark to preserve his family and many animal species from a flood. According to the narrative, after he and his family and the other living creatures got out the ark, Noah got drunk and passed out naked. Now, Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham ended up seeing his father’s nudity by mistake, and so his two brothers covered their eyes, walked into Noah’s tent backwards, and then covered their father up. When Noah got up, he knew what had happened, and he got angry with Ham for seeing his nakedness, and decided to curse Ham’s son, whose name was Canaan. In ancient Hebrew cultures, your firstborn son was the one who inherited your legacy, so to curse Canaan was to impose a curse on Ham’s entire legacy. Noah said, “a servant of servants shall he be.” Canaan was doomed to be enslaved. There is no literal truth to this story. Some scholars believe this story was developed to explain why there was conflict between the Hebrew people and certain other ethnic groups in ancient Palestine.

Religious leaders, however, began to use this story to explain how humanity had gotten divided into racial groupings. There is a map that was made during the time of the ancient Roman empire. It depicts the Middle East and Asia as being descended from Shem, and it depicts Europe as being descended from Japheth. And it depicts Africa as being descended from Ham. Because these religions taught that Ham’s legacy, through his son Canaan, had been cursed and doomed to be a “servant of servants,” this meant, in the minds of many Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religions, that Africans were all supposed to be enslaved. This is the origin of anti-black racism.

To top it all off, since Noah only cursed Ham because Ham supposedly saw him naked, followers of these religions began to associate African people with sexual immorality, sexual predation. Today, when people think of Blackness, they think of hypersexuality and physical prowess, they think of us as animalistic in these ways, and there is a long history of Black men and Black women being painted as sexually threatening and deserving of violence because of it. This goes back to the “curse of Ham” doctrine.

There is a veil between us (Black) and them (white), and gender/sexuality is like the needle used to stitch it together, to keep the submissive knee-bender in line, to keep us seen as the Hamite, and justify their right to dominate our land. Blackness is therefore understood in a rigid, binary gendered fashion as the way to qualify our savagery and uphold their pursuit of African resources.

The veil established then pulls a wool over your eyes. You end up believing the narratives put on you. Black people start to really believe that we are what white Man religion says we are. And

then, for the trans girls and other gender variant folk, we end up feeling dysphoric. Or maybe we just feel worthless. Ugly. Despicable. This was me.

Scared, I said maybe my brain is messed up. I mean, I do feel split into two different directions. Two worlds. I don't know. I see what I saw in the spirit and then I see what is in the mirror.

Maybe that means I am crazy. Maybe I do have a disorder. My consciousness does feel split in half after all. Maybe I can only ever be what they say our bodies are: man, straight, woman, straight, right? I must have been wrong. My body is wrong. My mind is wrong. Maybe I am worthless. Hamite. Sinner. Abomination. Tranny. Fag. Nigger.

I run from myself. I'm always fleeing. It's never a moment rest in my spirit. My mind is racing daily. I'm being chased. Snarls are at my back. I am worthless. I am despicable. I run. I can't rest. I run. Doors and walls are in my way. I have to break them down. I can't break them down. I run into them. Bust through. I scar myself on the way but it don't matter. I can't feel pain. I'm not supposed to feel pain. I just run. I cant rest. I'm not supposed to rest. I run.

I'm being chased through a narrow, filthy, dark alleyway, and the only measure of safety is to keep going. I am despicable. I can't rest. I run. If I can't run then I must fight. Fight the enemy. Fight every battle. Or fix every problem. Try. Til it overcomes me. Overtakes me. Wears me down. I drown. If I can't run, Imma drown. If I can't drown, Imma grind. If I can't grind then I'm numbing myself somehow.

I fall to the floor, and I can't get up. I'm broken. And I want to fly up out of here but I just can't. Fight or run: the only two options. Run or fight. No rest. No escape. I am a slave. I am a descendant of those the Europeans had dragged to the Americas and the Caribbean and elsewhere in chains. And it aint just the Word that says this of me, but also the science, so it must be true.

Something about the environment in Africa had changed our skin black, and that same environment caused us to be sexually immoral, and lazy, and deformed our cultures and to this day our environments, whether it's the village or the hood or favela or the barrio or the reservation: it doing the same thing. Proving that something is wrong with us.

In the United States, one of the scientists to point this out was a man named Dr. Samuel Cartwright. Dr. Cartwright was noticing that there were a lot of runaway slaves, rebels. Many enslaved Africans got off the plantation, or they chose to slow down working in the fields on purpose, or they broke one of the tools, or they attacked the masters, or they killed themselves so that the Man would not have anyone to exploit. All of these actions would disrupt the flow of money and resources that the Man was tryna gain off our backs. The masters needed a way to put a stop to this constant resistance. First, they tried to use the Bible to tell us that we needed to be obedient to their rule. But, when that was not enough, their scientists came along to say that trying to resist slavery was evidence of a mental illness. Yes, Dr. Samuel Cartwright taught that the desire to get out of our chains was nothing but a "disease of the mind" and that it needed to be "cured" in order for us to re-align with what he said was God's will.

The cure, according to "Dr" Cartwright, was for slavemasters to find a way to balance not being too nice or too harsh. Master had to follow a middle ground in order to use the power over Black people that God supposedly had "willed" for him. If s/he was too nice, it would make African people see ourselves as human and want to run away; so the master had to exert just enough brutality over us, according to Dr Cartwright, and not let us think we were equal to them. If s/he was too cruel, though, it would make African people sad and upset and ready to run away; so the master had to give just enough crumbs to us, according to Dr Cartwright, just enough comforts, basic physical and material needs.

“If treated kindly, well fed and clothed, with fuel enough to keep a small fire burning all night—separated into families, each family having its own house—not permitted to run about at night to visit their neighbors, to receive visits or use intoxicating liquors, and not overworked or exposed too much to the weather, they are very easily governed—more so than any other people in the world. When all this is done, if any one of more of them, at any time, are inclined to raise their heads to a level with their master or overseer, humanity and their own good require that they should be punished until they fall into that submissive state which it was intended for them to occupy in all after-time, when their progenitor received the name of Canaan or ‘submissive knee-bender.’”

Flash forward centuries later. Our contemporary context. Slavery is no longer legal; it was abolished after the Civil War in the 1800s. But the US Constitution says that if someone is convicted for a crime, then they can be forced back into it. White society did not stop at the opportunity to begin creating new laws that ended up criminalizing Black people in mass numbers. This was a sneaky, legal way to force us back into chains. When they could not jail us, they would claim that without slavery, we would “revert” to our savage and sexually immoral, Hamitic ways. This way they could use Christian hate groups like the KKK to lynch us and worse as a form of non-legal punishment outside the prison. Over the course of decades, the prison system became used to target us specifically, and has grown to become a source of labor for a number of corporations and produce goods for many towns, and provide jobs to white folk who want to be police and corrections officers and guards (aka modern day overseers and slave catchers). As outrageous and evil as this is, Americans refuse to abolish the prison/police/court system that is just modern day slavery disguised, and they continue to use narratives about sexual immorality/predators (the Hamitic hypothesis) as the excuse for why.

They might not say it is about race anymore, either. They will disguise it by talking about “violent crime,” and fear of predators, and talk about the IQs and “cultural pathology” of these mysterious, immoral figures. It is a back door way to continue the dehumanization and demonization of Black people. At the same time, they still give the promise of equal rights. They still put up listings for a 9-5 so that you think you have the opportunity to get on the grind, even if the wages are piss poor or they fire you for any old reason or abuse you on the job. They still promise some degree of health coverage to get by, even if it ain’t the best or it is hard for most of us to access, or the doctors intentionally harm or neglect you. And they still promise us housing and education and water and food and soon clean air, even though the housing is substandard and dangerous and filled with poison, the education is underfunded and full of lies and violence, and the water and food and air is full of toxins and harmful chemicals.

They keep that balance between giving us some things, and controlling us in other ways. Just like Dr Cartwright said. And it is a bonus if you live in two parent homes they say, with a straight, cisgender man in charge, and where everyone believes in white Man religion and is devoutly aligned with it, and everyone talks and dresses “proper” like they do, and everyone looks somewhat close to or almost as light and thin and delicate and “normal” and “human” as they do. These are the ways to keep us governed, and if you step outside them, well then you deserve what you get. You deserve poverty and police abuse and poison/pollution and political/economic oppression if you don’t meet their standards; you deserve poverty and police abuse and pollution and political/economic oppression if you live in a broken or extended family; you deserve poverty and police abuse and poison/pollution and political/economic oppression if you are not Christian; you deserve poverty and police abuse and poison/pollution and political/economic

conomic oppression if you don't talk proper or dress proper; you deserve poverty and police abuse and poison/pollution and political/economic oppression if you are dark skinned or if you are fat, or if you are rough or tough or hardened and mistrustful and on edge and anxious and angry because of the bullshit we deal with; you deserve poverty and police abuse and pollution and political/economic oppression if you don't look or act "normal" or "human" by their standards. And yes, according to the narrative, you deserve poverty and police abuse and pollution and political/economic oppression if you are not straight or cisgender.

And so, the veil comes back. In the looking glass, when I'm brushing my teeth. It pulls the wool over my eyes. The veil comes back, when they use the pronouns I don't accept. Or when the paperwork speaks of a "biological sex." Or when they use that government name, that slave name, the name I don't like, the name I inherited as a mark that I am someone's "son." And it pulls the wool over my eyes.

And the veil comes back, yes, even when I claim who I am. Even when I feel like I pass, even when the mirror don't bother me, when I feel fierce and fabulous, when folks accept my pronouns, or even when they use my chosen name: the veil still comes back anyway. When they don't hire me for the job, they disrespect my intelligence, it pulls the wool over my eyes. The veil is back as they stop and frisk me, as they treat me like a Thing, as they force me onto a grind that feeds their pockets but bleeds mine out, and as they keep me trapped in a world that feels too much like a plantation every day, and they deny me housing, and as they jail me.

The veil is there again in all these ways and I cannot escape. And its wool comes over my eyes and makes me start to wonder again if I am bugging after all, and they are right. Maybe I deserve this. Maybe I should not have transgressed. Maybe I need to bend my knee. Maybe I need to obey. I have so many reasons to already be seen as worthless, why add queer and trans to the equation?

And so the veil, stitched together with the wool of gendered prohibitions, calls me back to the prayer Closet. So I can bend my knee again. And align myself with their narratives. But there is an anointing on my head. It's saying something about who I'm called to be.

There is an anointing on my head, and it's not a disease of the mind at all. It's not a pathology. And it ain't demonic. It's an ancestral calling. A higher truth. And it's something our bodies have always made a possibility, and even when I'm not fully conscious of it, it's pointing me to something outside the self that I need to do to get free. It tells me not only to run, or to fight. It tells me to balance myself. To find out who I am here to be. And journey to create and establish that, and in so establishing, to pursue the role I want to play in this world. When I listen to this, I start to pull the wool off my eyes, see past the veil, even if just a little bit, and there's a higher truth there. Some kind of horizon of liberation for us all. And when you cross that line, you find not just something ancestral but also something for the future. Some other world, perhaps, where one class of beings doesn't dispossess the earth of everyone else, keep us subordinate to a profit motive, dominate our very bodies, oppress our consciousness and desires, poison our lands and waterways, and control our autonomy. I start to lean into this, and while it feels like it is opposite to "reality" I know that if I act on it, I can synthesize it into this world, make the vision more real, and make reality closer to the vision. So I start small: I know that in that world I dream of, I am a mother, and I am sitting down with kids, and I'm telling them the story of how we as a people got free.

“Jubilee, jubilee
Oh, my lawd
Jubilee in the morning
My lawd, Jubilee
Jubilee in the evening
Oh, my lawd
Jubilee, jubilee
My lawd Jubilee
Dont care what you call me
Oh, my lawd
Shout my children, cuz you free
My lawd, jubilee.”

8. Musoni (Saturday 26th June)

I was reading about Imam Jamil Al-Amin. The Black Power revolutionary. He was once part of the Black Panther Party, a self-defense formation that arose in response to racism and the class war. He was also part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, an organization from the civil rights era that eventually became more radical because of the influence of folk like Ella Baker and Kwame Ture. Baker, Ture, and SNCC began to understand that the Black struggle in the United States was connected to a global struggle against capitalism and imperialism, aka the Second Great Upheaval.

Imam Jamil Al-Amin was known as H. Rap Brown during those days, and he, like many Black revolutionaries of that time, was constantly being framed by the government and police for crimes he did not do. The US government, the ruling slavemaster and land-stealing class, intentionally sent agents to either infiltrate or set up Black activists and organizers, even pacifists like Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King wasn't even as militant or radical as many of the others during those days, but the Man still saw him as a threat, and they eventually killed him because he became critical of capitalism and imperialism like the revolutionaries were. Imam Al-Amin was able to survive that era, however, something that a lot of Black radicals did not do unfortunately. He became a Muslim cleric and community leader, and while he did not renounce his radical politics, he was not as engaged in more militant activity any more, at least not publicly. Yet, the US still continued to target him, try and set him up, trying to connect him to terrorist activity and associate him with the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Anyways, I probably shouldn't have been reading about this before bed. I felt like I needed to, though, especially because of the spiritual wisdom that Al-Amin teaches. One of my favorite things reading about and from him are these words:

“To be successful in struggle requires remembrance of Creator and the doing of good deeds. This is important because successful struggle demands that there be a kind of social consciousness. There has to be a social commitment, a social consciousness that joins men together. On the basis of their coming together, they do not transgress against themselves and they do not transgress against others.”

I am not Muslim, but any time I read from Muslim revolutionaries like Al-Amin, not only am I impressed with deep respect, but there is something in me that flickers, like a page in a book turned by a wind. It is probably because ring shout, despite being rooted in African traditional religion, had Islamic influences. In the 1930s, Lorenzo A Turner was a pioneering linguist of Southern Black Gullah cultures, and he connected the use of the word “shout” to the Arabic word “*sha’wt*.” The *sha’wt* refers to a circular movement around the *Kaaba*, the most sacred site in the Muslim faith. Whenever Muslims pray *salat*, and face toward the East, it is because of facing toward the *Kaaba*. Circumambulating the *Kaaba* is something the faithful engage in when they make the mandatory pilgrimage known as the *Hajj*. The Islamic “shout” is a ceremony done in community, seven times, and is supposed to represent oneness, from what I understand. But I am no expert.

What I have gathered is that it was translated to the African traditional religious context in the United States because of Christianity and enslavement. The Shout therefore became a site of “syncretism,” where various faiths and cultures interacted with each other. Since it was a circular ritual, it was comfortably adopted into the perspectives of the various African ethnic groups who valued the circle in their cosmologies and beliefs. Katrina Hazzard-Donald talks about how the circle was one of eight elements in a larger “African religion complex” common to various African cultures, and that became the religion of Hoodoo in the United States. Here, beyond just being a ceremony for the remembrance of God, it was also a ritual of ancestral veneration, to remember those who came before us and the wisdom they pass down.

I remember watching a Christian woman discuss her relationship to a ring shout. She said something about how it allowed her to honor God through reflecting on what he did for her people in the past. This is most certainly a residue of the African religion complex, because in African traditions, it is *through the ancestors* that one derives their initial understanding of Creator. African traditions value learning from the elders; ancestors are seen as your first spiritual elders. Africans from among the Fon, Ewe, Igbo, Bantu peoples, Yoruba peoples, Mande peoples, and various other backgrounds, were able to create community together in the hush harbors, and combined their contemplative and medico-magical traditions through it that allowed them to resist. The ring shout was one of the central forces for continuity here, and in my opinion was the birthplace of a Pan-African politico-religious movement. African spirituality gave them a social bond, social commitment.

It took me a while to even learn the little bit I know about these things, and even longer to embrace them without being afraid that it was evil stuff. While I grew up seeing people “Shout” in church, nobody dared say it was an African thing. Everyone either attributed it to just God moving through someone, or someone’s emotions moving them toward God. They never spoke of ancestors or the Motherland. But African spiritual traditions was always at the root everything we did in the church, whether we knew it or not. Mine was a Pentecostal denomination founded way in the early 1900s. They believed that speaking in tongues was a sign that God’s spirit was inside of you. So, any time a praise break happened, someone was speaking in tongues as their own personal prayer language from God. The founder of the church had an anti-racist stance. He didn’t like the fact that during that time, a lot of Christians were segregationists. They believed that Black people should live in separate conditions. It was ironic to him. Because in the Bible, on the day of Pentecost, which is where the Pentecostal denomination gets their name, the Spirit of God is recorded to have fallen on people from all backgrounds and enabled them to speak in

all languages, not just one. My church founder believed that segregation was therefore against the Word.

And this was true for a lot of Black Pentecostals from his generation. Black Pentecostal churches were some of the earliest to integrate, especially at the Azusa Revival. The Azusa Revival is what made Pentecostalism get global attention. For whatever reason, all the news reporters were interested in this racially-integrated, tongue-speaking religious experience. It was to the point that many white Christians thought Pentecostalism as a whole was actually sinful, because they were so racist that they didn't wanna believe that God had given his Spirit to people who were in communion with folks from other races. What's more, one of the main critiques made of the Azusa revival was that it was "voodoo," because the Black folk who led the revival were singing spirituals and engaging in practices that were derived from the Hush harbor. To this day, Pentecostalism itself is demonized by most Christian denominations. The rituals and politics of Black Pentecostals was always seen as satanic.

When I first began to piece together the context and origin of these rituals and political histories, I was in college, a time I do not like remembering. That time was my earliest experience being faced with outright white racial aggression, something that was so alienating that I did not know what to do with myself. The only thing that made sense was getting into student activism on my campus, to address the ways my peers and I were being called slurs and being told that Black folk deserve police brutality. I was so angry and upset, and my peers and I were pushing a social media campaign in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives, and student activism across the country. While I was posting about my experiences, my family members and people from the church I grew up in started telling me that what I was doing was not okay in the eyes of God. That I needed to stop focusing on "the things of this world," and that activism would distract me from my walk with Christ.

I began feeling isolated from my religion. It was difficult to reconcile my Christian beliefs with a social commitment when everyone kept telling me this was at odds with the faith. And then the ring shout came back into my life. I was on youtube, and I saw a video of these women, dressed in white, shuffling in a circle, clapping their hands, in a grassy backyard. There were drums and a piano. And they were singing this song "*you've got a right to the tree of life.*" Seeing these women awoke something in me: I felt connected to them, and those words, that spiritual song, and it reminded me that I had a right to resist, that my church at home was wrong.

I started to parse the African spirituality and resistance at the heart of the Black church history. I began to connect the Shouts I grew up watching to this ring ceremony, to the Hush harbor. I found a theological vocabulary to challenge what my family's church was saying. I started to dig into Black church archives, and I even found that the founder of my family's church used to have community programs, because of his anti-racist stance. I tried to bring this information to my church, connecting it to ring shout and hush harbor and slave rebellion and the African rituals that prioritized individual autonomy and collective uplift.

My family and church would not hear me. They felt like me telling them the Shout was African "took the glory away from God." And they felt like Black church involvement in activism needed to be avoided because of the one thing Martin Luther King learned: that if you get involved in a racial justice struggle, you eventually have to confront capitalism which is its economic basis. My church did not want to do that, because in confronting capitalism and racism then you realize you have to confront the institution of the nuclear family, cisheteropatriarchy, and my family's church was too transphobic and homophobic and sexist to allow for that. The founder of our

church was so emphatic about cisheteropatriarchy that he broke away from other Pentecostal denominations that allowed for women preachers, because he saw that as ungodly.

At this point I knew I was at a crossroads. I could either hold onto a faith that was so exclusionary in this way, or return to the source and struggle my way to freedom. But I was afraid. It was like a stumbling block had been thrown before me. I didn't know what to do. That video had an impact on me. Ring shout had woke up something in me, something that felt ancient and expansive and powerful and more grounded than anything else. I could not put it into words, but it was not just frightening: it was illuminating. The narratives that associated Africanness and rebellion with the devil were still working through my nerves, though, still working through my brain, still distracting me and making me believe white Man lies. I found myself caught between a rock and a hard place, on one hand trying to maintain favor with my family and church, but on the other knowing that there was something bigger out there.

It took a while to feel brave enough to step out on new faith, and the way I was able to begin unpacking the beliefs forced onto me was by choosing to be brave enough to mimic those women. See, my inner head saw myself in them. And as I played the video, I would shuffle my feet on the floor, in a circle, counterclockwise, and close my eyes, and I started to think about my enslaved ancestors, and thinking of them reminding themselves that they had a right to the tree of life helped me remind myself of the same. And this is when an old buried memory, something I had forgotten came back, and an old vision came back to me, and I realized that when I was small, I used to do this shuffle thing, this meditation thing, and I used to know who I was when I was a kid before I got knocked out of alignment. And when that clicked, I started to change. It was still a slow process. It took years. I had to do the ring shout again and again; I turned it into a regular thing. Whenever I had time alone, I would do it. Sometimes I would schedule when: once at dawn, again at sunhigh, then evening, and finally at midnight before bed.

During this time, I started to learn about the modern prison abolition movement, and I started to learn about Black nationalism, and the Black Panther Party, the civil rights movement, the Black Liberation Army. I started to learn about Assata Shakur, a modern maroon, who escaped being chained in the US penal system after she was wrongfully framed for the death of a cop, and is now alive in exile, overseas. The US government classifies her a terrorist and still wants to recapture her. I started to understand what Marxism was a little more, how relations to natural resources were transformed by a mode of production that valued things in terms of unfettered growth, accumulation, and exploitation rather than direct use and production for needs of the people. This system warps how we arrange ourselves and our labor in service of a market and is enabled by organized, protected robbery and theft of resources by the colonizer.

I was becoming braver, less afraid, and so I started to study revolutionary theory. I began to learn about how race and gender was a nature-nurture question, not just nature (genetics). The human species has more variation within so called racial groupings than across those groupings, because the traits used to create those categories are actually minute and inconsequential to our biophysical makeup; furthermore, regarding sex characteristics, there are about four other known combinations beyond the two classified as male/female, such diversity being about as common as there are redheads, and many people aren't aware that there is variation even within so-called sexes. The flattening of both these truths, however, to fit our differences into a hierarchy and value system, served a political function on behalf of the Man. And they were inherently intertwined: the scientists who pioneered modern biological sciences were the same ones who created racism

and a central facet of how they “proved” Africans were inhuman was through classifications of anatomical differences marked as “sex.”

I started to learn that what was called “Crime” was really just a code word for anything that oppressed people did to fight a system of haves and have nots, or to survive that system, and so prisons/police and the courts were tools of oppression. Some of the main people impacted by this were queer/trans folk just tryna live, because if you’re constantly being segregated against and pushed out of homes, healthcare access, houses of worship, it’s harder to get or keep jobs, and you’re more likely to turn to certain underground activities to make it through, including actual resistance. This put them on the front lines of the struggle against modern slavery. These were new ideas that I had heard about and somewhat considered growing up, but I never got the opportunity to really study or examine very deeply until that time period. All the while, I was beginning to slowly but surely unpack a lot of the things I was taught to hold onto while I was locking myself in the prayer Closet. And this meant learning to love the ancestors, to cherish them, to lean on what they have to teach us, and to love myself.

My first big act of self-love and ancestral remembrance was saying a big “fuck you” to gender norms. I remember that my older brother would try to argue with me about this: “the Bible says God created male and female,” I was told, which meant man was the head and woman created for him. So anything violating that was against nature, but more importantly it was a threat to the species being able to propagate and get its needs in the environment. How can one be “fruitful and multiply” otherwise right? My brother would emphasize that “there has to be a distinction.” In his mind, and in the mind of many others, the only way to manage the affairs of a culture, nation, society, is in accordance to what biology supposedly says we can do. Biology supposedly says that a person’s gonad and other sex characteristics equal such and such thing and so that is the way they must behave. I was learning that these ideas came from a “survival of the fittest” narrative, to justify transphobia and homophobia. I started to learn, however, that life was more than just about biological imperatives: and that the capitalist and the colonizer only told us it was because they need to arrange our people in particular ways in order to divide us and exploit our labor, keep us suppressed, and continue to profit from our domination and the destruction of the planet. Rigid gender norms maintain this process.

In African cultures, I then learned, especially those that were communalistic, there was a lot more freedom in terms of gender and sexuality, because the material mode of production, provisioning, and environmental inhabitation did not allow for certain forms of oppression. Therefore, when Europeans encountered African people, they saw whole persons, who had gifts and talents. We were medicine people, artisans, divers, farmers, storytellers, warriors, childrearers, craftspeople, builders, musicians, and more. We were and are a people who hold the skills that are necessary to build a healthy society, because we passed those skills down from generation to generation, and we invent new ones and update them as time has gone on since the beginning of our existence. We are the origin of humanity, and we had entire societies and cultures and often times, the ones holding onto our traditions, the ones taking leadership as shamans or serving in the royal court, or pioneering as warriors, were queer and trans. These were the skills and labor we often passed down, the roles we occupied. There were multiple ways to arrange ourselves.

Granted, the labels “queer” and “trans” were not used by the ancestors to describe people like us. There was no need for such terminology because the marginalization and demonization of those who today would be called queer or trans is not universal across the Motherland. Africa was very diverse in ancient times, and is still very diverse to this very day. But our ancestors used

gender norms to arrange their societies and divide labor in a very different way. They knew that a class of beings could meet its needs in the environment in various ways. When we were given status as priests or in the royal court, it was because of a recognition of the many roles that can be played to help our societies survive and evolve. And it wasn't based off a concern with biology alone, but rather with spirit. Myth and culture were central in the socio-ecological processes by which Africans would arrange labor, assign value, and establish a network of relations that allowed us to inhabit our environments in certain ways. Life in those times was far from perfect, but the systems developed were far less hierarchical and exploitative.

Flash forward all these centuries later, and Black trans people are saying that our labor and our role in society does not have to be limited anymore. This is what I began to understand. We can do more than what the master/bourgeoisie says *and* we don't have to *only* be what our ancestors did in the past: we each can define what it means to be the descendants of our ancestors for today and the future. We can choose to determine our genders, and thus establish on our OWN terms what role in the community we will play, for each individual. According to our personal autonomy, and the needs of the collective. This is a communistic and anarchistic vision, aimed at developing a society maintained by all, from each person's capacity, unhindered by a caste or class or even a party or any demiurge or patriarch, and that is invested in the life of the planet.

I began to appreciate the value of this revolutionary and ecogenic perspective on the right to my gender liberation, because it exposed the question of labor and power and resources and how they get divided. Without this outlook, it would have been impossible for me to understand why transphobia and queerphobia were so hard to exorcise from our people. Even those who would acknowledge that it was connected to European religion would still uphold its institutions. It's because while it could be traced to the myth of the Hamite, the sexually predatory heathen, the animalistic, savage, crazy, inferior, Black African, it had more than just a religio-cultural function: it was developed to serve a society and material interest that too many of our people, unfortunately want to reap the benefits of.

Europeans, or Black people who want to reclaim colonial/capitalist hierarchies and labor divisions and material power for themselves, would throw gender/sexually variant Africans in particular under the bus, to make us a scapegoat that represented all that was wrong about the "Hamite." Our queerness and transness was always used as evidence for why Africans *as a whole* are supposedly inhuman and deserving of slavery. And they did this intentionally because if they could destroy us, they could make everyone avoid the cultural touchstones that were vital to our unity and self-understanding, to further weaken our nations. So once they get rid of those holding onto the mythic forces that Africans used to define ourselves, by calling our spiritual leadership satanic, they introduce their narratives, to get people to align their consciousness with whatever myths the Man wanted to impose, so we could unite with their material interests over our own. This helps them get over on our backs.

In this context, some of us began to look down on ourselves, to see white people's rigid standards as a more "civilized" update to African standards. We ran after the master's values in place of ours, hoping to secure some degree of power for ourselves. We would hide or deny the existence of gender/sexual variance, or of traditional spirituality in our lives, to help everyone look more civilized and holy, and rise above our "jungle status." We became obedient and subservient, bending our knees under their authority, and gave our bodies and labor over because we were forced. We went into hiding. And the secrecy turned into forgetting about our own lifeways, and eventually the forgetting turned into denial, and then the denial turned into what happens now

where folk pattern the white Man's religion by calling our faiths "demonic" and when that fails they use the white Man's science by saying that "transness is unnatural."

When I began to understand these things, I began to realize that to be "trans" (a prefix which literally means "away") is always about moving "away" from that which was hierarchically imposed on me at birth. This is why when I first came out I said that my gender was "marronage," evoking the runaway slaves. I was trying to define my life in the "wilderness" beyond or *away* from the reaches of slavery and its afterlives. I was seeing my transness as a struggle against the racial capitalism that imposed cisgender institutions onto my body. Importantly, I was trying to emphasize that I was not just escaping something but creating something new in the "wilderness" of gender struggle. I learned from Saidiya Hartman that the maroons and runaways and outliers were defined as much by what they were running *from* as by what they were running *toward* (her words, not mine):

"[S]afe at last, we have come together, here where no one can reach us anymore, the village of free people, here we speak of peace, a place of abundance, haven."

It was essential for us to update our myths now. Now they would need to be used to neurochemically reinforce these rebellious and proto-revolutionary activities. This is when I rediscovered the stories about people who could fly. Through these narratives our ancestors would symbolically uphold the spiritual and ethical validity of maroon acts.

It is said the people who could fly had other powers, too: levitating objects, teleportation, starting fires with their mind, disappearing into objects. This was, again, a "psychological trick" (to use Toni Morrison's words): translation, whatever they needed to do to get free and meet their needs, they did it. They were not bound by what the Man had to say was possible in this reality because they work its roots, grasp its roots, and transform that reality in pursuit of life for themselves. So I began to say to myself that my gender is marronage, getting lost in the wild, and marronage is both about running away from something and establishing a new form of African life simultaneously, and people can fly stories tell me that there is no limits to how I get this done, if I grasp and work from the roots of what is oppressing us (ie, I must get free by any means necessary).

I hold onto these insights and beliefs and stories and rituals now, as a form of remembrance of God and connection to my people and our ancestors and the Black Radical Traditions they passed down. This is how I immerse myself into a certain consciousness or conscience, a revolutionary commitment. It has cost me relationships to the people I grew up loving at home and in church. It has brought me ridicule and other challenges that I grew up trying to avoid through conformity. But it has also meant that I was able to discover what it means to be a star queen. Even though I got spat on and things hurled at me and attacked and lied on and disrespected, the rewards of learning how not to bend your knee to the master, how not to transgress against yourself and how to maintain respect for who you are and where you came from, and how not to transgress against your people and to move in solidarity with all of us in our liberation – this has outweighed everything else.

“Run, Mary, Run
(Oh, Lord)
Run, Martha, Run
(Oh, Lord)
Tell, Mary, Run
I say, you got a right
to the tree of life
Run, Mary, Run
(Oh, Lord)
Run, Martha, Run
(Oh, Lord)
Tell, Mary, Run
I say, you got a right
to the tree of life.”

9. Kala (Sunday 27th June)

I tried to tell my mother, but she ain't understand: she had raised a sojourner in a strange land. Life was like quicksand and I was up to my waist, charging through the fray. I would walk at night under the glare of the lights, wishing for the day I'd lose my life. By this point I was standing in who I was, and the world was beating back at me. I had to drop out of school after being attacked.

My back was always on fire and my legs were giving out. I couldn't sleep, my skin was always itchy. My mind was racing, throat was sore, body was shaking. Palpitations. There were knives wearing me down. I got so thin. I felt like pencil shavings sitting at the bottom of a dustbin. I tried to find love. Find something that gave me purpose. My partner at the time showed me a sweetness I will always remember. And I was working for a bit, and could save, and I was able to pay off a few things and it was an enjoyable time. But I was unwell. And the doctors weren't listening to me as I tried to tell them I was falling apart. And my parents weren't listening to me as I begged and pleaded with them to let me stay with them, so I could find rest for my weary bones. And the church kept offering to pray for me and my healing, but really they were praying that I'd return to the lies I was taught. And kept subtly implying that it was my fault why I was now beset with so many physical, mental, emotional, and financial crises.

In the 1970s, there was a Black revolutionary by the name of George Jackson who wrote a revolutionary set of letters and theorized the grounding for a lot of modern prison revolutionary organizing. He was assassinated by the prison State, after having first been jailed on false accusations. To honor him, his brother Jonathan Jackson, and others who struggled as he did, incarcerated brethren in the California prisons began to fast, to train for warfare, to fight, and to study Black radical tradition during the month of August.

Over the years, the Black August tradition has come to honor the many deaths and births of Black revolutionary ancestors and political formations, from across the Diaspora, which all fortuitously converge in this month. They say the Underground Railroad was founded on August 2nd. The Ferguson Uprising after the death of Mike Brown in 2014 happened during August. The designation of a red, black, green flag for all Black people by the Universal Negro Improvement

Association (an organization founded by Marcus Garvey) happened on August 13th, 1920. The revolutionary and political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal once put it this way:

“August is a month of meaning, of repression and radical resistance, of injustice and divine justice, of righteous rebellion, of individual and collective efforts to free the slaves and break the chains that bind us.”

The amount of historical coincidences during August for the history of Black resistance is so vast I cannot even list all the important dates here. I found out about it only in 2018, so I’m not an expert. I’m still learning. What is always interesting to me is that the day I first came out as gender variant, that first time I wore flowers, and I told people “my gender is marronage,” was in August. I remember it. August 14th. That’s the same day as the Bwa Kayiman ceremony. This was the ritual that launched the Haitian Revolution.

I began to call this day my “fugiversary,” or “fugitive anniversary,” to highlight that connection between Black rebellion and my journey toward gender self-definition. I began to look at my “coming out” as a new birth into a sacred or holy season. I partook in the Black August fast the first that month, and would try my best to exercise in a way that wasn’t too much on my disabled body, and to study more, so much more. I also would meditate, pray, ring shout at sunrise, sunhigh, sunset, midnight. I then learned that that year a prison strike was gonna happen too, a big one, one of the biggest prison strikes in the history of the United States. The organizers of the strike wanted to hold it in honor of the Attica Uprising.

I started telling anyone I could about Black August, about the Prison Strike, and about Black revolutionary struggle in general. It wasn’t like proselytizing though. It was more so like I was sharing a people’s history with others. Like I was a modern *djeli*, a griot, the ancient culture bearers and oral historians of ancient Mali. I was on fire. There was a revolutionary history I could see myself and my transness in now, more clearly than ever before, and my fugiversary coincided with some of the most important dates in that history. I was beginning to take underground methods, dialectics, critical theory more seriously. I remember diving into an analysis of humanism with my comrades at this time. I started to explore my family’s genealogy records too. Black August fasting was causing my consciousness to expand in newer directions. This was when I started to explicitly identify as “gender nonconforming.” Before then I hadn’t used any of the labels pioneered in the LGBTQIA+ movement. But now I had a confidence and a frame of reference within which I could locate that terminology on my own terms.

The contradictions between me and my parents or between me and my doctors or me and my church began to get heavier. The more radical I became, the less willing to conform to my assigned gender I became: and my parents weren’t having that, the strictures in the medical industrial complex could not fathom that, and my church wasn’t tolerating that. Coming out of Black August of that year, going into the fall, eventually my battles forced me out the home, and I stopped going to the doctors, and I stopped going to church eventually too.

Some comrades came through. One of them I knew through my comrade Gil Balagoon (not their real name, but this cat will know why I call them that). My other comrade, I call him Jimi Love (also not his real name but he will know why I call him that) also held me down.

The love they showed me, that comrade love, it’s a different type of love. It’s not like friendship or family or something sexual and romantic (although it’s possible for people to have comrades who are family, friends, or sexually/romantically intimate). I can’t explain the love in words, but

when I think about it, I remember this dream I once had. A dream where a bunch of us are dancing in the dream, creating something otherworldly but so grounded and needed. And there's this music playing behind us to set that atmosphere and those intentions. It's this set of piano chords, and it's the kind of sound that feels at once elegiac and at once blissful, at once melancholy and at once grateful as hell. That's my picture of a comrade's love: a dream and a song.

I met my older sister around then too. She also showed up for me. She started to teach me what it meant to be queer and on your own. Surviving and hustling, we did that. It was a rough time. Out where we was at, I faced more outright gender violence than I had ever before. Rocks thrown at me, people harassing me even while standing in a crowd in front of the police with no fear at all, men following me on bikes at night. I was a lot more feminine in my appearance then too, and a lot more comfortable with myself and so that meant people wanted to fuck with me. My sister tried to teach me how to keep my head up, to grind, to watch the streets as a gender nonconforming person, to move tact.

The more dangerous the outdoors got for me, the more militant it made me. This was 2019 now. A lot more trans people, especially Black ones, were being attacked and killed that year, I learned. By June, we found out that Layleen Polanco Xtravaganza had been taken from us at Rikers Island. I remember being at a rally in her honor. I was so angry and fed up by then with seeing Black trans folks, specifically Black trans women murdered. I remember going off on the reporters who were at the rally. Why were journalists showing up after Layleen died? Where was the media before that? I was in such a rage. I went off and I remember some people got shaken up by it and asked me to lead a march so folks could protest and express their frustration. I went for it. I was fired up. We did march. Some of the folks marching had not wanted to march though, particularly a few of the trans gurls who knew Layleen and so they called me out for it. I had tried to get everyone's input on whether a march was feasible, but the gurls there let me know I needed to center them because of their safety concerns. Everyone at the march, for example, kept saying "we have nothing to lose but our chains," echoing Assata Shakur, but all the trans women kept yelling "and our lives! We have nothing to lose but our chains and our lives." That shook me up. One of my old peers and comrades was right by my side. We ended up co-founding a defense formation together. The "street queer anarkata defenders." SQuAD. We chose an acronym like that so it could blend in with Black lingo. It was focused specifically on the safety needs of Black trans women and transfeminine people. That was the vision.

"SQuAD is Street. As in hood, ratchet, ghetto. There's no respectability over here. We fighting for freedom by any means necessary. And we don't need nobody's institutions or authority to get it.

SQuAD is Queer. As in not cis/het. The straights and cis gays and their politics stay away! We queer as in we don't jack transmisogynoir, we don't jack colonial values, and we don't jack boujie values, dont jack cisheteropatriarchy, disablism, human-centrism—none of it.

SQuAD is Anarkata. As in, Black/anarchic/radical. This about African-centered anarchy. We fierce, we maroon, we wayward, we crazy, we savage, we ungoverned, we undomesticated, we uncivilized, we wild—all the Things that threaten Man.

SQuAD is a Defense network. This is a fight for communal and personal safety, by us, for us. Defenders are committed revolutionaries fighting against all domination."

Black August of that year was focused on SQuAD shit, for me. I was fasting, studying, training, trying to figure out how to establish a revolutionary network that would actually center the defense of Black trans women and transfeminine people. I was pulling together comrades from across the gender spectrum to struggle and build with them on this “Anarkata” wavelength that SQuAD was tryna build from on the ground. Anarchist niggas against racial kapitalist ableist transmisogynoirist authority. That was how one comrade put it, to tie it all together, and tie to Black trans women’s liberation. I was talking with cats from throughout the world, Black Autonomous Radicals from North, South, Midwest, overseas. My uncle let me come stay with him during this time, so I had a measure of stability and that animated me to put in work for this SQuAD shit. I started to make my Black August focused on trans liberation history. This is when I found out that Marsha P Johnson was born during Black August. August 24th. One of the many holy coincidences during this sacred month.

Marsha P Johnson was one of my biggest inspirations. She was a revolutionary Black trans woman who co-founded the first trans woman of color, sex worker led labor organization in United States history, the Street Trans Action Revolutionaries. She was badass. She said “we believe in picking up the gun.” She was fierce and fine, always looking gorgeous. She once said “Star people are beautiful people.” She was also a performer and a poet. One of her most famous works was a spoken word piece called “Soul.” Marsha struggled with mental issues, and even admitted to Sylvia Rivera once that she had focus/attention issues (she may have been neurodivergent). Marsha was also religious. She talked about how she had married Jesus because “he never laughed at me.” Her and the STAR girls also practiced a Catholicized form of African spirituality, which they would use to protect themselves as they organized and hustled the streets. They struggled to hold down free housing for homeless trans youth and to raise funds to get trans folk out of the prison system. They had three chapters in the United States and one overseas.

Learning to honor Marsha during Black August really became like the last piece in a puzzle I was slowly putting together about who I am, about my destiny, about who I am supposed to be and what I am here to do. I began to identify as “nonbinary” during this time period, because I realized that it was more than just not conforming to gender for me, I had an affinity to Marsha P Johnson, especially because in a lot of the pictures I saw of her, she was wearing flowers like I did. And she was dark skinned too. Yet, I felt like I was a little too Brick to actually claim trans womanhood without being seen as an outsider or a liar. I tried to make sure SQuAD was modeled on what Marsha did through STAR, though. Supporting street houseless folk, the prison struggle, class struggle, having a firm anti-imperial and anti-colonial outlook, a critique of the medical industrial complex and military industrial complex, and a spiritual as well as artistic center. We would host “Kritical Kickbacks” that were like a mix of an open mic night with a political education session. And when we were out, we’d pour a libation and do ring shout, to get that ancestral communion going. With my comrades we pioneered the “liberation ritual” which is like an Afrofuturist performance that mixes hip hop, soul, storytelling, theatre with revolutionary theory and consciousness raising. Liberation ritual is basically a secular ceremony (hence the name) and is supposed to call forth a sense of elevation or uplift in your body, while inspiring revolutionary consciousness. I was remembering that Marsha had said that nothing mattered if you ain’t had Soul. Liberation ritual was about Soul.

Coming out of Black August and going into the fall, things began to get tiresome for me. I was working again but not making nearly enough to survive or save. I was taking on mad jobs.

Organizing around trans self defense and mutual aid was burning me out. And I had trauma I was burying. The trauma from being harassed was catching up to me, but also the trauma from being kicked out of home, and the traumas from the past, from my childhood, things that I buried and forgot and told myself I had gotten over... it was all coming back. Plus my health: the back pains, the insomnia, the itching. It all had gotten worse and I never once went back to the doctor about it.

But I kept acting like I was strong, like I had it together, like I was okay, and just focusing on Anarkata shit, on trying to help everyone else, especially other trans women and transfeminine folk. By the winter, one of my comrades envisioned a temporary community center that we Anarkatas could host, that was like an Afrofuturist immersion into our politics, and we started putting in the work to get that built. It took a few months of fundraising, telling folk about it, and getting shit set up so we could have food, games, music, and to make sure it'd be accessible. We brought kids with us when we finally put it together; we had self defense equipment and contraceptives and zines and books and a free store for folk as well. SQuAD held some liberation rituals, and workshops on mental health with one of the other SQuADsibs. There was a film screening, *Pumzi* by Wanuri Kahiu, and we used to open up discussions about Black radical ecology. It was so beautiful. So enriching. We had so many Black trans people show up, and so many of them felt so honored and safe. It was actually pretty game changing. The Left has historically failed the community, but we Anarkatas was changing that. And yet I was still stressing out at the event. I wasn't satisfied; I was anxious. I remember Jimi Love had to tell me to basically calm the fuck down. I enjoyed myself but I was also really freaking out. Mostly I was worried about one thing: safety. Safety for the gurls, safety for the kids. Was everyone safe? But behind all of that, it was really pain and traumas that I had buried, it was bubbling up again.

Then the pandemic hit. A virus that changed the world. Everyone thought the Anarkatas was gonna host another round of events but we all got forced indoors. A "quarantine." Nobody had predicted that was coming. Shit got terrifying. The streets of New York emptied out in a way I had only seen in apocalyptic zombie films. I remember one of my best friends called me crying because they were out of the city and worried by what they saw. I have no words for how chilling that season was for me. It was like ice filled my bones. And I was already not feeling great, and that coronavirus shit honestly just made it worse. People were panic buying items from stores, throwing themselves into weird conspiracies, preparing for the end of the world.

And killing Black trans women. The death rates for the gurls skyrocketed during the pandemic. If I'm not mistaken, 2020 was the worst year in modern history for Black trans lives in the United States. Majority of those slain was Black trans women. What did that tell me? I needed to do more with this SQuAD shit. That was my immediate response. I was tryna act like a hero; but really it was my traumas that I kept burying that animated me.

Me and my comrades went so hard with the online political education, coordination of mutual aid, tryna get masks and sanitizer and funds and food moved around. Working hard to try to make sure people could get by during a time when nobody could really get by. Jobs was disappearing and everyone was becoming homeless. And then Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor died. And that's when Black people had enough. I heard the word of the streets. Black folk went to the parts of the cities that had all the capital and nice stores and they turnt the fuck up. Started burning shit down. Rioting. Looting. They attacked police stations, cut the wires, burnt them down. They threw shit at cops, set cop cars on fire. Prisoners rebelled and set things ablaze.

This wasn't just in the United States either. In places like Nigeria, folks were realizing that their government had locked away supplies that was supposed to be used for covid relief, so they looted. Many young queer folk in Nigeria were going up against their police, who kept targeting them. In Brazil, there were prison breaks, and protests against their fascist president, and Black people were rising up there. Black people had been rioting and protesting since before the pandemic, in places like Sudan, Haiti, and elsewhere, but in 2020 it was like global Black resistance just swelled and interwove. A Third Great Upheaval. In the United States, it scared the shit out of white people. They seemed to think for sure that every Black person was ready to slit their throats.

It didn't help that everyone had to wear masks too: now you couldn't see nobody face. I remember walking down the block with my cousins, and if we were in white neighborhoods, the white folk would look at us all skittish, as if they thought we was about to avenge our ancestors by attacking them. This was what the rebellions of 2020 had white people thinking. And so they started tryna show fake love to Black people. Going to our protests, and putting out little "we support Black Lives Matter (now)" statements on every business and website and college. None of them wanted to catch the heat so they had to act like they was on our good side. And if they didn't do that, then they just got violent in response. Vigilantes were driving cars into the protesters. And the cops were doing their best to do a slew of revenge killings. They used military grade weapons to suppress our people. Still, it didn't stop our people. Black people fought back so hard that many cops actually quit their jobs, because their morale got so low. They were fighting an enemy they couldn't defeat.

White civilians began to act like the world was gonna end, when really it was that Black people were rebelling against their world. Rebelling because now it was like after all we been through, here we are collectively suffering from a virus, and nobody is outside due to that, and mad people are dying, and becoming homeless and poor, and yall still find a way to kill us? Fuck that. As one woman said in a video. "We did it yall way. Now burn it down." That was the word on the street. But the gorls were still being killed. Black people were turning up on the Man, but still kept finding a way to punch down and murder Black trans women. It became unsafe for Black trans people to go to protests with our own people, because our straight counterparts would deadass turn around from rebelling just to attack us. I remember being on the train after being at a march (a peaceful demonstration, by the way) and this straight man looked at me and my SQuADsib and was just like "see the reason why God is using the cops to kill us is because of that community." It was one of those "this generation is calling wrong right and calling right wrong, and God is not pleased, and so judgement is here." Attacks on the community from our own people deadass skyrocketed as the contradiction between Man and the so-called Negro got hotter and hotter in the summer of 2020.

And, make no mistake, white people was doing it too: they literally started saying in the media "transgender Black Marxists are trying to destroy the United States." They literally put us at the center of the rebellion. As this continued to happen, the harder things got in the work I was doing with my comrades. I remember being at a protest and I was the one that a cop and some local politician got violent with, not my comrades. Me, the transfeminine one.

During this time, that was the label I started going toward. Black August came along again, and I was starting to wear dresses now. For the first time ever. I had never considered doing it, but I had had a dream. In the dream I was transfeminine. I felt it was time to explore that in reality. My first dress was this beautiful black colored joint that had green, yellow, red, blue,

orange jewels all over it. It was the exact color of my vision from all those years ago, the one I saw when I first pondered the Divine. My gender was cosmic effluvia that day. I was a star queen. The second dress I wore was this white skirt, and I put on a pair of wings, and I wore a fringe necklace over my face, and I started to tell people I was one of the people who could fly. A femme queen, warrior queen. It was scary to claim that for myself though. I had kinda always had a feeling, and truth be told, some of the trans women I had organized with would always clock it for me, but I was deeply terrified to speak that out loud. Transfem? In a world that is so dangerous for us?

And indeed, that Black August, I experienced so much street harassment it was wild. Even at protests and actions and events me and my comrades were doing, random folks on the street felt entitled to come near me, to touch me, to express sexual interest, to stare at me. And while I had been through all of these things before, the regularity with which it happened and the fact that it was because of only one reason: my trans womanhood... that shook me up bad. But I continued to act like I was okay. Like I was strong. I could handle anything. I was the Brick Cunt, the bitch they threw at Stonewall at the cops. I was bold. The wild thing Man cannot house. I remember when I would say to other gurls "I cant feel fear." It wasn't that I couldn't feel it, I just didn't let myself feel it. I kept saying to myself "don't panic, organize." Fight. Fight. Fight. "Are you okay?" People would ask me. "You're scaring me." I told them I was okay. I wasn't. But I thought I had to say that I was. To be that trans heroine that I didn't have...

And that's what it was. All my heroines were dead. Some part of me thought I was supposed to be too. That all it was was to live as a beacon of subversion and then disappear into the grave. Cuz aint that how it was for Marsha? She's only remembered for her resistance, not her humanity, right? Isn't that what we deserve? Because we are descendants from the priests and shamans and witch doctors of ancient Africa! Right? What about Mary Jones? New York City. During slavery. One of the earliest Black trans women in the US record. Caught stealing to survive. They called her the "man monster." Aint that all we are? We show up in the record only as rebels, only when we demonized, and then we forgotten right? Right? Same with Frances Thompson. Memphis, Tennessee. Just after slavery. How do we hear about her? Resistance, right! She's testifying at the federal level about the white racist terror visited upon her and her community. They also misgendered her, using her transness to delegitimize the truth of her story! And then she fades from memory. That's the only way we know her: a rebel, and then she dies!

Who else? Other trans and gender variant women, queens, mothers: Zazu Nova, who was also at Stonewall with Marsha P. Or the gurls at the Compton Cafeteria Riots, which happens before Stonewall and was an early example of Black trans rebellion. Known only for heroics, and also forgotten. William Dorsey Swann, one of the first recorded drag queens in US history. Also resisted the cops. Also known for heroics; also forgotten. Crystal Labeija, who pioneered modern House ballroom culture because why? Protest. She was upset at the racism and colorism in the usual drag balls. So, she implemented a new institution for our community. Then she dies of health complications and so many people don't know about her or her contributions unless you've been in Ballroom. Even as ballroom hits mainstream attention. The gurls are here, we fight, we are forgotten, and then the only thing we are remembered for is our resistance. So why live for anything else then? Why live for shit when the only thing that will matter when you are gone is what you did to save everyone else right? Right? So fuck self care! Fuck acknowledging that I wasn't okay, that I was unwell, that I needed help, that I was scared. Fuck my traumas and shit. Fuck that, right? Because it'd be forgotten!

In the Bible, Jesus once spoke about a sign of the end times, when the Buzzard would come. Many early Christians interpreted this symbol as representing God's messengers. In the South, during slavery, when African people died in the field, and were left to rot to be eaten by Buzzards, some enslaved folk developed a ritual called the Buzzard Lope, where they connected the Buzzard to Jesus, and would mimic the movements of the Buzzard, in honor to honor those who had died. In the Yoruba religion, there is a story about how the Buzzard went up to heaven to intercede on behalf of humanity, and restore the earth from a crisis. This Buzzard was a manifestation of Oshun, the orisha of waters, of fertility, of femininity, and an orisha who they say is the guardian of queer, trans, gay people.

I mention these things because coming out of Black August during the fall of 2020, as I was falling apart, and my godmother, a daughter of Oshun, came to me, and let me know that I wasn't okay. That I needed to take a break. And that it was okay to do so. And in that time period, she asked me to be her daughter. She asked to take me under her wing. To let her teach me how to navigate these apocalyptic times and nurture myself. To let her teach me how to properly honor those gworls who had died. And to let her teach me how to connect with the Divine and ride for my people in a *real* way. She taught me that being real is about taking the bad *and* the good in life, and finding it worthwhile to actually try to live in this world with them both. And not just live with both, but create something from that complicated life. Actively. For myself. Not anyone else. For me. To not lose sight of the personal stake I had in everything I was trying to do, but to both honor it and actively center it. Because that's the only way to be conscious of the inner needs that everything else is acting on behalf of.

So I became Bl3ssing Oshun Ra. I became Bl3ssing Oshun Ra, so I could learn how to create a legacy that was more than just how I would be remembered once I died. I became Bl3ssing Oshun Ra because I needed a *living* heroine to learn from. Remember when I said that in African traditions, it was the elders that helped one with aligning their inner head with my destiny? The elders are important not simply because of age or even experience but because of the wisdom they should carry and pass down. Divine power is acknowledged within all things, but it is apportioned like a web with certain meeting points at the nexus of consciousness. Ritual serves to facilitate meditation on that fact, an alignment that has ethical implications. And the point of this mysticism was to help with reaching one's highest self, their fullest potential.

Now, with my godmother's input I could learn how to create a legacy that was truly meaningful, because I had a *living* legacy to learn from and apply to my own struggle. This was the missing piece I needed. I could learn how to fly better now, and to walk like a Buzzard, to honor our community, and to connect with the sacred and advocate for my people, because I have someone to guide me. Without a *living* legacy, one is without a struggle to carry out.

I needed an intergenerational connection to understand my trans womanhood in a more humane fashion. At the core of what she taught me was something the Combahee River Collective once said all Black women must learn: to be *levelly* human is enough. My godmother taught me what it meant to begin rejecting queendom and pedestals. Yes, we can understand our spiritual and political history, to be the ones who can fly, but we are also *human*. We fly and we resist and we grasp roots, and we invoke spirit and build society and pursue our needs in the environment and all these other things that are true of our people for no other reason than that we are *humans* responding to varied conditions, good and bad, large and small, and trying to make the best life of them to meet our needs. That *levelly* humanness is important to how I am beginning to align

my inner head now. That *levelly* humanness is how we become cognizant of our needs, personal and collective, large or small, and act on them.

My godmother teaches me what it means to touch the stars. She helps me better understand what gender self-determination looks like at the personal level. It's not just about a transition or who we love, although it can include those things. It's also about how we form community bonds. It's about rejecting the hierarchies our parents taught us and creating motherhood based off respect. It's about fighting to occupy land and defending ourselves from the pigs and the Man, like my godmother did at the Christopher Street Piers. It's about not being told by the master how we use our bodies or our labor. So it's about not being confined to the plantation. It's about choosing to build ourselves and our people up in our own way, and not just in a way society says our bodies are "supposed" to. It's about defending ourselves, our community. But it's also about personal dignity. A *personal* definition of things. She helps me examine my *individual* place in this journey, as well as the collective vision of things. I talk with her, laugh with her, listen to her, and then I reflect on my *inner* relationship to this struggle. What does my *heart* tell me? How do I *feel*? She is always asking us that. And that becomes a question of who do I *model* my femininity and my womanhood after? After my birth mother, who I'm so similar to, who is like me in so many ways, but who also had to harden herself in the face of a fucked up world. And where did she learn her womanhood from? Her own birth mother, who was hardened in the jungle of misogynoir too. Is it healthy for me to pattern it? To live in self-neglect? If not, what would best help me feel *whole*? And *treat* others as whole persons too? Because maybe my birth mother struggles to accept me because she hasn't gotten the chance to be levelly human either!

These kinds of questions I started asking myself because of my godmother's guidance. And it helped me soften up. I had begun to see myself as just a ferocious ass bitch. I would say that I was a rough bitch, tough bitch, a thug, a soldier. That I was *just* a descendant of the warrior queens and shamans from Africa, and nothing further. And my mother would celebrate these things, but she would also ask me to be more fluid, like water, and to shapeshift, like those who turned into Buzzards, and to ask myself about what other ways of being human are available to me in this journey. Including softer ways. Ways that were less militant. Newer ways to escape the chains forced onto my mind and my body. Ways that might even be apolitical. To be levelly human is enough. If the people who could fly used their powers to get free by any means, that also has to include normalcy, the mundane too. I'm trying to understand how the destiny my inner head points toward is a full experience in this world, that includes but isn't limited to the spiritual or political.

For example, I learned that it was okay to cry because of my trans godmother. This was part of learning to fly, to nurture myself, to walk like a Buzzard, to honor the slain, to connect to the divine and ride for my people. Part of this is to actually let tears fall, to start bawling, and just let it out. Gorls like me don't do it because people will take advantage of your tears. So I hated crying. But I also needed to learn how to open up to my fullest, *human* experience, and embracing its possibilities, even despite the hardness and bitterness of this world.

So, I learned to embrace softness. I learned to embrace love. This was something else I struggled with. I hated the feeling of caring for someone in an intimate fashion. Even sitting and watching a movie with family members was too much for me, was scary even. I did not like to let people get close to me because I was so accustomed to just moving on from things, having to be ready for the next crisis or change in my life. But my godmother taught me to fly by opening to my fullest, *human* experience, and embrace its possibilities, even despite the hardness and bitter-

ness of this world. Again, being real is about creating life within both the bad *and* the good. So I also learned to ask for help and let people look out for me instead of trying to handle everything myself all the time. I felt alone and isolated, like nobody else felt what I felt or even cared or understood or empathized. I went around, then, just trying to carry everything. Carry, like an ant who told herself she was Atlas. I tried to carry so much I broke my psyche, I swear. I felt like I had to, like there was no other option, but my mother taught me to fly by opening up to my fullest, *human* experience, and embrace its possibilities, even despite the hardness and bitterness of this world.

And from that, I learned to become hungry and thirsty for life, too. I hadn't always wanted to keep living. Remember, I felt like life was a war: that's all it was to me. And I hit a point where I looked forward to the day I would die in the midst of combat.

I still struggle with this. But my godmother helped me develop that desire to create my life, defend *my* life. She helped me begin to see my future more clearly, and work towards it, not just the collective vision, but my *personal* stake in it. To be levelly human is enough. I would say that my godmother helped me rediscover the value in holding onto that part of things that feels like a secret between me and the Creator. The beautiful things. She taught me to fly into a place of nurturance, to walk like the Buzzard, honor the fallen, connect to heaven and defend my people in a real way: a way where I have not forgotten to open myself to my fullest, *human* experience. Where I have embraced *all* its possibilities, including the mundane ones, the regular ones, the normal ones. Rejecting pedestals.

So now I been going to therapy. Now, I been going to the doctors. Now I been taking small steps to check in with my health. Now I been wrestling with my traumas, fears, pain, rather than suppressing it. Now I been figuring out the kind of future I want for myself as I get older. And what things I will take with me to the grave, things that others may not remember, but that are worth it anyway because I was the one who lived them, and I was the one who defined them, and I was the one who made sure they happened. Memories, laughs, good vibes. And even mistakes, foibles, errors, bad times. Small things. Apolitical things. And perhaps, in the end, these are political things too, just of a different kind.

It hasn't been easy, though. Learning these lessons. Being levelly human. My godmother has to remind me all the time: "*remember to put the oxygen mask on yourself first.*" Because I tend to forget. And I get riled up and wrapped up and bellicose and self-neglectful and ready for what comes of that. Or I get stuck tryna be perfect, or tryna be heroic, stuck on the pedestals, which is really to say, stuck trying to be an abstraction, stuck trying to be what I think everyone will remember me for, rather than simply living and letting my legacy be what I and the universe and God decided regardless of what anyone else said. Gender is, in the Black world, a territory of cultural (or spiritual) and political maneuvers (as Saidiya Hartman once said)—and we must fashion those in a revolutionary direction... But there is a personhood and being who makes those maneuvers we must discover and honor. A vulnerable soul who flies not because she is reducible to spirit or resistance but because she is a complex human responding to the conditions forced onto her. Honoring that humanity is essential to balance. When we hit the grave, what will follow us is our levelity, and that matters so much. But it can be so hard to remember. I'm struggling with it right now.

It is Pride season at this point. And Juneteenth is here, and finally getting attention in ways it had not before. Finally, also, folks are acknowledging the real origins of Pride: that it wasn't

white people, but Black rebels, the same people who brought chattel slavery to an end with a general strike that caused the Civil War. These forms of acknowledgement from the ruling class are only happening because white society is still scared after the rebellions of 2020. Still tryna pander. Still worried that we gon turn the fuck up on them. And they are right to be worried. The Third Great Upheaval is still happening, it hasn't stopped. The same city in which George Floyd was killed is rising up against militarized policing as we speak. Conservatives have introduced dozens of new laws against reproductive autonomy and trans rights, as a direct response to Black rebellion. And they are trying to legislate our history out of the school system. Brazil, Colombia, the UK, Haiti, and elsewhere, Black folks are rising up against class, racial, and gendered violence. In Ghana and Nigeria, Black queer folk are still being repressed and on the front lines of struggle for right and decolonization. And another prison strike could happen in the US.

As Black August is getting ready to come back around we must remember these things. I will hit my fourth fugiversary, then, my fourth year on this lifelong journey. Another season of study, solidarity, spirit, and struggle. I'm looking forward to the occasion for fasting and shouts and building with my people and discovering and defining and determining who I am and why I am here. I want to make sure I have a more balanced head on my shoulders this time around, though: that's the goal. To practice that, with the help of my godmother, my ancestors, our rituals, our myths, the root-grasping science that is Black radical tradition, and a pursuit of my own choices, softness, brokenness, weakness. My own *levelly human* experience, a life that creates itself within the bad *and* the good, the big *and* the small. Holding onto that very mundane fullness is as important to running away from what was forced onto me as is the political pursuit of self-determination, or the spiritual aligning of my inner head with a higher truth (collective destiny and personal self-definition), or working to meet my material/metabolic needs and connect to this planet. I am beginning to learn that I can only ride the winds if I'm levelling myself at the same time.

“Throw my body anywhere
In that ole field
Throw my body anywhere
In that ole field
Dont care how you do me
In that ole field
Cuz my savior choose me
In that ole field
You might beat and bang me
In that ole field
But my savior choose me
In that ole field
Throw my body anywhere
In that ole field
Throw my body anywhere
In that ole field.”

Epilogue

“When I have a child,
I will hang pink petals against
her black shoulders
And tell her to fly...
She shall spring before
the moon, with mosses
baptized in dew
sparkling against her
charcoal-colored flesh.”

- Prof.Ound

In African traditions, nine is the number of the wind, a symbol of change, transformation, and revolution. This piece had nine reflections with that in mind, to mark the nine days from June 19th, the celebration of emancipatory struggle for Africans enslaved in the United States which culminated in abolition of chattel slavery and ongoing resistance to racial capitalism; leading to 27th, the night before the beginning of the Stonewall riots against police led by working class Black and other colonized trans, queer, nonbinary, and otherwise gender/sexually variant street kids, which culminated in an expansion of civil rights and Black Power struggle that continues today.

The ruling class has begun to use Juneteenth and Stonewall to make simplistic claims where Black resistance is co-opted into the success of the capitalist imperial project. What comes next is continued degradation of Black people especially the Trans, queer, gender/sexually variant, LGB+ community behind the guise of progress, coupled with immense criminalization of anyone deemed a threat to the nation or nuclear family. Despite this, our culture is being given a spotlight and the promises of assimilation are supposedly now being extended in our direction, under the auspices of acknowledgement about the brutal history we have faced and fought against. And so, the need for *Marronage* as a framing for Black transfeminism is more prescient than ever, in reclaiming our spirituality, our radicalism, and our levelity. Tokenization, fetishization, hypervisibility, alongside discrimination, harassment, and violence; these are two sides of the same coin and they will only intensify pressures on Black QTGNC life, especially in the form of transmisognoir.

Our community will have to rise up again, in the face of this. It will not be because we are spiritual or political abstractions but because we are *people*, made into sojourners by an accumulated historical process, and its material conditions. In order to prepare for what is to come, we must remember our levelly humanness and we must also remember that study, solidarity, spirit, and struggle are among the tools by which we must holistically affirm that for our unique selves. To the ones who can fly: I will see you in the whirlwind.

Suggested Resources

Sunrise

1. *The Importance of Ori*

2. *New Names, Old Gods: A Look at Seekin Rituals in Pentecostal and Gullah Religions*
3. *Mourning in Trinidad: How Spiritual Baptist, Orisa, and Ifa Traditions Converged in Laventille*

Midday

1. *Hoodoo Religion and America Dance Traditions: Rethinking the Ring Shout - Katrina Hazzard-Donald*
2. *The Two Head Manifesto - Yahya Toure*
3. *Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans - Sophia Nahli Allison*
4. *Drums and Shadows - Works Progress Administration*

Sunset

1. *African American Ring Shouts*
2. *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*
3. *Queerness and Candomble*
4. *Esu is not the Devil*
5. *The Priest and the Prophetess*

Midnight

1. *Marcus Garvey - Look for Me in the Whirlwind*
2. *Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations 1960-1975* (Muhammad Ahmad)
3. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: From the Panther 21 to 21st-Century Revolutions* (Dhoruba al-Mujahid bin Wahad, Jamal Joseph, and Sekou Odinga)
4. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Sunrise

1. Toni Morrison on Flying Africans
2. William Dorsey Swann
3. *Senzala o Quilombo - Pedro Ribeiro*

Midday

1. *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon)
2. *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon)

3. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle" (Wynter)
4. "What Will Be the Cure? A Conversation with Sylvia Wynter"
5. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*
6. "Towards a Vibrant and Broad Based African Anarchism"
7. "African Socialism Revisited" (Kwame Nkrumah)

Sunset

1. The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective - Edith R. Sanders
2. Strivings of the Negro People - W.E.B Du Bois
3. Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race - Samuel Cartwright

Midnight

1. *Die Nigger Die: The Political Autobiography of H Rap Brown*
2. *Revolution by the Book* - Jamil Al-Amin
3. *Mojo Workin* - Katrina Hazzard-Donald
4. *Run, Mary, Run* - Rashida Bumbray
5. *Assata: An Autobiography*

Sunrise

1. *Soledad Brother* - George Jackson
2. The Roots of Black August - Shaka At-Thinnin
3. "Transphobia is a Respectability Politic"
4. "Pan African Revolt for a New Century"
5. "Femme Queen, Warrior Queen"
6. *The Combahee River Collective Statement*
7. "To The Ones Who Can Fly: Message from the Whirlwind"

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Nsambu Za Suekama
My Gender is Marronage
A Revisitation
30 June 2021

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