

maroon choreog- raphy

fahima ife

A grayscale photograph of a forest stream. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding dense foliage and trees. Several large, weathered tree branches have fallen into the stream, creating a natural barrier. The background is filled with lush greenery, and the overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

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BLACK OUTDOORS: Innovations in the Poetics of Study
A series edited by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak

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for

poet **Taylor Johnson**

who reminds me to listen

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stay knowing that if they get this dance, there might be something wrong.
stay knowing that if something is only to be gotten, we
might all be doing something wrong.

—taisha paggett

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a prefatory note

Everything in *Maroon Choreography* is occurring (or has occurred) in what Fred Moten, in *Black and Blur*, calls “the native fugue-state of being-composed,” and it is a sense of being-and-not-being-composed, of moving through a series of disembodied lapses, outside any sense of bodily identities, that I move through and work to unravel through this work. The poems, poetic fragments, and lyrical essay in this collection presuppose a way out (of captivity, indebtedness, ecological ruin) by way of minimalist errantry, by way of refusal.

Creatively, methodologically, and theoretically, *Maroon Choreography* is pre-occupied with anachoreography. Anachoreography is a recursive practice of refusal. I refuse the choreographed apparatuses of coloniality, its methodologies, its origin stories, its naming rituals, and its movements. To move elsewhere and practice otherwise, I retrace my breath, loop back, and move with the opaque air. In the unseen, unknown expanse of blackness, I move inside the palimpsest of what exists prior, or beside us. Anachoreography is the feral spirit of *study*, *waywardness*, *tarrying*, *ritual*, *practice*, *rehearsal*, *shoal*, *ceremony*, *series*, *rematriation*, *wake*, *duration*, *intimacy*, *pause*, and *refusal*—given to us in the poiesis of black studies, ecological studies, performance studies, affect studies, and indigenous studies. If dance is the city’s mother tongue, as Fred Moten says, then what secret lives inside the city, in us, before the city, as us, before the clearing, inside air?

I began with a series of questions on the mythic human body, questions about proprioceptive sense limits, how a body moves in space, how we make sense of our movement in space, and how to expand our flesh limits. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, in *Dub*, questions historical biopolitics by looking back at Sylvia Wynter’s work and asking, what happens if what we consider as our blood lineage is

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simply a matter of paint? Through *Maroon Choreography* I ask, what if the entire narrative of enslavement and settler colonialism is just echolalia?

Nominal predispositions, naming rituals, linger in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, age, and so forth, are reanimated through an ongoing sense of self-regard, or relentless pride in looking back at, of having moved through, of being connected to, history. What if our sense of inherited subjectivity is sound? What if the reality we think we inhabit is nothing more than oscillation? Years into the future (now), will we look back at it, our inherited names, narratives, our bloodlines, hold on to them, refuse to change as everything around us changes all for the sake of belonging, of grounding ourselves in presumed subjectivity?

To refuse a biopolitical and sociohistorical patina, I ask, what undocumented black indigenous knowledges emerged in the seventeenth century on Turtle Island, and how do those knowledges persist in our contemporary air? Though it does not answer, *Maroon Choreography* moves inside the pneumatic feeling of fleeing in seventeenth-century black indigenous escape and lingers.

The seven years I spent at work on *Maroon Choreography*, in meticulous study, in solitude, in dispersal, in depression, are the years I spent cauterizing my relationship with this colonial language and its obsession with documenting the world and its bodies. Seven years ago I began studying the bureaucratic origins of writing and contemporary performances of poetry and poetics. My preoccupation with language and literacy is inspired by my maternal grandparents' inherited illiteracy. The fact that my grandparents, born during the Great Depression in the United States South, were made to work the land in this country and not develop a way with words has material consequences I continue to exist within. The uterine cancer my grandmother, Levada, experienced in her thirty-sixth year, a circumstance she survived for thirty more years before death, is likely a result of years of agricultural field labor, touching/breathing the toxic air of pesticides, picking the toxic food someone else would eat. The series of heart attacks my grandfather, Lucius, experienced in his sixty-first year (before his death in that same year) is likely the result of years of hard field and steel mill labor, and alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine addiction simply to make it through. I got so far inside the history of English language, orality and literacy, so far inside the imposition of black bodies within the documentary lineage of the written word, I lost my ability to participate, lost whatever imposed socializations, whatever norms, modes of group etiquette, expectations for research, I might have imitated or drawn upon in the past when I still believed academic writing was anything other than an irrefutable matter of money.

André Lepecki, in *Exhausting Dance*, equates choreography with the com-

mands of writing, so a “disciplined body” is one that moves according to captivity’s expectations for expression—bound in solipsism, in forced submission, the (dead) master’s voice on loop in the background. Levada and Lucius are two relatives in a long line—all the way back through the eighteenth-century agrarian (United States) South—of (black) farmers, workers, stewards of the land and field. The people I claim as familiar by way of a mythical grand blood lineage were field laborers, who worked the fields, for hundreds of years, without proper compensation or nourishment, whose lives were cut short by labor. This is the choreography of their external bodies, not interior.

Insofar as I could question the otherwise entanglements of movement and writing, I began to search for another mode of movement, one not reliant upon choreography as rule or dictated orientation, but a movement born in wildness, in fugitivity, in refusal. Inside the academy there are fields and bodies, conversations on how those fields and bodies remain in isolation, and expectations to argue on bodies within fields. There are single-disciplinary-field trajectories, and then there are radical creative-intellectual amalgamations, the interdisciplines, the cross-disciplines—the undisciplined—the matter that moves us beyond the academy, beyond the fields. *Maroon Choreography* is an attempt to document black study as something otherwise, some wiser configuration other than an argument.

If there is a traceable beginning to this work, before I moved to Louisiana, before I traveled to and lived briefly in Paris, it emerged in the sixteen years I spent in quiet study with my grandmother while she was alive. Levada is dead, but she is not gone. She is air. Anachoreography, as method and practice, involves opening up to, stammering, and moving again inside our quiet, entangled, pneumatic intimacies. The quiet I continue to share with my grandmother, in the two decades after her death, is supplemented by extensive study between and across multiple fields and nonfields.

After and at the same time as *Maroon Choreography* I am trying to enliven a prolonged discussion on the preternatural intimacy I share with my dead grandmother, on one level, and cultivate a hauntological practice that perhaps might yield a theory on movement, on another level. I want to get more precise in practicing and articulating the imprecise (im)materiality of our shared air, the nonfungible porousness I share with Levada, a woman who could not read or write in her time here but who continues reading and writing through me.

Maroon Choreography is ongoing, a series of works in ecological black study deriving from a series of still-unfolding questions on air and movement. In this work and the work to come I ask, what unregulated qualities of air flourish in

our global ecologies? What otherwise porous ecosystems emerge, or do we have access to, by way of deep listening? In *Maroon Choreography* my primary interlocutor, my unseen collaborator, is my dead maternal grandmother, Levada Harris. Though she died twenty-two years ago, we continue to share cosmic intimacy, we continue to study, and we continue to move together. My practice in *Maroon Choreography* is an attempt to collaborate with my grandmother's spirit to shape knowledge, to practice developing a theory informed by the knowledges she could not express while she was here, as flesh, among the living. Yet *Maroon Choreography* is not about my grandmother. The world inside *Maroon Choreography* attempts to move outside the blackness-as-enslavement narrative, to move inside a collective black interior by way of breathing.

In the pages that follow are three sections of poems and a lyrical essay. The poems, "Recrudescence" (a relevé in eleven parts), "Porous Aftermath" (a fugue in thirty-three parts), and "Nocturnal Work" (an improvisation in twenty-two parts), I see as a long recursive dance. The poems encounter our ecstatic air and move in it. The lyrical essay, "Maroon Choreography," is a long unbroken paragraph on form. The essay discusses place, space, time, and study—or where I was, what I experienced, and what I read—as the poems formed themselves through me. In lieu of a formal bibliography, notes, or index, the book closes with an errant coda, an experimental entanglement of all the texts I read, or otherwise engaged, in the process of working on this book. The coda entangles the titles and authors of works in a series of formations, or multiple progressions on each page, and omits publication details. I include this material not only as a means of accounting for what I covered, but also as a way to symbolically represent the philosophic grounds I was so immersed within for all the years I spent at work on this project, and how I imagine those works in a sort of ongoing creative cross-pollination with one another, how it all fades back to the nothingness of blackness. An anindex, a poetic index, follows the coda. The anindex references the muted *mu* concepts as they exist within the pages of this book. *Mu* as in Nathaniel Mackey's wandering band of jazz artists, *mu* as in the nothing space of Zen Buddhism, *mu* as in the words whose utterance most amuses my tongue. The anindex defies alphabetical impulse, instead offers a final procession of seven sets of words, to insinuate another variation on movement throughout this book.

This work will work only if you, friend, are open. Words are merely words unless we are open. To move deep inside the life of these poems, create an opening. Read the pieces, slow, in the pace of the life of each poem. Listen close. Read this work three times: once in a linear progression, from what we understand

as beginning to end, then again from the middle outward, and a third time in whatever way you choose. Pause. Pause in between moving from one page to the next. Pause at the end of a line. Pause whenever you encounter white space. Pause according to punctuation. Pause to match your breath to the pace of aeration in the work. Pause in stillness and breathe. Read this work outside under the open air of sky, under the breadth of trees, in the air of things. Read this work with friends, out loud, preferably while listening to some sort of avant-garde instrumental music (low in the background); pause in between reading to dance, or whatever it is you call it when you lose yourself in movement. Come together, in whatever creative configuration necessary, to talk about the work, talk about the inscrutable space of air, in between words, what is not spoken as the words themselves are spoken. Ask more of what we make of communing, of coming, of dispersing, of moving, of learning alongside one another. Arrive and arrive again in communion—the only desire I have for this work.

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