

*Viewing Hours*



*mayfield brooks*

OCTOBER 30, 2019



## *Order of Service*

*Spoken Prelude.....Can I get a Witness  
by mayfield brooks*

*Processional Selection....I come to the Garden Alone sung  
by Mahalia Jackson*

*Prayer(R)ant.....To Read Later*

*Scripture Reading - N/A*

*Entropy's Garden Tributes*

**MARSHA P. JOHNSON**

**JULIUS EASTMAN**

**NINA SIMONE**

**INDIRA SUGANDA (1965-2009)**

*my former dance partner of many years.*

*I do what I do because of her.*

*Messages of Comfort.....The Ancestors*

*Final Viewing*

*Recessional*

**ORIGINALLY PERFORMED AT**

**THE KITCHEN**

April 6, 2019

**TO BE PERFORMED**

**JANUARY 2020**

**@rubinfoudation and @jackartsny**



mayfield dancing in Entropy's Garden at The Kitchen NYC 2019 Paula Court

## **REPARATIONS, LABOR & WHY WE NEED VIEWING HOURS:**

### PROLOGUE TO ZINE:

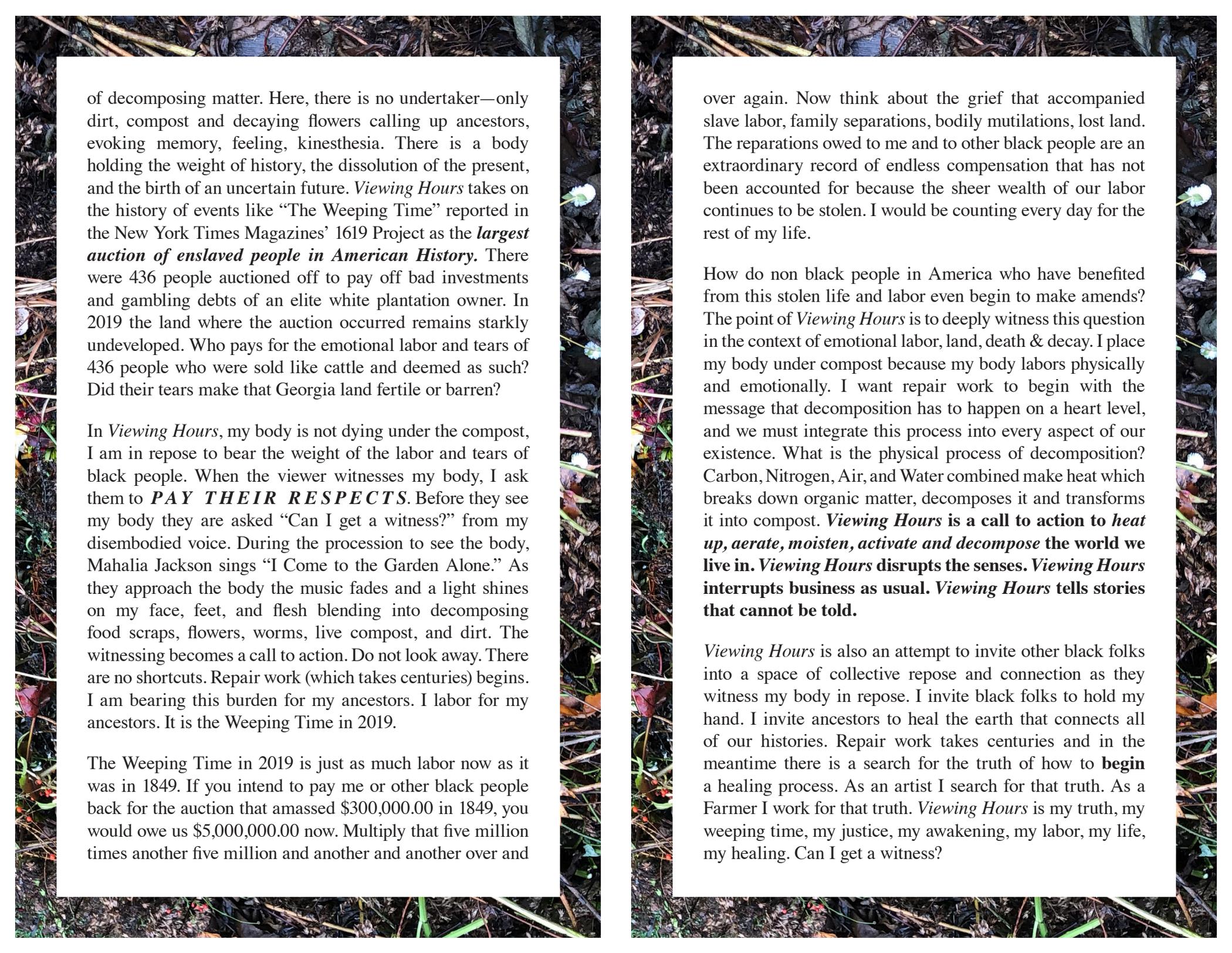
I am an urban farmer and a movement based performance artist. For the first time this year, my farmer and performer selves came together when I buried my naked body under forty plus pounds of dirt, decaying flowers and compost for two hours at The Kitchen performance space in New York City. I set up *Viewing Hours* as a live funeral wake where I invited

people to witness my body buried under the aforementioned decomposing organic matter while I remained in a state of repose. This zine documents *Viewing Hours* in the form of a mock funeral wake program or prayer card, and includes a letter to ancestors Marsha P. Johnson and Julius Eastman, images, and text that influenced the installation and the ensuing movement performance, *Entropy's Garden*. Through *Viewing Hours* I aim to challenge perceptions of death and decay—specifically the spectacle of black bodies dying, decaying, and grieving in plain sight—in order to transform people's thinking around what becomes possible, inevitable, and necessary when systems break down.

*Viewing Hours* challenges the currency and flippancy that makes black death and black grief profitable. We are now faced with the dissolution of sociopolitical systems touting blatant white supremacy and ecological systems altered by climate change, while human physiological systems become more vulnerable. Humans are facing unspeakable violence and greed. Shit is breaking down. As a black queer artist hustling to make ends meet, breaking down is the norm, so burying my body under compost functions as a trickster tactic of my ongoing life/art practice, *Improvising While Black /IWB* which is a practice of telling stories that cannot be told through movement and vocal improvisation. *Viewing Hours* challenges people to witness with great attention. *Viewing Hours* asks, *Can I get a Witness or Does the world need to be destroyed first?*

### REPARATIONS AND LABOR:

When we talk about labor, we often forget emotional labor. *Viewing Hours* takes a looking glass into the funeral chamber or the wake in order to awaken the dead and implicates the viewer in that process. Both viewer and the one being witnessed are invited to reexamine the labor of witnessing the scene of a body under the weight



of decomposing matter. Here, there is no undertaker—only dirt, compost and decaying flowers calling up ancestors, evoking memory, feeling, kinesthesia. There is a body holding the weight of history, the dissolution of the present, and the birth of an uncertain future. *Viewing Hours* takes on the history of events like “The Weeping Time” reported in the New York Times Magazines’ 1619 Project as the **largest auction of enslaved people in American History**. There were 436 people auctioned off to pay off bad investments and gambling debts of an elite white plantation owner. In 2019 the land where the auction occurred remains starkly undeveloped. Who pays for the emotional labor and tears of 436 people who were sold like cattle and deemed as such? Did their tears make that Georgia land fertile or barren?

In *Viewing Hours*, my body is not dying under the compost, I am in repose to bear the weight of the labor and tears of black people. When the viewer witnesses my body, I ask them to **PAY THEIR RESPECTS**. Before they see my body they are asked “Can I get a witness?” from my disembodied voice. During the procession to see the body, Mahalia Jackson sings “I Come to the Garden Alone.” As they approach the body the music fades and a light shines on my face, feet, and flesh blending into decomposing food scraps, flowers, worms, live compost, and dirt. The witnessing becomes a call to action. Do not look away. There are no shortcuts. Repair work (which takes centuries) begins. I am bearing this burden for my ancestors. I labor for my ancestors. It is the Weeping Time in 2019.

The Weeping Time in 2019 is just as much labor now as it was in 1849. If you intend to pay me or other black people back for the auction that amassed \$300,000.00 in 1849, you would owe us \$5,000,000.00 now. Multiply that five million times another five million and another and another over and

over again. Now think about the grief that accompanied slave labor, family separations, bodily mutilations, lost land. The reparations owed to me and to other black people are an extraordinary record of endless compensation that has not been accounted for because the sheer wealth of our labor continues to be stolen. I would be counting every day for the rest of my life.

How do non black people in America who have benefited from this stolen life and labor even begin to make amends? The point of *Viewing Hours* is to deeply witness this question in the context of emotional labor, land, death & decay. I place my body under compost because my body labors physically and emotionally. I want repair work to begin with the message that decomposition has to happen on a heart level, and we must integrate this process into every aspect of our existence. What is the physical process of decomposition? Carbon, Nitrogen, Air, and Water combined make heat which breaks down organic matter, decomposes it and transforms it into compost. ***Viewing Hours* is a call to action to heat up, aerate, moisten, activate and decompose the world we live in. *Viewing Hours* disrupts the senses. *Viewing Hours* interrupts business as usual. *Viewing Hours* tells stories that cannot be told.**

*Viewing Hours* is also an attempt to invite other black folks into a space of collective repose and connection as they witness my body in repose. I invite black folks to hold my hand. I invite ancestors to heal the earth that connects all of our histories. Repair work takes centuries and in the meantime there is a search for the truth of how to **begin** a healing process. As an artist I search for that truth. As a Farmer I work for that truth. *Viewing Hours* is my truth, my weeping time, my justice, my awakening, my labor, my life, my healing. Can I get a witness?

## *A Message...*

**FROM** the one who you are about to  
**WITNESSES**...who has given up the ghost:

*I'm not asking you to see me.*

Sit, sip tea or do whatever you need to do to prepare yourself for the *viewing hours*.

I am asking you to be a witness. **CAN I  
GET A WITNESS?**

I am asking you to take your pulse by pressing two fingers—*the fingers to the left of your thumb on your left hand*—against that small cavity of flesh behind & possibly slightly above your left earlobe. I am asking you to find your pulse.

*Are you alive?* Are you a **WITNESS** of your own life in this moment?

Thank your lucky stars that you are alive in this moment and that you have this opportunity to recognize your own life. But remember, *I am not asking you to see me* because the world has not prepared you to see me.

Witness what you think you are seeing, do not try to see me, do not try to look too hard.

**A**fter the viewing hours, I would like you to commit to a practice of witnessing what you see, what you don't see and what you cannot see. *In other words* observe yourself seeing. You are responsible, from this moment forth, to commit yourself to this practice as a move towards reparations, and as you know, repair work takes centuries. You and I will not live to see the repair work completed but you can still be a witness. Witnessing what you see is not everything, but it counts. The world that does not allow you to see me must end. Hopefully, you will aid in the process of ending that world. Ending the world as we know it would be reparations. Think about how you might do that? This world must decompose until it is gone. Then, we can start anew. Thank you for being here to witness this moment even though this world may not allow you to see me. I am thankful that you are here, from the bottom of my heart.

**Caveat:** *If you do see me (really see me)*, you have most likely experienced anti-black violence against your body, psyche, and ancestors. You know what anti-black violence is and you know why I have given up the ghost at this particular moment in time.



Men kissing under a tree, 1977. Photo by Kay Tobin Lahusen. Manuscripts and Archives Division.

You know how dangerous it is to be alive. So, you are not just a witness. You need your own viewing hours, and I invite you to sit with me. Hold my hand if you need to, and I will hold yours while we both give up the ghost. You and your ancestors were/are supposed to get reparations, but this world has not been accountable to you or them. This world needs to be destroyed so the repair work can begin. *Can I get a witness?* You deserve to be seen too. I will see you on the other side. Thank you for being here, from the bottom of my heart.

April 7, 2019

Dear Marsha: Julius,

Good morning. I made a solid cup of coffee this morning, but I'm still drowsy. Julius, usually I only write letters to Marsha but I'm including you in this correspondence today because I am performing a piece dedicated to you inspired by both of you. It's entitled "Entropy's Garden", and it's at the kitchen where you performed (Julius) back in the day. I wonder if you two have met? Anyway, I have a feeling you have crossed paths before, but I'll also introduce you Marsha F. Johnson to Julius Eastman (composer)? (activist/queer)

So I've been thinking about this crossing of you two ancestors and how during your lifetime you were not as well known as you are now. You were both ~~homosexual~~ <sup>bravest (at times), black, queer/queers; maybe nambinary?</sup>, you did not fit in and you both had mental health trauma and I just feel like I can relate to both of you so deeply and its why I write these letters. No one in this current time can understand what it feels like to have such ENORMOUS beauty in your blackness, your queerness, your weirdness! your spirituality, your complete and other refuge to conform, and your artistic; creative genius! Its great that people all over the world know who you are now because of ~~social media~~ <sup>social media</sup> but this new system of communication that we have now called, "social media" but its also kind of superficial. I feel conflicted about it because it doesn't go deep enough but it does bring awareness. Marsha, they put ... all over the internet, but I don't feel like



*You can count your karma  
if Nirvana is your goal  
you can shake and you can rattle  
you can rock and roll  
you can be a Clark Kent  
or a Lois  
or an Alice down a hole,  
you can be a vampire on a mountain  
with a heart of stone black coal.*

*you can be a leather angel  
on a sleek black Harley bike  
or a redhead screaming faggot  
or a dazzling dyke  
you can lock yourself in a closet  
in a fine mink stole  
but it really doesn't matter  
if you ain't got soul.*

*Marsha P. Johnson*

because it's also kind of superficial. I feel conflicted about it  
"suicide media" but it does bring awareness. Mantha, they put  
because it doesn't go deep enough but it does bring awareness. Mantha, they put  
Notes of you and Jilvis your music is all over the internet, but I don't feel like  
they understood what you had to do and how you chose to live because  
Frankly I don't think anyone - NOONE - really has the guts to say  
fuck you to the system; start a RIOT like you did Mantha; be a  
gay guerrilla like you were Jilvis. It all came together for me when I saw that

film, "Funeral Parade of Roses" in a  
cinema (like you were Jilvis). It all came together for me when I saw that  
documentary feature of the Crying Game @ BAM: Just felt so full of colors? music?  
Craziness? Queer Fun. I'm not going to critique the films right now because they  
really inspired me to create this proggy piece "Viewing Hours" as a  
companion to "Entropy's Garden". It was like the indulgence of the flowers,  
Mantha's Flowers and death and my life as a former (of sorts) and a  
lover (of sorts) and a lover of weedy aesthetics all came together.  
Anyway I just feel like more people need to dig deeper - beyond the  
#hashtag. You both lived these lives that were so incredible but they  
were not make believe. Like Jilvis how you and Nina Simone both got an  
degrees from Curtis Institute in Philly, and how the rejected her, then gave her an  
honorary degree later in life & they accepted. You but wouldn't hang you. Fuck  
I just want you - my black queer ancestors - to know that I am CARING for you!  
I am learning about you and living with you as in death as in life. Everything is everything.  
Thankyou Forlistening O Manthafield

ARE YOU  
AWAKE ?

OH,

***P R A Y E ( R ) A N T                      F O R  
J U L I U S , M A R S H A A N D M E***

**O H** . He crashed the canon? Really? Did he? *And where were you New York Times when he was actually making music and the canon was being crashed?* That crazy nigger was crazy for a fucking reason. And so this is the kind of awareness Eastman & Marsha get right now. Marsha gets an obit in the NY Times and a “noir-ish” movie mostly about her death. And I’m like, “Wait. They died in their 40s & I’m 48 and I’m like fuck am I gonna die? Is 40, it, for those of us that are black & mad? I’m black and mad. **R E A L L Y M A D** . So I do this. I write, *dance&write&cuss* and I study black people. I study blackness, I study death. I write to dead queer ancestors so they can keep me falling. Falling down, and this is not a memorial. It’s a wake for fallen flowers. And thanks to Eddie the “gay boy” trans character from that movie, *Funeral Parade of Roses*, for inspiring me. I love you Eddie.



So I am writing, listening to Eastman, reading articles *here and there*.

**M O S T L Y** , I am doing this multitasking because *I do not want* to memorialize Eastman. I want to just be with him, like the way I am with Marsha. I write Marsha letters pretty much every day. Eastman came into view last year when all the hype about the Kitchen show came out. That’s when I caught wind of him. Then I started rehearsing for DAP (*Dance And Process*) at The Kitchen, and I just started listening to Eastman speak about his work (*Evil Nigger & Gay Guerilla*)—it’s a recording on YouTube and he’s at Northwestern—my alma mater where I was going to get a PhD but I got the Masters instead—so there’s a connection.



So back to Julius and Marsha both being in their 40s when they died & how I am in my 40s and this thing about being black or a person of color and dying in your 40s mostly from sadness, or heartbreak, or some kind of violence is so normalized and how my dance partner died at 44, 8 years ago. I do a lot of counting.



So naturally Improvising While Black gravitates towards Eastman and Marsha. I wonder if they knew each other.



So this little piece of writing is just a little riff off of this interview of Eastman that I am listening to right now. He's talking about "Confucius being very constrained and elegant." He's talking about the Lord. He says, "I studied. I studied a lot." And there is a kind of reaching into being tired. He is saying, "I might create heresies...The Lord sent Himself to Himself..."



He keeps saying, "I must be very careful." Now he is singing, "Oh Lord let me rest, Let me rest in peace."



"The things that I usually sing are spontaneous," he says.

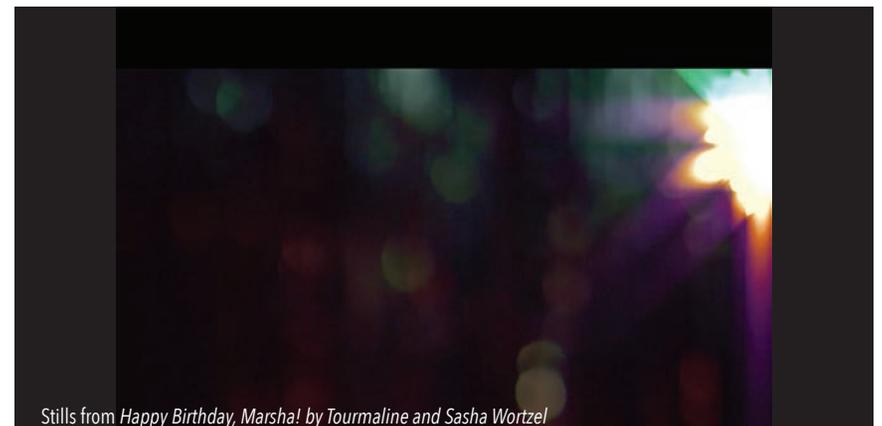
—mayfield



*In this interminable falling, there is neither event nor becoming; indeed the falling figures do not come to their end, nor is there any possibility of destination; in this perpetual, endless falling the figures—single, companionless—fall without ever agreeing at their final ends.*

*The elegy here makes disaster conceivable, but not representable: the unending falls...These falls are unending, and precisely because they fall into nothing...The figures keep on falling, but this is a repetition that neither takes us forward nor back...in fact these falls inaugurate nothing but waiting, a sort of nonevent...Dying without event, pure dying where nothing happens, as we wait for that dying to not happen again, the all-but-dying without meaning or possibility or interval.*

—David Marriot, "Waiting to Fall"



Stills from *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel



wake<sup>1</sup> |wāk|

verb (past **woke** |wōk| or **waked**; past part. **woken** |'wōkən| or **waked**)

1 emerge or cause to emerge from a state of sleep; stop sleeping: [intrans.] *she **woke up** feeling better* | [trans.] *I **wake him gently**.*

• [intrans.] (**wake up to**) become alert to or aware of: *he **needs to wake up to reality**.*

• [trans.] figurative cause (something) to stir or come to life: *it **wakes desire in others**.*

2 [trans.] dialect hold a vigil beside (someone who has died): *we **waked Jim last night**.*

noun

1 a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking.

2 (**wakes**) [treated as sing.] chiefly historical (in some parts of the UK) a festival and holiday held annually in a rural parish, originally on the feast day of the patron saint of the church. [ORIGIN: probably from Old Norse *vaka*.]

PHRASES

**wake up and smell the coffee** [usu. in imperative] informal become aware of the realities of a situation, however unpleasant.

DERIVATIVES

**waker** noun

ORIGIN Old English (recorded only in the past tense *wōc*), also partly from the weak verb *wacian* [remain awake, hold a vigil,] of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *waken* and German *wachen*; compare with *watch*.

wake<sup>2</sup>

noun

a trail of disturbed water or air left by the passage of a ship or aircraft.

• figurative used to refer to the aftermath or consequences of something: *the committee was set up **in the wake of the inquiry**.*

ORIGIN late 15th cent. (denoting a track made by a person or thing): probably via Middle Low German from Old Norse *vök, vaka* 'hole or opening in ice.'

ballad |'baləd|

noun

a poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas. Traditional ballads are typically of unknown authorship, having been passed on orally from one generation to the next as part of the folk culture.

• a slow sentimental or romantic song. ORIGIN late 15th cent. (denoting a light, simple song): from Old French *balade*, from Provençal *balada* 'dance, song to dance to,' from *balar* 'to dance,' from late Latin *ballare* (see *ball<sup>2</sup>*). The sense [narrative poem] dates from the mid 18th cent.

lullaby |'lələ, bī|

noun (pl. **-bies**)

a quiet, gentle song sung to send a child to sleep.

verb (**-bies, -bied**) trans.] rare sing to (someone) to get them to go to sleep: *she **lullabied us, she fed us**.*

ORIGIN mid 16th cent.: from *lull* + *bye-bye*, a sound used as a refrain in lullabies.



## THIS IS THE DISORIENTATION ROOM.

**ARE YOU AWAKE?** Okwui's character asked in *A Bronx Gothic*.

*IWB* wants to sleep. Julius Eastman wanted the Lord to let him rest and Marsha P. Johnson got locked out of the home that wasn't hers.

No place to lay your head—both homeless.

We really do need those Black Power Naps (*thank you Niv Acosta*) but unfortunately they are not available/NA.

## NAP NOT AVAILABLE.

So falling down could be a remedy !

**FALLING DOWN** could be the solution. **LOL**. *Falling down & staying down* might work. But who wants to stay down?

The down beat that's who.

Fall into the water. Be baptised.

Just let it wash over you.

But this wake is not a memorial

It is a place of action, movement,

**Surrender**.

**Surrender** to the fall.

**Surrender** to the fallen flowers

**Surrender** to

*the need to die right now.*

FRED MOTEN SAYS THAT BLACKNESS IS A KIND OF IMPROVISATION AND I'VE BEEN DOING THIS WORK OF IMPROVISING WHILE BLACK ALL MY LIFE AND I WANT TO SAY THAT IT IS HAUNTED WORK...

Echos haunt the call

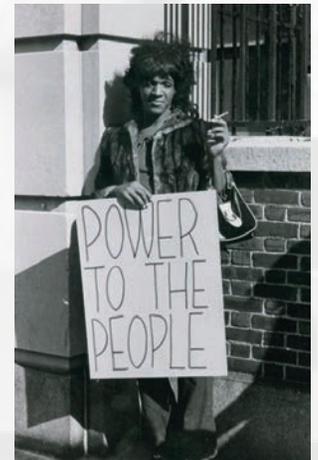
For the fallen ones

Who need rest

**Do not forget by memorializing**

*To be at a wake is to remember*

**ARE YOU AWAKE?????**



If Death is rest  
So be it

So maybe the wake  
is a celebration  
For when the black body gets to rest—  
in death.

So this is not a memorial.

I won't fight my black death.  
I am alive in it;  
I open my heart  
to its own vulnerable demise.

Can I get a witness?

I have to collect the seeds.

Life is so close  
to decomposition.

—mayfield brooks

Gay rights activists at City Hall rally for gay rights: Sylvia Ray Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Barbara Deming, and Kady Vandeurs by Diana Davies, 1968.



#### SEND REPARATIONS TO:

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mayfield's email: [mayfield.iwb@gmail.com](mailto:mayfield.iwb@gmail.com)

#### FURTHER READING:

About mayfield's project IWB/Improvising While Black:

<https://www.improvisingwhileblack.com>

<https://contactquarterly.com/cq/article-gallery/view/iwbimprovising-while-black>

About Reparations:

<http://www.soulfirefarm.org/support/reparations/>

this zine is a collaboration between mayfield brooks & carolyn m. a'hearn



Scene from Funeral Parade of Roses by Toshio Matsumoto



JEAN GENET

MAHLEN ZUP VAN ARNDT

ジャン・ジュネ全集

jean genet

Front cover photo by Malcolm-x Betts