

I Wanted to Be More of a Person: Conjuring [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] Futures¹

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ABSTRACT: Through an examination of the development of the poetry manuscript *Kohnjehr Woman*, and the character Shee, I discuss that which I call “the archives of the imagination” and what it means to draw on transnational Afro-Diasporic lexicons and experiences in order to imagine [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] futures. I suggest here that mapping our histories onto our present and future experiences generates new sites for the production of knowledge, in particular, knowledge based on seemingly impossible stories.

Key Words: Archive of the Imagination, [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer], Impossible Stories

¹ A different but related version of this essay was presented at the University of Oregon Sally Miller Gearhart Lecture, April 13, 2015 and was titled “Afro-Sappho Futurisms: Drawing on the Past to Imagine Us into the Future.”

This essay is a conversation sparked by the following questions: What does it mean to insert [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] bodies into historical and contemporary narratives? What are the implications of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivities on notions of history, art, place, belonging and the future? How do [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivities disrupt assumptions of racialized heteronormative identity/practices/performances/expectations in our shared day-to-day experiences of each other and each other's potential?

I. Conjuring

Centralizing memory and the imagination as primary sites of agency allows us to examine the ways in which [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness] is reconstituted through and on dismembered or dislocated bodies (e.g. "I can *imagine* and *experience* myself whole even when I am missing an arm." "I can *imagine* and *experience* myself whole at the same time that 49 people were blown to pieces."). The centrality of imagination bucks dominant processes of historicity and recentralizes imagination and memory as primary sites of epistemologies and methodologies. This serves to not only de-essentialize identity – push it from a static essential location into a dynamic process that is informed by multiple bodies – but to reframe the nature of the archive itself.

The brackets in this essay are meant to draw our attention to the intentional nature, historical specificity and incompleteness of naming. [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] can at any time become

[~~Afro~~] [Latinx] [Queers]

[Afro] [~~Latinx~~] [Queers]

[Afro] [Latinx] [~~Queers~~]

Relatedly, there are two necessary positions that must be made explicit. The first is that for the purposes of this essay, there is no [Latinx] without the [Afro] as there is no [Queer] without the [Latinx]. In other words, I am urging us to consider how the Afro-Diaspora transits (Byrd, 2011) through Latin America, and similarly, how the [Afro] transits through [Latinx-ness]. The transit of [Afro] may be explicit (Afro-Latinx), implicit ([Afro] Latinx) or invisible (Latinx). Rather than proscribing [Afro] to certain geographies or certain kinds of bodies, I am instead rendering visible the hegemonic discourse that invisibilizes the continued presence of Afro-descendent peoples throughout the continent and within [Latinx-ness].

In writing this essay, I have been reflecting on how the intentional evacuation of land, of spaces and places, the removal of [indigenous] peoples and the continued discursive erasure of living, breathing and struggling [indigenous] peoples may or may not be epistemically inscribed and re-inscribed within the logics that inform how we speak about [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness]. There is no [Latinx] or [Afro] without [indigenous], just as there is no [Latinx] without [queer]. On-going [indigenous] [queerness], love, activism and struggle happens within, alongside and despite the [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer]. The [Indigenous] is not a simple specter nor a *terra nullis* against which [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness] can be constructed. Rather, it is important to be conscious of the moments and ways in which we collectively and individually choose to leave a direct engagement with [indigeneity] and [indigenous peoples] out of the conversation, much in

the same way as when we leave the [Afro] or the [Latinx] or the [Queer]. Given this position, it is important to me that you as the reader understand that this essay focuses on the conjunction of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers], knowing that this is just one perspective on one part of the story.

II. Shee enters into being

In 2006 I was living in New York City, when the voice of the kohnjehr woman appeared as whispers in the air. Here I am referencing M. Jacqui Alexander's (2005) discussion of sacred epistemologies in which she writes, "I wanted to show the ways in which the body had become central in the contest between European and African systems: positioned as moveable property – chattel- and as a repository of sin, or understood as the direct instrument of the Divine, mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead" (293). In my case, upon hearing Shee's voice, I chose to be the instrument of mediation between this world and others. I sat down to listen, to take note of what Shee was telling me, in the hopes –truthfully - of silencing her. I did not want to know what Shee had to tell me. Nonetheless, three years later, her words and her voice telling me of Shee's life fill the pages of a manuscript. They have emerged as traces of Shee's body as poems, as written, replicable form, effectively expanding her reach through material and liminal interventions. Shee is a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] body/being/memory inserted into historical and contemporary narratives.

Mehkmahn²

meetuhng rahp rowund dees
sowunds
deymehk meespeek yusowunds
mee mehk yusowunds mahn
yusee meenawspeek yurtuhng
yurtuhng nawtmeetuhng
dismeetuhng
dismeetuhng
disdeesowunds omeetuhng
rahpah rowund
heel dehwind
omeetuhng kuht frawm meemout
fohspeek tulowud
speek tuprowud
dey kuhtmeetuhng
kuht eet owut
meeklem eet nowu
nowu

² The poems "Mehkmahn", "Samuel's Fancy", "Mid-Night (*Rebecca learns the truth*)", and "Hands (*Shee asks Samuel about his hands*)" are from the forthcoming book *Kohnjehr Woman* (RedBone Press, 2017).

nowu
nowu
meemehk demsowunds owurs
owurs
owurs
owurs

Shee was born in Dahomey. Shee fomented a rebellion in Santo Domingo. Shee was sold to a plantation in Virginia sometime in the early nineteenth century, just before the Haitian Revolution changed things for good. Shee's presence on the plantation signaled an interruption of history, of expectations, of the order that is supposed to unfold between the establishment of colonial power and [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjugation/subjection. For me as a twenty-first century writer, of ubiquitous national/racial/cultural locations, it's not so easy to reckon with the spirit of someone so unlikely, so possibly unimaginable and dangerous.

Just like Sadiya Hartman, I also wondered if it is "possible to construct a story from 'the locus of impossible speech 'or resurrect lives from the ruins'" (2008, 9)? Would the very act of writing Shee's story re-inscribe the violence of slavery itself and make violence of its own creation? What kinds of responsibilities did I have in the process of creating these new poems, of bringing these images to the page in concrete form?

To address my insecurities, I turned to Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*. In *Kindred*, the character Edana is snatched into her past by mysterious universal forces that seek to reconcile history. Butler begins the book with the lines: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (1988, 9). Invoking the trope of 'journey/trip/travels', Butler collapses time and space into infinite possibility. Flashes of light between here and there. Through the image of loss (of the character's arm), the author collapses the material and immaterial world and makes multiple parallel narratives possible. Edana's story was an apt metaphor for those of us engaged with the process of bringing [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivities into existence from locations that transcend simultaneous parallel universes: the universes of history, memory, and possibility – of that which has occurred, that which I only imagine occurred, and of that for which there is no memory.

Who will remember
the loves I have loved? Who
will remember this song
sung between the rays of dawn?
Who will draw the trace of my
fingers
along your open lips.
Who will remember I have loved.

Though I was not literally swallowed back into the past in the writing of *Kohnjehr Woman*, as was Edana in *Kindred*, I was drawn – often unwillingly – into remembering the past. Like Edana, I was forced to confront my ancestors, and to reconcile their survival as those who were enslaved, as those who were the owners of enslaved human beings. In order to make sense of how the kohnjehr woman called to me, and changed those around Shee, I had to make room to talk about the strategies used by my enslaved ancestors to ensure their survival, including the strategies of unlikely alliances, betrayals, assimilation, silencing and memory loss.

As an artist, committed to the act of truth-seeking and creation, I was forced to engage the unimaginable, and the "bridges to the dead" (Hartman 2008, 5) in order to navigate the very living world of the characters of Shee and the others who were transformed by Shee's presence on the plantation. Like Edana, I, too found comfort in returning home after entering Shee's world, of knowing that I am a modern subject, capable of articulating my own desire, movement and possibilities, and not simply a receptacle of histories past. After hours, of feeling– in my body – what Shee's life might have been, I could release her and return. At my desk, under my lamp's light, I was able to read and write, to stop when I could no longer continue. I could then go into another room, away from Shee's words, and curl up with another woman to be held, comforted, in the cotton of my clothes, a privilege.

Honoring the voice of the kohnjehr woman required that I engage in active research on the lives and experiences of enslaved peoples from this time period. I came up against the usual dilemma faced by many artists and scholars engaged with the history of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] in the Americas: the lack of an historical archive. As "history pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror" (Hartman 2008, 9), fiction relies on the facts of the historical archive to re-imagine locations. In other words, to substantiate the fictional world that Shee occupies, I had to understand the rules of the world as they operate in material history. I could not completely break from this history to create something devoid of specificity. This could not be the work of pure fantasy.

Like Shee, whose creation as a carrier of expressive and cultural traditions of an African Diasporic past and potentiality, disrupts the social and economic landscape of the plantation world Shee inhabits, [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivities also do so. And, they must often do so through a turn to alternative archives, what I call "the archives of the imagination": spaces where memory is generated through creative and performative acts that serve to create and recreate a sense of history for discontinuous subjects, where memory is constituted by that which has yet to be given form.

If we center the archives of imagination, we also center the other archives of immateriality: the "hauntological", the "ancestral", the "possible". This allows for creative acts to exist as works of "haunting, a wake of sorts, where the specters of the undead make themselves present" (Philip 2008, 201). What if, just what if, we gave equal weight to that which cannot be controlled, clamped, ordered, tied down? Do we or our lives become less real? If there is only one other witness, is our recognition less real? What of the material things created by our mining of this very archive, those forms of "evidence"?

III. Impossible Stories: We. Love We.

Can we imagine loving [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] who love [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers]?
Can we imagine love between [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] who love [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers]?
We. Love We.

The implications of love between [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] on notions of history, art, place, belonging and the future are

a hidden glance
a sweet sweet dance
a home
a nest
a flash of light
a re-encounter with the gaze (subjection)
the desperate scratch of the mistress's rough
is not the tenderness of kisses
even in sound and stills
healing is electric
We. Love We.

I believe words can save lives just as easily as they can kill. And, as Elizabeth Alexander reminds me, "Black writers know well the perils of white racism and racist judgments against us and our work...But we are also, as ever, faced with judgments and injunctions from within our community that our work should perform a certain service...and not say what is empowering or embarrassing to 'the race' at large" (2004, 46). I asked myself, Who would the kohnjehr woman's story speak to? What new memories would Shee's poems create?

Regardless of the dangers of engaging with this history, this was the story I needed to tell. And most importantly, I needed to tell Shee's story because the kohnjehr woman was a conjure woman and Shee had conjured me into existence to do just that: the more I tried to silence Shee, the louder Shee became. And it soon became clear to me that the specific circumstances of Shee's experience made her an extraordinary subject, for Shee loved only women at a time when the black female was, as Hortense Spiller theorizes, captured flesh devoid of human personality (Spillers, 1987). The fact of her in the pages of poetry, would disrupt all expectations about the enslaved black woman's body, and in the process, open up dangerous terrains of inquiry: how could anyone suggest an [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] loving another [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] in the midst of slavery?
We. Love We.

Driven by this understanding of my own responsibility, as well as an understanding of myself as a woman who loves women, I turned to historical archives in an attempt to substantiate Shee's world. I embarked on the process of constructing (re-constructing) a narrative that required a reconciliation with multiple historical locations and epistemologies.

The archives were limited, though thankfully not completely absent. The information consisted of historical renderings of Haitian plantations, quantitative records of sales, and the voices of black abolitionist leaders from the latter part of the 19th century: Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass to name a few. And there also existed the Works Project Administration oral histories from the early part of the 20th century. As I sat with over 200 WPA oral histories from the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I waited for the voice of the kohnjehr woman to reveal Shee: where could I find Shee's story? What in the records of US plantations would reveal the stories of women trafficked into the U.S. from the Caribbean? Where were the etchings of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] journeys? Of those born in Africa, raised on plantations in Santo Domingo, and then sold to plantations in Virginia? How would these stories reveal the shape of Shee's words?

Historical records alluded to the many of those enslaved in U.S. plantations that had been brought to the U.S. through trade routes in the Caribbean (Mannix & Cowley, 1962), despite the fear that importing workers from Santo Domingo might foment rebellion:

There was a fear
[among the Southern planters]
that Negroes must
not be allowed to assemble,
to read, or speak to each other
of such rumors rising from the
harvest winds, and the legal
precautions
were extended to all Negroes
on the grounds that they
might be affected by
each others' examples.³

More than a mere trading point, Santo Domingo was also a site of labor and memory, of language and cultural/social formation. It, too, is a place where babies were born into chattel labor, into forced language and religion, into material conditions which would force a new sense of self and history, as much as Virginia's particular terrain shaped the formations of people, life and struggles. From Dahomey, the Congo, Cameroon, Mali, Ghana, Togo, the Ivory Coast, [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] were joined together with iron, lived together through the salt and humiliation of bondage, blood smearing their thighs, their breasts heavy with milk, their hips a

³ The full passage reads: "There was a general feeling [among the Southern planters] that Negroes from Haiti must not be allowed to enter the country, and the legal precautions were extended to Negroes from other West Indian islands, on the ground that they might have been affected by the Haitian example...Largely as a result of this fear, even Georgia prohibited the importation of foreign Negroes in 1798." (Mannix & Cowley 187) Despite the problems of a potential revisionist reading of history by the authors, this passage nonetheless illuminated to me the multiple layers of trade and identity construction through historical readings of rebellion and revolution. Deployed in this passage are multiple conceptual frameworks of blackness including: Haiti, Negro, foreign and implicitly, slave.

constant call to danger, their skin untended and torn. Did not one [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] reach for another to hold their head, to kiss their eyes to sleep?

We. Love We.

What to make of a character whose story is shaped by the Middle Passage between Dahomey and Santo Domingo, by life on the Caribbean sugar cane plantations, who then has her tongue cut from her mouth before being packed onto yet another ship heading North to be sold into a tobacco plantation in Virginia? It is not that the conditions of either location were "better" or so vastly different as to be unrecognizable. But the subtleties of racial formation were sufficient enough that language itself was different. The landscapes of enslavement (the fauna and flora, the crops, the harvest) were different. The choreography of slave labor was also, different. D. Soyini Madison argues that the "expressive and cultural traditions [of a people] always occur within the machinations of power that encompass them..." (2009, 392). What the creation of the Kohnjehr Woman's poems has taught me is that the actual expressive and cultural traditions of a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] woman born in Africa, raised in Santo Domingo and sold into a plantation in Virginia are not only shaped by the machinations of power that encompass Shée in the plantation itself, but also radically transform and disrupt the economic and social landscape in which rebellion becomes possible because of the journey across waters and lands.

IV. Archives of the Imagination: [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] life today, yesterday, tomorrow, always

The presence of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] love disrupts assumptions of racialized heteronormative identities/practices/performances/expectations

of sows
of mules
of wives
of mistresses
of wetbacks
of boat people
of putas
of locas
and mammies

We. Love We.

The [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] are we who rebel against all we have received, who reject and reshape new futures through "the enunciation of alternative modes of thought, feeling, and existence." (Vogel 2009, 5)

We. Love We.

Dare to imagine [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness] close to your skin. Dare to imagine the scent of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers], musky, dark, textured velvet underneath the *flamboyan* of your touch. Dare to imagine a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] on the tip of your tongue.
We. Love We.

In her text, *Scenes of Subjection*, Sadiya Hartman speaks of the limited agency of black individuals and communities under slavery. She writes, "the promotion of innocent amusements and harmless pleasures was a central strategy in the slave owner's effort to cultivate contented subjection" (1997, 149). How to engage [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness] – an engagement with bodies and desires that operate both within and outside the modes of forced [re]production – and not render invisible the violence of the everyday "contented subjection"? Any connotations of agency become immediately suspect when [Afro] [Latinx] [Queerness] is conceptualized within the bonds of slavery, for [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] life is monitored day and night, [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] bodies mere wombs for the production of crops and of new labor (Spillers, 1987). [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] cannot be symbolically or semiotically constructed as anything other than a technology of labor, especially in the realm of [re]production. Angela Y. Davis writes, "slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of slave labor force. They were 'breeders' – animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers." (1981, 7). Within these narrow conceptualizations of black life, then, any act outside of the [re]production of labor is in and of itself 'queer'. However, pushing against this reading of subjection is also the possibility of actual queer acts: including love between [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers]. Given the continual monitoring of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] bodies into the present day, issues of how we survived on the plantation still hold relevance.

Samuel's Fancy

Aint never fancied
womens myself. Aint got the
feeling, if you know

what I mean. Massa
sent me once to the quarters,
stood with his whip loose

against his hip, the
tip drug along the floor. He
spoke, "Boy, you best get

*busy. I ain't got
time to waste on no sissified
slave."* They held scared

little Emma down
just held her down, I said and
the crack of the whip

behind me echoed
through the quarters. They pushed me
down, but I had a

choice, and I took it.
I took the choice, like I was
free. Little Emma

looked me in the eyes,
just as that whip flew against
my skin. We didn't cry.

The Massa, his men,
them whites just stood round, waited
till I gave in. Till

my blood and Emma's
was one.

It is possible to say that [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivities are constructed through public and private acts of complicity and resistance, of agency and submission that constantly reshape gender and sexuality while simultaneously reinforcing the excesses of reification. Turning back to the Virginia plantation on which Shee finds herself, it is then no surprise that Shee calls us into being, and through her body, existence and practices, allows for the possibility of a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivity that specifically engages in love acts and speech acts outside the narrow confines of a policed heterosexuality. It is this subjectivity itself which allows for a new re-imagining of liberation, resistance and rebellion within the violent context of slavery. It is Shee, calling out to memory, who calls us back into languages no longer, but also deeply, our own. Linda T. Smith argues that the remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people's responses to that pain. She reminds us that "this form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about, but what being dehumanized mean(s) for our own cultural practices." (1999, 146). As [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers], we can remember murder, and disappearance, and violence, and loss and exile and our response to that pain includes love, and dance, and prayer, and song, and poetry.

Hands (*Shee asks Samuel about his hands*)

Huat yu mehmbah?

Shee asked me one afternoon,
we, reaching through

the tobacco,
picking hornworms and beetles
off the leaves, our hands

scarred with lines and odd
swells. Shee moaned the question in
the pungent heat. What

do I remember?
I stared at my hands, at my
feet – they were thick as

boulders in crumbling soil.
I turned to Shee, answered with
sour breath *I remember*

having feet, real feet
not just nubs covered in scabs.
I remember hands,

hands to hold an
afternoon by. I remember
there might have been

laughter. Shee replied:
leht het nahet skrech deh skahrs awn
mee henkels meesee

deh irinfe shekehl
mehmbah peek deh jerapou
skehn awf dis lehgs, mee

tehnk a dat irinfe
rawd deh huan dat bern meegud.

Shee chewed on bark, slow
spit on even ground before
Shee looked me in the eye.

deh bluhd eh deh uhaets
raws hup ehn dem clawds no rehn
uhaet mehsah bluhd

kehn hehd deh stehn a
owurs. Shee chewed again, spit.
Handed me the bark

to gnaw on.

Mid-Night (*Rebecca learns the truth*)

I have never
known a man, not even He
has touched this flesh.

This body has not
carried life, nor chattel,
has not known touch of

sweetness, nor current
of stone broken loose from its
moorings. I, I

offer myself to Shee,
my naked flesh warm in the dark's
coolness, my breath dancing

with Shee's whispers,
her hands a salve made
of this bitter root.

The “not-telling” of a severed tongue reveals the violence of the dominant discourse. And yet it also serves as a piece of evidence, proof of some sort, that the imagination has given us something specific: possibility, memory, a seam, an anchor that exists outside of dominant order, logic or rationality; that exists inside a completely different way of knowing, inside another logic of meaning.

In centering the lives of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] who love other [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers], and recognizing that [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] have always been here and are still here and will always be here, then the fact of our being, when centered within our own worldviews, when infiltrating other centers, inserts the possibility of [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] love and liberation into the imagination and unbridles the very laws that dominate that center.

The very fact of how the history of the slave trade and plantation life has been constructed undermines the very notion of a “whole history”: where are the perspectives of the people removed from their lands, chained with irons, forced onto ships, forced into water, forced to work the land? The archives of domination rest upon the creaking silences of our bones. And the centrality of these same archives requires that we engage the same “order, logic, and rationality” (Philip 2008, 198) of domination. In these ways, we must then prove the existence of slavery and genocide, while simultaneously being at risk of engaging in the same act of erasure. We. Love We.

The danger lies in realizing that [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] desire is deeply tied into the history of slavery, as much as it is tied into our collective liberation.

We. Love We.

How did enslaved [Afro] [Latinx] [Queers] imagine us, even as they rubbed cracked skin, tore roots out from under swollen feet, made love in the corners of the slave quarters?

We. Love We.

Let us dare to be haunted. Let us awaken the specters of the sacred [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] dead and make them present to our existence. Let them be healed. And let them guide us forward into all we have imagined and all we cannot.

We. Love We.

Like Edana, I am whole even missing parts of the story. I am an arm lingering between space and time. I am a body aware of its missing arm. I am unknown memory on a June morning at dawn. I am the past to somebody’s [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] future, I am the conjured, the dreamed, the song.

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