



aka Wolfwoman: A Poetic Artist's Book

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Abstract

Twinned images in this visual poetic essay evoke a Du Boisian sense of double consciousness and Marasa consciousness found in cosmologies of Haitian Vodou and Yoruba Orisha Ibeji twin figures. I propose a “liberation of misfits,” through a visual poetic narrative resistant against marginalization on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, and ability. I present my poem, “aka Wolfwoman” in the form of a poetic artist’s book, featuring images created as arts-based research to support and expand upon the story invoked in the poem. The poem communicates the “othering” of an uncontained, neurodivergent woman hounded by a heteropatriarchal figure that seeks to dominate and control her. Amid the dispossession and homelessness of diaspora, I seek a sense of home situated firmly in the body. I engage with identities forged out of multiplicity and suggest the liberatory potential in misfitting.

Keywords: Du Bois, double consciousness, Haitian Vodou, Yoruba Orisha Ibeji, Marasa consciousness, twinnedness, misfit liberation

aka Wolfwoman

He found her repugnant
could not stand her
hairy ways
nor her desire
that laid
like a limp pat of butter
on a clean plate.

He hunted her
to the margins of his brain.
Knew she was wolfwoman
brazen plunges beneath
woman,
in a black nest
he wallowed
with prayers
in the hollow
of hope
buried
under her
dreams.

In my artist's book, *aka Wolfwoman*,¹ which features my poem by the same name, I explore the ideas of being a misfit and an “uncontained,” neurodivergent woman. I seek to express the flow of moods mostly through mixed media photo-based images of myself and my niece, Celia.² I depict layers of identity and the experience of interior shifts in mood through the images in my artist's book. According to the Smithsonian Library and Archives:

An artist's book is a medium of artistic expression that uses the form or function of ‘book’ as inspiration. It is the artistic initiative seen in the illustration, choice of materials, creation process, layout and design that makes it an art object. (Evenhaugen et al., 2012, n.p.)

I counterbalance the imagery with a poem that speaks to the patriarchal “He” that surveils the nonconforming woman and seeks to capture and contain her. “He” does not understand her but desires to control her.

In this artist's book, I seek to express my feelings as a woman who exceeds the boundaries imposed by a racist, ableist, patriarchal culture. I present the idea of twinning as a site of dialogues with the self through doubled imagery of my subjects. When I speak of “twinning,” on one level, I refer to a spiritual double that I believe all might have within. There is the relationship one may have to their “inner voice” or “higher self”—a gentle nudging from one's interiority. I bring out that dual interior quality as an embodiment, an image of doubled physical selves with power and drive within the matrix of the individual self. The doubling of the self also conveys a mirror image, were we to gaze too closely at ourselves in the looking glass. I wonder if that spiritual double had mass and form—would it look just like me? John Mason (2016) describes Ibeji, the Yoruba “Divine Twins,” as making “concrete the idea of the cleaved spirit, of the mirror image, of one spirit that inhabits and animates two, sometimes identical bodies. ... Ibeji is the visible incarnation of two working in harmony as one” (p. 68).³ I explore the idea of twinning by portraying the spiritual double of the self as somewhat shifted, out of

¹ Click on the title for a link to the book.

² Celia is a pseudonym.

³ This interdependent dynamic between Ibeji also relates to my personal understanding of my own queerness. Mason writes, “Marriage is ideally the producer of Ibeji” (p. 68). I have created several artworks and poems over time that explore my Ibeji-like connection to my wife.

alignment, flipped, or reversed. The movement between layers of identity is also indicated by my drawings on top of some of the photos (see Figure 1).

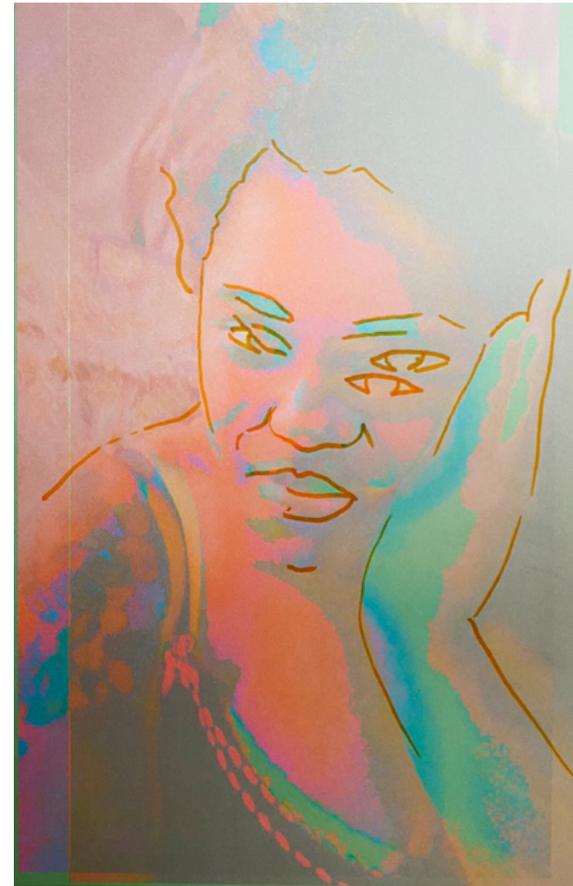


Figure 1. In the process of creating this mixed media photo-based self-portrait, I experimented with multiple approaches to the color scheme. This photo image is a multiple exposure of the same image, causing the figure to appear doubled. I created the digital collage then printed the image and drew on top of the print with an orange India ink brush pen, emphasizing the doubled appearance of the line drawing with two sets of eyes. Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Untitled*, 2021, 8.5” x 5.5”, Archival inkjet print with ink drawing. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.

My work with the doubling of the self is related to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. In his classic text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states:

It is a peculiar situation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2)

Du Bois engages with double consciousness here from the standpoint of African Americans' experiences of race. I also identify with a sense of double consciousness that speaks to the marginalization I experience in the multiple identities I inhabit. These identities reflect “warring ideals” and “unreconciled strivings,” making me vulnerable to tremendous objectification. The displacement of my own identity in its complicated entanglements produces the multiple consciousnesses of selves that are not isolated, but somehow relate to each other and network in experiences of exclusion. My Black, queer, neurodivergent self becomes invisible in the intersections of my identity for many different reasons, whether it is because of my race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, or any other factor that promotes ontological or epistemological estrangement from the mythic norm. Reflecting on who I am and what I know has value is a continuous process of trying to make a place for myself in situations where it feels like there is no place for me.

Consequently, rather than saying I “resort to” dialogues with the self, I assert that I utilize the entanglements and intersections of my identity as a way to better know myself and the world. I embrace my spiritual connection to my ancestors, whom I imagine comingle with me sometimes as if they are part of me. I employ artistic and meditative processes in creating an artist's book for the sake of self-revelation and self-(re)alignment. Through creating the imagery for my artist's book and combining the imagery with a feminist poem, I articulate my positionality as a social outsider. Rather than dwelling on a sense of lack caused by social exclusions, I instead positively construct a visual and poetic narrative that empowers my voice and allows me to create the light of identification for

those who are “othered” in any of the ways that I am. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4.)

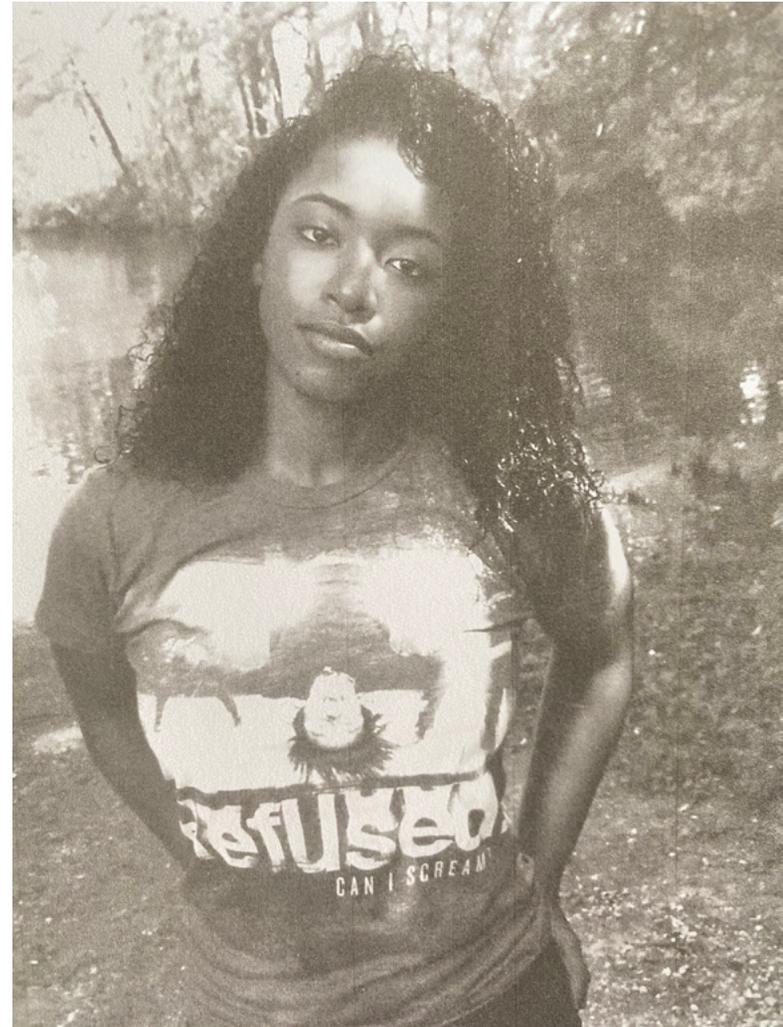


Figure 2. This grayscale image of my niece Celia (a pseudonym) is the basis for the twinned portraits in *Interior Dreams* and other artworks. She is standing in a park wearing a T-shirt that proclaims “Refused: CAN I SCREAM.” Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Untitled*, 2019, 8” x 7”, Inkjet print. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.

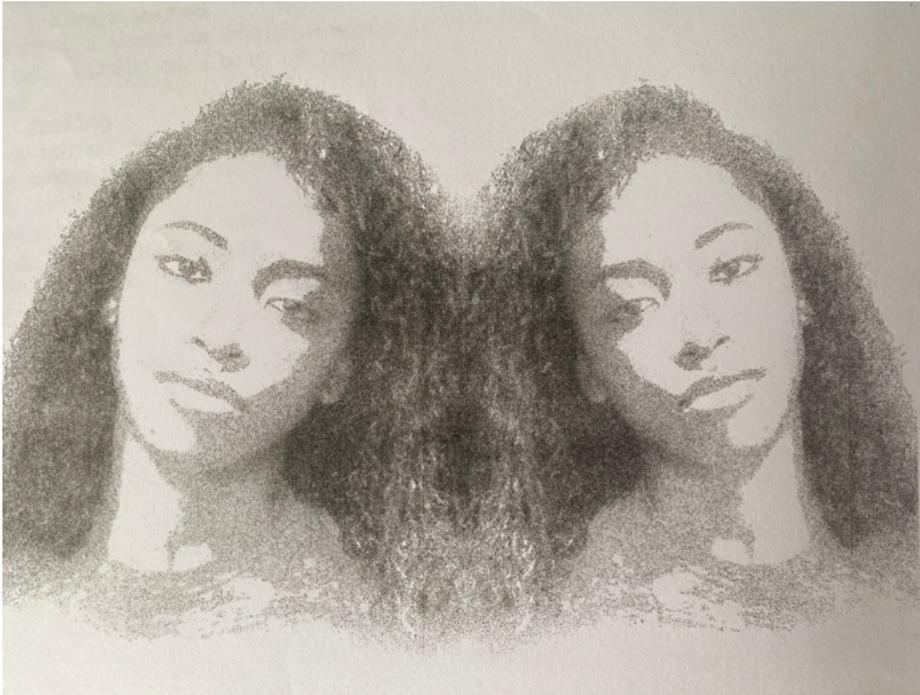


Figure 3. As I worked with the original portrait of Celia in Figure 2, I eventually arrived at this composition of Celia's doubled heads. I created the image in Photoshop and printed it in grayscale on a desktop printer. I initially printed the image of Celia in grayscale so that I could easily select the dark values and replace them with a single color. Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Untitled*, 2019, 5.5" x 7.5", Inkjet print. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.



Figure 4. In this image, I made the doubled portraits of Celia blue and printed them on bright yellow paper. This was only the beginning of my exploration of this composition. I have recently completed two pieces based on this image in mixed media drawings on top of archival inkjet prints on large format canvas. More details available at my artist website: www.glynnisreed.com.” Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Untitled*, 2019, 8.5" x 10.5", Inkjet print. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.

In this twinning, I am my own companion in the absence of being understood or accepted “out there” in spaces beyond myself. My articulation of twinning is networked to the idea of the Yoruba Ibeji—Divine Twins—that go by various names in the African diaspora. Ibeji are twin Orishas⁴ that represent dualistic, opposing yet complementary forces, such as masculine and feminine, light and dark, or expansion and contraction. Many of the dualistic pairs are co-constituted; and evoke an infinitude of diverse and divergent states of being between them. As a Black woman, I am not considered normative by a white supremacist, patriarchal culture. With my disability, I am not considered fully human by an ableist society. I am thought of as abject in the entanglement of all these aspects of myself. And even in the twin-like and fluid nature of my bisexuality I am often cast out as ‘beyond the pale’ by both queer and heterosexual people alike. With all these excluded conditions where could someone like me belong?

Wearing the mask to pass is an option, whether by choice or not, when it comes to attempting to fit in. I have an invisible disability, which ordinarily allows me to pass as able-bodied and neurotypical. Despite my queerness, people often assume that I am heterosexual because of preconceived notions of how a queer person looks. However, most people would correctly identify me as a Black woman. I juggle so many different sensibilities and feelings stemming from my multiple identities; living in the margins can lead to a sense of displacement. For years I have persistently felt like I am searching for home. Returning to the places I reside has not always satisfied that feeling. This longing for home relates to a diasporic consciousness, desiring to find a particular place and queer kinship relations where my needs of belonging and care can be fulfilled.

African American people often consider Africa to be our homeland, but as a queer Black woman, I am aware that I am not welcome in a number of African countries due to intense, anti-LGBTQ legislation. Currently, at home in the U.S., more and more states are enacting hateful anti-LGBTQ laws that are creating an increasingly hostile culture for queer and trans individuals domestically. I face a series of exclusions on a daily basis, whether experienced in the real world or

⁴ Orisha refers to “spiritual forces in nature” that “guide consciousness” in the West African religion of Ifá, a tradition that forms the foundation of many African diaspora religions (Fatunmbi, 1995, p. iv).

communicated through social and mass media. In the absence of a true homeland, I discover where I belong by making art. Writing poetry, painting, drawing, doing photography or other creative activities helps me realize that if I belong anywhere at this time, I belong in my own body, my home— this temple, my flesh. I am starting to understand that home, for me, begins right here, standing on my square of Earth, living life as this misfit called Glynnis.

In my photo drawing, *Interior Dreams* (2022), the doubled heads of my niece, Celia, causes her to appear to be twins joined at the skull, but they are not conjoined by the flesh, rather I imagine them to be deeply and radically entangled together by their hair. The two figures, in their connection, seem to oscillate between being one thing, then two. Multiples have the potential to come together to form oneness, while the multiplicity of one is not always apparent. (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Celia’s twinned heads became inspiration for pushing the limits of the expressiveness of the drawing medium. In this image I wanted to portray the messiness and intensity of feelings that I experience at times as a neurodivergent person. The image portrays the eruption of emotions that can rage in me as a “misfit” woman. Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Interior Dreams*, 2021, 8” x 10.5” Archival inkjet print. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.

In Haitian Vodou, the Divine Twins are called Marasa. Pressley-Sanon (2013) writes in “One Plus One Equals Three: *Marasa* Consciousness, the *Lwa*, and Three Stories”:

In a *marasa twa* formulation in Haiti and West and Central West Africa, the two twins that evoke the third element, *dosu/dosa*, [the third child born after twins], combined in the Americas and conceived another world, a diaspora steeped in ruptures as well as continuities, out of which arose something that was simultaneously both and neither. (p. 122)

This quotation from Pressley-Sanon evinces the macroscopic resonances of the twinned of myself and Celia in my artist’s book, where our multiplicity and multifacetedness relate to a similar dynamism and elasticity that could be found in the greater picture of African diaspora women’s experiences. Behind the mask of normativity are the twinned selves in my artworks, where two become one, then shift back to two and potentially create a third, as stated in Pressley-Sanon’s *marasa* formulation. In experiences of multiple marginalization, Black women’s relationships to historically violent colonial powers could be understood as forcing a twinned relationship to the self, analogous to Du Bois’s classic idea of Black double consciousness, compounded by the implications of gender in the heteropatriarchal, colonial encounter. Imagining the *dosa* or third emerging from twinned suggests the “new beings” that emerged from the dispersal of African people throughout the diaspora because of the Transatlantic slave trade.

I see my artist’s book situated in what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011) calls in her article, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept”:

The concept of misfitting as a shifting spatial and perpetually temporal relationship [that] confers agency and value on disabled subjects at risk of social devaluation by highlighting adaptability, resourcefulness, and subjugated knowledge as potential effects of misfitting. (p. 592)

My poem, “aka Wolfwoman,” begins with a sense of abject disgust on the part of the patriarchal other who finds the female subject of the poem “repugnant” and “could not stand her hairy ways.” This speaks to how women are continuously positioned as subject to the male gaze, and when perceived as outside of what is acceptable or beautiful, are often considered disposable. The male in this poem,

however, seeks to control my narrative’s uncontained, misfit woman, “hunting her to the margins of his brain” although he “knew she was wolfwoman.” The reference to wolfwoman is an intertextual allusion to a drawing titled *Wolfwoman* from an earlier series of my drawings called *The Beheld Beings* which depicts an emotive, hirsute female portrait. The term also refers to a feminist archetype in a book that celebrates the wild feminine self, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (Estés, 2003). (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. This mixed media photo drawing of a hybrid human, animal, and plant being carries the weight of my heavy emotions. I found the drawing process to be cathartic as I started making drawings on photo prints, soothing tumultuous feelings at a challenging time in my life. Glynnis Reed-Conway, *Wolfwoman*, 2018, 24” x 24”, India ink drawing on archival inkjet print. Published with permission, courtesy of the artist, Glynnis Reed-Conway.

I depict tensions of moods through the layering of images of nature in my portraits of myself and Celia; through saturated, flowing color; and drawing that mediates the photo-based work in my artist's book. I also aim, by the final image in the book, to portray a sense of self satisfaction and wholeness in the neurodivergent subject, who, experiencing the fluidity of feelings and ideas, accepts herself and stands sovereign from the patriarchal gaze.

In conclusion, artistic creation can allow for experiences of freedom from oppression through the expression of wayward identities. The arts allow misfit individuals to shape a point of view about their individual and collective subject positions amidst the vagaries of navigating oppressive social structures. This liberatory potential in misfitting is posited in Garland-Thomson's statement:

So, although misfitting can lead to segregation, exclusion from the rights of citizenship, and alienation from a majority community, it can also foster intense awareness of social injustice ... and the formation of a community of misfits that can collaborate to achieve a more liberatory politics and praxis. So whereas the benefit of fitting is material and visual anonymity, the cost of fitting is perhaps complacency about social justice and a desensitizing to material experience. (p. 597)

In perceiving self as a global feminist subject, having the freedom to articulate one's identity is crucial to liberating misfits. I created this artist's book by combining my poetry and portrait artworks, flowing freely with the emotions of experiences of neurodivergence, to forward a politics of resistance to hegemony and marginalization based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or ability.

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About the Author

Glynnis Reed-Conway (she/her, they/them) is an accomplished professional visual artist, art educator, and emerging scholar. She has two decades of experience as an art educator, working with diverse students as a teaching artist, K-12 art teacher, museum educator, and as a university instructor. She is a co-editor and contributor to the Curriculum and Pedagogy Group volume *BIPOC Alliances: Building Communities and Curricula* and author of the book, *James Baldwin: Novelist and Critic*. Reed-Conway has exhibited her artwork widely in the U.S. and internationally. She is a recipient of the Visions of a New California Award and numerous other grants and awards. She is currently a dual-title doctoral degree candidate in Art Education and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University. She recently served as the Blockson Graduate Assistant at Penn State University Libraries in the Charles L. Blockson Collection of African Americana and the African Diaspora, where she curated the exhibits "Haiti: Liberation of the First Black Republic" (2022) and "Black Feminist Embodiments of Self-Love and Self-Recovery" (2023). She is motivated by the capacity of art to build worlds and act as a potential healing agent and liberating force. Her scholarly activities weave multiple strands of study that include artmaking practices, African spiritualities, disability studies, and autoethnography to bring greater awareness of the value of the lives and contributions of intersectionally marginalized individuals in the field of art. The author may be contacted at reedglynnis@gmail.com