

VISITOR REPORT

by Wigbertson Julian Isenia, University of Amsterdam¹

on Chandra Frank's *Tidal Gatherings*
with Paula Albuquerque, Sharelly Emanuelson,
Desiree Mwalimu Banks, Toni Giselle Stuart,
Lisandro Suriel and Geo Wyex

Symposium
4, 5, 6 October 2024

If I Can't Dance
WG-Plein 881, Amsterdam

CBK Zuidoost, location SHEBANG
Hettenheuvelweg 8, Amsterdam

Water as an Archive: Memory / Identity / Elemental

Water is a nexus for personal narratives and broader historical forces. At the symposium, *Tidal Gatherings*, curated by scholar Chandra Frank, this nexus was looked at through themes of identity, memory and resistance within the African diaspora. Zambian-born artist and educator Desiree Mwalimu-Banks spoke first, introducing her 'water mandala'. This conceptual framework reflects the element's capacities to create, nurture, cleanse and remember as a psychic compass that situates Mwalimu-Banks in the diaspora. The sense of gathering central to this work extended into a communal dinner, where I met artist Isabel Cordeiro. While she did not perform at the symposium, we discussed her artistic practice, which includes performing suspended several meters above the ground with melting ice.

The programme continued with a series of film screenings: Toni Giselle Stuart's *Ocean Home* (2021) depicts efforts in Cape Town to preserve coastal heritages and reconnect communities displaced during apartheid; Geo Wyex's *Muck Studies Dept Statement of Intent* (2020) introduces an investigative persona that navigates murky waterways, symbolising the experiences

¹ I invoke the 'I' in this text, though it is partly a 'we'. My words and memories are inspired by the many people I have spoken with and listened to. I would like to acknowledge especially Desiree Mwalimu Banks, Sara Giannini, Chandra Frank, Paula Albuquerque, Lisandro Suriel, Anik Fournier, and Isabel Cordeiro.

of Black and trans identities with water's engulfing qualities recalling the self's resistance and hidden dimensions; Paula Albuquerque's *Like the Glitch of a Ghost* (2023) disrupts colonial archives through glitches in 1950s footage from Suriname, wherein those once invisible haunt images and challenge their historical erasure; and Lisandro Suriel's *Ghost Island — A Documentary of Black Imagination* (2021) moves between reality and ancestral memory, and uses water motifs, ritual, and visual orgasm to reclaim fragmented histories and reimagine Black identity beyond narratives of oppression.

The memories of water below are intrinsic to my experience, inseparable from who I am. To this, I bring reflections following the symposium's lectures, performances, prompts, readings, and conversations that created a space, which encouraged me to elaborate on the enduring ways water shapes and supports my sense of self.

'I do not believe in time; I do believe in water.'
'..., Water doesn't end.'
— Dionne Brand, *Nomenclature: New and Collected Poems* (2022)²

Water holds within it the essence of timelessness. For me, water has been a constant companion, both a healer and a source of fear.

On a cold January afternoon on a Dutch beach, approximately fifty family members and friends gathered to mourn the loss of a loved one who had died at sea. Clad in wetsuits, we held our surfboards and flower bouquets, and wore flower crowns on our heads. We were getting ready for a paddle-out, which is a customary Hawaiian remembrance of a deceased person's life and legacy. In this ceremony, surfers paddle out into the ocean, forming a floating circle where they join hands, share heartfelt words, chant and celebrate the departed's life.

Water was significant in the bonds I shared with him. Both raised on the island of Curaçao, we were competitive swimmers on the same team as children. We reunited in the Netherlands as adults, once more joining a swim team and spending nights with friends on Klein Curaçao — a small uninhabited island lying southeast of Curaçao.

² Brand, Dionne. *Nomenclature: New and Collected Poems*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022, 26 & 69.

I never made it to the paddle-out, only 100 metres out. The water roared in my ears and burned in my eyes. Waves grew ever higher, rolling relentlessly over me. I swallowed the first unwanted gulp; the second soon followed. Submerged and searching for the rope connecting my hand to the surfboard, a realisation crystallised: the water was too powerful that day.... They should not have to mourn another loss at this funeral. Me.

I swam calmly back to the shore with resignation and relief.

This experience laid bare the paradox of water – its capacity to gather us into communion and to humble us; it is both the fluid thread that connects our souls and the vast force that commands our reverence.

‘Water is eternal summer, and the depths of winter, too.’
— Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (2018)³

Since I was little, I have been afraid of water, haunted by recurring nightmares of drowning. I recall a time during a swimming lesson when I resisted learning to dive. Frustrated, the instructor pushed my small body beneath the surface. Instinctively, I grasped around me and broke his necklace, causing him to release me. Despite these fearful beginnings, I became a swimmer and, ultimately, a lifeguard.

What compelled me to swim was a severe struggle with asthma. Allergic to many things – even disposable diapers as a baby – swimming helped ease my breathing and taught me how to pace my breaths. Water became a vital therapy, transforming my relationship with it from fear to necessity. It became my eternal summer, soothing my ailments, and my winter, echoing my nightmares.

As a lifeguard, my connection with water transformed into a mix of respect and humility towards its unpredictability. We are trained to recognise and respond to a drowning victim within 30 seconds — a nearly impossible task. Prevention becomes crucial; we learn to anticipate danger before it arises, such as by advising against swimming in rough conditions or when under influence. Water demands vigilance and esteem.

³ Tinsley, Omise’eke Natasha. *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 3.

‘To all those above the water and beneath it, still silent.’
— Thomas Glave, *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008)⁴

In 2020, during a performance lecture with friends in Brussels, I participated in my first libation ceremony — a ritual where liquid is poured as an offering to honour deities, spirits or ancestors guided by Adéolá Naomi Adérèmi. The event fostered a collaborative space where artists, writers and scholars — including myself — interacted with one another’s work. Under the guidance of music, the libation was both preceded and followed by readings, short lectures and a prom dance that I had longed to experience.

Growing up, I could not come out during my teenage years. As an adult, I found myself dancing to Ritmo Kombina — a genre of Curaçaoan music — with a partner I desired. This performance lecture expressed my deep longing, tied to our sense of self, queerness and Blackness. Our bodies moved as if led by spirits. It was an act of reclamation and embodiment, accompanied by alcohol and an abundance of water.

‘I am from this place, my blood runs in each of these trees, my flesh is kneaded from the dirt of these hills. I am the water enclosed in these rocks, my eyes are buds of the sun.’
— Kettly Mars, *Kasalé* (2003)⁵

In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997) co-edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Alexander discusses how European colonial fantasies of conquest, exoticism and desire converge on untouched beaches and aquamarine waters, facilitated by both Black state officials and white multinational interests.⁶ This convergence mirrors my relationship with water — a space where histories of colonialism and personal memories intertwine, where danger and allure coexist.

Similarly, Vic Muñoz has described tatume squash, which defies Western binaries such as summer versus winter or maturity versus immaturity.⁷ It thrives in harsh conditions, extending its tendrils for moisture even when other plants wilt. Like the tatume, I navigate between binaries, gender

⁴ Glave, Thomas (ed). *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, v.

⁵ Kettly Mars, as quoted and translated in Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023, 237.

⁶ Alexander, M. Jacqui. “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy.” In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 92-124. New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁷ Vic Muñoz, ‘Tatume’, *TSQ*, vol.1, no.1–2, May 2014, pp.213–16.

and otherwise, finding sustenance in unlikely places and reaching out even when circumstances seem barren.

In moments of stillness, I recall Palestinian landscapes akin to those evoked by Adania Shibli in *Minor Detail* (2020) — vast stretches of barren hills trembling under the weight of a mirage, with harsh sunlight blurring their outlines.⁸ This illustrates how fleeting my anxieties and reverence are, how reality, perception are constantly changing, and how my inner landscapes are constantly changing.

‘One of the physical characteristics that unites us with marine mammals is that they process air in a way similar to us. Though they spend most or all their time in water, they do not have gills. We, too, on land are often navigating contexts that seem impossible for us to breathe in, and yet we must.’

– Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020)⁹

Water can be a place to spread the ashes of a loved one, but it also becomes a communal space for gathering and nourishment. I see my fears about water, which I had and still have, about water not as a barrier to overcome but as a reflection of my deep connection with it.

Water is a metaphor as well as an element; it is a flowing realm where identities, emotions and histories come together and disperse. It is a force that may uplift, challenge, bind and free us; it is a reflection of the densities both inside and outside of us. Water, as Dionne Brand explains, is not limited by time; it never stops — it changes, just like humans do.

Moving through life, I know that water carries the tangible remnants of our past – the silt, the salt, the fragments of history that shape us.

⁸ Shibli, Adania. *Minor Detail*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

⁹ Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, 2020, 25.

ABOUT THE EVENT

Tidal Gatherings was a three-day symposium on the intersections between water, ecology, and Dutch colonialism curated by Chandra Frank. Connecting different sites and modes of convening, *Tidal Gatherings* included talks, film screenings, and a study group. Through these different facets, the programme invited to think with water alongside ideas of belonging, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as artistic production. *Tidal Gatherings* featured the work of Paula Albuquerque, Sharelly Emanuelson, Desiree Mwalimu Banks, Toni Giselle Stuart, Lisandro Suriel, and Geo Wyex, and was conceived as part of *Sound System Ecologies*, a broader collaborative project between Chandra Frank and DJ Lynnée Dennise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wigbertson Julian Isenia (they/them) is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and holds a PhD in Cultural Analysis from the same institution. Their interdisciplinary research combines ethnography and archival studies to explore Caribbean identities, postcolonial contexts, and queer subjectivities, particularly in Curaçao. They have published in journals including *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, *Small Axe* and *Feminist Review*; contributed chapters to anthologies such as *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism* (2021), and co-curated exhibitions such as *House of HIV: The Stories Behind 40 Years of Community Initiatives*, various locations, Amsterdam, 2022 and *Nos Tei*, IHLIA, Amsterdam (2019).

ABOUT THE VISITOR REPORT

At If I Can't Dance we see the visitor report as a method of documentation. The affectual, relational and embodied nature of performance work is not always easily captured in audio-visual formats. To supplement such formats, If I Can't Dance commissions written visitor reports, which are meant to offer subjective responses to a lived experience of a work and its context. The visitor report is, therefore, not to be confused with a critical review. It is first and foremost a form of witnessing. The people commissioned to write the report span a range of positions and practices within and outside the field of art.

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