They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater

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Abstract
This photo essay takes the reader through the images and ideas Wood explores in her solo exhibit, They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater, installed at A Space Gallery in Toronto in September 2022. It incorporates photos of the artwork and installation, along with a discussion of the concepts floating through the exhibit. The images and this essay are found at the intersections of Abolition geographies, Black Radical Tradition, Black feminist, Black Atlantic, Aquatic theories.

Keywords
Black Radical Tradition, Abolition Geographies, Black Atlantic, the Undrowned, Black Aquatic theories

> *I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales... Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. It made a context. The context of undrowning. Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning. (Gumbs, 2020, p. 2)*

Figure 1

They Say We Can't Breath Underwater Poster

Introduction: I Can't Breathe

"I can't breathe", a last cry from Eric Garner and a rallying cry of Black Lives Matter became a terrifying reality for me in the time of Toronto's lockdown. A flare up of asthma from a combination of anxiety brought on by the fear of contracting COVID-19, the trauma at witnessing how fungible Black lives are, the fruitless organizing around relentless institutional anti-Black racism, left me struggling for breath. Caring for myself and preparing for this show, I thought about what abolitionist practices that channel collective caring for those of us considered infrahuman would look like; how those practices must extend and embrace watery (pelagic) ecologies; and how to dismantle and do some freedom dreaming and world-building.

I have always known I was living in a time which Christina Sharpe (2016) calls slavery's wake, I just had not felt it as viscerally as in this time. I write in our artist' text,

> It is as though I had been pushed under, underwater, I could not find my breath in the face of fear, rage, and institutional aggressions. I believe in that moment (which lasted a year for me) I learnt to breathe differently, I learned to breathe underwater and through time. I felt myself to be what Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) calls the undrowned. Out of my depth, out of my breath, underwater I imagined myself flowing into and out of the holds of decaying ships, not drowning but struggling. I reached across time and encountered a vision of a water-breathing woman and recognized her as Yemayá, Mother of the Oceans and protectress of those undrowned and drowning – a knowledge keeper and healer located in the Black Atlantic, the domain of the Middle Passage. I believe through this time many of us have learned to breathe differently to expand our breathing into the depths of the ocean and our interior lives to find some healing for ourselves and our communities. (Wood & Wallen, 2023)

Out of this relationship and ancestral knowledge flowed this exhibit, which explores living in the wake of slavery, in the wake and waves of the pandemic, in the wake of anti-Black racism, in the wake of Imperial ecocide. It is meant to acknowledge my? our? adaptations and mutations that allow us to breathe and live differently and to create and dream and build new worlds.

Yemayá, Mother Who Cares for All

Yemayá is the Orisha (African Traditional Religion) deity who travelled with Africans through the Middle Passage, onboard slave ships to be reconstituted, and revitalized in the diaspora as a powerful deity, healing those who are sick and bringing wealth to her devotees. Gumbs (2020) speaks of the sounds of whales calling to each other, emanating from sea and heard by the Africans confined to the hold of the ship. Were these comforting sounds? Did it evoke the presence of Yemayá? In her origin story it is said Yemayá birthed the seas, which flowed from her like a ruptured amniotic sac and created life, making her the mother of all life, of all the Orishas (African spiritual deities) and of the World (González-Whippler, 1992). In the diaspora, she is known by many names – Mami Wata, Mama dlo, Imanja, Yemonja, Lasiren and she appears in many forms, a beautiful woman, a mermaid, a woman with two fish tails instead of legs, a dolphin, a whale, a snake charmer (Drewal,

2008). Whatever form she takes or name she is called by, she is considered the ruler or Queen of the seas, reputed to live in an underwater palace in Ginen with her devotees and Africans thrown overboard from slave ships. Ginen is derived from the European name for the West African or Guinea coast and is "the home of the spirits, a forested island residing simultaneously at the bottom of the cosmic waters (anba dlo) and at the backs of mirrors (do miwa)" (McGee, 2012). This underwater island home is where she takes people and where two things can occur – either they struggle in panic and drown, or they flow with Yemayá learning to breathe underwater and are returned as the undrowned with the power to see into the future and to heal and provide spiritual and mental care for the community (Brown, 2001). Thus, Yemayá, Mami Wata, etc. provides a journey of care and a collective care practice to those who know her in the diaspora. She embodies or is depicted as having the properties of water, cleansing, cooling, healing, life giving and a portal to the subconscious and its fears and anxieties. She forms the central motif and inspiration for this exhibit. Although I am not a devotee, I am like many other artists before me who see Mami Wata as an artists' muse (Drewal, 2008). An epistemology of caring and respect for water, and for life.

The Tour of *They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater*

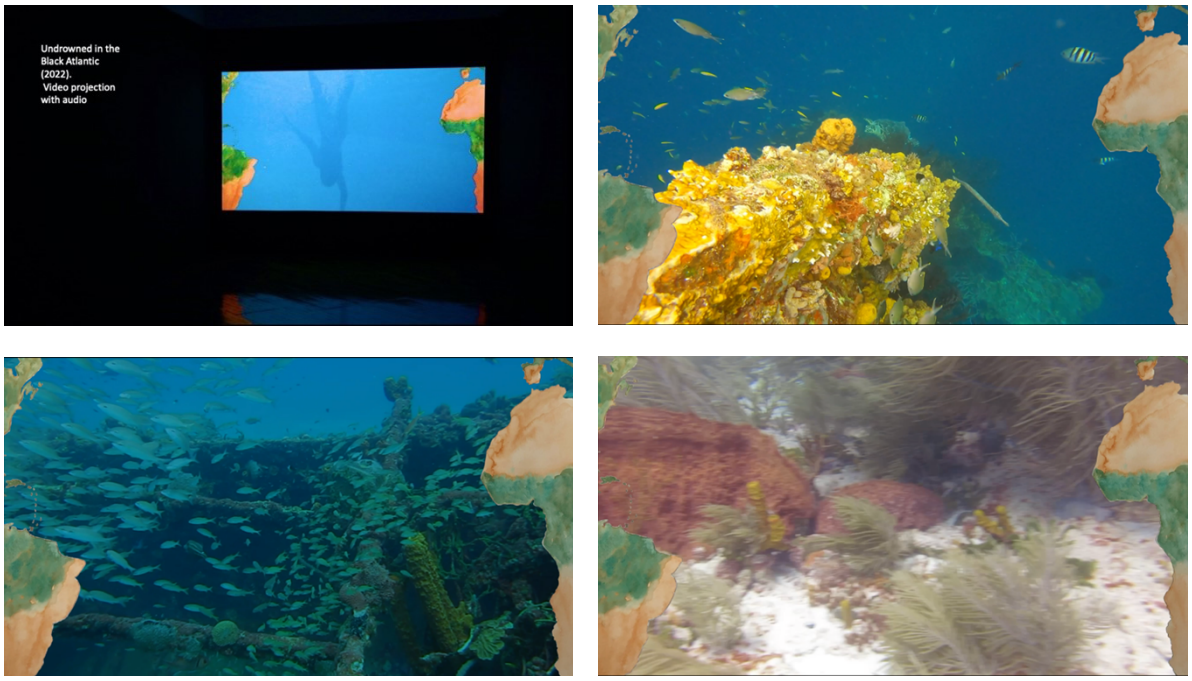
I now will take you on a photo-based tour of the exhibit. I begin the journey with the floor to ceiling projection of the video Undrowned in the Black Atlantic. This video is 11 minutes long and takes the viewer on a journey under the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. In the video, there are two tour guides. The first is Yemayá, who appears faint as though from a distance. She takes us underwater until we encounter the wreck of a ship. The second guide is a turtle who takes us further down into the holds of the ship and finally onto the ocean floor, where we encounter sharks, sponges, and other sea creatures. Once we are on the ocean floor, the turtle returns to take us back up, all the wiser for encountering life underwater in the Black Atlantic (see Figure 2). The breathing of the unseen scuba diver is the only sound that we hear, and her breathing is rhythmic and measured. This is meant to be a meditative piece where viewers see an underwater world abundant with life and where anything can transform becoming something else. The shipwreck becomes home for corals and fish and other living organisms, reconstituting it into jewel like effigies of ancestral gods. It is also where the practice of breathing is reinforced, and we are reminded that we too can breathe when it feels life is unbearable and unbreathable.

Going from top to bottom, Yemayá takes the viewer underwater: a turtle swims up the bejeweled and coral encrusted mask to continue our journey to the ocean floor, entering the hold of the ship – teeming with life, swaying bushes, flora, fauna, and anthropomorphic sponges on the ocean floor.

There are many stories associated with the Black Atlantic and the Middle Passage. One says Yemayá collects and cares for the souls of the Africans thrown overboard. Others speak of her transforming, in particular the children of pregnant mothers thrown overboard into Black merfolk who now form the mythic underwater civilization of Drexciya (Scales, 2021). Drexciya is a techno synth album and imaginary world created by a Detroit techno duo who chose to be anonymous and who have since sparked numerous books and songs. In creating this underwater world, they drew inspiration from the stories of Yemayá and Mami

Figure 2

Stills from Undrowned in the Black Atlantic, 2022



Wata, like was done for *They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater*. Ultimately, many people of the African diaspora have an ambivalent relationship to the Atlantic Ocean: "As far as the sea and ocean were concerned, reverence and fear, and sometimes both simultaneously, characterized our relationship to bodies of water, especially the sea" (Walcott, 2021, p. 64). In agreement with Gilroy, Walcott recognizes that Blackness was birthed in the dark, salty, amniotic, and rough seas of the Atlantic, which is awash in the memory of Black death. This, he rightfully says, is a form of hauntology. *They Say We Can't Breathe Underwater* are like the visions of Drexciya. After watching the video, viewers commented on the meditative state induced by the breathing and the beauty underwater despite the history of trauma and pain they knew was associated with this geo-tidal space (my terminology to indicate an underwater space that is always in motion).

After leaving the projection room, we enter the installation *Rise Up!* The installation is a deconstructed carnival costume that myself and a team built to enter the 2022 Caribbean Carnival parade. The costume was also entered into a Kings and Queens competition under the category of Individual Female. The costume itself stretched 15 feet all around and had to be pulled on wheels attached to a metal frame. Upon the metal frame was attached 7 waves (metal rods with fabric and sequins to simulate waves) upon which 7 embodied spirits were attached. In the middle was a painted foam core statue of a dreadlocked Yemayá blowing a conch shell. The back and sides of the costumes had 7 fishes, including one dolphin. The number 7 is associated with Yemayá and is one of the ways we chose to maintain a spiritual connection to her. These separate pieces, the waves, and fishes were attached to the walls and the floor and Yemayá was situated in the centre of the room with the waves behind her and the fishes in front of her.

As part of the installation, we projected waves, so the room appeared underwater (see Figure 3). Viewers met Yemayá in this projected underwater world, breathing, sometimes in awe at the translucency of the fabrics and size of the costume deconstructed. Several devotees of Yemayá and the Orishas visited this exhibit and said they connected with her power and the healing presence of her underwater domain. In this site we were all protected and preparing for imagining and re-worlding asking perhaps "what is your theory of change?" (Tuck, 2022) and can it not reproduce the harm of colonialism, and racial capitalism?

Figure 3

Rise Up! Installation with deconstructed Yemayá carnival costume with Carnival Chairs

Carnival

In front of this installation, I placed what I called two Carnival Chairs. These chairs were painted and decorated with sequins and feathers as though it was a costume ready for visitors to sit in and enter the carnival. Sitting on the chairs we performed, dancing and 'jumping up' and thus creating a portal transporting us to carnival through evoking our collective memories of the festival. We danced to a soca song that participants chose such as "Famalay" by Skinny Fabulous, Machel Montano, and Bunji Garlin with lyrics such as "play with meh famalay, jump up together". The performances activated the birthing process taking us from the underwater domain (anba dlo) of Yemayá to a space of joy, caring and community. Soca, coined by Lord Shorty, a Trinidadian calypso singer, in the 1970's "is both a fusion of

calypso and East Indian music, and sometimes thought of as 'soul calypso.' ...It draws upon West African and Indian drumming and percussion, African American gospel vocals, and traditional calypso sounds" (BAC, 2022). In its combined form it can transport, bring joy, heal souls (see Figure 4), showing participants performing in the Carnival Chairs who were photographed, and posted on Instagram under the #theysaywecantbreatheunderwater.

Figure 4

Performance on Carnival Chairs

For me one statement combines the visit to the depths of the Black Atlantic to Carnival. It is as the voice over says on my second video called Yemayá's Journey (see Figure 5). It is "wherever there was slavery, there was Carnival". This statement meshes with Gilroy's (2018) argument and presentation of his Sea Level theory where he reminds us that coastal areas form the end and beginning points of the triangular trade crossings, according to Alexander (2005) a form of crossroads (see Figure 6). These areas were often subject to maritime ethics and values which Gilroy (2018) equates to "breezes that speak of courage and liberty". In and around the Atlantic, enslaved Black people refused to stay infrahuman and instead developed and applied Indigenous, Afro-Indigenous, Asian, and European cosmologies and "subordinated knowledges" to assert themselves and invent new embodied ways of healing, and radical placemaking, such as Carnival.

Figure 5

Stills from the video Yemayá's Journey

Figure 6

Still from the video Breathing Lessons

Alexander (2005) sees this as "the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary ... It is that imaginary from which we dream the craft of a new compass" (p. 8). The symbol of the crossroads spanning and bordering the Atlantic Ocean is also present in the Caribbean carnival. Philips (2017) in her writing of characters into the parading of the Carnival says they were,

> ... understanding and tasting the power of the crossroads of Eshu-Elegbara [Deity of the crossroads in West African cosmologies] and the power of anything happening; they breaking up space into rhythm which is time, and time and space making one. They know when they reaching the crossroads where living and dying meeting, they forgetting the jobs they not getting, the money they not making and so they taking to the streets and to the crossroads of their minds hearing the sounds of their ancestors... (p. 241)

In this room that held the *Rise Up!* installation and 2 other videos, the viewer was able to cross from the ethereal, devotional space and altar of Yemayá to the joy of the Carnival Chairs where we played Soca and captured ourselves jumping up.

The final installation piece held within the hallway vitrines at A Space Gallery was called Dismantling Patterns; Abolition Dreams. Encased in four vitrines were four sequential versions of a 4 x 2 ft boat wreck that showed four stages of dismantling (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Dismantling Patterns; Abolition Dreams (Wood, 2022)

The piece was inspired by Gilroy's (1993) statement,

> ...ships were living means by which the points within [the] Atlantic world were joined... Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather that abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more – a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production. (p. 17)

That they were something more inspired me to create abolitionist pods, dismantling representations of white supremacy, and racial capitalism. These pods were made from stone paper dipped in wax and attached to the cardboard boat series in the vitrines as though they were ingesting the material of the boats and leaving behind patterns. The patterns carved into the cardboard boats were based on my research of wood boring beetles and the beautiful and mesmerizing tracks they carve into tree barks in their demolition and recycling. The artwork within the vitrines became a form of imaginary of abolition geographies and an invocation of not just the loss but also the innovative and resilient beauty of nature's adaptive cycle where destruction can release innovation and creativity (Westley, et al., 2006). The last boat which was just a flat piece of carved cardboard no longer looked like a boat but instead looked like something else. Some folks saw a shield, a stain glass window, an arrow, a home. These conversations made me realize the power and importance of imagination useful in the calls to abolish colonial and carceral logics and their world-ending outcomes. Throughout the colonial era Black and Indigenous communities have faced numerous Anthropocene moments – in fact a billion and one Anthropocenes (Yusoff, 2018). We know that world-ending and world-building can happen simultaneously (Maynard & Simpson, 2022); it takes resourcefulness, a willingness to heal, share power, and imagine ways to generate collective care.

Throughout the exhibit I lay calabash bowls and filled them with different ingredients useful in care practices and healing processes. The abolitionist pods in the vitrines represented

imagination and creativity, the salt under the video Breathing Lessons referenced the sea, amniotic fluid and tears, the water at the foot of the Yemayá statue was a respect for and in honour of life, the cowrie shells represented a choice to prioritize what is valuable, and the carnival sequins called to the joy and communal nature of carnival. For me, this was an attempt to engage the imaginary of the Black Radical Tradition, which Robinson, et al. (2017) see as "a questing for freedom" (p. 7). As Gilmore (2017) further states, it is an ongoing practice of selecting and re-selecting of the past, of ancestors, for acts of freedom in order to generate hope and what Heynen (2021) calls an abolition ecology, one that inspires us to start world-building through radical acts of placemaking.

In Summary but Not in Conclusion

An example of radical acts of placemaking and learning to breathe differently is the call to memorialize the Middle Passage (Menzie, 2020). Scholars from institutions such as Duke University and the U.K.'s University of Southampton and the Republic of Sierra Leone Permanent Mission to the United Nations, have called for a virtual memorial that would take the form of coloured ribbons printed onto World Maps of the Atlantic Ocean (Turner et al., 2020). The memorial is meant to recognize that the Atlantic seabed now the site of many European nations' exploratory attempts to extract minerals in international waters, is also an archaeological site of cultural value marking the deaths of up to 2 million Africans (Scales, 2021). This to me is an example of action that leads to Black Futures, geographies of the future, it is a socio-spatial fight for recognition, reparation, and memorializing. In Scales' (2021) article for the Guardian Seascape series, she quotes Rivers Solomon, a nonbinary science fiction author inspired by the imaginary world of Drexciya to write the award-winning The Deep. Solomon says, "our human history, our stories, what happened to us, our cultural legacies, are extraordinarily important, informative and shape who we are today. [They] should be at the forefront for how we think about how we're going to engage with the environment, how we engage with the ocean". The struggle for our histories is a struggle for our futures. "How we memorialize the dead is also a struggle over how we care for the living" (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p. 251). This act of placemaking is an Abolitionist practice and Black Radical futures strategy. In *Critical Black Futures: Speculative Theories and Explorations* editor Philip Butler (2021) writes, "Black Futures... are new spaces... of critical thought and imagination" (p. 2). For Black Futures Jam, an ideating collaborative process designed to create healthy Black Futures at George Brown College, Wood (2023) writes,

> Black Futures is a process that engages in dismantling and building new worlds that find Black folks thriving, empowered and alive. Critical to this process is the role of imagining worlds that do not exist as yet, ones that defy the forces of colonialism, white supremacy, neo-liberalism, racial capitalism and racism to create worlds that are truly inclusive and welcoming of all Black perspectives. (p. 19)

Therefore remembering, memorialising, imagining Black futures that overcome the trauma of slavery to envision caring for the environment and the ocean is synonymous with caring for ourselves. I sought to engage viewers of my exhibit in this ongoing discussion of Black futures, Black radical imaginings, collective care and caring for the environment and the ocean. The Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Passage continue to be important in Black spiritual, epistemological, traditional, and contemporary mythmaking narratives and artistic

work. This paper asks that we join the international push by Black communities to virtually recognize the millions lost in the Atlantic during the slave trade.

In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelly (2002) writes that the "...most radical art is not protest art, but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling" (p. 11). I believe in this exhibit, I was able to take the viewer to visit Yemayá, Mother who cares for all, in her underwater domain. My aim was to remind the viewer of the richness of Black traditional narratives, contemporary innovations and symbologies of caring. In my performances of this show (artist talk, tour, and Carnival Chairs) I practiced forms of caring and healing, of mindful and meditative breathing, bringing community together, of finding joy and laughter after the gravity of leaving the underwater world of the Black Atlantic, the memory of the Middle Passage and the reminders of contemporary Black struggles to breathe. The hope is that viewers engaging with the artwork would have left A Space Gallery feeling lighter, more grounded, enriched by the knowledge of Black ingenuity to provide care and generate Black radical futures. Maybe they would even begin to reflect on what their theory of change is.

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Born and raised in Trinidad, Natalie Wood arrived in Toronto in 1984 to study psychology, sociology and women's studies at the University of Toronto before obtaining her studio training at Ontario College of Art. Wood then went on to complete an MA in Art Education from OISE, at the University of Toronto, in 2000. Wood's work cohabits the areas of popular culture, education and historical research, spanning the visual and media arts. The practice includes painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, video and performance, and extends into Wood's work as a curator, educator and community-based queer activist. Wood is currently a tenured Professor in the Social Service Work Program at George Brown College, where she co-founded and coordinated their Social Innovation Hub, an early stage incubator. She is also pursuing a PhD through the Environmental Studies program at York University.