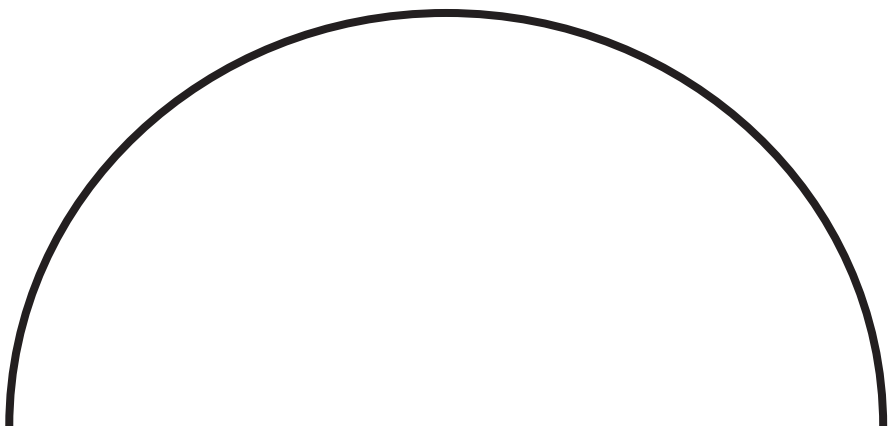


SIMONE LEIGH

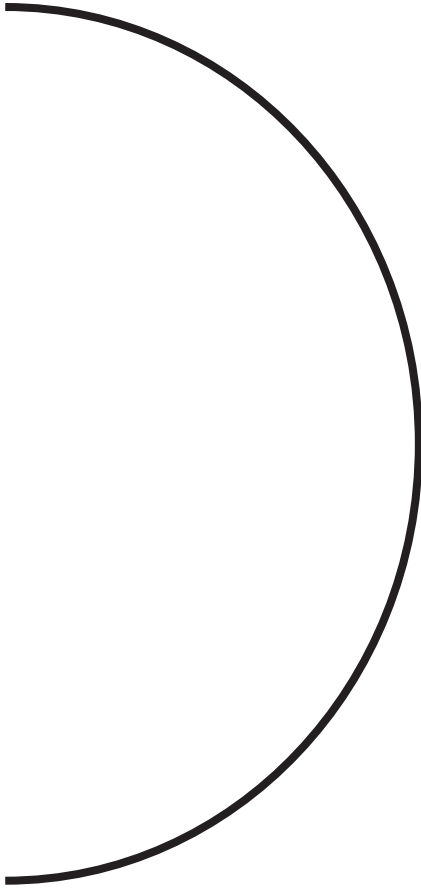


THE WAITING ROOM



JUNE 22

SEPT 18



For artist Simone Leigh, what happens within the duration and space of waiting is active, personal, political, and, in turn, an opportunity for reflection brimming with revolutionary potential. By way of introducing audiences to such a sense of liminal, yet urgent, possibility, the artist is apt to tell the disturbing story of Esmine Green. On June 18, 2008, the forty-nine-year-old woman was forcibly admitted to the psychiatric emergency department of Kings County Hospital Center, in Brooklyn, New York, due to “psychosis and agitation,” and subsequently waited for nearly twenty-four hours to receive treatment that never came. Instead, at 5:42 a.m. the following day, Green collapsed in her waiting room chair, falling to the floor—where she lay for more than an hour, unattended by employees who nevertheless stood by and looked on as she died. Adding to this tragedy was the fact that those who presumed themselves Green’s caretakers sought to skew documentation of this event: Contrary to what was recorded from four different angles by the hospital’s video cameras, her medical records say that at 6 a.m. she stood up and went to the bathroom—when in truth she was already lying on the floor—and that at 6:20 a.m. she was “sitting quietly in the waiting room.” And so while Green—a Jamaican native who lived in Brownsville, and who, according to a neighbor, kept to herself except for her regular visits to church—was claimed to have died due to a “deep venous thrombosis of lower extremities due to physical inactivity,” she could best be said to have died from waiting. Indeed, in the wake of her death, she was waiting still, for justice and, at the very least, for a truthful narrative.

It would be overreaching to suppose that artists hold the answers and means for enacting broad transformations of institutionalized violence and the repudiation of pain (specifically of black pain) such as led to Green’s death. Yet Leigh’s practice, through installation, sculpture, video, and performance, has consistently been invested in centralizing the subjectivities of black women like Green, referencing a wide span of diasporic histories across time and geography. “Free People’s Medical Clinic” (2014) and its follow up at the New Museum, “The Waiting Room”—the artist’s first major works that might fall under what has now been codified as socially engaged art—focus on the rights and roles of women of color in expanding notions of medicine within a socio-political state of deferred health justice. The new installation and its offering of public programs and care sessions, hosted at the New Museum, indicate that the road to health and empowerment has been long fought, and continues to be fought, on fronts both personal and social: dominant narratives frame the conversation as one of passivity, austerity, bureaucracy, and entitlement, rather than of defense, self-sufficiency, and active calls for reparative justice under untenable circumstances.

Carving out a space for health care in its absence may be best understood—historically and in

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

JOHANNA BURTON, Keith Haring Director and Curator of
Education and Public Engagement

SHAUN LEONARDO, Manager of School, Youth, and
Community Programs

EMILY MELLO, Associate Director of Education

the present—as an act of civil disobedience that brings to light the stark normativity of injustice. In this regard, one may consider the example of the United Order of Tents, a secret society of nurses that provided care for escaped slaves in the Underground Railroad. More recently, one might point to the Black Panther Party’s free health clinics staffed by volunteers, which, as Alondra Nelson points out, served not only the practical purpose of providing access to care, but also provided an ideological and political “reframing of the definition and stakes of black well-being,” demanding health care as a birthright. Against this broader cultural backdrop, Leigh’s installation functions as both a sanctuary and a site of care—featuring a meditation room (where the artist screens video works focusing on the existential status of women of color) and an herbalist apothecary (inspired by a shop owned by one of the artist’s collaborators, herbalist Karen Rose, as well as by the artist’s visits to muthi markets in South Africa that feature indigenous medicines derived from plants). The gallery space is activated through free access to a range of holistic care sessions with community-based professionals, at times becoming a classroom for activities such as movement courses, herbalism workshops, and community acupuncture. These provide an arsenal of tools with which to approach the health of both mind and body, and call attention to ways that a stratified health care system relegates well-being to the status of luxury good.

How we differentiate between immediate need and opulent extravagance, and for whom, offers some insight into the ways and means by which prejudice is normalized through cultural assumptions. Leigh seeks to expand internalized preconceptions around self- and community-care, while at the same time refusing to relinquish the singularity of time, place, history, and tradition. In “The Waiting Room”, abundance is signaled by a sensuous herb room, an extensive public program series on subjects relating to healing and mind-body connections, and in-depth courses for teens on self-awareness, while the presence of sandbags alludes to the means by which Black Panther clinics were once barricaded from police embattlement. The cohabitation of conflict and well-being in the installation alludes to histories of care understood as radical threats. It also speaks to the added pressures that accompany the stereotype of exceptional, strong, invulnerable black women, who are expected to stand as symbols of transcended societal racism and misogyny as they support, educate, and address inequity. One can also read here (and not only metaphorically in light of recent mass shootings) that sites for spiritual and clinical health—to say nothing of the self-determination of mind and body—continually require defense.

Measures of health have long been ledgered for the use value of objectified, commodified bodies, as traced from slavery to medical experiments to the profitable prison industrial complex, to say nothing of everyday instances of ignorance undergirded

by sanctioned racism. Turning to surveillance, narratives, and counternarratives for substantiation, and empathy training for prevention, we find visible but largely incommensurate tactics for addressing what ought to be the acknowledgment and transformation of a system that is, at its core, adversarial to human rights and dignified lives. As Naomi Murakawa has pointed out in her analysis of the carceral state, too often the focus on correcting procedures enacted by rogue cops, or perhaps here, dispassionate medical workers (as though purging anomalies in an otherwise effective structure), work against the desired concept of universal safety and care.

The New Museum has a precedent for working with artists who engage in social justice, and specifically health justice: in 1987 the Museum organized “‘Let the Record Show...’,” one of the first major art world responses to the AIDS crisis. The show sparked the creation of Gran Fury, an artist collective using visual strategies to create awareness of the disease and to promote political demands. If a larger vision for change within political structures, to ensure that lives and health matter, cannot, or should not, be relegated to government alone, nor solely to activists whose outcry is too often met with being told to be patient and pragmatic, what might be the role of artists and art institutions? As the measure of change continually shifts in time, as in any social sphere, the desire for transformative actions taking place within and without institutional walls persists.

Scholar Saidiya Hartman has suggested that we consider both the limits and the possibilities for historical records, documents necessarily written with, and even by way of, omissions. For Hartman, the present might be viewed as a space between what is and what ought to be, a middle passage, an “interval, between too late and too early.” This kind of waiting is urgent and perilous, yet holds open the “as-yet-incomplete project of freedom.”

¹ “Simone Leigh: Free People’s Medical Clinic” was organized by Creative Time at the Stuyvesant Mansion in Brooklyn, New York. See <http://creativetime.org/projects/black-radical-brooklyn/artists/simone-leigh/>.

² Adam Gaffney, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/is-the-path-to-racial-health-equity-paved-with-reparations-the-politics-of-health-part-ii/>.

³ Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011), 24.

⁴ Myisha Priest, “Salvation Is the Issue,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 2 (2008): 116–22. Priest’s essay, calling for dialogue on the premature deaths and health issues of black women intellectuals, activists, and cultural workers, has been influential to Leigh and her collaborators; and see Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial, 1979). Wallace’s book foregrounds much continued discussion on the expectations of “resilience.”

⁵ Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ “‘Let the Record Show...’” held November 20, 1987–January 24, 1988, was organized by William Olander and Act Up. See http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/158.

⁶ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (2008): 1–14.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Rashida Bumbray: MOTHERLESS CHILD SET

THURSDAY, JUNE 23, 5–7 PM
FIFTH FLOOR
FREE WITH MUSEUM ADMISSION

To celebrate the opening of “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room,” curator and choreographer Rashida Bumbray and guests will perform a cycle of black folk songs during this event.

Chitra Ganesh: ON DISOBEDIENCE

THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 7 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
\$15 GENERAL PUBLIC
\$10 MEMBERS

Artist Chitra Ganesh will draw upon her recent visual research on the aesthetics and performative gestures of protest, exploring the notion of disobedience as it has been mobilized in political protest and social movements outside of the United States. Ganesh will share images and texts that elaborate on forms of disobedience—as harnessed most specifically in the Global South—that challenge structural power and actualize social change, drawing attention to state-sponsored violence and erasures enacted on human bodies.

For over a decade, Ganesh’s drawing-based practice has probed mythological and queer narratives to develop complex visual iconographies of female subjectivity and power. Her work has been widely exhibited locally and internationally, and she is the recipient of numerous awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts.

Karen Rose: HOW TO HEAL YOURSELF WITH PLANTS: HERBALISM GALLERY TALK

THURSDAY, JULY 21, 7 PM
FREE WITH MUSEUM ADMISSION

Karen Rose is trained in Eastern and Western herbal medicine and is personally dedicated to empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding their health and lives. For her public talk and in-depth workshop series at the New Museum, she will draw from over fifteen years of experience as a community, clinical, and formulary master herbalist, bringing a particular focus to how women may live inspired lives using the energies of plants. Rose created Sacred Vibes Healing and the Sacred Vibes Apothecary in 2002, a Brooklyn-based herbal apothecary.

María Magdalena Campos-Pons: REMEDIOS: PERFORMANCE RITUALS AS HEALING

SATURDAY, JULY 23, 3 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
\$15 GENERAL PUBLIC
\$10 MEMBERS

Artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons will present a performative meditation on survival. As part of her performance, she will negotiate narratives of pain, loss, and resilience, while reimagining herself in a time of societal and geopolitical transitions.

Born in Matanzas, Cuba, in 1959, and based in Boston, Campos-Pons has established an international career as an interdisciplinary artist and teacher. Campos-Pons draws from her Afro-Cuban and American identities, connecting migratory experiences through a range of mediums, objects, installations, and in situ actions. Influenced by Yoruba spiritual practices from Africa that survived the Middle Passage and their syncretic forms in Cuba, she redresses and reclaims cultural, ancestral, and personal memories, as well as new beginnings, through ritual engagement with materials and spatial experiences.

Lorraine O’Grady: ASK ME ANYTHING ABOUT AGING

THURSDAY, AUG 4, 7 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
\$15 GENERAL PUBLIC
\$10 MEMBERS

This event will consider the benefits of intergenerational word-of-mouth information and strategy sharing among women. Artist Lorraine O’Grady will field questions about aging from the audience joining her for this intimate conversation.

O’Grady identified as an artist when she was in her forties, making her first public artwork in 1980 after previous careers as an intelligence analyst for the US government, a literature translator, and a rock critic. O’Grady’s performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83) has long been considered a landmark of identity-based institutional critique, and widespread recognition of her importance as a Conceptual artist has grown over the last decade. Often employing her own autobiography to consider black female subjectivities and identity construction within the social and political structures of art and the world at large, here O’Grady brings sharp focus to the experience of aging.

ON ABORTION: A CONVERSATION

THURSDAY, SEPT 1, 7 PM
SKY ROOM
FREE

During her residency at the New Museum, Simone Leigh will organize an event addressing historic and contemporary narratives surrounding the reproductive health and rights of black women through dialogues with invited guests.

Vanessa Agard-Jones: ON TOXICITY

SATURDAY, SEPT 10, 3 PM
NEW MUSEUM THEATER
\$15 GENERAL PUBLIC
\$10 MEMBERS

During this event, anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones will share research from her forthcoming book, *Body Burdens: Toxic Endurance and Decolonial Desire in the French Atlantic*, which considers pesticides, sexual politics, and postcoloniality in Martinique. “Body burden” is a term that has been used by toxicologists for the past half century to describe the accumulated amount of harmful substances present in the body of a human or an animal. While the original meaning of “body burden” draws from a scientific definition of contamination, such “burdens” are at once material and metaphorical. In particular, they account for the ways in which black bodies remain inextricably entangled with the forces of capital—and are disproportionately porous in the face of exposure to, and penetration by, both toxic materials and toxic discourses.

Agard-Jones has held the position of Assistant Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University and recently joined the faculty of Columbia University as Assistant Professor of Anthropology. She was formerly Managing Editor of *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism and Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*. She has also previously served as the coordinator of the Prison Activist Resource Center in Oakland, CA, and as the board chair of the Audre Lorde Project in New York.



Cover image
Ibomvu, a red clay cosmetic. Courtesy of the artist

Above
Work in progress, Simone Leigh’s studio, 2016. Courtesy of the artist

THE WAITING ROOM UNDERGROUND

The Waiting Room Underground will provide a safe space for in-depth engagements that will occur out of the public view, offering intimate classes to ongoing and newly affiliated New Museum partners.

HOME ECONOMICS

Home Economics is a series of courses geared toward creating an arsenal of skills to sharpen the critical thinking, self-awareness, and strategic planning of young black women in New York. The group of teens, formed in collaboration with outreach partners, will work with master herbalist Karen Rose, renowned musician Kaoru Watanabe, and Afrocentering creator Aimee Meredith Cox. Home Economics is supported by Simone Leigh’s A Blade of Grass Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art.

TAIKO DRUMMING

Each week, eight young adults from the Hetrick-Martin Institute, an organization that provides services for LGBTQ youth and is an ongoing partner of the New Museum, will meet to make drums and learn taiko drumming with musician Kaoru Watanabe.

WAITING ROOM APPRENTICES

Youth in the New Museum Teen Apprentice Program, an annual six-week paid summer internship that engages teens in learning about contemporary art while gaining career skills, will assist with exhibition programs and participate in private workshops with Aimee Meredith Cox, Karen Rose, and New Museum staff.

CARE SESSIONS

All care sessions will be open to the public free of charge and will take place on the Fifth Floor. Participants must sign-up in the New Museum Lobby on the day of the event to attend. Space is limited and admission is available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Queries related to services and programs offered through “The Waiting Room” can be directed to waitingroom@newmuseum.org

AFROCENTERING

with Aimee Meredith Cox

SATURDAYS
JUNE 25, JULY 23, AUG 6, AUG 27, SEPT 17
11:30 AM–12:30 PM

THURSDAYS
JULY 14, JULY 28, AUG 18, AUG 25
7–8:30 PM

Afrocentering is a movement philosophy created by Aimee Meredith Cox that focuses on mind-body connection and self-awareness. In this series of events, Cox will lead participants through movements that incorporate Katherine Dunham–inspired dance, yoga, and Pilates. Cox’s professional dance experience includes performing and leading master classes as a member of Ailey II. A tenured professor at Fordham University, where she teaches courses in the Department of African and African American Studies and the Department of Anthropology, she is the author of *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, which is based on eight years of fieldwork at a Detroit shelter for women and girls. Cox trained with the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and is also a certified Stott Pilates advanced mat instructor.

MASSAGE

with Malik K. Bellamy

SUNDAYS
JUNE 26, JULY 3, JULY 24,
AUG 7, SEPT 4, SEPT 18
1–4 PM

Led by Malik K. Bellamy, each twenty-minute massage session will consist of compression, tapotement, and a hand-and-foot massage incorporating gentle stretching. The goal of these twenty-minute sessions is to stimulate circulation and increase range of motion, preparing you for the rest of your day. Bellamy attended Helma Institute of Massage Therapy and received his professional massage therapist certificate in 2006. His mother, Suzanne Bellamy, is a former member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

COMMUNITY ACUPUNCTURE

with Julia Bennett

THURSDAYS
JULY 7, AUG 11, SEPT 8
6–9 PM

SATURDAYS
JULY 16, AUG 13, SEPT 10
4–6 PM

Community acupuncture is a growing approach to providing accessible, cost-effective treatment to groups of people in a soothing, shared environment. Participants will be separated by folding screens for privacy and treated together for twenty-minute acupuncture sessions. Julia Bennett is a board-certified, licensed acupuncturist whose particular passion is community health and the health concerns of women, with an emphasis on working with women who have tested positive for HIV and AIDS. Bennett believes that one of the greatest health challenges of our humanity involves addressing wellness as a birthright.

HERBALISM: LEARNING

HOW TO HEAL YOURSELF

WITH PLANTS

Six-Week Workshop Series with Karen Rose

SATURDAYS
JULY 9, JULY 16, JULY 23, JULY 30, AUG 6, AUG 13
2–3 PM

The founder and owner of Sacred Vibes Healing and the Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Brooklyn, Karen Rose is trained in Eastern and Western herbal medicine and is personally dedicated to empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding their health and lives. For this in-depth course at the New Museum, she will draw from over fifteen years of experience as a community, clinical, and formulary master herbalist, and will focus on how women may live inspired lives using the energies of plants.

Salvation is the Issue¹

When we read the work of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, or Zora Neale Hurston, we hold in our hands more than a book, but a dream of community: living evidence of a spiraling chain of black women intellectuals whose work has been the saving of our spiritual, intellectual, and cultural lives. Their work has made possible Oprah's success and Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize. The work of these women has been the discovery and publication of lost works of other black women. It has been the founding of black studies programs at universities around the country. It has been the teaching and apprenticeship of the next generation. They have created, taught, and performed poetry, fiction, criticism, and theater art of startling liberatory power. Their work has been a means of healing for many of us. When we read these works we participate in a long process of writing, editing, publishing, critiquing, promoting, teaching, and reading in which the visionary voices of black women were recognized as such because of their value to other black women, who passed them on to the world: from hand to hand, to our hands.

But now those links are breaking, and voices of great power are dwindling into silence around us.

Death is becoming an occupational hazard of black female intellectual

[Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 2008, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 116-122]
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life. Black women intellectuals are sickening and dying at alarming rates. Most of us are alert to the sobering statistics that tell us that African Americans are generally among the least healthy people in this nation, with the fastest growing number of AIDS cases, and rates over 30% higher than the general population of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. We also know that though black women are slightly less likely to face breast, lung, and cervical cancers, we face them at much younger ages and in their more virulent strains, making us 67% more likely to die of them (NBWHP). We have the highest rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, and lupus among women, and higher rates of mental illness than most. But not many of us are aware of the violent assault these diseases have made against the lives of black women who are artists, teachers, activists, and scholars.

Barbara Christian, a professor of African American Literature at the University of California at Berkeley, had been ill for months, years really, experiencing a slow ebbing of physical vigor marked by chronic back dysfunction, unshakable fatigue, and later, undiagnosable chest pain. Before she became ill her impact as a writer, scholar, and activist had been deep and wide. She was instrumental in the creation of the "open admissions" policy that made the City College system of New York accessible to people of color. She had been central in creating the African American studies program at Berkeley, and had published "the bible" of black feminist criticism, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (Christian 1980). But when her life's work began to crumble around her, she got tired. Hers was a progressive debilitation, a slow chipping away of power and energy that was a precise mirror of the slow destruction of progress she saw around her. Around the country, affirmative action programs were being dismantled and ridiculed. There were fewer and fewer students of color each term. Harvard notwithstanding, black studies departments were losing power, losing faculty, losing funding and institutional support in the midst of a renewed debate about the worth of those programs and the necessity of linking art and education with social and political concerns. In the publishing world, black editorships were down. The publication of black books was on the rise but was increasingly limited to commercially lucrative romances and thrillers, closing down avenues for other kinds of work and other kinds of voices. In the meantime, and in this context, her health continued to fail.²

When her cancer was still undiagnosed, she walked around with her

hand pressed against her heart, where the pain seemed to originate. To friends and colleagues she spoke often about her disappointment with the direction black cultural work was taking, not knowing her own life would be cut brutally short as a result of the very set of problems she had spent her life fighting. Or perhaps she did know.

"My heart is broken," she said, months and months before she was diagnosed. "That is why I'm dying."

Though we may not know all of their names, we know their work, because it is everywhere around us: on our bookshelves and televisions, on our walls and in the rooms of our children. They are women like Lorraine Hansberry, the first black playwright on Broadway, a social activist, dead at 34 of ovarian cancer (*Voices*). Sylvia Boone, teacher, author, scholar of African women's art, first black woman tenured at Yale, dead from cancer at 54 (Wells 2002). Audre Lorde, writer and warrior extraordinaire, dead at 58 after a fourteen-year-long encounter with breast cancer (*Voices*). Toni Cade Bambara, community scribe, novelist, and filmmaker, taken by colon cancer at 56 (*Voices*). Sherley Anne Williams, poet, novelist, first African American to receive tenure at UC San Diego, dead of cancer at 54 (*Voices*). Barbara Christian, foremother of black studies, peerless teacher, dead at 56 of lung cancer. Then, a vicious escalation between winter and summer 2002: Virginia Hamilton, children's author, literary innovator, dead at 65 from breast cancer (Hamilton). Beverly Robinson, 56, film and theater artist and teacher, from pancreatic cancer (Richards 2002). June Jordan, people's poet, teacher, our most published African American author, dead at 65 after a ten-year struggle with metastatic breast cancer (Griffey and Thornton 2002). Claudia Tate, 55, teacher and critic, publishing power, dead of lung cancer (Altmann 2002). Even as this article went to press, VeVe Clark, Professor of Caribbean, African, and African American literature, mentor, and keeper of Katherine Dunham's legacy, passed at 62.

There are others who have been menaced by similar cancers or other serious illness, and survived: Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, and Gayle Jones. And then there are unknown women who struggle privately even now with the probability of early death.

Their deaths are not natural. While the average life expectancy for black women is 75 years (NBWHP, 9/18/2002) the average life span of the preceding group is just 55 years. Many are mothers who did not see their children into adulthood, and who will not know their grandchildren. They are artists who

and as profound as restoring a hand's touch: Brothers, Sisters, Kin. Let us hold their hands in ours, so that all our lives might be saved. Because salvation is the issue.

NOTES

1. This title is taken from an essay in Bambara 1970.
2. The sources for these quotations and ideas are my own conversations with Barbara Christian, who was my friend and mentor for well over ten years.

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left unfinished works. They are visionaries who did not live to see the world they tried to build. Such a list is overwhelming, painful, even frightening to see. But acknowledge it we must, for this is our register of embattled and fallen women, part memorial to our precious dead, part prayer for the living, part witness to the hidden epidemic overtaking them. Most importantly, acknowledging it is our opportunity to break the silence that harms us all.

Their deaths are a political issue. The import of each of these deaths, though of course acknowledged by communities of colleagues, friends, and family, has been isolated to the local, the particular, and the personal. In reality these are not private matters of mourning but are central to the collective struggles of African Americans, matters of grave import: a moment of choice. When we lose black women scholars, writers, and activists, we all pay the price in the weakening of our political power, the silencing of our spiritual voices, and the diminished possibility of our deliverance. They have individually struggled to arm us by raising their voices for and with us all. Yet each one of these beloveds represents the work of many: one voice speaking from centuries of knowledge, work, and action. Their silencing is the destruction of historical and cultural continuity, the failure of a dream of community. Without them, who will create the brilliant works that force us to move forward by thundering into our minds, bringing change like rain—nourishing, overwhelming, necessary—and startling us into action? When we seek to witness their lives and preserve their voices we work toward our own salvation. On the other hand, when we are silent about the collective nature of their loss, our silence makes us complicit with the punishment imposed on those whose artistic and intellectual work is the practice of political and spiritual freedom, exacted not by jail and imprisonment but by brutal excesses of stress, isolation, fear, and despair. Audre Lorde has called this punishment "a physiologically engendered despair" (Lorde 1988, 131). Despair at a cellular, bone-deep, soul-wrenching level. Despair that sickens and kills.

Their deaths are an economic issue. While black women have been busy dying, public awareness of black male scholars has risen through commercials, print ads, television shows, and appearances that have brought them wealth and fame, and transformed black studies into a lucrative commercial enterprise. The hypervisibility of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker gives a false impression of both institutional power and economic prosperity in the lives of black women cultural workers. Black women remain the

THE

lowest paid and least tenured members of departments across disciplines and geography, constituting only 2.5 percent of the professoriate. They are the most likely professional nomads, hopping from one short-term teaching appointment to the next. They are overburdened with departmental duties, admissions and funding committees, advising and mentoring, and outreach and community service. They are hobbled by the lack of institutional and financial support for their work, by issues of retention and mentorship, and by extreme isolation, overwork, and exhaustion (Benjamin 1997). Nell Painter, a noted historian whose own work at Princeton has been overlooked in the discussions about the exodus of the black male professors to her university, agrees. "How many times have our names not appeared where they should in Scholars' footnotes? How many times have our books been overlooked—not even considered—for prizes?" Black women, she argues "live with a strange kind of invisibility that minimizes us as scholars and allows others to neglect the content of our thought. Living with that kind of marginalization can do bad things to one's health" (Painter 2002).

Their deaths are a cultural issue, a black-on-black issue, one that recalls the unequal gender relations that fractured the movements of the sixties and seventies. The press surrounding the African American studies department at Harvard, and the university's "Dream Team" of black male professors, suggests that black intellectual life is the exclusive domain of black men. According to *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*, black intellectual history flows in a clean, uninterrupted arc from W. E. B. DuBois, Harvard's first black scholar, to the current crop of scholars, men like Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, and Kwame Appiah. But the reality is that black women have been equal though invisible partners in black cultural work. And although it is important to recognize the tremendous value of these men's work, we must also recognize the differences in power and opportunity between the men and their female peers: the discussion is not about if the men can work but at what prestigious university. It is not about whether or not their voices are lost or silenced but how many of the voices of our community leaders, the Reverend Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson among them, will rise to their support. Black male scholars may not be guilty of active, conscious destruction, but of a passive collusion with the institutional neglect of black women. If they are to truly safeguard our political and creative traditions, then it is imperative that they consider what is happening to their partners and peers. Power and prosperity must be shared, as are struggle and hardship.

WAITING

Racial, gender, and economic disparities are playing themselves out on the bodies of black women, manifesting themselves as fatal disease and chronic illness. Audre Lorde is one of the few women who wrote extensively about her experience with life-threatening disease, and for her the connection between the political and cultural struggles of black people and health of black women was clear. "Of course cancer is political!" she wrote, "The struggle with cancer now informs all my days, but it is only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that black women fight daily, often in triumph" (Lorde 1980, 147).

Their deaths are an issue that concerns us all.

Those who work on our behalf are now in need of the clear light of scrutiny, so that they too might be healed, and the circle of healing work restored. The experiences of these women must be known and shared, so that they will not be lost to us, recovered decades from now by scholars of "history," their import muted by the vast, inevitable distance of time, long past this moment when we have the power to create change. We must revere the secrets of their lives and deaths as we do the beauty of their works, for we need that knowledge as well. The dark secret of black sisterhood must be given, like their other works, into the hands of the world. We need to open the dialogue around the health of black women cultural workers in all of our debates, but most especially in those between black men and black women. We need vocal and financial support for the investigation of the impact of the environment and the process of disease on black women's bodies in particular. And we have to see, to be aware as a means of arming ourselves. We cannot continue to regard their lives as individual and their deaths as inevitable, but must begin initiating changes in the direction of our collective lives.

Death is not a necessary or inevitable outcome of struggle. There is also freedom. There is also salvation. Now is our opportunity to heed June Jordan's plea: "With the word out about / the ultimate soft spoken emergency / maybe now / somebody knows maybe someone will stop the mystery / stop the suffering . . . / maybe somebody / will save my life / for example . . . / I'm ready" (Jordan 1998, 169). To achieve that we must acknowledge their deaths as a call to arms, because the reality is that their lives are our own, and if we do not assume the responsibility for their salvation, then none of us—not our lives, not our work—will be saved. In their work they have provided us with a model of recuperation and resistance. It is as simple

Above
Work in progress, Simone Leigh's studio, 2016. Courtesy of the artist

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SIMONE LEIGH: THE WAITING ROOM

JUNE 22 — SEPT 18

“Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room” marks a new chapter in artist Simone Leigh’s (b. 1968, Chicago, IL) ongoing exploration of black subjectivities, particularly those of women. In her work, Leigh demands that the concerns, roles, and rights of women of color are recognized as central, rather than pushed to the margins. Her exhibition and residency at the New Museum considers the possibilities of disobedience, desire, and self-determination as they manifest in resistance to an imposed state of deferral and debasement. Whereas discourses of patience, pragmatism, and austerity often underscore political debates surrounding the failures of public health care and related conditions, Leigh finds inspiration in parallel histories of urgency, agency, and intervention within social movements and black communities, past and present. Troubling the notion of separate narratives, she implicates violent, institutionalized control and indifference as the conditions under which forms of self care and social care can become radical or alternative.

Focusing specifically on an expanded notion of medicine, “The Waiting Room” references a wide range of care environments and opportunities—from herbalist apothecaries, to muthi [medicine] markets in Durban, South Africa, to meditation rooms, to movement studios—and involves a range of public and private workshops and healing treatments. Blurring the distinction between bodily and spiritual health, or between wellness and happiness—and, in doing so, countering the perception of holistic care as a luxury good—Leigh convenes practitioners who view social justice as integral to their work. The project also takes into account a history of social inequalities that have necessitated community-organized care, traditionally provided by women, from the United Order of Tents (a secret society of nurses active since the Underground Railroad) to volunteers in the Black Panther Party’s police-embattled clinics active from the 1960s to the 1980s. “The Waiting Room” suggests that creating a space for wellness may require both the making of a sanctuary and an act of disobedience against the systematic enactment and repudiation of black pain.

This project developed out of an earlier iteration of Leigh’s socially engaged work “Free People’s Medical Clinic” (2014), organized by Creative Time, which provided free treatments and workshops over the course of four weekends in the former Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, home of Dr. Josephine English, the first black OB-GYN in the state of New York. At the New Museum, Leigh continues her involvement with professionals in the field of holistic health, while creating a new installation and a private, “underground” series of intimate, in-depth workshops and classes for community partners. Additionally, a series of talks, performances, and events conceptualized as medicinal dialogues on aging, disobedience, abortion, healing performances, and toxicity are offered throughout Leigh’s residency.

“The Waiting Room” inaugurates the Department of Education and Public Engagement’s annual R&D Summers, a research and development residency and exhibition program that foregrounds the New Museum’s year-round commitment to community partnerships and to public dialogue at the intersection of art and social justice. Each R&D Summer will take the form of a residency and an exhibition.

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