Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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The Impossibility of Breathing
When the Sun Covers Your Face

Marcia Michael

I was going to run away.
Surrounded by water, I did not care, I had been here before, surrounded by water, my birth, all births, remember. I was set free, then, again and again.
Why should this one be any different?
—Marcia Michael, I go away taken from My History is in Her(e), 2020

It is only breath that enables us to be, to see and to feel; without it many believe that life does not continue (that is, if we do not breathe), we are dead. Yet many of our ancestors knew better, my mother knew better, I know better. Somehow, we decided that she would show me how to breathe forever. In asking many questions about her past, I was instructed to communicate with her body and hear her voice, the camera was my choice to enhance this learning. She then taught me how to read my own body and memories, allowing me to gaze upon my ancestors, recognizing them in me. This challenging and controversial dialogue (controversial because most of the time our bodies were naked) became an act of Black matrilineage that only my mother and I as her daughter could participate in. In being her, I reclaim a fragment of my ancestral narratives and share this with you.

At the end where everything is told as if it were a story, I open my heart and speak the histories that I have reclaimed. We seem to remember better and longer if the information we want to keep and hold and share is retold to us in a story, therefore, stories matter.

If some stories cannot be told, where do we go? How do we find them?

I had to ask my mother.
In revealing to me how our ancestors’ stories survived in her body with the need for them to be transplanted into mine, she uncovers a language I do not know. She thinks because I was pulled out of her stomach too young, too weak, that the contractions of this new birth that would have secreted onto me as I passed through the birth canal, remained inside her. Meaning that for their journey to become mine, she had to find a way to teach me her voice. I wanted to know the stories of my ancestors. I wanted to find them and honour them, I also wanted to honour my mother.

Turning always to mummy when things got tough, I told her that I could not locate any information about her mother in the Jamaican archives. To find out about my mother’s grandmother, and so on and so forth, this information was crucial to me: when was my grandmother born? How else was I to begin the search for the mother of all mothers, my African Queen? As the years went by and still no information surfaced, my mother drew me into an act which I had only ever experienced through reading the novels of Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), Gayl Jones’s, Corregidora (1975), and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982). This was an act that between mother and daughter, somehow, some way, recovered histories: this act was Black matrilineage. I never knew what it was at the time, I never knew at the time what it was, but years after it began, I now understand everything. For with it I was taught so many things, for with it I was shown and heard so many things. Turning to Morrison to find an attachment, I became familiar with “another way of knowing” (Morrison 1984). This is because there simply was no other way. My mother opened her archived body to me and through this, my mother guided me through my search, in the ritual art of conjuring.

I understand what conjuring is. Introduced through Pryse’s (1985) essay, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and the Ancient Power of Black Women (Pryse and Spillers 1985), I began to see who these other women could be. Describing conjuring as a folk art similar to quilt-makers, fine cooks, gardeners, seamstresses (also mentioned by Walker in In Search of Our Mothers Garden (1983) as the places were creativity was kept), which is passed on by mother to daughter, it’s acknowledgment as spiritual and magical “provides an alternative, unofficial basis of cultural authority...[and becomes the] medium of temporal wholeness and continuity, countering the daughter’s traumatic experience of historical dislocation” (Dubey 1995: 254–255). A conjure woman is one who is able to “blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other” (Morrison 1984: 342), conjuring, to remind you, is “another
way of knowing things” (Morrison 1984). Our mothers had always been conjuring—as resistance.

As literary matrilineage is that which uncovers the slave mother through the mother and daughter relationship, not only is conjuring an embodiment but for Pryse, “Zora Neale Hurston took conjuring as a great leap forward and with it, transposed the terms of literary authority for women writers” (Pryse and Spillers 1985: 10).

Looking back now, I understand the connection between Hurston and Walker, who are held to be the mother and daughter of Black matrilineage (Sadoff 1985). And how through them, what I was to re-experience, as a tradition, was a ritual. My mother’s voice and me with my camera, would become the tools of tradition that would begin and hopefully affirm my place in the tradition of conjuring, but also as a storyteller.

Drawn to Hurston’s and Walker’s respective literature and how they both used photography and photographic imagery in their work, there were aspects in their writings that pronounced themselves to me more than others. The first was that Hurston, as part of her observations as an anthropologist, took photographs and video footage of the people and experiences she was researching. For her book, *Tell My Horse*, published in 1935, Hurston went to Jamaica (my mother’s place of birth) and other countries to research Voudoun. Whilst there, witnessing the ceremony for a female priestess, Hurston gained an understanding of the sovereignty of women. In answering the question of truth, the priestess in this ceremony, revealing her genitalia, it is understood that here, with men kissing her organs, they “come face to face with the truth” (Hurston 1990: 114). In highlighting the female aspect of the deity in *Tell my Horse*, it is clear in her description of Erzulie (a Goddess) as “the perfect female” (121) that this image of the female struck a chord with Hurston. This chord may have been what Maya Deren described Erzulie as, a woman who owns “the capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need” (Deren 1983, 138). Nonetheless, the image of the woman figure that Hurston was captivated by, became rooted in her writing.

Hurston as a mother figure, according to Pryse “served as a kind of bridge for an imaginative matrilineage extending from the tradition of conjure to the literary genius of Black women writers in the last two decades” (Dutton 1993: 148).

The second was Walker’s literal call for Zora whilst searching for her grave in *Looking for Zora*. This shows that when we cannot find what we are searching for, we will call for those that we need, “Zora ... are you out here?... I’m here, are you?” (Walker 1983: 403), and come they will. Walker’s (1989) *The Temple of My Familiar*
is also a significant source. Creating a woman who remembers living many lifetimes including experiencing the full horrors of slavery, is Lissie. All her previous lives are re-remembered and re-seen through photographs taken of her current self: “The selves I had thought gone forever, existed only in my memory, were still there! photographable” (Walker 1989: 92). Lissie remembers women teaching their traditions to their daughters. Lissie’s consciousness is Black. Lissie’s reincarnations of the female persona as Goddess, is Hurston’s Erzulie. Hurston transmutes Erzulie through the literary tradition developing between mother and daughters, which begets a concoction for Walker’s, “womanist: 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (Walker 2006: 19).

This is one of the abilities of photography, transferable, transportable, exchangeable. Such power that these images have to actually see the past, but to stay true: it’s up to you to see it, if you can, if you dare. Lissie’s life story, written in invisible ink disappears when it has been read, so be quick, or learn another way?

I am a woman who conjures.
I can offer a vision of that which cannot be seen.
Like Douglass’s revenant, a return from a social death, (Wexler 2012: 33), a task which the photograph performs, wilfully, now through me, created by a Black mother behind the camera.
I aid them to return.
I am a conjuring woman.

I now become a daughter who is poised to shatter the illusion that patriarchal white bodies created to soothe their troubled minds. As a photographer, I am poised to consider the past they wanted me to see. In showing me her past, my mother inducted me into the tradition of our family to be able to see the future. Most importantly, she reminded me that I knew how to travel through time and the camera was my transportation and preferred method of travel. Hers was her voice, she had the ability to poly-vocalise her soul, allowing the strands to stretch to and fro to the time they remembered, catapulting her there. My maternal grandmother’s method of transfiguration was her names, shifting between them, to shift between worlds. My great-great maternal grandmother could simply walk to her chosen destination.

In continuing this story, I have to tell you how it started, knowing that the dream future becomes a utopian vision of Black life. I did not know how to get
there. My mother taught me all of the histories that she had heard. Her body transmuted the information and like a child I gazed mesmerized at it, trying to discern what it actually was. As a reminder of my own history, being born in Britain to a mother who was born in Jamaica, I had to translate my mother’s coded Black language. As I have said already, I was mesmerized by gazing on this Blackness that was more than beautiful and thereafter transfixed as I was, it became the object of my gaze.

Are you ready for the story?

We invent, reclaim, and appropriate those aspects used previously against our Black bodies, winning our survival by signifyin(g). Those words and phrases used once, twice, too many times to determine our Black bodies: you remember them, right? Partus Sequitur Ventrem, Matriarch, Jezebel, Mammy. In a sign of strength and love for who we are and have always been, we use the same terminology and apparatus you thought would destroy us.

The story

My mother’s body and my own are presented to be read openly, publicly, and examined as if re-enacting the bodies transacted at a slave market. I am hoping that this image will allow you to remember. Here is where we declare our sovereignty and present our stories to be read, remembered and understood. With our bodies glistening and enjoying the feel of the diamonds that emerge from our skin as the sun shines, I hope you are listening and not looking at the value of our bodies. Remember the past but know that there are new ones waiting to be your past. We present your story, for we are here to provide you with another way of remembering and recovering: your history/ourselves.

I ask you to imagine that these bodies you see are not for sale but are vessels that elucidate a scene beyond memory, filling your space with information you needed to know. These bodies have a worth that devalues the labour of the historicized Black body, simply because these bodies appear and exist in a place where they are wanted. Having only travelled to places where the condition of their historicized Black bodies is not recognized—these bodies appear different, unaffected; imagine that! Conscribing to this body a showering of attention, admiration and awe, this magnificent vessel of a being, a Black woman, becomes time without time. She comprehends time and transforms time. In
finding within herself an ability to navigate time, to hold and make visible on her body, her family: her body becomes more than a depository of memories. Her body archived you. It is a beautiful detailed treasured atlas, which glistens like a star-filled universe immersed and bathed in auroral moonlight. These memories of people and places past resurface after being bade and they wait: emerging then projecting themselves over and over on this body, shapeshifting, time-travelling, click, click, click. Capturing what they offer, what they need to tell, their bodies are a language they know you will soon learn to understand. The watcher who is not a witness, recreates and repeats all that it has seen and heard, mesmerized by the object of my gaze: a story is retold.

I have been repeating all along and I will keep on repeating my ancestors’ echoes—gather them if you can, treasure them if you can. Having travelled to present themselves to you, you are offered a story; there within this poly-vocality you are told the story. All that my mother has remembered is revealed. She sings, she shows, and she hands you objects to know the passageway that was created to pass this information on. The vessel that reforms itself as a physical reckoning of being, you called for and this you named: a photographic image.

It is this entity filled with reflections of dreams, words heard and steadied, floating where they were said, yet touching each other, reacting. In love they come together when not being gazed upon, hurrying when they feel the warmth of their image in your hands. Changing forms as quickly as dreams are made and lost in their own worlds that you create. Other beings enter, bringing colours to share and hide: they ask permission to create a story of what is, what was and what could never be again. This entity placed in this object is weighty, and through its scent, comes in contact with the skin that absorbs it, supports it. The t of t----------------i----------------m-------------e------------- bends its head and curves its tail: tightening, reaching, merging, and in its place a scene emerges, right before your eyes—magic! Leaving in its wake, I, and Me.

This photograph is what could be kept when the vessels departed, continuing their journey: they left a passageway. The vessels continue their journey and must depart. The photographic image given to us is, in our present day, a glimpse of the past it has seen and ones you wanted to know. Piecing together the fragments, remembering their history and your own, the wall you placed the pictures on, the book you read them from tells a story. Each, changing sequence, configuring narratives of you and them replenishing your understanding of this body and your family. Each sequence changing as the narrative deepens and resurfaces, revealing something you had not remembered
before, and not known until you tell their story through you. This is the story you tell yourself; this is the story you tell everyone else. This is the story my mother told me. This is the story I will tell my children, the possibility of breathing when the sun covers your face...will you follow my lead?

The Photographs

Photographs can be a performative link between the past and present, between ancestors and descendants. These photographs are able to conjure memories: produce a story already imagined and perhaps already told. This performative link is the important part to remember because depending on how YOU tell a story and how you construct your world, [it becomes] “culturally inscribed at a very profound level (Poignant, 1996: 10), but not forever, but for – ever for it all begins again.
the impossibility of breathing when the sun covers your face
Always remember the one that sees first enough—the child, the photographer—to hold on to it for you—mothers. “I didn't want these pictures to go to just anybody. They’re special and I wanted to give them only to someone who understands” (Walker 1989: 89).

You.

Works cited


