

Steffani Jemison's *A Rock, A River, A Street*

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March 1, 2023

Art Books

Reading this is like finding a way through an enigmatic moment of performance.

Steffani Jemison

A Rock, A River, A Street

(Primary Information, 2022)

Artist Steffani Jemison is perhaps best known for work which inhabits the in-betweens of artforms and materials, and is grounded in a rigorous curiosity about Black life—Black embodiment, sound cultures, vernacular practices, and language. Aesthetic process, meticulous research, and interpersonal practice are often entangled with the very forms of Jemison's projects. *A Rock, A River, A Street* marks the artist's first stand-alone, single-author novella. Usually "novella" is a term for either a short novel or long short story; this is both—and something all its own.

The text is expansive and spacious: it poetically holds together the sprawl of its main character's childhood, teen years, and adulthood in the form of dispersed, often ambiguous scenes. Each vignette arrives out of chronological sequence, so that the passing of time is acutely present as a thing unto itself: often measured by the narrator's own bodily activity. In the very first pages, she describes taking a run through her Brooklyn neighborhood, the repetitive action a means of orderly physical timekeeping, even as her path meanders and disorients. Time's passing and linear narrative turn productively unimportant: what matters more are the connections and repetitions across them. Bodily gestures—the narrator's own gestures and her quiet observations of others' gestures—remain a curious obsession that puts her into a sometimes tenuous, sometimes hyperattuned relationship with her surroundings: "So here we were, not meeting, not touching, but rather operating in a kind of permanent parallel," she says of a woman in her exercise class. This self-awareness is nearly always navigated through relation with others—a friend, a parent, a stranger on the train. The narrator's voice is both past memory and present musing, experienced alongside her in a "permanent parallel" of our own. The book itself is a train of thought, a largely unvoiced internal monologue to which we are given partial access. Our narrator—who is never addressed by name, even when called after (mistaken for someone else) or sought out (but somehow overlooked) in public spaces—is regularly silenced. She stops speaking as a child and remains quiet in adulthood.

Even with its sprawling structure, however, the book is compact. Its 154 spaciouly printed pages are “punctuated by gestural drawings that point to questions of repetition and difference”; its lower-case title pressed in warm reflective print onto the petite 5 by 7 1/4 inch cover at such large proportion that it amplifies the book’s intimate size. Many of the scenes are brief, but they accumulate and are packed with intriguingly ambiguous meanings and poetic curiosities which sustain its density, while near the end, it shifts into poetic line breaks. Grayscale full-bleed images break up the text into larger series of vignettes; the images might be close-up details of something bigger, watery paint swipes—often in repeating pairs—which retain the hand’s gesture.

Certain key moments receive extended treatment, such as the climactic description of the narrator’s college friendship with an aging and underrecognized Black feminist philosopher-choreographer who had originally set out to be a dancer-anthropologist along the lines of Katherine Dunham. “She was interested in physical habits and intuitions, and the tools we use to refine them,” but her research was stymied by the question of self-control, especially in relation to the language of “master” and “slave”: “Could a body be one’s own possession?” The narrator is wholly and bodily changed by the experience of transcribing the philosopher’s book: the work “attracted me to certain things and repelled me from others, established certain habits of speech, even changed the way I hold my head.” Pages of italicized excerpts from the transcription bring a sudden weight to this other voice, enacting in writing the philosopher’s influence on the narrator’s voice. Here, *A Rock, A River, A Street* zooms in on someone else’s life—a practice in which the narrator herself often speculatively indulges. But this apparent detour into the voice of another also points to the narrator’s habit of losing and finding herself in relation to those around her.

The book’s title is a close cousin of the opening line of the 1993 Maya Angelou poem “On the Pulse of Morning” which appears, unnamed, as the narrator learns to recite it as a teenager alone in her room. On the page, the first few lines of the titular poem appear in bits, see-sawing between a word-by-word breakdown and the narrator’s own odd mnemonic devices for remembering each of those words, which read like movement instructions. The moment hinges on the possibility that, even as the Angelou lines are dissected, their poetry can be felt. That the moving body might bring memory closer to feeling. “*Hosts—*,” she begins with the first word of the poem’s line, and then follows it with the assigned movement before going on to the next. Reading *A Rock, A River, A Street* is like finding a way through an enigmatic moment of performance: the body is the thing that connects feelings and experiences, moves us through them. Like a performance, there is something quite real happening here, and yet it is entirely fiction. What matters more is where it calls our attention in the world.