

Selves Portraits: On Three Recent Books

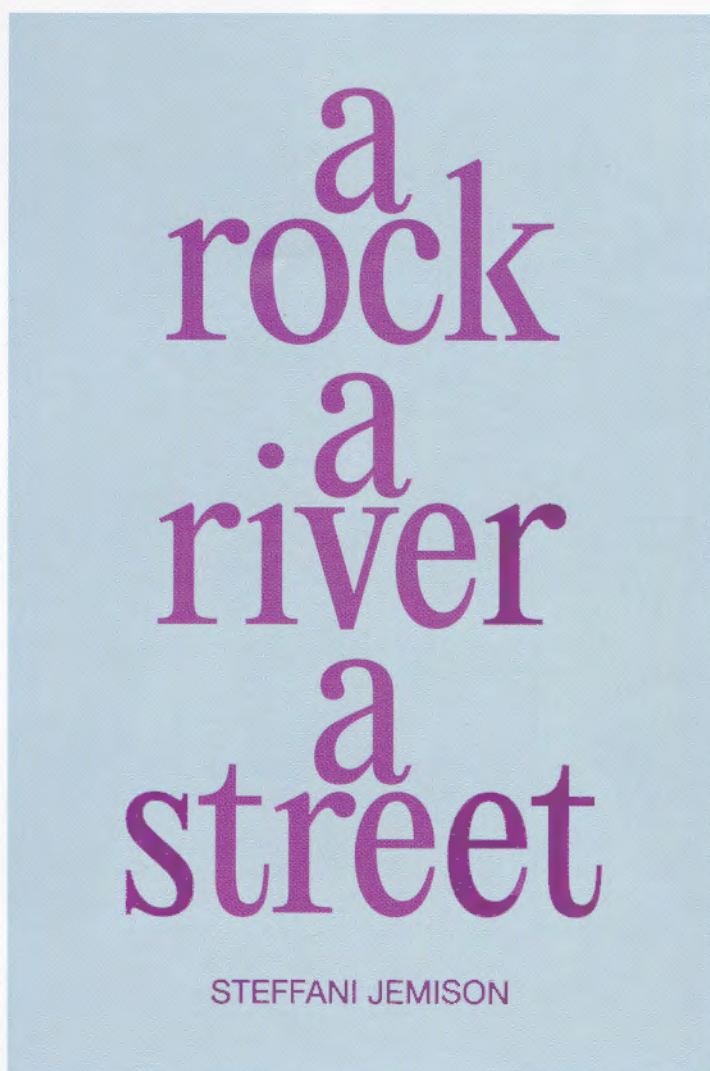
Meg Whiteford

**Book review of *Neural Swamp*,
The Bluest Nude, and *A Rock,
A River, A Street***

In Martine Syms's exhibition *Neural Swamp*, two women wear SnorriCam bodycams strapped to their chests. This setup allows the subjects to film themselves speaking directly to the camera—much the way one might speak to a mirror, or tear oneself down. The arrangement between woman and camera evokes a sense of ownership, individual action in one's storytelling and portraiture, which Syms breaks through vocal distortion (called "voice skins") with an AI-operated algorithm. The *Neural Swamp* catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition, which took place as part of the Philadelphia Museum of Arts' biannual Future Fields Commission in Time-Based Media, co-produced with Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, Italy. The catalogue features three critical essays on the artist's installation by associate curator Amanda Sroka, theorist Christina Sharpe, and assistant curator Irene Calderoni, with translation by Marguerite Shore. Renderings and stills of Syms's video installation accompany these three astute essays, which span discussions of voice, agency, the camera eye, AI, and identity manipulation and surveillance. The book takes the "green screen" theme of the exhibition to heart, infusing the page with lurid, Slimer-green text and image overlays, and in doing so, suggesting the content may itself be a mask, or that a reader

might overlay their own background into its subtexts.

Mirroring Syms's exploration of avatars as a way of turning the camera on oneself, Ama Codjoe's poetry collection *The Bluest Nude* (Milkweed Editions, 2022), turns its gaze both out toward a multiplicity of Black



women artists at the same time that the narrator discusses herself, as if her body were too a work of art worthy of ekphrasis. As with *Neural Swamp*, in *The Bluest Nude* the lines between subject and author blur, blend, and fade into the green screen. Codjoe observes her world like a canvas: descriptive of the details, laying emphasis on color—lots of blues and greens. She visits (twice) Betye Saar's *The Liberation of*

Aunt Jemima (1972), Pina Bausch's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1975), Deana Lawson's *Living Room, Brownsville, Brooklyn* (2015), work by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and more. A fragmented poem in the vein of a court proceeding lies at the center of the book, a story of an identity breaking down, which is restored in four subsequent

sections. By manipulating her narrator's life into artists' works, Codjoe creates a collection that inhabits multiple environments at once, sometimes single poems cross the line between observation of a subject and self-reflection, thus obliterating the falsehood of said singular "subject." Writes Codjoe, "It is impossible to draw a self-portrait without the other women figured." So too does Calderoni write (of the ecosystem that is *Neural Swamp* essay "A Viva Voce (With the Living Voice)": "Sharing this path with the artist, it has been possible to witness this evolving mechanism, a device has inhabited different environments, has migrated from one form to the other, progressing from being a starting point for research to playing a leading role, then becoming an element of a

broader ecosystem—raw material for further manipulations."

Likewise, Steffani Jemison's *A Rock, A River, A Street* (Primary Information, 2022), abounds with "permanent parallels" between and across women, providing further entanglements and manipulations of the notion of a solid identity. *A Rock, A River, A Street* follows an unnamed narrator whose body breaks down from running injuries.

Given the time she has on her hands now that she can't physically move as freely, her mind sprints into recollections of her childhoods—as a self-imposed mute, as a wannabe dancer, as an outsider in a private school full of uniforms. Her present self melds with her past selves. Throughout the book, the narrator confuses women with one another. While in a dressing room, she thinks a voice that belongs to a mother is a daughter's and vice versa. She recognizes herself in another woman in the mirror at a dance class. She "audits" herself in relation to other women—not in a self-critical way, but as a way of comparison, in seeking commonality. She writes, "I thought I was an island, but now I see that my shoulders have been rubbing and rubbing and rubbing again with the shoulders of strangers. ... Put another way, every person had previously been plural."

Jemison's signature brushstrokes set off each section in an act of negation of meaning expected of a "novel," filling the space instead with an alternative to speech. The narrator states, "Now I was drawing one girl, now I was drawing another. I looked at my marks. So now there were four, two in life and two on the page. I wondered which would last longest." Jemison's marks in the book are set in pairs: two side by side, two vertical strokes in a dance, two circles, two pairs of two, a single stroke never appears alone.

When we think of a self, we think of a single being. But in practice, what we think "was a single tree was actually two plants entangled." We can retain individual features as we merge into part of a larger system of shared experience, which could be between two people, a person and an artist they admire, or a person

On the cover of *The Bluest Nude* is Simone Leigh's white stoneware sculpture *Martinique* (2020) set against a sharp white background. A bust with two pendulous breasts sits atop a hollow, bell-shaped skirt. If seen as a jug, cup, or bowl (or hut), the hollowness of the skirt belies the placement of expectations upon its

woman-coded body—it pours out at the same time that it takes in. The headless figure denies us its identity, its voice, and its gaze. The subjects of *Neural Swamp*, *The Bluest Nude*, and *A Rock, A River, A Street* disperse, convene, and disperse again—to say, they exist in an intimate swamp, rather than a neat network. That they are mostly spliced women speaks to the desire and often necessity of such subterfuge for an oppressed class.

In the epigraph to the final section of Codjoe's collection, an unnamed interviewer speaks with artist Mickalene Thomas:

Interviewer: I have one last question: Who is in that mirror?

Mickalene Thomas: It's always me. Sometimes it's also my mother, my grandmother, or my great-grandmother. Sometimes it's a person I've never seen before, sometimes it's the person I want to be ... or someone I haven't become yet.



and their future or past self. A rock from the bottom of a riverbed that is a watery street. "No one," Jemison writes, "ever talks about the intimacy of parallel, like the intimacy between siblings, next to one another in straight lines that can never cross, or the intimacy of your street and your neighbor's street that run side by side and never touch."