Acting Edition

cullud wattah

by Erika
Dickerson-Despenza

song by Avery R. Young

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

PLUM – 9. physically frail, arithmetically sharp African American girl. curious, intuitive & wise. she is blue-blk – like a plum.

MARION – 34. a robust cinnamon-colored African American woman worn from care-taking. she is responsible, pragmatic & status quo. a third-generation engine assembly line worker at general motors. a widow. plum & reesee's mama.

REESEE – 17. a queer, brass African American young woman devotee of yemọja. deeply curious about the spiritual nature of healing. a dancer & aspiring doula.

BIG MA – 60s. slight build with an elegant presence. a stern but deeply loving African American woman. the widowed matriarch of the cooper family – but only in title. a mississippi migrant with the south in her mouth; she often talks in pictures. rooted in a Blk southern baptist aesthetic that she finds herself queering.

AINEE – 37. a 34-weeks-pregnant African American woman the color of pulled taffy. addiction survivor. frank, humorous & slick-mouthed; a straight shooter. fiercely maternal. the family historian & rebel interested in building political power. marion's older sister.

all characters can hold a note. here, music comes as easily as breathing. additionally, words between these women move quickly & sharply – a medley of playful banter, weaponized memories & piercing questions.

SETTING

5th ward. genesee county. flint, michigan.
the cooper home. november 2016
but also the past, present & future
(which has already happened).

an entirely naturalistic set is inappropriate.
less is more. leave room for the Afro-surreal.

author's notes

All musical renderings (Blk chant & liquindi & "lead in de wattah") are ensemble-devised. A musical director is helpful & Sweet Honey in the Rock is an excellent muse.

The prologue & epilogue are not optional; they are vital to the story.

The filling of the tub for Act II should be magical; it should go fully undetected both visually & sonically. A tip: fill the tub during the intermission.

a note on recordings

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elements of style

The form & structure of this script rely heavily on caesuras & line breaks to transport the weight & rhythm of the text. Conventions of "Standard English" grammar, spelling & punctuation are destabilized. These choices originally reverenced the use of Black vernaculars in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange & early Suzan-Lori Parks, respectively – the playwright's sources of inspiration. Now, these elements are fundamental components of an artistic aesthetic & political instrument the playwright calls "jook joint writing": a radical, subversive practice that dis/orders linguistic (neo) colonialism & imperialism, building vernacular without walls.[1] Together, the elements of style re/appropriate the space they inhabit, turning it into something new, yet indigenous to its community.[2] The elements vigilantly orchestrate the drama for readers while directing the actors' volume, pace, rhythm & intended pronunciation.

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[1]Etymologically, *jook* or *juke* comes from the Gullah word *joog*, meaning "disorderly," which comes from the Wolof *dzug*, meaning "to live wickedly" or the Bambara *dzugu*, meaning "wicked." I have heard that in another language of the Congo, the word means "a building without walls." I like that. It points toward an endless array of possible free futures for language.

[2]Just as the jook joint is an indigenous Black cultural formation, so are Black Englishes. See Zora Neale Hurston "The Characteristics of Negro Expression" in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (London: Nancy Cunard at Wishart & Co., 1934) 39–46.

for
sincere smith
amariyanna 'little miss flint' copeny
all the blk & undocumented children of flint, michigan

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.

– Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"

. . .

What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a "liquid grave"?

– M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

// prelude: tally marks. //

house lights are up. upon arrival, spectators are given a bottle of dated, contaminated water to add to the set or an installation beyond it. in the bathroom: a white clawfoot tub. a leaky faucet is heard & perhaps, seen. bottles of dated, contaminated water are sprawled about. **plum** *wears a head scarf & a white slip—used to be reesee's & you can tell. the walls of the cooper home are a museum of time.* **plum** *makes 937 tally marks. upon completion, house lights dim. the tally marks glow: a constellation of winter ash dusting the blk night of an elbow. interstice #1:* **plum** *sleepwalks toward the tub.*

// lead. //

> **plum** *hides inside the tub. she springs up. her slip is wet with rust-colored stains.*

plum.

lead/ in thuh wattah

> **plum***'s voice echoes & multiplies.* **marion**, **ainee**, **reesee** & **big ma** *appear dressed in white—except for* **marion**. **marion** *carries two jugs of clean water.* **ainee** *carries one jug of clean water.* **reesee** *carries one jug of clean water.* **big ma** *carries a basin of clean water & leans on a hand-carved ironwood cane.* **marion**, **ainee**, **reesee** & **big ma** *move slow. funeral procession slow. a haunting arabesque of a dissonant five-part polyphonic harmony ensues. think: a ricochet of voices.*

plum, marion, ainee, reesee & big ma.

lead/ in thuh wattah/
lead/ in thuh wattah cheeldrun/
lead/ in thuh wattah/
snyder playin god/ with wattah

lead/ in thuh wattah
lead/ in thuh wattah cheeldrun/
lead/ in thuh wattah/
snyder playin god/ with wattah

lead/ in thuh wattah/
lead/ in thuh wattah cheeldrun/
lead/ in thuh wattah/
snyder playin god/ with wattah

> **plum** *turns on the bathtub faucet & reaches for the empty container near the foot of the tub. she fills it with faucet water. nearby: masking tape & a blk permanent marker. she rips a piece of tape, writes the date & labels the container.*

plum.

weenzday/ novembuh 16, 2016

> **marion**, **ainee**, **reesee** & **big ma** *erupt in blk chant.* **big ma** *pours her basin of clean water into a plugged sink.* **plum** *begins a liquindi in the tub.* **marion**, **big ma** & **ainee** *set aside their jugs of clean water & collaboratively reorder the contaminated vessels by date.*

friday/ april 25th 2014

reesee.

somethin different

big ma.

change done come

marion.

i know somethin

ainee.

a historic moment/ they called it

reesee.

thuh city's return to its roots/ they say

big ma.

playin gawd/

big ma & marion.

i say

marion.

thuh faucet runnin

big ma.
cullud wattah

reesee.
a sewer aroma

ainee.
waftin round my tea

marion, ainee, reesee & big ma.
somethin aint right

marion.
i know/

ainee.
i keep havin these/ pangs

marion.
/somethin

big ma.
boil it/ thuh wattah will return

marion.
as all wattah does

reesee.
to where it come from

big ma.
whut it usta be

ainee.
these spasms/ stretchin cross my body

plum.
good wattah or bad wattah?

marion, reesee & big ma.
all wattah

marion.
got a temper

big ma.
like gawd

marion.
when man try & take

big ma.
his place

reesee.
her place

ainee.
these/ headaches

reesee.
monday/ may 12th 2014

plum.
good wattah or bad wattah?

ainee.
e. coli

marion.
all wattah

big ma & reesee.
got a memory

reesee.
these scars be tellin

marion.
a testament

i know/ somethin

ainee.
knots of skin bubblin ovah

big ma.
feel like braille

reesee.
itchin me

ainee.
a constellation of memory

big ma.
hooverin ovah thuh wattah

plum.
good wattah or bad wattah?

marion.
i/ know

reesee.
total trihalomethanes

marion.
a cancer-causing chlorine disinfectant

big ma.
friday/ septembuh 11th 2015

reesee.
hazardous waste

marion.
lead

big ma.
thuh wattah

ainee.
got that flinty taste

marion.
friday/ octobuh 16th 2015

plum.
lead/ in thuh wattah/
lead/ in thuh wattah
cheeldrun/
lead/ in thuh wattah/
snyder playin god/
with wattah

plum*'s liquindi becomes violent.*

lead/ in thuh wattah/
lead/ in thuh wattah
cheeldrun/
lead/ in thuh wattah/

snyder playin god/
with wattah

ainee.
monday/ decembuh 14th 2015

reesee.
tuesday/ januaree 5th 2016

big ma.
friday/ februaree 19th 2016

marion.
weenzday/ may 4th 2016

ainee.
thursday/ novembuh 10th 2016

plum, *dizzied & frantic, collapses in the tub.*

war.

wednesday morning. a clock radio alarm sounds. **reesee** *silences it. the radio blares soundbites of public dismay over the president-(s)elect. #45 is heard proposing epa cuts & promising that flint will be "fixed quickly & effectively."*[1] **plum**, **marion**, **reesee**, **ainee** & **big ma** *begin the morning ritual of dressing: teeth-brushing, hoe-bathing, shaving, face washing—solely with bottled water.* **marion** *is already dressed: an oversized general motors t-shirt, loose jeans & steel-toed boots.* **marion** *turns off the radio.*

marion.

plum why in thuh hell is you in thuh tub with that gown on?!/ you done got it all durty!

reesee.

you pee on yrself again?

marion.

reesee!

reesee.

aint like it's nevuh happened!

big ma.

she sensitive bout bein teezed!

big ma *jabs* **reesee** *with her cane.*

reesee.

ouch!

[1] a license to produce *cullud wattah* does not include a performance license for any third-party or copyrighted recordings. licensees should create their own.

plum.
i aint pee in no bed!/ i wuz tryna clean thuh tub but thuh wattah came spoutin out all crazy & well—/

marion.
'sides, yr piss cleaner than this damn wattah

big ma.
how many days it been?

marion.
too many to count

reesee.
it's been alotta days

big ma.
sho'll has

marion.
sth/ too many to count big ma

plum.
936 days & 16 hrs

plum.
17

marion *dismisses* **plum** *to dress herself.*

big ma.
too damn many/

ainee.
/any news from thuh realtor?

reesee.

marion.

ainee.

marion *dismisses* **reesee.**

marion.
nothin yet/ not one taker in sight/
unstable housing market

big ma.
white folks'll take this house n flip it for a million once this whole lead thing is ovah

marion.
well we a long way from it being ovah

ainee.
especially with 45 comin into office

big ma.
one monkey dont stop no show

ainee.
it aint one monkey/ issa whole ass circus

big ma *whacks* **ainee** *with her cane.*

big ma.
language!

ainee.

big ma.

ainee.

big ma.
you oughtta reconsider sellin it marion/
yr chirrun grew up in this house

marion.
aint no good memories livin here/ & with talk of layoffs down at thuh plant sellin this house is thuh last thing on my mind

big ma.
layoffs?

marion.
my contract is up

big ma.
thuh union just negotiated contracts last year—/

marion.
we know what side them uaw reps on/ & it aint ours

marion.

big ma.

ainee.

marion.

big ma.
you in thuh clear/ first shift

ainee.
aint no in thuh clear with general motors/
they closin plants/ layin off folks left & right

marion.
hirin all these temporary & part-time workers/
endin seniority transfers

ainee.
just as crooked as they've always been

big ma.
aint dat thuh pot callin thuh kettle blk

reesee & **plum** *return.*

ainee.

big ma.

marion.
how many times i gotta say you shouldnt be totin
nothin heavy in these last weeks of you carryin?

reesee.
she just nestin mama

marion.
nestin?

reesee.
yeah/ it's when a womxn nearin thuh end of her pregnancy & gets a surge of energy to clean & prep for thuh baby's arrival

big ma.
seem a bit late tuh be preparin

marion.
big ma/ not today

ainee.
nah let her carry on/ go head big ma/
tell me again how ima bust hell wide open for havin a bastard baby

marion.
how many times you gone rebuke her mama?

reesee.
too many to count

big ma.
all im sayin is you shoulda got a surge uf energy tuh use protection/ or tuh git an ab—/

marion.
big ma!

ainee.
gone & say it!

marion.

big ma.

ainee.

big ma.

ainee.

big ma.
in this day n age you gots ways tuh have taken care uf yr/ situation

ainee.
you'd think by now you'd have a lil excitement/
just a mustard seed worth/ afta all i been through?

big ma.
thuh lawd giveth n thuh lawd taketh away

marion.
leave thuh good lord outta this mama

ainee, *fatigued, groans in agony.*

plum.
ainee you okay?!

marion.
come on & sit/ all this drama upsettin thuh baby

reesee.
prolly just braxton hicks contractions/ dont worry
ainee/ yemọja/ thuh protectress of mothers/ is with you

(pulse)

big ma.
i done toldju bout talkin dat folk religion talk/
aint but one gawd up in this house

marion.
prolly dehydrated/ plum go pour halfa bottle of wattah in a glass & dont waste nann drop/
thuh church done handed out all thuh wattah they got/
thuh firehouse too/ & save-a-lot's shelves empty/

white folks done got a head start on they thanksgivin preparation

reesee.

here ainee/ wear this eleke for protection

> **reesee** *places a necklace bearing the beading pattern of seven indigo beads & seven clear quartz crystals around* **ainee***'s neck.*

big ma.

reesee.

big ma.

reesee.

reesee.

marion.

alright now drink up/ good ainee/
reesee help ainee to her room

big ma.

marion

> **marion** *searches for her hard hat in the living room.*

marion.

plum/ come in here so i can do yr hair

big ma.

marion

plum.

but mama auntie ainee always—/

marion.

ainee cant do yr hair today/ she aint feelin well

big ma.

marion/ she wanderin again

marion.
& bring thuh wide-tooth comb

marion *finds the hard hat & places it beside her on the couch. atop of an end table: a stack of water bills & a family photo.*

big ma.
you oughtta put a bell on her wrist at nite/
& we gotta make sure we double lockin the front—/

marion.
she fine/ was just cleanin thuh tub

big ma.
marion

marion.
plum hurry up/ i cant be late for work

big ma.
aint no chile dat eager tuh clean/
marion/ i know you hear me

big ma *raises her cane to nudge* **marion** *but just before it reaches her:*

marion.
how bout i focus on my child & you focus on yrs

big ma.
marion!

marion.
you just told yr firstborn she shoulda aborted thuh one baby she able to carry to term/ where's thuh god in that mama?/ plum/ you gone be late for school!

big ma.
it's bad enuf you thuh only one got consistent work/
now ainee bringin another mouf tuh feed witout a clue as tuh who thuh father is

marion.
thuh city fulla women doin it for themselves these days mama

big ma.
well dat aint how gawd intended for it tuh be/ a chile should have a mother n a father

marion.
im sure thuh lord aint intend for us to be without clean wattah for ovah two years either/ but here we are

big ma.

marion.

marion.

big ma.

marion.
plum!

plum.
comin!

big ma.
i dont know where i failed

marion.
here we go

big ma.
yall grew up in thuh same house/ how she end up walkin on a slant?

marion.
she clean now mama

big ma.
i mean you turned out jus fine/ you n eddie got married right outta high school—/

marion.
cause i was pregnant

big ma.
got jobs down at thuh plant/

marion.
cause we was broke

big ma.
had a beautiful family

marion.

marion.

big ma.

marion.
yeah & afta bein laid off from buick city he died in that damn war in afghanistan

big ma.
he provided for his family by any means necessary/ there's money in war

(pulse)

marion.
there are wars in money mama/ too many to count

state of emergency.

living room. **marion** *sits on the couch.* **plum** *enters, fully dressed. she sits between* **marion***'s legs, a plastic bag & wide-tooth comb in hand. a television is on, but no one watches.* **marion** *removes* **plum***'s head scarf, revealing a bald head.* **plum** *hands* **marion** *a wig from inside the plastic bag.*

marion.
you know it's not forever plum

plum.

plum.

marion.

plum.

marion.
reesee was only joking about you peein in thuh bed

plum.
i didnt pee in thuh bed!

plum *aimlessly flips through the television channels.*

marion.
i know you didnt honey/ i believe you/ you been doin
such a good job/ but yr treatment was intense/
& with thuh medicine sometimes you might have
an accident or find yrself walkin in yr sleep/
i can get you one of them charm bracelets
with thuh lil bells on em/ you wanted one last chris—/

plum.
am i gone die?

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