

Exploring Black feminism via Water



Black Water Ecologies

Exploring Water via Black feminism

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Me, Hannah Jo King, out with my sister (the photographer) near Monk's Bath, Frederiksted, St. Croix, USVI²; just a few miles east of here is Hams Bluff and Maroon Ridge, where lived an African community who escaped from slavery.

Me as Water

Although I am an Earth sign (Virgo)

I often think of my life as that of a River

I think about the moments when I pool—getting stagnant or coming to rest—

I think about the moments when I rush

I think about the ones who fly above me and the stones that still the path below me

I think to my origin, and to my destination

The ocean, the sea, our common destiny?

All Waters exist in a cycle. They move. They drain. They rain.

We may be like a glacial lake or an underground aquifer, far from that so-called “common source.”

But what is the source? Are not the “isolated” reserves the source? Are not the headwater springs the source? Are not the rains the source? Is not the ocean the source?

Me as Water

Nothing more than moving in rhythm with the world around me

— H. J. King

I wrote this poem after attending Professor Roderick Ferguson’s talk: *The Sea is History: Social and Environmental Justice and the Black Radical Tradition*³. I suppose he planted below my conscious a question of Black diaspora. A question which is in continuity from my studies this winter and spring in Black Feminist Thought...

***What can Water teach us about Black life?
And what can Black life teach us about Water?***

I invite Black feminist ways of knowing into these questions and explore the relationships between Water and Black diaspora in this zine...

Welcome Watery Beings!

Interlocking oppressions | intersectionality:

*The most general of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to **struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression**, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that **the major systems of oppression are interlocking.**"*

—The Combahee River Collective Statement⁴

Self-definition | Collective meaning

*"This book reflects one stage in my ongoing struggle to regain my voice. Over the years I have tried to replace the external definitions of my life forwarded by dominant groups with my own self-defined viewpoint. But while my personal odyssey forms the catalyst for this volume, I now know that my experiences are far from unique. Like African-American women, many others who occupy societally denigrated categories have been similarly silenced. So **the voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times.**"*

—Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*⁵



Both/and | Rejecting binaries

*"... the "spaces in-between" a "both/and" practice is a familiar concept for those in the margins, a hybrid perspective resulting from lives lived at the intersections of two cultures. Scholars across disciplines have **challenged the "either/or"***

*thinking in Eurocentric, patriarchal thought, as modernist thinking categorizes the world and all therein in static, binary oppositions (e.g., White/ Black, man/ woman, Standard English/Non-Standard English, Christian/ heathen). These scholars have illustrated in varying ways that consciousness and **experience can syncretize sometimes contradictory angles of vision.***

—Annette Henry, "There's Saltwater in our Blood"⁷

Water is memory. Black life is memory?

“Water is the first thing in my imagination. Over the reaches of the eyes at Guaya when I was a little girl, I knew that there was still more water. All beginning in water, all ending in water. Turquoise, aquamarine, deep green, deep blue, ink blue, navy, blue-black cerulean water. . . . Water is the first thing in my memory. The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time. In the daytime it was indistinguishable to me from air. . . . The same substance that carried voices or smells, music or emotion.” — Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*⁸

“... the etymology of the word *mati*. This is the word Creole women use for their female lovers: figuratively *mi mati* is “my girl,” but literally it means *mate*, as in *shipmate* — she who survived the Middle Passage with me.”

—Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic”⁶



[Listen](#): Wave Sounds at Lake Wakatipu, New Zealand¹⁰

“You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places to make room for houses & liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that... Like water, I remember where I was before I was ‘straightened out.’”

—Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory”⁹

Every language in the world has a word for Water

Black life is queer. Water is queer.

In her piece “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic”⁶, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley situates queerness in the Atlantic and Caribbean during the Middle Passage and yola crossings of the Mona Straight. In doing so, she validates **queerness as essential to Black survival**. Moreover, she reframes **queerness as a radical praxis of resistance and self-definition**.

Queer praxis

“As fragmentarily recorded here, the emergence of intense shipmate relationships in the water-rocked, no-person’s-land of slave holds created a black Atlantic same-sex eroticism: a *feeling of, feeling for* the kidnapped that asserted the sentience of the bodies that slavers attempted to transform into brute matter. This Atlantic and these erotic relationships are neither metaphors nor sources of disempowerment. Instead, they are one way that fluid black bodies refused to accept that the liquidation of their social selves — the colonization of oceanic and body waters — meant the liquidation of their sentient selves. Some *mati* and *malungo* were probably sexual connections, others not. Yet regardless of whether intimate sexual contact took place between enslaved Africans in the Atlantic or after landing, relationships between shipmates read as queer relationships. *Queer* not in the sense of a “gay” or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance. *Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths.”

—Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic”⁶

**Water is hella non-normative. Shapeshifting,
phase-shifting, living inside us, cracking open
rocks, the very definition of wet.
Water expands; Water contracts. Water is erotic.**

spill (v) 2. (of liquid) flow over the edge of its container.

“Some of the wine spilled onto the floor.”

SYNONYMS: overflow, flow, pour, run, slop, slosh, splash

she lit a candle for Tuesday. she lit a candle for sweat. she lit a candle when you woke up and the sheets were wet. she lit a candle for lovers. she lit a candle for friends. she lit a candle for maybe and for sometimes and for depends. she poured some water for cooling. she poured some water for sleep. she drank some water for the things she said she would do and forgot that week. she offered food to the corners and to the mourners and the ghosts. she planted grass for the exiles and the stateless and the hosts. she chanted peace to the pilgrims and the playmates and the pimps. she chewed on glass for the mothers and never even winced. she prostrated before the teacups and the teachers and the books.

and it is still it is still it is still

it is still just as bad as it looks.

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill*¹¹

Water is ceremony



Two women offer thanks to Yemoja, goddess of the river and mother of all other Yoruba gods, during an annual celebration in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The sacred cowrie shells are seen in their jewelry. Video by Òrìsà Priestess Iyalorisa Omitonade Ifawemimo (@orisa_priestess)¹².

[Watch @orisa_priestess video](#)

“To me, the bathtub is a portal, you know, that’s kind of just what it is. Also I’m a Cancer, and, you know [laughter]. Those places of the estuary, the river, the bathtub, in Salacia the scrying bowl, are all places of intuition, of receptivity, of receiving as a gift. And to me, they are also places that connect in a non-linear timeline, time.”



—Tourmaline (fka Reina Gossett)¹³



[Watch](#) interview, “Long Live Our 4Billion Year Old Mother”¹³

“A feminist future is inextricably linked to holding the past of queer and trans people of color, people who have been exiled out of feminist movements and spaces.”

—Tourmaline (fka Reina Gossett)¹³

Cultural and religious water rituals connect Black peoples to their ancestors and to healing power.

In my life, I keep Water on an alter besides meaningful photos, rocks, sage, and dried flowers. Sometimes I take the Water from my alter and set it beside me while I pray, meditate, or read tarot.

**I also honor and relate to the elements on a weekly cycle:
Water is on Sundays.**

Frequently, I bathe and water my plants on Sundays.

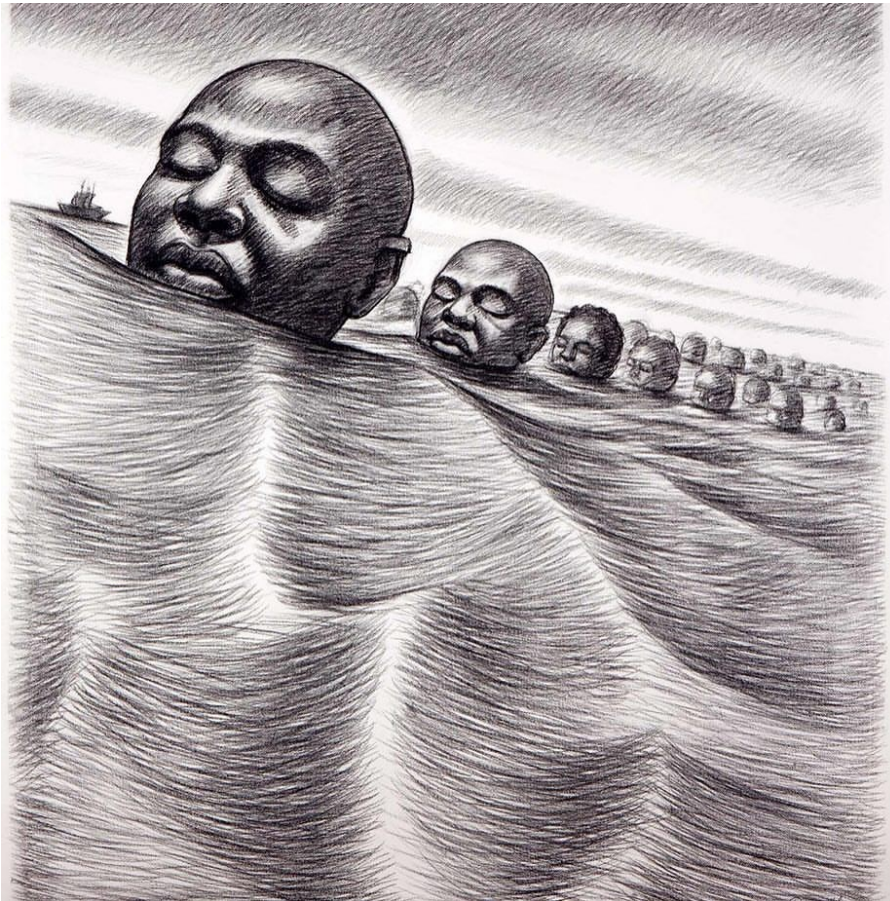
What are your Water ceremonies and rituals?



Pastors Rev. L. D. Oliver, of the St. Paul Baptist Church, and Rev. Roosevelt Wright, of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, both in Monroe, Louisiana, gathered their congregations together for river baptisms at Lake Providence. Photo by Susan Roach, 1996¹⁴.

In their subterfuge of the system of slavery, Black peoples in the Americas found **Water as an ally to resistance.** Water masked the scent of fugitive slaves from hounds. Swamps were a rugged terrain, practical hideout, a spiritual refuge. Rivers were a pathway north and west. Ocean cliffsides became hidden maroon communities¹. The Atlantic was a graveyard.

In Harriet Tubman's Combahee River Raid of 1863, she worked in collaboration with the Union Army and the African-American 2nd South Carolina Volunteers Regiment to free over 700 enslaved people. Tubman also used her knowledge of the environment for self and group liberation. For example, using the North Star and patterns of tree moss to navigate at night, imitating the owl or whippoorwill to communicate with other runaways, and making opium-based medicines to put babies to sleep while their families escaped to freedom¹⁶. Songs like "Wade in Water" were grassroots hymnals that provided lessons and encouragement for escape¹⁵.

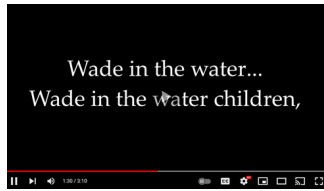


Patricia Hill Collins talks about **institutional transformation** and **group survival** as two forms of Black feminist activism¹⁸. Institutional transformation involves direct confrontation to power structures and group survival involves everyday actions to preserve Black culture, self-definition, and livelihood. **Slave fugitivity was radical, pre-Emancipation activism.** This activism was **"both/and"**: decentralized and organized. On plantations and in escape. Spiritual and militant.

Donovan Nelson: *Ibo Landing #8*, 2009. An artistic rendering of a collective suicide carried out in 1803 off the coast of Georgia in a place now called Igbo Landing, where a group of recently arrived slaves released their souls.¹⁹

“Wade in the Water”: Negro Spiritual
(Listen [here](#))

Wade in the Water
Wade in the Water
children,



Wade in the Water

God's a gonna trouble the Water

See dat band all dressed in white

(God's a gonna trouble the Water)

De Leader looks like de Israelite.

(God's a gonna trouble the Water)

Wade in the Water

Wade in the Water children,

Wade in the Water

God's a gonna trouble the Water

See dat band all dressed in red

(God's a gonna trouble the water)

It looks like de band dat Moses led.

(God's a gonna trouble the water)

Wade in the Water

Wade in the Water children,

Wade in the Water

God's a gonna trouble the Water

Hum...

Hum...

God's a gonna trouble the water.

God's a gonna trouble the water.

God's a gonna trouble the water.

— Version by Cynthia Liggins

“There’s one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have de oder; for No man will take me back alive.”

—Harriet Tubman

(born Araminta Ross in 1822)¹⁶



Jacob Lawrence: *Harriet Tubman series No. 10, 1939-1940.*¹⁷

But Black peoples relationship to Water is not all rosy. Water has also been weaponized against us as a tool of colonial, state, police, and corporate oppression...



Firefighters weaponize a high-pressure water hose at African-American civil rights protesters, Birmingham, Alabama, 1963.²⁰



A city employee flushes out a fire hydrant in Flint, Michigan, 2016. The government of Flint was accused of toxic Water coverup and were sued for lead poisoning by thousands of families in a class-action lawsuit. The battle for clean Water in Flint continues.²¹

For Black peoples globally: “Freedom is a constant struggle”²⁴

When Water is unavailable or unsafe for household use, it is especially burdensome for women and femmes, who often have familial caregiving responsibilities such as bathing kids, preparing meals, and washing clothes. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities are also particularly vulnerable. The impacts of lead poisoning, for example, are irreversible and range from cognitive impairment to seizures or even death. **Intersectional feminism** teaches us that access to clean water is not a “right” that is equally distributed. In Flint, MI, for example, around 60% of residents are Black and 40% of residents live below the poverty line²⁴. In Cape Town, South Africa the threat of privatizing Water is economic violence to Black and working poor families.

[Listen](#) to an interview with Shaheed Mohammed from Cape Town Water Crisis Coalition²²



Nationwide strike against the proposed national minimum wage, Cape Town, South Africa, April 2018 . This strike came on the heels of Cape Town’s so-called “Day Zero” water crisis. Protesting workers hold signs such as “NO TO DESALINATION” and “NO TO PRIVATIZATION OF OUR WATER.”²³

Is Water free? Does freeing Water also free Black peoples?

The overriding engine of US racism cut through my family's ambitions and desires. It coursed through our social and public encounters and our living room. Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects ("the American ship of state . . . the ark of the covenant that authorized both liberty and slavery": DeLoughrey 2010, 53) cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow.

Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow...

Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness. It was with this sense of wakefulness as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation...

Joy James and João Costa Vargas ask in "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs": What happens when instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a Black person is killed in the United States, we recognize Black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy? "...

Wake; in the line of recoil of (a gun)...

In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present..

Wake: grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*²⁶

“Middle Passage Epistemology” is used by millions of Black diaspora peoples in the Americas to claim their African identities by situating their ancestors in the Middle Passage²⁷. Although practical and legitimate, this method of sourcing our Blackness is limited. First, continental Africans, refugees, immigrants, and many others cannot situate themselves in a Middle Passage context. Second, a Middle Passage Epistemology relies on linear time—an order of events from which Blackness starts and therefore also stops? Blackness defies western notions of time. The Middle Passage is repeated today in the Mona Passage⁶.

Black life is “In the Wake” and is Outside the Wake

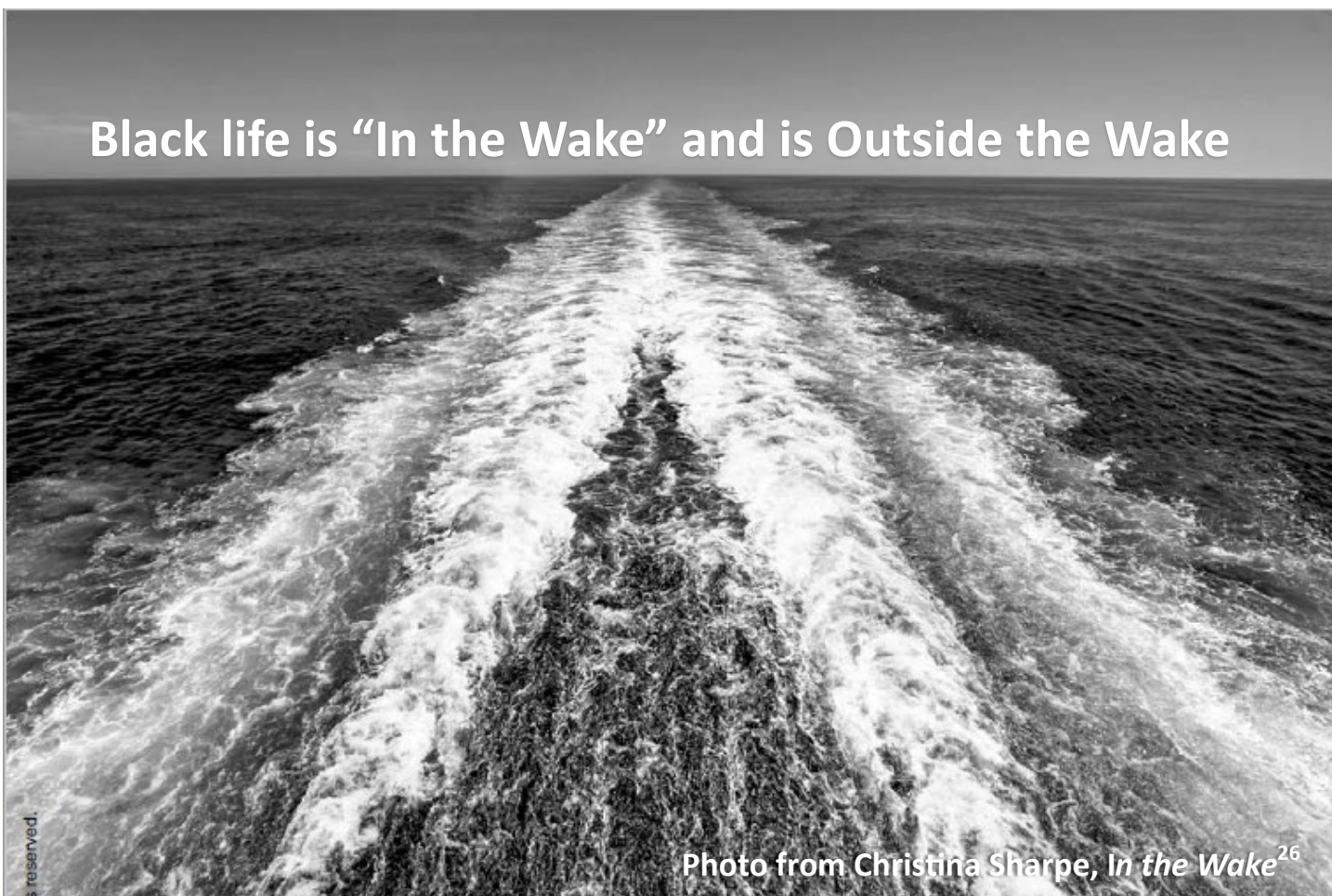


Photo from Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*²⁶

The Middle Passage was a type of beginning for some in the Black diaspora. A beginning with multiple origins, both in the Atlantic and across the continent of Africa. A beginning that is repeating. *In the Wake* there will *always* be a wake so long as the ship keeps moving.

But the ship and the wake need the Water. The Water does not need the wake.

The Mississippi River Empties Into The Gulf

and the gulf enters the sea and so forth,
none of them emptying anything,
all of them carrying yesterday
forever on their white tipped backs,
all of them dragging forward tomorrow.
it is the great circulation
of the earth's body, like the blood
of the gods, this river in which the past
is always flowing. every water
is the same water coming round.
everyday someone is standing on the edge
of this river, staring into time,
whispering mistakenly:
only here. only now.

— Lucille Clifton

The Author

Hannah Jo King (she/they) is a Black woman of mixed African and European ancestry. She is a sister, daughter, granddaughter, auntie, niece, and friend. She is a starseed and an ancestor and a descendant. They are currently a graduate student studying environmental justice at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. They are committed to Black and BIPOC liberation and believe that healing our relations to both human and non-human beings is an essential part of liberation.

Sources for Photos, Videos, & Media

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²Trisha King (@froladyfashion): Photo near Monk’s Bath, Frederiksted, St. Croix, USVI, 2021

¹⁰The Relaxed Guy: “WAVE Sounds at the Lake, Waves Lapping at Lakeside, Water Sounds for Sleep, Relaxing, Studying, PTSD,” 2019. <https://youtu.be/13pOTDduNRo>

¹²Iyalorisa Omitonade Ifawemimo (@orisa_priestess): Video of women giving thanks to the river goddess Yemoja, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cih0_UCnlHb/?utm_source=ig

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