

## Sisters Found and Chosen

R. Alexia McFee

## A Note

This is inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumb's M. Archive, not so much for its content (although it is extremely relevant) but for its form which I see as a decolonial practice of producing scholarship.

I hail it for the possibilities it opens up for persons who recognize how unsayable their truths are but nevertheless wish to share their memories in ways that resonate with those also struggling to be heard in environments that are inherently violent and unsafe

I recognize and acknowledge the arduous work of other critical beings such as Audre Lorde (Sister Outsider), Toni Morrison (The Bluest Eye), Barbara Smith (Home Girls), Warsan Shire (Teaching My Mother How to give Birth) and others whose badassery not only inspires us to look but inspire us to chart courses unallowed.

I recognize the Black, Women of Color and Third World Feminists who never allow us to forget but more importantly who push for rememory of our future and our imagined lives. This is why I write. This is why I am here.

The women whose spirits I invoke in my titles and footnotes represent the ground that has anchored me. I build from that ground. Some of them I have met, others I remember but all have helped me to imagine otherwise.

I honor them.

Nanny <sup>1</sup>

It is not like it is murder.

Shivers. The room is so small. It is so hot but I must be extremely cold. Shivers.

Lips twitching. Heart racing. Why is it so cold? \*breathes\*

Sit in that row, no, that one. Can they feel my eyes swelling, smell my fear....

Wait, are they talking to each other, laughing? And I shiver. Waiting to hear my name called up...

Waiting... to stand so close it was like being there again, that room, that car, that place, 2003, 2006. 2017...what even is the difference?

You say you are a lesbian, Defence might raise it in court and you know once the jury hears that

Wait. so I am rapeable?

Headline: [Moravian Church left battered and wounded, says acting president](#)

Headline after headline after headline. Out on bail. Threatening lawsuit. Next date 2020.

So tell us again, all the details. Did you notice any birthmarks?

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<sup>1</sup> Nanny of the Maroons is an iconic figure in Jamaican history. Much of what is known about her is from historical memory and folklore. Nanny sought refuge from slavery in the mountains of Jamaica and trained her warriors in the art of guerilla warfare to fight against the British from 1720-1739. Nanny is credited for passing down legends and encouraging the continuation of customs, music, and dance that had come with our people from Africa. Her spirit of freedom was so great that in 1739 when Quoa Signed the second peace treaty with the British Nanny disagreed with the principles which she knew meant another form of subjugation- she inspired the struggles to maintain the spirit of freedom and a life of independence which was a rightful inheritance. I invoke her spirit of resistance against the violence wrought against us and I begin with her as a way to place the contemporary manifestations of structural violence within a long history of slavery and colonization. Nanny is a sistah Chosen.

Take your clothes off. Don't mind the officers at the door, they have to witness this examination. Was there any oral sex (did she call it sex?). Anal? Its 14 years late but we have to do this to prove you are a woman and that your hymen is no longer intact.

We take a two-hour drive to the country. Sandwiched by officers. These are the scenes of subjection<sup>2</sup>. Are you sure this is where it happened? This house, this road, that year? It looks a little different from your statement. As if I counted the tiles as if I stopped to admire the paint.

You are a perpetual survivor and an emotional terrorist

You dont need drugs.

Why so much sex.

AND

In my dreams my peace plant is on fire, newborn babies talk and my toilet floods the house. Wake me up. Please.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Scenes of Subjection* Saidiya Hartman explores racial subjugation and the shaping of black identity during slavery and its aftermath. I cite her to bring into focus colonial formations, including of justice that facilitates the re-enactment and continued subjugation and violation of black women's bodies. While *Scenes* is written in the context of the US, I read it as applicable to other temporalities and geographies- in this case, the Caribbean where the 'justice' system remains rooted in colonial laws post-emancipation. *Scenes* offer useful insights for thinking through why survivors would endure the reproduction of their violence vis-a-vis redress, and why violence under this framework is inescapable

**4What justice wants \*\*\***

What justice wants  
But does not know how to give  
Itself  
Give away itself  
Roots from hollowed brown and black bodies  
Trunk from not much else  
The oxygen from these leaves\*\* poison

What justice wants  
But only takes  
Self  
Dignity  
Your humanity as it subjects  
You who are “violent”  
You- violated  
You dont get it (?)  
It only prosecutes

Under its weight  
Wait  
Years in the complex of bars and wires, ropes whips and rocks  
Wait  
Years waiting to testify to its weight.  
Labyrinth

Lose it  
Find webs and circles and spirals and breath<sup>5</sup>  
Find books not their books, bibles but not their faith  
And remember. You.

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Larasi is the Executive Director of IMKaan, the United Kingdom-based Black and Minority Ethnic women's organization which works to prevent and respond to violence against marginalized women and girls. My first contact with Maria was via twitter (on the advice of Tracy Robinson who I talk about next) in the heights of what felt like a very public undoing. Since then, Maria has been an essential part of my care web. She traveled to Jamaica numerous times and provided emotional support, we shared hundreds of texts and voice notes and calls; she interpreted dreams, prepared meals together, performed healing rituals at rivers, gave me feedback on writings, just listened, laughed and cried with me. I include her here because of all the ways she continues to save my life- asking for nothing in return. I honor her. She is a sistah found.

<sup>4</sup> I reflect on Tuck and Yang's What Justice Wants- its impossibility, whom it fails, what it lacks and how it might be reconceptualized and operationalized

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking with Leah Lakshmi and her notion of care webs as well as Alexis Gumbs and her focus on breathing as survival practices. Considering the inherent violence in the formal application of justice, I think about other practices that foster healing.

Tracy<sup>6</sup>

SOA<sup>7</sup> In VIEW

What about our young black girls and black boys. The children. The babies

Backra Massa<sup>8</sup> Calls it “sex with a person under the age of sixteen”.

the Rape that disheveled

Groomed to trust everything except the fire erupting inside

Taught to trust nothing that says you deserve something else

Because

How

Black girlhood is always suspect. Black girls are forced ripe<sup>9</sup>

So she consented. No, but she can't consent. That's what your law says. But this Pornotropic

GAZE<sup>10</sup>

robs black women and girls of complex personhood. Pathologizes - reduce women to the zone of the erotic. Forecloses the violence- amplifies - the sexual element.

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<sup>6</sup> Tracy Robinson is an attorney and a professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of the West Indies Mona. Tracy has produced legal feminist scholarship that maps the entanglements of race, gender, sexuality, and class in Jamaican legislation. I have named her here because of her work but more importantly because of the personal support she has offered and continue to offer to me as a survivor. Understanding the impossibility of justice, Tracy created for me, what she termed my ‘web of support’ consisting of women who were also surviving violence, women who could accompany me to court, women who I could call on to interpret dreams, women I could dance with and women who were willing to sit with me in silence. In the absence of juridical ‘justice’, I cite Tracy as a good practice. I claim her as a found sistah.

<sup>7</sup> The Sexual Offenses Act was passed in 2009 and is currently under review as the first stand-alone piece of legislation about sexual violence which had heretofore been part of the Offenses Against the Person Act which had been unaltered since 1864

<sup>8</sup> Backra Massa is a Jamaican (patios) term used to describe the slave master or any white person particularly one in a position of authority

<sup>9</sup> Force ripe or fouce ripe creole) is used mostly to describe fruits that have been overexposed to sunlight causing them to become ripe but lack nutritional content and taste. Forced ripe fruits are deficient, they are poor tasting and are easily discarded. Adults use the term to describe underage girls who they believe are initiating sexual activity with adult men (Gayle and Levy, 2009)

<sup>10</sup> Hortense Spillers’ Mama’s baby; Papa’s Maybe. An American Grammer Book

It is NOT SEX.

And what about boys, queer or cis-het\* men, transgender women? Cisgender women and girls forcibly penetrated by anything that is not the celebrated penis?

Well

This is how they insist on a heteronormative nation. They:

Say sex is the penetration of a vagina by a penis

Say rape draws its meaning from how sex is defined

Say oral penetration of the vagina is a crime

Say penetration of the vagina or anus by the fingers is a crime

Say Penetration of the vagina or anus by the use of an object is a crime

Say it. The repetition is important

Screw di dikes, di sodomites, di batty boy dem

Screw di kinks

Screw every “sex act” that cant reproduce

Screw you if you think you can give consent to what is ‘criminal’, and

Screw you if you think you can claim rape for any of what they name criminal when it occurs without your consent.

## Excerpts from my Diary

Like Cherrie Moraga, “I was raised to rely on my sister, to believe sisters could be counted on ‘to go the long hard way with you.’” I was raised to know this by my grandmother, my aunts, my mother, and my sisters bound by blood: my sister, 11 years elder, whose constant, warm touch was respite to a young girl, her support unwavering, genuine, and unadorned, the sweetest and simplest words of encouragement and affirmation; my sister, who grew with me, (bitterly) shared with me, bawled with me, tied to me in a subtle closeness bound up in the unspoken, with bridges we still have to walk together; and my baby sister, who, five-years-old called me home when I was 18, coming out gay, both lost and confused, defiant and exploring, her sweet hands on either side of my face, asking me “Shelly, when are you coming home? Are you sleeping on the road?”

I was also raised to know this by sisters found and chosen: childhood and adolescent mischievousness, carefree together, burdened together; taking each other’s burdens as our own, taking each other’s aunties, fathers, families as our own, giving each other love as our own, wrapped up together in the one sheet, one bed, one another, the friendships of girls finding themselves through each other, those girlhood friendships that can turn years apart into long night conversations. Girlhood friendships defiant of the ways we were supposed to see each other, too damaged, too different, or too much to be good; when we decided we needed something in each other more than we needed to make sense together. Girlhood friendships that brought us into womanhood, ride or die. When needs, desires, fantasies, wants, all the pleasures we weren’t supposed to indulge in were only responded to with questions of who, when, where, how do we live the lives we want to... not why. When we know how to offer forgiveness, to shed shame, have no fear of judgment, when we find souls, mates, persons in boundaries, borders, unexpected, sometimes unallowed. Who are we to love each other so? We were told this love belonged to lovers, the terrain where true commitment belongs, the boundaries of who we can be wrought out of not only who we can love, but how we can love. I have loved my sisters how I have loved my lover and have known how to do justice to my love in this world because of how we girls have loved each other. Because of this girlhood love, I find the women in my life in each other.

But I also have found that I have sisters in other capacities. I have found sisters in groups of women where we may not have liked each other. WE had found ourselves together because of the social violences that forced us to know ourselves in each other. WE had found each other

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<sup>11</sup> WE” is intentionally capitalized in homage to the organization several of us founded in 2015, WE-Change (Women’s Empowerment for Change).



because we each had a story and an experience that was debilitating. WE were black women brought together sometimes by black girlhood love, but also brought together by the violences that black womanhood has had to bear. WE knew, no matter our affection for each woman among us, that we had to be the ones to hold each other up, because we could not depend on the systems and institutions to be accountable to the violence we faced or to make accommodations to the ways we found to survive the violence we had experienced. In this expanded sisterhood, WE knew at least there was a ground to lay on and bawl, a woman to hold space when there were no words to make sense of hurt, someone who was aware of the impact and significance of the pain we felt. WE found ourselves building a movement. WE did not set out to be feminists. What WE felt was deeply personal and what was built came from realizing that each of us were not the only ones who had experienced these things, that our responses needed to accommodate all the different ways WE as women had experience violation, and do that work until our violation was no longer so.

WE learnt what so many black women had learned before -- this is how WE find ourselves and each other. This is how WE become black feminists from the rawness of the violation and the realization that the singularity we felt was not ours alone to bear; the shame thrust upon us did not come from within; that we were not culpable for the violence brought upon us; that there were tools through which we could name these violences, mark the ways in which these violences marked each of us, and then agitate. Excerpts from my diary look like the “Combahee River Collective Statement” before I had ever read it: “if we come at it from the fringes as black lesbian women in Jamaica we will find the anomaly, and in creating a response to that anomaly, we will create a response that will include everyone.”

WE found ourselves as feminists together, trying to find responses that could accommodate our needs, together, but different. In words similar to Audre Lorde, WE were black women together, but different, WE were black queer women together, but different, aware of these differences, but finding a way together. So WE had hoped, but there was denial in the fractures of our difference.