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As told to Annie Bielski, 2861 words.

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On creating the story you don't see

Writer and performer Shanekia McIntosh on the confidence that comes from sharing your writing, the importance of accessible language, and how her work is a testament to the necessity of community.

Across your roles as poet, performer, organizer, and your job working with the youth at a library, there are common threads of accessibility, community, and creating space. These themes are on the minds of a lot of people right now. To start, will you talk about the performances and parties you organize and curate?

There's a quote or something I read or someone said to me, "Make the story that you don't see, make the thing that you don't see." There's this part that could be really overwhelming, especially when you get into gate-keeping and cool points and clout and caché and all of that stuff. It's really easy [to think], "I don't see myself in this and I'm really discouraged and I'm over it." But it's about following on that other impulse of "I don't see myself, and instead of waiting around for that to happen, I'm going to make it happen."

Free Range is a semi-annual Black performance night that I co-curate with Tschabalala Self and Mike Mosby. Tschabalala is a really amazing artist, and Mike is a really amazing DJ and overall community person. We do the party at Half Moon in Hudson. I grew up in New York City, so at this point I'm like, "Yup, this is just the way the world is right now," this kind of acceleration of class and privilege.

Hudson is having a moment like that, though I think the difference is that it's smaller and full of a lot of people who have moved here with a strong desire to be a part of a team. I think a lot of people have really taken up that community responsibility of trying to be accessible. Half Moon's definitely a space like that. It's one of the few places in Hudson where you will see everyone in the community, from people who've grown up here their whole lives, the Black community, the Hispanic community, the hipsters, working class—you just really get a full mix of Hudson. We were like, "We have to do it in a place that everyone feels like they do show up and be comfortable."

We've also done Free Range in different contexts. There was one at Art Basel in Miami, and one at Art Omi last summer. It's been a special moment, and the community shows up for it too, which is great. Taking a year to do it allows for us to really put our energy into it and to make it the environment we want it to be. We're not trying to oversaturate.

With TRIPTYCH, I partnered with Joey De Jesus, who's a really good friend, poet, and all around amazing individual who is now running for office. The idea of TRIPTYCH at its core is that it's one singular performance, so we're really curating people to be part of that, especially artists of color, Black, brown, and queer artists. [These artists] are making work that we knew people would enjoy, but they don't necessarily have the platform or space to be considered as acts to come to a place like Hudson or a place like Basilica Hudson. We like the idea of people bleeding into each other in sounds, and there's been some interesting mash up in collaborations that have happened because of that. We don't really have set breaks. Everyone figures out their spot where they want to go, and usually it's a circle or something. We got to do that for three years, and since Joey's running for office right now, they don't have time. It was like, "Okay, it's called TRIPTYCH. We did it for three years." It was a lovely thing to have the opportunity to do.

What has your path toward writing and sharing your writing been like?

As long as I've been reading, there's always been a need to write my story. Something that I held as the deepest desire of my heart was to be a writer. My mom and my dad are both immigrants. My whole family's from Jamaica. I'm first generation, and I think a lot of first generation kids can relate to this pressure of expectation, the expectation of, "We sacrificed for you to be here," or, "You have so many more

opportunities than we had”—that constant reminder. So the dream for parents like that is the lawyer, the doctor. Everyone was like, “You’re going to be a lawyer,” and I was like, “Nooo! Okay, fine. That’s what I’ll be.” But I wanted to express myself in other ways.

A few years ago I had to do a lot of work on myself. Part of that was really putting pen to paper and writing out. I was really in the process of doing it, and then [writer] Hallie Goodman, who has this event Volume Reading Series, came to me one day and said, “Okay, so I think you should do a reading...you’re going to do it.” And I was like, “Oh yeah, I don’t...” and then she said, “Okay, so we’re doing it in February. Thanks. Bye.”

That really just kind of kicked me into the door when I really needed it. I love her endlessly for that because it forced me to institute a practice for my writing, which I hadn’t really had for a long time. That reading was interesting because I think that what I wrote was crap, but it was really cathartic and really necessary for what needed to happen. Ever since then it’s just like, “Okay, now I have a writing practice, and here’s my work.” Confidence is a big thing. When you don’t have access to expressing yourself, and that’s your great desire—if you don’t have the confidence in your work, which comes from doing it, it’s really hard to put yourself out there.

Who are some writers you’re drawn to?

I love writers who are really accessible. I love Octavia Butler and Kurt Vonnegut, actually. I’m also a really big fan of social science theory, philosophy, and Walter Benjamin—he’s a huge inspiration for my work. I don’t think that people get that, which is fine. What makes those writers so powerful to me is their ability of taking topics, like stuff that we’re dealing with now—race, class, gender, you know, existential crises, theories, concepts—they were able to capture that and put it in a narrative that a 12-year-old could read.

I feel like there’s a thing with literature, especially when I was in school and taking lit classes around “lit nerds,” I always got uncomfortable because there was this thing of over-contextualizing the text. I always was like, “Wait, did they do that?” They make you read stuff that’s kind of inaccessible. Then it’s like, “You got it. This is a canon. Inaccessible, but we’re going to dissect it. Now you know the truth.” And I’m like, “But why can’t everyone know the truth?” because honestly these are all universal experiences we all have. Everyone has some situation that relates to it, and so creating work that is giving insight to it, that is informed by these really brilliant thinkers that aren’t accessible to everyone, really does help shift perspective and narratives.

Toni Morrison’s another person like that. Those are my favorite writers and the people I aspire to be in the same room with, not even like—there’s a whole banquet hall, there’s a table, I’m not even at the table. Maybe I’m in the hallway. That would be amazing just to even be in the hallway with those people. Honestly, that’s my inspiration, and so is applying what I love and using that in my work to tell more contemporary narratives, and having it be accessible. It’s hard. I get two things from it. One, it takes so long for me to get to a good place with a piece because there is this thing where I’m like, “Okay, how can you be more clear about that, and how can you be more poetic about talking about that?” How can you take this idea you have and make it so that people can understand where you’re coming from and don’t feel like you’re talking down to them? That’s a lot of writing and a lot of drafts. Then the second part of it is definitely, “No one knows how smart this is!” But again, that’s something I always have to deal with, having confidence in my work. Someone came up to me at a reading, and they were like, “That was a great speech.” At first I was like, “Are you fucking kidding me? You know how long I worked on that shit?” But then I was like, “You know what? The fact that you thought it was a speech is kind of cool, too.”

Language is so important. The words you’re using are so important. There are so many parts of this gate-keeping culture that have created these bubbles. Putting yourself outside of the bubble, but also making your work outside of the bubble is not an immediately rewarding thing, because the things that are rewarded are still things that are in the pantheon of academic structures of writing and art, and those are the things that people have been trained to identify with easier or put up higher. For me, if someone who has no interest in poetry read a poem of mine and they got it, and then it makes them reflect on something, then mission accomplished, you know?

How did your youth inform your current position working with kids at the Hudson Area Library?

I grew up in a strong sense of community. The block I grew up in Brooklyn was just one of those classic Brooklyn blocks where in the summertime everyone knew that that street was shut down because that became our park, and we were all running around the street. Cars wouldn’t really drive by because they knew that that block was the kids’ playground and people would be outside on the street. You can run in and out of people’s houses and they had snacks for you. It was really important for my development in having so many adults around me that really looked out for me and offered support.

Growing up in New York City, there were so many opportunities when it came to arts, like, “Oh, we can go to this museum for free, we can go to this thing for free.” That just carried on my whole life. The idea of having things be accessible and there being a community—I feel like I’m just a testament to how important that work is to who I am. It’s definitely a legacy that I try to continue on. Another part outside of arts was educational opportunities that I had and after school programs. I was such a library kid too, you know?

We used to go to Jamaica every summer, and as we got older my brothers would have to go to summer school, so I would just be stuck at home because I couldn’t go to Jamaica, and it was all-or-nothing kind of thing

really. I would just go to the library because it was right there. It was my sense of early freedom and exploration. It was a few blocks away from my house. I could just be like, "Hey, I'm going to the library to get out of the house." My mom would be like, "Okay." I'd come back home for lunch and go straight back to the library.

Our first computer I got for free from school one year, but before we had a computer at home, I would go to the library to use a computer to go on the internet, to go on message boards to print off song lyrics, do all the research stuff that is so much a part of my practice now actually. My first job was at a library because I was such a regular there. My older brother and his friends were getting their employment card, which is a big deal, especially in the city. Everyone's like, "Yes, I'm 16 now. I can get a job. I'm getting my working papers." You needed to get a piece of paper that was blue and you can work. Everyone was excited about it, and I remember just kind of like, "Okay, another summer of me just reading," and my youth librarian came up to me and was like, "What are you doing this summer?" And I was like, "I'm going to be here." And she was like, "Fill out your working papers. We're going to hire you for a job."

So my first job was at my local library branch working as the book buddy, which was basically just helping people's computers, cleaning up, and helping with the kid programs. So funny enough, at my current job, I help people with computers and work on the kids' programs. I do programs that I know if I was a kid at that age, I would be super psyched on. I just feel like—let's really democratize this experience and the illusion of meritocracy by having it be accessible. It doesn't matter that you're not middle class or upper middle class or from a comfortable family [when you're] having these art experiences that are free.

Where are you currently finding connection?

So much of [my day job] is about connecting to the community at the library. I'm like, "What is a public space after this?" As a science fiction nut, a lot of the work that I've been making for the past like two years feels very, "Oh, this is actually happening?" As someone who [was raised with] a third-world perspective, growing up in Jamaican culture—none of this is fully surprising. We have no idea what's going to happen in this post-Corona world. That's the scariest thing. I think it affects every part of my life—[performances] that were supposed to happen are not happening, and now it's like maybe they will never happen or not this year, which is a lot to think about. We need to have compassion, have empathy. There's a level of control that I need to maintain for my mental health state, and so it's been interesting to have to go with the uncertainty with it. I'm like, "Okay, things are going to be different." How different, how that looks—I have no idea. No one has any idea. And I think we're all in the void now, but in that sense, it's like, "Okay, so what's the work now?" That's what I'm trying to pursue right now.

Shanekia McIntosh Recommends:

1. Get a Library card! - Public Libraries offer so many free resources in physical and digital form. It is the soul of any community. If you don't have one I highly recommend getting a library card and exploring!
2. Octavia Butler - Her whole bibliography is essential reading. If you're not familiar with her work I always recommend starting with *Kindred*, then her anthology *Bloodchild* and, of course, her *Parable of the Sower* series. In the *Parable* series, the US is barely functioning and limited resources have divided up the county and cities have been bought out wholesale by foreign countries for labor amongst other things. It also features a president who strokes the fears of his constituents through the actions of a militarized christian supremacist group. His campaign slogan is "Make America Great Again." The book was published in 1993. To me, *Parable* is all about finding hope and beauty through relentless trauma. That the good fight is hard won, I think we can all use that reminder and inspiration right now.
3. "Epitaph" by Shanekia McIntosh - I wrote this poem in 2019 for a performance curated by the Flow Chart Foundation. It was originally performed to the stargate scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey* being projected behind me. Working with my normal palette of themes—dislocation, immigration, algorithms, capitalism and the decline of empathy—it feels appropriate to share.
4. "On The Concept of History" by Walter Benjamin - This essay is one of my biggest literary inspirations.
5. The Knife - The Knife is my favorite band. If you know me, you know how important they are to me. There seems to be a Knife album for every stage of my life. Right now, *Shaking The Habitual* has been on repeat since the last election. When this was released in 2013, it was not the album I was expecting it to be. The subtle political messaging of their previous work became more explicit and more urgent. There is so much I can say about this band and specifically this record but to keep it short: This is their last record before they decided to disband and they really left us with something that is astonishingly prescient. I mean, the album is called *Shaking the Habitual*! Isn't that what we're all experiencing now?

Name

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Vocation


Writer, poet, performer, community organizer

Fact

courtesy of Shanekia McIntosh

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