Letters to My Brother
(or: How to Live in a Country That Requires Your Destruction)

Brian Alsup
The following correspondence between Brian Alsup and Kiese Laymon took place during the week of August 31, 2015. As John Callahan once wrote of the decades-long exchange between Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison in Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters, it is “the bounty of a rare and spontaneous friendship in which each taps into the deepest experience of each other.” Together, Alsup and Laymon reckon with black love, liberation, and shouldering the weight of white terror in America.

9/1/15

What’s good, Kiese?

I need help. This shit ain’t going be that long cause I hate writing about politics, white folks, America, and black death, which are all interchangeable things. For real, for real.

But I just had to say that America be on some shit, I swear. Some Frankenstein shit. America will create and cultivate the fuck out of a monster and then gasp and point when their creations do Incredible Hulk shit. America has been taking chunks out of niggas. Dark meat. Large, meaty chunks of black excellence, black rigor, black mental, emotional, and physical wholeness. For centuries. I’m tired of walking around and seeing partial people. Partial-ass black folks with chunks missing and blood oozing because America likes us medium rare. Partial-ass black folks trying to keep from killing a nigga or a cracker on a day-to-day basis. And Vester Lee Flanagan was one of those partial-ass black folks.

America likes to talk about gun violence in black communities, but conveniently neglects to talk about how it is the largest exporter of defense weaponry in the world. The world. These are the same muthafuckas who, since 2010, have given Saudi Arabia 90 million dollars in defense efforts to execute mass death in Yemen, then got the nerve to call brown folks terrorist.

These muthafuckas love that black/brown domestic/foreign death parallel. The country’s preoccupation with the taste of black and brown flesh is cannibalistic. But when that death is white and wholesome, two more interchangeable American terms, black grief and guilt (and death) is demanded. Whites asking, “Where are the Black Lives Matter people when [white person killed by police/black person] died?” Like, we owe them tears. Like we need to sacrifice one of us to make it right.

There have been hundreds of black folks killed by police since the start of 2014. And you got white supremacists calling for the extermination of black folks like it ain’t already happening. Yet we’re supposed to collectively offer ourselves to console white supremacy? White supremacy just let Officer Joseph Weekley, the man who killed seven-year old Aiyana Stanley Jones, walk free. They need consoling!? Fuck that. Forgive us and turn the other cheek like y’all tell us to do when y’all take one of ours.

America spends more on defense than they do healthcare. In recent years, almost 40 percent of tax dollars went to military and defense-related spending. Combined, less than 30 percent went to healthcare, education, and housing. They would much rather have people know how to kill than for them to be mentally, emotionally, physically whole.

My family, though they’ll never admit it, is more invested in doing the work of anti-blackness than any actual loving of black folks. My grandfather, a man who has shared stories of stealing meat from grocery stores to feed my mother and uncle because his job didn’t pay black folks livable wages, talks about how we always want a handout. I swear; I feel like I’m in the fucking twilight zone sometimes. My grandfather was stealing chunks of meat while white supremacy was taking it out of him. Maybe black folks got their hands out cause we ain’t got shit. I know black people that work every day but have to use their stoves for heat because the electricity is off. You know how damaging, just on a psychological level, that is? Shit is enough to make you wanna kill a muthafucka. Man, capitalism itself is a fucking hand out. And it, in tandem with white supremacy, is killing me slowly. Every. Day. All this is shit killing me. It’s fucking with me.

Is what Vester did fucked up? Yeah. Is what America did and still does to black folks fucked up, also? Hell yeah. There’s no comparison. You can’t plant seeds in shit, water it with piss, and expect flowers. You can’t.

But you already knew that,

Brian
What’s good, Brian?

I’m thankful for your words. They’re wide-eyed, wandering, and wonderfully black as Toni Cade Bambara. I need help, too, man. I can’t wholeheartedly disagree with anything you’ve said. Nothing. I wonder, though, if it’s possible to recognize and target white folk’s structural and personal obsession with making us “partial” while asking ourselves how we become obsessed with making ourselves whole. And if not whole, how do we black folk practice more care and compassion for each other while targeting white supremacy and heteropatriarchy?

Do you know what I mean?

At our best, we’ve refused, or at least, remixed American notions of beauty, style and grace. How do we do the same thing with American notions of violence, masculinity, gender performance, memory, forgiveness, health, and time?

Can we? Are we?

I’m really asking. I know we’re reeling from mass incarceration, predatory educational practice and policy, layers of rape culture, and generations of poverty pinioned by white folk maniacally stealing and undervaluing our labor, but how do we practice a different kind of black love that accepts the abuse we’ve suffered, the abusive roles some of us have played, while pushing back on every single thing this nation has taught us about intimacy, violence, memory, patriarchy, blackness and love?

And, honestly, if we don’t do this, do we have a chance to morally be anything other than them? Shit, are we morally any better than them? When I read your letter, brother, I wondered if you thought we were destined to partial lives of death and destruction?

I completely hear what you’re saying when you write, “You can’t plant seeds in shit, water it with piss, and expect flowers.” And while I don’t believe in that reactionary shit about us being goofy kings and queens, I do believe that I come from Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, and my grandmama. These are southern black women workers and lovers from Mississippi. I know that a lot of white folk have been educated to believe that those black Mississsippi women, and their children are pitiful, and, as you say, partial niggas.

But fuck them, and fuck anyone else invested in limiting the healthy choices and second chances of cis, trans, and gender nonconforming black folks.

We know that we come from the greatest, most complicated Americans to work and walk this nation. Our folk sang together, prayed together, reckoned, lost, won, and imaginatively organized direct mass action to get themselves and us a little bit more access to good love, healthy choices, and second chances. And hell yes, the nation made sure they, and we, suffered for their work. But they worked for us. And right now, around this country, various black liberation movements are working in the spirit of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells and my grandmama.

So I guess I’m asking, Brian, if you think these black love movements for black liberation are doomed because white folks and whiteness and white supremacy are so good at horrifically dismantling black lives, are we more than what you called seeds planted in shit and watered in piss?

I’m really asking because I love you. I’m asking because I trust you, young brother. Thank you for talking to me, Brian. Thank you for honoring and respecting your rage. This feels like black love. Let’s keep talking.

Kiese

9/4/15

Kie,

Goddamn, bruh. Thank you for asking me these hard-ass questions. Thank you for loving me. Honestly, it gets
hard to do that shit sometimes. A lot of the time.

You may think I hate black folks for being partial, or we need white folks to make us—or let us be—whole. I used to. I talked so much shit about white people in that first letter and, while all true, I just hate centering whiteness in my writing. I hate writing about, as you call it, the worst of white folks. They know what they did, and still do. Because when I do, I neglect the best, and worst, of black folks.

It’s like that time you told that corny white dude in high-waters at Columbia about James Baldwin: “When you center whiteness in your writing, you have to think about who’s being left out.”

To answer your question, yes, I know what you mean. I think the first step is for us to stop asking white folks for permission to love each other. Black folks truly swear we got this love shit on lock. But white supremacy has made us the most wishful group of partial niggas ever. We’re good at envisioning love, thinking about health, thinking about care, about what that shit could look like and how much better we could be. But when it comes to practicing it? Very few of us really know how to do it. Even fewer are honest about not knowing how to.

I’m one of them.

I would add that we also need to wrestle with American notions of responsibility, (dis)honesty, fear, failure, sacrifice, (un)imaginable change, and right and wrong. If we don’t do that we can just wrap it up. And I get why we don’t. I get it. It’s hard to live in a nation that requires your destruction and then hold yourself accountable for being (un)consciously destructive.

I promise I didn’t mean that we ain’t shit. Fuck; thank you for letting me know what I said was destructive. I think that as good as white folks are at terrorizing black efforts of love, health, time, and care, that we are twice as good at doing the work of love, as you say.

We got us. We ain’t doomed. We ain’t shit seeds. We got work to do, though. We are partial and whole and presently complicated and righteously fucked up and good and not so good and capable and broken and beautiful as fuck. I love you. I trust you. I trust us. Please, let’s talk more about this soon.

I’m thankful for the work, big brother.

Brian

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Brian Alsup is a young, fat black boy from Baltimore, Maryland trying to be better. Kiese Laymon is an old, fat black boy from Jackson, Mississippi trying to be better.

[Illustration by Jim Cooke]

>via: http://gawker.com/letters-to-my-brother-or-how-to-live-in-a-country-tha-1728859788

# Kalamu ya Salaam # neo-grio # neogrio

September 8th in Neo-Griot

POV: Addy Walker, American Girl

the PARIS REVIEW

May 28, 2015
Addy Walker, American Girl

The role of black dolls in American culture.

by Brit Bennett

From the cover of Meet Addy.

In 1864, a nine-year-old slave girl was punished for daydreaming. Distracted by rumors that her brother and father would be sold, she failed to remove worms from the tobacco leaves she was picking. The overseer didn't whip her. Instead, he pried her mouth open, stuffed a worm inside, and forced her to eat it.

This girl is not real. Her name is Addy Walker; she is an American Girl doll, one of eight historical dolls produced by the Pleasant Company who arrive with dresses, accessories, and a series of books about their lives. Of all the harrowing scenes I've encountered in slave narratives, I remember this scene from Meet Addy, her origin story, most vividly. How the worm—green, fat, and juicy—burst inside Addy's mouth. At eight years old, I understood that slavery was cruel—I knew about hard labor and whippings—but the idea of a little girl being forced to eat a worm stunned me. I did not yet understand that violence is an art. There's creativity to cruelty. What did I know of its boundaries and edges?

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An American Girl store is designed like a little girl's fantasyland, or what the Pleasant Company, owned by Mattel, imagines that to be. Pink glows from the walls; yellow shelves hold delicate dolls in display cases. Nurses tend to a hospital for defunct toys and a café hosts tea parties for girls and their dolls. The company has retired many of the historical American Girls from my childhood—the colonist Felicity, the frontierswoman Kirsten, and the World War II–era Molly, all among the original set of dolls, released in 1986—but Addy remains.

Against the store's backdrop of pink tea parties, her story seems even more harrowing. Addy escapes to the north with her mother, forced to leave her baby sister behind because her cries might alert slave-catchers. In Philadelphia, Addy struggles to adjust and dreams of her family reuniting. They do, it turns out, find each other eventually—a near impossibility for an actual enslaved family—but at no small cost. Her brother loses an arm fighting in the Civil War. Her surrogate grandparents die on the plantation before she can say goodbye. Other
American Girls struggle, but Addy’s story is distinctly more traumatic. For seventeen years, Addy was the only black historical doll; she was the only nonwhite doll until 1998. If you were a white girl who wanted a historical doll who looked like you, you could imagine yourself in Samantha’s Victorian home or with Kirsten, weathering life on the prairie. If you were a black girl, you could only picture yourself as a runaway slave.

Since 2013, a Change.com petition has gathered nearly seventy signatures demanding that the Pleasant Company discontinue the Addy doll. “Slavery was a vile, cruel, inhumane, unjust holocaust of Black Americans,” the petition reads. “Why would this subject matter ever be considered entertaining?” The petition accuses the Pleasant Company of “diminish[ing] the cruelty of slavery and instead glorif[y]ing it as some sort of adventurous fantasy.”

“I didn’t even think about that,” my mother told me. “I just thought it was a beautiful doll.”

My mother didn’t own a doll until she was seven or eight. She grew up in rural Louisiana, one of nine children, and her mother couldn’t afford to buy dolls, so she made her own out of corncobs. One year, her uncle brought back dolls from Chicago. They were white. Mass-produced black dolls were not readily available until the late 1960s; before then, many of the black dolls in existence were ugly racist caricatures.

A “vintage pickaninny windup doll.”

Of course, you can still buy racist dolls. Golliwogs—blackfaced rag dolls—are still sold in the United Kingdom; only in 2009 were they finally removed from a gift shop on the Queen’s Sandringham Estate. Pickaninny dolls, racist caricatures of black children, live on in the homes of collectors and in the recesses of the Internet. eBay sellers advertise “charming vintage” pickaninny dolls with black skin, bulging eyes, and big red lips. An Etsy page describes a windup toy as “a historic remnant of America’s past,” an antique that depicts “a crying little black boy performing the iconic action commonly seen in the pickaninny stereotype as the child is eating a slice of plantation watermelon.” The seller acknowledges that the piece is “certainly racist,” but hails “the adorable characteristics of a precious little toddler with his charming little shape and cute chubby cheeks and limbs.”

In Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights, Robin Bernstein describes the popularity of pickaninny dolls with white children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Passionate love for a black doll was often couched in violence. White children mutilated their black dolls,
gashing their throats, cutting between their legs, even hanging or burning them. “Love and violence were not mutually exclusive but were instead interdependent,” Bernstein writes. Although children often commit violence against dolls, “nineteenth-century white children singled out black dolls for attacks that were especially vicious and that took racialized forms.” This is no coincidence. Pickaninnies are often depicted as targets of violence, as in a 1900 postcard that features a white man throwing baseballs at pickaninny dolls in a carnival game called “Hit the Nigger Babies.” Likewise, a cloth-doll ad in an 1893 issue of a juvenile magazine reads:

| What child in America does not at some time want a cloth "Nigger" dollie—one that can be petted or thrown about without harm to the doll or anything that it comes in contact with[?] “Pickaninny” fills all the requirements most completely. |

What does it mean for a doll ad not only to acknowledge but to encourage a white child’s violence against a representation of a black child? Maybe it means nothing. Dolls aren’t real—they can’t feel pain. But neither, apparently, can pickaninnies: in books and postcards and minstrel shows, they were shown crushed by boulders, mauled by dogs, and dangled over alligators as bait.

Addy is not a pickaninny doll. She is beautifully crafted, and her story portrays her as a girl who is smart and courageous. Generations of black girls before me would’ve loved to hold Addy in their arms. But she is still complicated, fraught with painful history. If a doll exists on the border between person and thing, what does it mean to own a doll that represents an enslaved child who once existed on that same border?

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Dolls have never simply been toys, especially not throughout America’s racial history. In *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny*, Michele Mitchell writes about black reformers in the early twentieth century who argued that if beautiful white dolls reinforced white superiority and minstrel dolls reinforced black inferiority, then perhaps owning beautiful black dolls could teach children racial pride. Booker T. Washington wrote, in 1910, that black dolls “will have the effect of instilling in Negro girls and in Negro women a feeling of respect for their own race.” Marcus Garvey urged mothers to “give your children dolls that look like them to play with and cuddle so that they will learn as they grow older to love and care for their own children and not neglect them.”

A few decades later, dolls played a crucial role in toppling segregation. Dr. Mamie Clark and Dr. Kenneth Clark’s *famous doll test* presented children with two dolls, identical except for color and hair. The Clarks asked their subjects a series of questions: Which doll do you like to play with? Which doll is a nice color? When they asked the final question—Which doll looks like you?—many black children, who had until this point preferred the white doll, burst into tears. The Clarks testified as expert witnesses during Brown v. Board of Education,
presenting their results as proof that segregation damages the self-esteem of black children.

The doll test has been replicated as recently as 2005, fifty years after desegregation, and the results remain the same. In one video, a black girl, asked which doll is prettier and smarter, points quickly to the white doll. She hesitates when asked which doll looks like her; her reluctance to touch the black doll breaks my heart.

In 2011, the Pleasant Company launched their second black historical doll, Cécile, a girl growing up in 1850s New Orleans. She has a white best friend and dreams of finding a gown for the Children’s Ball at Mardi Gras. Many black parents were relieved when Cécile was introduced. Shelley Walcott, a Milwaukee reporter, wrote that although she “believes learning about the history of slavery in America is critical and should in no way be hidden from our children,” she had also wished that the Pleasant Company would release another black doll, one that “celebrated a more positive time in African American history.”

“As a parent,” she writes,

I find Cécile’s story a lot more appropriate for playtime than plantation scenes and a bullwhip-cracking slave master … Much of African American history is painful. And I’m glad to see the folks at American Girl have introduced a new doll that can allow children’s fantasies to be … less intense.

But Cécile was discontinued in 2014, along with the only historical Asian American doll, Ivy Ling. Cécile is light-skinned with long, beautiful ringlets. She dreams of pretty dresses. If I had been offered Addy or Cécile as a girl, I wonder which I would have chosen.

In “A Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin describes the inevitability of young black children discovering “the shape of [their] oppression”:

As adults, we are easily fooled because we are so anxious to be fooled. But children are very different. Children, not yet aware that it is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything, look at each other, and draw their own conclusions. They don’t have the vocabulary to express what they see … but a black child, looking at the world around him, though he cannot know quite what to make of it … is aware that there is some terrible weight on his parents’ shoulders which menaces him.

Perhaps playing with dolls like Addy and reading books about her life provides children with the language to confront that terrible, menacing weight of racism. Perhaps it is better to have language, even when language hurts.

Still, I envy the privilege of not knowing. In 2013, Laura Murphy, a Virginia mother, made news when she pushed for the school district to allow students to opt out of reading Toni Morrison’s Beloved. The book, she claimed, was “too intense for teenage readers”; reading it had given her seventeen-year-old son nightmares. Well, good—Beloved should give your child nightmares. Why should her son be allowed to opt out of a horrifying history just because it unsettles him? Her son admitted that the book was “hard for [him] to handle,” so he just gave up on it. Murphy later argued that she was not trying to ban the book; instead, she wanted a choice, as a parent, to decide whether her children could be exposed to “disturbing” content. She expects the
ability to protect her child’s innocence. But, as Bernstein argues, childhood innocence has always been raced white. White children feel pain. Black children are barely children.

A recent study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that subjects perceived black boys to be an average of four-and-a-half-years older than their actual age. In some cases, a black child was perceived as an adult when he was only thirteen. “Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection,” the study reads. But black boys are seen as responsible for their actions “at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent.” Is it any surprise then, that Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old black boy playing with a toy gun in a park, was shot by police before the cruiser even came to a full stop? The 9-1-1 caller had warned that the gun was “probably fake,” Rice “probably a juvenile.” And yet an officer shot the boy in seconds. Moments before, surveillance video shows Rice stomping on snowballs, like any child might do. When the 9-1-1 caller spotted him, he was sitting on a playground swing.

*In the sixth grade, I earned the role of Addy in a play at the public library. By that point, I was too old for dolls—later that year I would read *Roots* and learn that an enslaved black girl had much worse to fear than worms—but I hadn’t outgrown the pleasure of pretending, so my mother sewed me the pink-striped dress from the cover of *Meet Addy*, and I stepped on stage. Afterward, I signed autographs in character to shy girls clutching Addy dolls. This is the particular joy of an American Girl doll: she is a doll your age who arrives with her story told; she allows you to leap into history and imagine yourself alongside her. Addy humanizes slavery for children, which is crucial since slavery, by definition, strips humanity away.

In a round-table discussion at the University of Michigan, Marilyn Nelson said that when her publishers asked her to write a children’s book about Emmett Till’s lynching, she laughed in disbelief. But she did—she wrote *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, thus completing the work that black authors do, that black adults do, in teaching racial pain to the next generation. I’ll have to do this work someday, too, and I hope I handle it with the grace of my parents, for whom exposing me to brutal stories was an act of love.

“I wanted children to see African American people as part of strong, loving families, caught up in slavery, doing what they had to do to survive,” Connie Porter, the author of the six Addy books, has said. She did not allow me to look away. She forced me to swallow.

*Brit Bennett recently earned her M.F.A. in fiction at the Helen Zell Writers’ Program at the University of Michigan. Her debut novel, *The Mothers*, is forthcoming.*

>via: [http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/05/28/addy-walker-american-girl/](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/05/28/addy-walker-american-girl/)

#Kalamu ya Salaam #neo-gho #neogho

**VIDEO: Oil & Water documentary**
An oil documentary like no other, Oil & Water explores the complex relationship between coastal Cajuns in Louisiana and the oil and gas industry, following a family and their seafood business as they continue to support deepwater drilling in the wake of the BP spill, the worst oil spill in U.S. history.

Accepted into many film festivals and runner up for best feature documentary at the prestigious Oxford Film Festival, Oil & Water is available for free online for the first time. If you like the film, please give us a thumbs up or a quick review.

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS:

AFROFUTURES ANTHOLOGY 2015

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Oil-Wa...
DEADLINE: 19TH SEPTEMBER

Firstly, a huge thank you to everyone who has supported us thus far. Thank you for your retweets and retumbles, for following us on Facebook and generally spreading the word about our event. Buoyed by your support, we thoroughly intend to put on a brilliant, multi-disciplinary festival, with conferences and workshops in the day and performance in the evening.

With a growing number of amazing speakers, academics, artists and musicians, from the U.S. and Europe, we’re looking to produce an anthology of work to help raise funds for our special guests.

As such, we’re looking to you, our talented sisters and brothers out there. Our first anthology will include artwork, comics, essays and short stories. However, we’re also putting together a special album which will contain spoken word, poetry, music and soundscape art. We will be giving the complete set as rewards for contributing to our Kickstarter as well as available for sale after the event.

GUIDELINES

WRITING
1. The theme of the anthology is ‘what will it mean to be black in the future?’. We welcome stories that are woman positive and explore alternative sexualities and gender expression; the nature of futuristic spirituality and religion and the impact our history as black people will have on our future. Fiction and non-fiction are accepted.
2. Fiction/Biographical pieces must be less than 5,000 words in length. Flash fiction and poetry is also accepted.
3. Academic Non-fiction must be less than 8,000 words in length and referenced using the Harvard Reference Style. A useful tool can be found here.
4. Up to three entries are allowed per author. Each must be submitted as a separate .doc/.docx file.
5. Please submit your work as .doc/.docx files only. Double line spacing with the author’s name, page number and story title/paper title at the top of every page.

ART
We welcome all art that focuses on an afrofuturist theme. Images must be of minimum 300 dpi and in formats optimised for printing. We will make sure to contact you for preferences regarding layout.

COMICS
We would love to see work using the comics medium. Please ensure all pieces are less than 12 pages in length.

AUDIO
1. We accept spoken word, poetry readings, music and soundscapes. If you are unsure if your piece is suitable, please get in touch via the email below.
2. All pieces must be under 6 minutes.
3. Up to three entries are allowed.
4. Please submit your work as .mp4 files only.
5. In your submission email, include your performance name, the title, length and any additional information about the piece.

Please send all submissions to: afrofutures.uk@gmail.com

Do remember that this is a free event, open to everyone of all ages. It is our aim to encourage participation from amongst those who might not normally be able to, or feel welcome to, attend a conference/exhibition space like this. Your contributions will help us take care of our guest speakers and ensure that the event is one to remember!

For those of you who are interested in the publishing side of things, read this!

You do not want to miss out on the opportunity to receive editorial training at Ayiba Magazine—one of the most dynamic digital platforms offering Africa-related content.

DEADLINE: SEPTEMBER 14TH!

Ayiba Magazine is offering two lucky applicants great training platform. Ayiba Magazine is a fast-growing online publication focused on breaking down perpetuating stereotypes of Africa by telling stories that exemplify the complexity of African identity.

Beginning September 28, 2015, Ayiba will offer two six-month-long editorial fellowships. Applicants must be pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree. Applicants should also be enthusiastic,
highly organized, self-motivated and be interested in our mission of chronicling the African renaissance. A passion for great reporting and writing is essential. Fellows will work remotely with an international team stretching across three continents. Each fellow is expected to work approximately 8 – 10 hours per week with a flexible schedule created in consultation with Ayiba’s editorial staff.

If interested, kindly email Akinyi Ochieng, akinyi@ayibamagazine.com, with your resume and a one – two page writing sample (topics related to Africa are strongly preferred). If you keep a personal blog, we would love you to share the link with us as well.

Responsibilities

- Write two – three weekly blog posts on topics pertaining African culture and politics
- Pitch story ideas to the Executive Editor
- Write feature pieces
- Identify pieces for re-publication
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Perks

- Ability to network with young African leaders
- Opportunity to attend/cover events for Ayiba
- Hands-on experience with a top-notch team
- Freedom to lead projects, test strategies, and implement your ideas
- Recommendation and references upon completion

Please note that this fellowship is unpaid.

18th Annual Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures
(“Islands In Between”) Conference

18th Annual Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures (“Islands In Between”) Conference on the Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the Eastern Caribbean

The UWI Open Campus
St. Kitts and Nevis
The Gardens
Basseterre

Thursday, 5 November – Saturday, 7 November 2015

Abstracts due: 15 September 2015

Suggested topics for presentation include:

- Language, Literature, Culture, History, and Education in St. Kitts and Nevis
- Eastern Caribbean Drama, Poetry, Fiction, Cinema, Essays, Biographies, etc.
- Language and Culture, Identity, and/or Gender in the Eastern Caribbean
- Creole Linguistics and the Creolization of Languages and Cultures in the Eastern Caribbean
- Art, Music, Dance, Cuisine, and Popular Culture of the Eastern Caribbean
- Eastern Caribbean Carnival, Religions, Other Performance Traditions
- The Environment, Tourism, and Development in the Eastern Caribbean
- Culture and Politics, Society, History, Law, and Economics in the Eastern Caribbean

Abstracts/panel proposals may be submitted in English, Spanish, or any other Caribbean language and should reach the conference organizing committee no later than 15 September 2015.

- Papers may be in English, Spanish or any other Caribbean language and should conform to the allotted fifteen minutes of presentation time and five minutes of question time. Please submit your proposal within the text of an e-mail and NOT as an attachment. Proposals should include: a one-page abstract (maximum 250 words), the author’s name, postal and e-mail addresses, home institution (if applicable), and a brief biography (50 words or less).
- Please send submissions or enquiries to the Puerto Rico Conference Organizing Committee (Robert Dupey and Reinhard Sander): islandsconference@gmail.com

Information regarding the conference will be available on the Islands In Between Web Page: http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/ingles/?page_id=2438

Co-organized by the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, The University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, and The UWI Open Campus St. Kitts and Nevis
VIDEO: Black Uhuru – Live in Essen (1981)
VIDEO: Jamaican Legends feat. Sly & Robbie, Ernest Ranglin & Tyrone Downie
JAMAICAN LEGENDS

feat. Sly & Robbie,
Ernest Ranglin & Tyrone Downie
Jamaican Legends live at Pori Jazz 2012

Drum Song
I Need A Fat Girl (Fattie Fattie; Fatty Fatty)
King Tubby Meets The Rockers
Satta Massagana
Lively Up Yourself
Below The Bassline
No No No (You Don’t Love Me Anymore)

total run time: 00:54:33

Sly Dunbar – drums
Robbie Shakespear – bass
Ernest Ranglin – guitar
Tyrone Downie – keyboards

SHORT STORY: EMILIO SANTIAGO

photo by Alex Lear
I woke up, slowly, or I thought I woke up. Maybe I was still dreaming. Next thing I knew I had quit my job at the factory, and at the office, and on the assembly line and I was sitting on the warm ground with my father fishing in City Park. We both had on freshly washed jeans and old shirts. His had a torn pocket and a hole in the left sleeve, mine had chocolate milk stains on it from that morning when I went to drink the milk and missed my mouth.

My dad was showing me things he never showed me when he was alive, or maybe it was things he showed me but things somehow I was unable to see then even though he tried to show me. I smile as I see myself learning stuff from my dad. I was 13 and I was learning how to smile like a man.

When the sun started going down we walked home. He walked slowly enough that I could keep up without rushing. I was holding the poles and the empty bucket, we had released all the fish we caught. Daddy had said there was no need to take what we didn’t need, we had food at home. I asked him why had we come fishing then, and he put his arm around my shoulder, loosely around my shoulders, and kissed me on the nose.

Fully awake now, I look over at you. You are still sleeping. The windows in our room are shaded but the morning light is spread around the edges like the crust on bread. You make a very light whistling sound as you inhale while sleeping. I don’t want to turn the TV on. I don’t want to see anymore hostages. If I turn the tv on I will become a hostage too. What does your mother think of me now? I am in the middle of my life and there are no bells on my shoulders, no post graduate degrees on my wall.

I can hear the traffic in the street outside. Where do people think they are going? I wish everyday I could go somewhere I’ve never been before, touch the doors of houses I’ve never entered, walk in the wash of seas that have never wet me. I start to wake you and ask you the last time we walked along in the park wandering hand in hand through the flock of ducks or when was it I most recently kissed you in public. Over all I’m pretty satisfied with our furniture, it’s just the nagging thought that we didn’t really need a leather sofa and glass topped coffee table to be happy, but it’s just a thought.

I see the shape of you beneath the thin sheet pulled up almost to your shoulders. The radio has come on automatically, and as the jazz filters into the room and into my consciousness I realize it’s on WWOZ and someone is on the radio saying that this is a gorgeous Monday, that Mondays are the best days of the week. I look at him queerly. The music is nice.

Suddenly there is this sound, this song that doesn’t quite sound like the average song, it sounds so, so, so I don’t know, so lonely, no not lonely, so incomplete, unfinished. It sounds like he is in my head, or I mean that music is music that is inside me, and somehow he saw it. Did my father tell him to play this music? And then the track is over. I listen for who the artist is and the DJ calls my name, but I never made any music. I never made the music I wanted to, maybe he is trying to tell me something.

The next song that plays is a ballad in some language I don’t recognize but I clearly see myself singing this...
foreign song on a red tiled patio early in the morning with five freshly cut yellow roses in my hand.

I stand up to listen to the music better. Both my hands are on top of my head with my fingers interlaced. I am nude. You wake up. I can feel you watching me. My eyes are closed.

When the song ends you ask me what am I thinking. I tell you I don’t know and you kiss my hand, the hand with which I reached down to touch your thick dark brown hair.

Is this still a dream? No, my fingers are wet where you kissed me. The music is filling our bedroom. Maybe I am supposed to be an artist. Finally I tell you as much of the truth as I am able to understand at this moment, “I was just listening to that music and it made me think about a lot of things I’ve always wanted to do….”

—kalamu ya salaam

HISTORY: New England’s hidden history

More than we like to think, the North was built on slavery.

By Francie Latour
In the year 1755, a black slave named Mark Codman plotted to kill his abusive master. A God-fearing man, Codman had resolved to use poison, reasoning that if he could kill without shedding blood, it would be no sin. Arsenic in hand, he and two female slaves poisoned the tea and porridge of John Codman repeatedly. The plan worked — but like so many stories of slave rebellion, this one ended in brutal death for the slaves as well. After a trial by jury, Mark Codman was hanged, tarred, and then suspended in a metal gibbet on the main road to town, where his body remained for more than 20 years.

It sounds like a classic account of Southern slavery. But Codman’s body didn’t hang in Savannah, Ga.; it hung in present-day Somerville, Mass. And the reason we know just how long Mark the slave was left on view is that Paul Revere passed it on his midnight ride. In a fleeting mention from Revere’s account, the horseman described galloping past “Charlestown Neck, and got nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains.”

When it comes to slavery, the story that New England has long told itself goes like this: Slavery happened in the South, and it ended thanks to the North. Maybe we had a little slavery, early on. But it wasn’t real slavery. We never had many slaves, and the ones we did have were practically family. We let them marry, we taught them to read, and soon enough, we freed them. New England is the home of abolitionists and underground railroads. In the story of slavery — and by extension, the story of race and racism in modern-day America — we’re the heroes. Aren’t we?

As the nation prepares to mark the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War in 2011, with commemorations that reinforce the North/South divide, researchers are offering uncomfortable answers to that question, unearthing more and more of the hidden stories of New England slavery — its brutality, its staying power, and its silent presence in the very places that have become synonymous with freedom. With the markers of slavery forgotten even as they lurk beneath our feet — from graveyards to historic homes, from Lexington and Concord to the halls of Harvard University — historians say it is time to radically rewrite America’s slavery story to include its buried history in New England.

“The story of slavery in New England is like a landscape that you learn to see,” said Anne Farrow, who co-wrote “Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited From Slavery” and who is researching a new book about slavery and memory. “Once you begin to see these great seaports and these great historic houses, everywhere you look, you can follow it back to the agricultural trade of the West Indies, to the trade of bodies in Africa, to the unpaid labor of black people.”
It was the 1991 discovery of an African burial ground in New York City that first revived the study of Northern slavery. Since then, fueled by educators, preservationists, and others, momentum has been building to recognize histories hidden in plain sight. Last year, Connecticut became the first New England state to formally apologize for slavery. In classrooms across the country, popularity has soared for educational programs on New England slavery designed at Brown University. In February, Emory University will hold a major conference on the role slavery’s profits played in establishing American colleges and universities, including in New England. And in Brookline, Mass., a program called Hidden Brookline is designing a virtual walking tour to illuminate its little-known slavery history: At one time, nearly half the town’s land was held by slave owners.

“What people need to understand is that, here in the North, while there were not the large plantations of the South or the Caribbean islands, there were families who owned slaves,” said Stephen Bressler, director of Brookline’s Human Relations-Youth Resources Commission. “There were businesses actively involved in the slave trade, either directly in the importation or selling of slaves on our shores, or in the shipbuilding, insurance, manufacturing of shackles, processing of sugar into rum, and so on. Slavery was a major stimulus to the Northern economy.”

Turning over the stones to find those histories isn’t just a matter of correcting the record, he and others say. It’s
crucial to our understanding of the New England we live in now.

"The absolute amnesia about slavery here on the one hand, and the gradualness of slavery ending on the other, work together to make race a very distinctive thing in New England," said Joanne Pope Melish, who teaches history at the University of Kentucky and wrote the book “Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and ‘Race’ in New England, 1780-1860.” “If you have obliterated the historical memory of actual slavery — because we’re the free states, right? — that makes it possible to turn around and look at a population that is disproportionately poor and say, it must be their own inferiority. That is where New England’s particular brand of racism comes from.”

Dismantling the myths of slavery doesn’t mean ignoring New England’s role in ending it. In the 1830s and ‘40s, an entire network of white Connecticut abolitionists emerged to house, feed, clothe, and aid in the legal defense of Africans from the slave ship Amistad, a legendary case that went all the way to the US Supreme Court and helped mobilize the fight against slavery. Perhaps nowhere were abolition leaders more diehard than in Massachusetts: Pacifist William Lloyd Garrison and writer Henry David Thoreau were engines of the antislavery movement. Thoreau famously refused to pay his taxes in protest of slavery, part of a philosophy of civil disobedience that would later influence Martin Luther King Jr. But Thoreau was tame compared to Garrison, a flame-thrower known for shocking audiences. Founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the newspaper The Liberator, Garrison once burned a copy of the US Constitution at a July Fourth rally, calling it “a covenant with death.” His cry for total, immediate emancipation made him a target of death threats and kept the slavery question at a perpetual boil, fueling the moral argument that, in time, would come to frame the Civil War.

But to focus on crusaders like Garrison is to ignore ugly truths about how unwillingly New England as a whole turned the page on slavery. Across the region, scholars have found, slavery here died a painfully gradual death, with emancipation laws and judicial rulings that either were unclear, poorly enforced, or written with provisions that kept slaves and the children born to them in bondage for years.

Meanwhile, whites who had trained slaves to do skilled work refused to hire the same blacks who were now free, driving an emerging class of skilled workers back to the lowest rungs of unskilled labor. Many whites, driven by reward money and racial hatred, continued to capture and return runaway Southern slaves; some even sent free New England blacks south, knowing no questions about identity would be asked at the other end. And as surely as there was abolition, there was “bobalition” — the mocking name given to graphic, racist broadsides printed through the 1830s, ridiculing free blacks with characters like Cezar Blubberlip and Mungo Mufflechops. Plastered around Boston, the posters had a subtext that seemed to boil down to this: Who do these people think they are? Citizens?

“Is Garrison important? Yes. Is it dangerous to be an abolitionist at that time? Absolutely,” said Melish. “What is conveniently forgotten is the number of people making a living snagging free black people in a dark alley and shipping them south.”

Growing up in Lincoln, Mass., historian Elise Lemire vividly remembers learning of the horrors of a slaveocracy far, far away. “You knew, for example, that families were split up, that people were broken psychologically and kept compliant by the fear of your husband or wife being sold away, or your children being sold away,” said Lemire, author of the 2009 book “Black Walden,” who became fascinated with former slaves banished to squatter communities in Walden Woods.

As she peeled back the layers, Lemire discovered a history rarely seen by the generations of tourists and schoolchildren who have learned to see Concord as a hotbed of antislavery activism. “Slaves [here] were split up in the same way,” she said. “You didn’t have any rights over your children. Slave children were given away all the time, sometimes when they were very young.”

In Lemire’s Concord, slave owners once filled half of town government seats, and in one episode town residents rose up to chase down a runaway slave. Some women remained enslaved into the 1820s, more than 30 years after census figures recorded no existing slaves in Massachusetts. According to one account, a former slave named Brister Freeman, for whom Brister’s Hill in Walden Woods is named, was locked inside a slaughterhouse shed with an enraged bull as his white tormentors laughed outside the door. And in Concord, Lemire argues, black families were not so much liberated as they were abandoned to their freedom, released by masters increasingly fearful their slaves would side with the British enemy. With freedom, she said, came immediate poverty: Blacks were forced to squat on small plots of the town’s least arable land, and eventually pushed out of Concord altogether — a precursor to the geographic segregation that continues to divide black
“This may be the birthplace of a certain kind of liberty,” Lemire said, “but Concord was a slave town. That’s what it was.”

If Concord was a slave town, historians say, Connecticut was a slave state. It didn’t abolish slavery until 1848, a little more than a decade before the Civil War. (A judge’s ruling ended legal slavery in Massachusetts in 1783, though the date is still hotly debated by historians.) It’s a history Connecticut author and former Hartford Courant journalist Anne Farrow knew nothing about — until she got drawn into an assignment to find the untold story of one local slave.

Once she started pulling the thread, Farrow said, countless histories unfurled: accounts of thousand-acre slave plantations and a livestock industry that bred the horses that turned the giant turnstiles of West Indian sugar mills. Each discovery punctured another slavery myth. “A mentor of mine has said New England really democratized slavery,” said Farrow. “Where in the South a few people owned so many slaves, here in the North, many people owned a few. There was a widespread ownership of black people.”

Perhaps no New England colony or state profited more from the unpaid labor of blacks than Rhode Island: Following the Revolution, scholars estimate, slave traders in the tiny Ocean State controlled between two-thirds and 90 percent of America’s trade in enslaved Africans. On the rolling farms of Narragansett, nearly one-third of the population was black — a proportion not much different from Southern plantations. In 2003, the push to reckon with that legacy hit a turning point when Brown University, led by its first African-American president, launched a highly controversial effort to account for its ties to Rhode Island’s slave trade. Today, that ongoing effort includes the CHOICES program, an education initiative whose curriculum on New England slavery is now taught in over 2,000 classrooms.

As Brown’s decision made national headlines, Katrina Browne, a Boston filmmaker, was on a more private journey through New England slavery, tracing her bloodlines back to her Rhode Island forebears, the DeWolf family. As it turned out, the DeWolfs were the biggest slave-trading family in the nation’s biggest slave-trading state. Browne’s journey, which she chronicled in the acclaimed documentary “Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North,” led her to a trove of records of the family’s business at every point in slavery’s triangle trade. Interspersed among the canceled checks and ship logs, Browne said, she caught glimpses into everyday life under slavery, like the diary entry by an overseer in Cuba that began, “I hit my first Negro today for laughing at prayers.” Today, Browne runs the Tracing Center, a nonprofit to foster education about the North’s complicity in slavery.

“I recently picked up a middle school textbook at an independent school in Philadelphia, and it had sub-chapter headings for the Colonial period that said ‘New England,’ and then ‘The South and Slavery,’ ” said Browne, who has trained park rangers to talk about Northern complicity in tours of sites like Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell. “Since learning about my family and the whole North’s role in slavery, I now consider these things to be my problem in a way that I didn’t before.”

If New England’s amnesia has been pervasive, it has also been willful, argues C.S. Manegold, author of the new book “Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North.” That’s because many of slavery’s markers aren’t hidden or buried. In New England, one need look no further than a symbol that graces welcome mats, door knockers, bedposts, and all manner of household decor: the pineapple. That exotic fruit, said Manegold, is as intertwined with slavery as the Confederate flag: When New England ships came to port, captains would impale pineapples on a fence post, a sign to everyone that they were home and open for business, bearing the bounty of slave labor and sometimes slaves themselves.

“It’s a symbol everyone knows the benign version of — the happy story that pineapples signify hospitality and welcome,” said Manegold, whose book centers on five generations of slaveholders tied to one Colonial era estate, the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Mass., now a museum. The house features two carved pineapples at its gateposts.

By Manegold’s account, pineapples were just the beginning at this particular Massachusetts farm: Generation after generation, history at the Royall House collides with myths of freedom in New England — starting with one of the most mythical figures of all, John Winthrop. Author of the celebrated “City Upon a Hill” sermon and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop not only owned slaves at Ten Hills Farm, but in 1641, he helped pass one of the first laws making chattel slavery legal in North America.
When the house passed to the Royalls, Manegold said, it entered a family line whose massive fortune came from slave plantations in Antigua. Members of the Royall family would eventually give land and money that helped establish Harvard Law School. To this day, the law school bears a seal borrowed from the Royall family crest, and for years the Royall Professorship of Law remained the school’s most prestigious faculty post, almost always occupied by the law school dean. It wasn’t until 2003 that an incoming dean — now Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan — quietly turned the title down.

Kagan didn’t publicly explain her decision. But her actions speak to something Manegold and others say could happen more broadly: not just inserting footnotes to New England heritage tours and history books, but truly recasting that heritage in all its painful complexity.

“In Concord,” Lemire said, “the Minutemen clashed with the British at the Old North Bridge within sight of a man enslaved in the local minister’s house. The fact that there was slavery in the town that helped birth American liberty doesn’t mean we shouldn’t celebrate the sacrifices made by the Minutemen. But it does mean New England has to catch up with the rest of the country, in much of which residents have already wrestled with their dual legacies of freedom and slavery.”

Francie Latour is an associate editor at Wellesley magazine and a former Globe reporter.

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This girl is not real. Her name is Addy Walker; she is an American Girl doll, one of eight historical dolls produced by the Pleasant Company who arrive with dresses, accessories, and a series of books about their lives. Of all the harrowing scenes I've encountered in slave narratives, I remember this scene from Meet Addy, her origin story, most vividly. How the worm—green, fat, and juicy—burst inside Addy's mouth. For seventeen years, Addy was the only black historical doll; she was the only nonwhite doll until 1998. If you were a white girl who wanted a historical doll who looked like you, you could imagine yourself in Samantha's Victorian home or with Kirsten, weathering life on the prairie. If you were a black girl, you could only picture yourself as a runaway slave.