The House that Rosette Built

Charlotte Henay

Charlotte Henay is Bahamian diasporic storyteller, multidisciplinary artist, scholar and Assistant Professor in Women's and Gender Studies at Brock University.
—chenay@brocku.ca

The House That Rosette Built

what cannot be burned | I remember
I am made of the things that do not that are not register
the silences in the archive
an archive
the unspoken
the unnamed I am made from
nothingness the repository of tomorrow and yesterday
bat in the house the mind questing after sperrit

I remember I am made from jay feather and trance stickiness moonlight blessings on the out
breath loose teeth from a quick backhand
too tight pants shoes secrets

I remember I am made from release
as a whisper
and that you must not know me since you have forgotten what I am capable of

When I began to think through sitting with my mother's bones as a practice of memorying, I realized that there was a necessary embodied component to the process. A protocol. That I had to go where she was, where all of my people's bones are, to consider what it meant to grieve this way – as a channel for sperrit – as an archive of ancestral stories. The process compounded my grieving. It also opened up a world of connections I had elided, that were a part of my own silencing and that of my grandmothers', too. This portfolio-piece asks how do we read into the absences in which we are transfigured?

They wanted, my grandmothers. They had things to say. This is a wanting not limited only to breath. It is not to be rushed. Neither is our grief. This piece demands sitting with grief, in it, as a vehicle for journeying, deepening. Deeper analysis must begin with how we relate to and care for each other. Deathwork is an act of co-creation and reciprocity. We never do our work alone. This is a calling in to create a circle of care, responding to the call to use imagination, empathy and dreaming to unshackle our relations in the futures we dream. Sitting with the dead is work in service to spirit (Hopkinson, 1998. P. 81).

I began talking to my grammies, I had to learn how to listen, build relationships. I asked what were/are they like? What is their history? How might they have felt in their living? I asked, and ask, what they would like. This led to the cacophony/polyphony I describe - writing in a way that is collective. The protocols develop in a process of hearing and seeing from, and in, other spaces, listening to voices through landscapes, spirits, and dreams. Iterations of field notes, archival photographs and documents, models/potential outcomes of chosen methods come together to serve as introduction to what I am calling mash-up methodology, where experimentation and adaptation of methods and reflection on the effects are recognized as forms of research. Bringing my people into the writing meant taking the work out of the footnotes, which had been my original intention, and putting it into the body of the text. I did the same with citations, paying attention to other ways that people are taking up ideas in writing. Citation weaves a web of intertextuality, intratextuality and relationality. Refuses disconnection.

THE DIOCESE OF THE BAHAMAS AND THE TURKS & CAICOS ISLANDS

ADDINGTON HOUSE
Sands Road
Telephone: (242) 322-3015, 6 or 7
(242) 356-4096 or 7
Fax: (242) 322-7943

P. O. Box N-656
Nassau, Bahamas
www.bahamasanglican.org
Email: diosec@batelnet.bs

What is left after death? Where can it be found?

Rosetta Agnes/ Archive: Witness

The Archives
Mackey Street
Nassau, Bahamas

Dear Sir/Madam,

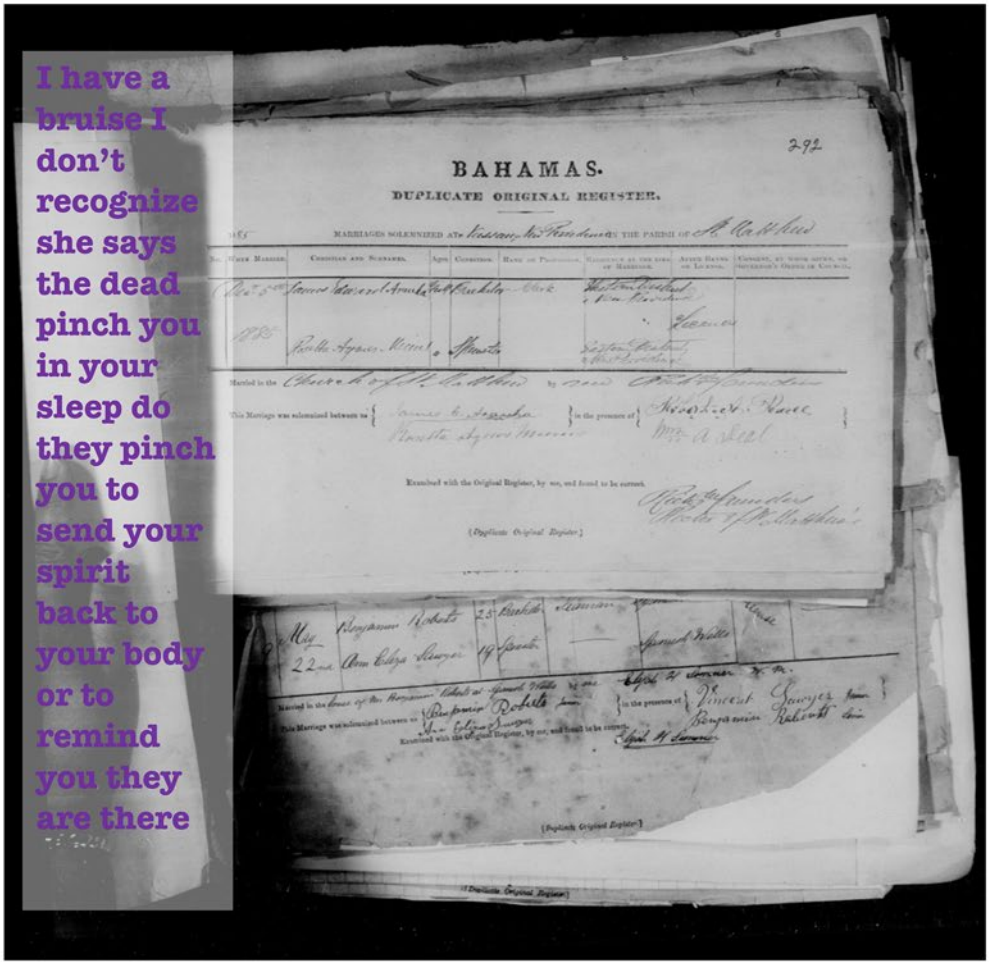
This letter authorizes you to allow Ms. Charlotte-Ann Henay access to the church records in your possession for the purpose of researching information.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

The Venerable James Palacious
ARCHDEACON FOR ADMINISTRATION

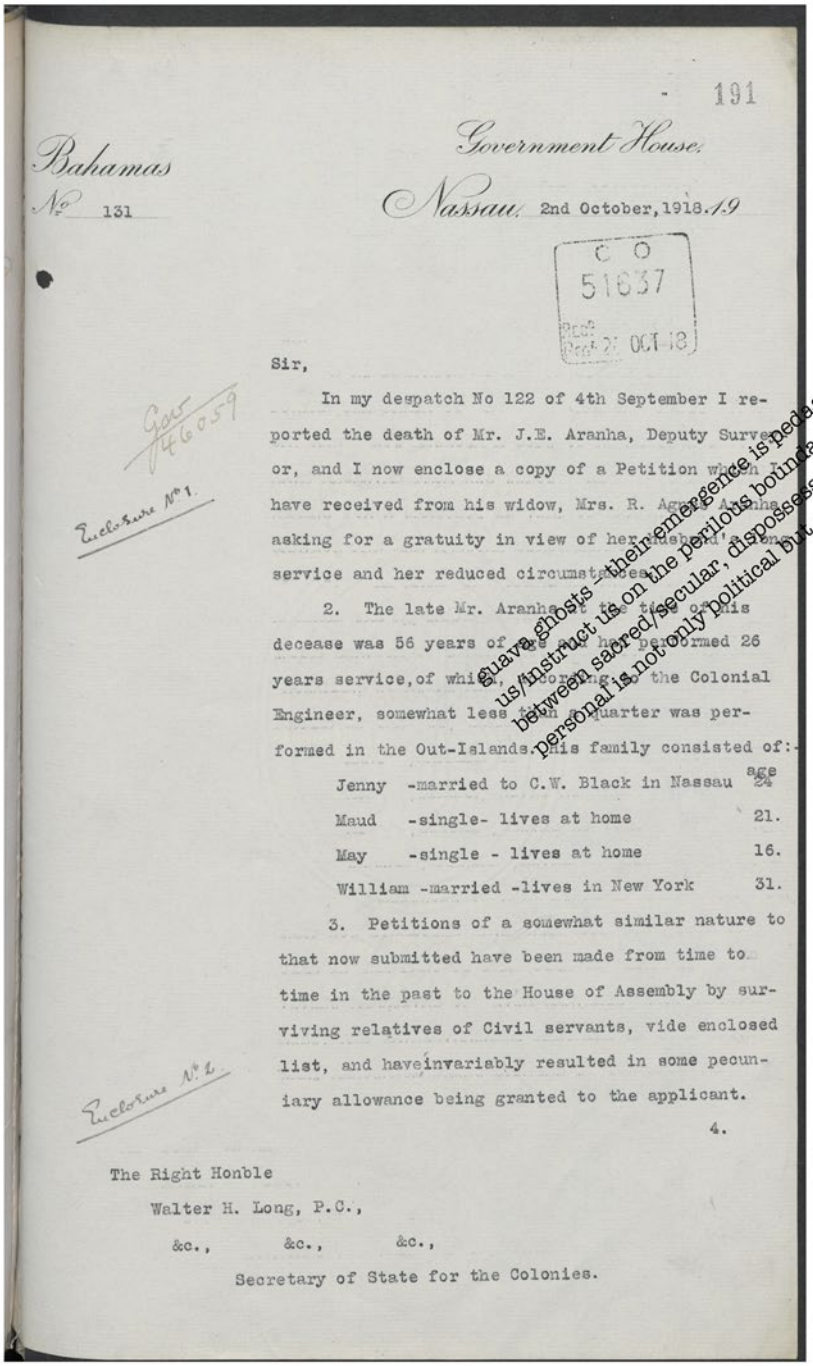
JP/lr



Ever since I was a child I have plied these sands ruthlessly digging big toe into crab holes at ebb tide seeking
sea snakes relatives my father
plastic buckets oil jugs coconut husks shampoo sargasso'ed remnants over honeycomb rock

Smile if you have a Bahamian passport there's us and then there's them
Investigation Deportation Haitian application section customs says so few days could be fourteen could be thirty that day on the hill designed to frustrate wait
fill out forms

We gat so much god there's no room for anything else



- 191

Bahamas

No 131

Government House,

Nassau, 2nd October, 1918. 19

C O
51637
Rec'd
Dec 27 OCT 18

Sir,

In my despatch No 122 of 4th September I reported the death of Mr. J.E. Aranha, Deputy Surveyor, and I now enclose a copy of a Petition which I have received from his widow, Mrs. R. Agnes Aranha, asking for a gratuity in view of her husband's long service and her reduced circumstances.

Gov 46059

Enclosure No 1.

2. The late Mr. Aranha at the time of his decease was 56 years of age and had performed 26 years service, of which, according to the Colonial Engineer, somewhat less than one quarter was performed in the Out-Islands. His family consisted of:-

	age
Jenny -married to C.W. Black in Nassau	24
Maud -single- lives at home	21.
May -single - lives at home	16.
William -married -lives in New York	31.

3. Petitions of a somewhat similar nature to that now submitted have been made from time to time in the past to the House of Assembly by surviving relatives of Civil servants, vide enclosed list, and have invariably resulted in some pecuniary allowance being granted to the applicant.

Enclosure No 2

4.

The Right Honble
Walter H. Long, P.C.,
&c., &c., &c.,
Secretary of State for the Colonies.

guava ghosts – their emergence is pedagogical, to teach us/instruct us on the perilous boundary keeping between sacred/secular, dispossession/possession...the personal is not only political but spiritual. *

James Edward was a womanizer and a philanderer.

LeRhonda Maignault-Bryant in *I Had a Praying Grandmother* makes a case for considering the knowledge passed on by black grandmothers as continuation of Black womxn's intellectual traditions…and sources of archival knowledge upon which we may draw. "Black women have negotiated in-between spaces– having to reconcile inherited knowledge w their experiences…spiritual identities tied to nearly four centuries of a black intellectual tradition comprised by oral teachings, writings, religious teachings and everyday activities, domestic arts."

Orality and performance treat the work differently, they intend and privilege trance induction - where the pieces and voices are echoing and in constant conversation - versus referenced on the page to recall belonging. Neither is linear, nor is the time of sperrit, they and it can be entered into at any and many points. The work sits in the time of ritual practice, encompassing collective memorying and ancestral veneration. In presenting deathwork as ancestral work, a reparation, I am engaging ephemera in an archive of futurities. This ephemeral archive, as Muñoz reminds, calls out warning, imagines the absences with a sense of responsibility. It is a space for dreamwork as serious engagement to explore what our reclamation of ancestors does. It is reckoning with what is lost, recovered, obscured. It asks who refers to their art as a talking point? What immobilizes you? What do you want to heal? Poetry can do a kind of radical work. The work itself is a practice of reciprocity – experiential in design, its fracture is intended as diffraction of the moving through grief, and hearing the dead. None of the registers alone hold the dead or their voices. Death taken as a portal offers us the possibilities of deepening the exchange with our relations. Dreams, meditations, memories shapeshift into allusion, renovation, rupture in intertextual, hypertextual and intratextual relationships unbound by linear time. Alive, ongoing, borrowed exchanges – not owned.

I had not originally intended archival work. I had a series of documents from our family's amateur genealogist, and I went to the historical archive thinking I would be able to find them, looking for my great-grandmother's great-grandmother, Rosette's daughters. I hadn't fully considered the potential for trauma in the historical archive as violent, and what I didn't find. The absences were, of course, the most noteworthy. How do you describe the shape of what is absent? The dead suffer, too. Speaking with them, acknowledging them in intimate relationships is a form of what Hess Love would call spiritual advocacy, its own form of reparations.

What comes before your hand hits the page? What happens inside of you? I had to find keys to this thinking through process, learn to be in conscious collaboration with spirit versus critiquing to control, doing myself and others violence; recognize that the guidance I needed and need is rooted in my belief, and know my own worth – that I can reconceptualize an archive of loss as a mattering.

I wanted to get people to think about the ways in which we structure our work and what this does – to push the bounds of a violent system, and our own neural pathways. We been here, this is therefore ours to tell and tell as we see fit. The work of reclaiming our imaginations and healing ancestral lineages is foundational to futurities – and is largely overlooked. As such, this work - the multidirectional work of Afro-Indigenous futurities - engages in processes of visionary thinking, enjoining decolonial and abolitionist schools in communities of memory.

I wanted to show where relationship can be held, and how that is also never uncomplicated – through evoking layers of representation. Through the lens of my own archival research and a polyphony of Black women's voices, this work theorizes relationality in Black Diasporic feminist work as futurities.

LeRhonda Maignault-Bryant in *I Had a Praying Grandmother* makes a case for considering the knowledge passed on by black grandmothers as continuation of Black womxn's intellectual traditions…and sources of archival knowledge upon which we may draw. "Black women have negotiated in-between spaces– having to reconcile inherited knowledge w their experiences…spiritual identities tied to nearly four centuries of a black intellectual tradition comprised by oral teachings, writings, religious teachings and everyday activities, domestic arts."

Orality and performance treat the work differently, they intend and privilege trance induction - where the pieces and voices are echoing and in constant conversation - versus referenced on the page to recall belonging. Neither is linear, nor is the time of sperrit, they and it can be entered into at any and many points. The work sits in the time of ritual practice, encompassing collective memorying and ancestral veneration. In presenting deathwork as ancestral work, a reparation, I am engaging ephemera in an archive of futurities. This ephemeral archive, as Muñoz reminds, calls out warning, imagines the absences with a sense of responsibility. It is a space for dreamwork as serious engagement to explore what our reclamation of ancestors does. It is reckoning with what is lost, recovered, obscured. It asks who refers to their art as a talking point? What immobilizes you? What do you want to heal? Poetry can do a kind of radical work. The work itself is a practice of reciprocity – experiential in design, its fracture is intended as diffraction of the moving through grief, and hearing the dead. None of the registers alone hold the dead or their voices. Death taken as a portal offers us the possibilities of deepening the exchange with our relations. Dreams, meditations, memories shapeshift into allusion, renovation, rupture in intertextual, hypertextual and intratextual relationships unbound by linear time. Alive, ongoing, borrowed exchanges – not owned.

I had not originally intended archival work. I had a series of documents from our family's amateur genealogist, and I went to the historical archive thinking I would be able to find them, looking for my great-grandmother's great-grandmother, Rosette's daughters. I hadn't fully considered the potential for trauma in the historical archive as violent, and what I didn't find. The absences were, of course, the most noteworthy. How do you describe the shape of what is absent? The dead suffer, too. Speaking with them, acknowledging them in intimate relationships is a form of what Hess Love would call spiritual advocacy, its own form of reparations.

What comes before your hand hits the page? What happens inside of you? I had to find keys to this thinking through process, learn to be in conscious collaboration with spirit versus critiquing to control, doing myself and others violence; recognize that the guidance I needed and need is rooted in my belief, and know my own worth – that I can reconceptualize an archive of loss as a mattering.

I wanted to get people to think about the ways in which we structure our work and what this does – to push the bounds of a violent system, and our own neural pathways. We been here, this is therefore ours to tell and tell as we see fit. The work of reclaiming our imaginations and healing ancestral lineages is foundational to futurities – and is largely overlooked. As such, this work - the multidirectional work of Afro-Indigenous futurities - engages in processes of visionary thinking, enjoining decolonial and abolitionist schools in communities of memory.

I wanted to show where relationship can be held, and how that is also never uncomplicated – through evoking layers of representation. Through the lens of my own archival research and a polyphony of Black women's voices, this work theorizes relationality in Black Diasporic feminist work as futurities.

Images

Figure 1 Letter The Venerable James Palacious to The Archives, Jan. 8, 2018. The Diocese of The Bahamas and the Turks & Caicos Islands. Author's personal archive.

Figure 2 "Bahamas Civil Registration, 1850-1959", database with images, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJDZ-NRMB : 9 August 2017), Rosetta Agnes Arauha, 1941.

Figure 3 "Petition by Rosetta Agnes Aranha for gratuity." National Archives (Kew), UK. Accessed 3 June 2017 https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/sources/LRDS-2ZY . Screenshot by author.

Figure 4 Aranha family photo, circa 1900. Front row L to R: Elizabeth Jane Aranha, Maude Aranha, Rosetta Agnes Minns, Edith Aranha, ?, James Edward Aranha (?), May Aranha, back row unknown. Author's personal archive.

Figure 5 Rosetta Agnes with parasol, circa 1900. Author's personal archive.

Figure 6 Rosetta Agnes headshot, circa 1900. Author's personal archive.

Figure 7 An Act, To ascertain who shall not be deemed mulattoes, "Bahamianology", https://bahamianology.com/an-act-to-ascertain-who-shall-not-be-deemed-mulattoes/ *text excerpt from Act.

Figure 8 Coakley Town, Andros Map, Jan. 1837. Department of Lands & Surveys, Nassau. Courtesy of Grace Turner.

Notes

James Edward was a womanizer, "When Blackbirds Gather," 1.
Guava ghosts, "Pedagogies of Crossing," 7.

References

Alexander, M. Jacqui. "Pedagogies of Crossing Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred." Perverse Modernities, edited by Ebrary - York University., Duke University Press, 2005, https://www.library.yorku.ca/find/Record/2536976.

Hopkinson, N. Brown girl in the ring. Grand Central Publishing, 1988.

Maignault-Bryant, LeRhonda S. ""I Had a Praying Grandmother": Religion, Prophetic Witness, and Black Women's Herstories." Keisha N. Blain, Christopher Cameron, Ashely D. Farmer (Eds.) New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition, Northwestern University Press, 2018.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban (1996) Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 8:2, 5-16, DOI: 10.1080/07407709608571228