

# Fieldwork with the Dead and Other Considerations: An Interview with Ashanté M. Reese

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## Abstract

Joining in virtual conversation, Ashanté M. Reese and Sheyda M. Aboii explore their engagements with Black feminist praxis and theory in their ethnographic fieldwork and emergent projects. Marking the start of the inaugural Black Feminist Health Science Studies (BFHSS) Collaboratory in May 2021, this edited interview between a professor and graduate student addresses perspectives on what it might mean to work alongside others and attend to methods of Black life and Black livingness. Together, Reese and Aboii consider refusal as a careful balance between documentation and redaction in their work. They also discuss fieldwork with the dead through altar making, practiced memorialization, and strategic remembrance. Their exchange concludes with a return to Black feminist guides for storytelling, witnessing, and living. Among other thematic, this exchange highlights the creative potential of generous collaboration in BFHSS and the attendant vulnerabilities that create the “something that feels shared” vital to medical anthropological inquiry.

Marking the start of the inaugural Black Feminist Health Science Studies (BFHSS) Collaboratory in May 2021, Ashanté M. Reese and I sat down in virtual conversation. Inspired by the theme of the Collaboratory, *Racial Geographies of Health and Wellness*, our conversation traversed elements of Reese’s work around Black foodways. We turned to her 2019 monograph *Black Food Geographies*, in which Reese engages the Deanwood neighborhood of northeast Washington, DC, to explore the practices, narratives, and memories inscribed on and by a sense of place. Attending to Black storytelling, in which “practices of everyday life ... neither loud nor attention seeking” are laid bare, Reese focuses on “quiet food refusals” as a key analytic for thinking through Black food geographies (Reese, 2019, 2, 4–5, 11–12). Collective desire, preference, taste, and creative imaginings of the future all have a role to play in the self-reliant practices and quiet food refusals that Reese traces (Reese, 2019, 114, 131). The notion of subsistence—an analytic central to my own work and which Reese depicts throughout her ethnographic engagement—not only exceeds the exigencies of bare survival but also blends “matter[s] of life and death” with those of preference (Reese, 2019, 51, 54, 60, 65–66, 119, 122–23).

Our conversation, selections of which are presented in this special issue, considers these elements of more-than-survival. Together, we explore what it might mean to work alongside others and attend to the methods of Black life. We consider refusal as a careful balance between documentation and redaction in our work. We imagine what it might mean to pursue fieldwork with the dead through altar making, practiced memorialization, and strategic remembrance. Our exchange ends with a return to Black feminist guides for storytelling, witnessing, and living, as well as a few concluding reflections on my part. The text that follows has been lightly edited for clarity in written form. Otherwise, we have endeavored to retain the original spirit of our discussion. While we expect different elements of our conversation will resonate with readers, I am perhaps most hopeful that those who engage this text will recognize our mutual generosity. I think of this generosity as a generousness toward self and others that then generously creates. This is a generosity that undergirds the more-than-survival sensibilities of mutual aid. And I would contend that this generosity feeds the tempo of our Black feminist approaches. It is a willed choreography, a recurrent imagining and materialization of an otherwise.

## WORKING ALONGSIDE

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** What would you say animates your interactions with community and advocacy networks? How and at what point does your research envision working alongside or for community?

**Ashanté M. Reese:** I asked Dara [Cooper] to write the foreword to *Black Food Geographies*, and Dara and I are colleagues. We're comrades in the work, but we're also friends. And I didn't say this to her [at first], but when I passed over the manuscript to her, I had already decided that if she thought it was problematic, I was going to revise it because she's someone who [has done] work in food justice and food sovereignty movements for about 20 years.

To get to this question around what animates my work in community and advocacy, even when I'm not working shoulder to shoulder with people, I think about the work that I do as tools that can support the work that people are doing every day in their organizing. So, if this person who I trust so much, not only intellectually but literally with my life, did not think that this book was good [or useful], I was going to revise it. I was going to figure out what was wrong or what was not useful [about it], think about it deeply, and revise. So, I was very happy when she thought it was a useful book and agreed to write the foreword for it. And also, [Dara] is a person who I knew would be really honest with me about whether or not what I was writing about Deanwood reflected back some of the main themes and struggles that we're thinking about in food movements more broadly.

I was thinking about this phrasing of "working alongside someone"—what does that mean? And I think there are a lot of ways to work alongside people and communities, even if you're not doing the same thing at the same time. But I do think that there is a way that we can think about our research and our writing as working alongside folks. I wanted to write a book that reflected back to Deanwood residents not only what I saw but what they were experiencing. And sometimes, that's hard with ethnography because we're pulling so many strands together, what we see may not reflect back a certain kind of reality to folks. And so, in terms of working alongside, one practical thing that I did was I let Deanwood residents read drafts of both my dissertation and my book chapters as they

were being produced. And I allowed them to comment on things that really resonated with them or things that didn't resonate with them.

So, that was one thing that feels really important to me. I think another way of working alongside is also kind of akin to this question around refusal. I have been pretty clear and pretty consistent in refusing [particular] questions around solutions because I don't think it's my place. And not because I don't think I'm smart. And not because I don't think I have ideas. I do have ideas about what solutions could look like. I think that I'm not interested in being the person who is assumed to have better ideas than people [whom] I work with on a regular basis who don't have PhDs and who are not writing books. So, for me there's this kind of question around who is invited into the room when we're asking questions around solutions and how do we do that ethically. And how do we do it in a way where it is not assumed that I can speak for people, because I don't speak for people.

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** I have thought when “working alongside,” does there have to be a certain amount of myself that's also on the line? Not necessarily in the same way as others are experiencing. But a part of me that's fundamentally invested, and this question of what is sustainable is something that I'm still navigating. And I think that honestly is probably one of the most difficult parts of navigating graduate school, the ethics of figuring out what feels right and what can I offer. So, I think that's something that I'm still navigating. But I do think this has given me something to think about. The characterization of “alongside” comes with quite a bit of responsibility.

**Ashanté M. Reese:** I think you're right. You asked this question that I think is beautiful. Does a part of me have to be on the line? What I wanted to say right in that moment was “Absolutely!” Like there's a big “yes” bubbling out of my spirit. I think this is part of what Black feminisms teach us. That there is no work that isn't a *we*. And the work of figuring out what that *we* means and to work across difference so that we can hold ourselves together as a *we*. I think that's a fundamental part of practicing Black feminism. But I also think, you know, about how Christina Sharpe (2016) writes in *In the Wake*, “care as shared risk” (131). That's what I think about. And I think about how she writes about this kind of project of writing into a *we*. And how do we write into a *we* if there isn't some kind of shared something on the line, even if it does look different? That could mean career stuff. But it could also mean how we leverage financial resources if we have them. How we leverage institutional resources. And it can also honestly be time. Students ask me all the time—how does one balance both an academic career and activist aspirations, or duties, or responsibilities? And I tell students, I wish I could tell you that this didn't feel like two full-time jobs sometimes. But sometimes, it does. And I also tell students, let's be clear, part of how I'm able to do this is I don't have children to take care of at home. I don't have elderly parents that I have to take care of on a daily basis. So, considering what part of you has to be on the line also means that we have to have really honest, ethical conversations around what's at stake for all of us, which is also a conversation around how we're embedded in larger structures and communities. Because all that stuff impacts what we're able to do.

## HOPSCOTCHING AROUND BLACK DEATH

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** In *Black Food Matters*, you and Hanna Garth (2020) center the affirmation of Black life. And in a previous conversation together, we thought through the

ways in which experimentation and improvisation might do something else to animate Black life beyond counting. Can you say more to the methodologies you see as offering returns beyond mere deprivation narratives? How do you confront the inherent problems of representational work in your endeavors to depict and engage Black lifeways?

**Ashanté M. Reese:** There are a lot of things that I actually do not think about when I'm doing research and writing. And some of those things include how others might think about what I am writing about or thinking about. When I've been in the field, the things that matter to me are what I'm seeing and what people are saying about their lives. It feels like tunnel vision in a way. So, when I started writing *Black Food Geographies*, I wasn't thinking that I was writing *against* anything. I didn't think I was speaking back to even this kind of narrative of Black. That was not necessarily my intention. My intention was to think about [how] do you not see all this life that is here? Do you not see all these decisions that people are making, and how they're navigating, and how they're thinking about community? This is, this is what it is, right? And so, I just share that to say that while I had criticisms or ideas around what was happening in food studies, what ultimately [became] the book was something that was born out of paying attention to life and livingness.

I'm really interested in ideas of improvisation, right? I think experimentation and improvising are methods for Black living generally. I think we can see it happening on so many different levels across the globe. I think part of the reason why that is true is because the ways anti-Blackness requires people to always be innovative. You opened with a description of my work as being animated by this question of who and what survives. And I think a sub-question of that is not just who and what, but *how* do people survive? And I think improvisation and experimentation are how people are able to live in the ever-present weather of anti-Blackness because as such, anti-Blackness as a system, as a structure—we know that it requires Black death. I'm imagining Black folks the world over trying to hopscotch around Black death. That's literally the image that is in my brain right now. And I think the reason that hopscotch feels important is that this navigating anti-Blackness is not always the kind of serious and heavy work that we think of. You think of kids playing hopscotch? You know they're serious about getting through the whole situation, right? Like, I need to make it. But there is also some joy, there's some play. There is some having to figure things out in the moment. And that's what I think about methodologically. When we talk about method as researchers, we're talking about how do we do the work that we do? But I've been increasingly thinking about method as *how are people living?* There are methods to living. There are methods to Black life.

And I think that slight difference matters in the sense that method becomes less about how do *I* go about doing this work that *I* want to do and more about how are people moving, being, seeing, talking, [and] living together? And I don't think that is new, I think people do this all the time as ethnographers. I think specifically Black ethnographers paying attention to Black life has been really valuable to me. But I think we should name it as such, right? That there is something different around paying attention to methods of living versus just the methods of how we collect the data that show that people are living.

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** I'm thinking about trying to visit a few places this summer [of 2021], depending on what's actually feasible and safe for all of us. And I think that I have a lot of trepidation about the omnipresence of death. Particularly, with COVID-19. But also, just in general. And it's something that I think I have always felt but has become definitely increased within the last year or so. And so, I think this injunction to think with life is such a lovely way of perhaps reentering "the field." Although I feel like I'm already living

“the field” in many ways. So, I appreciate that. This image of trying to hopscotch around death is such a lovely one. And thinking about leisure, and preference, and play, and joy as really integral, central.

## REFUSALS, DOCUMENTATION, REDACTION

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** There are moments within *Black Food Geographies* where you focus on specific individuals. I’m thinking in particular about an entire chapter that is devoted to Mr. Jones and his community market—where you explore the quiet food refusals contained in his daily strivings to cultivate a place for community. At times, Mr. Jones pursues this work to the detriment of his bottom line. To what extent do you think our research can contribute to such quiet refusals, or is this work really the work that is outside of academia? Is outside of [the] institution?

**Ashanté M. Reese:** Recently, someone asked me to do a mini-lecture on refusal as method. And it wasn’t until I finished the lecture that I realized why I felt icky about doing it. *Icky* is maybe not the right word, but it’s the one that comes to me right now. And the reason why I felt icky was because I was like, “Wow. Academics really do want to take a *thing* and make it a method all the time. And I’m supposed to teach you a step-by-step. I’m supposed to teach you refusal? That’s not how this works, you know.” And so, I guess that’s my way of saying that refusal shows up, and I don’t think we can anticipate *how* it shows up. That’s one thing. And I also think refusal, especially as I think about how Black feminists like Tina Campt (2017), Saidiya Hartman (2019), and Savannah Shange (2019) write about it, refusal is choreographed into everyday life already.

What I do think ethnographers can do is figure out how to see it and recognize it. Refusal doesn’t always make sense. Refusal doesn’t always fit into our schemas. And so, if that is true, how do we see it, how do we hear it, and how do we document it? Or do we document it? So, that’s the other thing. Insofar as we can practice refusal as a method, I think that refusal is in how and what we choose to document. This is the example that I use with my students a lot. Particularly, when you’re doing fieldwork with people [whom] you have built relationships with over time, and you kind of hang out sometimes.

There would be moments in the field where I’m talking to someone. They have never forgotten that I’m a researcher. I’ve never forgotten I’m a researcher. But there are moments when I’m talking to someone, and I can tell that something has shifted where they are no longer talking to me as a researcher, they are talking to me as a friend, a buddy, someone who’s cool. As a researcher, ethically I’ve done everything I need to do in terms of IRB [the Institutional Review Board]. They have consented to this hanging out. They know that I am recording. They know I’m taking notes. Like, what more is required from me? I think paying attention to refusal is a different ethical demand, which is that I am also paying attention to the slight shifts that might occur in a person when we’re having conversations, when we’re hanging out, such that I honor this impetus that I have to not use what they say in my research.

So, there are things that I recorded and didn’t use in the book. There are some recordings that I deleted so that I would not be tempted to use them because I knew that these were things that people were not telling me as a researcher. So, that is how I think we can practice

refusal as a method with ourselves. I think that whole process of documenting is place for experimentation. I have also been using the practice of redaction lately. I'm playing with redaction a lot with archival documents and with different kinds of "official" scientific reports. And I don't know yet if I want to call this a practice of refusal. I think I kind of think of it as such, but I'm not sure yet. And in these practices, I go through, and I redact different things.

In one report, I had been reading about the graves [of individuals conscripted into convict leasing and buried in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] found in Sugar Land, Texas. I went through and redacted everything that wasn't a mention of Blackness, or enslavement, or carcerality, or labor. And what I ended up with was this four-page document that had maybe 20 words left after I redacted everything. And it's fascinating because the document that I was redacting is acknowledgments. It's acknowledging all the people who had contributed to this research process that led to unearthing these graves. And what I wanted to think about is what happens if we black out all of these people and really only leave the acknowledgment of the kinds of systems that led to this moment.

And it really was like only 20 words left. On that level, how I think about refusal is this kind of refusal to accept the conditions or the terms by which, in this case, this research collaborative has framed what acknowledgment means. And so, by redacting I was thinking about is there a way to set a different—create a different—kind of acknowledgment? What does blacking out all these words make us, force the reader to look at, right? Both in terms of the words that remain but also what it means that these are the only words that remain. So, I think there's two levels of refusal. Again, going back to methods of Black livingness, refusal is already a part of that. And so, maybe we need to think about how to see it. And then there's this other refusal in terms of how we document or how we engage what are supposed to be official narratives.

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** You make me think about refusal as it is "choreographed into everyday life," how it resists capture. And so, then I'm thinking about in your work with redaction and your experimentation with redaction, is there a way of seeing by not seeing? Are we actually capturing the negative spaces? I always go back to an early experience that I had in an art class where I was prompted to really draw the negative space and not to focus in on the object or the subject. And I think about that kind of dynamic here in this work. And I also think about what the concept of quiet refusal might offer. There's a way in which the juxtaposition between quiet and refusal is very key. I think there's such a natural inclination to kind of push forward this need for everything to be very ostentatiously agentic, like very loud or very confrontational. And I think that does exist and it's important to look at that as well. But then there are all these other spaces. And again, dovetailing off of this image of choreography or hopscotch, there is movement that doesn't necessarily fit within the schema of that which is readily recognizable. And you also mentioned nonsense, or that which does not necessarily make sense. And I think I'm very keen to kind of tune into spaces that feel nonsensical from my academic positionality or other elements of my life. To really question why and let it remain nonsensical.

**Ashanté M. Reese:** I think what ethnographers potentially do well is that we, you know, we can document the granular everyday, right? We're spending time in the same places every day. And I'm obsessed with the everyday. I am obsessed with things that others might not necessarily stop and look at. I'm obsessed with things that might otherwise be considered boring. I'm just obsessed with them. But I think part of this is a reflection of what I think matters too. I'm interested in big social problems. And I don't believe that policy is the



only way to solve those big social problems. How do I connect these things that seem like they are not necessarily reflecting back on that big social problem? And so, I think quiet refusals are one way. In the context of writing about food, though, part of why I was interested in writing about the everyday is so much of food justice work is writing about movements and organizations, which I think are really important.

But I think for movements and organizations to serve people, we need some sense of what people actually want, and what they're doing, and what they're thinking about, and what they're feeling, and all those kinds of things. And so, I was very, very inspired by that. Your comment about negative space also made me think about this book on sugar that I am supposed to be writing. And how the news around the "Sugar Land 95"—I need to figure out another way of naming—this is the other thing about the violence of abstraction, right? They're named the "Sugar Land 95," but these were 95 people who had names. And every time I say the phrase, I feel sick about it. And so, I need to ... I need to think about this problem of language here and abstraction. But all the conversation is around how this finding<sup>1</sup> forces Texas into a reckoning around the convict lease system.

Everything's about labor. So little of it is about sugar. And this is what's interesting to me. Like how do I take this invitation for reckoning and make it be more a conversation around this thing that all of us consume on a daily basis that is intimately connected to past and present violences? And the other part of this that I'm thinking through is how does this product, sugar, a product of racial capitalism, connect to this concept of sweetness, which I'm thinking about as a necessary component of Black life? And so, for me this is always the question of how do we hold these things together? This violent, deathly thing with all we talked about before—joy, pleasure, all that. They don't exist on separate terms. They co-constitute each other, and how do we think about this in a meaningful way? And so, you know, that's kind of—that's my thing. I'm like I'm going to take this thing that is so... . Everyone likes food. Everyone talks about food, right? And most people in the United States mostly don't give a shit about the politics of food, right? So, like you take this thing that people like think about and think it's very neutral. And then it's like bam, but actually I'm going to hit you with the other stuff. And so, that's how I feel about sugar too. It's something that we connect with every day *and* it's something that can make us think about things that have nothing to do with food. Around carcerality. Around labor. Around pleasure. What are the decolonial possibilities of experimentation with baking, for example? What does it mean to play with baking? What does sweetness mean as both a literal [thing] that we need but also as metaphor? How does it operate every day in Black life in the context, again, of these both past and present violences?

I don't have answers for all these questions yet, but this kind of idea of methodologically looking for what isn't loud, I think for me has been very generative. I'm interested in the things that aren't present. They're always present. As Tina Campt (2017) talks about in *Listening to Images*, how do we basically recalibrate our hearing to hear the frequencies that may not be the surface-level frequencies but the sound underneath it?

## FIELDWORK WITH THE DEAD, OF ALTARS AND MEMORIALIZATION

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** In other speaking engagements, you have discussed your collaborations with and for the dead. Can you speak to this work? What draws you to it? And how do

you imagine it does or perhaps does not necessarily accommodate academic constraints on the sorts of questions we can ask ourselves?

**Ashanté M. Reese:** I'm going to say that the work I'm doing right now I would not have ever done for a first book. I don't think I could've done it for a first book. And I don't even mean that in terms of academic constraints. I mean that I wouldn't have been ready to do it, and I don't think I would've even conceived of doing things the way that I'm doing it now. So, I want to say that because I don't know if there are other graduate students in the room. And I think in my graduate students' research methods class, that was a question that always came up. Like, how do we do this thing? And I was like, you know, some of this is process. You get to that thing at some point. But maybe that door doesn't unlock until you've done another thing before that. So, I just wanted to say that.

I'm doing this book on sugar, and one of the first things that I did before I started even doing any real research was construct an altar in my home for these 95 people. It has dried flowers, artwork, a book with all their names in it, and prayers that I've written. Candles. Clean work shirts because they would not have had them at that time. Most of the time, their clothes were not replaced as often as they should've been. And then there's a bowl with whatever sweet things that I have made for that week that I put there. And I want to say that even though I have worked with altars in my personal life, I had not worked with altars in my professional life.

And I'm going to be honest and say I felt very uncomfortable, I sometimes still feel very uncomfortable with doing it because it doesn't seem to fit form. The other reason I feel uncomfortable is the question [of] what happens if they don't speak back to me? Like, what happens if I don't hear anything from this set of ancestors? That's something that I'm always thinking about. And then the other thing that kind of makes me uncomfortable a bit is just—I think there are different ethical questions to ask ourselves when we are working with people, or objects, or things that cannot speak. And so, I've been like constantly checking in with myself around how to attend to these kinds of questions that come up for me.

But all of that [is] to say what's been beautiful and generative about this is that I've been connecting an embodied practice with my research practice, which hadn't been my experience. And so, that's been really lovely to think about how, for me, baking has been part of the embodied practice. How that connects with this idea of sweetness, and how I literally, every day or every week, get to serve these ancestors with sweetness that I have created with my hands.

The other thing about embodied practices, which I know from my personal life—I know from my yoga and meditation practice—is that it can stimulate and bring up things that you may have forgotten, that you yourself have experienced. And so, there's this form of autoethnography that is kind of coming out of this too. Maybe it's a little bit of performance art too because I record myself doing some of this baking. Baking just awakened a lot of different kinds of memories on these questions of improvisation, and experimentation, and sweetness from my own life.

And so, it's been cool to work with some of that. And then I think a lot about archival practice. I'm not a historian, but I worked with archives for *Black Food Geographies*, and now I'm extensively working with archives for this book. And it's been kind of intimidating



because [there are] a lot of things that archival documents do not say. And finding that line between what it means to honor a silence versus trying to intuit into the silence or figure out is there some gap that you actually can speak to, I think, has been very challenging, although it's also rewarding. I don't know what else to say about this other than it is a welcome challenge in what I've been calling fieldwork with the dead in some ways. Because I think it requires a different kind of listening, and I'm trying to listen better and differently with every kind of project that I do.

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** Thank you for offering these reflections on your work with the dead. When you mentioned providing clean work clothes, I felt myself—I mean speaking about embodiment—I felt myself really reacting to that. You know, just feeling like that's such a lovely thing to do. I think it's tremendous work that you're doing.

**Ashanté M. Reese:** What kinds of silences exist, and how do we intuit into them? I'm reading archival documents, which include some testimonies, not from the 95 people whose graves were found in Sugar Land but from other prisoners who would've been incarcerated [around the same time]. I'm reading some of those testimonies and hearing what they had and did not have access to. And I just sit and think about if I'm someone who is talking about, commenting in some kind of official interview around how I haven't gotten new clothes in six months, what would I have wanted? I would've wanted something that was not just clean but *new*. That was not previously owned by someone else but is mine. Like, I get to have it. I get to wear it. I get to be the only person and the first person who wears it. There are dried flowers that I dry myself. Every time that I get flowers from someone, I pull stems out and I dry them, and they are here. The dried flowers are a reminder that things that are no longer living are also still present always and can be preserved always. And so, they're there. And there's a shelf above with a plant. So, sometimes when the plant is growing, the dried flowers and the plant literally touch each other. And I think about this kind of co-mingling of living and dying that is already present always. Like, they're not separate. And so, looking at that space reminds me of that.

And then there's a series of prayers that are written there. I don't know if there's such a thing as an apology prayer, but one of the prayers is kind of this apology for these folks who would've worked 16 hours a day or more, including also having to walk upwards of a mile back to the prison camps. I imagined that there was not a lot of time for play or a lot of time for creativity. And so, part of the artwork that is on the altar, I drew. And this goes along with the kind of general apology that I'm sorry that you did not have the space and time for creativity. Because I know creativity is what undergirds life.

And maybe there'll be more and different things on the altar. One of the redacted documents I will probably frame and put there as well because I think it's really important. And also, the only other thing that's on the altar is [a book with] the names of 72 of those 95 people [who] have been confirmed. I wrote all of their names. And then for the ones whose names I did not know, I wrote the same repetition and prayer for the other 23 people over, and over, and over again to just acknowledge that though we don't know their names, they are not nameless people. They are not invisible people. They are not people who have not been cared for. And so, there's this prayer for them that there are other ways that we might know them.

## BLACK FEMINISMS: STORYTELLING, WITNESSING, LIVING

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** At the conclusion of *Black Food Geographies*, you specifically invoke Black feminist anthropological theory, praxis, and living as foundational to your work. What does a Black feminist approach open up for you in the field, in the archive, or on an everyday basis?

**Ashanté M. Reese:** While I was doing fieldwork, I was thinking about what does a Black feminist project look like when you're not centering Black women as the subject of your work? And while I don't believe that you have to center specific bodies to be doing a Black feminist project, I did want to think very deeply about the implications of what it means. So, I love this question because I don't often get asked about a Black feminist approach to doing this work. The second thing I want to say is Black feminism isn't just theory. It is literally the way that I live my life. When things are really difficult, behind me, by my desk, there is a stack of books, Black feminist texts. And when things are difficult, they're like my Bibles. I go and I read them for sources of inspiration, whether it's about work or otherwise. And so, I think of Black feminisms as literally saving my life in a lot of ways, guiding my life even before I knew to call—even before I called myself a feminist, which actually came fairly late for me compared to, I think, when some other peoples' experiences may be. But what Black feminism instructs me to do is to center storytelling, to believe the stories that people tell about themselves and about their own lives.

Hortense Spillers (2019)—I love the way she described it in an interview once that she thinks about Black feminisms as a repertoire of concepts and practices, and different forms of alignment that help us think through not only gender and gender politics but our relationships to the Earth and our ideas about repair. And she calls Black feminisms a light. A light. It is a potential path for us to get in right relationship with each other and with the Earth. And I really love that, right? Because there are a lot of different lights that might lead us to different places. But this is the light that I chose and I think the light that chose me. In a practical sense for fieldwork—and I write a little bit about this in *Black Food Geographies*—I am enamored with the ways that Zora Neale Hurston (Hurston and Miles, 2018) did interviewing. I'm a student of how she did interviewing. And one of the things that showed up a lot in the texts that I read by her was a willingness to just forgo and abandon everything that she thought she wanted to know and how she wanted to acquire that knowing for the sake of people guiding her on their own terms. Part of a Black feminist practice is doing that.

Because it's not just about getting the information. To do that is also a shift in power. To say that I came with a framework, I know what I want to be doing, but I am willing to abandon this for the sake of the thing you want to say about your own life. It doesn't shift all the power dynamics, right? But it is a shift that I think is really important. And really, *Black Food Geographies* is not the book that I thought I was doing. My dissertation was *not* the project that I went into the field to do. But I'm so proud of it because of this willingness to abandon the kinds of things that I thought that I wanted to do.

Black feminisms is a world-making project. It's a world-building project, right? And I know sometimes public discourses get reduced to the things that people are critiquing, especially when it comes to white women. But I think what has been generative to me is the world-making of it all. When the [COVID-19] pandemic hit, one of the first things I

did was go to this stack of books and think about what kinds of worlds have these theorists written about, or theorized, or tried to create? And how do we take some of this and put these ideas into practice in what we're doing? This world-making, this world-building.

I talked about sugar, and I talked about baking. And I tweeted this the other day [that] something significantly changed for me when Savannah Shange was like, "We should bake together." And then we baked together on Zoom. I'm new to baking. Savannah is not new to the baking. Savannah is very, very much true to it. Like, she is a star. And so, what matters to me about this—and I'm still trying to figure out how or if to write about it—but what matters to me about this is not only that we were baking together, and I think Black feminism is inherently a collective project, but that I was also willing to let her see me fail at a thing that was new to me. And I was also willing to let her teach me things that I did not know. And willing to let her see the kinds of improvising I needed to do because I don't have all the tools I'm supposed to have to be able to bake all these things, right? And so, she could watch that in real time. And so, I guess what I'm getting at is, for me, part of Black feminism is also a project of witnessing. There's the political project, the broader political project that I think is really important.

And to live out that goal, again kind of thinking about the granular everyday, I think a lot about how I need to be seen so that I can also be able to live out this political vision that to me is about kind of preserving life for all lifeforms eventually. We're trying to preserve Earth. We're trying to preserve the trees. We're trying to preserve everything so that we can live. We can coexist. We can be interdependent in the ways that we're supposed to.

And so, these practices like baking with Savannah are praxis. They are opportunities to think about interdependency, relations, being seen, being witnessed, witnessing someone else. And I think all of that is about a Black feminist approach not only to research. I can't even think about it just as research. It's my worldview. It's my guiding light.

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** This question of remaining open to vulnerabilities, I think, is also something that I have found really helpful to see in Black feminisms. I, too, have come to slowly be aware of this world kind of late in the game. And really through my classmates, you know, mentioning have you read so and so? Have you thought with so and so? And so, it's been kind of a slow, accretive process. I think it's been pretty amazing to think about what that opens up for me when I'm allowed to be vulnerable in my own work and when I'm allowed to center that as a steppingstone. This question of collaborating but doing so in a way that is not always already figured.

**Ashanté M. Reese:** I was just thinking about how people make disparaging comments about me-search and all that kind of stuff. I don't believe in those things. But I also think that there's a tricky way we have to write about the *we* that doesn't privilege the *I*. And so, thinking about what our experiences are, not that our research, then, is just a way for us to know ourselves as individuals, but our research is a way for us to think about how this *I*, this life that I've lived, is a part of this collective *we* and how do I write about that? And how do I write about that in a way that doesn't just turn my research into a lens for me to understand myself? Which isn't a bad thing. I think research does help us understand ourselves. But then how do we write about this? How do we hold both of those things true?

**Sheyda M. Aboii:** Absolutely. I think that there's something to be said about the relationship. Figuring out what that relationship—that relativity—is. I've experienced this in my

own body while I was elsewhere in places that I have no familial connections to, I've never been before, and felt as though there were elements of the story. There were elements of the dynamics that were being shared with me that really reminded me of home or stories of home. And so, those moments of unexpected conversation where, again, they're not the same experiences, but there is a line of connection that I think feels really important to pay attention to.

**Ashanté M. Reese:** That makes me think about this kind of conversation that we have often across fields, but particularly within anthropology, around the relationship between universals and the particulars. And I think part of me is not actually interested in that conversation, but something about what you just said makes me think about how useful it is to not think about universals as static. There are moments where someone's particular experience and my particular experience create something that feels shared. And I think that is a generative way for me to think about universals. What is it that we share? And this isn't always static. And it's also not always predictable, which I think is partly why I am not wholly interested in those conversations. But they are rich moments. But how do we get to those moments? Something has to be revealed about your particular experience. And someone had to reveal something about their particular experience to create this *we*. This kind of writing into the *we* is, in part, a conversation around how do we share ourselves enough to be seen and witnessed by other people so that we can recognize the parts that are the *we*?

## “NO WORK THAT ISN'T A WE”

As we met virtually amid the uncertainties of a global pandemic, it is perhaps no surprise that our conversation queries what a mutual aid model of research in medical anthropology, experimentation, reflection, and living might look like. Central to this exploration is our interpretation of generous collaboration and the vulnerabilities inherent to such work. As an exchange between professor and student, our discussion entertains what curious dialog might look like across the divides of an academy that is hierarchical by design. Our conversation also notes how continua exist between death and life, discomfort and discovery, pleasure and violence, redaction and creation. Mutually acknowledging our stumbling on Black feminisms as guiding bodies of theory and practice, we think through the world-making, unfinished storytelling, and not totally figurative elements of our work. We suggest that this give-and-take inherent to Black feminisms is precisely that which fosters mutual imbrication where there is “no work that isn't a *we*.”

In many ways, our conversation draws on a rich tradition of Black feminist dialog. Such exchange is ever-unfolding—a guiding light for scholarship that must simultaneously respond to the urgent exigencies of presents, the staying inertia of pasts, and the undeterred arrival of futures.<sup>2</sup> As I continue my doctoral dissertation fieldwork, I find myself turning to the generosity of such exchange, of this conversing into a *we*. My engagements with Black subsistence fishers along the Anacostia River in Washington, DC, and the question of their contemporary exposure to toxic substances, capital de(re)investment, and racialized space are, for me, indelibly informed by Black feminist thought and practice. I cannot think about subsistence in the midst of this confluence of exposures without thinking about the “methods to Black life” and the “hopscotching around Black death” that Reese so eloquently evokes. These subsistence practices recall something of the improvisation Reese describes as always in response to *and* never entirely circumscribed by everyday anti-Blackness. Subsistence at the margins gestures toward an experimental choreography of sorts and requires an altogether different set of ethnographic questions. As I have published elsewhere, “navigating late industrial exposures and the livable thresholds of said exposures ... demands particular forms of paying attention in the field” (Aboii, 2021, 62).

Method, then, amounts to an exercise in redaction as much as (if not more than) execution—unlearning the metrics by which I was taught to measure, revising the questions I was taught to prioritize as I turn to ask them. The pursuit of “how people are able to live” is an open inquiry that neither overlooks nor concludes with the deathliness of current conditions. Black feminisms demand a malleable orientation toward the work of ethnographic analysis. As medical anthropologists, we need to ask ethnographic questions that open up onto the possibility of attending to methods of Black living and the unexpected encounter of the refusals already incorporated into routine. At the same time, Black feminisms offer a means of being in study not only with others but also with oneself, of practicing what Reese calls “refusal as a method with ourselves.” In my own work, this entails carefully considering what and how I document, the materials I do or do not set together to invite theorization, and those moments where I am compelled to urgently embrace praxis as theory-becoming.

Black feminisms encourage the sorts of vulnerable, embodied practices contouring Reese’s (2021) emergent, multimodal work on sugar. In my own research, I cannot theoretically approach the concept of exposure without conjuring Audre Lorde’s ([1984] 2007, [1988] 2017) erotics of the body wherein the body’s proximities and bodily exchange mark the very preconditions for political gathering. Black feminisms outline how theory necessarily remains tied to the personal, informed by the movements of our own bodies as they are engaged in curious, vitally necessary exploration. Akin to how Reese serves ancestors the sweetness created with her own hands, I experience the overhead swish of unspooling fishing line and the satisfying splash of the weighted hook into riverine waters as movement that is necessarily in fellowship with my forebears. Akin to how Reese (2020) w(e)arily sifts through the archive, the placement of my feet on the riverbank, the squaring of my shoulders, and the timing of my fingers’ release of the line are all enactments of living memorialization. At the Anacostia River these movements of mine, coordinated with those of more practiced fishers, testify to the lived experiences increasingly overshadowed by the pressurized rearrangement of urban space, the gentrification of homes, the many erasures affected through targeted deployments of capital.

My ongoing conversation with subsistence fishers at the Anacostia River further lingers with Black feminist maneuverings between the metaphorical and material. As Reese discusses here and elsewhere, the material scale of the small or the mundane spills out onto expansive theoretical and political grounds. The food we eat is intricately entangled with the carceral afterlives of slavery, and scholarly consideration of the food we eat calls forth an abolitionist project that “requires us to build community, grow food, and nurture people” (Reese and Carr, 2020). At the Anacostia River, the fish hauls Black subsistence fishers catch and share similarly narrate important, broad phenomena—the impact of uneven capital investments, the attachment of racial categorizations to space, and the proliferation of toxic materials as a key condition organizing late industrial lifeways. Black feminisms, then, usher a witnessing that takes little for granted. This witnessing remains resolutely collective, aggregating material remnants as the foundations of our storytelling.

But Black feminisms simultaneously beckon an unfastening of the narratives we might want to hastily tell. As Reese offers through a thoughtful return to Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic method, Black feminisms sometimes encourage an abandonment of the script for the sake of those who guide the medical anthropologist. Starting over, “a willingness to just forgo and abandon everything” we thought we wanted to know right in the middle of our knowing, is part and parcel of Black feminist approaches to study. This is perhaps one aspect of Black feminisms that most significantly informs my continued engagements along the Anacostia River—a vulnerable flexibility in the face of on-the-ground critique and redirection.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>From an overview provided by the Fort Bend Independent School District (n.d.): “In early 2018, construction at the site of Fort Bend [Independent School District’s] new James Reese Career and Technical Center unearthed a forgotten piece of Sugar Land’s past: a historic cemetery where 95 individuals were buried, [individuals] believed to be part of a convict-leasing program that began in the late 1800s. . . . The 95 individuals have become known collectively as the Sugar Land 95, and in November of 2019, they were laid to rest at the site where their remains were originally found. The arduous process continues to identify any possible descendants through the analysis of DNA.”

<sup>2</sup>For example, see engagements between Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick (2015), Camilla Hawthorne and Brittany Meche (2016), Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Hortense J. Spillers (Gumbs, 2016), and Kevin Quashie and Lucille Clifton (Quashie, 2021).

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