

Public Parking

A journal for storytelling, arguments, and discovery through tangential conversations.

Verging Tripartite: Camille Turner's "Otherworld"

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Camille Turner, *Maria*, 2023, Camille Turner, "Otherworld" at Art Museum, Toronto, 2024. Courtesy: the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Photo: Dominic Chan

Camille Turner's multi-modal solo exhibition *Otherworld* occupied the entire expanse of University of Toronto's Art Museum, transforming architectures of space and time into labyrinthine configurations suggestive of both the brutal lived reality of transatlantic slavery and its afterlife, as well as its fabulated futures. This liquid-like exhibition, curated by Barbara Fisher, mobilizes oceanic poetics, and calls for a poetic response, as prosaic prose falls short translating its fluid permutations.

Beyond breaking this essay into three parts to aid contextual submersion, I will lace my response to this exhibition employing an errant method of building synapses of thought, attempting to correspond to the artist's conceptual derivations and approaches. Turner's research-based practice affords and invites such analysis. In addition to the *Afronautic Research Lab*—a table displayed with evolving print metadata that exposes and probes the historical complicity of what is now Canada with the Middle Passage—expansive artwork labels synopsise details of historical contexts that each piece builds upon. Nearly all the video works are appositely titled after actual slave ships built in Newfoundland, Canada.

This essay unpacks Turner's method for producing speculative work from archives—as a tool that envisions the future by revisiting the past—and the myriad ways her work manifests in the contemporaneous. Turner's collaborative approach, how she problematizes linear time; both planetary and geologic, as well as how she mobilizes material through an interdisciplinary lens with phenomenological implications, both spatial and affect intact, will be highlighted. I will conclude this essay by exploring the role of the transatlantic slave trade in shaping finance capital and our currently disconcerted world order.

I

*Did you not land with your rocket behind
you, hope beyond hope on the tip of your rope
with the kindness of antigravity slowing you down,
you, before me, metal and earthen. But I am here to
confirm or deny, the millions of small
things that seven minutes of success were hinged upon
when I was little more than idea and research,
in the hypnotic gestures of flame and Bunsen burner,
and into parachute
no one foresaw, the bag of rags at the end
of the tunnel - all memory now,
this Paraclete*

—Canisia Lubrin, “Voodoo Hypothesis,” *Voodoo Hypothesis*

Utilizing photography, video, soundscapes, and installation—*Otherworld* unfolds as an interdisciplinary method and an immersive vehicle for tilting ontologies of African descendants in Canada on both a historical and investigative axis. With every inch of the gallery functioning as a threshold, Turner weaves sediments of memory lodged in the depths of oceanic mediations between continental divides; and hence migratory cartographies, while simultaneously zooming out through interplanetary speculations. Thereby finding a past while synchronously founding a future. In this way, the exhibition tests the limits of what a gallery can hold, visitors are steered through the composite expanse via a permutation of routes that offer portals into wide-ranging inquiry of suppressed Canadian histories that implicate the viewer.

Entering the space, I lie supine on one of the lounging chairs arranged within the contrivance of a spaceship titled *Pods for Dreaming*. To my right, a gaping window offers a video simulation of a hovering planet earth amidst an atmospheric vastness. Lyrically echoing and repetitious, the orator foretells an imminent return visit to earth from an unknown elsewhere by chanting in reverential dialogue with ancestors, acknowledging and honoring them. Further into the gallery one becomes engulfed amidst nineteen floor-to-ceiling rectangular fabric banners of printed photographs, each framing a pointed arch, a shape redolent of Brook’s planar diagram of a slave ship’s hold offer tableaux of both of historical relics, as well as conjectures of the future, creating a schismatic doorway. Appositely titled *Portals*, these images are redolent of the aquatic; their undulating fabric are suggestive of a body cast and floating at sea, or sharks in a vortex motion lurking below a ship.

Simultaneously, images of the putrescent past appear, embodied in an orthographic projection diagramming bodies crammed up and shackled within the hold of a ship, as well as an invocation of the Door-of-No-Return at the precipice of the room. Doors and windows feature prominently as light washes through openings. The seabed makes appearances via montage, with ruins of stranded or sunk ships indexing a grim history on the ocean floor. At the same time, urban images embody a futurity, suggestive of what lies ahead.

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Portal as a physical and pictorial enclosure is evocative of Édouard Glissant's tripartite treatise on the spatial mediation of the Middle Passage. In his essay *The Open Boat*, the Martinican writer ushers us into the concept of the abyss, stating "What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown." He then precedes with an inaugural poesis of the boat as a womb, a womb abyss that dissolves and precipitates its occupants into a non-world. Glissant's second expression of the abyss—and as reflected in Turner's *Portal*—is the Oceanic depths that are so vast and hence constitute a spatial tautology. It is in this abyss slaves were thrown in during the Middle Passage for a myriad of irrational reasons, while others were shipped towards an eternity of a non-world. The francophone writer's third metamorphosis of the abyss is animated in the threadbare waning memories of continental knowledge (ancestral, food, geographic, biota, and linguistic) by humans kidnapped from Africa.

As postulated by Édouard Glissant and embodied in Turner's encompassing installation, the inescapable matrix of the abyss is reproduced as thus: "Straight from the belly of the slave ship to the violet belly of the ocean they went." According to Glissant, the abyss becomes an epistemic site of unconscious and fugitive memory, and subsequent transformative imagination. It is from this womb abyss and infinite abyss—"a projection of and perspective into the unknown"—our foundational knowledge of the Whole (all experiences), and our clamoured and freeing knowledge of Relation within the encompassing Whole is birthed.

Amidst Glissant's utterance—"Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside of the abyss"—I forge ahead.

II

*beyond this there must be oceans, there must be
telephones, there must be notebooks with data,
there might be the curve of snows and rains*

*the bends in roads, the horizons or the sunrises,
that is our hope behind this wire,
gravity must give up its hold on us*

*surely, gravity the jail guard, the comandante
of surfaces,
might relent someday, unpin us*

*surely it will unhook our hearts,
from us, anchorless we will scale our faithless
legs, shed jealous hours*

*someone will find us brittle-winged,
beyond the punishments of leaves, of docile trees,
of windows, of our own skeletons*

—Dionne Brand, "OSSUARY XI," *Ossuaries*

One could argue that this exhibition embodies what Stefanie Hessler names ‘tidalectic curating,’ invoking the poet Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of ‘Tidalectics.’ This term, coined by Brathwaite, elicits a method of approaching the ocean as non-linear or non-dialectic through the constant ebb and flow of tides. Indeed, the moving image works beyond *Portal* invoke such a method. Multiple sounds, be it ocean waves, voices, and musical phrasings, syncopate in generative syntax as visitors traverse through several rooms exhibiting videos in asymmetrical movements.

The multimedia installation *Maria* (2023) is a prime example. Titled after a schooner built in Newfoundland in 1785 which carried eighty Africans captive, seventy-five of whom were children. Here, a video offers a white circular shape elevated to waist level, while sounds of cross-generational voices ebb and flow in undulating rhythms across the space. The image is deceptively simple: we witness tender overlapping hands commingling at an improvised tempo, while the voice over recounts various narratives in first-person. These protagonists or stand-ins offer a historical account through subjective experience stemming from different departure points of the transatlantic slave trade: ranging from the details of capture from Africa, to being kidnapped on North American soil, to descendants of slaves relating that they have no recollection of their so-called Motherland. The delineation of autobiographical happenings details the stench of the ship’s hold, the suicide of slaves, amongst more. Indeed, *Maria* is charged with what Tina M. Campt refers to in *A Black Gaze* as ‘Haptic Frequency,’ constituting ghostly affect, or hapticity that transcends that of touch and registers in an irrepressible frequency of feeling.

In this primordial act of witnessing, it’s as if the rocks remember, and the ocean splashing at its bed does follow in acts of recollection within the expansive exhibition *Sticks and Bones*, which comprises two parts and occupies a large room. The video component chronicles a gathering of objects washed up on ocean coasts by the artist. Items collected in the projected video are spread across a table in the middle of the same gallery room in their hardened materiality. Alchemized, driftwood is tied to bones, shells, and skeletal remains of aquatic arthropods, bird skulls and beaks, are stitched to sticks with plastic ropes, rusty metal twines, and more.

Beyond situating this oceanic debris as data and information preserved through centuries, these arrangements disrupt anthropocentric hierarchies: a dead tree branch latched onto a mammalian femur induces a perceptive singularity, both categorized as being structural parts of past lived organisms; all matter, all carbon, all oxygen. The plastic ropes as well—derived from crude oil or petroleum products—results from centuries worth of organic decay and decomposition of plants and animals over the course of multiple civilizations; all produced by oceans. All equivalent hydrocarbons. Indeed, the theme of ruination and degradation equally complements that of memory and haunting. Rust and rot embodied in the displayed objects index a passing of time, and are moreover characteristic of a recomposing act of mark making by the sea.

Named after a slave ship constructed in 1781, the video installation “*Fly*” is accompanied by an artwork label providing further context with the quote: “While anchored off the coast of West Africa, Africans on the shore liberated those held in captivity.” I appreciate the fact that *Fly* is neither a flattened nor clichéd reenactment of the label’s historical contextualization; yet the work remains implicated through nomenclature.

Emerging from the bushes and walking towards the shore in an unspoken tempo is a group of adorned African descendants. Amidst hand holding gestures, they form a harmonic circle in a stance typical of a prayerlike formation with their head touching. Subsequently opening in chorused and abstract bodily movements, they softly ascend merging with the elemental weather amidst melodious music rushing like water. Such a rapturous rescue fused towards a vanishing point.

III

was the cause was the remedy was the record was the argument
was the delay was the evidence was overboard was the not was the
cause was the was was the need was the case was the perils was the
want was the particular circumstance was the seas was the costs
was the could was the would was the policy was the loss was the
vessel was the rains was the order was the that was the this was the
necessity was the mistake was the captain was the crew was the
result was justified was the voyage was the water was the maps
was the weeks was the winds was the calms was the captain was
the seas was the rains was uncommon was the declaration was the
apprehension was the voyage was destroyed was thrown was the
question was the therefore was the this was the that was the
negroes was the cause

–Nourbese Philip, “Zong! #26”Zong!

Yet another room in Camille Turner’s mazelike exhibition houses a three-channel video titled *Nave* (2022) spreading across the length of a wall. This installation suggests the complicity of Euro-Christian faith in the transatlantic slave trade—drawing parallels between the nave of a church in the Canadian Maritimes both to the coplanar likeness of a slave ship’s hold, as well as the concrete or formal configuration of the hull of a ship when inversed. The artist features here as a time traveller from the future who visits a religious edifice in our present ‘Age of Silence’ to perform a ritual in remembrance of ancestors who lived during and through the Middle Passage. The artist, dressed more shamanic than sacramental, holds onto a mantle that bears resemblance to one of the compound /complex bio-sceptres found in *Sticks and Bones*.

A woman with a cowrie drooping necklace emerges from the ocean dancing serpentine and singing in a mellifluous chant of echoing phrases that dominates the air—competing with the sonic washes of the ocean’s lapping shore—in an unidentified language. Her parahuman and multicoloured skin and braided hair evokes a mythoi-imaginary of an otherworld approximating the psycho-sonic fiction of *Drexciya*; an Afrofuturist fable that describes how descendants of pregnant slaves strewn throughout the oceanic graveyard mutated into a subaqueous and amphibious empire whose constituents now walk the earth with redesigned bodies. In “*Drexciya as Spectre*,” writer Kodwo Eshun suggests that the Drexian myth complicates the conception of a posthuman condition, situating its point of emergence in the past as opposed to the future.

Commenting on this fabulation further, Eshun asserts that “the effect is not to deny the veracity of the transatlantic slave trade, but to produce a speculation capable of generating degrees of temporal anomaly in the present.”

The unearthing and recontextualization of historical data to shape our urgent now; as well as imagine an impending future, also motors Turner’s complementary *Afronautic Research Lab*. Here, exhibition visitors are invited to interact as well as consider evidence of Canada’s active involvements in the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath. Archival documents, newspaper clippings, and other ephemera containing suppressed histories of anti-Blackness and Black resistance since the 18th century to date are spread across a table. On the 23rd of October 2024, I attended a workshop facilitated by Outerregion; a collective of ‘Afronauts’—consisting of Camille Turner and her siblings, Karen and Lee Turner. Workshop attendees were asked to engage with the said records presented to revisit the past to help reshape the future.



Camille Turner, *Fly*, 2024. Single channel video (4:13). Filmed and edited by Jake Levinsky. Commissioned by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Camille Turner, *STICKS AND BONES*, 2023. Single channel video installation (2:59). Filmed and edited by Cody Westman. Commissioned by Grenfell Art Gallery.
Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid for *Otherworld* at Art Museum.

Browsing through the sticky notes left behind by past workshop participants I happened to come across one containing a racist remark so egregious that it would be beyond inappropriate to reiterate it here. Artists who risk engaging with viewer feedback like this must contend with vulnerability, given the trust required to invite strangers into their ongoing “live” practice. I quickly notified one of the workshop facilitators who removed the sticky note, admitting that the act was an attempt by an unscrupulous individual to desecrate this sacrosanct locale. Alas, Black artists have to contend with such acts of antiblackness while participating within radical and liberatory acts of creation and world building.

The final work I would like to bring to your attention is entitled *Sarah*, a video essay that explores the hapless experience of a Black artist/researcher carrying the burden of racism while doing the work of bringing to light records of antiblackness from the past. In this more documentary style piece, Turner as researcher sits in front of her laptop, with full frames of her computer screen appearing intermittently. She excavates multiple archives, scouring through the internet, evoking a citational ethic when she lands on *Slavevoyages.com*. Within this inventory of violence, she traverses a three-dimensional spatial rendering of a slave ship, navigating through the underbelly of its hold and hull, both treacherous and haunting. In the thick of enacting this task, she is bombarded by news of contemporaneous violence—police video cam footage of George Floyd’s murder, but one. The computer screen morphs into an ossuary, a site for Black death as spectacle.

Sarah was named after a slave ship constructed in 1790 in Newfoundland that carried 361 captive humans from Africa during the Middle Passage in three voyages. Further into the video, it is disclosed that slaves referred to as “Privileged Negroes” were used as debt-paying currency. Revealed within a document discovered by the researcher, we learn that the captain and surgeon of the slave ship ‘*Sarah*’ were paid for their labour in slaves. Writer Ian Baucom underscores such relations in his book *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance, Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), insisting that the transatlantic slave trade enabled the global spread of finance capital. Baucom cites accounts of businessmen from Liverpool who engaged in trading slaves as well as lending money across the Atlantic. He writes: “And, as significantly, they were lending money they did not yet possess or only possessed in the form of slaves. The slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money.”

Baucom’s attestation, as well as Turner’s witnessing forged from unearthing records clearly attest that Modernity—following Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*—is built on the foundations of—and is inextricable from—the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, as Nicole Starosielski attests in *Depth Mediators: Undersea Cables, Network Infrastructure, and the Deep Ocean* (2021); internet cables connecting both sides of the Atlantic—and laid on the ocean floor in 2012 —trace routes traversed during the transatlantic slave trade. Once again insisting that the Middle Passage is not a sole purview of the past: it prevails by shaping our present reality as well as the way we perceive and navigate this ravaged earth.

To qualify the utter importance of Camille Turner’s exhibition in our current genocidal climate—pioneered by regimes of forced exile—we must return to *The Open Boat*, and Édouard Glissant’s first-line annunciation of the experience of living through the Middle Passage as a “deportation to the Americas” and later on, “a debasement more eternal than apocalypse.” Turner’s work produces and exercises the Relation that distills the abyss into a modern force. It is by exploring the unconscious memory of the shared deterritorialized unknown (abyss) that has engendered a global creolization; the permutative tongue voicing the speculative Relation in Turner’s work. “This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange,” and a realm of possibility. As demonstrated by way of Camille Turner’s *Otherworld* and evinced throughout this written response by means of quotation; poetry is a radical technology of Relation and a potent method of confronting and verging through/out of the abyss. It is appropriate to close my essay with a concluding quote from Édouard Glissant’s *The Open Boat*.

“This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another –from forest to city, from story to computer – at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.”

The above text was written by Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, an artist, writer, and curator currently based in California.

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