

"Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic."—Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters."—Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"

"The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity. To be a slave is to be 'excluded from the prerogatives of birth.' The mother's only claim—to transfer her dispossession to the child. The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women's historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery. The theft, regulation and destruction of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery." —Sadiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors"

"It is dark in my favorite dream. Someone is following me. I don't know why. I'm scared. Then suddenly I lift off. Far away. How do I feel? As if I am swimming in the air. Free. Weightless. Nobody can reach me. Nobody can touch me. It's a wonderful feeling." —Aaliyah, interview with *Die Zeit* newspaper, July 2001

The Museum of Modern Art



PopRally Presents Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah A Woman's Work

MoMA

**The Agnes Gund
Garden Lobby
Sun, April 29, 2018,
7:00 p.m.**

A Woman's Work is a meditation on generative black female creativity, its genealogies, and its legacy in art and literature, conceived and organized by essayist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah in collaboration with PopRally. Tonight's program features readings by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Saeed Jones, Jamaica Kincaid, Darryl Pinckney, and Greg Tate; films by Julie Dash, dream hampton, Cissy Houston, Aretha Franklin, and Whitney Houston; a performance by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts and Steffani Jemison are FORT; and a DJ set by Helado Negro.

PopRally is a series of events at The Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PS1 that serve as a gateway for young and diverse audiences to engage with MoMA.

Interview

The Border State: On Anna Murray Douglass
Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah speaks with Kandis Williams

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah: So I actually ordered the book.

Kandis Williams: Which one?

The Five Fires?

No, I ordered *Five Fires* as well. Thank you for recommending that, but I also ordered *Love Across the Color Line: Otilie Assing and Frederick Douglass*, by Maria Diedrich.

It is absolutely insane.

Outrageous.

It's outrageous. During the same moment that Frederick Douglass is maybe the greatest scholar...

Black male scholar, yeah.

And yeah, abolitionist and black man in the world. He's having a love affair with...

A German woman.... Not just a love affair, because it's not really love. It's like he moved this lady into his house and she's the second one, Rachel. There was one before her that was there for six years, Julia Griffiths, and they stayed good family friends. She married another abolitionist dude after she leaves Frederick Douglass's house, or whatever, and then marries another dude and then they stayed friends with the family so it's all so...[Laughter]

Right.

And then...

Otilie Assing moves in for 20 years.

For 26 years he lived with her in Anna's house, his wife's house. How crazy is that?

During those years Otilie, with Frederick's knowledge, refers to Anna Douglass publicly as "the wife," "the old woman," "one of the uneducated, ignorant classes," and, "So far I was able to maintain the most friendly terms by means of diplomacy and feeding her with gifts."

Oh god, yeah, that part she talks about how ignorant this black woman is in her life to her sister. She only refers to her in terms of her age, in terms of her weight, in terms of her appearance. She mocks the wig that she wears, Anna Douglass. She calls her a glorified house servant. She refers to herself as Douglass's natural wife all the time, which is so, so insane. And then there's this myth of "Anna Douglass, illiterate" is what it all kind of boils down to. Frederick Douglass also had horrible relations with Sojourner. Did you know that?

No.

With Sojourner Truth? Well, he was calling her the quintessential under-educated, uncultured negro because she would interrupt him at abolitionist meetings and whenever their paths crossed she would call him out basically and say, "You're white, so..." and be like, "Fuck this book-learning," and like, "Who's your father? Who's the white man that birthed you?" Interjecting all along against his kind of logic of racial solidarity or whatever, because Sojourner Truth was very much like, "I'm not reading. I don't read, I don't write. I work, I speak, I'm here, I'm present." You know, she was not into changing herself to obtain a basic human right. And then with Frederick Douglass, you can see these flourishes for him where literacy is just like the ultimate adjacency to power. It is.... I'm trying to find the word but I've just been in German for so long. The *stimmung* is the general—the feeling that he has about literacy is really built into the narrative and to bondage and freedom, and then into the narrative of the life with the white people around him.

It is so interesting how writing and reading, for him, are basically an entrance into the masters' house. They are the doors.

Exactly.

Which is conflating illiteracy—something that was a forced ignorance because reading was illegal—with...

Slavery.

Exactly. The step out of slavery and, well, then the ideal black person had to not be black, especially not a dark-skinned black woman. In her letters Otilie says of Douglass that “he’s the light mulatto...with an unusually handsome exterior. I could imagine him being an Arab chief. Beautiful eyes were full of dark fire, while Anna Murray was very dark, stout and plain but with a good expression.” Otilie almost suggests that they think Anna Murray, and the Douglass children, won’t be anything exceptional because they are “completely black,” and Frederick can be so much is because he had that wonderful white blood.

Exactly. And they keep calling his children “just black.” They keep calling Anna Murray “just black,” and that’s really important. I’ve been thinking about this Frederick Douglass thing, like literacy is his access, and how interesting that is at that moment when no other—like it’s [illegal] for black people to read still, you know? And him claiming this kind of, white power without any criticism of how it’s experienced, how it’s captured by black people, is super interesting.

His wife wanted him to be a preacher. They met in Baltimore and she really wanted him to be a preacher and to become a free man and then to go back into the church—and this idea that he would go back into the church as an orator, bringing people together, bringing more black people out of slavery, working on the underground. Because Anna Murray worked on the underground. She was one of the first on underground railroad stops in the free North and she was from a free—half-free—family. I think she was the first child born out of slavery, but her parents were, it was way before 1865. They bought seven kids out of slavery and then had five more, and they were part of a free society of people in Baltimore. They met within this society for free blacks. They met there, so it’s like this whole myth of her illiteracy is also so bogus. She handled executive housekeeping and laundry duties with wealthy people’s houses, and was an amazing manager for not just her house, but many people’s houses. Anna paid for his ticket north to freedom, Anna paid for everything in the house. She was the earner in that household.

You know almost every fucking person on the underground railroad could read. Whether they’ve said they could read or not, that’s like—you know what I mean. So it’s also this thing of, the safety in being understood as dumb, or the safety in not being literate, or the safety in pretending outside of that system and in just black space. So it’s fucked up that they call her border state. It’s just so crazy that they called her “border state.”

She’s like...what is she? She’s the toll keeper. She’s the interlocker. She’s the price of the ticket and the person tasked with buying the ticket.

Literally. And they knew it. For Otilie, she decides that what’s holding him back is this sense of religiosity, the importance of family. This black woman is what’s holding him away from being the lion, the orator, or the great black savior that he is. The great half-black savior that he is, and it’s so interesting. They give him access, via literacy and via charisma, and it’s so interesting that Anna Murray—not playing into that, not posing as literate, not posing as a woman of letters.... Have you read Rosetta Douglass’s “Anna Murray Douglass, My Mother as I Recall Her”?

No.

It’s seven pages, and Anna’s biography too. “My Mother as I Recall Her” is a letter about Anna Douglass and even she—it seems this woman was so on to what was happening to her. Two interesting things to consider: access and Frederick and Otilie calling Anna the border state. Because charismatic access is for one black person only, right? When the white voice amplifies your voice, they’re not amplifying your voice, and your wife’s voice, and your kids’ voices. No, it’s like the one charismatic black male, and Frederick Douglass starts this tradition. From around 1845 to 1846 he is literally just in Europe. He has four kids at the time. Four kids. And just to give you a sense, too, of how fucked up—when he publishes *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he literally outs so many people who helped him. Names people who helped him on the underground railroad, his wife’s name, all the conductors that traveled him, the people who took his papers, even down to the sailor’s suit that, like, Anna stole from her, whatever, weird master—and he just publishes it. So he has to get out. And of course the abolitionists...he was working with at the time—I think in Lynn, Massachusetts—are like, “Get out. We’re going to make passage for you to Europe. We’re going to buy your freedom from Europe.” He has this incredible tour.

I've actually been to where he had his tour in Cork, Ireland, and they have a marker: "This is where Frederick Douglass did his famous European tour." So, it's unbelievable.

Meanwhile Anna is back in Massachusetts with four kids, literally cobbling shoes. She's sewing shoes together and every day she puts away the money from two pairs of shoes to give to the abolitionists that she worked with there. She's, like, a black woman in the 1840s who's putting money away for her different charities. She's feeding four kids and every cent that Frederick Douglass sporadically sent back to her she just put directly in the bank, so that when he got back she shows him her ledgers and she's like, "Look. None of the money you sent me actually went into this household. It's all in the bank. I have surpluses of shit. I give to charity and all this is money that I made, and all this is me holding down this...." She never went into debt, she never borrowed any money.

I'm speechless. Why do you think we relate to her so deeply? I was reading the part where they mock her for her wig, and when the house was burning down, and Ottilie says that she was probably only thinking about her wig and her silver spoons. And it's the same indictment we'd see of young black women today, right? What luxury we desire is always condemned.

Right, border state. I mean, you talk about it too, this ethos—black women being this strange ethos. And I think it is so interesting because we're sites of knowledge, but we're reproductive sites. Primarily we're sites of reproducing the trauma of this rape culture, reproducing the trauma of slavery, reproducing those broken ties to kinship like Frederick Douglass. One of the things that woman Maria Dietrich writes about is the absence of Anna Douglass in his narratives. She's not present, and when she is present she's fictionalized as fuck. She's given these white female characteristics. If he writes about her, you know it's about her love of the silver spoons, her keeping a good household, or having a nail for even the dirtiest of napkins. When he writes about her in terms of her keeping a good household...

Yes, always what we can do for others.

Sojourner Truth is thinking about actual separatism. She is saying that we're not here to learn English. We were slaves from another place and we have a home and we're still Africans. Like, she was stating, "I'm an African woman. I want my African language back and I want it

safe and separate from this shit." And Anna Douglass as well. You can see there's desire...for him to be back in the church. She's from a society of free black people in Baltimore. They had their own values. One of things Rosetta Douglass doesn't talk about is the separation, this loneliness that Anna felt from not being a part of a black community, but being forced into this white community. Ottilie's idea of Anna forcing Frederick Douglass into this martyrdom of marriage and the atrocity that is civil weddings—and they're so much more progressive and they're so much more above it and they don't want to live being commanded like that. But then Anna Douglass must be like, "White women actually come into my house who are sleeping with my husband." [Laughter] "And try to teach my kids about the Bible and civility and whatever the fuck. How are y'all in any way a moral authority in any sense? In any way a place of progress? How are your customs, your traditions, your ways of relating to each other, better than ours? They're not." What's interesting to me about Anna Douglass and Sojourner Truth is that they're African women. They're not looking to change for freedom: "We're not asking to become you, we want to be us." So to me they are African.

You are a genius, girl. But you know what? No, they aren't. You know what's amazing? They're black women. Such black women. Only America could forge them. As Audre Lorde said, "We appear as less than a vapor." When Fredrick and Ottilie do that to Anna Douglass... you're right, they start that tradition, but they also start this tradition of us wondering about and claiming Anna Douglass as our own.