

# S&F Online

*The Scholar and Feminist Online*

Published by The Barnard Center for Research on Women  
www.barnard.edu/sfoonline

Issue 8.3: Summer 2010

*Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert*

## **this is what it sounds like (an ecological approach)**

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

**1.**

put your ear to the ground [1]

face sideways your roots [2]

align your dirty rhythmic heart [3]

a yes [4]

deep with centuries of waiting [5]

listen [6]

you may be in danger [7]

(if) you are not extinct [8]

**2.**

maroon tap break beat [9]

old blood loose [10]

under tongue blade be [11]

time

stolen shared and saved [12]

**3.**

wake up early [13]

nocturnal animals

and unfinished dreams [14]

scratch your roof morse [15]

(and your throat open) [16]

**4.**

if there is a bell [17]  
it is our laughter [18]  
if there are 12 tambourines  
they are these children [19]  
if there is a woodwind echo [20]  
close your eyes to taste the deep breaths under [21]

this will teach you when to dance [22]  
and when to dart [23]

**5.**

neither tobacco [24]  
nor trend [25]  
nor tire treads [26]  
are edible  
for long

**6.**

seeds are [27]  
package bonds [28]  
portable and small [29]  
birds and wind will take them home. [30]

**7.**

cultivate breathable air

**8.**

shape trees for your gods [31]  
circles for your ancestors [32]  
fire from our stories [33]

**9.**

yemaya has a mirror [34]  
time travel salt roads [35]  
older than narcissus [36]  
and more true [37]

oshun has a trajectory [38]

they improvise in harmony

unmistakable direction

water  
the earth  
with your face [39]

## 10.

cue violins [40]  
blue strings broken grass [41]  
from plucking [42]  
and running [43]  
away [44]

## 11.

farmers are more patient lovers [45]  
for now [46]  
pretend

because...

## 12.

this is what it sounds like [47]  
your heart awake with mourning  
your hands already brown  
your face untied with rain  
your hope growing in jars

those passing by will hear  
whole note wind in a bottle tree  
the clear black ocean washing back  
a digital chorus of birds  
jumprope pavement friction songs

and they will remember.

## Footnotes

### 1. **Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind (An Example)**

The *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is based in, accountable to, and in love with Durham, North Carolina, a post-industrial southern city in a state with a history of plantation slavery and a contemporary practice of exploiting and targeting migrant workers. Something is happening here that has been happening for too long. Something new is also happening here. [[Back to text](#)]

2. Durham, as a city, has a large Black working class population, a growing Latino population, and

also a history of Black wealth (as defined in the destructive capitalist sense and also as defined in the subversive sense that Nikki Giovanni proposes in her poem "Nikki-Rosa": "Black love is Black wealth.") Durham is also a university city. See the above reference to plantation slavery and migrant exploitation as context. [\[Back to text\]](#)

3. The ground that nurtures the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*'s perpetual growth and expression through media, educational interactions, and interactive research is a transformative activist and organizing community watered in particular by the women of color, sex workers, survivors of sexual violence, queer and gender queer people and allies who created UBUNTU, a coalition dedicated to ending all gendered violence through the intentional creation of a communal practice of sustaining transformative love, and also by a network of collectives, organizations, and projects committed to racial and economic justice, abolishing the prison industrial complex, growing community-accountable healthy food sources, an intersectional approach to queer liberation, and the creation of a people's Durham led by working class women of color. [\[Back to text\]](#)

4. *The Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is accountable to these local conditions... [\[Back to text\]](#)

5. and seeks to fortify the loving and dynamic relationship between contemporary visionaries and the legacy of Black feminist activism, creativity and thought, specifically through the creation of ritual educational spaces that invite the participation of Black feminist ancestors. [\[Back to text\]](#)

6. The premise of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* and its "by every means necessary" approach, is the belief that Black feminist educators, community organizers, writers, and scholars are evidence of a spiritual reality, a revised meaning of life that not only challenges but also implies an alternative to the deadliness of capitalism. [\[Back to text\]](#)

7. The "Eternal Summer" riffs on and points out global warming, peak oil, and the cumulative friction of the global capitalist machine that expends life for profit as evidence that a different meaning of life is necessary now. [\[Back to text\]](#)

8. The good news, or gospel, of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is that BLACK FEMINISM LIVES as a spiritual practice, a political legacy, and a critical intersectional possibility that people of all backgrounds and experiences have the opportunity to be transformed by when they get with it. [\[Back to text\]](#)

9. The *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is revolutionary because it models what is possible in community as transformation. In much the way that the very existence of maroon communities as an alternative space of Black freedom inspired enslaved Africans trapped on plantations to rise up and rebel, the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*, which provides loving transformative spaces and technologies sustained by the brilliance of the oppressed genius communities we are accountable to, hopes to inspire those working for necessary change within the non-profit industrial complex to remember that we do not need to wait for or pander to foundation funding or a corporately validated organizational structure to create what we need. [\[Back to text\]](#)

10. The most radical danger is here in the already existing genius of oppressed people, constrained by a system that devalues that genius. [\[Back to text\]](#)

11. We believe that all of that brilliance is available under the right circumstances. Or as Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter says "the ceremony must be found." ["The Ceremony Must Be Found: After

Humanism' *Boundary II*, 12:3 & 13:1, (Spring/Fall 1984): 19-70.] [\[Back to text\]](#)

12. Therefore time is the most valued resource in the ecology of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*. Ancestral time, time as community, intentional time, and time across space are the forms of time that make the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* Eternal. Our time together is sacred. We were never meant to survive. See Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" in *The Black Unicorn*, New York: Norton, 1995 (re-issue). [\[Back to text\]](#)

13. *Ancestral time*: This means both setting intentional time for ancestor attention *and* an understanding of time that acknowledges the presence of all the energy that ever has been. Alexis wakes up at five o'clock in the morning, when no one else is interested in speaking to her, specifically to listen for what her long noticed or newly announced ancestors will demand, suggest, or make known. [\[Back to text\]](#)

14. Kifu Faruq, *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* participant, sustainer, and community food justice worker calls this practice being present to the "dream download." [\[Back to text\]](#)

15. These ancestors often bring specific instructions, exciting possibilities, and new details for how all of our dreams are possible. [\[Back to text\]](#)

16. This practice provides a miraculous clarity to an eternal day. [\[Back to text\]](#)

17. *Time as Community*: This means creating sacred and regular times to gather as community and also that our connections and accountability to each other is what makes our brilliance full of impact and eternal. [\[Back to text\]](#)

18. Along with the energy of our ancestors, the loving energy of the community—the way we bring our whole selves into the room with a spirit of play and desired intimacy for transformation—is another key resource of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*. This is what makes it summer, the heat (sometimes literally) of our bodies in the space. [\[Back to text\]](#)

19. The *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is eternal because it is intergenerational. We are learning to create child-inclusive, parent-supportive spaces. We have consistent participation from elders and babies that remind us all to improvise and be present. [\[Back to text\]](#)

20. The participants own and fund the projects in many ways. Participation itself is the most valuable contribution. Participants and supporters also donate food, shoe racks and coat racks, tea and childcare, reiki sessions, photocopies and art supplies, advice, money (literally enough to sustain the rent and utilities of the inspiration station, which is where Alexis already lived), documentation and spreading the word. The ecology of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is ever evolving and folks self-identify their contributions. [\[Back to text\]](#)

21. Many of the most important parts of our interactions are non-verbal. We breathe the presence of our ancestors. They join us... [\[Back to text\]](#)

22. in celebration... [\[Back to text\]](#)

23. and in warning. [\[Back to text\]](#)

24. The *Eternal Summer* process is an ongoing lesson in what is and is not sustainable. Tobacco, the plantation crop that was once the economic base of our city and area has now been replaced by gentrified post-tobacco processing plant lofts, and appropriated and commodified knowledge

and culture for sale. This is a place where we have trained ourselves to grow a plant that we cannot eat in order to transform each other into cancer. There is much unlearning to do here. The *Eternal Summer*, a tiny, grassroots educational project literally next to a huge university is an experiment in what nourishment might feel like. [\[Back to text\]](#)

25. We therefore find it important not to get carried away from our routes by trends in the funding world... [\[Back to text\]](#)

26. and we take care to make sure that our engagement with national and international contexts is grounded in our local timelines and processes. This is another way of staying present. Alexis is often reminded of this in direct, cosmic, physical, and spiritual ways. [\[Back to text\]](#)

27. *Time Across Space*: However, we understand our work here as intimately related to a transformation happening at the level of the planet. [\[Back to text\]](#)

28. Therefore our DIY multi-media work through podcasts, online videos, the school of our Lorde Webinars, and social networking sites are designed to be intimate portable space, useful for *and transformed* by communities that are inspired by our work in Durham and accountable to their own local conditions. [\[Back to text\]](#)

29. (And by DIY we mean for real DIY. There has been no purchase of software for media creation so far.) [\[Back to text\]](#)

30. In the tradition of Ida B. Wells, Kitchen Table Press, and radical women of color bloggers, we use every means necessary to make our love accessible to our wider community of comrades and kindred spirits. We are thrilled by the resonance and participation that folks around the United States and world have found in these projects that we created out of ancestral inspiration and our own local specific necessity. When we had the "Summer of Our Lorde," when we read an essay by Audre Lorde and had discussion potlucks every month, like-minded people participated through the blog and had their own gatherings in the Bay Area, New York, Chicago, and DC. Some folks even continued with an Autumn of (Gloria) Anzaldúa. The School of Our Lorde (a night school in Alexis's living room in Durham) has satellite campuses in Tuscaloosa, Chicago, New York, and Fayetteville, and webinar participants as far away as the Rio Grande Valley and Cairo. Queer feminist organizers in Beirut, Lebanon (Meem); Nairobi, Kenya (Fahamu); and Chennai, India (the Shakti Center) are using the multi-media educational tools and version of the practices to support their own amazing and specific work! Long distance lovers all over the world also donate to *Eternal Summer*; mobilize resources at their schools, jobs, or organizations to hire Alexis to do a workshop, lecture, or training; buy educational materials; donate proofreading; share connections; and give abundant advice and love. [\[Back to text\]](#)

### 31. **An Ecological Approach: A Treatise**

In a time when the planet is preparing to stop tolerating our collectively destructive relationship to life resources and the future, the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind* is a specific example of how to orchestrate an intimate, profound, and living feminist praxis full of impact. What the project itself exemplifies is an ecological approach based on the following principles:

- we have what we need (each other)
- everything is useful, everyone is priceless
- we are part of a larger environment that we can relate to symbiotically or destructively
- our ecology includes spiritual, physical, practical, social, emotional, technological, and intellectual resources

We offer *An Ecological Approach* as a necessary alternative to an economic approach to the planet that reifies capitalism as a resource model and disrespects the vitality of other resources, especially spiritual and emotional resources and the wisdom of oppressed people. This approach is very much informed by an approach called "organic pragmatism" developed and practiced by [SpiritHouse](#), a Durham-based social justice arts organization. [\[Back to text\]](#)

32. ***An ecological approach is beautiful.*** It matters whether we face each other in a circle or stand shoulder to shoulder in a line. Spiritual leader, scholar, and transnational feminist activist Jacqui Alexander teaches the spirit and responds to an aesthetic; 3-year-old spiritual teacher and gender queer baby Jibs (an *Eternal Summer* participant), practices this truth by ritually granting each person in our circle a hug and a kiss at transitional moments in our gatherings. We understand the way we organize ourselves as a creative process, with shapes, visuals, and rhythmic and sonic resonances. In other words any structure is an expression of an aesthetic that may or may not serve our vision, invite our ancestors, or allow energy to flow. An ecological approach means being artists with our lives, our relationships, and our organizing such that energy and inspiration move through us. What this looks like, feels like, sounds like, will be different in particular areas of our shared environment and will evolve. [\[Back to text\]](#)

33. ***An ecological approach is accountable.*** Because we know that we need each other, and that everything is useful, and everyone is priceless, an ecological approach must be accountable to communities and individuals in specific ways.

*Account (a story):* In order to be accountable it is key to create safe, sacred, informal, and regular spaces for the people we are accountable to to share their stories or *give an account of* their experiences, visions, and insights. People may give accounts through food preparation, song, text messages, body language, showing up, or not showing up. Related to the above, the forms of participation that we create and listen for must be as multiple as we are.

*Account (a reckoning of resources):* Accountability also means knowing that the people own the project. In an educational project it means remembering that all knowledge belongs to the people. In an activist project it means remembering that the power for transformation lives inside the people. In a practical sense it means the project is owned, supported, co-created by, and transparent in the community it nurtures and grows within. This is very different from giving an account (aka a grant report) to an outside funding source. The life source of a transformative community project is obviously that same transformative community, ancestors included. A funding source that sees itself as separate can disrupt our relationship to our life source. However, when the viability of a project depends on the people activating resources, literally feeding each other, looking for ways to mobilize or siphon resources from their jobs, supporting the project with money that is in no way disposable, the project has to be accountable. We will not sustain a project that we do not see as nourishing in our everyday lives.

Accountability activates us. [\[Back to text\]](#)

34. ***An ecological approach is reflective.*** [\[Back to text\]](#)

35. Which means studying the herstories in which we are grounded, and by

40. ***An ecological approach means staying rooted.*** [\[Back to text\]](#)

41. If we are accountable to and interdependent with our community as an environment, we must also acknowledge that we have the capability to disrupt or harm our eco-system with behaviors that forget or disrespect our interconnection. [\[Back to text\]](#)

42. This means staying, even when it is hard, and transforming our relationships instead of pretending that we can sever them. We cannot. Meaning: [\[Back to text\]](#)

43. We cannot live without each other. [\[Back to text\]](#)

44. Our connections to each other persist even across death. [\[Back to text\]](#)

45. ***An ecological approach is long-term.*** The intentional practice of growing a vision for a lovingly transformational way of life in an economic system that seeks to make our lives and love unthinkable feels ambitious and risky. It is actually as simple as remembering who we are, what life is, and acting accordingly, for the rest of our lives... and with an intergenerationally accountable relationship to the future with us always. [\[Back to text\]](#)

46. Revealing the world we need and deserve within the world we have is an everyday practice of unlearning what we think we know and becoming present how the miraculous future is already evident here. [\[Back to text\]](#)

47. Good luck. [\[Back to text\]](#)

which we are inspired. [\[Back to text\]](#)

36. And also means cultivating a loving practice of self-criticism that remembers that our relationship to the planet is in need of transformation. As poets Alixa and Naima of Climbing Poetree remind us: "raindrop let go, become the ocean." We are mostly water; so is the planet. [\[Back to text\]](#)

37. The world will only transform to the extent that we ourselves transform. This applies individually to each of us and also to what we create collectively. Our organizations, projects, and initiatives are only transformative if they transform. [\[Back to text\]](#)

38. So we honor our vision of a radically different world when we let go of ego and organizational ownership and embrace our purpose in relationship to something much greater than ourselves. [\[Back to text\]](#)

39. Transformation means letting go of who we thought we were, facing painful experiences and practices that harm others. This will almost definitely involve tears. [\[Back to text\]](#)

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