

Vanessa Agard-Jones  
**Selvage/Obsidian:**  
**A Response**

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In Simone Leigh’s practice, bodies become buildings. Crania become carafes. Busts become dwellings. As she takes the black female form and reimagines its relationship to materiality, Simone turns Aimé Césaire’s classic equation – “colonization = thingification” – squarely on its head.<sup>1</sup> Her body-objects, and their labile transformation from one form to another, act as a rejoinder to the old materialist conceit that we might imagine our selves and our lives as separate from the things around us: nonhuman beings, animate or not.<sup>2</sup> Each vessel is a study in the process of our entanglement, a meditation on the registers of, possibilities for, and challenges of this in/human relation, produced not only through the violence of enduring coloniality, but also through the possibilities that black women’s labor makes manifest in our worlds.

Black women’s labor, both intellectual and embodied, is at the core of Simone’s re/imagining of a Jacobs-ian “loophole of retreat.”<sup>3</sup> In this spirit, she imagined our gathering: a meeting of black women’s minds across lines of difference in discipline, language, praxis. As Simone’s sculpture keeps us attuned to the interimplication of form, the conference itself made space for different kinds and registers of coming together, of interface, and of making meet. As I considered the interventions that Dionne Brand, Zakiyyah Jackson, and Christina Sharpe offered us on this occasion, I kept coming back to my own practical labors, and their relationship to the loopholes that make my own life, both adjacent to and within the academy, one of deep meaning.

Like Christina’s mother, I too sew. And I’ve done so in much more earnest over the last nearly two years, because of my own trophallactic labor: my toddler has not once slept through the night. And sewing has been the one thing that my head and hands will allow in that time of foggy suspension, after being roused at 2:00 a.m. night after night after night (many of us know this altered state). I learned recently about the doubled meaning of this sewing word that I have long taken for granted: selvage. A selvage is a “self-finished” edge of fabric, a band that keeps it from unraveling and fraying. Many contemporary sewists, and quilters in particular, eschew its use, but for those of us who come from traditions of working with every scrap we’ve got, the selvage is just as important as the rest of the fabric bolt. The word came into the English language from an alteration of “self” and “edge,” on the pattern of the early modern Dutch word *selfegghe*.<sup>4</sup> As for so many, birthing a person was for me an experience of self meeting edge and of leaky, visceral spilling over – as my child left my body, she carried with her two liters of my blood.

Our meeting was a brutal confrontation with life's precarity. Selvage evokes childbirth's rending of the self, the splitting that produces two people from one, but the word flows through other domains as well: in geology, a selvage refers to a zone of altered rock, especially volcanic glass, at the edge of a rock mass. And volcanic glass is most commonly referred to as obsidian.

As I am wont to do, I have iterated my thinking about a loophole of retreat into these geological terms, finding the material and metaphorical resonance among rock, sand, and clay in Simone's practice, and a sense of kinship between obsidian's edge and the attention to black life that this conference's attendees make possible for us.<sup>5</sup> We might consider the volcano to be a version of what Christina has called "total climate," and the rock edge that becomes obsidian a space of reserve, but not escape, from the crucible at that formation's fiery heart.<sup>6</sup> So it is on obsidian, this zone of alteration, this site where self meets its edge, that I have imagined this conversation, this loophole, this place of retreat for us. It is a place made through our labor, aligned with the labor of the world.

"You make bread out of stone," Dionne once urged.<sup>7</sup> Out on and out of this obsidian selvage, Dionne, Zakiyyah, and Christina have offered us this sustenance from stone: a sense of what might be imagined if we can make our way to our selves' edges, and what possibilities might emerge from the loophole. Through the figures of the map, the insect, and the vessel they each engage in this edge-work, underscoring the porous processes out of which our bodies and our lives are made.

The map.

Dionne.

Since I first read *Bread Out of Stone* I have been stunned by the stretching that Dionne helps us do toward a cartography that accounts not only for place, but also for time. Her work defies the closures of the map as we have thus far known it and orients us instead toward a worldly navigation beyond the strictures of language, of discipline, and of matter itself.<sup>8</sup> Christina has interpreted Dionne's "Ruttier for the Marooned in Diaspora" far better than I might, but I think of its marooned spirits, how "they wander as if they have no century, as if they can bound time," and later, of the invocation that they occupy an "undeviating ever," and I hear in their relationship to this temporally palimpsested world the clerk of her more recent *Blue Clerk*.<sup>9</sup> There is a moment there, between the principal figures – the author and the clerk – when Dionne writes:

Verso 0.1:

I would like, therefore, to live in time and not in space. Not the timelessness that is often spoken about, but time, in this world, as if living in an area just adjacent to air, a film of air which carries time and where I could be in several impersonations of myself, several but simultaneous. If there were time like this.

But there is time like this. A pause from the author. The clerk lives in time like this, several and simultaneous. The author lives in place and not in time. Weighted. In place.<sup>10</sup>

Here Dionne gives us one way to imagine an area "adjacent to air," one way to refuse a weightedness in place, one way to imagine what it might be like to walk over the self's edge, to step one millimeter beyond the obsidian ledge, up – and into the atmosphere. Dionne charts sheer spatiality here, a zone of alteration that refuses to exist only in relation to time. She gives us what Omise'eke Tinsley has called "a crosscurrent of dissolved and reconfigured black selfhoods," bodies and beings that defy normative logics about their constitution, and their socialities.<sup>11</sup> As if anticipating a conversation with Simone's sculpture *Trophallaxis* (2008–2017), one of Dionne's versos intones: "the ants send their aged to war."

The insect.

Zakiyyah.

In Zakiyyah's essays, here and elsewhere, I have found a conceptual clearing, a vocabulary for thinking about blackness, the racial schema that we inherit, a sensorium capable of apprehending not only the material but also the immaterial world, and perhaps most importantly for me, the category human and its nonhuman others. She asks us to think along with her about the way that calls to move "beyond" the human are fundamentally compromised by our limited apprehension of the category itself. Pressing us to take seriously Sylvia Wynter's insistence that Man is but a genre of the human, but one mode of doing humanity, Zakiyyah calls for, in her words, "a queering of perspective and stance that mutates the racialized terms of Man's praxis of humanism."<sup>12</sup> For example, in a reading of Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* in an essay called "Sense of Things," Zakiyyah asks how we understand, and what we might learn, from a life constituted by vertigo, by disorientation.<sup>13</sup> Foregrounding "the reach of antiblackness [in particular] into the non-human," she challenges us, but also those – legions of scholars at a purported critical edge working under the signs of posthumanist, object-oriented, and new materialist theory – to reckon with blackness.<sup>14</sup> She has consistently demonstrated for us, in her

words, “the ways that black female experience de-essentializes gender and shows the arbitrary relation between flesh and symbol.”<sup>15</sup>

Her taking up of Simone’s *Trophallaxis* for this conversation draws our attention not only to constructions of humanity and its others – refusing any temptation to collapse triumphantly toward the queen bee – but also to the cataclysms that would remake our universe. Insect sociality, and the mereological concern for a part’s relationship to a whole (and vice versa), is precisely a question of self and edge, of the zone of alteration made through trophic exchange.

Finally, the vessel.

Christina.

From *Monstrous Intimacies* to *In the Wake*, to all of the essays in between, Christina has offered us a way to think about the making of post-slavery subjects, the imprint of inheritance, the afterlives of injury, the voraciousness of capital, and the work of haunting. She has taught me about care as shared risk among “we asterisked human/s – queer, black, women,” and she has encouraged me, encouraged us, to continue crafting accounts that might “counter the violence of abstraction.”<sup>16</sup> This work – its precision, its pain – has transformed my relationship to social analysis, but also my relationship to my own world.

And now, she gives us beauty as a method, as a practice. She gives us invocations of one vessel – her young self – imbued with grace, suffused with care. She gives us her mother’s care for her own intellectual life (That list. Its detail.), her own creative life (Those pins. That arrangement.), she gives us her care for beauty in their domestic life (Flowers even when the roof was falling in. Newspaper logs for the fire as beautiful as any paper folding called art.), she gives us her attentiveness and her attunement. In our gathering’s opening, Saidiya Hartman intoned, “Mother, make your mark on me,” and I thought immediately of what Christina has brought us to here. Maternal attunement in this rendering is what makes aspiration possible – in and through what Christina has called the total climate of antiblackness. Alongside Simone’s sculptural practice, she has reminded us of the beauty in becoming-vessel. In so many ways, this essay is one answer to the question that she poses in *In the Wake*: “what does it take to keep breath in the Black body?”<sup>17</sup> Even under the regime of the total climate, breath is still possible, she insists. Necessary. And here she reminds us that we can – and that black women’s labor does – make space for each other’s breathing. That’s what this conference, this loophole of retreat, has done. Together, Dionne, Zakiyyah, and Christina, alongside our day’s

other co-travelers, took us to the selvage, to an obsidian plane where for one afternoon our collective labors made possible another site of black possibility – of aerial alteration, somatic exchange, and care transformed into the vital essence of life.

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A note on the title: Following Jafari S. Allen’s invocation of the “strokes” that both demarcate and define intimacies among black/queer/diasporas, I place selvage and obsidian in relation here, as distinct sites of material transformation and too, as forms of merged mattering. See Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjunction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (2012). It was an honor to have been asked to participate in this gathering – in such distinguished company – and to honor Simone Leigh: a person who enlivens me, not only because of her intellectual and artistic brilliance, but also because of her steadfast, hilarious, and deeply generous friendship. Thank you to Simone Leigh, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt for all of their caring and intellectual labor in bringing us together. I am indebted to Naomi Greyser for shepherding this response into the world, and to Jafari S. Allen for being there, as ever, and for holding – like selvage – all of my unravellings. In 2017, the Guggenheim acquired Simone’s *Georgia Mae* – a sculpture named for my daughter in the year of her birth. There is no greater gift: Georgia Mae in person, and now too – thanks to this radical gesture of love – Georgia Mae in porcelain.

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1  
Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2001), 42.

2  
Leigh's work troubles the terms of "animacy" itself, not unlike the work of: Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Duke University Press, 2012); Kim TallBear, "Beyond the Life/Not Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking and the New Materialisms," in *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, eds. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (MIT Press, 2017).

3  
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

4  
See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/selvage#learn-more>.

5  
With all due respect to our journal of arts and letters, *Obsidian*, in publication since 1975.

6  
Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

7  
Dionne Brand, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics* (Coach House, 1994).

8  
My reading is indebted to Katherine McKittrick's fundamental insights about black feminist cartographies, and about Brand's work in particular, found in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

9  
Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Vintage Canada, 2012). On Christina's interpretation, see Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19, 106, 131.

10  
Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (McClelland & Stewart, 2018), 135.

11  
Omise'eke Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008).

12  
Zakiyyah Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013).

13  
Zakiyyah Jackson, "Sense of Things," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016).

14  
Zakiyyah Jackson, "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human,'" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21, no. 2-3 (June 2015): 215-18.

15  
Jackson, "Sense of Things."

16  
On asterisks, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 29-34. On abstraction, see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26, no. 7 (2008).

17  
Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

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