

LUCAS DE LIMA

SPIRITUAL BLUEPRINTS IN THE TIME OF RUPTURE



In her essay "[The Work of the Witness](#)," Sarah Aziza considers what it is to witness from an active position. For Aziza, the commitment to witnessing moves beyond passive, abstract feelings when it "insists on embodiment, on sacrifice, mourning and resisting what is seen." Aziza writes, "To be a witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch." She concludes with a sentence that sheds light, that bleeds as much as it orients: "Broken by what we see, we become rupture incarnate."

Aziza reveals, for me, the only tenable state of being as someone living in the west. Like her, I cannot simply bear witness. I cannot sever myself from the atrocities my taxes are funding, horrors that are themselves an extension of endless ongoing catastrophes, including the invasion of Turtle Island, US interventionism across the Global South, and a climate collapse driven by military emissions. As

I push against the normalization of bloodshed, I have to respond with a degree of accountability beyond allyship. In my grief I sit with the fact that I, too, am marked by empire. To embrace rupture as Aziza proposes, I turn to writers and artists who behold these catastrophic times not in a vacuum, but rather as a turning point in the history of western imperialism.

In the work of Jenni(f)fer Tamayo, Kamau Brathwaite, and Levani, the violence of the west is spiritual as well as political, and therefore must be met in kind. Just as the word for witness in multiple languages draws on the sacred, the poems and film discussed below enact rituals for navigating the 21st century's accumulating calamities. Here, ritual makes possible a necessary explosion of scale that the secular idea of bearing witness cannot hold. Once tied to the testimonial oath, the western notion of the witness shed its theological roots with the rise of modern legal procedures. Premised on a distance between violence and the reader/spectator, the voyeurism of the secular witness is what Tamayo, Brathwaite, and Levani each unravel through the sheer expansiveness of spirit worlds. In these capacious yet intimate worlds, poetry and film exert gravitational pull, closing the gap between the body and its audience. By bringing spirits to life through the senses, ritual enlarges art's relational space, producing blueprints for revolutionary consciousness that prove too immersive to be voyeuristically consumed.

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A 40-page poem by writer, artist, and performer Jenni(f)fer Tamayo, "Dora, the Dog Fucker" crisscrosses oral history with the protagonist from the animated children's series *Dora the Explorer*. Included in Tamayo's unpublished manuscript *DORA*, the poem orbits a harrowing memory of a woman in a Colombian town. As the speaker's mother tells it, the woman suffers a fatal infection after being bit by rabid dogs. Instead of coming to the woman's aid, the town watches her undergo physical and mental decline. The community lets her die, ultimately blaming her for playing with the dogs and feeding them scraps.

What follows is an homage to the woman and her refusal to distance herself from stray dogs—to sever herself from feral life, in other words, as per colonial understandings of the human. Upon concluding that the anecdote is “about how we are trained to abandon each other,” the speaker imagines a resuscitation of the infected:

And rabies *is* transmitted through saliva so the womangirl's screams and wails were literally poison scattered in the air

Her spittle like a toxic rain waiting to enter us

Animating contagions, Tamayo excavates a kaleidoscope of stories within the story of the “zombiewomangurl,” refracting the gendered, colonial narratives therein. As saliva lubricates the text, the speaker’s fixation on and desire for the dog figure tears a hole in space and time. Scrambling species hierarchy, “Dora, the Dog Fucker” moves through the waves of intersectional violence that flow from the western human project, touching on rape and the vengeful wishes that the speaker expresses in therapy, the invasion of Muisca and Chibcha lands, and the colonizer’s extermination of Indigenous people and consumption of their nonhuman kin. “This is the price of violence—you must witness it,” Tamayo writes, even as the poem’s inhabitation exceeds the act of witnessing. Alternating between breathless blocks of text and individual lines surrounded by white space, “Dora, the Dog Fucker” speaks from a vortex of its own making. As words snake, stutter, accrete, and recoil on the page, the poem performs the body inside of it, accelerating and slowing down a life-current forged in brutality and reimagined kinship.

I’ve been blessed to see Tamayo perform their poem twice now. Each time they held the room rapt, as if releasing the visceral world contained in the text. An act of unleashing, “Dora, the Dog Fucker” calls to mind Aisha Beliso-de Jesús’s description of “brujx gestures [that] intervene, push, block, and open social

forces in the material world.”¹ While fleeting, the bruix’s rituals have the power to guide us in the deepest sense, offering immersive spiritual maps for invoking and torquing energy amid the devastations of systemic collapse. Wrested from the colonial imaginary, zoonotic viral disease becomes the lowly portal into which Tamayo initiates their audience, demonstrating the resourcefulness of the body/spirit when liberated by a narration from below. Sketching a horizon wherein community must be borne of destruction, the poem ends with an abolitionist call, an unforgiving spell:

DORA, DORA GO EXPLORA
DORA, YOU ARE NOT FORGIVEN
I WILL PLACE THIS WRETCHED GRAVE
INSIDE UR LIL BELLY
PILE THE DIRT UNTIL YOU BLOAT
[PILE THE DIRT UNTIL YOU BLOAT -
LET this Worl go up in smoke
Place my name inside your throat
Thorns so sharp I’ll make you choke
Make my Revenge your scared ode
End the world make it explode] ²

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Like Tamayo, the late Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite mines myth, history, and folklore in “Défilée,” a poem from *Words Need Love Too* written in the voice of a heroine of the Haitian Revolution. Known as Défilée-la-folle (Défilée the Madwoman), Marie Sainte Dédée Bazile made a living by selling provisions to

1 Jesús, Aisha M. Beliso-De, ‘Bruix: An Afro-Latinx Queer Gesture’, in Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, and Mérida M. Rúa (eds), *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader* (New York, NY, 2021; online edn, NYU Press Scholarship Online, 20 Jan. 2022).

2 I am grateful to Tamayo for letting me quote their unpublished poem.

soldiers who rose up against slavery. After serving the troops of Jean-Jacques Dessalines—a leader of the revolution who would go on to become Haiti’s first ruler—Dédée plays the role of Dessalines’s undertaker when the latter is killed and dismembered by a crowd. According to historical accounts, it is Dédée who collects Dessalines’s mutilated body parts and brings them to their burial place, the act of which inscribes her in collective memory.

Taking liberties with the mythos surrounding Dédée’s life, Brathwaite recasts her as a meat-seller and Dessalines’s lover. As the poem interweaves fictional details with biographical evidence, including the rape Dédée suffered at the hands of her enslaver, adaptation raises the stakes of ritual integration:

the meat they make of you i cannot sell
 tho i sell sutler meat at Ogoum all my life
 the fragments of yr body’s dream i can but touch
 O cruel piece by piece i can but gather from the entrail

Just as Dédée picks up her lover’s body parts, “Défilée” pieces the bloodied world together: an image of scissors, placed in the middle of the poem, suggests the effect of collage. Assembling biographical and ancestral references such as the warrior-spirit Ogun, the legend of Dédée turns as grotesque as it does spiritual via mentions of Dessalines’s dismembered dreaming body. Reimagining ceremonies in which offerings of food allow the living to communicate with the dead, the poem assimilates flesh through enjambment and sparse use of periods, activating a visual, sonic, and gustatory economy. Amplified through and beyond the senses, this is a cosmology in which the story of modernity pivots on the glory, promise, and aftermath of Black self-emancipation. If the Haitian Revolution eludes the archive as a silenced, unthinkable event, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues,³ Brathwaite writes out of that silence, underscoring Haiti’s role as a cradle of ancestral life as well as a laboratory of empire and site of the

3 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event.” *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. 70-107.

largest enslaved uprising. Upending his training as a historian, Brathwaite gifts us with an experiential retrieval of the past:

Now sit i down beside you in yr pool of blood
w/seven wailer demons in my head, poor fool
to let them fling you down like this from yr high

horse, yr vision of a people marching on out of this
dungeon hearse of slavery into some proper light

Performed in lines that bleed into each other, Dessalines's burial is a ritual of rememory⁴ that links the cosmic and the carnal. Upon "witchering [herself] like blackbirds on the floor," Dédée gathers Dessalines's parts and entrails one by one, entrancing the reader piecemeal into the cavities of revolutionary memory. The fact that this memory is embodied in death/carried within spirit life is key. "Défilée" places us inside the enfleshment of Haiti's freedom at the same time as the poem grieves the latter as an unrealized, violently thwarted vision. Used to invoke the divine in ancient Greek poetry, the apostrophe becomes secular over the course of the western lyric's trajectory, reduced to a cry of longing for an absent something or someone in the human or natural world. Brathwaite's use of apostrophe, in this sense, heightens absence alongside presence. In summoning Dessalines, the last stanza reroutes the lyric's sacred origins. In "Défilée," the apostrophe's reenchantment draws on Afro-Caribbean spirit worlds rather than Homer as a source:

let me ride with you général. let me ride with you

in these dark eyes i will restore

in this fine head i plant here in this place of burial

4 In a [posthumous essay](#) Toni Morrison defines rememory as the act of "recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past."

O Dessalines O Dessalines gangan

O magic makandal & sun & flag

plaçage . nanchon

As part of ritual, Dédée's wish to ride with Dessalines alludes to more than mounted combat. Across the Caribbean and Latin America, African-rooted notions of spirit possession are often understood through the sexually charged metaphor of a spirit riding or mounting a horse. The yearning to ride with Dessalines in turn indexes possession religions in which the body, conceived as an open vessel, receives an outside presence. Just as a spirit is said to ride the head of an individual who is in a possessed state, Dédée tends to Dessalines's head with the aim of bringing about transformation. Notably, "Défilée" itself is transformed through Brathwaite's revision. In a reworking of the poem published in *Elegguas*, Dédée vows to "restore [the] ayisyen"—the Kreyòl word for Haitians—in Dessalines's head. In both versions of the text, Dédée apostrophizes him by various monickers, collapsing his name with the word for a Vodou priest (gangan). The lines that follow further expand the poem's range, encompassing François Mackandal (a priest and Maroon leader who preceded the revolution), informal marital relationships (plaçage), and the term for the nations or groupings of Vodou spirits (nanchon).

Refusing to sever Haitian liberation from its spiritual foundations, "Défilée" unravels not just lyric poetry's secularization but also its sensory deprivation, that is, the denial of the spiritual as a form of perception. As Dédée grieves Dessalines and cares for his corpse, her ritual animates the past by taking the senses to their limits. Invited into narration, spirit life peers out of death's sensory overload. To re-member appendages, then, is to show how embodied spiritual practice brings us ever closer to revolution's carnality, cosmology, and potentiality. Published in 2000, "Défilée" pronounces the decline of the west that increasingly marks this century. By exploiting the spiritual/political

vacuum left by this decline, Brathwaite's late work in particular lays out cosmic pathways for building revolutionary consciousness beyond the Global North's secular stranglehold. After all, one catalyst of the Haitian Revolution was a ritual performed in 1791 during the Bois Caïman gathering—an offering to the female spirit Erzulie Dantor that impels us to this day.

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If Tamayo's and Brathwaite's poems ritualize memory's incarnation, Levani's short film *a spell: xvi. the tower* magnifies spirit life below the flesh. A Georgian artist based in New York and Tbilisi, Levani screened the film as the centerpiece of their [2023 show at Turley Gallery](#). While the title refers to the tarot card depicting a tower, the appearance of a quote by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector in the film's opening sequence instantly zooms from the colonized skyline to the level of the cell: "All the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born." True to Lispector, *a spell: xvi. the tower* oscillates between two disparate scales—one cosmological, the other cellular. Throughout this oscillation, the body's fertile depths press up against footage of an actual tower recorded in the spring of 2020.

For the better part of 20 minutes, the Empire State Building flickers on screen. Destabilized and rendered malleable, the iconic skyscraper takes on the body's capacity for change. Blurred, magnified, multiplied, and flipped upside down, the Empire State Building is altered through an Instagram filter, subjected to the grainy quality of Super 8 film. Spliced with clips of cells forming synapses with one another, the New York skyline eventually coalesces with cellular life, turning the image red. As with the film's other amalgamations, the effect is discordant yet hypnotic. Amid excerpts of interviews with artists and writers such as SOPHIE and bell hooks, tracks by MikeQ, Arca, Shygirl, Sinéad O'Connor, and Tamriko Chokhanelidze, among others, provide a dizzying musical layer. Singing and speaking across genres, geographies, and racial/sexual margins, the film's interlocutors address topics ranging from humor's role in the revolution to the desire to "see a bitch let it all out." As narrators and muses, they collectivize,

reclaiming creative authority. Meanwhile, dissonant ambient sounds punctuate the visuals, blending distortion with the squeak of air horns in honor of essential workers.

Like cells making connections with each other, creating neural pathways, the melding of images, muses, and sounds in a *spell: xvi. the tower* offers yet another example of how spiritual space bridges the incommensurable. Integration, here, opens the door to rupture and rebirth. As permeable cells invade the closed systems and vertical structures of western capitalist cisheteropatriarchy—what Brathwaite in his late writings called the ‘manscape’ of ‘missilic consciousness’—new embodiments emerge on and off the latex, skin-like screen on which the film was originally projected. It is significant, then, that Levani dedicates their film to Rachel Pollack, a celebrated tarot expert and designer who died in 2023. In the interview that opens the film, Pollack links transness and transformation, introducing the threads that follow. She explains the tower card in light of her coming out as transgender lesbian: “The tower is the place where positions change between male and female. It’s also the card that comes right after the devil. Something shocking can happen. It’s not a nice experience, but it liberates you.”



Photo by Spencer House Studio. Image courtesy the artist and TURLEY Gallery.

It turns out that we are not the only spectators to Levani's film. Between the walls of the gallery, the fall of the tower—the uprooting of violent foundations—has already made room for liberated flesh in the form of “zoomorphic hybrid deities.” According to the exhibition text, the sculptures facing the screen and spread around the gallery consist of handmade, sourced, and found primal materials spanning wood, stone, plasma, glass, protein, flowers, and steel. The fruit of mutinous spirits who can only be projected on screen, these bodies improvise utopia, materializing out of recycled objects organic and synthetic. As beings tethered to the world of the film who “stand for queer resilience and spiritual awakening,” they do much more than simply bear witness as they fuse the sacred and the erotic, with one sculpture going by the name of the goddext. Blooming out of the film's mergings, such collapse of opposites cannot but reflect interviewee hannah baer's description of transness, bodies, health, and sickness as terms “riddled with contradiction.” Just as baer suggests that “being able to face [this contradiction] quite fearlessly becomes a place of power,” Levani's hybrid deities are unapologetic in their conflation of self-making and world-building. Desire—so deeply embodied that it reaches the cell—becomes the seed of a revolution that is already here in its dire need to be individually and collectively born.

Or in the lyrics of porn star Gracie Jane, sung in the film under the pulsating glow of an outdoor rave,

I don't need therapy.

I just need surgery.