



Prophetic Pasts, Presents, and Futures

LEAH RAMNATH

ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

In this creative nonfiction essay, I take account of my transcendental memories from childhood and track its effects on my past, present, and future selves. I engage my personal experiences using Black feminist theory to make visible the weightiness of the intangible inheritances that continue to affect my present life. Despite my trying to relinquish this inheritance, I bear the burden and mark of an insistent past adamant on determining a constrained future. The work of Black feminist theorists and queer thinkers walked so I could run; throughout this essay I locate where and when their work appeared and loosened the reigns of religious, gendered, and other oppressive discourses.

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“What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. And we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a destination. Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness’s pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel. We must take ecstasy.”¹

José Esteban Muñoz

My first lucid memory, and perhaps my first moments into consciousness, was a prophetic vision. In this vision, I was a baby, and I was wearing a pink dress with a bonnet lined with pink lace, white socks lined with lace at the top, and white shiny shoes; a tiny ball of brownness with big brown eyes, black hair, showcasing a huge, toothless, smile. I was on an old wooden ship with my mother, father, and their brothers and sisters—my two older brothers weren’t there. At first, everyone was harmonious, passing me around, playing with me and singing songs. And then, suddenly, the waters started to get choppy. The ocean was depicted by blue, wave-shaped, cardboard cutouts that were being moved by stagehands (people dressed in black to appear invisible and/or blend in as belonging to the set). As the ship rocked back and forth, my family became nervous, afraid they were going to be thrown off the boat. I was still being passed from hand to hand, but as the boat rocked more violently and the cardboard waves were being moved faster, the feeling changed from happy playfulness to fighting over me, baby Leah. I was being taken away from Auntie Rhona, thrown to Uncle Ravi, torn away from Rajendranath (my father), and so on and so forth. I was screaming and crying, scared that someone would drop me and confused why no one could keep me for more than a few minutes. More stagehands with buckets of water walk up to the ship and splash water to create a misty effect. Then, BOOM, suddenly I am conscious. I am 4 years old and I’m looking at my hands and touching my face, thinking “where am I? Is this me?”

For years I would think back to this memory; although it may not have happened in my physical, immediate reality, *it did happen somewhere*. Maybe I internalized my environment before I had the knowledge to understand what was going on in the world and within the boundaries of my familial happenings before I was in time. Emerging into time was my first break-through, breaking through the womb, born at 10:28 in the morning—sorry, mom! My dad gave me my name, over a decade before I was born, in a love letter he wrote to my mom in the 80s. My existence was a prophecy fulfilled, establishing my dad as a modern prophet and a mouthpiece for God. But why would dad give me a name that means weary? I sense there’s a hint of prophetic fulfillment there too because I am weary *as fuck* in, what José Muñoz calls, the “prison house of the here and now” from thinking/dreaming/obsessing about the there and then that has felt just quite out of reach.² I wonder what I would have been like if my parents named me Joy. My name also functioned as a kind of designation, I was located within the definition of weariness—in a sense, affectively alienated from happiness and its synonyms. Happiness became my horizon, it became the point of/to life that drove me towards the straight and narrow “totalizing rendering of reality” envisioned by the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”³

When I was born, my parents had been in the United States for about 10 years; they immigrated from Trinidad to New York in the 1980s. They were the forerunners, my parents, *of/for* their families in many regards. In this case, they were the first people to move and prepare America for the rest of their brothers and sisters to come. Within a few short years, the family was all here, squeezed into a small one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx. They called New York their home for some time, working as maids, assistants, night-shift clerks, and assembly line workers all while trying to go to school for their US high school diplomas and university for their associates degree. Even though most of them already had their college degrees and attended prestigious secondary schools, they still had to attend night school to get a GED. My mom has told me that, while she was pregnant with my oldest brother, Matthew, she worked for a nice Italian lady in a kitchen where she peeled potatoes. For 2 whole years she studied and

1 José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Sexual Cultures. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 185.

2 Muñoz, 1.

3 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 22. Muñoz, 1. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

graduated from the School of Nursing General Hospital San Fernando—she was a nurse but could only find a job peeling potatoes because she was undocumented and, furthermore, she had to pass another exam to qualify her license in the US, for which she did not have time or money.

My family had to adhere to the laws and legislation narrating the social, cultural, and political landscape in which they landed. They became used to the climate in no time though; they got used to the cold weather, figured out the public transportation system, and even adopted a New York accent—it's not “cough-ee” it's “caw-fee.” They cultivated tools of indifference, part of my present inheritance, which enabled them to navigate the socio-cultural-political climate where they embodied selective silence to disengage with the harshness of cold attitudes and environments recognizing them as only as being out of place (i.e., foreigners, strangers, others). At the same time, these tools were disabling and had the potential to further exacerbate feeling like outsiders without the potential to belong and without the possibility of truly being happy as they envisioned it. Sara Ahmed describes this feeling:

“To be alienated from happiness is to recognize not only that you are the one who is out of place but also that you cannot make yourself be in place, that you cannot make yourself belong “anywhere.” Such recognition involves an alienation from the abstract potentiality of the individual, premised on the belief that you can do or be whatever you want to do or be. Without that self-belief, happiness seems to recede from “where” one is, as if within the loss of the “whatever” is also the loss of a “wherever.” We are reminded that the freedom to be happy, even as fantasy, might evoke “somewhere,” as a where that only some can be.”⁴

Their stories of their transition from the first encounter with the chaos of the American way of life to American citizens themselves is often characterized by their simultaneous struggle and triumph of “making it,” wrapped with the religio-linguistic bow of “through God, anything is possible.” I inherited these stories, too, it was family folklore, and at every family gathering it became more and more mythical/mystical/extraordinary. The (now) fables encouraged, perhaps through a misreading, my generation (brothers, cousins, and pumpkin vine cousins) in the family to seek *out* hardships, because hard times breed character, integrity, and earning one's spot in American society. I say “misreading” because their hardships could have also been interpreted as laying a foundation for us, the next generation, to build upon their successes and avoid the pain they had to endure. Our mythical past, premised on a desirable future influenced by a Caribbean dialectic of the promise of the American dream and its exceptionalism, became the horizon of our current present.

I was raised on the blood of white Jesus and communion wafers—which is probably why I'm so skinny and short now, because metaphor wasn't very nutritious or filling for my then-growing body. I was dedicated to my parents' God when I was a few months old and during that dedication, of course, I was given a prophetic word—another inheritance—from that pastor. He said I was a prophet(ess) and had the anointing of both David and Esther. My cup runneth over with both holy oil and wine; was I to pour it over my head or drink it? David and Esther were clustered up in my personal cloud of witnesses, my spiritual ancestors whose successes, anointings, and stories became my own on the day of my dedication. These dead people, some maybe only existing in allegory, were relatives, part of my spiritual heritage and branches on my family tree: branches because our being was only made possible from the breakthroughs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob via the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I think this Biblical prophetic pairing is part of the reason why my parents raised me the way they did: toward an androgenous disposition, a type of trans identity. I was both a son and daughter to my parents—I was the present culmination of David, Esther, Joseph, Naomi, Moses, Ruth, and Samson. My parents believed that and I believed it too. So, as a child, although my parents dressed me like a girl, they indiscriminately raised me as both girl and boy under the banner of “strong charismatic leader.” bell hooks has given me the language to recognize my socialization process: “...patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles.”⁵ For me, growing up was a confusing

4 Ahmed, 156–157.

5 hooks, 2004, 22.

and overwhelming journey. To this day, my parents—perhaps unbeknownst to themselves—simultaneously keep the spectrum of possibility for both my gender and sexuality open and closed thereby imbuing me in a double portion of fully loaded gender/sexuality expectations. However, there is one standard that continues to be made very clear: men are leaders and women are supporters. Forever and always. Furthermore, this was bolstered by their cultural understandings of gendered and sexual performativity from a West Indian perspective. I was expected to persevere and preserve our spiritual and cultural traditions while embodying the responsibilities of both sexes. It doesn't help that, between being 19 and 21 years old, several well-known prophets came to our church anointing me as a modern-day Esther and my father's (metaphorical, he made sure to clarify) first born son.

hooks comes to mind, again, giving me the language to account for the weightiness of my dual/dueling gender endowment in relationality with my father: “[t]o the patriarchal dad, sons can only be regarded as recruits in training, hence they must constantly be subjected to sadomasochistic power struggles designed to toughen them up, to prepare them to maintain the patriarchal legacy.”⁶ This is a mirror representation of the relational dynamics between me and my dad. I was bound up in my parents’ obsession with carrying on their legacy, perhaps as a way of living beyond death through me. In a way, they were navigating life with the impending end, death, as a horizon. This death gaze oriented us toward a narrow way of living for all of us. I was informed of all the answers and my dad would test me by way of debate-conversation to demonstrate my devotion to a closed-circuit truth. He would ask me and my brothers (luckily for them, they got to fade into the background of this ego trip sooner than I did) about what we learned from his Sunday sermons on the drive home after church and, if we could not repeat a substantive point, we were subject to shame and guilt for not paying attention and seeing the value of his hour-long podium rants. He never asked us what we really thought about his sermons, just to repeat anything he had said. The everyday ordinariness of this repetition became empty, meaningless tradition. Truth, in this circumstance, centered on the infallibility of the Bible and a singular/common/generalized interpretation of it. Our truths were derived from a version of the Bible that was considered finished, it was dead and done. We were enabled to live now and forever because the book was dead. However, when I would ask questions and posit my own thoughts that did not reflect the truth regime of my dad, he would interpret my engagement as deviation, being influenced by the wrong spirit—Jezebel.⁷ What makes Jezebel the wrong spirit? Jezebel unveils an authentic human-being having rational responses to being dislocated/embedded into a system of conditional truths meant to confine our souls and spirits. However, being labeled as Jezebel came with a prescription of *silence*. It is better to be silent than to vocalize/utter confrontational truths derived from our own curiosity.

We became incredibly selective about the people we surrounded ourselves with; our chosen family at this point had to receive this dead-living book and our interpretation of it as such. Our church community became our family and we held each other accountable to safeguard our souls—when we should die physical deaths, we would most definitely be going to heaven and before that would happen, we had to “colonize the earth with the Kingdom gospel.” I was receiving discipline within two concentric circles between my immediate family and church family. It was here where I “witnessed and experience[d] the practice of sexist domination in [this] family setting.”⁸ Feeling powerless, I took cues to act out as either the first-born son or the supporting sister/daughter; it was only in these familial/familiar roles where I felt like a person with a minor tilt toward power—making a banquet out of crumbs. When I would respond as son, I would be met with the unfulfilled expectations of the unnamed Proverbs 31 woman. And when I would embody silence in an attempt at this virtue, I would be confronted with not being a bold enough leader. I practiced fasting, glorified starvation, thinking I will feast one day when my physical body is dust. I was holding onto the hope that in death, I would finally experience an authentic truth revealing who I actually was/am: “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”⁹

6 hooks, 2004, 40.

7 Tamara Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

8 bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013, 36.

9 2 Corinthians 5:8

The longer I was with my (current chosen-for-me) family the more intense my daily deaths became. My belonging was premised on my ability to choose death and the common vision of death as horizon; I would live in the now if I didn't keep death within view, and to be present (within my body) in the present would mean to attend to my withering self (flesh). At what point would I be able to live? And I thought when and *if* I do get the chance to live, how would I know what to do? Fear was my other mother and what I feared most was losing my only grasp of reality: my family. Even though life steadily became unbearable over the years, I still clung on to hope that maybe my first-born son inheritance would come through. I dreamt of a second birth, being born again conferred with realized/recognized authority from my father to lawfully and legally author new truths that enable life with a horizon forged through love in hope of reaching into the then and there.

I was never born again.

I deviated.

I prophesied to myself.

Dislocating myself, out of the sheer frustration of being made invisible and unheard, outside of my then kinship circle was one of the most intensely painful experiences of my life. I mourned and continue to grieve the sense of certainty that I had a time, place, and space where I felt belongingness.

After some time of being estranged, I did meet the Lord(e) again. I was co-resurrected with Audre Lorde's testimonial utterance, "[w]hat is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?"¹⁰ I was not looking for a new religion or traditions—I wanted to understand how I got here and what to do with the anxieties of being thrown into being. Lorde's work was a point of entry into a new kind of being and perspective that made room and enabled the reconfiguring of the components of life itself. Furthermore, reading Lorde made me feel alive and her work led me to other spaces where aliveness was the horizon. Through my chosen intellectual kinship ties, I was able to identify and name who the stagehands were that set the stage and moved the props (discourses around heteronormativity, patriarchy, citizenship, etc.). Taking Lorde's reflections seriously, I clung onto these particular words to make room and identify who and how belonged to my chosen family:

"My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living."¹¹

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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10 Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, San Francisco, California: Aunt Lute Books, 1997, 25.

11 Lorde, 20.

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