

“here to remind people of free”



Alexis Pauline Gumbs, self-proclaimed queer black trouble-maker, has a PhD in English, Africana studies and women’s studies from Duke University. In this post she engenders the intergenerational in poet, performer, playwright, visual artist and community arts organizer Marvin K. White’s newest work, Our Name be Witness.

Poet and activist Marvin K. White’s **latest release** from the Black gay and lesbian literary publisher, **Redbone Press** is a prose meditation, a divination surface, an exercise in ancestor and Alzheimer listening. White’s address is gendered in the second person, written from the point of view of the care-taker, the feminized person who carries, the reproductive laborer, also known as “girl”. This central character becomes both the person that momma delegates for chores and the person that the queen commiserates with in the doorways of black gay clubs. Which is to say that this book of memory, story and advice is queer. It engenders and places a listener in intergenerational time:

“You here to remind people of free.” (33)

This is a particular and shared liberation story baptized in the fluid oral and performative presence of Black American heritage:

It is the way they left the south. The way that their lives always watered themselves down and rose themselves up to that storyline that history drew on that perfume bottle that should be empty by now. It is the way they kept everything seemingly full. Even their bodies made you think slow. (40)

The poetic weight of White’s prose vignettes comes from his transformative practice of tense, moving present tense to past tense over and over again (it is the way they left...it is the way they kept) inviting time travel, historical presence and being beyond the self, deep into the lasting moment. Particularly poignant for the descendants of enslaved and sharecropping families, this practice in revising time towards a presence beyond is intentional. White is stealing freedom reminders, teaching the reader to call up all history into a gift of release, giving us ancestral permission to reject all that ties us down:

Our minds are not deeded or signed over to anyone. Our minds have never been leased land. We cannot lose our minds. We cannot lose. We will no longer struggle to make payments. We are free. (121)

Our Name Be Witness uses the clarity of affirmation to engender liberation. The implication is that with the wisdom of Black feminized ancestors (those without whom life could not have continued neither for the direct descendants nor for a nation of beneficiaries) everything is possible. And though the mummies and the washerwomen and the wet-nurses and the nursemaids and the factory workers and the waitresses no longer labor in the way they used to, the spiritual resources are here, passed intentionally into caretaking hands. Or hands that should take care. In the words of the anonymous speaker:



Be aware of your divinity...You the soul beneficiary. Accept your inheritance...
(45)

And this is the inheritance: warnings to leave abusive relationships, recipes to escape violent lovers, memories of chosen motherhood, survival stories of past displacement. They are all answered faithfully by Marvin K. White in response to the call he heard, which was to:

“Make it all a spell. Spell it out. Spell it out.” (105)

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, PhD is the co-creator of the [Mobile Homecoming Project](#), an experiential archive amplifying generations of Black LGBTQ brilliance.

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