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Ayo Tsalithaba

Atmospheric Arrivals: (A) Restless Spirit Returns Through Queer Time, Space and Memory

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This film is at once a living archive/polytemporal memory bank and a love letter to my other selves. I consider the act of revisiting my personal archives a time travelling practice and incorporating this into my films is an exercise in making said practice legible to others.

“Atmospheric Arrivals” is about home and the (im)possibility of return. The “atmospheric arrival” captures a means of coming into being through memory and imagination; by reaching across spacetimes to “fetch” parts of the self that may exist in elsewheres.

To attend to the atmospheric denotes the practice of active presence in and across spatial temporalities. The atmospheric is a way for me to imagine. It allows me to be aware of the present while gesturing towards multiple futures and pasts in order to carve out a space (even artistically) where my being is holistically possible. I use atmospheric here in a few ways, but it emerged (for me) out of a discussion about Sylvia Wynter and the “Third Event” or the “Great Leap” in a class that I took in the fall of 2020 (Alagraa, 2018; Wynter, 2015).

I am also inspired by the work of Akwaeke Emezi, Keguro Macharia, Sylvia Wynter, José Esteban Muñoz, and others who have pushed me to think about queer elsewheres and Black diasporic desire and (be)longing.

This is a project that is constantly evolving. If you are interested in reading more about this, I have attached a short essay titled “Atmospheric Arrivals: The Ceremony Found, Homo Narrans and Illustrating Autopoesis.” If you are still left wanting more engagement about this, you can email me and I will get back to you as soon as I can (or DM me on Instagram @ayotsalithaba)

- Ayo Tsalithaba

Atmospheric arrivals:

The Ceremony Found, Homo Narrans and Illustrating Autopoesis

Ayo Tsalithaba

This project is a written and visual response to and exploration of Sylvia Wynter's ideas of autopoiesis and the Third Event through two key texts: Wynter's "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition"; and Bedour Alagraa's 2018 essay "Homo Narrans and the Science of the Word: Toward a Caribbean Radical Imagination" (Alagraa, 2018; Wynter, 2015).

Working from the orienting questions and key arguments in Bedour Alagraa's (2018) "Homo Narrans and the Science of the Word: Toward a Caribbean Radical Imagination", I explore Sylvia Wynter's idea of autopoiesis, and how we can become routed towards what Wynter names the "Third Event/Fanonian break", or rupture of European humanist overrepresentations of Man (p. 164). I use digital illustration as a method of engagement with Wynter's ideas because of my interest in the role of image-making in autopoiesis.

Wynter's "autopoetic turn" is rooted in the propositions of two key thinkers: Césaire and Fanon. In "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn" (2015), Wynter puts Césaire's science of the "word" in conversation with Fanon's sociogenic principle and extends them outward to posit that humans as "hybrid" beings "enact ourselves as *humans*" (pp. 209–210). Here, Wynter is suggesting that it is through story, and specifically the stories that we tell about being human, that we come to understand ourselves and *what* makes us human (Wynter, 2015, p. 217).

In her essay, Alagraa begins by introducing Wynter's idea of "the human as a figure on the horizon" as an alternative to Enlightenment formulations of the human – Man1 and Man2 (2018, pp. 164–165). It is through the figure of the human on the horizon, of the "hybrid" self-authoring being, that we can find a path towards a "non-Eurocentric genre of the human" that lies in the yet to be completed Third Event (Alagraa, 2018, pp. 164-166). In her study of works of Caribbean fiction, Alagraa finds traces of the rupture/break/event because of the role of language, art and imagination in the project of moving away from the "semiolinguistic limits placed on our own imaginative realm due to the afterlife of colonialism and racial slavery." (2018, p. 165).

I am interested in expanding this by looking at how language, art and the very process of image-making allow us to approach the rupture from various planes, through a process that I am naming as atmospheric arrival.

Alagraa describes autopoiesis as the regenerative process of forming or creating oneself (Alagraa, 2018, p. 167). She offers a line of inquiry towards the Fanonian break through works of Caribbean fiction that open the door to the imaginative realm, wherein lies the room to explore alternative modes of being human. It is through her readings of *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Texaco* that Alagraa foregrounds the importance of story and radical imagination in exploring questions about what it means to be human, and how we can be otherwise (Alagraa, 2018, pp. 178–179).

I believe that working through and across forms is the best way for me to engage with these ideas and communicate some of my interventions. I am conscious of the importance of explaining these ideas in writing, but art and image-making adds to the writing by providing me with a different mode of engagement and my reader with another way to see the ideas. My artistic process involves illustration, filmmaking, collage and photography – mediums that allow me to map ideas and put them in conversation. I am able to understand things differently and look at them from many sides when they are presented visually, and my artistic process gives me new tools to understand big concepts. I am paying close attention to some key words presented in this piece: autopoiesis, imaginative realm, horizon. These words appear in the digital illustration that accompanies this piece of writing.

Alagraa's definitions of autopoiesis leads me to questions of queer and trans being and becoming that need more time, care and consideration than I can offer them (in writing) at this time. The idea of autopoiesis as a means through which “binary and oppositional epistemic codifications of sameness and difference” are called into question and challenged is a compelling assertion that generated a set of questions for me around Blackness, trans*ness, being and becoming that I explored in my image-making practice (Alagraa, 2018, p.167). I approached my visual response with this set of questions: In what ways can autopoiesis and the “autopoetic turn” inform our path towards the great

leap forward? What does reading autopoiesis and the Third Event through a Black queer and trans lens allow us to see about this project?

My conceptualization of atmospheric arrivals through autopoetic image-making as a mode of understanding and working through the Third Event is not intended to be a reconfiguration of Wynter's ideas. Instead, I hope to offer a way of articulating these ideas that gives us new ways of understanding them that are not in opposition to what Wynter and Alagraa present. The atmosphere makes these ideas feel possible to engage with. The atmosphere touches on the particularities of these ideas.

In her piece, Alagraa explores works that are "committed to a Caribbean radical imagination as an expression of political possibilities on the horizon" (2018, p.167). However, in reading through these works alongside Alagraa, I am compelled to rename these "possibilities on the horizon" to possibilities in the atmosphere. Furthermore, Wynter's core idea of the human as a "figure on the horizon" paired with Alagraa's argument that imagination may lead us out of our current predicament, create fertile ground for us to think about how to put the metaphor of the atmospheric to work towards the great leap (Alagraa, 2018, p. 165). I am interested in the ways in which people are already enacting forms of sociality that may point to the "alternate" modes of being human that exist outside of and in opposition to Enlightenment representations.

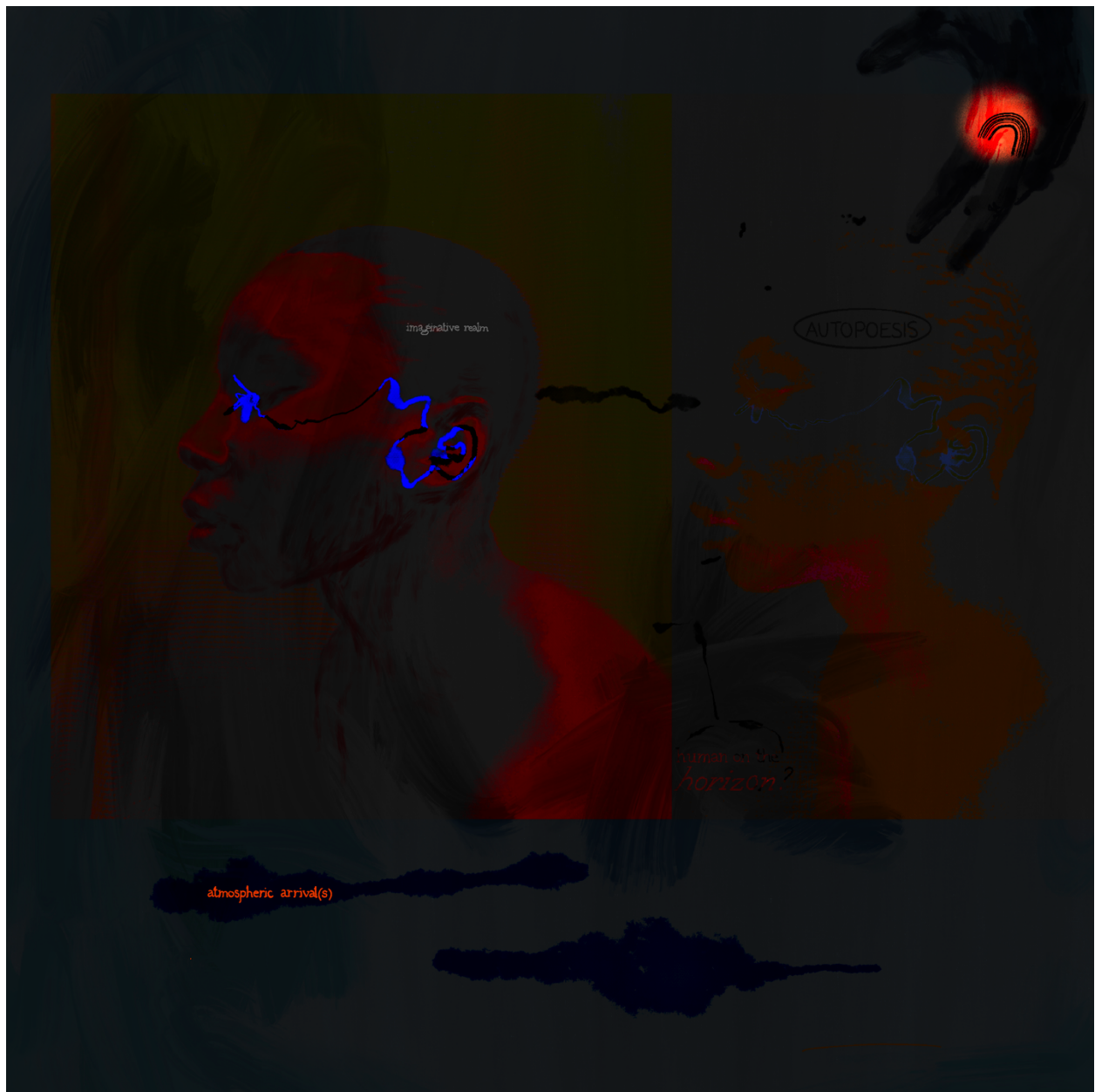


Fig.1: *Atmospheric Arrivals*, by A. Tsalithaba, 2021 (Tsalithaba, 2021)

References

Alagraa, B. (2018). Homo Narrans and the Science of the Word: Toward a Caribbean Radical Imagination. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 4(2), 164–181.

Tsalithaba, A. (2021). *Atmospheric Arrivals* [Digital illustration].

Wynter, S. (2015). The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition. In *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*. Liverpool University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6bfp.12>