Writing in a Belittered World

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Sometimes I wonder why I gave up a life in dance to earn a doctorate and become a professor. These moments are rare but they are dogged, especially when I hear my mother's warnings: “You'll be left holding the bag.” “You'll be nothing but a dried prune.” “You'll look like a librarian.” “You'll be behind the eight ball.” I grew up at a time and in a place when women were to be loving and lovely, dressed up and smiling. So why did I choose this life, and what does it mean to become an academic? Do words such as freedom and values change their meaning and reach when academic is attached to them? What do we mean by “academic freedom” and “academic values”?

The most moving and resilient answers to these questions come in these pages of Small Axe in response to my work. Varied and conflicting, sometimes dense and always passionate, the commentaries by Avery Gordon, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson, and Chris Bongie hold me hard in their grasp.1 I am grateful to have my work recognized in this way. And as I consider my response, I realize what it means to be part of a community of scholars and how our occupation matters: our voices, the positions we take, the choices we make, political and otherwise.

I thank editor David Scott for giving me this opportunity not only to take stock of my writing, which is and has always been my life, but also—recalling the words of the Guyanese historian and activist Walter Rodney—to “ground with my brothers,” and, let me add, “my sisters.”2


2 Walter Rodney, The Groundings with My Brothers (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1969). The government of Jamaica, led by Prime Minister Hugh Shearer, deemed Rodney a “threat to national security.” After attending the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal, he was banned from ever returning to Jamaica and from his post as lecturer in African history at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Some of his “most profound experiences,” he confessed, were the sessions of reasoning or
Back Talking Like I Did, or “Ghostly Matters”

My life, or what I remember of my childhood, began with a dream. I was in a dump, out in the dirt with broken footstools, cracked dishes, and piles of toys. No one else was around. I had been dropped off and left there just before the sun set. I do not remember myself then—how I looked, what I felt. All I see are things. The things in the dirt are not garbage, not like the stuff you throw in trashcans. Instead, they are weighty, extravagant and intemperate in their height and clutter. That is the feeling I have when I call up the dream. I am thrown away in a heap, in the midst of once-treasured junk that still seems effervescent with love, imprudent in excess.

Now I am back in the South. An old fear beckons, as the “lingering remains” of the past rise up again in the present. The white men are still tall and proud and their eyes bold and fearless. But I am not scared anymore like I was. Now, because I walk with Stella my American Staffordshire who is always recognized as a pit bull terrier, I can go down the street and look straight into their eyes when they stare at me from their trucks. Their smiles make me feel good. Their gaze takes me to a place of comfort that I do not understand. Something that gives me a respite from sensing that I do not belong, that I am not right in my skin.

What that something is I do not know. But I have a hunch that it has a lot to do with terror. They still do not like me. I know it. Their friendliness, like my nonchalance, puts us both at the edge of what is permissible. We are both faking it. Terror is always like that. It skirts the real. It looks to the past. Our talk carries the old scorn in its pauses. I like it. I get to pretend politeness and live again the fright of growing up when dogs and blood and big white men with guns were patrolling the streets and talking on the television news. I was as afraid of my mother’s hate as of the violence of the white men who kicked and spat at demonstrators two blocks from my father’s store. But I was not part of that either. I belonged nowhere.

I was saved by Lucille, the black woman from Jamaica who came into my life when I was two years old. She did not like dogs or men. But that did not matter to me. She told me stories about ghosts who landed in white skin on the window ledge, taught me how to tell one kind of cricket from another, showed me where in the creek I could find the biggest cottonmouth water moccasins, and gave me long lectures about men, mostly about how to live much better without them.

I was thirteen in 1963 when Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his letter from the Birmingham Jail, when four girls died in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing there, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas and Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon. Malcolm X suffered Elijah Muhammad’s discipline of public silence after he described Kennedy’s murder as a case of “the chickens coming home to roost.” In Atlanta, “the city too busy to hate,” Lester Maddox took up the Confederate flag, iron skillets, and ax handles at his Pickrick Restaurant to block “colored folk” from entry. My

“grounding” with black brothers: “I have sat on a little oil drum, rusty and in the midst of garbage, and some Black brothers and I have grounded together” (64).

3 In this section, I turn to Avery Gordon’s meditation on the vanishing and erasure of my life lived under cover of the published archive. See Gordon, “Ancient Modes of Proof”; see also Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
father’s friend Charlie Leb (born Lebedin) dragged the Reverend Ashton Jones by his feet, across the floor and out the door of his restaurant at 66 Lucky Street.

Hate was in the eyes of the white men, who were tall and proud. Hate caused fires to start, glass to break, guns to kill, clubs to hit, dogs to chase and bite. The dogs were big. They were German shepherds, not the blue tick or red bone hounds used to scent out black slaves and then prisoners. The eyes of the white men tracked me. But not just their eyes. Their mouths were smiling. They grinned as they beat up people kneeling in prayer. They smirked as they circled around reporters whose cameras they smashed.

Now, fifty years later when I see white men looking at my dog and me, I quicken in sight of their smiles. Are they grinning because they like the breed? Inviting me to bond with them in having a game dog, a dog that knows no fear and never gives up, as loyal as the day is long? Or is it that same old lethal grin, telling me with their eyes and in the twist of their lips that I might be walking now but they could hobble or cripple me anytime they wanted. They could do more than kill; they toyed with, tortured, and trashed.

Aside from Lucille, women never figured in my life except as examples of what I never wanted to be. Those women talked on the phone all day, shopped, got manicures, flirted, and seemed wildly beautiful to me though deeply unlikeable. How could I like women who lived in the shadow of men? So I decided early on not to wear makeup, not to entice. I enjoyed walking barefoot, playing with frogs and tearing the heads off dolls. If I ever had to put on a dress, I felt like I was in drag. Obsessed with the Church and Christ on the cross, I decided to become a nun. Instead, I became a professor.

Now I am back where it all began, with the lightning bugs, the extra-large mosquitoes Lucille called “gabber nipples,” the road kill, the possums in the night, the stray dogs, the chirping crickets, and the tall white men. My mother is back too. After she died, all her things arrived here at the house: old paintings, jewelry, silver, and hundreds upon hundreds of photos that my father took of her in every pose all over the world. She is here where she wants to be, going through her things and laughing at me while she pleads with me to be close, to get down with her on the bed and talk about Haiti all through the night, about the taste of mangos and the look of zandolites.

I live a life that comes out sounding like some kind of a joke. I could never tell the difference between past and present, life and death, anyway, with all the spirits Lucille called out at night: ghosts of little girls bitten by spiders, husbands whose legs were lost in cotton mills or torn off by scythes in the field, white women whom lust had worn down like the heels of shoes. So whether I am dead or alive, me or my mother, I never know.

It is all so complicated. And I am always so dishonest.

There Are No Fables Anymore, so Let’s “Open These Graves”

_Ezili o pa Ezili sa!_ (Ezili, oh, that’s not Ezili!). I distrusted the lure of “romance,” the word and its trappings. So the _Iwa_ Ezili, so powerfully imagined by men, and even by women like Maya Deren and Zora Neale Hurston, troubled me. Not as if I was a _sevite_, for I never thought of myself as wanted by her, but as an observer, standing outside her terrain and looking on her show of exquisite femininity.
Known variously by some writers, both Haitian and foreign, as Tragic Mistress, Black Venus, Goddess of Love, or Mater Dolorosa, in ritual performances she empties these names of meaning, letting herself be swept away by the absolutely unforeseeable. Promiscuous or pure, vengeful or gracious, she could never be held by the categories of knowledge, the limits imposed on her.\(^4\)

Here was a spirit courted as the most loved who cried because she was not loved enough, the most demanding lwa who remained vulnerable, porous to the deceptions and ambiguities of passion. Not love, for the word means nothing to her. Decked out in lace, doused with perfume, she embraces femininity but only to confront us with an experience that trades on sexual ambiguity. Men as well as women are “mounted” by her, and she chooses women as well as men in “mystic marriage.” The commands of sexual reproduction matter not at all.

Ezili Danto, Ezili Freda, Ezili-je-wouj (red-eyes), Ezili Mapian, Ezili-nwa-ke (black-heart), Ezilitowo (the bull). In her varying emanations, she invites us to consider how accidental, superficial, or even quite illusory are anatomical discriminations. In Vodou practice, spirits cannot appear or manifest in the world without the material envelope of the devotee, the husk or the horse that will be entered or ridden by the god. What kind of epistemology is this? What knowing does it promise? Overturning the taxonomic obsessions so crucial to dominion, this ritual practice threatens the technologies of the state, the authority and power of law. Inside and out, horse and rider, human and nonhuman, mastery and subjection are no longer opposed. The overlapping subjectivities that these categories engage became the habitat required for writing *Haiti, History, and the Gods*.

What remains intact, no matter the array of palpable mutations, is the *person*, whether human, animal, or spirit, no matter. That troubling, ambiguous vitality of personhood is what CeCe McDonald teaches us to know.\(^5\) She reminds us that the ghosts of slavery and racism linger still. Nothing stays buried, not for long. From her place of confinement, held for her own “protection” in the tomb of solitary, she can *fem it up* while she teaches us something basic, rock bottom about how we come to know. “Gender,” she says, “is NOT” determined by chromosomes or limited by terms such as *male* and *female*. Instead, what matters is “personal identity,” as she puts it: your way of relating to yourself.\(^6\)

Wherein, Locke asked in a passage of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that has long obsessed me, lies “personal identity”—that self that makes you who you are? Not concerned with the chimera of the “frontispiece,” the exterior shape or structure of an entity, he concluded that *sameness of person* is indifferent to *sameness of body*. It is thought that matters, consciousness. Identity is in the person, not the body.\(^7\) And it is that self that radical isolation and imprisonment threaten. But McDonald, in her status of black transgender woman, knows that her body is

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\(^5\) In appreciation to Tinsley and Richardson’s call for “thiefing” and “graverobber methodology,” I follow their prompt to “open these graves” and exhum the remnants of racism and transphobia made whole in the presence of CeCe McDonald. See Tinsley and Richardson, “From Black Transgender Studies,” 155.

\(^6\) Ibid., 157. The authors quote from CeCe McDonald, “Shoutout to Black and Pink Newsletter, Support CeCe!, 6 May 2013 (emphasis in original), supportcece.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/shoutout-to-black-and-pink-newsletter.”

inextricable from her mind. She wills to choose her identity. That is the risk her embodiment poses to the illusions of mastery, the befouling discriminations that lurk in the shrill performance of white privilege, the desperation captured in the slur, “Boy dressed like a girl tucking her dick in.”

To recuperate from the tomb of neglect the terms of abuse, to give a history to contemporary tags for the unfit or expendable stands before us as a goal, here in the university and in our lives. Phantasms of criminality drive our elected officials, our police, our state, and our nation. And the unreal “rationality” of racism in the United States depends on identifying what can be rendered as “waste” or “dirt,” or what one prisoner at Pelican Bay State Prison in California called “the cast-away.”

Much of our population is in thrall to labels such as “criminal,” “threat,” or “thug,” as we saw in the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Or in the general indifference to the killing of a black man named Marlon Brown; chased and mowed down by a squad car in a Florida garden, he was fleeing from the police for an alleged seatbelt violation. We should ask not how we allow the existence of “black sites” (our overseas prisons), “frozen zones” (in the borough of Brooklyn), “security housing units,” “special management units,” or “supermaxes” (throughout the United States), but rather how we live and breathe with a status that exempts us for the moment from being labeled as threats. For, even if we are safe today, we live on a slippery slope.

In responding to the state of dread and injury, the servility, pain, and violence we confront, I want to invoke, if just tentatively, a kind of uncertain reservoir on which all creatures might draw but from which most of us have learned to cut ourselves off completely. I do not mean to call to mind any concept of relativism; rather, I mean to cast doubt on the robustness and transportability of the ontological partitions that we so easily presuppose: body and mind, animality and humanity, matter and not matter, feminine and masculine, though the latter pairing has dropped out of my most recent work.

We need to step back and ask how we can know feeling that is not tied to our assumptions. To risk losing ourselves in what is beyond our ken is to experience what it might mean to feel sufficiently. Whenever I turn from academic contexts to the lived, daily reality of what is happening to the majority of people in this country—impoverishment and disregard—I realize that animality and its tight bind with divinity are what we need to consider, not claims for humanity. Put another way, I try to break out of conventional academic analyses in order to test or question the boundaries of humanity, to confirm or enhance the making and management of human boundary objects.

In writing for years about the legal history and practice of slavery in the United States, I learned that the idea of the beast—or, according to the quite unnatural natural historian of Jamaica, Edward Long, the so-called brute icon of the human—was a category best avoided. After all, such categorical thinking ushered in taxonomic limits that separated humans from animals, as well as generating radical ideas about who got to be human. These divisions depended on, for example, the rank of

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8 Tinsley and Richardson, “From Black Transgender Studies,” 154. The authors quote from State of Minnesota v. Chrisehaun Reed McDonald.

9 E-mail correspondence between a Pelican Bay prisoner and the author in 2013, during a hunger strike to protest solitary confinement.
animal to embody the slave, a fiction of law that became a moral truth: a fantastic amalgam of human, animal, and inanimate thing. Such racist fantasies could locate “a guinea-negro” in the same category as “learned horses, learned and even talking dogs.”

So it is natural to sense the danger of such juxtapositions. Yet with the challenge of “graverobber methodology” in mind, I invoke the oscillation between, or alteration of, the categories that bind. Terminologies matter. Words such as mulatto, mixed-blood, octoroon, sambo, négresse, and nigger hold within them a history of abuse. But rather than excise them from our vocabulary, banish them from our classrooms, we need to know “the pain of history words contain,” as Derek Walcott put it so formidably in “The Schooner Flight.”

Out of the graves and into the open come the words of hate. And we recognize, just for an instant, the magic of transmutation, a sort of reworking that turns what we have been given, the old and the dead, into something that exceeds them. In this insistence on unconditional engagement lies a politics that might not only subvert subjection but even recast its meaning. We can learn from, and repeat after, CeCe McDonald: “I came out blessed.”

Not in the Mood for Tragedy

On 21 December 2008, I sat in the Jewish National and University Library, now renamed the National Library of Israel, across from the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament, and the Israel Museum. In the courtyard I noticed a sign for the Institute for Advanced Studies. Below it there was another sign, one for the Center for the Study of Rationality.

I had seen the crumbled homes of East Jerusalem, the uprooted olive trees, slabs of concrete and rubble in the places that Israeli guidebooks do not include. My thoughts wandered away from West Jerusalem to places rooted in Palestinian memory even as they are erased. It is hard to imagine what the term rationality means in this context. Just six days later, two days after Christmas, Israel began an assault on the open-air prison that is Gaza. The delirious violence, cruelty, and indifference were justified as a reasonable response to Hamas rocket fire. The cohabitation of claims of reason and actual barbarity makes the lethal effects of brute force less open to criticism.

What are the stories we tell ourselves when we endeavor to describe what we do as professors? This question has been much on my mind since the American Studies Association resolution to boycott Israeli academic institutions and the invective and threat that followed the vote supporting it. Then, in preparation for the meetings of the Modern Language Association (MLA) and in their aftermath, numerous critics condemned this association, too, for its affront to academic freedom, open discourse, and reason. In a particularly hyperbolic article in the Tablet, Liel Leibovitz

concludes, “In its lunatic monomania, the MLA affair stands as a stark reminder that what’s at stake here is reason itself.”

For many of us, it seems that academic freedom matters only when it resolutely ignores the continued oppression of Palestinians, their access to universities and their ability to study. But this is not my point here, or at least not my main concern. What matters to me in thinking through my uses of terms such as *convertibility*, *convertible logic*, and *conversionary tactics* is the pursuit of this thread throughout my work, whether on Edgar Allan Poe, Haiti, or the religious and legal history of the Americas.

Conversion, from the time I first read John Calvin’s *Institutes*, became for me a method, a way of thinking through oppositions such as flesh and spirit, matter and not matter, sacred and profane. I was thrilled by his argument with Martin Luther on the matter of transubstantiation, for I always thought that the sacred found itself most realized in trash, that what we thought common is also exalted, that the basest matter was not transcended into spirit but, rather, kept uncomfortably close to it. The spiritual found meaning and heft in what most seemed to deny it. So Christ was meant not to be hidden under the “mask” of bread—“His body swallowed up by His divinity”—but rather meant to tangle with the base and everyday. That tussle back and forth signals the kind of exchange that ushers in the unexpected.

What matters here is that the more arbitrary the relation, the more striking the consecration. A perceived lack of resemblance between the body and the bread signifies the consecration. The trope of the sacrament depends upon a fusion, not a consummation of one into the other. And the peculiar kind of merging that comes with this metonymic exchange keeps both intact and before us as two distinct loci: the heavenly and the earthly domains.

When I began work in Haiti, over forty years ago now, I was struck by what it meant to *serve the gods* and the risk for both lwa and servite in this ritual practice. The gods relate to and are activated by things that do not conform to cravings for purity, longings for transcendence, or clear-cut distinctions between good and evil. The oscillation between supposed oppositions matters. There is no dichotomy, for this ethics thrives on ambivalence. Destroying hierarchy demands something akin to dancing barefoot on the ground, going sideways, turning round, backward and forward, until such tired dualisms as body and soul become something materially new, a political practice par excellence.

Like law itself, spirits form the locus of embodied history. The appearance of the gods, and even the cult of the ancestors, is operative only in a social world: the spirits are always, for better or for worse, functions of rather exigent—though sometimes temporary—sociopolitical situations. Whether materializing dispossession or enhancement, they teach us something crucial about life: both earthly and heavenly, the high and the low. Replacing stigma with spirit, the servitors, once mounted by the lwa (meaning both “law” and “spirit” in Haitian), redeem the oppressor’s law.

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sevis lwa thus elaborates the insufficiency of the division between the ritualistic, religious, and magical, on the one side, and the juridical, logical, and enlightened, on the other. In that mingling and derivation lies the possibility of reorienting how we think politically.

I found my politics in courting unreason, in letting the hypothetical loose in the room with facts, in knowing year after year how prescient were Aimé Césaire’s words in his Notebook: “Because we hate you / and your reason, we claim kinship / with dementia praecox with the flaming madness / of persistent cannibalism.”¹⁵ That madness and that commandeering of unreason is not just a matter for poetry. For Césaire, who watched intolerable brutality and racism under cover of consensus and, above all, rationality in the halls of the French National Assembly, there was no greater mission than to expose this doublet of enlightenment. That exposure meant not only turning acceptable assumptions on their head, but also gutting words of their customary meanings, creating a verbal landscape in which words no longer accommodated themselves to the acceptable scripts of civility.

In graduate school, one professor said I should be a poet; then, when I became an assistant professor, a senior colleague told me I should be out on the streets, not in the halls of academe. So I was strung out between poetry and politics, or so my mentors bemoaned my plight. For me, however, there was no problem. I had early on, while in college, discovered poets such as Carl Brouard, Léon Laleau, Césaire, and René Depestre. And then I went to Haiti, and there I sensed the promise of another way of thinking and writing. In the countryside I found a way to think through the rituals of those I admired and so to recover the histories that had been silenced. Out of my experience in the daily discipline of Vodou, I found a spirituality that depends on matter and brings on practical change.

Long before I read Herman Melville’s Pierre, I sensed the terrible but giddy truth of Pierre’s lament: “It is ambiguous still.” How, I wondered, could I use language to jolt readers out of the misrecognition and comfort necessary to maintaining society’s mechanisms of hierarchy and control? How might I coerce all kinds of categories and distinctions into confusion? I wanted somehow to become vulnerable to the task at hand, to unleash the excess and risk of any genuine task of thought, no matter where it leads: into the chair where Guantánamo prisoners are strapped and force fed; into the solitary cell where US prisoners are indefinitely isolated; into the texts of case law where ghosts are born and the living translated into the dead.

I do not think of my insights as “tragic” but rather aim to take my readers away from the old plots of loss and gain.¹⁶ Shake them up and shout out. The academy, as Antonio Gramsci once wrote, trains us all to be “experts in legitimation.” We do that with our aura of authority, our claims of objectivity and balance. So the formidable anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his introduction to Pierre Clastres’s Archéology of Violence asks us to beware, and I paraphrase, how


¹⁶ It is only with Chris Bongie’s attentive marking of my path toward the tragic mode that I recognize fully what is at stake with my writing and my politics and the sometime glory of doing the macro history, whether legal or religious. See Bongie, “Haiti, History, and the Law.”
“academic discourse conceptually defangs thought.”17 How, then, to unsettle disciplinary boundaries to make the classroom into a place of collision and conflict and not merely polite acquiescence?

These questions do not have easy answers, but in asking them we let a lot of fresh air into the room. For me, the horrors I describe in The Law Is a White Dog do not entrap. Instead they create a space for activism in the precincts of law.18 That is not a “tragic turn” but rather an exhilarating spin round, something akin to Poe’s call for “a mental gyration of the heel,” “a rapid whirling,” as he declares in Eureka, his “essay on the material and spiritual universe,” which he also called “a prose poem.”19

The Law Is a White Dog is a text deeply preoccupied with metamorphoses, predominantly those wrought by law that are almost always evil but also those, like the rabid dog both healed and transformed by Apollonius, that augur good. Even when discussing William Blackstone’s “gothic tangle” of the common law, I am enchanted by it. I might just be a little too much in love with its fictions. What I abhor is the veneer of rationality and objectivity that makes law’s machinations both possible and invisible: the mask that covers its intimacy with the phantasmal, wayward, and irrational.

Reading chapters of the book with prisoners at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville was an enlivening experience. The leaps in chronology, the unexpected juxtaposition of things usually kept separate, and the chaos of “terror and bewilderment” that comes in response to torture and dispossession, did not defeat them. We challenged each other to see things differently, to get at the visceral force of legal language, to flesh out its fictions, to see its categories crosswise or otherwise. That perspectival phenomenon leaves no room for tragedy.

To think of history as a record of suffering and a mode of deliverance, as a gateway to transfiguration, is a way to understanding, a will to abide with the civic ghosts and convicted felons the white dog’s penalty has colonized and made incomplete. But facing the injury and harm of our contemporary penal archipelago, these readers, though imprisoned, puzzled out law’s alternative reality, and it came to life without any safe or customary theoretical framing. Such knowledge is never abstract; instead, it remains subject to jostling and pressure. Their words showed me that thought is always at the ready.

Perhaps the most honest way to put it, although admittedly it might lead to yet another gesture of reversal and confounding, is that whatever might be associated with disenchantment, or taken to be evidence of disenchantment, is in fact the product of its opposite, the expression of enchantment, which continues to hold me firmly captive. The lesson, then, is the lesson of Vodou practice, of any confrontation with the unknown or what is adamantly not our own: the sheer perturbation of our confidence in what we think we know. In fact, what we know is so close to what we do not know that it can simply flip into its opposite. That is the plot of true philosophy. And the practice of desire.

I am far from “sanguine” when I sit down to write. Although sometimes physically uneasy, I remain committed to a way of writing that is, if I may be so bold, rollicking and unruly. Joyful in kicking at the pricks of pretense and happy to stand in the sinkhole of the past, I find my way forward in a convertibility that is always a both/and way of thinking—countering a language of dichotomy with proliferation. Even the southern Poe embraced this mode when destroying the certainty normally housed in words such as body and spirit, male and female. In such counterfeit conversions, the initiation into any saving energy of the spirit and its saving grace is always a motley drama.