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## GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

# Imagining Futures in the Age of Twilight

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In ‘Imagining Futures in the Age of Twilight’, Salt traverses a number of geographies of blackness in order to tease out the ways that twilight draws upon historical, cultural and political apparatuses as needed – along with issues of race, difference, indigeneity and capitalism. In walking with a range of thinkers – including Tina Campt and Keguro Macharia – Salt considers how practicing refusal can enable one to live in – and reimagine a future outside of – toxic soils. This is not an essay of solutions, but more one of determination to theorise futures within occlusion and to reanimate equitable world(s) even as ours are bathed in twilight.

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The dusk was a raucous chaos of curses, gossip and laughter;  
everything performed in public, but the voice of the inner language  
was reflective and mannered as far above its subjects as that sun  
which would never set until its twilight became a metaphor for  
the withdrawal of Empire and the beginning of our doubt.  
(Walcott, “What the Twilight Says” 4)

You can’t fight fire with air. But equally you can’t fight  
for a freedom you’ve forgotten how to identify.  
(Smith xii)

### Introduction

Africana and black feminist cultural theorist Tina M. Campt frames the work of the Practicing Refusal Collective as a ‘desire to think through and toward *refusal* as a generative and capacious rubric for theorizing everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis on collective acts of resistance’ (Campt 80; emphasis in the original). In stressing the disjuncture between figuration, form and practice, the collective wrestles with the vocabulary that construes ‘politics, activism and theory’ and the terms that codify and give meaning to these themes, conditions and struggles. By refusing to name and be named through languages imbued with older logics of dispossession and extraction, Campt and her collective of co-conspirators practice a form of what I call critical inhabitation that insists on existence while simultaneously refusing to become the fantasies (or the refuse) of others. This practice keeps twilight in abeyance.

In other writings, I have described twilight. I first encountered the notion of twilight in the writings of Nobel Laureate, playwright, poet and politician Derek Walcott, who initially

configures twilight as ‘the transitional potential of the time after the dark of empire and colonialism’ (Salt, “Twilight Islands and Environmental Crises” 57). This moment of becoming is more than constrained – it is perpetually unfulfilled. Walcott, in a brilliant essay, “What the Twilight Says”, describes the limited potential transformation of postcolonialism by noting its violence – in other words, as former colonial rulers rush to constrain or control formerly colonial people’s self-determination and sovereignty.

Yes, territories transform into independent nations, but imperial and international forces remain in their orbit. In still other cases, formerly colonial peoples morph into peoples controlled through new forms of governance (outer departments, non-incorporation etc.). What emerges from this varied postcolonial system – aptly on display throughout the Caribbean region – is a narrative of becoming already foreclosed or predetermined to never fully come to fruition. Walcott fears that this form of existing through not becoming informs all decisions and processes in the Caribbean – and possibly for all people previously governed under colonial systems.

What Walcott sees as the conditions of Caribbean postcolonialism, I view as a much wider set of structures governing how territories and regions shift from or remain tethered to colonial and imperial processes. Rather than see twilight as a condition only at play in the Caribbean, I have begun to envision it as a more global phenomenon that draws upon historical, cultural and political apparatuses as needed – along with issues of race, difference, indigeneity and capitalism – and one that is fundamentally about limiting futures rather than facilitating change into something fundamentally more equitable, redistributive and egalitarian.

In this short piece, I would like to spend a bit more time with the idea of twilight (via a number of scenarios and sources) and think through the challenges of inhabiting toxic soils, building on the work of black queer theorist Keguro Macharia, before thinking through and with others to (re)learn how to practise refusal, to rephrase Campt. This is not an essay of solutions, but more one of determination to theorize futures within occlusion and to reanimate equitable world(s) even as ours are bathed in twilight.

### **Living with toxicity**

A useful case can be found in the nineteenth century. In 1804, after a tumultuous and violent revolution burned through the French colonial territory of Saint-Domingue, sweeping aside British, Spanish and French forces in the process, an unlikely collection of formerly enslaved persons, freeborn blacks and wealthy ‘people of colour’ were made citizens of a newly independent nation, Haiti. Erupting in the midst of an Atlantic world consumed by racial capitalism, Haitian leaders would struggle to lead a self-avowed black and sovereign nation and reclaim Saint-Domingue’s former staggering wealth that had previously fuelled the French Empire.

By 1820, after the last of the independence leaders had died and Haiti had emerged from a civil war that split the nation in half, it would be led for over two decades by President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1818–43). Focused on the economy – including tying members of the masses to labour on former plantation lands through his Code Rural – Boyer set his sights outside of Haiti and engaged in a marketing and migration campaign that utilized familial language of connectivity saturated in notions of place-ness and racial recognition. In enticing people of African descent from the United States to Haiti, Boyer sought a way to revitalize production on abandoned plantations (as formerly enslaved persons in Haiti rejected these sites and refused to work on them) and monetarily return Haiti to its former colonial place as the financial ‘pearl’ of the Antilles.

Although this campaign hid the elements of racial capitalism that resided within it, the language used to embrace and pull people of African descent to Haiti’s shores stressed that

Haiti's soil loved and recognized African people – and more importantly, would only offer its productivity to them. From the moment people of African descent, literally, put their feet upon Haitian soil, the land would register their Africanness and transfer its abundance to them (Ferrer; Salt, *The Unfinished Revolution*). Prosperity lived in the grains of earth and it would now feed the souls of people who had been starved for respect, decency and livelihood within the toxic racial culture and system of dispossession bestowed upon them in the United States. Critically, Boyer labelled the United States as a poisoned land that had claimed the vitality and the inheritance of African peoples. Only Haiti could enrich their souls. This campaign would not be the first moment, nor would it be the last, in which toxicity and futurity would be intertwined.

A recent example of this occurred when Macharia announced that he was leaving an academic position in the United States due to what he described as the United States' and academia's toxicity. Writer, thinker, agitator and activist Macharia announced his departure via a well-circulated essay in *The New Inquiry*, "On Quitting". In it, he discusses his reasons for leaving the United States – and a tenure-track position – for Kenya. His return to the country of his birth was not about escaping, but about finding. It took time for him to understand this and a brief return to Kenya for him to fully recognize what it meant to move through space and time without wearing the racial armour that he had adopted to survive living and working in the United States.

In charting and analysing the different modes of living that Kenya provided, Macharia began to think through how the world that he had worked and lived in within the United States contributed to a feeling of dis-ease. He knew that he was being undone – deracinated – every day. In order to truly live, he had to return to Kenya. This return, though, would at best be a limited detoxification, as he knew that he still needed a way to live within a different land of unequal soils. In another essay, on Mbiti and Glissant (by way of black feminism and queer studies), Macharia muses aloud about his search for connections between himself and other collectives within the diaspora.

To navigate terrains and find useful theoretical 'stones' to suck (a loose paraphrase of Macharia's thinking), he recognizes that he 'must think of how to be in toxic soils – of deracination and transplanting, obsolescent habits in climate-changed worlds' (Macharia, "Mbiti & Glissant"). Rather than focus on the United States, or even academia, Macharia's ruminations illuminate the toxicity that has taken root in so many of our ever-changing environments. To find a way to exist and be present in the world, Macharia has begun forging a language that captures how toxic soils – and histories – can strangle one's soul. Macharia recognizes, as do I, that we, in the widest sense possible, may have learnt to live with toxicity by absorbing its constraints and limiting our own futures by living within its suboptimal conditions. Macharia may not have all the answers – yet – but he knows that any practices that oppose these ways of living must unmake traditions and knowledges steeped in the logics of deracination and loss; logics that build and feed into constructions of twilight.

### **Perpetual twilight**

Walcott revisits his musings on twilight later in his career and extends his lens. He thinks about the impact of twilight, noting what the land sighs, the sea remembers, the people transpose and the islands of the Caribbean reveal about memory, history and futures. In his Nobel lecture, published as "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory", Walcott offers a tribute to sunrise and remarks that everyone greeting the dawn can self-define themselves as inhabitants of a waking island. But twilight hovers at the edge of his celebratory prose. Walcott notes that even as he stands in awe of his ancestors to receive a Nobel prize, he knows that his achievement and those of others who are greeting their own sunrises cannot alter history.

'The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage', he laments, and 'the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians [...] are still serving time' (Walcott, *The Antilles* 81).

The Caribbean's leaders do not try to resist this elision of time. They plot and plan, but mostly just sit, waiting for the dawn and a new day to come – over and over again. Yet, Walcott senses that this waiting contains within it a destructive edge. The leaders in the Caribbean, he argues, sell the land 'as inflated rubber islands' whose presents and futures include 'polluted marinas, land deals negotiated by ministers, and all of this conducted to the music of Happy Hour and the rictus of a smile'. Living in twilight and resisting within its frames 'is an effort of memory' (Walcott, *The Antilles* 81).

It is not all tragedy for Walcott. He sees pockets within the lands (and seas) bathed in twilight that resist the lure of tax breaks, change, 'progress' or development. Walcott warns, though, that these spaces are becoming rarer – and he is not talking about keeping the Caribbean pristine, but about resisting occluded ways of seeing that situate twilight as the predetermined context for relating to and extracting the resources from former colonial peoples. Although Walcott does not identify these logics as enactments of nullification or ecological eradication, he nevertheless warns about the possible end result of these types of relationships: 'Every day on some island, rootless trees in suits are signing favourable tax breaks with entrepreneurs, poisoning the sea almond and the spice laurel of the mountains [...] A morning could come in which governments might ask what happened not merely to the forests and the bays but to a whole people' (Walcott, *The Antilles* 83). Twilight, then, is not just a way of seeing and being in the world. Twilight can also destroy it. What, then, can we do to safeguard futures?

### **Building futures**

In *M Archive*, poet, playwright, scholar and activist Alexis Pauline Gumbs produces a set of poetic responses to writer, activist and critic M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*. In an unnamed poem-song, Gumbs's poetic narrator talks about the work and the price of collective re-knowing. The poetic voice looks around at the world – perhaps a world bathed in twilight – and notes the effect of practising for a future that must have had to exist (in a nod to Camp's black feminist futurity). Within this free verse, Gumbs's narrator demands that freedom is a practice (Gumbs 93). In Gumbs's hands, the watchers who have been guarding against this type of revolutionary action become freedom's freshest adherents. In settling into the practice, they translate the world around them into a new language and recast tools that (en)chant their everyday interactions. By sitting in the practice, they learn how to inoculate themselves against twilight – not by becoming something else, but by resisting the lure of becoming predicated on a limited and limiting set of terms. If refusing contains the key to futurity, how do we remember to practice it?

### **Practicing remembrance**

In theorizing and practising 'a grammar in which Black existence might be the thought and not the unthought', poet, writer and documentary filmmaker Dionne Brand offers up poetry that practices refusal and movement through the art of writing and claiming (Brand, "An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk" 59). In *The Blue Clerk*, Brand transposes this theory into a conversation between a poet and 'the Blue Clerk' who archives, assembles and orders the words and the pages of poetry/prose that the poet has created. Yet, surprisingly, a prose poem about writing does not begin only with words. Brand nestles the lure of becoming

and its costs in and amidst fantastical configurations that place aphids – specifically, unclassified green ones – onto the poet's pages. In a series of happenings that fold and bend time, the Blue Clerk waits for a ship to materialize from the horizon line. Stacking, arranging, moving the poet's pages, the Blue Clerk anticipates the arrival of this unnamed ship and transferring the pages and other cargo into the hold, possibly to complete her task. Time passes, but the transference never happens. The ship never comes. The Blue Clerk repeats her cataloguing on the docks, adjusts the pages and piles of possibility, but never finishes her task. Over time, the clerk forgets her purpose and questions her very existence. Although the location is unnamed, Brand's Blue Clerk could just as easily be living in twilight (Brand, *The Blue Clerk*).

We might be tempted to comfort the Blue Clerk by asserting that one day her ship will arrive. This statement is trite and also immaterial. It is not that the Blue Clerk needs reminding that the ship *may* someday come. She has forgotten what she was waiting for and who she is. The arrival of a ship will not enable her to re-knit her world, her culture or her beingness. In this sense, the Blue Clerk has internalized the abeyance effect of twilight and altered her life course to simply do – with no purpose. She can never become something else, (un)become what others suggest is her reason for existence or refuse even to prepare the poet's pages because she has forgotten, as Smith suggests in the epigraph above, how to identify freedom.

Walcott describes the fight against forms of forgetting exhibited by the Blue Clerk. In detailing this, he makes a case for the necessity of imagination and words – providing the many Blue Clerks of the world dangerous creative tools that will let remember how to be in the world. For Gumbs and Macharia, this remembering cannot come from the same bank of knowledge that gave rise to the conditions that originally brought the Blue Clerk to the docks to wait. She – and we – need radical tools so that we can practice how to be in a limited world while demanding more from the many tethers we have and the relationships we are cultivating within it.

I realize that this sounds very presentist and it is, to a point. I note that doing our best to be fully present, right now, is important. But claiming a now opens space for a future – a condition that, as illustrated by the Blue Clerk, becomes infinitely more challenging the less people remember about why they are even here in the first place. And Walcott's warning about the vanishing bays and their people should sound a warning.

Imagining futures in an age of twilight is not about finding new ways to articulate old logics and conditions. I recognize the path that has been prepared by other creatives and thinkers. In linking the thinkers cited in this essay together to further interrogate twilight and its conditions, I am searching for a process – and a practice – that can inoculate all of us against the allure of the horizon line, not as an actual point of reference or physical instantiation, but as a node in the process of (un)becoming.

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