

# dear Alice, ‘for the murder of [your] bastard child’ of the starry-eyed tribe born to children<sup>1</sup>

Umniya Najaer

“My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”  
—Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”

“Black femme freedom resided in enslaved and free African women and girls’  
*capacity to belong to themselves and each other.*”<sup>2</sup>  
—Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh* (emphasis mine)

“Certainly we know that enslaved women fled the plantation, albeit not in as great numbers as men; poisoned slaveholders; plotted resistance; dreamed of destroying the master and his house; utilized abortifacients rather than reproduce slaves; practiced infanticide rather than sentence their children to social death, the auction block, and the master’s bed; exercised autonomy in suicidal acts; gave birth to children as testament to an abiding knowledge of freedom contrary to every empirical index of the plantation; and yearned for radically different ways of being in the world.”  
—Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World”

The infant is born in the room above the parlor where the Bartholomew’s eat supper in their new home on the corner of Second and Market Street in Philadelphia. Must have been a quiet birth since no one heard a thing. Even with the door wide open, there is no evidence she cried. Not

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<sup>1</sup> This essay performs a historical, and at times speculative, recounting of Alice Clifton’s 1787 case, “The Trial of Alice Clifton for the Murder of her Bastard-Child, At the Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Gaol Delivery, held at Philadelphia, on Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1787.” Italics denote direct quotations from the aforementioned trial record. Only when stated otherwise do italics denote quotations from other texts.

<sup>2</sup> In her monograph *Wicked Flesh* (2020) Jessica Marie Johnson writes, “Black femme freedom resided in enslaved and free African women and girls’ capacity to *belong to themselves and each other*. It demanded a promiscuous accounting of blackness not as bondage and subjection, but as future possibility. It rejected discourses of Black women as lascivious or wicked, and transmuted them into practices of defiance and pleasure for themselves. Black femme freedom enacted a radical opposition to bondage, reinterpreting wickedness as freedom, intimacy as fugitive, and blackness as diasporic and archipelagic.” This articulation resonates with my sense of Black femmeness as an intrinsically collective and relational experience.

at the intake of the first breath, not in the harrowing push when her head was in the world and her body engulfed in the world of another body.

The way they see it, you have been the legal property of Mr. Bartholomew for three years. Before that, you were *brought up* by his father-in-law, Mr. Milne. Passed on, or so the expression goes. It appears no one cared for you when a month before going into labor you fell down the cellar stairs with a log of wood in your arms. In court, Mr. Bartholomew will admit they didn't call a doctor, even when the bruises darkened, that it was unwarranted since the quality of your work was not affected. Nor did they call for help when three days before giving birth you fell down the same flight of stairs. Why not? the attorney general will want to know. Because *she was not confined*.

Twelve days after giving birth alone and silently, the Philadelphia court tries you *for the murder of [your] bastard-child* on a Wednesday. It is April 18, and your mistress, Mrs. Mary Bartholomew tells the court you continuously denied your pregnancy, but she knew all along, it was obvious from your bulk. She says the morning of the birth you *got up and made fire in the parlor* before lying down. Without recalling what was served for supper, or by whom, Mrs. Bartholomew tells the court that after supper she suspected you had given birth and *searched about in the closets, and in the chimney* but found nothing.

The sister-in-law, Miss Bartholomew began probing every nook and cranny. Later Miss B will tell the court: No, she did not observe cuts or bruises when she found the infant at the bottom of a trunk, *under a large roll of linen*, wrapped in your petticoat. That had there been blood, you must have wiped it away, for she recalls seeing none before returning the corpse to you. She will recall you sitting on the floor, rocking the quiet corpse.

Alice, I imagine you, *the prisoner*, gazing into the five eclipses forming where you press nails into skin, listening as the attorney general, sergeant, and council pose the strangest questions.

*Did you see any blood about the child? Was the child cold or warm? Had the infant hair and nails?*

<sup>3</sup> Miss B answers to the best of her ability. After some hesitation, she responds that yes, she believes *it had nails*.

In the courtroom time is a dimensionless swamp with no beginning and you are the cradle of your terror. The coroner, John Leacock testifies that you told him you did it to stop her from crying. That he measured the cut: one inch in depth and four inches across the infant's neck, from ear to ear. The sheriff, Samuel Bullfinch, testifies that he found you *sitting on the floor, with the child leaning over [your] arm*. He thought *it appeared plump and hearty*. Nathaniel Norgrove says you confided in him that you did it with a razor, because John Schaffer—the fat Schaffer, the one who married Chavilier's daughter—told you to. Dr. Foulke tells the court that Schaffer promised *if she made away with the child, she should have her time purchased, and he would set her at liberty*. Adding that before he did it to you, *Schaffer persuaded a milk-girl to do the like once before*.

It seems the moving lips are never yours, Alice.

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<sup>3</sup> Blood and nails are beside the point. Presumably, the question about the presence of blood intends to clarify whether the child was born full term or not. The underlying reasoning is flawed since these are not contingent factors: she could have been a full-term stillborn infant or a living preterm infant or a living full-term infant or a stillborn preterm infant. It is not possible to tell whether or not she was stillborn based on the presence of blood. The question presumes that if her throat was slit and she didn't bleed then the infant was stillborn. But blood would have been present regardless as it is, simply, a natural part of birth. More so, it would have been impossible to distinguish if the blood was Alice's or the infant's. These inquiries illustrate that the decision about Alice's guilt or innocence, and whether she should be pardoned or hanged, was framed around questions that are scientifically unsound, even by eighteenth-century standards, and on a more basic level, lack elementary logical reasoning.

On the day of the trial you have been a passenger on earth, lapping air, circling the sun with astonishing precision for a mere sixteen years. You are so young. Not a “child” but briefly new on earth.<sup>4</sup> So new, even after hate’s longing for a resting place cores you.

Whereas so much still awaits you.

I wonder how you care for you. Are you someone beside yourself when the contractions set in and you have no mother to turn to? When the coroner holds your newborn up to the afternoon light, squinting into her slit? Or during the thirteen long days you sit in the jail, braiding and unbraiding your hair to distract from the need to evacuate your waterlogged breasts, sore and brimming with sustenance? What is the content of your dreams leading up to the day your fate would rest with a jury comprised of Schaffer’s compatriots? Did you believe Schaffer when he promised, in exchange for the infant’s death, to purchase your freedom and *make [you] as happy and as fine as his wife?* That if you failed to comply [you] *should suffer immensely?*

The threat betrays the bait. The bait is never freedom, this much I think you knew.

Doctor Foulke tells the jury: It was towards the end of September that John Schaffer dā'bôCHt you on your master’s lot. Debauched, stemming from the French *debauchier*, meaning to scatter or disperse, entered the English language in 1595, nearly a century after those initial flocks of colonists disembarked.<sup>5</sup> Its synonyms include: [to] abase, bastardize, bestialize, brutalize,

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<sup>4</sup> Since Black children’s experiences complicate antebellum and contemporary conception of “childhood” I find newness an apt counter-concept, one that defines youthfulness through a temporal framework, as opposed to a contingent subject position. For more on Black girlhood studies see Crystal Lynn Webster’s “The History of Black Girls and the Field of Black Girlhood Studies: At the Forefront of Academic Scholarship” (2020); Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011); Aimee Meredith Cox’s *Shapeshifter: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (2015); Toby Rollo’s “The Color of Childhood: The Role of the Child/Human Binary in the Production of Anti-Black Racism” (2018); and the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality’s publication *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood* (2017).

<sup>5</sup> From the Oxford English Dictionary: To turn or lead away, entice, seduce, *from* one to whom service or allegiance is due. To seduce from allegiance or duty, induce to desert; to render disaffected; to pervert or

canker, cheapen, corrupt, debase, degrade, demean, demoralize, deprave, deteriorate, pervert, and ravish. And yet, you are juridically unrapable.<sup>6</sup>

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What is it about the Black female and femme that incites such violence?<sup>7</sup> This violence that boils down to the act of division—where partition is the instrument of invention.<sup>8</sup> They are inventing a New World and you are its dexterous blueprint. The year is 1787. The law’s acrobatics contend that you have no will and can neither give nor withhold consent.<sup>9</sup> As property you have

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corrupt in regard of allegiance or duty to others. To seduce from virtue or morality; to pervert, deprave, or corrupt morally; *esp.* to corrupt or deprave by intemperance, or sensual indulgence. To seduce (a woman) from chastity. To vilify, damage in reputation; to depreciate, disparage. To damage or spoil in quality.

<sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century America* (1997).

<sup>7</sup> This violence is at times particular to female anatomy and at others applies to Black femme embodiments and expressions broadly. For my purposes, I try to think of Black femmeness and femaleness in coherence without collapsing one into the other. For more on the Black female and femme see Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (2020); Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage” (2008); Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili’s Mirros: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (2018); Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme and the Image of Common Sense* (2007). See also Treva Carrie Ellison’s “Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender” (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Hortense Spillers’s use of the term “atomization” comes to mind here in that it attends to the violent material partition of the Black female flesh, alongside, at the level of grammar, epistemology, and ontology the violence of being an unsolvable paradox.

<sup>9</sup> As an enslaved girl you were subjected to a regime of “institutionalized rape” and a colonial sexual economy in which you were physically, structurally, and legally vulnerable to acts of sexual violence from all men. Legally, rape was a legitimate use of property. As Hartman explains, fertility figured as a form of “speculative capital” which slaveholders could actualize by enacting a myriad of sexual and reproductive terrors upon girls and women within childbearing age. The institution of slavery—and by extension the modernity that it ushered into maturity—depended on the creation of Blackness as object, both materially (a steady and self-reproducing slave population) and ontologically (to define their “humanity” against the

no right to legal recourse. You are a Black girl and therefore always willing. A metaphysically inexhaustible reservoir, your body is “a form of infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, a plastic upon which projects of humanization and animalization rest.”<sup>10</sup> Your flesh is modernity’s definitional site. Without you, how could they invent themselves rightful creators and inheritors of the New World?

The year is 1787. According to the law of *partus sequitur ventrum* any child born of your body inherits your legal status as “Slave.”<sup>11</sup> This law is the mother of the New World and your womb is its anchor. This law ensures a steady and self-reproducing population of “slaves” in case the transnational trafficking of humans is ever to be prohibited. It guarantees that long after your mammary glands dry out not a single descendent of yours will be a rights-bearing subject—even if they are the afterlife of rape. This logic of there will always be more is a legal whirlpool making you and the life of your budding womb into slavery’s insurance policy.

Dispensable and indispensable, you creator of Black life, are the prototype of the subhuman.<sup>12</sup> You are the prerequisite to their iteration of the human. They need you.<sup>13</sup> This need

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non-being of the “slave”). The legalization of *partus sequitur ventrem* utilized the doubling of the biological and ontological in the realm of birth to produce both.

<sup>10</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative” (2016).

<sup>11</sup> For work that deals with *partus sequitur ventrem* and enslaved women’s reproductive lives see Jennifer L. Morgan, “Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery” (2018) and *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004). See also Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016).

<sup>12</sup> For more on this see Sylvia Wynter “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” (2003) and Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> In his book *The Repeating Island* (1992) Antonio Benitez-Rojo imagines that western capital accumulation is birthed from the Caribbean Womb. In his poetic rendition, “The Atlantic is today the Atlantic (The navel of capitalism) because Europe, in its mercantilist laboratory, conceived of the project of

for a subhuman is the Achilles' heel of modernity since, paradoxically, you are the source of the Black life whose brutalization shapes the meaning and content of their humanity. Too much hinges on your womb and their ability to delineate the life that flows through it as less than human. This desperate need to control your womb is the father of American rape culture. Fortifying and fertilizing the nation from the inside out, rape becomes the first instrument of our political order.<sup>14</sup>

This is how the fathers of the Enlightenment invent a world in which their humanity depends on your permanent and inheritable exclusion from humanity. It is an attempt to predestine the Black life *yet to come*. The year is 1787. At the advent of modernity your womb is the frontier of a global war over who will control the future. This sustained occupation to discipline, extort, cull, and otherwise control the Black female/femme and her body is the first world war of the modern world. This war is a means to an end. It is one strategy of a loftier scheme to govern the Black womb in order to yoke Black futurity.<sup>15</sup>

You and your baby girl are its frontier.

Ajar—you are the revolving door to the inception and destruction of our current order.

What are you to do? You who *belong to yourself and each other*.

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inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic ... because it is the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps ... All Europe pulling on the forceps to help the birth of the Atlantic ... After the blood and salt water spurts, quickly sew up the torn flesh and apply the antiseptic tinctures, the gauze and surgical plaster; then the febrile wait through the forming of a scar: suppurating, always suppurating” (5).

<sup>14</sup> This argument extends to the systematized rape of Indigenous women. For more on this subject see Audra Simpson's "The State is a Man: Therese Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty" (2016) and Stéphane Guimont Marceu's "Approaching Violence against Indigenous Women in the Americas from Relation, Intersectional and Multiscalar Perspectives" (2019).

<sup>15</sup> To control black futurity—and by extension—all futurity. The flesh wound is a seed. Seeds, like us, are not singular, but collective entities belonging to a tribe of before and after.

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Doctor Jones testifies you were born dead. *The windpipe was cut through from side to side and the other large vessels were separated*, but you were never alive to begin with, the doctor is certain of this, it is a fact, based on your general size and the amount of hair on your head. Maybe it was the log or the tumble down the stairs that did it. The second doctor, Dr. Foulke, agrees that infanticide is off the table since it is not possible to manslaughter the deceased. Based on the size of your outer limbs you could not have been full term. By his estimation likely closer to six or seven months. Sure, a dead infant might bleed upon having its throat cut, he assures the council, because you see, *the blood of children is much finer than the blood of men*.

And since Dr. Foulke went to all the trouble of preserving you, the jury ought to judge for themselves the spectacle of your small limbs. You are *brought in a large glass jar . . . with it a pair of forceps to if deemed necessary extract it*. All eyes flock to the jar, past the glass, through the amber liquid to you, little sister, the pale morsel nodding imperceptibly, suspended in a capsule where you are so sterile that time cannot touch you. Splayed in a wide prayer, the eternal eyes of your corpse rattle the living men arbitrating the facts of your death-birth.<sup>16</sup>

When it was all said and done, when the jury left and the court closed, did Dr. Foulke keep you in his study on a low shelf beside the jaw of a rhinoceros—both collectible and instructional model—so that those whose mouths went dry at the site of you could get a closer look? Preserved in an interval, who was your first friend there and was it more or less lonely to collect dust in communion with canines and amphibians? When none were watching did you rest your eyes? Did

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<sup>16</sup> This evokes for me the Elizabeth Alexander's essay "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" (1994) Alexander poses this question in the context of King's murder, questioning the role of the photographer who videotaped the brutal beating. "Who could watch and videotape such an event? What is the role of looking," she probes.



Dr. Foulke bequeath you to your mother, so she could bury you and return you to your maker in the kingdom of matrilineal descent; where she is bound one day to join you *in pleasures without measure, without end?*<sup>17</sup> Did you become the soil where the living dance as they lay you to sleep for a retreat at the river's craned neck, one day perhaps to surface again, to collide with the foot of a shovel, a dead end, as once was her cervix, an archeological relic, nearly decapitated and premature? It is highly unlikely. You are too valuable an asset to forgo, so perhaps you are warehoused in the basement of a museum awaiting the eternal rest of decomposition.<sup>18</sup>

You, the little sister who did not taste air, waiting for this, the most rudimentary of natural rights, to unfurl, atom by atom.

You, of the millions dead before alive, child of the starry-eyed tribe born to children, tribe of the miscarried maroons and infants unzipped by the one who birthed you. Cellular fledglings of intricately choreographed proteins undone by teas brewed of Peacock Flower, Pennyroyal, Rue, Blue Cohosh, Poinciana, Savin, Quinquina, and Tansy.<sup>19</sup> This world whose fragile flowers unhinge the unborn from their mother's uterine lining, sequestering the seashore within her, liquefying her interior address until she becomes the season of the hemoglobin monsoons. All the while, keeping her alive in this world where flesh is the alter of being.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Phillis Wheatley Peters, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), 71. This line is taken from the poem "A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve months." The full line reads, "Delightful infant, nightly visions give thee to our arms, and we with joy receive, we fain would clasp the *Phantom* to our breast, the *Phantom* flies, and leaves the soul unblest. To yon bright regions let your faith ascend, prepare to join your dearest infant friend, in pleasures without measure, without end."

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Foulke tells the court, "I have compared this child with several others which I have preserved, as I have them of almost every period of conception."

<sup>19</sup> These are some of the plants used by Black and Indigenous women to induce abortions. For more on the use of abortifacient plants see Joscelyn Garner's *Bleeding and Breeding* series (2011) and Londa Schiebinger's *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Its profound that humans have no intrinsic way to control our internal reproductive processes and therefore must turn to interspecies relations with plants that remarkably give us some control over our

Whereas you, little sister, the flowers dissolve. You, who enter the revolving door of surrogacy the tiniest of bubbles and come out the other end without a body. You, whose tender body is slayed upon arrival. You, the secret born out of sight, clandestine teachers in the school of how to celebrate the death of an origin, incognito ancestors, disciples of our unknown beyond, occasionally hold ceremony for the living, the wilderness surpassed behind.

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They all get what they want. The Bartholomews get their show. Perhaps Mrs. B wears a new wool dress sewn just for the occasion. The jurors proudly serve as arbitrators of justice in the name of the almighty, the doctors and coroners as experts in delineating the margin between life and death. Schaffer, too gets what he wants, you in the palm of his hand, in the lot and later, your hands an extension of his, a jolt at the top of the stairs, a cut where there may have been a pulse.<sup>21</sup>

And you, dear Alice, get one last look at the nameless flesh of your flesh. They call her *it and bastard-child* of debauchment and formaldehyde traveling with no feet of her own, head bobbing; how unfortunate, the afterlife of rape, to have never known the ease of sleep nor the mercy of a grave.

The year is 1787. You have not said a word and I am worried for you. I imagine you anxiously picking your cuticles down to the meat. I picture your blood staining the cuffs of your blouse a relentless maroon.

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reproductive processes, the power to prevent pregnancy, induce sterility, or terminate emerging human life without terminating the life of the carrier. Cultivating them, we in turn become a part of the reproductive life cycles of the very plants that can increase our reproductive autonomy.

<sup>21</sup> Despite being named several times, John Shaffer who had a less than favorable reputation in Philadelphia, was not present at the trial. This is not surprising since the crimes done onto Alice were never part of the conversation.

The fact of the matter is your freedom pivots on this, the meat and marrow of the production: Was *it* ever alive? Did *it* cry?<sup>22</sup> The jury decides. If yes, you shall be denied the dividend of air. But if the thing at the edge of her larynx never chimed, if you are the kind of creature to carnage a cadaver, then you are neither innocent nor a threat to anything but yourself and the deceased. Then, and only then, may you live.

Following both doctors' consensus that she was born dead, the attorney general recaps the staggering evidence against you: your persistent denial of the pregnancy, *having made not the least provision of cloaths for the infant*, delivering alone rather than inviting the assistance of [your] mistress, the cut, of course, and finally your *endeavor to conceal it, by placing it wrapped up under a large roll of linen, in a trunk*.

After a three-hour recess the jury rules you guilty of murder and you are sentenced to death.

It is Wednesday and, as far as you are concerned, this fate is final. Most likely they transport you back to prison. You don't know yet that some combination of Schaffer's reputation and your "naivete" and the lifelike corpse has spooked the jury, unearthing a force of benevolent remorse. Jointly, the twelve jurors write to Thomas McKean the chief justice, a plea to spare your life. The letter reads in part, "*Alice being of tender age ignorant and unexperienced was seduced to the perpetration of the said crime by the persuasions and instigation of the father of the child your petitioners are desirous that the life of the said Alice may be saved.*"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> All three Bartholomews testified that they *did not* hear the infant cry. A cry would have been the only irrefutable and unequivocal proof the infant was born living.

<sup>23</sup> Note, the jury's pivot—the shift from convicting Alice of murder, to begging, quite literally, for her mercy—lays bare the distinction between the logic of the verdict and the logic of amnesty. The two logics cohere to form the following narrative: Alice committed a crime but did not exercise criminal will due to both her age and her actions being ventriloquized by Schaffer, "the father." Alice doesn't have to uphold the doctrine of "perfect submission" described by Saidiya Hartman in the essay "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" because the rapist and ventriloquist is not Alice's master or his son, but a white man with whom she has no kind of relation or obligation. In a way, Schaffer betrays the fragile "family romance" through which the Bartholomews likely imagine their enslavement of the young Alice as a benevolent relation. By

That Saturday Thomas McKean writes to Benjamin Franklin:

*Philadelphia April 21, 1787:*

*Sir,*

*In consideration of the tender years of the mother named Alice Clifton, being only sixteen years of age, and of her situation in life, being a Mute Slave, illiterate and ignorant; and out of respect to the Petition of the Jury, who convicted her, We beg leave to recommend her, to Your Excellency and the Supreme Executive Council, as an object of Mercy.*

*Your most obedient humble*

*Tho McKean*

On these grounds Benjamin Franklin, supreme executive council, repeals the verdict.<sup>24</sup>

And you, dear Alice, do not sway from atop the gallows. You, the object of mercy, live. You of us, the sum who did not die, not right away.<sup>25</sup> I don't know how long or where, and certainly not *how*. Only that you infiltrated my own shapeless grief, asking *What has the moon's waning got to do with skimming myself from the surface of my body? If the only prayer granted is that my knees have stopped behaving as magnets, the left knee no longer pulling the right knee into its orbit—What does that leave of the bewildering intimacy of sinking into myself like a wick into wax?*

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virtue of this romance, the betrayal extends beyond Alice, to the Bartholomews, who *were all so affected, that they could not bear to remain in the room* of their home, where Alice sat with the infant.

<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that this exchange arbitrating Alice's fate occurs in the two days before the completion of *The Constitution of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage*. On May 2, 1787, three weeks after she gives birth, the official statement is made that Franklin, who also served as the Society's president, pardoned Alice. The fact that "leaders of the nation" such as McKean and Franklin arbitrated over cases like Alice's illustrates the centrality of Black women's reproductive lives to the project/s of early America.

<sup>25</sup> June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die* (2002).

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Alice, when I dream your dream I think of the groves' umbilical exchange of data.<sup>26</sup> The dream goes something like this: You pass through me. I am a pasture and you are the bird. I am a bird and you are the sun. Our bygone babies are winged. The ones who lived to cast moving shadows, but nonetheless one day bounced overboard, escaped to the caves, and caught bullets with their flesh are the snowcapped mountaintops that shoulder the sky. The mothers we lost are our song and we are the flock.<sup>27</sup> Together, we are impenetrable since a flock has no outside, no inside, like water, like smoke, like wind, like fire. Unlike our flesh bodies, you can't point at the flock's interior. Your finger is also her heart, is the eye and winged timber of gospel. I am the nest and you are the tree. You are the soil and we are the grove.

In your dream the unborn thrusts her tiny feet, soft as naked pecans, into my sleeping face. I take it to mean the wound is a collective hole.<sup>28</sup> That we are sisters as are our seedling ancestors who did not cry. Awakened by the unborn, the scream you deprived of breath takes refuge in my

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<sup>26</sup> Alice, can you believe that trees suckle their young through subterranean networks? Root to root, elder trees transmit messages, warnings and nutrients to the young and vulnerable saplings of the grove through something akin to a collective mammary-nervous system. Their life force is continuous and distributed in accordance with the laws of symbiosis, a biologically ingrained impulse favoring the survival of the collective. Imagine millions of Black girls, women, femmes, and queers as a grove, likewise tapped into an transcorporeal network retaining memory and redistributing resilience. This life force that is continuous when we love, care, tell stories, and dare to imagine. These instinctual and learned acts toward collective survival are at their core rituals of mothering. Love is the practice of freedom. Freedom is at the core of all being.

<sup>27</sup> Black feminist writers have turned to analogies such as swarms and flocks to describe Black female, femme, and/or queer socialites by centering the aspect of collective interdependency and symbiosis. For examples of flocking as relational framework see adrienne marie brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), Treva Carrie Ellison's "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender" (2019) and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019).

<sup>28</sup> See Evelyn Hammonds's "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" (1997) as well as Rizvanna Bradley's work in "Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness" (2016).

lungs. Swallowing mouthfuls of air, I give it free rein.<sup>29</sup> For you beloveds, the glowing pearls at my center.

If the soundest sanctuary from this world is the spiritworld thawing within me then why do I outwake the morning aching to name you without having to name you?<sup>30</sup> You who are permanent

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<sup>29</sup> We have gathered at the Ashara Ekundayo gallery in Oakland, California. This *is* the ceremony that must be found (Sylvia Wynter “The Ceremony Must be Found, After Humanism” [1984].) The invitation comes through word of mouth. For us there is no way to prepare, since none beside the women in white know what is to follow. They are the ones who break our waters with their song. Every eye comes undone. Each griever is subsumed in contractions of her own sorrow, the unreckoned, old and new, a collective release amidst strangers. We fall to our knees and holler. We tear down the wallpaper. The grief doulas hold us and sing. They bathe us with white water and bouquets of basil, these guardians of the things that weigh us down, the grief we inherit or pick up along the way and otherwise risk passing on. The year is 2019, the season is spring. The occasion is *Black Women Grieving*, an episode of Amara Tabor-Smith’s *House Full of Black Women* series, a ritual performance project with separate but connected site specific episodes set in Oakland, California, over a seven-year period. More ceremony than performance, she calls it “conjure art”—integrating where the art practice and the spiritual practice cannot be separated. Amara tells me her art is guided by the belief “that Black women need each other. That we have a lot of grief to release and are worthy of protection and love.” For more I suggest watching *Blatant: A Forum on Art, Joy and Rage with Amara Tabor-Smith, Ashara Ekundayo, and Savannah Shange* (2020) hosted by the Museum of the African Diaspora.

<sup>30</sup> Numerous scholars, including most notably Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Katherine McKittrick, have observed that one of slavery’s monstrosities is the mutilation of motherhood. Orlando Patterson argued the constant threat of losing one’s kin cast Black life into a state of social death, meaning, the enslaved and their descendants are born biologically alive but socially deceased. I think of it less like social death and more as the systematic wounding of the Black social body. Black mothers become central enemies of the state because of our capacity to heal, through care and love, a wound whose festering presence anchors the project of white supremacist modernity. We are the main destination of this studied, practiced wounding. As with torture, the state’s maiming and killing of Black people is secondary, the primary aim is to break the spirit of the living left behind and thereby undermine the spirit of the collective. The life force of the collective enables the individual to survive the fatal aftereffect of the grief that follows losing one’s kin to anti-Black violence, what Christen Smith terms “sequalae.” This communal immunity impulse—to love, care, protect, and defend with ferocity is medicine for the wounded Black social body. The opposition has staked its claim on futurity by continuing a war on the entirety of Black social life. In stark opposition, our capacity to move as one, as flock, as grove, to nurture, heal, and immunize against impending violence threatens the wrath of the state.

In 1787 the state’s targeting of Black kinship relations includes systematized rape and a global economy bent on separating families, as it did in centuries past and to follow. In 2022 it looks like uninvestigated disappearances of Black girls and women, police violence, mass incarceration, borders and immigration policies designed to keep the most vulnerable of the world’s population in closer proximity to death, US gun culture broadly—including Black-on-Black violence that is precipitated by state’s investment in

residents of my interior, the lawless island where nothing is prey, where I go to shed the sunset robe of my sorrow and spread my skin, where my breasts are stargazers done guarding the citadel of a body I lay no claim to. Hollowed of matter, the inside world is engorged. I, the inside, am boundless and touch the outside only through the membrane of my interior; that nameless crossroad where we assemble to marvel as the untethered hand of the afterlife pares away our many husks, beneath each pilfered flesh a horizon, and beneath that a stone heavy as a wet star, a light pilgrimaging the cosmos anonymously, untouched and touching nothing.

Newly husked, I discover I am not my mother's daughter. Unmasked our children, born and unborn, are not our children.<sup>31</sup> They are stepping-stones of the divine unruly. Despite the heart's insistence, loss is not loss. You sleep, I wake. You flock, we grove. Yesterday's unburied are here embalmed in a language wearing the emerald dress of a coffin. This is all I know to do, to build from flesh and discourse an alter at the open entry of my heart. To crown you the open sky through which every leg of light must wade before resting its tired feet.

“the presence among us / of the unfenced Is”<sup>32</sup>

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ensuring a large chunk of the US's Black population lives in poverty, which is to say, at the brink of life, and therefore fighting for our lives—and extends as far as the transnational weapons industry which produces the unnatural means by which so many across the globe have and will continue to die.

<sup>31</sup> Khalil Gibran wrote, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you . . . You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.” The real power of kinship (social and biological) has nothing to do with lineage or racial categories, but rather the chaotic chorography of spirit-matter begetting spirit-matter.

<sup>32</sup> This line is from the poem “All Praises” which appears in *How to Carry Water: Selected Poems of Lucille Clifton* (2020) gathered and tended by aracelis girmay.

“breaking hard against things, turning to burning reason this is you girl,  
this is the poem no woman ever write for a woman because she ’fraid to touch this river  
boiling like a woman in she sleep...”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This line is taken from page 7 of Dionne Brand’s book *No Language Is Neutral* (1990).



