Hypatia (2021), **36**, 555–565
doi:10.1017/hyp.2021.42

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MUSING

Breathe into Believing

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(Received 1 August 2019; revised 31 March 2020; accepted 20 February 2021;
first published online 24 September 2021)

This begins before 1896. This begins before Arkansas. But "this can't be right grandmother. who are our Ancestors! she said, shit gal, i don't know" (Bridgforth 2012). One of my ancestors walks toward me. She be Gertrude. Gertrude Grant. I have no pictures of her. I have no living memories of her. Yet I remember. Her. My Nana's mama, born around 1890 in the lumber town of Canfield in southern Arkansas.

Canfield, Arkansas, 1896
We're children
Babies really
when the fires start
A mob is always ready to take
our wages
Run us away
Always ready to lynch us
When a volley of shots
be my lullabies
I won't live to see 36

I learn about the Canfield Race War of 1896 through online searches, old newspaper clippings, doctoral dissertations. Great-Grandma Gertrude would have been around six when the rioting happened, when white laborers became jealous of Black laborers and tried to push them, beat them, burn them out of town. Free library access to census documents and land deeds tells me that Gertrude's daddy, James W. Grant, purchased eighty acres of land in Canfield on February 1, 1893, perhaps thanks to the Southern Homestead Act, which made millions of acres of land available to homesteaders, including migrating and free Negroes. James and his wife, Susie A. Lewis, raised their children on their land in Canfield. How did the riots affect them, their land, their kin, their safety, their daily lives? I ask all the questions. I was raised with the permission to ask all the questions. I ask all the questions before I'm trained in the academy to ask all the questions.

I don't know much about Gertrude's childhood or adolescence. Or how Canfield shifted after the Race War. Or how Gertrude came to find love once, twice, three times over. What I do know is that by 1922, Gertrude had had three children of her own, and had made her way twenty miles south of Canfield to Plain Dealing,

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https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Louisiana, where my Nana Susie was born. Gertrude had another baby after my Nana, but legend has it that she knew she wasn't going to be around to raise her babies. She knew that she was going to die soon. She worried who was gonna take care of her babies. This be a conjure. This knowing. This worry. This possible preparation with limited resources. Maybe this prayer be the only preparation. Be enough. Who knows what ailment or oppressive condition or stressors or heartache killed Gertrude, but my Nana didn't get to know her own mama, didn't have memories of her. Yet somehow I remember Gertrude. Or I am coming to know Gertrude. And although my Nana never spoke to me about her mama, "the holy mother visits me in my dreams. sometimes with aunt marie always smiling/they talk to me. and i don't know how i understand them but i do" (Bridgforth 2012).

Land in the Land of my Mother's Mother's Mother
You already saw me walking
down the red dirt road
Long skirt
and black boots
You already heard me
Praying
for my babies
Please, Lord, take care of my babies
You heard my babies asking
about me
Missing me
Before I left
They saw me dancing
I showed them how
This is the kind of love
You wish for
wait for
Told my babies
They enough
Good enough
Took them some time to see
They know now and they told you
And you found me
I knew you were coming
Home
Knew you were coming
Here

Gertrude's parents Susie and James ended up raising her children back in Canfield. Susie Lewis doesn't visit me in my dreams (yet), but perhaps she's the first Conjure Woman of this story, my story, giving birth to Gertrude's conjure ways. Her ways of knowing. In honor of Susie Lewis, my Nana, born Dottie Sue Layton, changed her name to Susie Mae Layton.

Breath of Life
my baby girl left

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

after birthin a baby left
bloody left
breathless left
her baby girl on my doorstep left
four more youngins left
louisiana thought I was done

but now I got someone to
write my first name
carry my cotton sack
ring my chicken neck
sell my moon shine
tie my oxford shoes
braid my plaits thick
sing my hymnal book

my baby girl left
her baby girl ready
passa dip her down
in the bodcau creek
she catch the holy ghost
soon as
she catch her breath

This begins before 1944. This begins before California. By 1944, Nana Susie's grandparents had become Ancestors, and she made her way from Canfield probably to Little Rock, boarded a train, and moved to Los Angeles, California. I'm a proud #CaliGirl because of my Nana (and my other Nana and my Papas). The Second Wave of the Great Migration moves from the bookshelf, from a map; it moves within me. Nana Susie never talked to me about Canfield. I know that I asked her. I ask all the questions. I was raised with the permission to ask all the questions. All Nana ever said was, "we had a hard way to go."

Translating Her Cadence
Planting Birds of Paradise as soon as you get
yourself a garden. Escaped out back to tell the
Pullman Porter to take you to the Golden State.
Put your hand on your waist and throw your head back, just
a smiling. What do you like best? His uniform
or his triceps or his mama's sweet potato
pie? She told you call her Mama Jennie, didn't
know you been lookin for a mama to call your
own. Find yourself on front yards and parks and gardens
anywhere green and growing and open. Find your
self free. Find yourself falling in love. What you know
bout love? I be lovin you from a brownstone stoop. (Dill 2019)

Nana Susie was my first Black feminist theorist and practitioner, even if she didn't know or claim or use such labels. In her garden, on the couch, in the kitchen, and at the

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dining room table, she cooked, ate, braided hair, played cards, drank tea, spilled the tea, read, did crossword puzzles, wrote, and talked politics. She was critically literate and critically analytical, even if Black women like her—working class, fifth-grade educated—are not documented and read as such (Haddix et al. 2016; Baker-Bell 2017). Talks "across the kitchen table" (Smith and Smith 1981) became a form of sisterhood that my Nana was practicing (Haddix et al. 2016). She was also practicing conjure. Nana Susie literally and figuratively made space for this Blackgirl[1] to gather, to be seen, to be heard, to witness, to heal, and to simply be (Haddix et al. 2016; Taaffe 2018).

This begins before 1965. This begins before Watts. By the 1960s, Nana Susie had seen the Black population in LA quadruple since the time that she had arrived there. By the 1960s, she was navigating the working-class economy and home-ownership. She was navigating a sprawling car culture of LA on public transportation. She was navigating domestic violence, on the brink of divorce. She was raising her four children, including my mom, Debra Sterling.

Los Angeles, CA, 1965
Everything Black was named Watts
Watts bore the brand
Damn Moynihan!
The smoke and fires are in the distance
but the gunshots are real close
I can't tell the police from the National Guard
My pressure's up
I'm scared and
Under Martial Law
at the age of 10

Like her grandmother Gertrude before her, my Mom experienced a riot during her childhood in her hometown—the Watts Riot in August 1965. After this civil uprising, South Central experienced the demise of the local Black Panther Party, the emergence of the Bloods and Crips gangs and gang-related violence, the crack epidemic, increased surveillance and state-sanctioned violence by the LA Police Department, and a mass out-migration of many middle- and upper-class Black residents outside of LA to emerging neighborhoods some sixty miles east in the Inland Empire. These social and cultural geopolitics of 1960s–1990s South Central Los Angeles (Coleman 1996; 2001; 2004) urge me to acknowledge that, in addition to my Nanas and our foremothers and othermothers, my own Mom was theorizing her own form of urban contemporary Black Conjure Feminism. I name and claim this "Hooptie Feminism" (Debra Sterling, pers. comm.; Dill 2017), recognizing that there is a generation of women who were *not* conjuring at the kitchen table, dining-room table, garden, or couch. Instead, these women spent most of their time teaching lessons, telling stories, performing, and were able to just be in their "hoopties"[2] as they navigated the inner city by car. Specifically, my Mom's hooptie was a dark blue 1981 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme.

Mom's Hooptie
Mom's Cutlass was blue
in a Blood neighborhood but she don't know nuthin bout that
Mom's Cutlass was new
when 5-0 pulled her over for runnin the stop sign that she didn't run

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mom's Cutlass stayed true
for 10 long years, back and forth to school, ballet, doctor's appointments, her good government job
Mom's Cutlass was through
and I was glad cuz Johnny called it a Hooptie and laughed in my face
Felt like he was laughin at my mama
His laugh cut me
Felt like he was cuttin my mama
She don't care nuthin bout no Hooptie jokes
Care if we got there on time—school, ballet, doctor's appointments, her good government job
She let me warm it up in the mornings
I'm tall enough
Pump the pedal three times
In Park
Make it start
Crank the heater
Crank the Anita
Wait for Mom
Roller Set bouncin
Leavin notes in my lunchpail
I slide over so she can get in
That's Us
Rollin

Also driving around South Central LA, poet Wanda Coleman (1985) said:

i pray to the mechanic for heat again and air conditioning
when i meet people i used to know i'm glad to see them until
i remember what i'm driving and am afraid they'll go outside and
see me climb into that struggle buggy and laugh deep long loud

In mom's "struggle buggy" or "hooptie," I always had a notebook, a tape recorder, a book of poetry or fiction, just because I wanted to. I later learned, or remembered, that I was learning and conducting ethnography, that I was an ethnographer from an early age. Mom's Hooptie Feminism had a soundtrack of R&B and Soul music—it was Big and Little Luther, Anita Baker, Whitney Houston, Karyn White, and Freddie Jackson. It was the longing and demanding and hoping and loving embedded in the lyrics. In mom's Oldsmobile I listened, I shared, I sang, I committed to memory, I worried, I cried, I wrote. Mom told stories of intergenerational trauma, the lingering silences of domestic violence, the Jackson 5 transferring to Fairfax High School near West Hollywood and her wanting to transfer there, too, her adorning halter tops to hang out with prettyboys, her situationships with fckbois. Mom conjured. I first learned about the regime of apartheid and anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa from Mom's community college research paper about Mandela—both Nelson and Winnie—which she shared with me during our drives in her hooptie.

Mama Has Dance Parties with Her 3-Year-Old Self
Sounds like there is a party in the background

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Because there is
Usually 3000 miles between us
But tonight
Feels like just a living room
She say it might be Curtis Mayfield
one minute
then
Jaheim
the next
Ghetto Crooners
The Ghetto always
her home always has a song
She speaks in
1st person plural
"We groovin"
"That's our jam"
Her dance partner is
a 3-year-old middle child
big-eyed
and chocolate brown
her first words were cuss words
heard her parents screaming them
learned how to open the closet sliding door
and how to hide
in between
broughams and pocketbooks
Years later inherited that closet,
pocketbook full of black & white photos,
cuss words
inherited a mortgage
and panic attacks
The 3-year-old taught the grownup to cock her head to the side
and smile for the camera
big-eyed
and chocolate brown
To groove to ghetto crooners
To find a song (Dill 2018)

Although the whitestream canon of literature was pervasive in my seventh- to twelfth-grade prep-school classrooms, I knew of another canon that existed on the bookshelves and coffee tables and closet shelves and Oldsmobile seats at home—Giovanni and Morrison and Walker and Angelou. Through Hooptie Feminism (Mom remarks, *Who knew there would be a term for these interactions?*), I was learning about, witnessing, analyzing, and practicing self-determination, empowerment, agency, resilience, and healing (Sterling 1978). Mom says, "do your best," "love yourself," and "keep it movin."

This begins before 1992. This begins before South Central. Like my Mom, and my Great-Grandma Gertrude, I also experienced a riot during my childhood in my hometown—the LA Uprising in April 1992. The civil unrest came on the heels of the murder

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of LaTasha Harlins, the brutal beating of Rodney King, surging gang violence, mounting racial tensions, and persistent, decades-long police brutality by the LAPD.

Los Angeles, CA, 1992
Everywhere is burning
We been screaming and nobody came to see
What's a matter?
What do we need?
At 14, I'm just learning my screams
Hearing them for the first time
Liking the way they sound

Some rappers, journalists, and social scientists say that Gangsta rappers narrated these oppressions from the ground up. Gangsta rap poured from the radio as Mom drove me and my carpool from South Central to our prep school in the beachfront suburb where we were able to attend on scholarship. Therefore, Hooptie Feminisms are not all Southern California sunshine and palm trees and passed-down recipes of Down South sweet-potato pie and hot-water cornbread. You can catch my Mom calling any person, classmate, or colleague who would do me harm a "trick-ass biaaaaatch"—her care also embedded with this 1990s Gangsta rap, all Compton and Watts and South Central and hypermasculinity and bravado.

Nana Susie knew she was sick but didn't tell nobody until it was too late. Ain't that what her mama did? I traveled 2200 miles to school and back again before I found out. She waited to leave until I finished my first year of college and had returned home to LA in May 1997. A few weeks later, she was gone. Poet Dominique Christina says, and I agree, "I believe that people don't really leave. They leave things for us to find. We bump into those things without knowing what we are seeing. Yielding to ancestral logic is the only way I am able to write anything at all" (Christina n.d.).

This begins before 2011. This begins before academia. By now, I have three degrees. I am Nana Susie's and Gertrude's and Susie Lewis's wildest dreams. I am about to enter the academy as a professor. Hopefully as a decolonizing disruptor. But the academy is a hostile place that continues to marginalize and oppress Black women. Black women are concentrated among the lowest professional ranks, are promoted at a slower rate, receive the lowest salaries (Generett and Cozart, 2011). I am beginning to enact a refusal of my/our erasure, as a naming and claiming of myself/ourselves and my/our multiple roles inside and outside of the academy, and as a clapback to the master narrative of ivory experts in too-tall inaccessible towers. This be a conjure. My Mom now tells me, "don't lick nobody's ass!" as I recount her stories from life as an instructor, assistant professor, associate professor. This reminds me of when Black feminist scholar, activist, writer, filmmaker, and teacher Toni Cade Bambara wrote and mailed a postcard from her hospice bed in Philadelphia in 1995 to poet Nikky Finney. On it, she wrote, "Do not leave the arena to the fools" (Finney 2009). Bambara passed away just a few months later. My Mom, Bambara, and even Saint Paul to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:19) remind me/us *not* to suffer fools gladly. Academia enables me to have a playground for discovery. A place to ask all the questions. But it is not my only playground in which to practice conjure.

This begins before 2018. This begins before Canfield. "i carry those tears too. i call them exile blues/which is what you have/when home is a place you feel but have never seen. saddness burns in you a hole that can't be filled" (Bridgforth 2012). In April 2018,

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I traveled to land originally inhabited and stewarded by the Caddo Tribe, now known as northern Louisiana and southern Arkansas, in which my family has histories of family-making, placemaking, farming, wounds and secrets, and departures. I had never been to Arkansas, had never been to this part of Louisiana. My Mom didn't tell me to go. She didn't even want to go with me. "We don't know anyone there. No one is left," she said.

Epiphany
I sucked my teeth
thought you weren't claiming
your birthright
your rootwork
your conjure
your mystic
But then I remembered
How you take new babies to the backyard
and lift them up to the sky
How you sit with the newly dead
How you so comfortable
How you touch the soil
Talk to what the earth births
How you brew
stew
concoct
How you pray away my negative
dreams
energy
folks in my way
How you make me laugh
Then say it's the best
Healing
Holy you are
With me since my first
Breath

I journeyed to Canfield anyway. Great-Great-Grandma Susie was calling me there. And Great-Grandma Gertrude. And even Nana Susie was calling me back to her homeland. From Suzan-Lori Parks I learned, "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" (Parks 1995). I learn more about my Conjure Feminist lineage from this trip. From my meditation time there. From my time on the land. I ask all the questions. I was raised with the permission to ask all the questions.

I get questioned for all of the maroons in me
are you here for business or for pleasure?
what do you do?
what do you do for pleasure?
what's your pleasure?
what business do you have here?

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would you like a view of the river or the city?
do you know why the river is red?
do you see why the river is red?
can you read the river?
can you read the river red?

will anyone be joining you?
why does that make you laugh?
do you have family here?
so, your family will be showing you around?
how do you know how to get around?
do you get around?

where is home?
so, you're a long way from home?
why don't you make yourself at home?

are you taking something to go?
why do you have to go?
where?

After my time in Canfield, I begin to not just ask questions, but to offer some answers. I can now articulate that I express spirit and work toward social justice through interrogating and honoring these lineages. I realize and recognize that I am:

born fifth generation conjure woman
women who know their hands work flesh
who worry, cry into their own bosoms
born with lungs that don't have time for much mess
inhale vicks, mercurochrome, ginger, keys
on the back of necks to stop the bleeding
got no time to ail, praying on their knees
pills they can't pronounce with 5th grade reading
how ya doin' is always "can't call it,"
"fair to middlin'," "hangin' in there," barely
standing upright, bend down to grab hold, pick
aloe, spread everywhere it hurts, scary
cod liver miracles unseen, it's sad
just because mama made moynihan mad

I now identify as a healer. I now believe that my practices of play are healing. I now remember that my breath, my connection with breath, holds more answers.

Finding My Meridians
Try to un-ball my fists
and find a patch of dirt to plant seeds
that will become tulips
peeking out of the spaces of picket fences
I am practicing forgiving myself

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for taking such a long time to love myself
I am loving myself and
thanking myself
for remembering

I now know that this remembering is healing. This healing is a spiritual practice. This spiritual practice is Black feminism. This Black feminism is conjure.

This begins before 2019. This begins before motherhood.

Waiting for My Miracle
But is a word that I'm trying not to use so often
It's okay to hold out for hope to be
alright sometimes
We been having a hard road, we
can still be dreamers, be makers, find play and joy
still
Go back to the altar or to the doctor, both call
on me to come on bended knee and to breathe into believing

Notes

1 Scholar-Artist Dr. Dominique C. Hill encourages the use of "Blackgirl" as one word to reject the compartmentalization of Blackgirls' lives, stories, and bodies, and instead to see them/us as complex and whole (Hill 2019).

2 In 1987, Sir Mix-A-Lot rapped the following lyrics:

My hooptie rollin', tailpipe draggin'
Heat don't work an' my girl keeps naggin'
Six-nine Buick, deuce keeps rollin'
One hubcap 'cause three got stolen
Bumper shook loose, chrome keeps scrapin'
Mis-matched tires, and my white walls flakin'

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https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Dill LJ (2021). Breathe into Believing. *Hypatia* **36**, 555–565. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press