

# The Trophallaxis Study Group

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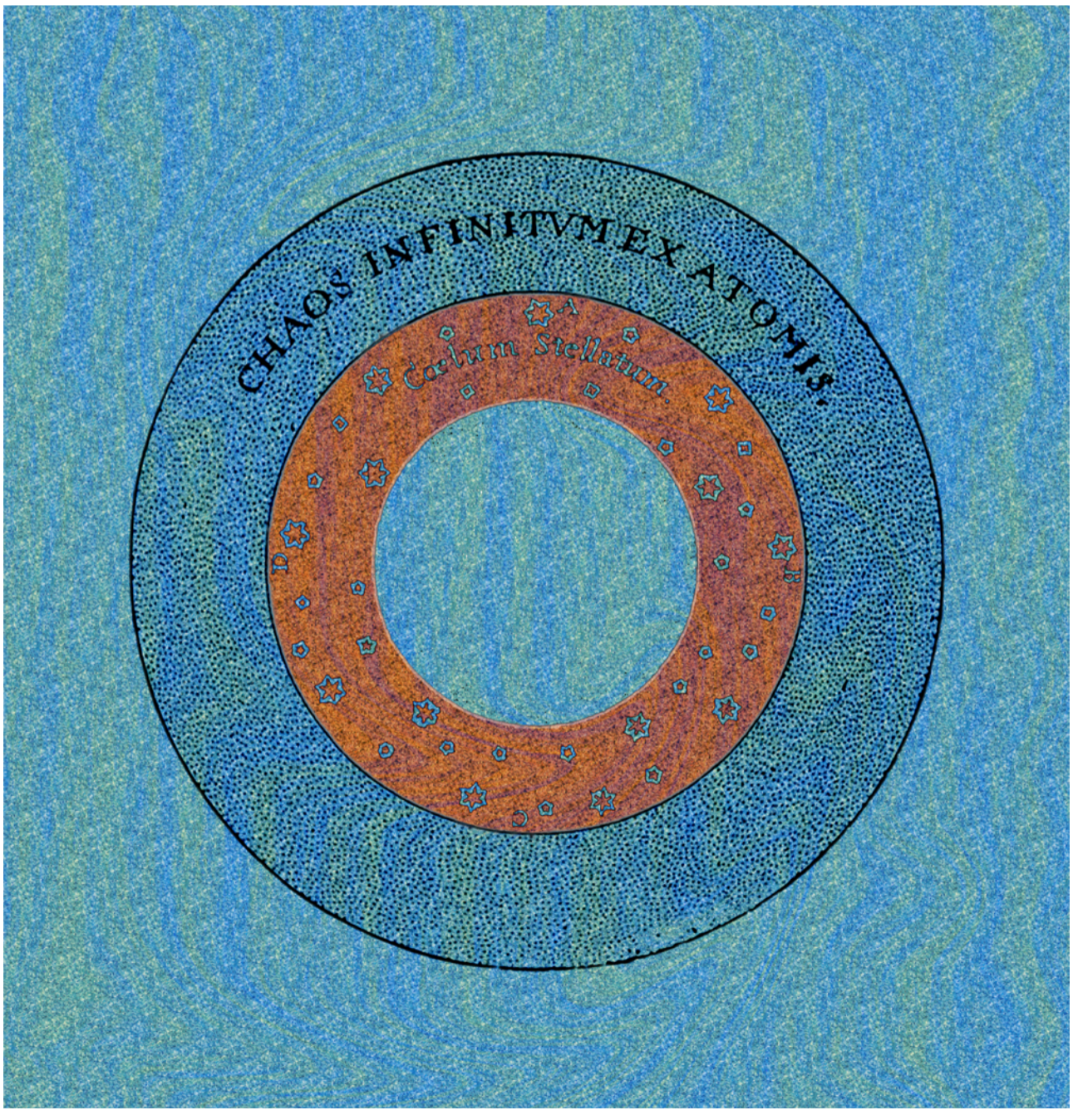


Image credit: Democritus' atomistic universe as depicted in a book published in England in 1672. Outside the planetary system (dark) is the stellar sphere, surrounded by a chaos of atoms moving randomly in infinite space.

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# Study Group The Tropics axis

What might be the rationale for a *hesitant sociology*<sup>1</sup>?  
If such an act could ever exist.

And, could we perceive this event in our everyday life?  
Waiting to be indexed.

Perhaps, located in the suspended relief of the *ginga*<sup>2</sup> before the strike...  
Or, laid bare in the refrain on the sheet music of the ensemble before the coda.

Could it be exemplified in the form of a gesture?  
Or, would it need more temporal room to rebound off linear time?  
Cataloging memory in a present-perfect tense, through reconstructions,  
offered to an audience, this time, with a dramaturgical prompt to increase  
the capacity for more life with each re-performance.

Perhaps, this *otherwise*<sup>3</sup> is a textual mutiny. Tagging the walls and the  
mouths of the non-converted with vocabularies that share how to ambu-  
late around, and through, the grasp of genre.  
Consequently, forming collective containers wherein members compose  
citational loopholes, from the *here-now*<sup>4</sup>, with coordinates to, the  
*t h e n - h o w .*

Practice, in this way, is a double-bind that produces an accumulation of  
friction through the negotiation of a public comprehension and a private  
undoing. A simultaneity conducted in proximity to everyone and every-  
thing else.

Like, an overexposed image<sup>5</sup>.  
A transparent celluloid<sup>6</sup>.

Or, like a plenum or “fullness” – from English “plenty”, cognate to “full”  
related to kenophobia, Greek in origin, meaning a fear of the empty.

1 “Why do not Sociologists state their object simply and plainly?” W.E.B. DuBois, *Sociology Hesitant*. *boundary 2*, Vol 27.3 (2000) 37-44. Elsewhere referred to as *hesitant sociology* by Fred Moten. See, <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/academic-information/centers-institutes/flexer-lecturership/lectures-overview-hesitant-sociology-blackness-poetry>

2 See the Maroon population practices within the Quilombos of Brazil, <https://www.smithsonian-mag.com/smithsonian-institution/capoeira-occult-martial-art-international-dance-180964924/>

3 See Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenel Navarro, Andrea Smith, *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (2020) <https://www.dukeupress.edu/otherwise-worlds>

4 See more on Black Temporal Metaphysics, Ashon Crawley, *Against Water Shutoffs and Occupation* (2014) <https://ashoncrawley.com/blog/tag/Detroit>

5 For more on color theory and image, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) <https://tupress.temple.edu/books/the-black-female-body>

6 For more on visibility and image, Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (2017) <https://www.dukeupress.edu/listening-to-images>

# Study Group

# The Tropics Axis.

Emerging in physics as horror vacui, or plenism, referred to in the phrase “nature abhors a vacuum”<sup>7</sup>. And attributed to Aristotle, who hypothesized nature contains no vacuums as *denser surrounding material continuums would immediately fill the rarity of an incipient void*.

In this, Aristotle foreshadows fundamental pillars to Western onto-epistemological philosophy<sup>8</sup> which make necessary the individual, and the dominance of that subject by, in this example, *he* who claims the void as “separable”.

The *void*,<sup>9</sup> as a determined and divisible thing from its’ witness, the rational subject, who may identify it as nothing, coterminous with Plato’s assessment that *nothing cannot rightly be said to exist*.

Such an equation of value brutally unearths the human species from the *terra preta*. From within the plenum of biodiversity in order to produce an equation of value where the rule of 1, the human, is that of the dominant and singular. To be, or “I am”, the transparent *I*<sup>10</sup>, or (+1), as an identified atomic unit nimbly scaling up to the unit of the individual.

James Clerk Maxwell’s 1961 paper, *On Physical Lines of Force*,<sup>11</sup> attempts to determine the atomic structure of a plenum by investigating the trajectory of light emissions by the sun in the solar system. His findings bring him to construct a diagram of the Milky Way Galaxy as an aether of directional streams of solar matter bifurcating in randomized patterns, zig-zagging across the container of the galaxy; *e x p a n d i n g ad infinitum*.

What might this omnidirectional choreography of the sun’s rays speak back to us and our sciences of cultural gathering?

What could the unaccounted for, in this case of the plenum, reveal regarding contemporary rubrics of identification, representation and inclusion? And, why might the will to not be accounted for as *the one*, *a=a*, require protection?

7 More on the developments of the vacuum as naturally occurring, <https://news.tulane.edu/Roll-over-Aristotle-nature-doesn't-always-hate-a-vacuum>.

8 For a re-contextualizing of the fundamental of Western thought, see Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (2022) <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9783956795428/unpayable-debt/>

9 For more on the variable of the void, *x*, see Nahum Chandler, *X—THE PROBLEM OF THE NEGRO AS A PROBLEM FOR THOUGHT* (2013) <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823254071/xthe-problem-of-the-negro-as-a-problem-for-thought/>

10 In late 1700’s, many famous philosophers (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) held the ‘transparency thesis’, the view that all important mental contents could only be conscious. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-representational/>

11 James Clerk Maxwell, *On Physical Lines of Force*, March 1861. <https://www.math.ucdavis.edu/~temple/MAT22C/MaxwellOnPhysicalLinesOfForce.pdf>

# Study Group The Trophallaxis

What could this affective slippage towards  
desiring to  
*be with*  
rather than  
*for*

reveal within its linguistic operation about a potential antidote to the over-determination of man<sup>12</sup>?

Within the title of this exhibition, *Trophallaxis*, is derived from the Greek trophé, meaning ‘nourishment’ and ‘allaxis’ meaning ‘exchange’. Introduced by the entomologist William Morton Wheeler<sup>13</sup> in 1918. It is defined as the exchange of food, fluids, and trigger chemicals through actions of tactility and scent emission, and aids in the homeostasis of a population in acquiring sustenance, communicating essential needs and avoiding predators within their given ecosystem. Commonly, the term is used in the natural sciences in reference to colonies of insects. Predominantly, ants and bees.

To presuppose negation and become a thing amongst things, (+) and (-)<sup>14</sup> simultaneously, *The Trophallaxis Study Group* assembles its participating researchers, Marguerite Angelica Monique Hemmings, jah elyse sayers, Winter Rae Schneider, and Jonathan González as curator, within the Vox galleries and Black Box spaces, and with the Vox community and visitors to engage in original works of printed matter, performance, film, sculpture, soundscapes and participatory engagements that animate the interstices of contemporary topics on the intra-mural, communal and inter-special.

Prior to the public opening, research has been shared in-process through two closed gatherings. These gatherings operate as an experiment in engendering what we term,

*c r o s s - p o l l i n a t i o n* ,  
or pliability to each project as effectible by the group.

<sup>12</sup> “If Césaire called in 1946 for a new science of the Word, a science therefore of our dual descriptive statements and thereby of our modes/genres of being human, doing so from the perspective of a poet—in 1988, the physicist Hans Pagel would make a parallel call in his 1988 book *The Dream of Reason: The Computer and the Rise of the Sciences of Complexity*. His call, too, was for a new frontier to be opened onto a nonadaptive mode of human self-cognition: onto the possibility, therefore, of our fully realized autonomy of feelings, thoughts, behaviors. The true leap, Fanon wrote at the end of his *Black Skins, White Masks*, consists in introducing invention into existence. The buck stops with us.” *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument*, Sylvia Wynter, *The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337

<sup>13</sup> See, *Encyclopedia of Social Insects*, pp 972–976, [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-030-28102-1\\_130](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-030-28102-1_130)

<sup>14</sup> For use of numerical sociological metaphor, see Denise Ferreira Sa Silva, 1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: *On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value* (2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>

# The Trophallaxis Study Group

Occluding the position of the solutionary, or the vanguard, The Trophallaxis Study Group assembles its participating cohort from intellectual traditions and para-traditions of history, geography, performance, pedagogy, and civic practice to contemplate experimentation through the point of engagement as the beginner. We do this by taking up new skills and cultivating study from this role of the amateur. Permitting a departure from each researchers' traditional training and usual methods of practice.

Veering past the specter of the artist and their political economy of circulation, this exhibition and study group aims to bring the attachments to terms like artistic value, cultural production, mutuality, and the creative product into crisis<sup>15</sup> as it ushers in a series of potentially new, unfinished narratives about our conditions of possibility.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For a steadier critique on the coeval histories of cultural production and the modern capitalist state, see Charisse Burden-Stelly, *The Modern Capitalist State and the Black Challenge: Culturalism and the Elision of Political Economy* (2016) [https://escholarship.org/content/qt2gs4b7z3/qt2gs4b7z3\\_noSplash\\_3a3688cf56caa588e87ac34384a8ab66.pdf](https://escholarship.org/content/qt2gs4b7z3/qt2gs4b7z3_noSplash_3a3688cf56caa588e87ac34384a8ab66.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Or, *Bedingungen der Möglichkeit*, "condition of possibility", made popular by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. See also Michel Foucault's, "episteme". In regards to this usage riffing upon the contemplations of an insurgent aesthetics, see Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*.(2018) <https://www.dukeupress.edu/designs-for-the-pluriverse>



# light escapes (one)



Photo of uprooted tree in Lindenvold, NJ, 2022.

We celebrate what happens in our internal, unseen, liminal, psychic, psychological worlds.

They have come out of the ground for us to see.

We have been uprooted. Hooray!

We dine, dance, and laugh with what's been haunting us. tell stories. move. make image, move image, imagine. feed unseen. be fed by unreal.

## Unreally real . Unruly, even .

We're citing the stories and experiences that happened in and around our immigrant Jamaican-Caribbean household/identity. We are citing our imaginary friends. Our escape routes. Our nightmares. Our storytime, conversation, memory, and dreaming as we grew up uprooted, addicted to escape. I remember story times were imaginative, dissociative, terrifying. Usually happening at dusk, at dinner tables, in living rooms, in bedrooms as children entered the state between waking and sleep. What did these storytimes feed our child brains?

# light (one) escapes

: Limbic brain. Limbo. : social, spirit, emo brain :  
help the community survive brain : I like this. Do I  
know not to like this? : desire, i don't know, brain. :

Where we make the unconscious conscious. Where we confess our  
shame and sin to the Jonkanoo, the real syncretic priestx.

We're being haunted by all these old shames. Colonial monsters. And  
their sins.

But we're also haunted by other things. Communications from other spe-  
cies and ancestors. And other entities that operate through an infinite  
breadth of mathematics. A breadth of logics, somatics, and technologies  
that disrupt those old colonial shames. We dig these up. And show our-  
selves.



Me and my two sisters are working together, one consciously, the other  
subconsciously. Youngest, middle, oldest.

The sister working consciously on this with me, Marsha, makes imag-  
es with oil paint on any surface that would oblige her hauntings. She  
paints of the invisible present, she figures blackness, anew. Colorfully.  
She builds worlds.

The sister working unconsciously with us, Melissa, taught me about  
image-based psychoanalysis during a late night conversation where she  
told me the story of finding her hidden impossible. This story-telling made  
me find mine.

And I write down my/our hauntings. I story-tell my multi. And make  
moving images with my body and my eyes, feeling what I don't see.

(one)

light

escapes

There was a night recently when we three stayed up late, talking, in our parent's home. In the living room. Lights were off because the kids were sleeping. We were talking in the liminal space. and marsha told me i don't need to hide. and melissa agreed. cuz even though i hide, they see me. salt water wells.

s h a m e  
r e -

moved.

I reminded melissa about the time she told me about her hidden impossible and how that story inspired me to find and write down my hidden impossible. And melissa re-membered and re-told her story right then, again, time collapsing, sweeping marsha in.

This night felt like a kind of neural trophallaxis. A neural sparking. Or a fire, working. A sharing of shadow sustenance. I wish I could see a map of our individual-collective neural constellations from that night. Maybe this work is an attempt at that.

Still from film What If/Not Ok, Marguerite AM.H., Danspace, 2021.



# We're all come the motto



“XII: Hanged Man/Is” Cobbs Creek, Philadelphia, May 29, 2021. Photo by author.  
Description: artist-hatched Chinese mantis suspended from Chrysanthemum flowers during a spring rain shower.

*“Those of us who are treated as natural commodities, particularly Black people (and more particularly the wombs of Black cisgender women), must see our inextricable link to the environment. Land-based politics grounded in a sustained and nurturing relationship with the natural world and in*

*protecting nature is a means of protecting ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson, 2018, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation*, p. 33.

# the welter come mantis

Myrmecologist<sup>2</sup> William Morton Wheeler introduced the term *trophallaxis* in 1918 to describe the transfer of regurgitated food and fluid-based information (e.g., hormones, chemical cues) between social insects. Wheeler's 1910 book *Ants*, which precedes the introduction of *trophallaxis*, opens with arguments toward the dominance of ants, inferiority of other insects, and "striking resemblances between human and ant societies" in ways that put forth stories and ideals about human life, non-human life, and social and environmental relations.<sup>3</sup> In entomology<sup>4</sup>, trophallaxis as a behavior and eusociality as a category of biosocial organization closely correlate. While the Greek prefix *eu* means "good," here it indicates the "highest level of organization of sociality" and "in the most refined cases—a biological caste system."<sup>5</sup> Biological sciences, as is true of other disciplines, articulate particular ways of knowing that reinforce and *are* culturally specific situated knowledges—despite claims and appearances of objectivity and universality. Following Fanon's *sociogeny*<sup>6</sup> (and Wynter's development of it<sup>7</sup>), I question how what is socially produced (i.e. situated knowledges) is naturalized as ontological (or simply *what is*, immutably) and in mutually constitutive relationship with race science, racial capitalism and attendant genocide and ecocide. All the while Katherine McKittrick's words (born themselves out of study of Wynter, Fanon, and Black livingness) echo in my head like they echo in *Dear Science*: "Description is not liberation."<sup>8</sup>

I utilize the space of the Trophallaxis Study Group to follow a line of flight from this reading of sociality by mapping the nurturing relationship between myself and a solitary insect (the spectral opposite of eusocial ants),

## the mantis

. I began raising mantises after growing quite attached to one that set up home in my Cobbs Creek backyard in August 2020, even flying into my kitchen once that September. 2020: a time of COVID-responsive shifts in collective social practices variously called distancing, remote, isolation, quarantine as well as seemingly individualized but highly situated experiences of what I variously called solitude, distance, lonely, alone, isolation.

<sup>2</sup> scientist specializing in ants

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 1: "Ants as Dominant Insects," pp. 1-12.

<sup>4</sup> biological study of insects

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, pages for "Sociality" and "Eusociality."

<sup>6</sup> *Black Skins, White Masks*, 1952.

<sup>7</sup> 1999, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black;'" 2003, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument."

<sup>8</sup> 2020, pp. 39, 44, 45, 128, and possibly elsewhere.

# We're all come the the mott



caption: Chinese mantis on power line in artist's backyard, Cobbs Creek, Philadelphia, August 21, 2020. Photo by author.

While I was struck by the magnitude of feeling that the late-fall departure of this first mantis provoked, Milford Graves' *A Mind-Body Deal* opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. I learned through the exhibit and subsequent dive into Graves' work that he, in his martial arts training, was denied entry into ethnically specific training spaces while simultaneously

reading about this so called grandmaster [who]'d be up in the mountains meditating, and he saw this and he saw that. [Graves] said, 'wow - I could do the same thing, man. I'll just go out in nature 'cause that's where they got it from.'

# the wavelcormolt

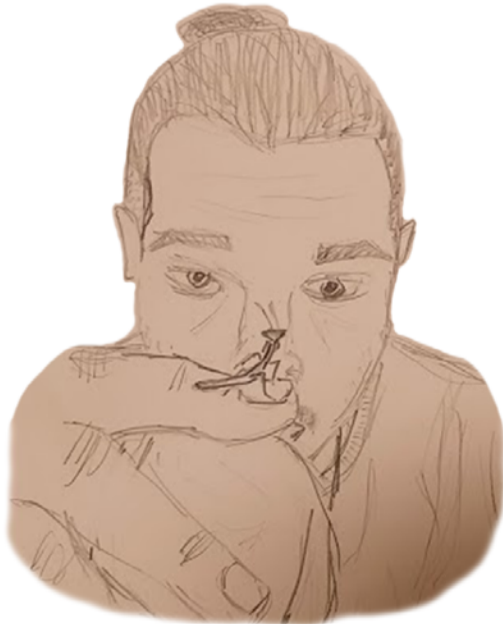
He ordered some mantises from a plant magazine and released them in his South Jamaica, Queens, backyard: “I’m going right to the praying mantis[...] going right to the source[...] It goes back to hanging out with nature.”<sup>9</sup> Graves developed the martial arts practice of Yara, composed of West African dance movement and observations from his *hanging out* and named for the Yoruba word for nimble.



description: crop of still from Full Mantis [film], 2018. Image includes the words “Yara - The Black Way of Self Protection” scrawled above Graves’ arm, outstretched in a left jab. Source:c.1969. Scan from Graves personal archive. Milford Graves, Askia Muhammed Toure, Maruin X, The Last Poets, Abdullah Ali Rahmam, Rashid Ail, Maxine Rayson, 5/31/69

When plant and seed magazines arrived at my home ahead of spring 2021 planting season, I followed Graves’ example and placed an order. 2022 marks my second year of hatching and hanging out with mantises. In *vivarium, suspended* I offer suspension as a technology for being in “sustained and nurturing relationship”<sup>10</sup> and “hanging out”<sup>11</sup> with mantises. Choose suspension over settlement. Sit with the sit-and-wait. Find shared time, shared measure.

description: sawers with mantis, 2021, sketch by author, after Danielle McKinney, Imagination, 2021.



Slip out of the dead skin of ill-fitting epistemologies and habits.

Welcome

the

molt.

9 “Milford Graves on Yara,” n.d., <https://www.milfordgraves.com/what-is-yara>.  
10 per Samudzi and Anderson in this essay’s epigraph  
11 per Graves, quoted above

So  
r  
o  
n  
u  
n  
s  
c  
o  
v  
e  
r  
s  
i  
n  
g

adrienne      maree      brown      wrote      that  
a   broken   heart   covers   more   ground.

In this moment, would it be possible to just *be*? How might it be possible to be, and to *be with*? Breathe, drink some water if you can, drop your shoulders, settle down. Furiously grinding thoughts,

unwind them,

breathe,

breathe,

breathe,

dispel. How might it be possible to be so still that you can feel your roots, such that they are? Tender, vital, blooded, roots. Pour yourself out every time taking stock makes your heart yelp.

Complete      the      gesture

where pain reverberates in your body, break down, give back to the dark and warm and quiet where we all meet.

We grieve those who gave us care, we grieve those we loved and lost, we grieve those we never had, or who we had but who we could not feel. We grieve, generously, those for whom holding and being held was a matter of terror and of sacrifice. We look for any nutrients that fed us well, and we discern what is ours to carry. We pour over the ground looking for evidence, of joy, of nurture, of care. We grieve understanding that wheat and chaff grow together, and that separating them is always a labor. We grieve those for whom we find no evidence. We pour ourselves out, as evidence.

I      make      a      home      for      myself  
in my longing just to be with you. I make home for myself in all that is left  
unsaid

as a matter of survival, letting it exist, listening. I clear a space for you and the grief you carry to set down. I heat water and pour out tea for you as many times as it takes to coax your presence. I make home with a willingness to care and to be changed by it. I make home with room to grow, with as much room as can grieve those for whom the conditions of giving care consumed their lives. I pour myself out to prepare the ground for us to be with one another. I will love you in this season and the next, and the next. I pray you receive      it.



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## ABOUT THE CURATOR

**Jonathan González** is an artist, scholar and educator based in Philadelphia, PA. Their practice examines conditions that figure Black life at the intersections of insurgent aesthetics, political economy, metaphysics and performance studies through research-based processes in live art, pedagogy, and time-based media, usually generated collaboratively. Their writings have been published by Cultured Magazine, deem journal, EAR|WAVE|EVENT, among others. They have received support from Art Matters Foundation, Foundation for Contemporary Arts and Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Their research has been supported by Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Center for Afro-futurist Studies, Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography, and Loghaven Artist Residency, among others.

More Info: [gonzalezinfo.com](http://gonzalezinfo.com)

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**Marguerite Angelica Monique Hemmings** is a performance artist/educator currently based in Philadelphia, USA. They focus on one's own body, one's own way of moving, and connecting to the unseen. They are a master of body ceremonies and a curator of vibes. As a choreographer they specialize in emergent, improvisational and social dance movement styles and technologies, rooted in the story of the African Diaspora. They are researching the ancestral and subversive role of dance and the dancer throughout the African Diaspora and look to conjure these technologies through all of their (present) work. Marguerite uses body, text, media, and moving images in their work. They direct a multimedia endeavor called *we free*, which looks at the millennial and gen z approach to liberation through its music, social dance and social media.

**jah elyse sayers** works toward spatial justice through research, writing, farming, building, teaching, organizing, and art-making at the intersections of environmental psychology, Black geographies, abolition geographies, urban studies, Black queer and trans studies, and embodiment. Their work draws on poetic, historical, and participatory methods to further struggles—especially Black queer and trans struggles—for liberatory placemaking against racial capitalism. Their writing has appeared in *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* and *BRICLab Essays*; they have performed at Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX); and have exhibited sculptural work at MetaDen. They are currently a PhD candidate in environmental psychology.

**Winter Rae Schneider** is a futurist from the Delaware Valley. They follow a path of liberatory praxis at the crossroad of storytelling, power, radical love and accountability. They have been and they continue to be schooled in interdisciplinary freedom technologies, and they claim an intellectual lineage of scholars and artists reckoning with history and yearning for the next world. Rooted in West Philly, they spend their time mothering, and designing containers for historical reckoning and relational healing as co-founder of the worker-owned co-op, *the Accountable History Network*. They teach a critical analysis of power and facilitate thinking about structural and embodied legacies of dispossession and colonization. They practice coalitional organizing with the Philly Revenue Project, the Our City Our Schools coalition and the PILOTs (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) campaign.

