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POETRY PROJECT 131 E TENTH ST NY, NY SINCE 1966**

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

by Kay Gabriel

Early last month I gave some of my first-year students an assignment, asking them to list some things they believe that poetry can do, and some things they believe it can't. I told them that the list didn't have to be exhaustive, and that they would be allowed to change their minds. Looking at some of their answers—on the one hand, poetry "educates"; on the other, it can't "explicitly show an argument"—I think they probably will.

I'm interested in this exercise in part because I think that poetry—for whatever institutional reasons of history, transmission, representation—functions for many people as a synecdoche for culture or aesthetics more generally: you think about poetry as an especially indicative case of what culture can do and how you feel about it. So maybe you think it's difficult, useless, moral, fun, perverse, overhyped, or positively and/or negatively didactic. Maybe you think it can't do anything at all; maybe you think the conditions under which poetry can be effective haven't arrived yet, or are in the process of emerging. Any of those might be interesting claims, and some of them may become true if they aren't currently so. If I have an agenda here, it's to nudge people, and especially poets, into asking this question as if they didn't already believe themselves to know the answer.

And in fact, history keeps delivering us unexpected possibilities and convergences. In Jasmine Gibson's interview with the editors of *How We Stay Free*, we hear about the career of the singer Paul Robeson, whose "life work," editor Chris Rogers says, "tracks through every global people's resistance movement of the 20th century." Robeson, Gibson notes, was a poet, too, and the dynamic interrelation between Black-led movement work and poetry among other forms of cultural production shines through the interview. Greg Nissan's essay in this issue focuses on the two recent reissues of books by N.H. Pritchard, a member of the Umbra Poets' Workshop whose "phonetic mosaics disappeared from anthologies of Black poetry" after the 70s. In Nissan's essay, the reissues are a "reminder that we're still catching up to the past." Pritchard's "combined and uneven development of the syllable" doesn't take the social links of language for granted; it presumes, and forces, their recombination.

Other convergences, in this issue: a series of poets reframe the proposed demolition of the East River Park, noting the shifting map of land use and struggle over who and what happens where, and according to whose plans and desires. And Cam Scott reviews Dodie Bellamy's *Bee Reaved*, an essay collection and work of mourning for Bellamy's late partner Kevin Killian. Like in *The Letters of Mina Harker*, itself due for a reissue this fall from Semiotext(e), Bellamy publicly writes to the dead, in a reminder, as Scott argues, "not to hoard what should be common, nor to circulate what should be still."

Riffing on Stuart Hall, do we need a poetry without guarantees? I think what I'm saying is that's actually what we already have. If we're alive to its resonances, its audiences and its directions, I think we'll surprise ourselves, and that'll only be to good effect.





# Liberatory Leaps: Jasmine Gibson in conversation with the editors of *How We Stay Free*

The year was 2020. There was and still are dueling pandemics that plague social and intrapsychic life. Crises can reveal many things. Among the revelation, there is life. There are relationships and intimacy that blossoms and fuels the locomotive of resistance. What does it mean to be bound to a horizon that hinges upon the freedom for all? That question becomes elucidated in this interview with the editors of the anthology *How We Stay Free: NOTES ON A BLACK UPRISING* (Common Notions, 2022), Christopher R. Rogers, Jasmine L. Combs, and Fajr Muhammad. Editors Rogers, Combs and Muhammad generously share their perspectives on the uprisings that occurred during summer 2020 in Philadelphia and internationally.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** The West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance (WPCA) has been established in the community since 1984. The year after its founding the City of Philadelphia dropped a bomb on the MOVE Organization in West Philadelphia. In its wake, WPCA established itself as a cultural center of healing and justice, and expanded years later to acquire and operate the historic property at 4951 Walnut St. as the Paul Robeson House & Museum. How would you place the Paul Robeson House and Museum and this book in the context of Philadelphia today?

**CHRIS:** I first came into the Paul Robeson House & Museum in Fall 2015 after the passing of our founding WPCA Executive Director Frances Aulston. She committed her entire life to support Black cultural production in West Philadelphia, get this museum placed on the map, and teach the youth of our neighborhood on Paul Robeson's contributions to the world. We do not define ourselves as an activist organization, yet the life work of Paul Robeson or Uncle Paul, as we say around here, tracks through every global peoples' resistance movement of the 20th Century, from the Soviet Revolution, to Pan-African anticolonial struggle, the Civil Rights Movement, and the blossoming of Third World organizing. We aim to recover, steward, and extend these histories through our relationship to ongoing organizing in Philadelphia because that is the work that Paul & Essie championed throughout their lives. Not simply to acquire and hold this knowledge, but to share with the world in a manner that supports ongoing movement work. Interestingly enough, one of those current projects includes partnering with the MOVE Organization in the development of their own community archive, which returns to this breakthrough moment for our organization in our early years. I'm excited to see that work get off the ground.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** The act of creating an anthology is an art. It is the delicate and precise action of curating and orienting voices to be amplified. Like a choir plugged

into an electric amp. How did y'all decide what to put into the *How We Stay Free* anthology and what to leave out?

**FAJR:** That is a beautiful and powerful way to describe the process. It was a collective effort between ourselves as editors and the contributors as writers, organizers, and artists. Early on, Chris and I decided that the contributors would lead the tone and theme of their work and that we would take our cues from them. We edited but we wanted to stay true to their intentions. While we had ideas around topics, we wanted the space to honestly reflect how the actions took shape, ebbed and flowed, and how their feelings took similar trajectories. Providing an open-ended platform seemed like the best way to get to authentic reflection. In terms of editorial focus, we kept the lens centered on Black Philadelphians and the actions of 2020.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** Robeson was an active theoretician and staunch critic of American nationalism. What was the process like collecting essays for *How We Stay Free*?

**CHRIS:** Yes, this was such a crucial part of this entire process. We had a two-fold effort that focused on commissioning pieces from folks that we knew played a role in turnkey campaigns while leaving space through open submissions to receive fantastic creative work from Black Philadelphians across the city. We knew organizations like the Black Philly Radical Collective and Philadelphia Housing Action had to be included. We knew we wanted to find people who were on the frontlines of organizing mutual aid efforts, and were grateful to be introduced to Jena Harris of Bunny Hop PHL. We knew we needed material that spoke to those incarcerated and those organizing for their freedom from within the prisons and jails. We were grateful to have a contribution from Matthew Early and Saleem Holbrook. We thought about all the types of formal and informal organizing taking place, and these connections spilled out from those we had in our circle and many who came to us by way of a trusted friend's recommendation.

Overall, Fajr and I made sure that the anthology centered on agency, centered on care, and in meaningful ways challenged the idea of the spectacular moments that can overtake much of the mainstream reporting on Black freedom movement activity. We wanted to focus on the people and the labor that takes place behind the scenes, that envisions what's possible through a commitment to long-term organizing and not just the flash point of any moment of crisis. We wanted the enduring questions and lessons that people would ask their comrades, that folks within organizations struggle to find direction upon. And we wanted it to be accessible. We wanted those on the edges of the movement to see their own lives reflected and find an entrypoint

into the types of movement labor that suits their gifts and political development.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** As an internationalist and West Philly jawn, I appreciated the international insistence starting with your editor's note to look into your history as well as the history of others. How do you maintain your orientation to Philly but also towards the world?

**CHRIS:** Word, and we are glad to have you back in the city! This question brings me back to one of the moments that we intended to explore with Krystal Strong, a leader within BLM Philly and the Black Philly Radical Collective, which went Philly-viral during the riots after the Philadelphia police murdered Walter Wallace Jr. in October 2020. There's this quick clip of a Black teenage girl on 52nd & Chestnut near that McDonald's, and she's articulating what's so messed up and why it's time to shut it down. She yells, "this the same thing that's happening in Nigeria. And they going off too!", referencing the END SARS demonstrations that were happening at that time. And that moment was something that Krystal reflected on, this Black West Philly teenage girl who recognized beyond these imaginary borders and fictional U.S. exceptionalism, there's people I am connected to, suffering under the same regimes of violence, and refusing to be silent—a renewal of a deeply-rooted Black Philly Pan-Africanist spirit. With everything going on, we never finalized that piece for the anthology. Maybe we can get it done for the website? Oh yes, we got to promote the website too:

[howwestayfree.com](http://howwestayfree.com)

However, it speaks to how we architected the collection to echo these critical transnational connections, even as we are doing a deep dive on Black Philadelphia. We want people to come to this collection recognizing that what's at play here in Philadelphia is interconnected at both intimate and global scales with resistance taking place all throughout the diaspora. There's a consistent thread of conversations between organizers taking place and many are drawing upon some of the same political theories and revolutionary case studies. What's important for *How We Stay Free* is that we want readers to recognize the abundance of strategies that people are taking up locally, and that there is, and will always remain, an ecosystem of Black-led freedom movement activity that is irreducible to any one organization or set of leaders. When this tradition is given our attention to be made visible, our commitment for collective study, and our labor to make anew, we'll be able to drive liberation work further everywhere. There need not be one of these books simply of Philadelphia, nor does it have to be frozen to just 2020. Paul Robeson modeled this mission of uplifting people's struggles from the communities he visited all throughout the world. Let a thousand books bloom.



These are the practices that make for a healthy radical internationalist left.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** Robeson was a poet. *How We Stay Free* has a poetry section reflecting on the multifaceted presence of Black uprising and autonomy. What was the process of collecting the poetic material?

**JASMINE COMBS:** The poetry featured in *How We Stay Free* was collected through an online call for submission shared amongst writers, organizers, and activists from or based in Philly. The other editors and I worked together to select which pieces moved us and spoke to the mission of *How We Stay Free*. From there, I worked directly with each poet to edit their pieces from the rough drafts submitted to the final drafts you see in the anthology.

**CHRIS:** It was important for us to be able to include different forms of witnessing and processing the events of the summer. There's particular human emotions that can be translated through poems in ways no other written form can convey. We were so grateful to have Jasmine participate in the process, being a guide for the poems to be included within the collection. She's held down the Philly poetry scene for many years and worked alongside so many local poets. I'm reminded too of her performances at Malcolm X Park during one of the many 2020 Black community rallies there. There's this one poem she has about the circles

Black women create to cope and heal that I believe to be canon.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** Music, culture, sex, conflict, uprisings, food, and all substances that accentuate life cast a mood over projects. What were y'all listening, reading, eating, etc. while creating *How We Stay Free*?

**CHRIS:** This is such a great question. And it gets some coverage in a submission to the collection from Malkia Okech, who does an amazing job at documenting some of what she calls "resistance objects," which both spurred and sustained Black Philadelphians through the 2020 protests. Listening, I gotta show love to Philly's own Moor Mother. She's been on one recently, bringing radical afrofuturist ideas to the forefront. For written work, I have to give a major shoutout to The End of Chiraq which gave me a blueprint about mapping out how to write about the narrative of a community within a cross-generational forum. And as we got further into the manuscript, contemporary essays reflecting on 2020 like Hannah Black's *Go Outside for ArtForum* and Tobi Haslett's *Magic Actions for N+1* were pacesetters. And revisiting *Freedomways!* Run by Robeson mentees Esther Cooper Jackson and Jack O'Dell, *Freedomways* represented a critical avenue for recovering a Black radical internationalist legacy with legendary contributors between the late 1950s and 1980s. It's open access now, too. Everyone needs to return to *Freedomways*. Maybe begin with the special Paul Robeson issue.

**FAJR:** So I was trying to be surrounded by history and pulled every Black anthology I could find. Something about being surrounded by voices and stories from the not so distant past helped me to see the ground *How We Stay Free* was walking. *The Black Woman* edited by Toni Cade Bambara really helped hone the purpose and politics. I read and reread Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's introductions and afterword for *Black Fire*. I also referenced some of the personal essays in Tarana Burke's anthology *You Are Your Best Thing to Help Contributors* shape and sharpen their work.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** At the heart of *How We Stay Free* is the insistence on relationships from meetings at Church of the Advocate or making food together or mutual aid groups or even people coming together to create worker collectives. What are the relationships that made *How We Stay Free*?

**FAJR:** Relationships made this book. I have to give huge props to Chris in this regard. He knows everybody! And not just knowing everyone, he has great capital with people in that he could just fire off a text with an ask and folks would be like, "Ok, I'm in." That told me a lot about the caliber of his relationships. Additionally, we looked for people we were already in community with to do the work including Maya Arthur, Jasmine Combs, and Jared Michael Lowe, who we both reached out to and were down immediately off the strength of the project, but also probably off the strength of us.

**CHRIS:** Relationships are crucial to the work that we do at the Paul Robeson House & Museum. This book is not possible without the longstanding relationships we have to organizers and activists who are on the ground in Philadelphia and see the Paul Robeson House & Museum as a historic site and community center which stands in solidarity with their mission. We've built our programming around serving these audiences before it became a corporate hashtag, and remain excited to grow in this effort. For museums, there's a world of a difference between solely exhibiting Black life and being fully invested in Black life, and at 4951 Walnut St., you feel it. This is what makes the Robeson House such a dynamic leader within the arts and culture ecosystem of Philadelphia. How does the programming we do at the Museum explicitly refuse to be boxed in as the "past," or challenge the perceived distance from the lives of everyday folks in our communities? How do we emphasize through our lens and our invitations that we ALL hold the revolutionary possibility for making history? We seek to live the philosophy of Paul Robeson daily and through that principled engagement. We bring his legacy alive for new generations.

**JASMINE GIBSON:** What is one thing y'all would like readers to come away thinking or feeling after reading *How We Stay Free*?

**FAJR:** Possibility. So much of the actions and strategies of 2020 were new to young people and opened an avenue of resistance that many were not intimate or familiar with, which is great and one of the brilliant things that came out of this year. But I also think it felt like a blip on the radar and not another necessary step in a longer journey. First, I hope readers see themselves and the actions they took (or saw on the news) in these pages. Second, I hope they see that resistance and change are possible. The Housing Action and encampments story displayed so poignantly what can happen when regular people fight back and demand their needs. If it was possible for them, it's possible for all of us.

**CHRIS:** Call me an educator, but I'm excited to see how this work may inspire more writing about contemporary Black-led organizing. I've noticed how our political movements have been challenged by regimes of celebrity, which in some ways determine who gets a book deal to tell the story of what's being learned and practiced in certain formations. We don't have to be resolved to these narrow conditions of mainstream publishing, as we hold the tools to do more to expansively create avenues for reflection, study, and experimentation. How are we documenting our questions and lessons for ourselves and future generations? No one can do this work for us. It may not look like a full publishable manuscript, but we must be invested in habits of self and collective reflection if we are to build movements which will win our liberation.

## Forums of Ruined Will:

### N.H. Pritchard's Reissues

by Greg Nissan

N.H. Pritchard, who published two books in the 1970s in New York City where he lived as a writer and teacher, is one of the most radically warped poets of a period rich in experimentation. Pritchard's collection *The Matrix, Poems: 1960-1970* (Doubleday 1970) has approached the status of lost classic in the past years, thanks in part to a meticulous reissue from Ugly Duckling Presse and Primary Information in March. *EECCHHOOEESS*, originally published by NYU Press in 1971 and reissued by DABA this year, is heading in the same direction. Pritchard was a well-published poet in his day and a member of the legendary Umbra Poets' Workshop, a fermentation of Black experimental literature with reverberations in the Black Arts Movement and jazz. But Pritchard's phonetic mosaics disappeared from anthologies of Black poetry and would soon recede into the margins of minor literatures, according to Aldon Nielsen's *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*, which traces critical befuddlement at Pritchard's scating poetics. *The Matrix*—this uncategoryzable







# Deal of the Century by Eileen Myles

Lately I've been considering it the deal of the century. If you stand in East River Park on a sunny day or even a nice overcast one in which every inch of our gorgeous park becomes so eminently photographable you kind of can't help thinking what a spectacular piece of real estate. I had never had these kinds of thoughts about the park before. Not before the past year. In the current climate even the most wondrous experience of nature is somehow just a shade and I can only compare this sensation to the opening of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* where he's wandering around on his father's dacha in fact you don't even know that for a while, it's just a guy walking in nature yet the lighting is such that there's a foreboding to the overwhelming sense of beauty he's moving through like every bit of him is trying to hold on and absorb and photograph it in some way with his body and it's just because he's a psychologist about to go off into outer space. He's about to leave the earth and that's the source of the oddly stable unstable feeling. So I'll be sitting around the amphitheater in East River Park watching the water move and runners passing by or a cyclist or a person with their dogs and some birds cross the sky and whirl off. I can hear kids cry out playing some sport and sports are practiced of course by people of all ages but I think sports in general are a pastime of people in relatively good health or passable health or enough health to move and finally sports are practiced a lot by people who are young and the 50 odd acres of East River Park are filled

with young people playing sports, team sports a lot and it's actually a really great thing for kids to do in the present and for the rest of their lives this experience of playing soccer with your friends or little league will stay with them. Or just hanging around. It's the pleasure (for everyone) of having a body in unbridled space and it's free and it's home. Seems like a human right. Animal and plant rights too. And bees. So I hate to be a spoilsport but once in a while we'll slide over to the coach hey do you know the city is planning to destroy this park. He gets a grim look and goes I know and returns to the game. Cause it can't be true. You probably know that East River Park was built in 1939 by Robert Moses. He wanted to build FDR and by adding a park to the plan he convinced the city the feds to let him do it. The notion almost sounds quaint now. The idea of creating green space for the poor and the working class of the city. You can certainly talk about the lack of such space today. Or the value of it. But actually initiating it on a large scale (or keeping it here) is something else. They'd rather start from scratch. Before the park the current shoreline was nonexistent. It's landfill. The true riverfront is Avenue C. Indigenous people of course lived here. They were massacred about where the amphitheater is now by the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> C and then like a century later they started putting in landfill then there were slaughterhouses, a glass factory and eventually there were sailors and a bunch of prostitutes walking around. I guess

prostitutes are like a harbinger of development of some kind. Think of the west side.

Today across from the East River there's NYCHA which is public housing for low income people (slowly getting warehoused and privatized) and I can just imagine Mayor Bill DeBlasio sitting in a room somewhere looking at a map thinking no no no this just can't be. Looking at all that public housing at the riverfront and then those fifty odd acres of "empty" land continuing to exist day after day for the pleasure of the poor and working class and people from a wide variety of classes who use it—100K in a "normal" year and who knows how many are using it in a pandemic—the problem for DeBlasio and the DDC (Department of Design and Construction) is that that land is not being monetized. If you go a little further down the river you'll bump into something called Basketball City which is kind of a pay to play basketball facility (kids get scholarships to use it) and Van Gogh the immersive experience is also down there. I think of both of these as predatory alien life forms creeping up the river. Because this unruly vernacular riverfront has always astonished me. In the 80s I liked running along the East river with headphones listening to opera. For newly sober me that was an immersive experience. I inherited this pastime from my friend James who ran around Rome with headphones listening to *Aida* before he died of AIDS in 1989. And the riverfront was still

gorgeously funky then. The amphitheater was in shambles. There were broken concrete steps forming the ruins of what looked like an ancient theater and no indication of anybody having any thoughts of fixing it. There were beautiful collapsing WPA looking buildings you could wander around in and see strange maroon fallen curtains and busted walls. It was public abandonment. It was fun. I popped some of those interiors into a poem. There was a tiny building at the end of the path homeless people clearly dwelled in that must have been the best place to sleep in the whole entire city. It was some kind of little electrical building and it was all covered in graffiti and it had a tiny guardrail but the outer edge of this building was like a concrete lip over the river—I loved smoking there—it makes me crazy with joy that someone actually slept in that spot. The path along the river was closed then for ten years before Sandy and when it re-opened we were just in awe. The amphitheater was done up cool like it is now. That rebuild was funded as a gift for the kids who had lost their parents in 9-11. The esplanade as the trail along the river was now called was gorgeous. The track was redone in this soft dark pink material. The center of the track is astro-turf which is unfortunate. But that tree, one of 991 trees in the park, I first stretched my leg on in 1978 is still there. But not for long. So let me return to the terrible time of the present.

In the same way that 9-11 was an opportunity to push America to the right, bomb the middle east and grab all their oil while trampling domestically on our "freedoms," same way the Reichstag fire enabled Hitler (always glad to pull him in!), Sandy is a new green opportunity for the real estate interests embedded in our city government (like the DDC and much of city planning) and its politician buddies to scarf up land and public funding in the name of climate resiliency. So the official reason the city wants to destroy the park is flood control. But it's not true, it's a lousy destructive plan and there were better ones but none of them laid bare the 50 plus acres of the park to other interests. The other plans made the park more resilient but kept it intact. I've only known about this for a year and thought hey I can write about this. People will want to hear this story. Uh-uh. There's a media blackout on this project. *The Times* says it's local and they don't do local. *The New Yorker* will definitely write one of those long beautiful articles when it's over. How could this have happened. The Mayor's talking points are everywhere. We're saving lives! But nobody died in the lower east side during Sandy. On Staten Island where people did die the city just approved a BJ's big box store getting built right in the very wetlands that were another low income neighborhood of color's last lines of defense. So I don't believe the talk about protecting the vulnerable NYCHA residents. It's almost like everyone's in on it. How else can you label total *silence in the face of a systemic assault on public health and green spaces all over the city. Some of the best plans for climate resiliency and our coastline got banded around before Sandy and a little while after. Go look up the East River Blue Way. Somehow this very sweet plan full of beaches and wetlands and schemes for covering FDR just got trashed. In 2012 during Obama, HUD funded something called the Big U—which created the original ESCR (East Side Coastal Resiliency Plan) which was about protecting the neighborhood with rolling berms along FDR and maintaining the park. The community spent four years on the plan. It's always been a fact that the neighborhood needs to be protected, first from FDR which spews carbon monoxide but the trees in the park help with that. Most of the flooding in the east village didn't come from the river but from uptown and the park itself is very resilient, it's like a big sponge and was open in two days after Sandy so you need to build on that, that's protection, you don't want to destroy it. But yes yes you do. If you want to get your paws on that land yes you do. The current plan, rammed through in 2019 by Jamie Torres Springer, the new guy at the DDC, protects the park by annihilation—removing every speck of biodiversity, uprooting all 991 trees, covering that exposed toxic scar with a million tons of landfill, putting concrete and astro-turf over that then stick in a bunch of tennis courts and saplings. There'll be a ten-foot wall along the river though it's widely known that walls don't work. You need to work*



with water. But not in the city of New York. And this new plan costs twice what the earlier plan costs. The city will absolutely run out of money and that's when the developers will come in. Everyone seems to know this except the city. They know something else and they just won't tell. I just see a big pile of landfill sitting there for years and then the city will say we've run out of money and developers will come to the rescue.

*The Daily News* just ran an op-ed by Jamie Torres Springer (who came to the DDC from HR & A, a real estate consultancy the NYC planning sector is crawling with) on September 10 with the headline "NYC NEEDS TO BUILD DIFFERENTLY FROM NOW ON" and it's him explaining that since Sandy we need to speed up and give the DDC more freedom to go forward on the great projects he's so very proud of like "managing new shoreline protection programs" (the anti-park) and the construction of four new jails. These projects synch up nicely like the kids all having a wonderful time down at the park right now can be slid into the four new jails if we don't know what to do with all that young energy. He says "[t]hese are important public projects that will help lift the local economy." I guess that means the kids could alternately work in the jails.

But keeping the park is cheaper than destroying it, right, and cheaper than jails too. What gives? It seems like nobody cares

if the new ESCR plan actually works. Jamie *doesn't* care. Him and DeBlasio are go ahead guys. The health effects of ESCR on the neighborhood haven't even been examined since the pandemic and what about all the recent flooding. There's been no comprehensive state or federal review of ESCR. It'll be okay.

I remember reading once the reason the Titanic really happened— well actually there were several. One was they forgot to supply the men on the crow's nest with binoculars. That is an actual fact. So they couldn't see the iceberg. And the captain wanted the Titanic to go fast on its maiden voyage. While the thing they actually should have done on the night to remember was stop dead in their tracks in the middle of that iceberg rich sea and wait for daylight so they could see what was going on. But it's thrilling to go fast especially if you're sailing on a lot of money and if you make a blunder well you'll make a really big one which you can always fix. I have to admit I'm scared. It's the deal of the century and everybody knows it and it's like screaming in a dream and nobody can hear and *The New Yorker* ran that beautiful piece about oysters coming back and we're hearing about how important trees are in *The New York Times* and if no one intervenes we'll be hearing them fall, and the birds making noise, we'll be smelling that dirt and feeling that shudder and it will be anything but calm. It will be hot and airless and silent except for those cars still driving by the river. They didn't even have to close a lane and that's great.

## By Nataneh River

a runon sentence dedicated to this event and all beings who are here. please note that this comes from just one lenape perspective, i in no way claim to represent anyone but myself.

Content warning: heavy racial subject matter

lenape existence here is fractured  
and as they try to frack  
in this lenape sipu  
this delaware river  
they dig their hands into poisoned soil,  
attempting to drag out and cut our arteries  
they have always used blood  
against blood  
such violence  
is the breath of morning for lenapeyok  
we look east  
smudging with sweet grass smoke we hope  
will float all the way back home (it does)  
they say we have abandonment issues  
from our fathers and our fathers fathers  
but what about our separation from our  
mother  
that genderless matriarch who whispers  
whims  
to us in our sleep

the first time i came home  
i ran to the ocean  
starving to float  
be held  
by my home  
chemicals, waste  
let me drown too  
because we are of flesh the same  
and sometimes  
it feels like we'll be safer  
in the next life anyway  
but no matter it all  
because these men possess no real power  
to kill something that cannot die  
and one day  
if they don't stop  
she will rise up  
swallow them whole  
i'll go with the current  
in new form  
i am not scared of what white people call  
death  
i am only scared of this life

and my mind in layered reality  
does not mean i do not hold responsibility  
to put out oil fires  
and to sing seeds alive  
hope for a black and red return  
i ask again and again  
why did that white foam wash against these  
shores?

us lenapeyok  
the roots who call us home  
we deserve a place here  
as you plant these seeds  
and prepare a gift for those who have given

you more than you can imagine  
you do the labor of our hands  
you shape physically what we do spiritually

our land is waking up  
and you are letting them know  
that you will learn from the water poured  
from the sky  
you will listen to children  
you will collect blessings and share

a surrender  
as a guest  
humility  
only the land can teach

i pray you become land based  
i pray you think about this land as much as  
my bones do  
i pray you read about us  
i pray you bring my elders home  
i pray you take on a responsibility us  
lenapeyok can only dream of having

this city  
built on money and lies  
severed heads and slave bones  
white death  
apocalypse

to stand against this city  
sit against this city  
sleep against this city  
speak against this city  
is to birth life  
to be earth tree trunk canoe in water  
to hold steady in an ocean  
that might fight back any day now  
to fight  
is to surrender to four ways  
of earth  
of fire  
of water  
of sky

and so  
as you listen to us grandfathers  
the old ones who have walked so far away  
tears which fall to words  
which fall to prayers  
which fall to rain  
water for  
tobacco,  
corn,  
and daydreams where babies sit in three  
sisters gardens, teething on squash harvest  
and mothers no longer have to search for  
homes here  
clay pressed to cracks to hold all the liquid  
tattoos over scars  
smell sweetgrass story  
which sings us home.



# The Ways of East River Park by Marcella Durand

Between what is deemed politically and therefore environmentally as important and who and what is important

where water might and does touch land, does undermine land  
a question of: is space ever empty?  
Unvisited? What does it mean if  
a place is not visited. When it is. What is  
uncounted and unseen, deliberately.

Here is an accounting of what life is seen in East River Park, counted from today:

(9 pm, 9/22, autumn equinox)

## The East River

Night fishing, fishing poles one after the other, in line, lines into water, fishing in groups or pairs, or as partners, partners sitting on bench, pointing out when a line moves, tautens, pull the lines in, squid on the hook, toss it out again.

Promenade is collapsing in area east of amphitheater. This could be convincing; we have no details. Asphalt has been poured along one line of subsidence. The hexagonal tiles are splitting. The tiles are wet—waves are smacking over. Two rats run from water to land at end of promenade.

Air is beautiful. Lights on the waters. Powerplant, ferries, triangle of dust across the water.  
We breathe it all in.

## The Common Ditch

(12 pm, 9/22, autumn equinox)

Meet other birder around siberian elm. Siberian elm is invasive and ratty looking. Lush green leaves at base return every year. Two or three or 12 mourning doves on every dead branch at top. Siberian elm is uniquely alive/dead in almost perfect half.

American elm is shapely with open spread like arms. Walk to and from american elm to siberian elm under american sycamores/london plane trees. Milkweed stand is devastated for some reason. Monarchs all over the butterfly bush. Feel like a sucker getting completely sucked into their black-and-white polka dots and stained-glass-like wings. Can't take my eyes off them to the extent that I feel their wings as breath against my skin. Insect synesthesia.

## Road to the Ferry

(3 pm, 9/20)

15 mourning doves are either coming or going south. Eight pigeons, three starlings

after a summer of many, two cardinals fooling me with their warbler-like chipping, and one black-and-white warbler behind the newly mown brambles behind the siberian elm. So the walk was worth it. I am late for the restructuring meeting. People are disagreeing about the most effective methods to save the park. We are all so anguished. The city is brutal and unresponsive. How can our eyes be the only ones to see the trees here? How did the meaning of "value" become so relative? The weight of this city's laws toward land possession presses this island down. We are not going to be able to breathe when this park is destroyed.

## The Sheep's Pasture

(9 am, 9/16)

I meet two other park activists to take a bird walk together. We are trying to relax and enjoy what we are fighting for. We meet at the top of the amphitheater and immediately start discussing the situation. We walk along the compost yard when four large goose-like birds fly out of a tree. I think they are cormorants but have never seen them in a tree before. We talk about the hawk that sits on the chain-link fence looking for rats in the compost. We also see a crow and talk about how crows are being affected by a virus. We identify laughing gulls and wonder why they never laugh while flying over the park. A herring gull sits on top of one of the ferry piles. We see three or four yellow-rumped warblers and 25 pigeons. The activists know the park in ways I don't. Like when I learned that the plastic cauldron under a tree with a skull in it was particular and deliberate. Or when I saw that the squares of weeds running along the FDR were actually cultivated gardens. After being told this.

## The Shore of the East River

(11 am, 9/11)

I bring my binoculars to the rally to save East River Park at 11 on the 11<sup>th</sup>. We had spent the morning obligating ourselves to remember our own experiences on that day and now I was ready to yell against capitalist land grab and see some birds. I count: 6 crows, 5 mourning doves, 1 american redstart (maybe), 1 red-tailed hawk, spotted by someone else, and another activist counts about a hundred people. (We guess about 200 people later). Poets Karen Weiser, Brenda Coultas, Atticus Fierman, Laura Henriksen, and Morgan Vö join us. I remember how much the same group (plus Kristin Prevallet) gathered in the exact same spot in 2010 to mourn the BP oil spill. We thought about how the East River is an estuary and connects to the Atlantic Ocean that flows eventually downward to the south and into the Gulf of Mexico. Water finds its way, even when laden with oil.

## The Oblique Road, or Pathway to the Ditch and Fort

(4 pm, 9/7)

I see exactly one mourning dove. It is a miserable birding day. I run into a fellow activist and unload my ideas about how the city has planted ultrasonic repellers to scare off the birds. She looks perturbed. I feel crazy. But I can't figure out why there are no birds. Even house sparrows or the robins who last spring by the dozens had been pulling worms out of the grasses north of Seal Park. Last fall, there were a dozen pine siskins in the goldenrod stands just south of the park. Now that area is fenced off and the goldenrod gone. Contagious construction and destruction soon to be ours.

## Narrioch

(3 pm, 9/24)

I am torquing time and bringing the last day back around because I want to end this piece here and because I can do that in a poem. We can celebrate and explore and juxtapose and experiment and push the edges of creativity and compassion in a poem because we can do that in a poem. But the poem also now needs to be respectful. Of other beings, of that which begins from our skin and extends outward to the sky. Of our history, of the air and all of those of us under the soil. We are not buying into the myth of uninhabited wilderness. Nature is heaving, sleeping, working, eating, watching each other breathe. Web. Net. Connection.

So. Yesterday extraordinary bird day. I knew it would be good as soon as I crossed Corlears Hook Bridge. It began with common yellow throats in the leaning juniper trees. Then I saw a leaping little warbler with yellow stripe extending from its head down its back in the narrow strip of native greenery they like. I actually shrieked when I came upon a slightly larger grayish bird in the grasses at my feet. It flew over to an oak tree and its gray resolved to a more beautiful nuanced lime-yellow-salmon color—the indefinable color of cedar waxwings. Its tail feathers dipped in gold. We looked at each other for a good long time—long enough to see the leaping little warbler again and a tiny mystery gray bird with white-ringed eyes. And two yellow-rumped warblers flying back and forth—at least, they had the streamlined bodies of yellow-rumps. Or could be magnolia or pine or canada warblers. It tortures me to think I am misidentifying a rare species of warbler that could save the park single-wingedly.

I move up to the troubled area about the siberian elm, which has developed an issue of biting bugs and scattered toilet paper. I'm irritated by this, but the essence of this park is to share it, even with the couple who walk by talking loudly just as I'm recording an



american redstart chirping. Because this is all part of the park in that it is a beautiful and jarring juxtaposition of people and nature that needs to be in this new apprehension of ecology that must include the human within it. This park is that: it must be music and fishing and picnicking and dancing with warblers and the smell of ocean and oak trees and food and squid bait and squirrels. That said, they could open the public toilets again. Instead of destroying the park for money and power. Again. As they do and did and do.

On the way back, there she is: the red-tailed hawk at perfect apex of amphitheatre arch, taking in the view of estuary.

**Notes:**

All but the last subtitle is taken from street and area names in a map showing the original lots of Dutch settlement located at Steven Duncan's blog on the watercourses of New York City: <https://watercourses.typepad.com/watercourses/broad-street-canalheere-g.html>. The last subtitle, "Narrioch," is what the Canarsie people called the area I now inhabit on lands unceded by them. Thank you to Evan Pritchard, a descendent of the Micmac people and founder of The Center for Algonquin Culture, who shared with me the term and the fact that the Canarsie people have lived here since 1300.

The punctuation of the line "What does it mean if/ a place is not visited." is an homage to Eileen Myles, who has been a powerful force in drawing attention to East River Park, and who often finds an essential space between questions and truths. To learn more about East River Park and how you can protest its destruction, visit [www.eastriverparkaction.org](http://www.eastriverparkaction.org).

by Emily Johnson

**That dancing in/of past, present, and future is a shaking, is a way of transforming this place we are caught up in, this place of knowing only one way of knowing, of forced worldview, of bunkers on mountains, of concrete levee, of rising heat, of 1000 dead trees, of nothing in promise, no sound of bee or bird or place to fish or carry on, for career, for nothing real, for what you have been sold, for a future you. This is land. This is water. This is air. This is Lenapehoking. This is for you Carlina Rivera, Council Member District 2, Mannahatta, Destroyer of East River Park.**

The whole world waits.

Do you remember that time I told you the story about the tree?

It was a very heavy tree. It was cut down or it fell down and I found it, I brought it here, to you, for you. I thought you would like to remember how a tree smells.

Do you, remember?

Do you remember when you came to build this (monument) this (concrete levee) and found our bones in the ground?

It wasn't always like this; these bones used to be mine and we were always running around (all over these hills). It's sort of hard to imagine right now because there were so many of us! Feasting and dancing, talking and making things. There was this one time, we caught so many salmon we had a huge party and there was so much laughing. We were all gathered, right over there.

Do you remember that story? The one I told you about the tree? I'll tell it again. It was a very heavy tree. I found it, in the basement of this building, a pile of dirt that used to be a tree. And I brought it up—for you, remember? But it was so heavy, we just had to pretend?

Slow and steady breathing from the corners of my eyes.

My legs felt strong. My chest felt heavy and like it wanted to go down. I stood, my chest tipped and curved forward. I kept having to pull my neck back into a more comfortable alignment. Then nothing, then the jostling. The ground felt very humus-y and moist, which is maybe not what it actually is.


The longing and the pulling. There was an actual pull toward west and also down, like the floor was tipping even, even though, well, maybe it does slope. And there was something in the distance and a knowledge of that distance—a measurement which came in the form of an imagined shot. Bullet traveling. The ground was forest.

A tipping slope.

A conversation with the enemy. How do you know we didn't want it this way? Stuck and dying? How do you know if we even ever loved anything you took away? I didn't want these kids—they were loud, laughing all the time, and running around, playing like deer—and swimming—all the time swimming in that clear, beautiful, shining river. What a mess—their dirty, little feet! How do you know I ever loved my sister, my brother? And my fire, my home? Always full of relatives and relatives of relatives, eating and joking. See these chairs? This is where they sat. All the time, their butts on these chairs, resting their elbows on my table, slapping it every time a joke made them laugh, leaning their chairs back just a bit and rocking back in for a snack. How do you know I'm not glad they're gone? And the fish, so gorgeously red and plentiful. I used to watch then jump up their falls, their entire bodies surging with their might. How do you know I miss them or not? This bit of cake I made from this box is suiting me just fine. Would you like some? There's plenty, and maybe it makes me happy, sharing cake with my enemy, watching you stuff your mouth full standing in the rubble of my own home, still smoldering logs outside where there used to be trees, a brown, stinking river, and silence because everything is dead. Except the sound of your drills digging through death, through genocide, through extinction, through oblivion. Sweet oblivion. Maybe I like that coarse, crumbling, etching sound: hot, empty, loud, and not a drop of rain.

Do you remember rain?

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