Worldbuilding Between Burrows and Spaceships

By Ladi'Sasha Jones

// on spirituals

I began thinking critically about death after the passing of my uncle Howard in 2016, and even more so after my maternal grandmother transitioned in 2018. Mrs. Vivian Lee (née Vivian Louise Brandon) was born on August 17, 1925 in Newport News, Virginia. She moved to Harlem as a young woman and gave birth to over sixteen children—my mother is number fourteen and I am one of eighty-plus grandchildren and great-grandchildren, nearly all of whom were reared in Central Harlem. Through the process of writing her obituary, I learned so much about her life as a mother, laborer and community organizer. I have hours of recordings from conversations with my grandmother, and thus was surprised by how much of her story was still unknown to me and the varying parts that are alive within her children. My mother read the obituary during the funeral or what is colloquially referred to as a homegoing ceremony. Throughout that evening, the language of paradise surfaced repeatedly by the presiding pastor in an attempt to add comfort or solace. "She is resting in paradise." the pastor said. "She is in pain no more, but free in the Lord's kingdom of paradise [...] God willing, you all will meet her again in paradise.", and so on and so forth.

Similar statements were also uttered from deacons to ministry leaders as they consoled family members and a community of mourners that spilled out of the packed sanctuary. And this language struck a chord with me; in that moment, I realized that so much of what I know to be true about Black death is rooted in the Judeo-Christian construction of peace after passing— paradise as reward for virtuosity. Now, I didn't grow up Christian, as my father is Muslim and my mother is resistant to the performance of church-going culture. However, Black Christian traditions are greatly present in my life and across the communities I was brought up in, regardless of steadfast beliefs. And this is an interesting place to meditate on as it connects to a larger relationship between death and paradisal ideation that extends to Black radical traditions of coalescing death and freedom.

The Negro spiritual is one of these radical traditions. They are the survival of plantation songs, the sonics of a collective spiritual imagining, made possible by oral traditions and ushered into popular culture by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their first leader, Ella Shepphard Moore. Just as many others have asserted before me,

the very idea and pursuit of freedom is embedded within the genesis of Black American music.

And although the georgraphy of that genesis is far-reaching, the Negro spirtual is a beginning of many.

The expressions of death as a homegoing is one of the elements I adore most about Negro spirituals. It pulls up death, not as an escape, but a choice for survival and resistance. Much like the ongoing and daily acts of rebellion, the Negro spiritual is a measure of Black refusal towards living in the imagination of white terror. Take the popular lyrics of the spiritual, *Steal Away* as an example of the working towards freedom from the plantation, by taking oneself home to Jesus:

Steal away / Steal away / Steal away to Jesus
Steal away / Steal away home / I ain't got long to stay here

W.E.B. Du Bois remarked that Negro spirituals "...remain the singular spiritual heritage of this nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."[1] The Negro spiritual is also a marker within the spiritual economy of worldbuilding. I suppose I should contextualize this assertion by stating there is indeed a spiritual field to worldbuilding. As a spatial thought practice, worldbuilding is traced across the constructions of Black prayer and worship. And at the center of this field is the collective invocation of home. Not merely the soft shape of a heavenly deliverance, but home as an opening and a site of power. A space of absolute release, the place of freedom. The Black home is wholly holy and it is not only written into Black sonic traditions, but also embedded within a praxis of worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding is of the interior.

The interior is the inner life and imaginary.
It is living matter; it is alive and actionable.

Worldbuilding is shaped in the movements toward invention, dreaming anew, wandering in the unseen. It is the work of self-definition. Informed by our desires and led by our own markers of beauty, worldbuilding services how we make meaning of space, place, community and home.

// on play

The project Black Interior Space or Black Interior Spatial Thought is a set of conceptual worldbuilding actions. At the center is a sculptural system that offers a geometric, unfixed typology, responding to the spatial conditions of Black life in urban commons. Exploring the social values of Black communal spaces, the economies of assembly, and the organization of domesticity.

We know the long. The rectangular, the box.
The shotgun and railroad.
We remember the rocking of the hull.

[1] Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches. Chicago, A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968.

The sculptural system is a modular kit of parts designed around the shape of the circle and the qualities of the round, the fold, the bend, the dip, and the tuck. The system is not an articulation nor a representative of the clichéd association of the circle as a Black-African cultural fragment. Instead, it offers an abstraction of circular spatial lines and intervals as a space for play. The geometrical dics in the kit interlock across three axis points, allowing for open sequencing and an engagement with the void as opposed to the mere stacking of solid and closed forms. This design is a gesture toward activating worldbuilding in the space of the break. Wherein the triangular breaks across each wooden disc invites the projection of new patterning that stretches and even disrupts the circular formation.

The sculptural system considers the social production of collective play and assemblage in reflection of our built environments.

The programming of the kit shapes speculative experimentation through a series of design prompts. These prompts are offered as a pedagogical approach to learning through play that poses the question: what of the sociability of making meaning through abstraction? Curator Adrienne Edwards identifies the relationship between Blackneess and abstraction as consequential to the conditions of race in America:

> "... the abiding radical love between blackness and abstraction, is foundational. It arises from the most basic and essential notions of what we know to be the United States of America; it is born of capitalism, the very historical and economic system on which this nation took form and in which a concept of blackness took shape, and it has rocked and been rocked by the capricious lullaby that is the assemblage of unalienable rights we know as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[2]

[2] Edwards, Adrienne. "The Struggle for Happiness, or What is American About Black Dada. "Black Dada Reader, edited by Adam Pendelton, Koenig Books, 2017, 29 - 34.

The function of abstraction within the kit is in the exploratory practice of relational building (and unbuilding). Determining what sequences and patterns are possible reflections of one's inquiry into home, community, city, or civics is very much a part of the project's larger study of Black interiority and space.

// on home

So much of my relationship to poverty is steeped in the spatial politics of worldbuilding. I believe the constant working to disrupt the deferment of one's dreams is rooted in flexes of experimentation and worldbuilding. In this space, worldbuilding sometimes takes on the location of an open void - similar to the looping of prayers and dreams that are both alive and necessary. This context of worldbuilding is connected to the social fields that circulate throughout the built environment, both in rhythm with and in direct opposition to its architecture. When I think about Harlem, I think about the poetics of Black urbanity and the remixed uses of city commons.

I also think about the structural processes of knowledge production that shape the narratives surrounding one's context of the local. A guiding question I return to is: What does it mean to write about home from the perspective of the archive and familial storytelling? I asked family members to share what makes this place home; what memories of Harlem connect them to this place spatially and environmentally. The purpose of this exchange is to learn how we map remembrance and identify the tools we use to do so.

Pause. I must insert that I was raised in South Carolina for nine years, from the ages of four to thirteen. Home is there and in New York. Both places catalyzed my impressions around Black space and Black publics. Resume.

In using Central Harlem as a site of inquiry for the guiding questions around worldbuilding and spatial interiority, I focused my research on public life and the public commons via a series of mapping exercises. One map is in the format of an index that collates an open record of Black-owned businesses, beginning in 1923. To keep a narrow research field for this project, the index only maps the history of Black-owned businesses along three avenues: Frederick Douglass Boulevard (Eighth Avenue), Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (Seventh Avenue), and Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox Avenue). This index began in the search for documentation of my paternal great-great-great grandmother's restaurant. The story is that Faithful-Peace (née Izola or Isola Bush) owned a soul food restaurant in Harlem, roughly between the 1940s and 1960s. I have not found a record of it or may very well have it listed within the index, but the name and location is unbeknownst to my living family members.

There is so much to glean from the index, especially over the course of its continued growth. I have learned that architect E. R. Williams had an office at 2296 Seventh Avenue, the south-west corner of 135th Street. Although it was never built, Williams was selected to design an African museum along the National Mall in 1926. In the location his office once stood, is now the charter school Thurgood Marshall Academy with an IHOP in the storefront retail space of the school. I did not grow up with any ice cream parlors or many candy stores in the neighborhood. However, I learned there were several during the childhoods of my mother's older siblings and the generations preceding them. Nearly a quarter of the businesses I've identified thus far are dedicated to haircare alone. Of the three corridors, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard holds the more dense concentration of Black-owned businesses, particularly small business owners. A reality that remains to this day.

The Black research index is an indelible tool of self-historization.

The Central-Harlem Business Index within this project builds on this history. In a very direct way by pulling from historic works like *The Simm's Blue Book* (1923) by lawyer, compiler, and publisher James N. Simms, alongside Victor H. Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936 - 1967). This unfolding and growing business index is organized as a long list with broad categories that are repeated across the three spatial corridors. The lifespans of the businesses are not annotated; thus, it observes a plurality of time and movement as multiple businesses and professionals are marked under the same address or multiple addressees. It is structured to offer a long breath (a long scroll) of Black presence and space making in the neighborhood.

Another map generated for the project is an audio piece, *Decked in the Sky* (2021), that stitches together a series of interviews, movie clips and family recordings that touch upon the interiority of making meaning of the world and one's orientation within it. Central to the piece are excerpts from Ann Petry's *The Street* (1947). This text takes place along one-hundred and sixteenth street between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. This is the block I grew up on. This is the same block of my mother's last childhood home. That same apartment is still home to family members and was the central site for family convenings before the passing of my grandmother. Discovering this made for an uncanny reading experience. I was absolutely enthralled and glued to Petry's descriptions of the block and surrounding avenues. Even with this spatial connection to the text, what makes this an incredibly special work of art is Petry's acute handling of the built environment's effect and impressions on the interior lives of the characters. She provided deep meditations on the areas of housing, work, and leisure that are unlike similar texts from that genre and era. Through the main character Lutie Johnson, Petry explores the looping fatigue from the holds of poverty and the conditions of anti-blackness and patriarchy. The destructive despair of it all cradles a longing for the breaks or opportunities to shape another world. A scene that is quite generative for me is around a train ride on the express from Columbus Circle to 125th Street. Petry describes the way Black folks transform as a collective body as they exit the train, leaving the white gaze underground and emerging into Harlem.

> "She noticed that once the crowd walked the length of the platform and started up the stairs toward the street, it expanded in size. The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together."[3]

[3] Petry, Ann. The Street. Michael Joseph Ltd, 1947.

Petry carefully strikes a balance between the inner lamenting of a singular character with a keen awareness of collective struggle. An understanding that the conditions one is facing is shared and systemic. And within this tone, she offers great insight into communal responses of recovery and reprieve. Describing the textures of urban living and the collective pushback the people place onto the commons and domestic spaces. Like her details of the block turning into a great outdoor living room in the summertime and the painstaking labor that one puts into making a home within tight and darkened tenement quarters. In many ways, this text was a guidepost for the varying outputs of this project. Particularly the space it opened up for me to reflect on the presence of dreamscaping and prayer, as quotidian workings of worldbuilding.

It is through these various mappings of businesses, literature, and actual cartography that enabled me to gather and collate material with the aim of contextualizing how Black folks, like my kin folk, not only shape their living in Harlem, but in the city.

// on home, still

Skyrise for Harlem, Reconstructed Harlem, Elevated Harlem, or New Harlem. All refer to the architectural revisioning of Harlem by feminist writer and educator, June Millicent Jordan, with architect R. Buckminster Fuller. The plan: fifteen tree towns that are *one hundred circular decks high* in the sky. Published in 1965, Jordan provided us with a set of considerations for the redevelopment of Black urban space:

Urban redevelopment does not need to be the "pretext for the permanent expulsion of Negro populations". Widen the average square footage of public housing. Jordan's plan offered an average of 1,200 sq ft per housing unit, which did not include the garden and balcony spaces. Provide every tenant with a view of their own from every room. Create new public commons with cultural centers "decked in the sky". Design a plan for the conservation of natural resources. Create self-sustaining structures that do not rely on municipal resources. Shatter the parallel grid. Rethink sidewalks and the pathways for navigating public and communal spaces. Make new connections and thoroughfares between neighborhoods. Build to illuminate. Build consciously and deliberately.

Below is a litany of considerations for Black interior spatial thought and making, that reflects and builds upon Jordan's design.

Consider the underground as a site for designing ourselves out of the prevailing spatial conditions of anti-blackness. Possibly a grid that burrows into the underground. Consider life in relation to light. Performance in relation to light. Encircle the performances of daily life with light and air. Consider the poetics of convening and public community engagement. The hyperactive vernaculars of Black programming and assembly. Consider spaces for mourning and grief. Spaces to fill with our dead. Spaces to fill with Black prayers. Consider the Black home as a site of protection. Consider the long historical and ongoing relationships Black folks have to public space. Consider the Jim Crow constructions of Black public life and movement, before and after sundown. Consider the spatial qualities of sound and construct spaces for Black sonics, rhythms and vibrations. Consider the vernaculars of Black self-built spaces. Consider spaces for laboring and overworked bodies. Consider spaces for rest and recovery. Respite and stillness. Renewal. Consider Blackness: yours and others.