

DUST: murmurs and a play

Pamela S. Booker

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for

Marcy Borders / *Dust Lady*

and

Sharbut Gula / *Green-Eyed Girl*

and

Mamie, Wilhelmina, & William

“Without exception the days when I am writing are
days of images fiercely pounding in my head...”

Adrienne Kennedy
Funnyhouse of A Negro

Acknowledgements

In the tradition in which films and political campaigns require the galvanizing of cooperative spirits in the realization of the final creation so too does the publication of a book. Given that our very survival is burdened, by the relentless war-mongering that competes for our sensibilities across this planet, I choose, in this regard, to thank the “villagers” that have supported and affirmed my efforts as opposed to the “army” metaphor so often used in this context.

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Introduction

Art Talk

When my eldest nephew Gian was about four years old and visiting me one summer, he wandered into the bathroom while I was struggling to remove a contact lens that was suctioned to my eye. He cocked his head and paused for a moment to observe my display of hyper frustration and then piped:

What ya' doin'?

Taking my eyes out, I sulked.

What? They're not yours? he quipped.

This profoundly simple exchange has lingered in my memory, as one of those enduring teachable moments that children often unwittingly provide for adults. While I stood annoyed by the artificial tools that aided in my sight, a child's wisdom questioned why I didn't possess the tool of vision—metaphorically and perceptibly—to begin with. What I learned from this consequential lesson is that vision is not a universal given. Even more ironic, if not an unsettling revelation, is that the ordinary act of plucking out a contact lens is often how we choose to see the world—through the selective shifting variables of a short or near-sightedness or being at-risk for outright blindness. We tug and pull at our sightlines, unsure of what we do possess

of that inner-vision, and are often reluctant to own much of what we see in our daily perceptions. In other words, of what this past encounter reminded me, is that sightlines, and the resulting images they produce, are only as valuable as our ability to possess them—of making them “yours,” as my nephew exclaimed.

This collection, *Dust: murmurs and a play*, provides a course of recognition that is equal parts critical, performative, and personal in the moments during and years following 9-11. This introductory meditation, along with the writings that follow, are the dialectical monographs of my play *Dust*, an imagined chronicling of two war-shattered women (one African American, the other Afghani) who survive a world that has betrayed them. Concurrently, the essays—*In the Mess of the Aftermath*, *Staging black/female/body in the (Ongoing) Age of Global Terror*—along with *Scream of Consciousness Monologue*, speak to issues that flood our complex human narratives—racial/ethnic politics, globalism, love and healing.

As a playwright/creative investigator, my inclination throughout *Dust*, is to function as an archivist, a collector, a documentarian, a disseminator and, most importantly, to witness. This is in large part stirred by what I *saw* on September 11th 2001. My remembrances as an artist serve first to retrieve what remains of the remains of the collective mutilated human bodies and spirits. Second, I hope to secure a place for Marcy Borders, the subject of my play—also known as *Dust Lady*—the figure whose arresting photograph haunted me from the first spectral flash of the media broadcast, within the larger historical archives for future generations. In *Dust*, however, where we are introduced to Borders and her maverick tale as a survivor, she is never situated exclusively in ruins specific to 9-11 or New York City. Rather, she is seen through the lens of an apocalyptic or dystopic setting that could be any urban epoch—here, now, or soon to be.

Much of my artistic inquiry embraces the convergences of race, gender, sexuality, and cultural power, in the lives of globally-centered women—of how these women move through the world and how I see myself centered in them. As the process of writing *Dust* revealed to me, the global gaze and how it positions an individual is often not of their choosing, such as discovered by the real-life Marcy Borders and Sharbut Gula, a living Afghani woman (called Green-Eyed Girl in the play) whom she encounters through a series of dreams. How these

“real” women negotiate the political betrayals that have fractured their personal lives while working towards recovery and healing, demands a level of trust that only a fictionalized account could support. Within this scope, I find myself drawn to the wedding of language and voice, and to the personal power found in cultural authority. Ultimately, it is their mislaid ownership (or sense of possession/perception that my young nephew tapped into) partnered with their ability to reclaim voice that transforms these extraordinary women.

In her seminal writing, *Autobiography of the Self as Object*, visual conceptualist Adrian Piper uses her body and therefore her *self* as the subjective object of investigation. More a philosophical architect of the body politic discourse, you might assign Piper’s tracings of a woman touching her breasts (sometimes for pleasure or curiosity and at other times for medical examination) feeling the lumps and blemishes that may or may not be life-threatening, but as merely representative of the supple imperfections that map a body and, more importantly, provide a course of recognition that is part critical and part expressive.

Central to the underpinnings of *Dust* is the critical essay *Staging black/female/body in the (Ongoing) Age of Global Terror*, which served as my original thesis project while a graduate student in the Gallatin Program at New York University 2001-2003. In my decision to revise this work for an audience beyond the academy, the story and my impressions of the events suddenly revealed a more substantial explanation of the arc on which the expressions of the play was originally crafted. As I see it, this is a time when the “portrait” of the *West African-Carolinian derived American Negro* has fallen from vogue, cast aside, if you will, for more tempting features. I use the Carolinas as a personal reference since they serve as the geographical point of entry for my own familial migration. Any American southern state could just as easily be substituted. *Negro* of course denotes the pre-Black Arts time frame in which black folks were migrating from the South to the northern-most states for obvious historical reasons.

On the one hand, we flourish during a time when literary/cultural scholar Henry Louis Gates navigates us through the emotionally searing retrieval of our ancestral roots grounded in the accuracy of DNA and other scientific methodologies. Genetics-based applications such as these could only have been imagined by the famed *Roots* author,

Staging blackfemalebody in the (Ongoing) Age of Global Terror

Using the bio-fictionalized characterization of Marcy Borders as the subject of my performance-play *Dust*, the following modified critical essay reflects the coalescing of the original theories that helped shape my understanding of the real and imagined public framing of her terror. This writing began shortly following the United States's "intervention" in Afghanistan in early 2002.

It is not without irony that the political climate and socio-cultural conditions that led to the catastrophic events of September 11th 2001 also lend themselves to the visual representation/naming of a woman called *Dust Lady*, an anonymous African American female figure dust-



Trade Center terror survivor Marcy Borders. The Day That Changed America!: Working Class Professional Tells Her Story Of Emerging From the Inferno! National Enquirer / November 6th 2001.

ed/marked *white* by falling debris. Like thousands of others on that day, her image was captured as the random subject of a photographer's lens. Yet this unnamed figure moved, if not haunted me. I was drawn to her story, her name, and to determine further why these intersections of identity appeared as aesthetically compelling as they are historically disturbing. In the following excerpted internet article titled: *Dust Lady Sells Story: Bayonne WTC Survivor in National Enquirer*, journalist Steven Kalcanides tenders a sympathetic portrait of Borders and the harrowing ordeal that would, over time, define her endurance.

Marcy Borders, then 28 years-old, had only started her new job about one month earlier, after struggling through a long stretch of unemployment. A single mother of an 8 year-old daughter and living in Bayonne, New Jersey, she wasn't thrilled with her commute to Manhattan. But with her first decent paying administrative position in the prestigious Bank of America, she was thankful for the opportunity. The office where she worked was located on the 81st floor of the World Trade Center Tower 1. She recalls the pandemonium of the escape: "It took more than an hour to reach the ground floor, which seemed like forever." She recalls them all as alarmed masses blindly making their way down 81 flights of throat-choking, smoke and soot-filled stairs. Not only would Borders barely escape with her life, but she immediately discovered the enormity of the malevolence that was to indelibly mark her body and consciousness. "Two guys grabbed me and dragged me outside," she said. "...Suddenly firemen raced toward us screaming, 'RUN! DON'T LOOK BACK! RUN!'...That had to be when the photograph was taken."¹

What I found most striking about Borders's account is that on first *seeing* her photographic image, coupled with reading subsequent interviews about her miraculous escape, I was made aware of two explicit revelations. First, that this woman suffered an inordinate amount of trauma, and second, that in some ontological sense, sustained trauma of this magnitude has a longstanding, discomfiting historical context where the well-being and safety of African American

¹ A direct quote made by Marcy Borders that I use as a refrain in the scene RUN! in the play.

women are concerned. That her flight was captured in a daunting photograph then distributed electronically for a collective global gaze, profoundly underscores the complexities of black female endurance rooted in what literary critic Hortense Spillers denotes as: “a common border with another country of symbols—the iconographic.”²

In an imagined space, Borders experiences a series of dream encounters with the Afghani refugee Sharbut Gula who was originally “discovered” in 1985 by *National Geographic* and “found” again by the magazine in 2002 as an adult following U.S. interventions. Both women attained international celebrity status when their transfixing images were featured the world over on media covers and infotainment shows, situating them, by extension, as symbols of global terror. (Gula’s wrenching tale, dating back to her childhood years spent under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, is for the first time revealed in the magazine article and was further dissected by Oprah on the Oxygen Network.) In my play however, these women are linked as cultural and historical forces that confront their photographers, media predators, and, perhaps, for the first time also see themselves.

Despite the reality that Marcy Borders and Sharbut Gula will probably never meet, there are several paradoxes that bind them. The most important of which is, that they exist as “accidental” subjects documented in settings that have been alternately romanticized, exoticized, and traumatized, and where the “dust” of their immediate circumstances serves to blanket their identities. Through movement, text, and visual projections, the play *Dust* examines how Historical stains, persistent war, and conditional vulnerability have compromised these women’s bodies, and indeed their lives.

Realizing early on the potential expansiveness of this research, I have limited this discussion to the positioning of Marcy Borders, rather than including her Afghani companion Sharbut Gula. Gula’s story is instead actively figured in the performance in which she serves as a reflection of moral outrage in keeping with Borders’s. The following excerpt from the original script, introduces both characters during *Dust Lady*’s first hallucinatory vision of *Green-Eyed Girl*:

² Holland, Sharon P. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000. *Bakulu Discourse: Bodies Made Flesh in Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. 41-67.

SC.6 - YOU HAUNT MY DREAMS

SOUND: MUSLIM CALL TO WORSHIP PRAYER SUNG IN ARABIC.

VISUAL PROJECTION: IMAGES OF AFGHANI FLAG AND WAR-TORN DUSTY REGION.

DUST LADY IS NAPPING IN HER LIVING ROOM. ENTER GREEN-EYED GIRL FULLY DRAPED IN BURKA DRESS. SHE KNEELS TO PRAY ON A RUG, THEN RISES WITH A GILDED FRAME DRAPED AWKWARDLY ACROSS HER BODY.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

Wake up! Open your eyes American woman. Open your eyes! Wake up!

DUST LADY

(Dazed) What? What? (Shaken) It's a dream. (Beat) At least I thought so. Oh God...I'm losing my mind. Who are you? (Rises cautiously then points to GREEN-EYED GIRL'S gilded frame.) You have one too?

GREEN-EYED GIRL

(Pulls at her burka) Yes, it is how I dress.

DUST LADY

No, no. (Points to picture frame) That.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

That's the image your Western culture sees of me. Menacing yet exotic. Anything you Americans can't rationalize, you exoticize.

DUST LADY

(Defensive) Don't lump me in with YOU Americans. I don't judge people.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

No? Even with all that's happened?

DUST LADY

No! Look, I don't know you and I don't understand why you're in MY dreams.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

Perhaps it is time we move beyond dreams. These times demand brutal, hard, Truths.

DUST LADY

I've had enough brutal.(Beat) Wait...now I remember you! (Beat) How have you survived?

GREEN-EYED GIRL

As with you, it is the will of God.

DUST LADY

How can you be so sure?

GREEN-EYED GIRL

Because we are here.

Although we can never be certain of the quality of either woman's hard-fought survivorship, Marcy Borders, in the end, suffered disheartening attacks on her character and debilitating depression in the ebbs and flow of her unsolicited celebrity. When the dust settled, she would be branded *Dust Lady* by the media, before having the opportunity to disclose her full identity somewhere in the back pages of the *National Enquirer*.³ This publication and other press would then vilify her for accepting a stipend of a thousand dollars—which also granted them “exclusive rights” to her apocalyptic tale.

I wondered, if by suppressing her name, was an African American woman again denied the basic function of identity (i.e., the *naming* of person and place) routinely assigned to most (white) Western media subjects? Wole Soyinka, in his essay *Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns* (Huxley 25-29), argues that culture, despite the history of coercion, appropriation and colonization, will, at the end of its “dispersal,” find its rightful place among the intended mass-

³ The photo of the real-life Marcy Borders appears with the article that revealed the troubling circumstances surrounding her “celebrity.” Tellingly, the article was buried at the back of the newspaper.

es. Further, Soyinka suggests that, given the complex system of cultural hegemony actively enforced in the West, Marcy Borders's iconography and disengaged identity could be interpreted as an act of "cultural resistance and survival." This is how I choose to *see* her photograph.

Within this larger construction, the figurative or allegorical identity of *Dust Lady* will be theorized as *black/female/body*. As a representative African American female figure, she is cast historically and, therefore repeatedly in sites of terror. Often, she is renamed; more often, she is stripped of a personal identity altogether. Yet not only does this figure resist annihilation, she simultaneously educates her viewers through her survival. Literary scholar Houston Baker supports this assertion by imparting an immediately useful framing when he writes:

black women [serve] as examples of the connection between the material and the nonmaterial world. Their bodies give shape to a sounding of a particular theory. One in which we begin to synthesize the dusting of institutional practice and which locates the gender, race and cultural implications in historical terms. (Holland 45)

Baker's reasoning is echoed by feminist historian Ann duCille when she states: "The weight of black women's experiences serves as a kind of readable map. We make the experiences of other people more *real* to them. Period" (Holland 42).

One of the first questions that I found myself engaged with posits: what, then, are feasible examples of *conditions* or *circumstances* that have historically served to cast, i.e., dust, mark or mask *black/female/body*, both as social construction and on the *stage*?⁴ Together, the harvesting of these theories as cultural expressions privileges what visual conceptualist Adrian Piper terms a "catalytic agency"—one that proves indispensable to continuing queries and the conversations they trigger.

⁴ These terms will be applied based on contextual specificity, though in all instances, directly allude to the damaging effects etc., of Western colonization. For example, in discussing Frantz Fanon's political writings, the term "mark" might prove more definitionally useful vs. how the application of "masking" black bodies is literally used in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*. Stage in this assertion is not restricted to "a theatre," rather it broadly lends itself to creative platforms of examination.

As a group, these conversations become multilogues—a multiplicity of voices and incisive arguments which locate definitionally *black/female/body*. Further, they navigate the complex relationship between African and colonial retentions in Western culture that prove vital to the original query. By assessing the historical conditioning and schema of *black/female/body*, we locate the “readable map” that duCille first introduces. It is with this urgency that my investigation endeavors in the retrieval of hidden and implicit meanings first witnessed in *Dust Lady’s* figure in flight securing it as “the site of a transformation.”⁵

The Big ‘C’ – Culture

For creative investigators such as myself who are drawn to the diametrically odd in literature and history, probing remains crucial to the hidden or implicit meanings that potentially bind/contradict/coalesce the myriad assertions framed by the original architects. In *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture*, performance scholar Jennifer De Vere Brody, asserts as much when examining the range of contradictions with respect to notions of “racial purity” carefully mined in the Old English poem *Jack and the Beanstalk*. It reads: “Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum—I smell the blood of an Englishman!” (Prologue). Brody views the pun as little more than an “impure” paradox—even though purity is precisely what it implies. Further she adds: “This cultural contradiction, contained in and by the citation of the [writer], is also an icon of an impossibly mixed situation...” (4). We are left to conclude that History and the interpretation of Culture, is always at risk for the denial and omission of difference.

Dust as a performance text and creative metaphor that characterizes the historical tropes that have served to locate *black/female/body* on stage and as social construction, relies heavily on the origins of Culture. It is not a simple word to define.

Literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt reminds us in his definitive essay, that *Culture*, is a fairly “modern” term with respect to literary studies, whose origins are derived from nineteenth century anthropological sources.⁶ As such, uses of the term have evolved in complexi-

⁵ Holland, Sharon P. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000. *Bakulu Discourse: Bodies Made Flesh in Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. 41-67.

VISUAL PROJECTION:

Mosque disappears into a non-descript western city skyline.

WITH GREAT DELIBERATION BAHRAM JAN REMOVES HIS FATIGUES AND CHANGES INTO TRADITIONAL MUSLIM DRESS, LONG CAFTAN AND CROWN.

V/O

You are time, fixed and evolving. Absolute devotion.

BAHRAM JAN

(Startled, then agitated) They have started without me.

V/O

You are time, fixed and evolving. Absolute devotion.

LIGHTS CHANGE AGAIN. BAHRAM JAN DISAPPEARS INTO FLASHING, BLINDING LIGHTS AS SOUND ECHOES OUT.

LIGHTS TO BLACK.

SCENE 5 – WOMB AND STAIRWAYS

VISUAL PROJECTION: WOMB AND STAIRWAYS

IN THE DARK, THE SOUND OF FIRE ALARMS AND A RISING AND FALLING HEARTBEAT ARE HEARD.

A CHEWED AWAY SET OF CONCRETE STAIRS RISES AS IF SUSPENDED IN SPACE. ALL AROUND EMERGENCY LIGHTS ARE FLASHING. VOICES ECHO, SHOUTS, SCREAMING, CRYING, PRAYING IS HEARD.

DUST: a play with visual elements

V/O (Through a bullhorn)

This is the fire department. Please evacuate the building immediately. Repeat, please evacuate the building immediately! Stairway exits are to the north and south sides of the building.

LIGHTS UP. WE SEE THE ENTIRE CAST DRESSED IN BUSINESS ATTIRE, EXCEPT BAHRAM JAN WHO WEARS TRADITIONAL MUSLIM GARB. THEY ARE ALL NAVIGATING A DIMLY LIT STAIRWAY.

AT DIRECTED INTERVALS, THE EXITING CAST SHOULD FALL OR GAG FROM THE SMOKE, COUGHING. FEAR PERMEATES THEIR MOVEMENTS. THEY ARE ALL TELLING THE SAME STORY.

DUST LADY

It was about 7:50 a.m. when I got off the elevator. I was in early since I needed to finish preparing a report for the staff meeting. It was scheduled to begin at 9:30. My office is located... on the 81st floor and I have a direct sightline....

V/O (Through a bullhorn)

This is the fire department. Please evacuate the building immediately. Repeat, please evacuate the building immediately! Stairway exits are to the north and south sides of the building.

DUST LADY

Maggie's office. She's the VP for Fiscal Allocations, to have a preliminary discussion of the agenda. I'm the department's Executive Assistant. Somehow, in her mind, that translates into the sum total of my identity. Anyway...that Maggie, she can be an uptight COW when she wants to. You know those New England-raised WASPs! Pilgrims!. No particular state—Connecticut, Maine, MassaCHEWsetts.

TSUNAMI

Give me a Southern cracker any day...WASPs...kill you softly.

DUST LADY

At around quarter to eight—

GREEN-EYED GIRL

8:46 to be exact—

NATE

We hear what sounds like a couple of Mack trucks backfire. But on the 81st floor? (Pause) I ran to the window—

DUST LADY

So did I—

TSUNAMI

At, at first, I was thinking.... I don't know what I was thinking.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

We are going to die, is what I'm thinking!

DUST LADY

I can't, I have a little girl.

TOGETHER THEY ALL SCREAM

Ella!

V/O (Through a bullhorn)

This is the fire department, please evacuate the building immediately. Repeat, please evacuate the building immediately! Stairway exits are to the north and south sides of the building.

DUST LADY

What, come again? Should we “discuss” whether to evacuate or await further instructions? I looked at Maggie and the rest of those simpletons like they had lost their minds.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

The office was starting to smell. It was alarming, funky air. We could see the smoke. Maggie instructs everyone to stay put, be calm.

DUST: a play with visual elements

V/O (through a bullhorn)

This is the fire department, please evacuate the building immediately. Repeat, please evacuate the building immediately! Stairway exits are to the north and south sides of the building.

THEY ALL SCREAM

Shut up!

DUST LADY

(Chuckles) Did you ever hear Eddie Murphy's spin on the movie Amityville Horror?

NATE

I haven't.

TSUNAMI

I haven't either.

GREEN-EYED GIRL

Good, it'll keep our minds distracted—

DUST LADY

Well...Murphy talks about how no black family in their right mind would be caught deliberately walking their asses into a haunted house. That's some white people's shit. I tell the Lady VP that she can have her meeting without me! (tosses a file) I leave. (suddenly aware of her surroundings again)

TOGETHER EVERYONE SCREAMS

Where are we?

V/O

This is the fire department. Please evacuate the building immediately. Repeat, please evacuate the building immediately! Stairway exits are to the north and south sides of the building.

LIGHTS TO BLACK.