

## BOOK REVIEW

**A rock, a river, a street**, by Steffani Jemison, Brooklyn, Primary Information, 2022, 154 pages, \$16.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9781736534663

Across the wall of the world,  
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,  
Come, rest here by my side.

– Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning”

Flesh was less solid than it seemed.

– Steffani Jemison, *A Rock, A River, A Street*

In a 2019 article for *Artforum* titled “Drafts: Steffani Jemison On the Stroke, the Glyph, and the Mark,” the artist Steffani Jemison meditates on the act of making marks in the world—manifest as hieroglyph, letter, stria on wall, floor, and leaf—and the indiscernible border between drawings and writings. Pondering the aesthetics, kinetics and atmospherics of writing, she considers the imaginary communions opened by a (with)drawing hand and a draft(y) page. The textures of a private breeze given in shapes and extensions, variously (un)available to someone else’s discernment.

Moreover, Jemison’s meditation on writing/drawing/mark-making lingers with the eco-literary histories of formerly enslaved or fugitive scribes, who, despite prohibitions otherwise, wrote everywhere on everything, from “writing on floors to writing on walls to writing on the leaves of the trees (Jemison 2019).” A leaving behind of earthly relation for someone to hold later. The artist concludes her meditation by asking how we might think writing (and drawing) as a kinetics: a propositional imprint and withdrawn recess of color and form. A consideration of the pen burrowing and retreating from the page, in lines and loops that engender freedom, something the fugitive scribes saw traced but not always translated on the green side of corn. An invisible reach and painted line across time.

I begin with Jemison’s writing “Drafts” as a kind of circuitous way to get to her recent novella, *A Rock, A River, A Street*. I do this in part because I’ve been thinking about the Black feminist practice of writing, of wordly arrangements, and of what such arrangements, following Toni Cade Bambara, might alchemically and ecologically engender.<sup>1</sup> How there’s a long tradition of Black women writers, and of Black feminist literary criticism that advances the practice of writing itself as a praxis of living and a reimagining of relation. Renee Gladman, Cheryl Wall, and Adrian Piper come to mind.<sup>2</sup> In different ways, all three writers ask after a line making that doesn’t break the earth in the interest of asserting domination—as maps and latitudinal prescription—but believe that some other mode of togetherness might open in, and with, lines on a page. Arguably, this mode of witness/“with-ness” manifests in the form and conceptual proposition and retreat of Jemison’s very writerly practice.

Jemison’s latest book *A Rock, A River, A Street* proposes with-ness in and as the writing and the painting; that is, there’s an insistent multiplicity materializing throughout the novella, and notably beginning with the thickened paint lines or abstract circles that

appear before and between the written story/stories themselves. As the author's prose accompanies and is accompanied by abstract paintings of thick brush strokes and faded watercolored pools, the novella's title takes its inspiration from a famous Maya Angelou poem similarly oriented around togetherness's shapes. "A Rock, A River, A Tree" is the first line of Angelou's 1993 poem "On the Pulse of Morning," a poem summoning togetherness amidst peoples and rocks and rivers and trees. A togetherness that, according to Angelou, preceded the violence seemingly necessitated and exacerbated by the divisive forces of racial capitalism, imperialism, and war.

In some ways, Jemison's beginning at relation, through the very formal assertion of the book as painting/text, powerfully sets up the undoing called for by Angelou. An undoing that reorients the late poet's phrase to now include "street"; Jemison's book title, once more, is *A Rock, A River, A Street*. Centering a Black woman narrator who muses as she wanders streets across New York City, the novella is a powerful meditation on the blurred, somewhat undone, borders between people and landscape, including the ana-geographies of the narrator's larynx interacting with her unspoken mental word piles along with the sunlit ether of floating dead skin cells hovering between strangers in a place. Poignantly, close to the book's beginning, the narrator describes her proprioceptive, haptic relation with the city; as her hand glides against a mural bearing the visage and memory of a man named Antwaun, she ponders "a kind of intimacy that requires no explanation" (9). This philosophical musing extends from those words into the "little paint" of the decaying mural that gets under her nails (9).

The novella is about, in and around witness and wandering; the textures of relation that unfold between fingers and paint chips, inaudible reveries at vision's corner and the tunnel vision that comes with a desire to be a runner in the city. It asks about the perceptual foreclosures, what and who needs, as Erin Manning and Brian Massumi might say, to be "backgrounded," so that one can arrive somewhere – a subway stop, a place beyond a stare and a nagging pain, a smooth exit without interruption (Manning and Massumi 2014, 113). But still what Jemison does via the juxtaposition of vignettes and the narrator's voice is conceptualize all of it as already there. "A rock, a river, a street": all that surrounds – resemblances between city strangers, the opening of a wall that transmutes from concrete into speech into private musing into someone's name and faded visage – blooms on a page. All of it is an undoing and unfolding with each other, like the distance and intimacy between an abstract painting and the story with which it keeps company.

The wandering narrator's meditations on relation move between the people she sees in grocery stores, on the street, in subway cars, the (exclusionary) social life of white girl-groups at school, the invisible congress she holds between her own sore shin and the thoughts that stay unspoken in her brain. *A Rock, A River, A Street* is a set of vignettes about an unnamed I, including the narrator's childhood speech memorization, yoga/meditation and Zumba practice, a later (adult) experience of transcribing the spoken book of another, and the everyday undone boundaries between forms, timespace states, and people despite normative modernity's insistence on divisive walls otherwise.

In one scene, the narrator, a quiet kid or more nearly, a kid who stopped talking, remembers memorizing a speech for school, privately tasting the words of the Maya Angelou poem from which this book's title takes its inspiration. Getting to the words, secretly mouthing their textures, and imagining being with them as earthly objects move

in this beautiful novella as not only a kind of inward inhabitation, but also another gesture of black togetherness on and with earth. A gesture maybe akin to those painted duets featured in the novella and perhaps emergent from words left behind and perhaps with the hope that someone else will hold them on the tongue later.

The narrator tells us, “I needed to find the conditions through which the words could emerge and then wait, allow them to bubble up and over” (63). This reverie of speech practice, a memory about a childhood tasting of words and an inwardly proprioceptive comportment toward their arrangement, emerges during or follows (time is an accordion here) the narrator’s meditative practice with an unnamed teacher, in an unnamed church. Its movements like this, back and forth between various experiences of togetherness – the taste of words, the feel of another’s muraled face, the withdrawn world made inside, the haptic dreaming that aligns the Earth’s crust with a sensation of one’s undone, borderless body – that beautifully poeticizes and aestheticizes relation.

This book is a painterly writerly opening into ... *in* and *to*. It is a book that pushes against the presumptive borders in its very form, reminding readers that even though there is a last page, it will open again.

## Notes

1. I am reminded of a quote by Toni Cade Bambara from her essay “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow”: “Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I’ve seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges” (Bambara 1980, 163).
2. I am thinking of Renee Gladman’s artistic-ethical-philosophical praxis generally, but particularly how she imagines writing as a line making and an ecology where “all these lines together made environments of the earth, where I could put my body and you could put yours (Gladman 2018).” I am also thinking of Cheryl Wall’s literary concept of Black women writers’ “worrying the line,” which is derived from the blues: “Representing a past that is largely unwritten, remembered only in fragments of music and memory, demands of writers both a visionary spirit and the capacity for dramatic revisions of form. These writers appropriate what they find useful in multiple literary traditions in addition to the African-American: from African and European mythology to the King James Bible to Anglo-American modernism. As they ‘worry the line,’ they revise, clarify, subvert, or extend the traditions they appropriate” (Wall 2000, 1450–1451). And, finally, what comes to mind is Adrian Piper’s meditation on language, lines from her personal diary, as “depersonalized expressions,” floating in the air and on the street from her *Mythic Being* series (Piper 1996, 112).

## References

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