

the cosmic matter of Black lives

by Cherise Morris

this one is dedicated to the ancestors: because y'all did, I do

Black.

i grew up in kitchen-table, front-porch, corner-store prophesizing of Her
Her manifestations, problems and potentials Black
what She is can be might become.

i can't remember when or how i first knew i was Black when i realized what being Black
meant portended encompassed surpassed.
can't think back to the moment i first met Her Black
or all that Blackness would be could be was.

i grew up in Her Black the only source of such wonders
Her Black an inherited wisdom
a feeling always knew

Black

a problem a possibility a hope a dream.

Spirit calls out to me and I see myself submerged in the glistening currents of a winding river,
breathing beneath water the ancestors spilling over shape-shifting into liquidus figures
birthing verse *Go forth and conjure.*

Conjure is a home, they tell me.

Conjure is your home.

Conjure is the possibility of all that you are can be might become.

*How does it feel to be a **possibility**? they ask me.*

it's an-always-kind-of-knowing

I'm here.

it's an-always-sort-of-knowing we will always be here and there would be no *here* without us.

* * *

I know I'm Black, but I'm not invisible, I “mouth back” to the DWM (Decrepit White Man) who cuts ahead of me in the Barnes & Noble checkout line of a suburb of Detroit.

It's the week of the murders of Alton Brown and Philando Castile. The earth is scorching and the air stagnant thick and heavy with the uncomfortable honesty of summer humidity unwieldy hopelessness of a dystopia.

The linear idea of time kept moving, under a stillness hanging overhead a familiar stillness a looming building distressing stillness muffled the growing rage.

The world was opening the gaping hole separating us from this freedom elusive growing more exposed by the day hour minute.

The sticky heat with this week in Black deaths and the widening cavity between history and its other side had me vexed.

checkout LINE STARTS HERE i wanting to be anywhere but where I was move forward.

the woman ahead of me finishes paying

I proceed to the register—

to be cut off by DWM who catapults straight to the head of the line

He shoves his 500-odd-piece-puzzle onto the counter.

The cashier “-- Sir,” reminds “she was in line ahead of you.”

“I know I'm Black, but I'm not invisible” I “mouth back,” stepping back in front my place and “shut up” spell set and cast. It was an always-kind-of knowing the most powerful forms of conjure are the simplest.

DWM straightening his crooked spine as though he can steps up to me.

I tower over him tall and stature straight skin burnished its deepest brown.

Once he probably was about as tall but the bend in his back shaped by age

and hatred and the size of the puzzle box cradled makes him so small and insignificant

in this moment.

“She got *smart* with me first,” he exclaims with flushed face, thinking he just might be able to move or make someone else move me.

I’m looking him dead in the eyes without listening to a word and he’s trying to figure out how in the world I have the Black-ass nerve to look him in the eye and *get smart* with him.

Keep at it. The more resistance a hex is met the strong the magick becomes.

“What’s the matter, old racist white man?”

I’m confident I can outrun him should a precarious situation arise and DWM decides my *smart* talking is enough of a threat to his life liberty and pursuit of happiness to open fire.

“Wish you could kill me, but don’t have the gun on you?”

says nothing.

I checkout. take my time with it.

smile and thank the cashier, linger a moment longer to place my books in my bag.

leaving the suburbs, there are police to follow me onto the highway

and I head back home towards the river back to

Detroit.

In Yoruba tradition, rivers and other bodies of water are powerful domains of ancestral and spiritual energy.

African cosmologies understand water is never still and

energy its exchange and transmission is constant.

all energy has a reflection

and water is infinite potential *energy*.

Energy neither created nor destroyed is the source from which existence rises forms regenerates

All life depends on the divinity of energy,
and divine malleable workable *energy* known to the Yoruba people as Asé exists
in every single thing, every one of us.

Asé as divine as it is ordinary the life force of change which lives within all of us.

Within everything and everyone, the power to make
change
happen.

Asé.

It's a sunny September afternoon in lower Manhattan, when the Uber driver picks me up between the Hudson River and the African Burial Ground.

"Dat boy down in Baton Rouge died," he speaks of Philando Castile "and de next thing ya know ..." he glances at me through the rearview mirror.

The sweet cadence of the Caribbean carries his voice with striking intention through his words wonder "Tink it'was a coincidence de whole damn place near'ly washed away de next monf?"

I can't answer because, in the moment, I can't understand what he's saying or realize he looks for no response. He is speaking our truths our ancestors: there is no such thing as coincidence, all energy has a reflection and every action, a cosmic consequence a reckoning.

The sinkhole that nearly swallowed Mara Lago? this remembering, this candence, later conjures in me an intimate type of always-knowing: the ancestors are always with us, and when the limits of the physical world fail they are here to serve their own kind of justice.

We tap into these ancestral truths with the vulnerability of unshakeable belief. the possibilities limitless as the cosmos infinite as *energy*.

Conjure, at its core, is the manipulation of energy.

To conjure is to bend the ever-present energy of spirit towards a specific intention.

The magick of African-descendant conjure was rooted in the experiences of enslavement and addressed the necessities of life:
it healed protected defended.

Enslaved Black conjurers manipulated spiritual energy in service of healing wounded kin, protecting enslaved brethren from beatings, safeguarding fugitive escape missions and defending loved ones from the ever-present threat of bodily and spiritual harm dealt by white supremacy.

Conjure was a home.

Conjure was the power to make change happen.
And the conjurer with nothing but the power of spirit was the greatest threat to the power structures of the plantation state.

Within the confines of chattel slavery, African traditions of manipulating of spiritual energy became a people's magick with cultural implications and political applications.

It's November 9, 2016, like any other Wednesday, they fill the streets cafes university buildings. But today – “How did this happen?” drowns out the humdrum. They move through the day weary and heavy like quicksand but still despite the expanding cavity the weight of the ever-present stillness overhead the obligations of daily life persist

get up go to work and school back to sleep.

I walk to the river flowing along forever and notice today every white person who otherwise would not have acknowledged my presence enough to make room on the sidewalk nods at me. Today their heads hang low to me offer looks of condolence.

But I know they soon will re-learn how to live their lives they will soon accept this reality as the new normal and despite today's fears of what is to come the stillness will persist.

get up go to work and school back to sleep.

How it happened they can't understand I recognize in the moment a 500 year making. Today, they mourn a country I never believed lived.

I know this day is *nothing* compared to those my ancestors survived for me to be here now moving through hopelessness the river in front of me.

I walk back to my apartment

Conjure is a home,
they whisper.

that night they directed me go into ritual banishing and setting intentions.

I burn symbols of the things I hate in this world
carve sigils of my dreams the liberated future my children will one day
inherit.

The present tense is where intentions for ritual magick are written
Happen.

An intention in the future tense, will manifest as fleeting aspiration something of the
perpetual future no end no materializing.

To manifest, it must be articulated and visualized in the present fore if one can't envision to the
point of *believing* it *seeing* it how will it *live* ?

I write:

“we eagerly await the end of this world as we know it we are ready to begin again to start over
knowing our bodies are limitless our minds are never-ending our imaginations have no
boundaries our souls know no borders our freedom is here our evolution is now
here and now the end of this era has come, the calling is heard we our ready ourselves we
prepare to evolve as individuals as communities and as a people, we ascend to accept destiny
our freedom is here.”

so shall it be as I will it and so it is.

Asé.

I grew up hearing stories of captured Africans who flew home.
fractured people, we search for our home(s), but what is home if not a floating horizon
a way of becoming a place never reached
but rather a process of making and remaking manipulating where we fit and where we'd like to
homecoming coming home coming to
a belief that tethers us to the possibilities of who we are who we might become.

Conjure is a home.
us Black folk, we always understood
we always knew we made magick: making homes out of nothing and a way out of no way *magick.*

*How does it feel to be **magick**?*

dreams.

last night, i dreamt one of my earliest memories:

i'm in kindergarten waiting for the school bus one morning with my mother
when she asks me why I'm *always walkin with your head down.*
there ain't nothin on the ground worth staring at, she says, *never walk with your head down.* the bus pulls to a
stop in front of my house
and Momma looks after me making sure I walk with my head up
a little reminder of the God in me.

* * *

All the tools you need -- they are already inside you, says the Vodou priest in Oaxaca, *your soul is Black.*

This is the only thing he says in English before he takes me under to begin the ceremony, which will bind me with the stone of the Seven African Powers.

It's hot I'm dehydrated, but today it all becomes clear: the magick that runs through me has always been there from the checkout line of that Barnes & Noble to the backseat of that Nissan

an always-kind-of-knowing.

A week later, the spirit of Cécile Fatiman comes to visit. She taps my walls, transmitting the same melodies through my body. She comes to me with the same fury that pumped blood through her veins August 14th, 1791 Her rage drapes me in a blanket of affection, embodying anger and love.

Vodou

is

the God

in you.

God the Divine the power of the universe lives within you, she tells me.

The God who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us.

in darkness the conch shell sounded beckoning revolt Black skin glistened against the
silvery moonlight illuminating the forest's native ferns and orchid leaves.

one steamy night in *Ayiti*

God calls upon us to do good works.

Mambo Cécile Fatiman and Houngan Dutty Boukman convened at *Nan Bwa Kay Imam* in the woods
at *Imam's house*

machetes daggers drums clapped to the rhythm of change the power to make things happen.

cornmeal shifted against rough fingertips birthing veves invoking the Seven African Powers.

Our God, who is good to us, orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us.

the black female pig squealed a hundred raised voices chanted

through the stillness of night

Viv lib ou mouri Live free or die.

warm blood over the sweaty palms labored hands cradled an oath pledged freedom
by any means necessary.

the evening's attendees several hundred enslaved Africans from the northern plantations
shared a sacred pact
a potion concocted from equal parts

blood sweat tears.

*Throw away the symbol of the God of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty,
which speaks in the hearts of us all.*

they danced sang conjured all night long ate and poured libations shared stories of
stolen histories through polyrhythmic beats recognized
the God that lived within each and every one of them *Vodou.*

days later the first insurrections of what would become the Haitian Revolution.

two weeks later 450,000 Africans had taken control of Saint-Domingue's northern region.

thirteen years later Black Haitians had defeated the world's most powerful army.

revolution was change. change was a forceful opposition to white supremacy. Vodou was the conduit of opposition. a source of magick only available to a special kind of always-knowing. a powerful manipulation of energy. an inspired r evolution,

a hope a dream a possibility

the power to make things change that only possibility itself could conjure or even understand.

Vodou was a home.

Vodou was the God in you.

Ayibobo.

tonight, the ancestors whisper to me in my sleep again,

you are a dream,

a dream an ideal a vision a product of the power of imagination a possibility.

who told you you were a dream?

*and do you remember when you first believed it was true? they ask. as true as
the beauty that is conceived from the persistence of struggle – you. true.*

truth when that which is imagined really is.

possibility when that which exists has potential.

*the possibility of that which is imagined being made real,
now that's magick. they say.*

and if Black is possibility and you are Black,

*you are possibility personified
meaning you are
magick.*

*How does it feel to be **magick**?*

Black magick.

magick.

Conjure was a home

fabled far and wide for its power to enact change
from the slave memoirs of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Henry Bibb
to the oral histories collected by white anthropologists in the early twentieth century
down to the kitchen-table, front-porch, corner-store prophesizing that raised
me

Conjure was a calling

Kidnapped slaves brought with them to this not new world their ancient traditions ways of
seeing understanding and manipulating the world around them.

The erasure of the African spiritual traditions soon became a fundamental practice of the institution
of slavery and the subjugation of Black people across the world.

New names new customs new languages new ways of understanding oneself in relation to
others beaten and brutalized into our ancestors
Christianity was forced upon captive Africans as a means of control and
African spiritualities and traditions of conjure were prohibited
made punishable by law.

The Black Christian church became a sanctuary a place to camouflage and preserve subversive the
practices of indigenous Black spiritualities.

“Catching the Holy Ghost” and “getting happy” during a church service | a reimagining of the same
Divine possession that occurred during West African Vodoun ceremonies.

The practice of “laying hands” before the pulpit | a remaking of the African witch doctors’ physical healing modalities.

“Pouring one out” for those who had transitioned | a reincarnation of the African custom of pouring libations to the dead.

Conjure was a destiny

The spiritual was political,
for if the enslaved ever returned to their truth,
a vision of their God who lived within each and every one of them
they would understand their freedom as inevitable.

Conjure was a power

a way of retaining reclaiming and reimagining stolen African roots.
a political economic and social science of the oppressed which could not be thwarted or even
understood by the limited frameworks of white supremacy,
threatening the power structures of the plantation because of its ability to transcend them.
an illegibility a hidden home an underworld of possibility
an always-kind-of-knowing.
magick.

inspiring open rebellion from Brazil to Jamaica to Mississippi. keeping ancestors alive despite the ever-present threat of death. connecting kin across distances. remembering. undoing. rebelling. changing. making living a possibility.

Conjure was an inherited wisdom
an intimate kind-of-always-knowing
a believing.

the same believing that inspired African women to braid seeds in their hair before being detained by european slave traders.

the same believing that inspired those who met at Bwa Kay Iman to envision a free Ayiti and build the world’s first Black republic.

the same believing that kept people alive on rooftops in the wake of Katrina and kept our great grandparents believing we would one day be grandchildren.

the same believing that the river will forever flow.

it is the same believing, an *always-kind-of-knowing* that we are destined to one day be free.

August 12, 2017 I find myself floating somewhere between Hudson, New York and Charlottesville, Virginia between two planes

The most horrific day of my life;

I remember my grandmother used to say

God don't like ugly

her tired voice in my ears

as I scroll through images from the night
before.

Pictures of the ugliest white men I've ever seen parading down the streets of the city I went to school in appropriating a Polynesian symbol of fertility to incite fear hijacking my newsfeed with bellies full of centuries of hatred.

Their faces mutate and contort like mass-produced masks gestures of pale whiteness, mouths ajar, eyes wide and vacant congregating to shout obscenities around weathered statues of Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee, proud forefathers of their discontent.

All day I had been plagued by an intimate-sort-of-knowing a feeling which caused me earlier in the morning to send my spirit guides to stand with my sister and niece headed to the counter-demonstration.

2 pm when my niece stops responding to texts

By 3 I've seen the footage of a grey Dodge Charger barreling through the crowd of peaceful demonstrators

backing up ramming forward again and again bodies strewn about pavement in its dust.

the people I love most in this world fall among those bodies.

After 3:30 my mother calls "your niece" words muffled by tears "she got hit."

3:45 when I call the hospital, the building is on lockdown, and they're not accepting calls.

5 pm I'm deep in ritual my coven of Black witches calling on our ancestors for protection
a crowd of forty or more ancestors from times distant and nearer, *we are with you* they've come
to let me know *we are with your sister and your niece.*

That evening, those rituals those prayers those ancestors keep them safe.

The next day, my mother tells me she *felt a blanket of love* drape over her protect her from the anger
and sadness *it was like all these forces from somewhere else held me* she says *they told me not to worry.*

as my sister lay on the concrete a bone jutting from her ankle this image of her across national
news outlets scanning the crowd for her own injured daughter *she sees* a car enveloped in a
cloud of gold

The license plate reads

God is in you.

Magick is only as powerful as you believe it to be.

Believing is an always-kind-of knowing a feeling.

it is the same always-kind-of-believing that never let Harriet Tubman lose a passenger
and led marooned Black communities to the hills, jungles and swamps that could best
support their living.

the same believing that sprouted trees from the graves of our ancestors, and implored them and
now, us, to fight for a future which has never been promised.

the same believing that keeps me holding on to the fact that we are destined to one day be
free.

*an always-sort-of knowing a feeling
we're here and we will always be here
magick*

and I wonder if it might save us.

I wonder if Black mothers might feel at ease watching their children leave home with mojo. or if
gris gris might protect protesters and agitators against the weaponry of the police state.

I wonder if a barrier of black salt or brick dust might bring sanctuary to the undocumented.
or if the right type of dirt might protect Black and brown residents from the
forces of gentrification that seek to displace them.

I wonder if an energy circle might be powerful enough to crack
the prison walls open.

I wonder what might happen when we use what we
have inside us once we become
action to the change we need.

And I wonder if I'll ever have the same Uber driver again,
if he'll ask me if something else is a coincidence
and if this time, I'll reply.

possibility.

last night i dreamt of hope possibility magick.
we came in pairs, couplets of 2, 4, 6, so on. we strode past arms linked and hand-in-hand marching
to the river's edge. we came in a dream in unison, we left no one behind. we came in song, praising
the God that lives in each of us buzzing, humming and clapping we came wearing
white, with gold chains, copper wristbands, gold-plated teeth & diamond grillz histories
extracted from iron ore. we came singing evolution, a chorus of aunties holding the beat. we were
womxn dancing all shades of Black, brown, in-between womxn, tall and short, every shape
and size, braids and locks, plaits and weaves, afros and buzzcuts womxn. we took over the streets
our never-ending parade led by the sway of low riders cruising down the avenues, circling the crowd
of dancing womxn, queers misfits to the front. hydraulics bouncing babies. dealers, tricks,
bitches, sluts, hos & hustlers swaying with joy, hustling with the flow holding the
formation together. and it grew ballooning down sidewalks, around river bends, through forests
& down valleys across imagined borders. we took our time with it. we left no one behind.
all different abilities and experiences, we came as we were, and we began to levitate. and it was
the most beautiful powerful thing, it was our truth. the presence and power of all our ancestors
and spirits holding us up bent Spirit en masse floated over roadways, slid past police
barriers, moonwalked through bullets and over water

& the people, they kept coming. those whose ancestors were indigenous to this land. every shade of immigrant and those who had been forced to flee their homes seeking refuge. the grannies, grandmas, and abuelas riding on chariots in their sunday's best hats, flowers & crowns adorning their ori. rootworkers, mamas, baby mamas, mama's babies breaking it down, breaking through. we were brothers and sisters and cousins and play-mamas. our expressions above words in their fullness. we were crying, laughing, hysterical, manic, depressed, joyous people. the swindlers and the shiftless right along us because it's like my landlady Ms. Pat said, *we got to love everybody, which means them ones too* towards images of freedom, we conjured day and night. we made it up as we went along, we created. replicated & recreated. mixed, matched & mingled. we believed. and out of that cloud of dancing loving pulsing moving living believing people *energy* all our people summoning the Spirit which is the essence of our joy and freedom. and here, we made magick together, its force unparalleled. protecting freeing loving powerful magick kept us sheltered from the elements, well-fed and rested impervious to security guards, soldiers, SWAT teams, dogs, drones, water cannons, gas and guns

and we stood at the end of the world we once knew.

it was our evolution

free. *an always-sort-of-knowing*

who told you to dream of being free? the ancestors call out to me in sleep.

and how will you know how it feels

when you finally

are