

**Alexis Pauline Gumbs**, *Dub: Finding Ceremony*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0645-9 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-0541-4 (cloth)

I am so grateful that Alexis Pauline Gumbs listens to Black women writers and scholars the way that she does. In the introductory note to *Dub*, she names her listening to Sylvia Wynter as a “threatening listening” that at times left her sitting at her computer in shock (p.xii). Throughout Gumbs’ poetic trilogy that includes *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Duke University Press, 2016), *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2018) and *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (Duke University Press, 2020) the reader finds Gumbs listening to Hortense Spillers, M. Jacqui Alexander and Sylvia Wynter listening to life. Listening in the mode of Gumbs, Spillers, Alexander and Wynter exceeds the sonic and reorganizes and unmoors the sensorium something akin to the haptic. We (in Sylvia Wynter’s expansive and ethical sense) need all of these books right now in order to develop new senses to survive this Butlerian (Octavia) (via Lauren Oya Olamina) moment of collective adaptation (see Butler 2012).

I especially needed *Dub* as I navigated pandemic time over the spring and summer months of 2020. In May, I punished myself for missing the original April deadline for submitting my review of *Dub*. However, I made peace with the reality that I needed to travel with this book and have this book travel with me through *our* global pandemic and the stirring of older rebellions against modernity’s newer iterations of anti-black violence. *Dub* is a book of our now. As tends to be the case with the books that Gumbs summons, the timing of *Dub* is prescient. With *our* breathless global attention set to registering the various way a virus connects all life forms, I cannot think of a better time for a book that tarries with and makes ceremony with Sylvia Wynter. This book is organized into thirty ceremonies (or sections) that poetically meditate on the theme of relation within Wynter’s work. Wynter is a scholar whose oeuvre ushers readers through hundreds of years of global epistemic revolutions that have shifted relations between and among species and life forms. What better time to read about a Black Caribbean woman artist and scholar who says that we can and must imagine more for ourselves than the impoverished and “inhumane history of man” that we have told ourselves is true (p.x).

What better time to know that we can and must enact a “species-scale betrayal of our founding mythologies” (p.x). In fact, we must be co-conspirators with those that we have written as outside of our species if we are to survive.

If Gumbs’ last book *M Archive*, inspired by the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, prepared us for our “imminent apocalypse” with a view from the future by its survivors, *Dub* travels with us through the apocalypse that has arrived and the epistemic revolution that must accompany it (p.xi). Through “heretical poetic action” that scales us both down and up through the simultaneously mundane and sublime gesture and acts of the everyday, Gumbs gives us a different point of entry into thinking with Wynter (p.x). Gumbs approached this “experiment” with Wynter as 300 individual mornings of prayer and writing. Throughout *Dub*, Gumbs’ poetics focus in on her, and our, first morning breaths, tea making rituals, pouring of honey, the labor of our fingers, and what our ancestors say about what we have made. What we have made with our own hands, minds, trauma, fear, shortness of breath and sight is up for consideration in each poetic offering. Equally as important to Gumbs as the ritual of creating is the ritual of understanding what we can unmake, reshape, change and unlearn. For many, time during the pandemic has bent and wrapped itself around the handheld minutiae of everyday acts. There are so many poems that feature hands throughout the book. (“let your fingers shape it until they remember the making of the world”; p.68). Gumbs’ ability to shape and render the scale and phenomenon of Wynter’s body of work and profound questions about human origin stories that span disciplines and levels of abstraction into embodied morning rituals is something to marvel.

This book is ideal for academics and scholars of Wynter who want to engage Wynter’s work anew. As a scholar who is committed to and loves to struggle with Wynter, Gumbs’ invitation to engage Wynter through ritual acts both stymied me and offered me new ground. The proposal that Wynter could be approached daily as a vital regimen and perhaps even approached more rigorously as a practice of listening to dub reconfigures my own understanding of Black study. I am particularly grateful for Gumbs ushering us into this shift in orientation toward Wynter as it facilitates a change in how readers approach Wynter’s work. Over the years, I’ve witnessed Black scholars who toiled, often in small dedicated communities, to be in relationship

with Wynter's body of work watch her work become a "hot" (and devalued) commodity in the academy. Wynter's work has begun to travel widely with various effects and results that are at times in conflict. As Wynter's work travels, and many try to claim (or capture) her work within their disciplinary boundaries, Gumbs has situated or put her back in relation to her Jamaican and Caribbean kin who created dub as an anti-colonial aesthetic in the 1970s.

Gumbs attends to Wynter's rhythms (riddims and breaks) as a part of the tradition of overturning and revolt. As a Black diaspora studies scholar this interpretation resonates with me at the deepest level of my scholarly praise for Wynter. As a scholar who has strained and struggled to bend and stretch myself to Wynter's measure for years (without regret), I appreciate Gumbs' demand for the reader to locate Wynter and her work within a Black aesthetic tradition that centers Jamaican black peasant culture and anti-colonial creativity. Gumbs' poetic praise, which M. NourbeSe Philip describes as oriki-like, celebrates Wynter's aesthetic choices (as a playwright, novelist, essayist) who sought to speak to many different kinds of Black diasporan people as well as to disciplining forces in multiple institutions. As a poet, Gumbs hones and works the aesthetic power of repetition (at the vibration of incantation) in calling forth the Wynterian theme (or verses) of relation throughout *Dub's* poems. My favorite verses of Wynter's essays are the ones where she repeats and reproduces the historic moments of rupture when the master code is overthrown. The riddim/rhythm of Wynter's insistence that these orders of knowledge can be broken, have not held, and cannot hold is my music. Gumbs attempts to acknowledge all of the relations and kin that created dub's riddim – and break with sacred stories – and situate Wynter within this tradition.

Throughout *Dub*, Gumbs brings Wynter's and her own relations (her father, unclaimed kin, whales, turtles, seaweed, coral, mud, sand) to voice and form on the page. Relation is a key term for Gumbs. I encourage readers to watch a 4 March 2020 talk that Gumbs delivered on the occasion of the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the feminist journal *Meridians*. In Gumbs' talk "A We That Requires No Other: A Sociopoetic Ceremony", she talks about the enormous

influence of Wynter's 1976 essay "Ethno or Socio Poetics".<sup>1</sup> Gumbs is a scholar who takes convening with Wynter's work seriously and therefore chose judiciously the galaxies of Wynter's universe that could be approached in a book length project. I found her careful and strategic choice of a handful of key texts a loving and respectful gesture that did not attempt to take up and master all of Wynter's work in one tome. Because who possibly could?

Gumbs' choice of "Ethno or Socio Poetics" as a key text (49 references are made to the essay throughout *Dub*) allowed her to home in on the theme of relation. Gumbs also held the essays "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues" (1994) and "Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis?" (unpublished) close to her heart as she wrote. Moving with Wynter's argument that our current capacity to communicate with one another at an unprecedented planetary scale requires us to articulate a "real universalism" that we are all related (p.x), Gumbs repeats and reiterates this theme of relation, in a new way, throughout each poetic meditation of the book.

Each section's/ceremonies' title page features a black and white print of ocean life (rock, crystals, coral, seaweed). Section one, "Request", begins with a request from Gumbs' (and our) ancestors: "we would like it if you wrote us poems" and "we would like it if you broke sentences..." (p.2). Gumbs' pantheon of ancestors and relations become more expansive throughout *Dub*. In the section, "Opening", Gumbs listens to "what the coral said" (p.13). Section after section, a litany of ancestors and kin pronounce themselves on the pages including and exceeding sand, water, turtles, seaweed, coral, whales, honey, hibiscus, mud and land. Some of Gumbs' named kin will sit comfortably with us (Arawak, Shinnecock, and ocean ancestors) and others (Irish, slave traders) will not. The section "Opening" requests that we gather "unclaimed fathers, the ones with guns" (p.13), for instance. In Gumbs' naming of relations, she disrupts the normative boundaries of the family and respectable genealogical recitations by naming illicit lines of descent. In this heretical act, Gumbs gets personal and names her own unclaimed, abandoned and unwanted kin which at times includes Gumbs herself. In the sections,

<sup>1</sup> See "Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism | Alexis Pauline Gumbs and the Future of Praxis" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsT5yvMSYjM> (last accessed 14 September 2020).

“Red August” and “Skin” the Gumbs family appears in their fullness as “William”, as “Catherine”, as “Lydia” and as “other company”. In one of the more heartrending sections, particularly for those grieving loved ones, Gumbs’ devotes ceremonial poems to her father. “It’s Your Father”, lays bare aspects of Gumbs’ process of grieving the death of her father. The section ends with the aching calls of whales sending out their vibrations to one another.

As she retells the story of Caribbean familial relations, and in a sense contributes to Caribbean studies’ theories of gender, sexuality and kinship (domestic, national, regional, more than human), Gumbs tells the survival stories of the shipwrecked, the enslaved, the captured and colonized across species. She retells the stories that all of these relations told themselves in order to survive, including the lies. The story of ancestry – or what I call “ancestory” – as a way of narrating kin, is a difficult and complicated poetic for Gumbs and readers to contend with. I found that there was palpable tension, heartache, and a sense of being at the edge or limits of idiom, for instance, in the way that Gumbs told stories about Black Caribbean and Indigenous relations. As a scholar of Black and Indigenous studies, I respect the challenge (that might bring failure) of turning shared Black and Indigenous experiences with terror, kin making and betrayal into a Black and Indigenous poetics of “wampum and press” (p.35). I saw this tension most palpably in the sections, “Nunánuk” and “Anguilla”. Gumbs grapples with the question, how do we remember Black indigeneity and Indigenous kin in ways that don’t try to “possess”? In the section “Anguilla”, Gumbs tells the story of the formerly enslaved who try to craft a narrative of nation while they “pretend to be native” in order to make themselves whole (p.57). Indigeneity and Blackness are struggling to survive and recreate a language of “we and us” in these sections and their ceremonial offerings. These sections on Blackness and Indigeneity left me both wanting for and hopeful about the work of creating new and becoming familiar with existing Black and Indigenous rhythms/riddims.

Gumbs uses the repetition and riddim of dub to allow ancestors the space to give “instructions” and then later in the book in a repetition with a difference give “another set of instructions”. While these aesthetics of repetition are more apparent, there are other kinds of repetitions that work on a metalevel across her trilogy and across Caribbean poetics. Some of

these repetitions appeared to me as uncanny hauntings in the text but may very well be deliberate acts for Gumbs. For example, Spillers' flesh appeared time and time again for me, in the "Boda" section when survivors of the hold spoke about their own rituals of survival (breathing and tea making). I also found Gumbs speaking through time with the late Kamau Brathwaite's ekphrastic writing in the section "Whale Chorus". Gumbs keeps rhythm with Brathwaite and the sweeping motions of an Old Caribbean woman at dawn as Gumbs asks "ever wonder why an island woman loves a clean floor?" (p.16). Gumbs also rehearses the timeless questions posed by Lorde and Wynter about poetry. In the section "Blood Chorus", ancestors give the poet the news that "you have to be a poet because of all that didn't happen / but if we'd had our way / really had our day / who knows what you'd be doing now" (p.210). Gumbs rearticulates Wynter's wish to dismantle ethnopoetics in exchange for a sociopoetics that write and create the world that we desperately want and need; in other words, a poetics of the possible (p.x).

*Dub*, as well as *Spill* and *M Archive*, model a form of Black feminist study that is timely and instructive. A crucial detail to think about when considering the production of work like *Dub*, *M Archive* and *Spill* is that it is produced under conditions related to Gumbs' unique relationship to the academy (both outside and in proximity to) as an independent scholar. This is not a positionality that Gumbs' herself valorizes or suggests can be achieved by all; however, it does provide margins of maneuver that are important. In a moment where I observe, and am pained by, the consumption of Black feminist work as a fungible commodity, Gumbs models a kind of study that resists consumption and mastery. Gumbs offers readers a way of making ritual with living Black feminist thinkers in order to be transformed by their thinking and living. I am grateful for all the ways that Gumbs feels, waits, listens, carries and seeks to be transformed.

As a scholar trained to master, there are times when I have felt like a failure in the presence of Wynter's work. *Dub* helps me rethink and reframe the moments that I have considered Wynter's work impenetrable. *Dub* helps me ponder: Why did I want to penetrate her work or any other Black person's work? What do I need to change about my orientation to her work? Why had I not also read and valued her other ways of speaking as a novelist and playwright? What work do I need to do to meet her? Why had I not considered a morning or

“other time” ritual for meeting Wynter and others that I have come to hold dear? Do I really hold these thinkers dear? Do I really value them? Do I believe they can change me? Do I believe that I can change? What is my path/way to change?

Rituals abound, particularly for people currently struggling to navigate survival during the pandemic. If ritual carries too much spiritual baggage for folks, I propose thinking with practice or habit. Covid-19 has made it imperative for people to practice a kind of care for the self and others in every single social interaction. If we are to unlearn the deadly story that humans tell themselves is written in “blood”, we must develop a form of practice akin to ritual to create another life giving story that we believe (p.ix). Poetics offer a mode of praxis, meditation and continual *doing* that seeks to transform. To practice to master is to miss the point and accept the ritual of death. To read *Spill*, *M Archive* and now *Dub* is to practice something that seeks to take us into survival and beyond. Be grateful for a book that meets us in our time of need.

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*Tiffany Lethabo King*  
*African-American Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*  
*Georgia State University*  
*tking37@gsu.edu*

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