



# M Archive

AFTER  
THE  
END  
OF THE  
WORLD

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

# M Archive

*This page intentionally left blank*

# M Archive

*After the End of  
the World*

**ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS**

Duke University Press Durham and London 2018

© 2018 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ☷

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Minion Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from

the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-0-8223-7069-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-7084-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-7187-8 (ebook)

Cover art: Soraya Jean-Louis McElroy, *Ancestral Alchemy 1*, 2012–2013.

to the purveyors of our  
bright black future

AFTER AND WITH

*Pedagogies of Crossing*  
by M. Jacqui Alexander

*This page intentionally left blank*

## CONTENTS

ix	A NOTE
3	From the Lab Notebooks of the Last Experiments
31	Archive of Dirt: <i>What We Did</i>
71	Archive of Sky: <i>What We Became</i>
89	Archive of Fire: <i>Rate of Change</i>
105	Archive of Ocean: <i>Origin</i>
133	Baskets (Possible Futures Yet to Be Woven)
185	Memory Drive
213	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
217	NOTES
227	PERIODIC KITCHEN TABLE OF ELEMENTS

*This page intentionally left blank*

## A NOTE

**She had to feel what it was like to survive above ground while really living underground by fire. She had to come as close to the ground as I did, learning to depend upon the damp rain smell of earth to clean her insides, jar her senses and to bring her to the heart of the oath I had sworn never to betray: all life is shared with those at the bottom of the Ocean. . . . This learning would take at least the span of one life, and only the Soul could decide what would be left over for a different time, a different place.**

—Kitsimba describing Jacqui’s work in  
M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*

M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005) is an ancestrally cowritten text. This means that in addition to the interventions this text makes in the ways we imagine transnational feminist accountability, movements from within the university industrial complex, layers of time and space in quantitative research, postnationalist Caribbean sexualities, radical feminist of color memory, and the labor economics of spirit work, to name a few of the enduring interventions this text has made over the past decade, the book itself also works to create textual possibilities for inquiry beyond individual scholarly authority.

Kitsimba, a persistent ancestor who challenges Alexander's academic interpretations of her historical plantation resistance existence, chooses to school Alexander and to speak to her and through her, wryly resenting the employees who get credit for being Alexander's so-called research assistants. Unpaid in one sense, overpaid in others, I have also been a research assistant of M. Jacqui Alexander's. Along with Moya Bailey and Julia Roxanne Wallace, I had the honor of assisting Alexander while she was a visiting chair at Spelman College (at the same time that I was engaged in a dissertation research fellowship at Emory University). Alexander taught two courses—"Migrations of the Sacred" and "Black and Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars"—crafted a digital migration story-sharing process between her Atlanta students and her Toronto students, and organized a two-day symposium called Africa in the Americas: Movement, Light, Sound and Water. Much of our time was spent troubleshooting technology, observing Alexander as she taught, and sitting on Alexander's living-room floor listening to the story of the migration of the *obi* oracle from West Africa through the New World. Soon after this time, Alexander left the academy to build a center for indigenous knowledge in Tobago.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander clarifies the middle passage of the transatlantic slave trade as an act of violence that continues to impact the entire planet through the indivisibility of the water, wind, earth, and fire that surround and constitute our world. She also suggests that the crossing was not only a geographic transfer of millions of people but also a movement of energies and elements into a relationship that persists, a material and conceptual relationship we navigate with the potential and compelled crossings we make in each moment. Periodically, then, in my text you will be confronted with the periodic table of elements, interacting with the organization of this text based on the impact, difference, and transformative potential of the material traces of this moment. At the end of the book a list of texts other than *Pedagogies of Crossing* that have had a chemical impact on this work are included for your continued engagement.

Honoring *Pedagogies of Crossing* as an ancestrally cowritten text and an ancestor to this book, *M Archive: After the End of the World* imagines another form, speculative documentary, which is not *not* ancestrally cowritten but is also written in collaboration with the survivors, the far-into-the-future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse. This book centers Black life, Black feminist metaphysics, and the theoretical imperative of attending to Black bodies in a way that doesn't seek to prove that Black people are human but instead calls preexisting definitions of the human into question. It depicts a species at the edge of its integrity, on the verge or in the practice of transforming into something beyond the luxuries and limitations of what some call "the human." Will the future witnesses of this crossing know themselves as human? This book offers a possibility of being beyond the human and an invitation into the blackness of what we cannot know from here.

In other words, this speculative documentary work is written from and with the perspective of a researcher, a post-scientist sorting artifacts after the end of the world. This is you beyond you. After and with the consequences of fracking past peak oil. After and with the defunding of the humanities. After and with the removal of people of color from the cities they built. After and with Audre Lorde. After and with Toni Cade Bambara. After and with Barbara Christian. After and with Nellie McKay. After and with June Jordan. After and with Cheryll Y. Greene. After and with Gloria Naylor. After and with Jayne Cortez. After and with Lucille Clifton. After and with Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. After and with the Combahee River Collective. After and with clean water. After and with handwriting. After and with a multitude of small and large present apocalypses. After the end of the world as we know it. After the ways we have been knowing the world.

*M* is for Mary and Maryam and Moses and make-believe. *M* is for McKenzie. *M* is for miracle and mayhem and mass incarceration. *M* is for migrant and microcosmic and major. *M* is for magic and metas-

tasization. *M* is for muscle and memory and mitochondria. *M* is for minor and malevolence and manna. *M* is for maternal and mule and music. *M* is for meal and minute and mandrill. *M* is for mammal and makeup and mercury. *M* is for must be and maybe and much.

Consider this text an experiment, an index, an oracle, an archive. Let this text be as alive as you are alive. Might be enough.

it's hard to say what the people did. because as usual there was no "the people" there were only people. but all the people thought they were part of "a people" which was rightly "the people" even when they weren't sure anyone else had survived.

so different people did different things. but, for a time at least, they all thought they were the only people left alive, and so they documented what happened with them as if it were the whole record. that's the historiographical problem.

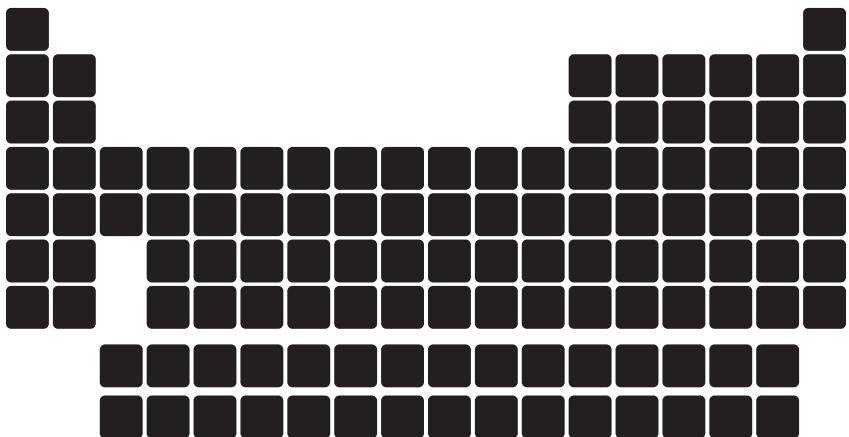
which is not to say the remaining survivors were ignorant or proud or separatist or that they *wanted* to be the only people. but a major part of their sense of the situation depended on their understanding that everyone else was dead. according to the radio waves that we can still find floating around here sometimes, some of them did reach out and state their locations to see if there was anyone else checking. but we don't actually have evidence of signal reading.

i like to think there were some readers though. descendants of those ancients who kept their computers on listening for responses from so-called extraterrestrials. there had to be some good listeners left alive.<sup>1</sup>



**From the  
Lab Notebooks  
of the Last\*  
Experiments**

\*Last is a verb



divide by the deaths you had to metabolize yesterday. divide by the shot echoes in your dreams. divide by the sleep you didn't get thinking you had to hustle harder. divide by the water you didn't drink either.

multiply by every pore touched, every memory made skin again, every word of love and the lips that share them. multiply by the sound of children. the sound that never stops. exponent of the will of the ancestors which will be dreamt. but not slept through.

all things are not equal.  
wake up.<sup>1</sup>

this thing about one body. it was the black feminist metaphysicians who first said it wouldn't be enough. never had been enough. was not the actual scale of breathing. they were the controversial priestesses who came out and said it in a way that people could understand (which is the same as saying they were the ones who said it in a way that the foolish would ignore, and then complain about and then co-opt without ever mentioning the black feminist metaphysicians again, like with intersectionality, but that's another apocalypse).

the Lorde of their understanding had taught them. *this work began before I was born and it will continue . . .*

the university taught them through its selective genocide. one body. the unitary body. one body was not a sustainable unit for the project at hand. the project itself being black feminist metaphysics. which is to say, breathing.

hindsight is everything (and also one of the key reasons that the individual body is not a workable unit of impact), but if the biochemists had diverted their energy towards this type of theoretical antioxidant around the time of the explicit emergence of this idea (let's say the end of the second-to-last century), everything could have been different. if the environmentalists sampling the ozone had factored this in, the possibilities would have expanded exponentially.

that wouldn't have happened (and of course we see that it didn't) because of the primary incompatibility. the constitutive element of individualism being adverse, if not antithetical to the dark feminine, which is to say, everything.

to put it in tweetable terms, they believed they had to hate black women in order to be themselves.

even many of the black women believed it sometimes. (which is also to say that some of the people on the planet believed they themselves were actually other than black women. which was a false and

impossible belief about origin. they were all, in their origin, maintenance, and measure of survival more parts black woman than anything else.) it was like saying they were no parts water. (which they must have believed as well. you can see what they did to the water.)

the problematic core construct was that in order to be sane, which is to live in one body, which is to live one lifetime at one time, which is to disconnect from the black simultaneity of the universe, you could and must deny black femininity. and somehow breathe. the fundamental fallacy being (obvious now. obscured at the time.) that there is no separation from the black simultaneity of the universe also known as everything also known as the black feminist pragmatic intergenerational sphere. everything is everything.

they thought escaping the dark feminine was the only way to earn breathing room in this life. they were wrong.

you can have breathing and the reality of the radical black porousness of love (aka black feminist metaphysics aka us all of us, *us*) or you cannot. there is only both or neither. there is no either or. there is no this or that. there is only all.

this was their downfall. they hated the black women who were themselves. a suicidal form of genocide. so that was it. they could only make the planet unbreathable.<sup>2</sup>

and then there was the muscle called the heart. at one stage of human history they liked to say it was the size of the fist. this was one way they admitted how central extremity was. and the fist-lifting people were sincere. they imagined that they could show their hearts, lift them up and out of their chests, make their blood flow vulnerable and coordinated. that's what they meant.

but of course it was as anatomically irrelevant as those european medieval anatomists who insisted that the heart was directly in the middle of the body, or that the stomach was the organ of love, or even those patriots who imagined the heart always already on the right side of the chest.

what we have to remember about the human heart is that yes it was a muscle. yes it was central. yes it was vulnerable when it was. and so when the toxicity of the species developed to the point where extremities started freezing and falling off. (you'll remember that one of the first results of the fracked water was deep interruptions in circulation.) the idea of the heart had to change.

the engaged heart, temporarily measured by small machines that people wore to count their steps and movements and calories, developed a counter-rate that communicated something other than the conditioning of the individual. it ticked like the urgency of action. and so in the end, those specific people who had used the colloquial name for the heart “ticker” were closest to being right.

and of course at this point it goes without saying that they were (to be colloquial again) running out of time.<sup>3</sup>

they never proved it, but we know. some of the hand-waving women had always known. some of the metaphysicians had been trying to say. no one took them literally. until the earth broke apart.

and then. with the probe technology, with the accurate diagrams. with the skilled cave divers going deep into the fault lines. and with the simultaneous release of the human heart project and the lateral lobe mapping, it became impossible to ignore.

the cracks where the earthquakes expressed themselves were exactly the same contours of the fissures in our minds and the breaks. all the breaks. in our hearts.<sup>4</sup>

they had this thing about darkness. the bottom of the ocean, outer space. they were afraid of it, they wanted to penetrate it. they wanted to pretend it only existed in contrast to light. and there was something about not wanting to have their eyes closed. not wanting to go within. lightweight enlightenment equaled mass black death.

so through the accidents of scholarships, the trickle-down of diversity funding, and the calling from spirit that was before and behind and up under all of that, the black oceanists emerged. and the black oceanists trained themselves and each other not to be afraid of going black (that was what they called it) for days at a time. they were not afraid to slow and evolve their breathing. they were not afraid of their kinship with bottom crawlers who could or could not glow. they were not afraid of being touched by what they could never see, never bring back to the light, never have a witness for.

or to be more precise. they knew about that already. and they were less afraid of the underwater unknown than they were of the blatant dangers up on land.

so the second skin they put on to dive was thick and black, but not quite as thick, nowhere near as constricting as what they already knew.

they showed each other their teeth. drunk and daring on what the unknowable would teach them. and it was not long before they started to long for longer, to plan for a plan that would sustain generations below. depth of a plan that didn't require, include, value, or chart a return to the surface ever again.<sup>5</sup>

they were the first ones who learned to light themselves and find each other. the critical black marine biologists, scientists of the dark matter under fathoms, suggest that there may be a causal relationship between the bioluminescence in the ocean and the bones of the millions of transatlantic dead. oyeku ogbe. they have been studying the relationship between blackness and light. which is not to say that before the face of god or the race of capital moved across the deep there was no light within the deepest sea creature, but is instead a signal to remember the character of calcium, the meaning of the presence of magnesium. both of which catalyze bioluminescence.

don't let me lose you. they are not saying that the light in the deep or the stars at the bottom of the sea didn't exist before the weight of the bones of the captives who would not live as captives. before the introduction of the diving shark-cleaned bones of the free into the complex environment of the one inseparable ocean. they would never say that.

but who would suggest an origin for light, except blackness.

what the dark scientists are saying is that now that the bones are there as fine as sand, the marrow like coral to itself, the magnesium and calcium has infiltrated the systems of even the lowest filter feeders. so any light that you find in the ocean right now cannot be separated from the stolen light of those we long for every morning. and I don't need to remind you that the ocean, that place where the evolutionists and creationists all agree that life began, the source of all the salt we breathed to get here, lives within us.

all light is shared with those at the bottom of the ocean.<sup>6</sup>

*remember the frogs.*

after everything we had tried to say to prove that human was human beyond gender. after people had cobbled together the bodies of loved ones out of rubble that didn't segregate or care. after the water content and the advocacy advance led to historically unprecedented numbers of proud intersex leaders. after the pronoun transformation and the protests and the institution building and the ostensibly safer spaces, we let that go and took a different approach. we liked to think of it as an evolutionary approach. and really at that point what could anyone do with this rising water but emulate the amphibians. what we had done to the planet made us crave and need a bothness of slick skin and webbing and genital adaptability.

they say that it was deep in the ocean that certain fish learned to self-fertilize. or that after the ice age the remaining amphibians evolved how they needed to. and if any species knew how to decimate habitat, i mean how to zone ourselves out of safe space for contact, it was ours right? or what we had been. and our range of ancestors moved beyond the eunuchs to a more ancient and just as relevant set of references. some said it would be the extremely logical end point of our individualism and ownership: self-impregnation. but we, the evolutionaries, knew it was just as valuable as transparent waterproof skin over your eyeballs. we could become whoever we needed to be for each other.

we created the future in form.<sup>7</sup>