


**LINEAGE
FOR A
PHANTOM
ZONE**

Sondra Perry

LINE ≈  GE
FOB ≈
PH ≈ TOM
ZONE

Sondra Perry

Introduction

This publication has been developed to accompany Sondra Perry's *Lineage for a Phantom Zone*, and includes the voices of Black writers: psychotherapist Bola Shonubi, psychiatrist and sci-fi writer Tade Thompson, video artist and arts writer Kareem Reid, science fiction and fantasy writer N.K. Jemisin and the filmmaker and installation artist Isaac Julien CBE.

This book enables readers to engage with the research and thinking that informs *Lineage for a Phantom Zone*.

There is also space to document one's own dreams.

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LINEAGE FOR A PHANTOM ZONE

About the artwork *Lineage for a Phantom Zone*

BY SONDRA PERRY

Lineage for a Phantom Zone is an immersive audio-visual installation which imagines a dream that the artist Sondra Perry wishes that she could have had. The work explores personal history as the roots of dreams, the erasure of Black history in the American South, and the dream space as a passage for reaching sites of heritage that are inaccessible.

Upon entering the gallery space, the audience will first smell the scent of oranges, immediately evoking a family myth. Perry's grandmother has told the artist that when she passes, Perry will know as she will smell oranges and so the scent of this fruit is laden with both grief and intimacy.

Young cypress trees stand upright and hang upside-down from the gallery ceiling, indicating the disorientating experience of dreaming and the inability to root the body in this space. Cypress trees are native to North Carolina, the birthplace of Perry's grandmother who worked here as a sharecropper, and left for the North at thirteen. A significant element in the development of *Lineage for a Phantom Zone* was a family pilgrimage in 2021 to find the land upon which Perry's grandmother worked, and which she should now, by rights, own a part of. However, upon visiting, Perry discovered that it is impossible to find any of the places that her grandmother remembers – all that remains is her cousin's house, which sits in the midst of a forest.

Set amid the cypresses is a 1930s salmon-colored couch, suspended and floating 6-feet above the floor. It is wrapped in a clear plastic cover to resemble the couch that Perry sat on as a child in her grandmother's home. However, its plastic wrap does not finish at the base but drapes all the way to the gallery floor, and spills out like the train of a dress. A split in the plastic allows the audience to step inside this transparent curtain and look up at the base of the couch, which has been entirely replaced by a screen. The exhibition's video centrepiece is displayed on this screen, and speakers are inset to ensure that its sound is concentrated in this tight space.

The filmic elements in *Lineage for a Phantom Zone* engage with ideas of legibility and groundlessness, having been strongly influenced by Perry's interest

in astral projection and dreams as a mode of travel. Perry's film content moves between spaces from memory - real and imagined - with archival and recently filmed footage reflecting both her familial history and Black history in the USA. Perry's studio in Newark, the former Trade Winds Hair Salon, steps out into the exhibition space via three of its vintage barber chairs, whose seats have been repurposed to move up and down of their own accord and to house video pieces. For Perry, Trade Winds has become a character itself through its visceral link to the body and the bodies that have moved through it, and, crucially, through its title. The salon's name refers to the south-east Trade Winds which were co-opted by the Transatlantic Slave Trade to propel ships across the Atlantic – directly conveying the way in which historic events continue to impact people's lives and dreams.

Along with the scent of oranges, the installation is set to the sounds of Perry playing the theramin. A touchless instrument, its sound is key to the work as it notes the way in which memories and dreams are tangible and sensory, yet just out of reach. At times, written thoughts spin into view – backwards, mirrored or legible – and disappear, communicating the ephemeral nature of dreams and how they are briefly remembered then lost.

'Lineage for a Phantom Zone' by Sonda Perry launched at Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland in February 2022.



DREAMING AWAKE

Dreaming Awake

N. K. JEMISIN

*Long ago, in the time before now, black people
were all kings and queens.*

This is not true.

There is a strange emptiness to life
without myths.

I am African American — by which I mean, a descendant of slaves, rather than a descendant of immigrants who came here willingly and with lives more or less intact. My ancestors were the unwilling, unintact ones: children torn from parents, parents torn from elders, people torn from roots, stories torn from language. Past a certain point, my family's history just... stops.

As if there was nothing there.

I could do what others have done, and attempt to reconstruct this lost past. I could research genealogy and genetics, search for the traces of myself in moldering old sale documents and scanned images on microfiche. I could also do what members of other cultures lacking myths

have done: steal. A little BS about Atlantis here, some appropriation of other cultures' intellectual property there, and bam! Instant historically-justified superiority. Worked great for the Nazis, new and old. Even today, white people in my neck of the woods call themselves "Caucasian", most of them little realizing that the term and its history are as constructed as anything sold in the fantasy section of a bookstore.

These are proven strategies, but I have no interest in them. They'll tell me where I came from, but not what I really want to know: where I'm going. To figure that out, I make it up.

Not so long ago, at the dawn of the New World, black people were saved from ignorance in darkest Africa by being brought into the light of the West.

This is not true.

When I was a child, my parents tried hard to give me a mythology.

I read every book they gave me. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (Verna Aardema) was a favorite. I voluntarily devoured volumes of Egyptian myths alongside the Greek and Roman mythology I was being shovel-fed in school. I eventually looked up the origins of my middle name — Keita — and discovered the half-

mythic, half-real tale of Sundiata Keita, who might well have been counted among my ancestors.

Probably not. But my parents wanted me to be able to dream, and they knew that myths matter.

They knew this because they had been raised in the days when people like us were assumed to have no mythology, and no history worth knowing. Instead they were fed a new, carefully-constructed mythology: our ancestors were supposedly semi-animal creatures that spent all their time swinging around in the jungle until they were captured and humanized by lash and firebrand and rape. This shamed my parents — as such myths are meant to do. Generations before and including them wondered: if they truly came from such crude origins, did they have any right to want something more for themselves than powerlessness and marginalization? My parents' generation was the first to really confront the lies in these myths, so I don't blame them for trying to give me something better.

But as I grew older, I began to realize: the stories my parents had given me weren't my myths, either. Not wholly, not specifically. My father has spent the past few years researching our genealogy. As far as he has been able to determine, I am many parts African, most of it probably from the western coast of the continent, though in truth we'll probably never know. But I am also several parts American Indian — Creek/Muscogee that we know, some others that we don't — and at least one part European. That component is probably Scots-Irish; we don't know for sure because nobody talks

about it. But that's just the genetics. The culture in which I was reared, along the Gulf Coast of the United States, added components of Spanish and French to the mix. And the culture I've since adopted — New York, New York, big city of dreams — is such a stew of components that there's no point in trying to extricate any one thing from the mass.

And no point in trying to apply any single mythology. I have nothing. I have everything. I am whatever I wish to be.

Very long ago, in the ancient days of the world, black people were created when Noah was sodomized by Ham, his son. In retaliation, Noah cursed all Ham's descendants to be servants of servants for all eternity.

This is... I don't even know what the hell this is.

J. K. K. Tolkien, the near-universally-hailed father of modern epic fantasy, crafted his magnum opus *The Lord of the Rings* to explore the forces of creation as he saw them: God and country, race and class, journeying to war and returning home. I've heard it said that he was trying to create some kind of original British mythology using the structure of other cultures' myths, and maybe that was true. I don't know. What I see, when I read his work, is a man trying desperately to dream.

Dreaming is impossible without myths. If we don't have enough myths of our own, we'll latch onto those of others — even if those myths make us believe terrible or false things about ourselves. Tolkien understood this, I think because it's human nature. Call it the superego, call it common sense, call it pragmatism, call it learned helplessness, but the mind craves boundaries. Depending on the myths we believe in, those boundaries can be magnificently vast, or crushingly tight.

Throughout my life as I've sought to become a published writer of Speculative Fiction, my strongest detractors and discouragers have been other African Americans. These were people who had, like generations before them, bought into the mythology of racism: black people don't read. Black people can't write. Black people have no talents other than singing and dancing and sports and crime. No one wants to read about black people, so don't write about them. No one wants to write about black people, which is why you never see a black protagonist. Even if you self-publish, black people won't support you. And if you aim for traditional publication, no one who matters — that is, white people — will buy your work.

(A corollary of all this: there is only black and white. Nothing else matters.)

Having swallowed these ideas, people regurgitated them at me at nearly every turn. And for a time, I swallowed them, too. As a black woman, I believed I wasn't supposed to be a writer. Simultaneously I believed I was supposed to write about black people — and only black

people. And only within a strictly limited set of topics deemed relevant to black people, because only black people would ever read anything I'd written. Took me years after I started writing to create a protagonist who looked like me. And then once I started doing so, it took me years to write a protagonist who was something different.

Myths tell us what those like us have done, can do, should do. Without myths to lead the way, we hesitate to leap forward. Listen to the wrong myths, and we might even go back a few steps.

Throughout history, all over this world, black people have been scholars and inventors, hard workers on whose backs more than one nation was built.

This is true, but not the whole truth.

After my parents divorced, I spent every summer visiting my father in New York. We spent every night of those summers watching *Star Trek* (the original series) and *The Twilight Zone*, which came on back to back in syndication on Channel Eleven. It was father-daughter bonding over geekery. It was also, for me, a lesson in how hard it was to dream of the future when every depiction of it said you don't have one.

Because *Star Trek* takes place 500 years from now, supposedly long after humanity has transcended racism,

sexism, etc. But there's still only one black person on the crew, and she's the receptionist.

This is disingenuous. I know now what I did not understand then: that most Science Fiction doesn't realistically depict the future; it reacts to the present in which it is written. So for the 1960s, Uhura's presence was groundbreaking — and her marginalization was to be expected. But I wasn't watching the show in the 1960s. I was watching it in the 1980s, amid the destitute, gritty New York of Tawana Brawley and Double Dutch and Public Enemy. I was watching it as one of five billion members of the human species — nearly 80% of whom were people of color even then. I was watching it as a tween/teen girl who'd grown up being told that she could do anything if she only put her mind to it, and I looked to Science Fiction to provide me with useful myths about my future: who I might become, what was possible, how far I and my descendants might go.

The myth that *Star Trek* planted in my mind: people like me exist in the future, but there are only a few of us. Something's obviously going to kill off a few billion people of color and the majority of women in the next few centuries. And despite it being, y'know, the future, my descendants' career options are going to be even more limited than my own.

Fortunately in 1992, reality gave me a better myth: Mae Jemison became the first black woman in space. She wasn't the goddamn receptionist. Only after that came *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, with its much-vaunted black captain.

In the present, black people can be anything they want to be. This is not true. Yet.

For a long time, I was ashamed that I wrote Science Fiction and fantasy.

I write a little of everything — cyberpunk, dark fantasy, slipstream, space opera, liminal fantasy. But it bothered me most to write epic fantasy because, well, as far as I knew, epic fantasy was Tolkien's British mythos. It was D&D campaigns writ large with stalwart pale-skinned people killing Always Chaotic Evil dark-skinned people, if the latter were even given the courtesy of being called people. It was doorstopper-sized novels whose covers were emblazoned with powerful-looking white characters brandishing enormous phallic symbols; it was stories set in medieval pseudo-England about bookworms or farmboys becoming wealthy, mighty kings and getting the (usually blonde) girl. Epic fantasy was certainly not black women doing... well, anything.

And that's because there were no black women in the past, right? There will be no black women in the future. There have never been black women in any speculated setting. There are black women in reality, but that reality is constrained within wholly different myths from what's seen in fantasy novels. (The Welfare Queen. The Music Video Ho. The Jezebel. The Help.)

And once upon a time I wondered: Is writing epic fantasy not somehow a betrayal? Did I not somehow do a disservice to my own reality by paying so much attention to the power fantasies of disenfranchised white men?

But. Epic fantasy is not merely what Tolkien made it.

This genre is rooted in the epic — and the truth is that there are plenty of epics out there which feature people like me. Sundiata's badass mother. Dihya, warrior queen of the Amazighs. The Kain Queens. The Mino Warriors. Hatshepsut's reign. Everything Harriet Tubman ever did. And more, so much more, just within the African components of my heritage. I haven't even begun to explore the non-African stuff. So given all these myths, all these examinations of the possible... how can I not imagine more? How can I not envision an epic set somewhere other than medieval England, about someone other than an awkward white boy? How can I not use every building-block of my history and heritage and imagination when I make it up?

And how dare I disrespect that history, profane all my ancestors' suffering and struggles, by giving up the freedom to imagine that they've won for me.

So here is why I write what I do: We all have futures. We all have pasts. We all have stories. And we all, every single one of us, no matter who we are and no matter what's been taken from us or what poison we've internalized or how hard we've had to work to expel it — we all get to dream.

*In the future, as in the present, as in the past, black people
will build many new worlds.*

This is true. I will make it so.

And you will help me.

*N. K. Jemisin is an American science fiction and fantasy
writer, and psychologist. This essay was written in 2012
and published on the writer's website nkjemisin.com*



Is it ok if we stop?

BOLA SHONUBI

SONDRA PERRY:

I thought we could start with this reoccurring dream that I have about my grandmother, I haven't had it in a while. It holds a lot of space in my brain.

I started the project thinking about a dream I wish I'd had. So this is actually a dream I had. So the dream starts where I'm in our neighbourhood, the neighbourhood that my grandmother raised the family in, and it's flooding.

and I'm trying to find her. and the, the neighbourhood is two tiered. So we're on the top tier, and it's flooding. But then there's like a, there's like a bottom tier of the neighbourhood, which we're trying to get down to that isn't flooding.

and so I'm going through the houses, and I find her and I know she's my grandmother, but she doesn't look like my grandmother. and we get to this part of the neighbourhood that has a slide, almost like a

amusement park slide that goes down to this other part of the neighbourhood. and I put her on my back, and then we go down the slide. and we get to this camp, like this encampment, where all of the people from the neighbourhood who have escaped the flood are. and that's kind of where the dream ends. and it's like, it's really curious. It's hard to kind of know what to feel about it, you know.

BOLA SHONUBI: *First of all, it's a repetitive dream. That means that it's really important. It keeps on coming back because the latent content that is the real meaning, wants to be unravelled, wants to be found out by you, by your mind, it keeps on coming back. and probably each time you dream it, there's a bit more to it, it's not exactly the same as it was the last time. I can't tell you what it means without thinking through what you're associating with. So we'll start with that first. But what are your initial thoughts and feelings?*

SONDRA: Um, I think, water is very symbolically powerful, you know, it holds, water is the reason life exists on earth - water sustains life, but it also can be quite dangerous, you know. But also, just thinking about my relationship to my grandmother, like, she pretty much raised us alongside my mom, she took care of us when my mom was not work and when we lived near her we'd go to her house after school. So we spent a lot of time with my grandmother, I think more than any of the other grandchildren. and we had a really good relationship, we still do, we talk a lot. We talked about things that are difficult

for other people in our family to talk about - you have a big family and sometimes we're close sometimes we're not, you know? She's a big part of my life and she's just like everyone, she's a complicated person, but I really admire her, a lot. She was a kind of protection around me too, you know, she made me feel safe. That house that she lived in was, is, really important to me, because it's the state of stability, you know, it's the place that you can always go if you need a meal, or to talk, and talk, it's always been there in my life, in my time, my time here.

BOLA: *You spoke about water having different meanings, symbolising life, and I have been thinking about water, floods, as over spilling of emotion. I don't know what kind of emotion yet, but it is not being contained. and then, with the different levels of the neighbourhood, this could somewhat refer to different levels of the conscious.*

and the slide - every time you think about a dream, when we explore a dream, it can have a different meaning, but in the end, it all comes together. The slides, are these a way into your unconscious? Interesting, moving through the overwhelming, old emotions into your unconscious, taking your grandmother there. So what do you want her to see? What do you want her to know about you? and there are people in the neighbourhood who escaped, what do the neighbours know about you? You're going into that part of your unconscious mind. That's how I'm picking it up.

Slides c~n ~lso be pl~yful. You h~d fun with Gr~ndm~, I guess. On your b~ck, th~t's ~ pl~yful kind of thing too, isn't it? So there's ~ pl~yful thing there. But ~lso there's the seriousness of the flow, it c~n be quite thre~tening. I wonder wh~t you're m~king of this right now.

SONDRA: I'm re~lly interested in wh~t you're s~ying ~bout the slide going through the unconscious, ~nd I think th~t m~ybe there's like something to this, this ide~ of the emotion becoming overpowering - like ~ cup being so full th~t it just floods. I remember when we h~ve spoken before, something th~t re~lly, re~lly stuck with me w~s this ide~ of w~nting to be home ~nd close, but ~lso w~nting to esc~pe. I like th~t. I like it right ~w~y. You know, like the f~mily home. Th~t's the found~tion being flooded out to ~ point where you h~ve to kind of go somewhere else, I think th~t re~lly reson~tes.

BOLA: *So, m~ybe you're s~ying th~t there's ~ lot of emotion in the f~mily home, outside of your gr~ndm~. Floods ~re very dest~bilising, ~nd perh~ps if the emotions ~re ~ble to overflow, the fe~r is th~t they will dest~bilise. So I'm wondering wh~t you were running ~w~y from in the flood of emotion? Wh~t is th~t flood of emotion? ~nd ~lso, it's interesting th~t you weren't being c~rried, you w~nted to move her ~w~y from emotion th~t w~s - distr~ught?*

SONDRA: Ye~h, I me~n, like you s~id, in every f~mily, there's ~lw~ys these ups ~nd downs - people getting ~long, people not getting ~long, but there's

~lso this protective feeling ~nd something th~t tr~nsfers when ~ child becomes older, ~nd your p~rent or ~ gr~ndp~rent gets older, ~nd m~ybe c~n't do the things th~t they could do for themselves before. I don't c~re-t~ke for my gr~ndmother, but when you go over to the house ~nd you help to cle~n or cook, you do sit into ~ c~ret~king kind of role. But I ~lso feel like, I do h~ve ~ bit of guilt ~round th~t, like I should c~ll more, or I should go over more.

BOLA: *M~ybe you w~nt to rescue her, gr~ndm~, or rescue yourself from the guilt th~t you feel bec~use you're not ~round her ~ll the time? But before I go on, I ~lso w~nt to s~y I'm sensing ~nd picking up some resist~nce. ~nd th~t's norm~l. Especi~lly bec~use, you know, I'm ~ new ~n~lyst to you. ~lso, bec~use ~ lot of the time when we h~ve repetitive dre~ms, reoccurring dre~ms, we ~re protecting ~g~inst ~ rel underst~nding.*

SONDRA: C~n you t~lk ~bout th~t in the latent ~nd manifest?

BOLA: *Ye~h, I me~n, the latent ~nd m~nifest, the m~nifest is wh~t we see ~nd the latent is the deeper me~ning behind this - ~nd they c~n be in competition with one ~nother. There's ~lso something else which we c~ll division, second~ry division, where the conscious m~nifest dre~ming tries to m~ke sense of the latent ~nd it c~n ~ctu~lly t~ke you ~w~y from the deeper me~ning ~s you're re~soning it out. Th~t's protecting you ~g~inst re~lly unt~ngling the content. I'm picking it up ~ bit here, I don't doubt th~t you h~ve these feelings of w~nting to*

do more, but its stopping us from getting into the latent part, or more intellectual part of the dream. You're resisting, unconsciously defending something. Maybe you don't want to know. It takes time to really work through this, and I'm sure you've probably taken this dream and thought through each section, and whenever you think through it, there's more understanding and more meaning.

SONDRA: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

BOLA: *Whenever there's a dream, there will be resistance to the patient because sometimes, you just don't really want to know.*

SONDRA: Yeah, yeah, I know what that resistance is. I know, it is because I've been trying to fight. It's like, I think the flood is actually, I think it's an anger. I think it's like an immense, like, urge to want to start new, wipe things away. Just like, level everything out. So new things can happen.

But, I think "I wonder why its a flood?" but I grew up very religious and I don't know if it's because of that, the biblical flood. I love these places that I grew up in, the relationships with my familial group and things like that. But, there's so many things that I just wish could completely change, even like, time travel change, go into the past, shift how people work, trauma, all of those things. I think it definitely shows up as an anger for sure. And it's like, it's sometimes it's, it's quite hard to know where it is coming from, or not coming from but where it's geared toward? Is it certain individuals,

is it a situation? Sometimes it's kind of hard to figure it out, because familial traumas are wrapped up in people and you don't always think about people as people who've gone through something else, and then enact those things later, because they're unconscious of it.

It's like, that house that my grandmother has, she really struggled to get that place, she essentially had to lie to the mortgage agent, she had to have a male friend come to sign the house on the mortgage, because they refused to let her sign it on her own. Because she was a woman, and that story makes that space so important.

and I would really love it to stay in the family, but at the same time that place is so entrenched in trauma. It's such a weird sensation. Knowing that Black people in the United States have like the worst home ownership rates since the Fair Housing act was passed in 1964, it's actually worse than it was before '64 when it was legal to discriminate against Black people in that in housing.

It's worse now. So I hear something like that and think "this house should stay in this family" but then also, I never want to go there.

BOLA: *So, okay, you just said the flood is anger. And I mean, I'm sure that of the other emotions in the US, anger is an overarching one. And you mentioned the tides of Noah - do you use the flood to wash away all bad*

*people? I wonder what else you're trying to wish away?
and whether something happened in that house?*

SONDRA: Many things happened in that house, and that's the, lots of immense things that I think are foundational to why folks are struggling now. So it feels like an understatement to say that that physical location is complicated.

BOLA: and you said that there were neighbours in the area, too. They're not necessarily your neighbours, they could be or they could be family members who also have a relationship to that space.

SONDRA: That's the thing. The only way I could describe the space we moved into in the dream is like a refugee camp, from what we see on the news. It wasn't safe space, but far enough away that the flood couldn't reach - it was cramped, people everywhere, tents, it was totally manic but it was safe. Safe for them.

BOLA: How are you feeling right now?

SONDRA: Raw. Feeling raw. It's ok, we're getting deeper into what all of this really means. It's interesting how it all shows up when you're not asking for it, you know, I'm not intentionally suppressing these things but if it's in your dreams, then I'm thinking it will eventually show up in life. And how, I might not recognise it, like I hadn't in my dream.

BOLA: We can go deeper into latent content. But it's not always safe. That's what resistance is coming up. Because parts of you know, there's a part of you that knows that. What are you thinking about now, Sondra?

SONDRA: Okay, a couple things. How this will be perceived. And like, anger, and I'm making an artwork about this stuff, you know, I want it to be true. I kind of wonder where anger is in this work. I think it needs to be here. And now I'm just thinking about the work. You know, when I when I went back to North Carolina with my grandmother, we couldn't find the land that she grew up on. And people have been asking me about it. And I was like, "oh, it was just really sad." And I'm actually not sad about it, I'm very angry, about the whole thing, right?

First of all, she had to leave North Carolina, at 13 and went through hell. Second of all, in a weird way I'm angry at her for forgetting. And then just angry at this country, you know, that like forced Black people to migrate to the North because it was dangerous for them to live down there. And then it was still dangerous, you know? And then me and my cousins, all 22 of us have no access to that part of our history at all.

We tried everything, we went to the State archives, we brought her down there, we researched everything that we could, and we have no access to it. And, that's messed up. So, messed up. And we're already living a diasporic life where we don't have access to deep ancestral stuff.

and we can't even find two generations away, because of how messed up this country is. That makes me really mad. And I will say, "Oh, I'm sad," no, man, I'm mad, it's wack. And then, I guess it gets sad, because it's like, we're far from the best, the only people who have this story, far from it. What was so anxiety-inducing about the whole experience was that there were big houses from the 1800s everywhere in that town, so you're driving down the street, you see an abandoned house and you're like, Grandma, do you recognise this? She's wracking her brain and is like, "I have no idea." And then you drive five more minutes. And there's another abandoned property. We met a lot of Black people down there that were like, oh yeah, I think I know the family, they live this way, they live that way, you know, all of this stuff. And we still couldn't find anything. So it was like, we were like, almost close, like, super close. But then, I don't even know what I would do if we found the house. There's a lot of this that just infuriates me.

BOLA: So, this flood of anger is not just specific to the family but on other levels to the treatment of Black people - how you have been displaced, a flood displaces people, the levels, the traveling of your grandmother from South to North. It's very nuanced Sondra.

and it will take time, you can't unpick dreams in one session, it will take time because you have to be careful in going into the unconscious, your psyche, you have to be careful. That goes for anybody and their dreams. We don't play around with it, it is not a toy, we have to be

careful going into the unconscious and keep safe. Because if it is not made safe, you can shut off and go back to the manifest rather than the latent as a barrier comes up, and it becomes more repressed.

art is expression, it shares the dark and the light, and I hope that you can put forward this flood of anger into your artwork, a flood of rage that hasn't just been happening to you as a young girl or woman but you as a race.

SONDRA: Yes. I don't know why I feel anger, but when I was young, anger was seen as disrespectful – you don't get rewarded for being angry, and you deal with it in other ways

BOLA: So, your anger was repressed, but there always comes a point when anger comes out or overflows. This is what the latent dream tells us and this is what happened a few moments ago, it burst out.

SONDRA: Is it ok if we stop?

BOLA: Let's stop then.

This text is a transcription of a dream analysis session which took place between Sondra Perry and London-based psychotherapist Bola Shonubi in October 2021.



TURNPIKE LANE

Turnpike Lane TADE THOMPSON

“Gentle, are you sure this is randomised?”

He asked this casually, like it didn't mean I was going to spend the weekend at the office.

I thought of a thousand sarcastic responses, but he was my boss, and I like my job, so I didn't say anything. Who needed to go home anyway? Long commute, obnoxious neighbours, tiny even by London standards. Vending machine food is nutritious and good for the soul.

We stood there, in front of the monitor, watching what my deep dreaming AI threw up on the screen: the face of an elderly black man, about my grandfather's age, though definitely not him.

“It'll be different by Monday,” I said. In English, this meant I'd stay up, in the office, to fix the code.

I didn't really want to go home anyway. It had snowed and rained and snowed again. Ice like a motherfucker. I didn't want to drive on that shit. My ass was built for the tropics, not London.

He left and it was just me and my errant software in the offices of WhizBang! Media. For real, that

was their name. I didn't work there; I worked for myself. I had a specific contract. I thought I had finished my part, but this...head was in the way.

My output was meant to be a kind of display for the lobby. The dreaming AI was supposed to generate a series of images that were extrapolations of thousands of scans I exposed it to. In most instances, the output would be strange and often horrifying distortions of what it means to be human or animal. For some reason I didn't yet understand, my program would only project the face of this older black man.

I cracked my neck, slurped down industrial strength coffee, and did battle with my keyboard.

As I checked lines and lines of code the office got emptier and emptier until it was just me and the muted clacking of my fingertips on keyboard.

"Now that we're alone, Gentle, can I have a conversation with you?" said the computer-extrapolated black man.

Which he shouldn't have been able to, because this wasn't a simulation. "Is this a trick?" I asked.

"No, dummy, I'm talking to you. Did my descendants become daft since I moved on?"

"I--"

"What's that mess you're eating?"

I looked to my right where an open packet of sesame seeds languished. I looked back at the screen and the man was in the process of stepping out of the screen. He pushed through a transparent membrane, and this snapped back as he landed on the floor. He was short, a little above four feet and he was naked.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Gentle, I am a reminder. A gentle reminder," he said and barked a laugh at his own joke. He reached for the seeds and started to chomp. "Would it hurt you to feed me from time to time?"

"I've fallen asleep at the desk, haven't I?" I said.

"Not really. I'm your dream hidden in the dream of your AI. I slipped in between lines of code. How else could we get your attention?"

"We?"

"Aye. There are some you need to know about. Your ancestors first, of course. Me. Us." His hand swept behind him and the entire office space was full of black people, young, old, in splendor and in scarcity, portly and poorly.

"My ancestors." Their eyes were kindly, but accusing.

"You will be us one day, Gentle. You should honour us, put alcohol in our mouths, food in our bellies, sweet songs in our ears."

None of this made sense to me, but some of the people looked familiar.

The hand reaching for the seeds came out of the pack looking like a tentacle and the old man slapped me with it. I blinked from shock, but when I opened my eyes I was in deep water. Seaweed and algae all around me. I panicked because I cannot swim. I learned, but it didn't take.

The man, my ancestor, floated towards the light and dragged me along with his tentacle. We broke the surface and followed breaking waves to shore. The light was the moon, gibbous, pregnant in the night sky.

The water seemed like a sea when I emerged from it, with white froth, but now it was a river, black,

flowing, unstoppable like time and brutality.

“The second group you have neglected, Gentle. Our Mothers. Iyami Osorongá. The Birds. The World. The Wise Ones.”

They stood among trees, dark shadows, glowing heads radiating power. I felt my own head fill with flames and pressure. I fell to the sand. They spoke as one. “Just a little tribute, Gentle. A little regard. It goes a long way.”

I hid my face from them. I wanted to click my heels and find myself home in my tiny Turnpike Lane flat.

I have a dream, a regular dream, where I’m trying to get home, but I can never find my way. I take each street slowly, up and down, north to south, and I can’t find the turning that leads me home. I end up walking with sex workers and people armed with guns and knives and resentment. I usually wake up fearful.

I felt the hot breath of the old man on the back of my neck.

“One more thing, Gentle.”

Vibration. The entire world seemed to quake and a powerful wind blew, buffeting me. I opened my eyes and light obliterated the moon. It seemed at first to be coming from everywhere at once, but, no. It was from above.

A vast spaceship filled the sky, still, hovering. It was a disc dotted with lights and surrounded by dozens of smaller silvery spheres. The smaller ships were the size of football fields. I recognized the trappings of UFOs from the communal consciousness of the global West, but I knew this was something else and perceived it twice. I knew this was something else and perceived it twice.

The small man shouted something, but it was lost in the di.

I rose towards the mothership, feeling the kind of fear reserved for angel visitations and traffic stops.

Panels opened.

“Tune out of channel zero,” said the old man, clear as a pregnancy test.

They emerged in their dozens, astronauts, cosmonauts, spacefolk in fishbowl helmets and trailing umbilicals leading into the placenta of the heavens.

I knew them in my blood and in my flaming head. I did not need their reproach; my soul condemned me all on its own.

Perhaps because of this they remained silent.

I dropped into the waters again, the briey depths hiding the tears on my cheeks.

Down, down, down, I sank.

Ended at my desk.

Bright sunlight scattered into dapples by the tree outside the window.

On my screen, a rapid uncanny valley face with sixteen eyes.

No sign of the old man.

The AI worked. I went home to Turnpike Lane.

Noise from them Nigerians and ting opposite my house; three guys hanging out in their front garden.

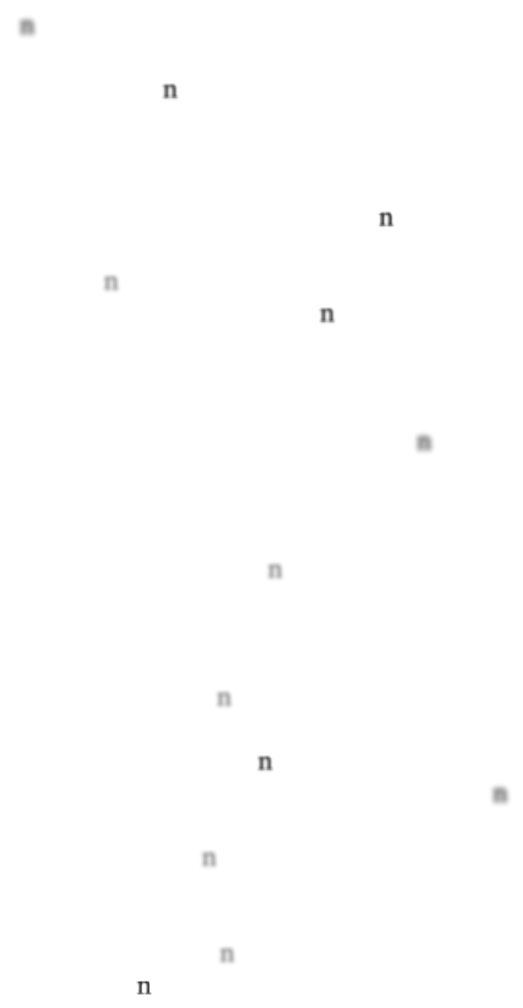
“Bobo Gentle! How now?”

“Back from work, in it?” I said. I didn’t know his name and had no idea how he knew mine.

Inside, I opened a bottle and for the first time I spilled some on the ground.

For the old man and them.

Tade Thompson is a British-born Nigerian psychiatrist and science fiction author. This text was written in response to the artwork, Lineage for a Phantom Zone.



Oranges

KAREEM REID

The scent of oranges fills the room.

The fragrant citrus fruit evokes a sensory link between Sondra Perry and a family myth, passed down by her grandmother. *'I wanted to place her in the space of imagination'*, Perry has said of her grandmother's influence on *Lineage for a Phantom Zone*, an immersive installation developed between 2020 and 2022 for the Beyeler Foundation in Basel and Serpentine, London.

The work began with photograph of Perry's grandmother, that *'was in her room for a long time when I was growing up'*, in which she stands as a young woman inside the foundations of the house in which she grew up, on the land in Wise County, North Carolina where she worked on as a sharecropper, before escalating racial tension caused her to migrate to New Jersey.

Perry's family history is a prominent part of her video installations. During a trip to find the site of her grandmother's former home, Perry's family visited the State Archives to find evidence of their history, *'we researched everything that we could,*

and we have no access to it.'

In this frustrating lack of documentation, the resulting sense of loss and a subsequent recuperation, Perry has mobilized the restorative potential of technology to build an archive of Black solidarity in contemporary visual culture. Filming her family pilgrimage to the American South, fluid camera movements destabilise the horizon, conveying Perry's interest in dreaming as both a mode of transportation to reach different places and times, and as a portal for astral projection or out of body experiences. Perry's searching camera roams the landscape, attempting to locate her grandmother's land. Its aerial perspective glides above a treescape. It floats, spins, pivots, and twists.

A long shot captures a forest of cypress trees below an expansive, panoramic sky. Entering the canopy, the camera pauses at a cabin owned by her cousin, the only identifiable remnant of her heritage.

Speaking to this place, cypress trees hang upside down inside Perry's installation, echoing the disorientation experienced while dreaming and the confusion of her search. The trees surround a levitating 1930s salmon sofa which floats six feet above the ground. This centrepiece is a replica of the couch pictured in a photographic family portrait of Perry and her

brother as infants. Like the original, the sofa is wrapped in transparent plastic – kept to maintain its pristine condition. However, in the artwork its plastic covering splits and extends to form a transparent curtain, creating an enclosure for viewing, with the base of the sofa replaced by a television screen.

Vintage barbershop chairs from Trade Winds Hair Salon, a former beauty salon in Newark which currently acts as Perry's studio, stand stationed between cypresses and sofa. Augmenting their robotic elements, the styling chairs have been fitted with screens and hydraulic systems, transforming them into automatic devices. Their movements push them into a phantom zone, evoking the presence of the previous life of Perry's studio as a local Black site of beauty, community, and self-fashioning. The salon's name is a reference to the terms and costs of mass forced migration, enslavement and the impact of the lives lost in the oceanic abyss of the Black Atlantic and the collective psyche of their descendants.

Perry's voice, distorted and manipulated in a multi-tracked vocalizer, delivers a sung narration. The song's refrains chart the disorientation and indeterminacy of our interior worlds, and the wrought processes of a subconscious state:

What do you remember?

We're in a field, in the picture that Grandma has on her dresser, where she grew up in Wise.

We can see the foundation of the house she grew up in.

We can see people but they're far away. Because of that we can't recognize anyone's face.

When we try to walk towards someone, it's like walking underwater.

We can reach them if we stretch our arms really long, and when we stretch, our hands dissolve into their bodies.

Perry plays the theremin, an electronic instrument with no strings. Careful gestures summon and control the pitch of the notes. On screen, a cropped image emphasizes the artist's hands in motion. Accompanied by the theremin's ominous, buzzing drone, Perry's roving camera captures oceanic waves up close. Perry's video installations have often centered on the power of the ocean waves. Here, the roils and ripples cut briefly to Perry's masked family members – footage taken from the artist's *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation* (2015) and *Wall 2* (2017), a computer-generated flesh-wall using magnified footage of Perry's own skin. With *Lineage for a Phantom Zone*, Perry has created a constantly dissolving archive of images framed in re-purposed and defamiliarized furniture,

programmed to display a glitching montage, dense with layers of superimposed imagery. Linear perspective is in freefall here, everything is upside down.

Woven among Perry's hypnotic landscape imagery is archival footage of 'Black people at rest, Black people doing the mundane, Black people running, walking, talking in fellowship with one another'. A woman selects a piece of fruit at the grocery store; another brushes grass from her summer dress as she waves to the camera; an athlete jogs on a treadmill with wires plugged into a machine that monitors his breathing and movement. A group of women join hands, laughing in a circle. Momentary signals in a mass of blurred objects. With dreamlike ephemerality, they dissolve into pixelation, reabsorbed by the landscape. The unreliable instability of dreams and memory is pointed to further by translucent text intermittently appearing against Perry's rapidly changing topography, its borders barely discernible.

Perry's artistic engagement with Black people's entanglement with machine, imaging, and surveillance technologies blends the fantastic with the mundane minutiae of everyday life. The re-contextualization of archival footage foregrounds the preservation of the material cultures that characterize our beauty rituals, our family traditions, our histories and our conversations.

Phantom Zone Coda

'The subject of the dream is the dreamer' [1]

In my dream, I saw a way to survive, and
I was full of joy! [2]

Gramma sealed the sofa in plastic, in the room
filled with the pictures and figurines. Do you
remember the house in Jamaica? The sound as you
squirmed - the squeak, squelch, and crunch of bare skin
made adhesive by sweat sticking on cool plastic
in mid-summer heat?

Mixed with the daydreams and sofa napping are
many recurring, unresolvable dreams of migration
and searching. Then the futile task
of gathering remnant
shards of a disappearing dream once awake.

The leftovers are an unrelenting flurry of emotion:
dread and anticipation.

In our dreams, we see a way to survive, and we are full
of joy!

Riding the bus through zones that cut a city
up into legible, mappable pieces.
Clenching a tangerine husk in my palm, the scent

brings wandering, wildin dream flashbacks interrupting a routine, detached
observation of the GPS tracker dot steadily
moving across my phone screen.

Imagination
is bound up with memory. There are many layers of
rind to peel through, and each one unleashes a cool,
stinging spray of misty, bitter zest.

*Kareem Reid is a writer and artist based in London.
He is the founder of Black queer club night Body Party
(2015 – 2018). His work has appeared in numerous
publications internationally.*

[1] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 1992

[2] A riff on the 1991 Jenny Holzer artwork
and slogan from her Survival series:
*'IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE
AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY'*

Sondra Perry in conversation with Isaac Julien

SONDRA PERRY:

I've been interested in psychoanalysis: the analyst and the person in the session. I'm kind of interested in what that looks like in a ritual. But then also thinking about the Freudian foundations around dreams, around the unconscious, around kind of repression.

And in something that I learned about the dreams being lost, thinking that your dreams are being lost. I don't know if anyone else has had this experience, when you wake up, and you feel the dream disappearing, you know? I think a Freudian analysis would say that the dream is actually being reabsorbed. So it's not going somewhere outside of your body, it's actually being reabsorbed, so you can deal with it again. And I'm kind of interested in that in relationship to lineage, but I'm also interested in that in relationship to a geological stacking, dream upon dream upon dream, that has to find its way back over and over and over again, like kind of this time based, I don't know... something. That's where video comes in for me.

ISAAC JULIEN: *Yes, because I mean, in a way you're quite light touch in relationship to technology. And, in a way, I think in your generation, there's a taking for granted of the new technologies to articulate things which are of great concern to the society as a whole. So, in this work there's also this possibility that you're creating for us to connect to stories that haven't really been told. I'm thinking about this question of the role of the family in your work. And how that is really very important in terms of not separating these categories, and making that become very much sort of a central theme in your work.*

SONDRA: *Yeah, I mean, family tends to be kind of the starting point, just because it's useful to, to think about the broader histories that we're interested in, within this thing that feels like it should be close, but feels like we should have a deeper relation to. But I think a lot of times, the reality is these relations tend to be very distant. And figuring out that distance I think can bring us to our understanding of how we are situated historically. I went down south twice for this trip. And all of the footage that you that you're seeing, all of it, except for I think one piece of it, you're seeing is from the first trip. And the second trip, I brought my grandmother with us, and we couldn't find anything, because she can't remember things, you know, and she was also very young when she left and so there are lots of things that I was trying to grasp on to, there's a video that I was trying to make, that was a tour de force, like videos on every wall, and I was trying to tell a very concise story. And I realised that I couldn't do that, I couldn't do it,*

because I didn't have access to it.

ISAAC: *So in a way, I think, you know, through your work, you're creating a kind of archive as well, both of a family, a community, but in a way utilising the aesthetics of video art, for a different end. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what this commission has meant for you, and the project that you're going to be making, and showing in February.*

SONDRA: *Yeah, we're still living through a really treacherous time. And this commission came in the middle of all of this and it was really nice. I am building an archive, but it's an archive that that some of us will see. And then there there's there are things that none of the people in this room will see, that as an archive for my family. And this prize is allowing me to create two things at once, something that my folks can dive into you, images, video, all of this stuff around my grandmother and grandfather and where they grew up and all of these things, and some of that isn't for us, sometimes some of that isn't for y'all. And that's okay. But some of it will be, and that's okay, too, you know. So it's allowing a couple of things to happen, which I'm really excited about. And I love making art, I love it, and the opportunities that I have to make it I am so grateful for. So, you know, that's what it means to me.*

ISAAC: *But I have to say that I think the commission has reached a certain maturity. And I think that maturity came out of the experiences of 2020. I lived in the United States for 15 months. And as someone who wasn't born there, but to experience this moment of*

Black Lives Matter, of the terrible atrocities that took place, I think there's a way in which you make a work, which courageously takes us tap the step away from the kinds of images which we were bombard with, and enter into this realm of dreaming to allow the space for the possibility of desire to be part of the artist's work, and not to replicate the kinds of images which became very synonymous, I would say, with violence. I mean, I think it's a very important sort of antidote. So it feels like there is a kind of seriousness to what you're doing. And I think there's ways in which being able to share your kind of research processes, but also the way you're able to bring together these different sculptural elements. Because you actually studied as a ceramicist as well, didn't you?

SONDRA: Yeah, being kind of raised as a ceramicist, you are embedded in material culture in a way that never leaves you. So I think of moving image in the same way that I think about ceramics, moving image, technology, is material culture, there's nothing ephemeral about it, everything comes from the earth, in some way, shape, or form, and it will go back in this in some way, shape, or form. And so that is the most interesting thing, I think that's the most useful part of growing up as sculpture person, you know, what I mean.

ISAAC: *But also, I think there's a wonderful way in which you're able to take that language, and make it fairly accessible because, of course, you know, if you think about it, the way that new technologies have developed, they have made the possibilities of a new language, of a new art. I think there's the sculptor in you that is repurposing that language, and making it become more holistic for*

thinking about the ways in which we want to reimagine ourselves, and the ways in which we want to create poetry within the world, because I think there is a very poetic aspect in your works. And I wonder if you agree.

SONDRA: Sure. I agree. I loved all of that. I know that there are kind of like these moments where medium disappears a bit, which I really enjoy. But also it's just like I said before, sometimes the work just needs what it needs. And then you kind of think about how you're going to figure out where it sits later.

I think about technologies like satellites, satellite imaging, things like that, that we're more connected to the land and I think about those in relationship to imaging technologies of people, surveillance, of course. I do kind of question this idea of newness around them, you know. Sometimes I think about how new technologies are just reconfigurations of a certain politic, of a certain way that we think of seeing those types of things.

And I guess my interest in poetics around that, is that poetics can get to things in a different way than maybe something else can. I think a lot of times when we think about poetics, we think about indirectness, but I don't think of that. I think that we can kind of think it kind of gets a little closer, actually.

This text is a transcription of a conversation that took place between Sondra Perry and Isaac Julien CBA at Fondation Beyeler, upon the preview of the artwork at Art Basel in September 2021. Isaac Julien CBA is a Turner prize-nominated artist and filmmaker.

Dream Diary

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