

# (RE)SURFACING: TRACING STREAMS OF SUPPRESSED/ OBSCURED/RAZED KNOWLEDGE

\*Loose Assemblages: Messy(e)  
Alternative Modes of Queer History  
with Paul Soulellis and Sapphrodite Slut,  
**Edie Fine** \* Sex Talks: An Antiguan  
RISD Filmmaker's experimental porn  
movies subvert race, gender, and the  
gaze, liberating Black bodies, **Elon  
Collins** \* Who's Gonna Save Us?  
Rapping Towards Liberation in the City,  
**Garrett Brand** \* Digging Up the Roots:  
Reimagining the Valley Arts District,  
**Glenn Wang** \* How Did We Get Here?  
Almost-visions of Providence's Lost  
Chinatown, **Mei Zheng** \* Rose is a  
reminder that defiance without love is  
meaningless, **mito smith** \* FINDING  
'US' HERE: Artmaking and space-  
taking through NOTSODIFFERENT,  
**Natalie Mitchell** \* Making in Radical  
Diasporic Multiplicity, **Simone Klein**



## Towards a *Kinder* Art Criticism

We need to reinvent our connection to our communities/bodies/land/systems/spirituality/intimacy/each other. We are students of RISD and Brown in Providence, RI—institutions built on the stolen native lands of the Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc Nations and built through the labor and wealth of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Colonialism is not a dynamic of the past; it is an ongoing, destructive process. We recognize our positionalities in and out of the classroom, at the intersections of a growing collective knowledge. We aggregate/collect/produce knowledge within structures and inherited memories of violence. We bear witness to forced erasure, hyper-policing, and surveillance in every direction. This semester alone, anti-trans and anti-drag bills proliferated and propagated across the country, 381 acres of Weelaunee Forest (stolen Muscogee land) were leased to the Atlanta Police Foundation for a police and military facility (Cop City), gun violence continually destroys innocent lives, and war rages on around the world, triggering mass movements of displacement and refugee crises. We are still talking about abortion rights and protesting for fair pay.

Amidst the state-sanctioned razing of targeted communities, what (re) surfaces, artistically and aesthetically, in the rifts of forced underground networks? Where and how do we find radical solace amidst maps created and delineated by death cultures?

We aim to subvert systems of power by championing the works of artists who are crafting new modes of expression and subjectivity, standing firmly against incarceration, colonialism, imperialism, racism, classism, ableism, transphobia, and queerphobia. Telling a story, any story, carries with it the immense weight of representing what may not be known, recognizing its inherent value, and mobilizing its radical power.

In the process of our writing and research, we have engaged with transformative cultural texts, reflecting on artistic utterances that deal with, push against, chart, disidentify with oppressive systems, tracing pathways towards hope and community. We are positing our work not as radical change, but as a channel to collectively imagine radical change. Andrea Abi Karam and Kay Gabriel, on the topic of (trans)poetics, write, "poetry isn't revolutionary practice; poetry provides a way to inhabit revolutionary practice, to ground ourselves in our relations to ourselves and each other, to think about an unevenly miserable world and to spit in its face" (*We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*). We are adopting the idea that "poetry bears on the project of imagining and making actual a totally inverted world."

In our worldbuilding, we played with writing as an act of intimacy and care. The Sudanese-American poet Safia Elhillo, who visited us and served as a guide on exile, cultural heritage and the Ghazal, language and creativity,

talks of the intimacy of language in the invitation of lovers to say exactly what they mean – freeing themselves from inherited oppression, speaking in a stream of consciousness or flow. In *Pomegranate* (Girls that Never Die, 2022), she writes:

'Because I am their daughter my body is not mine  
I was raised like fruit, unpeeled & then peeled. Raised  
To bleed in some man's bed. I was given my name  
& with it my instructions. Pure. *Pure.*'

We dream of new worlds:

- where shared knowledge is honored and credited
- where memory collections are liberatory, power-shifting portals
- where Rap can help us save ourselves
- where queer- and transness power alternative histories
- where community is built on the practice of creative freedom
- where the plurality of sexuality and desire is beautifully represented in film
- where music aids in an embrace of self and of heritage
- where urban history is rediscovered and drives the creation of art collectives

We deserve better than fear. We desire spaces and pursuits of excessive and radical abundance, joy, sensuality, and liberation. In our (re)search of these spaces, we crafted and built this zine together. As an ode to the underground-ness, the DIY-ness, the ethos of intimacy that each of us investigated, we are proposing an alternative and unruly, *kinder* model of arts criticism/journalism.



# Loose Assemblages: Messy(e) Alternative Modes of Queer History

by Edie B. Fine

*“Because, you know,” Sapphrodite said,  
“queer bitches are crafty.”*

*As opposed to conventional and normative art and library practices, QAW “is not about the objects themselves, but how we’re using them. It’s the use, the access, and the confrontation that allows this library to be a time machine into the future as well as the past,” in a very “queer futurity, Jose Esteban Munoz, kind of way.” —Paul Soulellis*

*“The best thing you can do is to be a kind of a manifestation of a future thing you want to do. It’s always iterative and it’s always repeating. It’s always like building.” —Sapphrodite*

The work of Providence-based Paul Soulellis and Bushwick-based Sapphrodite Sluŧ—zines and collaborative publications, oral histories, drag and performance art, messy archives and libraries—typifies a robust and distinctly queer practice of preserving queer history and mobilizing towards liberatory futures via alternative (and colorful) methods.

The first time I frequented open library hours at Queer.Archive.Work—Providence’s only hybrid zine library and publishing studio since, a queer community and print hub—I was taken by its fluorescence. The walls are adorned messily, with souvenirs and markings of the practices that they engender: fisograph color swatches encircle the machine itself like an altar, a *Genderfail* wall textile reads “softness is a boundless form of resistance” printed on laying linen. Spines of zines, art books, independently published queer ephemera of varying thicknesses are sprinkled along the shelves dedicated to the library along the entryway wall. Post-its stick below the library’s sections, purposeful and still wayward. Categories are still being worked out: “queer history?” reads one, “comics.” spells out another.

This print studio, community space, library holder (among a multitude of other possible epithets), envisioned and co-built by RISD Design Department Director Paul Soulellis, hosts biweekly open library hours. Arriving at the refurbished industrial loft near the Steelyard in the artist-filtered Olneyville area, folks can pull out zines, art books, queer ephemera and read or chat. The low buzz



of library-quiet but still jazzed conversation provides the reading soundtrack. But I realized, upon interviewing Paul (whose projects and visions evolved into QAW as it is today, though he rejects ownership or foundership), that I was perhaps more interested in how the material and library itself talks—among each other, to the reader, to each of the artists across temporal and locational lines.

As I fingered through the bins and shelves of the library, I encountered zines I'd read before in New York City in my early high school years (thanks, Bluestockings Cooperative!), queer theory anthologies I'd read in classes that semester, among many titles I had never seen before. I picked up one small one sheet A4 red riso printed zine, "A Definitive Transsexual Solo Gaga Album Tier List" What an amalgamation; I was giddy.

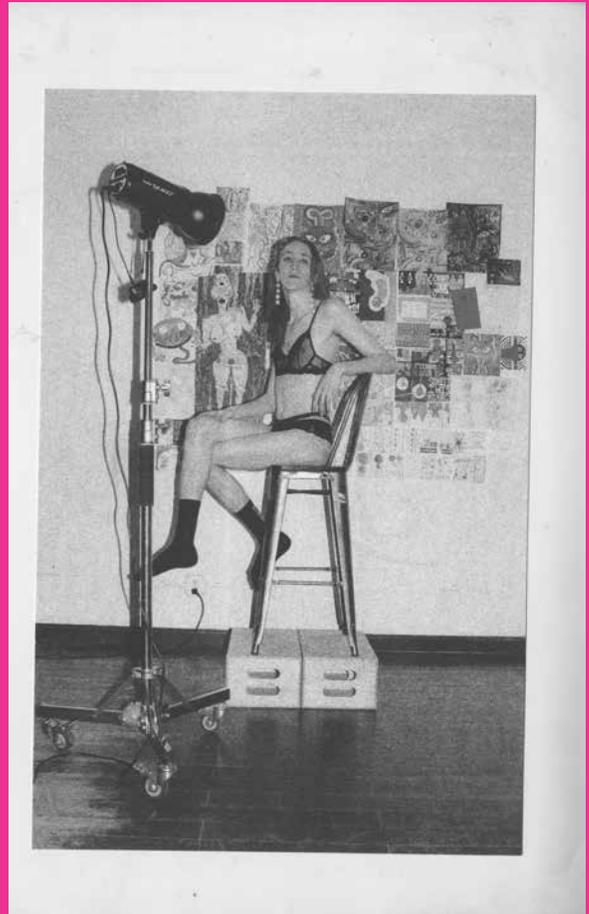
I noticed the name (their Instagram handle, if those things are separable, at this point and in this case) scribbled in credit on the back cover—@Sapphrodite.slut, the self proclaimed "trans oral historian, printmaker, drag creature". Synapsing between Paul and Sapphrodite, this little zine traversed the physical distance between Sapphrodite's risograph studio in Brooklyn and Paul's Providence library. Despite being practicing artists in different home locations, they meet through their work. Zine magic!

This marginal, alternative, and DIY mode of preserved story and history—that of the Gaga zine—sutures together conversations in the most queer way. Both Paul and Sapphrodite occupy these artmaking and historiography margins—Paul's Providence based community centered/run printing press, zine library, and individual zine making/compiling practices and Sapphrodite's risograph printing, zine artistry, trans oral history projects, and drag creation.

Paul says he came to embrace the political salience of queerness only recently, relative to his journey as an artmaker and gay man alongside a history of queer liberation movements, though it is now central to all of the work and community he makes. "When I moved to New York City in the early 90s," he explains, "I was in my early 20s and I was scared of the word queer. You know? It was like having a real moment. It was the height of the AIDS crisis. Queer Nation was happening and queer and trans zine making was really flourishing and happening, but I was kind of like quite consciously staying away from it because I didn't identify with the term. I didn't feel or see myself as a political body or agent in the world." But instead of heeding the temptations of regret, he considers his intentional queerness a process of "becoming, that must continue." His personal nonlinear history matches that of QAW's origins—the fluidity of the studio as a project, community, and space in its conception works just alongside this notion.

QAW emerged from a history of print projects. In 2014 he assembled a zine called *The Printed Web*, a proxy-printed-archive that hosted images of digital artists' work and transmuted them into a printed catalog. Immediately following a successful public reception—that included a MoMA acquisition and an International Center of Photography showing—Trump was elected. Paul was urged to reconsider the place of politics in his art. The project shifted gears, and at *Printed Web #6*, he decided to give the issue a distinctly queer underline. 18 artists participated in the issue, and Paul bound it in a learning process after he acquired his first Risograph printer.

The space's history, Paul's anthologized approach to art book making, and his own personal understanding of queerness—that of a "gathering around the journey and meeting up around the word"—all seem to epitomize a conceit that he often returns to: loose assemblages. What he thinks is distinctly queer about his approach to his print practice, to co-curating a loosely held



together and ever-expanding library, to teaching, is its messiness, the contact, and the assemblage of all of the component parts. As opposed to conventional and normative art and library practices, this collection “is not about the objects themselves, but how we’re using them. It’s the use, the access, and the confrontation that allows this library to be a time machine into the future as well as the past,” in a very “queer futurity, Jose Esteban Munoz, kind of way,” Paul noted.

Paul got up a few times during our interview, spending a few moments sifting through the shelves to pull titles to put in front of me. We both wanted to hold the zines in our hands, to touch the ink, the paper (possibly newsprint, possibly fluorescent, possibly printer paper), the words, the images, the history. There is a kind of spirit held among and across the individual zines of the library, the loose assemblage, that Paul was physically interacting with. He told me that this library is “a place for ancestors to be speaking and to keep ancestors alive and growing and speaking with each other. And a place to put ancestors in conversation with each other and with the activities that are happening in this space.”

The beauty of what Paul has dubbed a “bad archive,” is its willingness to be messy, to allow for encounters to materialize among the ephemera (the objects, garments, printed work, flyers, postcards, letters, more), and its emergence out of scenarios of otherwise being dispossessed, ignored, or marginalized. The loose assemblage that he praises and considers here is one of often uniquely queer context—when, as Paul writes, “queer culture is always at risk of illegibility, invisibility, and erasure,” and often vulnerable to violence and silencing, the preservation of queer life, joy, art, jubilation, production, becomes all the more urgent. “Bad Archives” erupt out of this need, possibly in the homes of friends, or community organizers, or those who otherwise bear immediate witness. “In them,” Paul said, in his talk, “we can see communities in action, alive in support and survival, using print and digital media as connective tissue.”

This connective tissue bridges Paul’s work to Sapphrodite’s—whom I first met only a few blocks from Queer.Archive.Work at the Queer Trans Zine fest. They approach their practices of art and preservation of queer- and transness in a similar fashion. All the work she engages in is intentionally and necessarily nonnormative and marginal. She forefronts “Trans Oral Historian,” in her identities, because it captures her multiplicity and “that in and of itself is intrinsically tied to me being a friend, maker and a zinester, as well as a community organizer, because obviously all those things are interconnected—I am an oral historian because I talk with my community and I engage with my community and spread information and access in a very mutual way. And then of course it’s also DIY and it’s just like making sh\*t happen where you can.”

Sapphrodite sees oral history as a particularly queer historical remembrance that “is very broad and manifold—it is not new.” She departs from traditional notions of oral histories by elaborating on what it can be, on what, in their practice, makes it specifically trans: “Oral history is allowing generational wisdom to flow. It is radical. It is talking shit, you know, gossiping and spilling tea.” She continues: “it’s also fun. And colorful.”

Sapph mixes their mediums—zines become their channel of communicating oral histories, they often mix their print work with their drag performances. In fact, for their thesis project in undergrad, she performed a piece called “Mess(e) Pile,” a multimedia rumination on transsexualism, the possibility of beginning estrogen (accounting for the title’s “E”), and their university’s failure to give them the space and support to explore their academic and artistic inquiries. With a lifesize crafted glory hole background, and a large stack of papers with transcripts

and documentation from her research that she was impelled to cleave and reduce for the sake of academic legibility, they brought to the stage their proclamation that “my life is worth preserving and the lives of trans people who choose to do performance and choose to participate in alternate economies and alternate ways of living are worth preserving.”

Her mess(e) pile, like Paul’s loose assemblages, reiterate a uniquely queer affinity (and survival or protest tactic), to nonlinearity, nonsingularity, and messiness in artmaking and documentation as a meditation on what it means to be a trans artist, a trans oral historian, and a performer. In this work, and in much of Sapphrodite’s work, they are communicating with the past and the present in an activation of a different kind of future (one where estrogen becomes possible, one where a university allows more expansive academia, a very trans one). “The best thing you can do,” she said, “is to be a kind of a manifestation of a future thing you want to do. It’s always iterative and it’s always repeating. It’s always like building.”

Paul and Sapphrodite’s work are time machines, bridges. The pulling of the past into the present, to Paul, is a reminder of queer futurity that “we are never arriving and it is always approaching and we can use history as a way to get at that. This collection [QAW] enacts a nonlinear queering of time that allows the past to be in conversation with plans for the future.”

Thinking big, through glitter and fluorescent risograph prints, they both pursue a manifold art and archival process that represents a current (as well as forever ongoing) practice of radical, messy, alternatives in preserving queer history, and moving toward a future of queer utopian gestures. “Because, you know,” Sapphrodite said, “queer bitches are crafty.”

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**GAY LIBERATOR**  
detroit • september 1971 • 25¢

**SANDY WANDER**

I've been looking for queer typography. Is anyone else out there? Who else is searching? I wonder if this is even a valid question. Looking for queer anything often feels lonely. The word queer resists definition, sometimes aligned with ideas about rejection, refusal, deviating from the expected, away from the normative. It's certainly a political word, one that's taken on expansive qualities throughout its history, qualities that aren't necessarily confined to gender and sexuality.

**2** words doing as they want to do

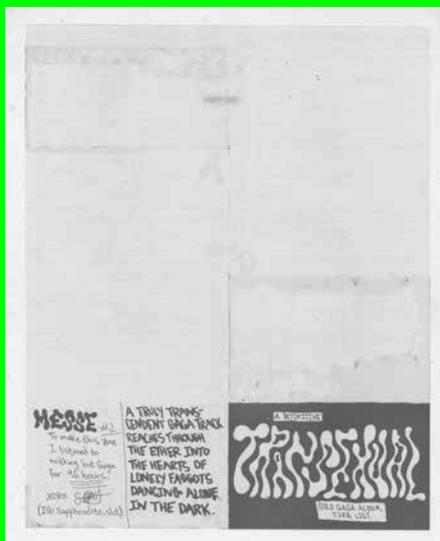
**QUEER NATION**

**THE LESBIAN TIDE**

As early as 1998 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote:

*"A lot of the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes 'queer' ... are using the leverage of 'queer' ... to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, and state."*

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- Images of Queer.Archive.Work set up for open library hours by Paul Soulellis.
- Photos of a Sapphrodite Slut drag performance by Kevin Jackson Jr., 2022.
- Photo of "Margafitas in Purgatory," a collaborative oral history zine by Sapphrodite Slut and Junior Mintt, taken by Mthr Trsa.
- Risograph self portraits by Sapphrodite Slut, 2022.
- Zine scans by Paul Soulellis, 2021.
- Zine scan by Sapphrodite Slut, 2021.

## SEX TALKS

# Antiguan Filmmaker Gabriel Bellone's experimental porn movies subvert race, gender, and the gaze, liberating Black bodies

by ELON COLLINS

*“Making a pornographic film is to me, clearly to explain my childhood, my life, my world, the way I see things.”*

I'm about to watch nine minutes of raw footage from Gabriel Bellone's freshest avant-garde porn film at the RISD Design Center. When I first met the filmmaker back in August 2022, he had just played an inspiring and cacophonous set with his noise band, Suburbanabuse, at the Mayday bar in Olneyville. Deeply struck by the performance, I approached Bellone to ask about the band and his artistry. During an excited and closely spoken conversation, we found out that we share Antiguan heritage and a love of pornography. As Black people in this country, a question looms in the air, persistently asking: why make porn? What does sex—specifically staged and filmed sexual acts—have to do with the contemporary Black experience? Our society ought to pay attention to the statistics that tell us that sexual labor and exploitation structure the very landscape of racism and anti-Blackness in our country. Making pornography from a Black perspective offers a sexual counter narrative that unsettles dominant white supremacist portrayals of Black sexuality as perverse, deviant, and excessive, which is why I know Bellone's work is so crucial.

In this excruciating, and hardly singular, moment in American history, Black people remain highly vulnerable. Police kill Black Americans at twice the rate of white Americans, and 22% of adult Black women experience attempted or completed rape at some point in their lives. America's devaluation and violence against Black bodies shows up in contemporary porn as well. “Ebony”, an outdated and derogatory term for Black women, remains the #1 category in the United States on PornHub. Demand for this content requires constant supply, and much of the free online porn industry capitalizes on racist fantasies. These numbers represent lives, and Bellone grew up with an intimate knowledge of the pain of tangible structural violence, because his own mother disclosed her violent sexual assault



and trauma to him. Knowing and sharing in her pain stripped Bellone of any privileges of childhood innocence; growing up as a queer Black man in an anti-Black and homophobic America didn't afford any comforts either. Where there are wounds from internalized racism, there must be reckoning, and Bellone uses pornography as an opportunity to stage a different kind of sex that revels in Black pleasure, and the pleasure of other people of color. This strategy centers on marginalized bodies and their fulfillment rather than hegemonic white desire.

The 22 year old Film/Animation/Video ('23) student hails from Brooklyn, NY and Plainsboro, NJ where his late father steeped him in art. He recounted that "where I grew up, my father was a painter, so it was important that I was watching." Works from cross-genre film noir Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa and French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard populated Gabriel's childhood. His father's death from cancer further propelled his passion: refining his craft helped Bellone keep his father's creative image alive. At the age of twelve, Bellone was raised by his widowed mother and visited her home country of Antigua most summers. Surrounded by the ocean and his mother's family, Bellone found himself drawn to the work of West Indian experimental documentarist William Greaves. Greaves uses documentary to turn the gaze back on the filmmaker, implicating their choices and practices in his work. By centering these themes and methods in his work, Bellone makes clear that film, race, and gender soaked the fabric of his earlier years. Since he could not escape systemic racism, he chose to produce his own methods for survival. Making pornography provides a place to intervene in narratives at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.

As we bound up the stairs of the RISD Design Center, Bellone tells me that the building houses many machines, including his trade tool: a Steenbeck film editor. The editing room could be compared to a tiny bedroom, or large closet. The white cinderblock walls feel impersonal, until Bellone turns off the main lights, and the warm yellow editing table lamp pops on. We take our seats and allow the small screen to suck us in. I watch as the Steenbeck translates single frames on a long roll of film into a jittery, gossamer movie. An Asian woman appears on screen: she begins stripping in a dark room, lit only by the glow of a spotlight. As she removes each article of clothing, she reveals a myriad of tattoos. Fully nude and with intense purpose, she sits down in a chair, spreads her legs and the camera phases into a close-up of her solo masturbation. Her movements emanate unabashed pleasure in experiencing and having full control over herself. Bellone watches



intently, and slows down certain scenes to mark and splice the film with a separate machine. While the shots feel streamlined, Bellone tells me that one of his core tenants necessitates “creating scenarios where the actor can walk around and do what they need to do in the scene.” This attention to agency defines contemporary ethical pornography practices, as highlighted in an article by Vice’s i-D imprint.

Bellone is among the ranks of other successful Black pornographers such as Sally Fenaux Barleycorn, Shine Louise Houston, and Brittany Franklin. In their company’s manifesto, Houston’s Pink + White Productions declare that their job remains “to fuck with the artistic and ideological languages we’ve inherited.” Bellone’s work ruptures industry norms through narrative, production, and craft. In 2022, he released his most recently completed film “I Love Pictures”, which screened at the international Curta Cinema festival in Brazil. The short film portrays a model who wants to murder the photographer she works with. Shot on 16mm Color 50D and Color 200T film, the short takes on a vintage quality, and compares the camera to a weapon using clipped, disoriented shots and sharp sound. Hinging on the violence present in much of photography and cinema, Gabriel has used his filmmaking practice to push against the obscured male gaze. UChicago’s School of Media Theory considers that an aspect of the gaze in film “objectifies us and robs us of our freedom as a subject.” To combat this cruelty, feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, argues that we must “free the looks of the camera into its materiality in time and space.” Revealing the specific subject positions of filmmakers and directors opens an opportunity to interrogate how the landscape of anti-Blackness has informed their filmic choices. Pornography provides a place where this voyeuristic deconstruction can happen, and it starts with creating beauty and pleasure out of violence and hate.



Photos by Carter Hiett and Gabriel Bellone, 2022.



# Who's Gonna Save Us? Rapping Towards Liberation in the City

by Garrett Brand

## A PERSONAL EXPLORATION & SYNTHESIS OF RAP MUSIC, POLITICS, AND MUSIC JOURNALISM WITH JOE COSCARELLI OF THE NEW YORK TIMES.

The air was thick with heat so intense that it seemed to form a physical wall in the path of our steps—oppressive humidity is just a fact of life during the Georgia summer. Still, hundreds of footsteps landed in discordant harmony on the concrete as the throng of protesters (myself in the midst somewhere) filled the streets of downtown Atlanta under the watchful eye of the global headquarters of Coca-Cola and Truist Bank, and, of course, the Atlanta Police Department. The typical noises of the city—the roaring engines of sports cars, the timid buzz of tourists—were replaced by choruses of, “no justice, no peace, fuck them racist ass police!” and “say his name: George Floyd!” At the center of the noise though, was a (most likely stolen) yellow school bus, graffitied and outfitted with a custom speaker system, blaring music. We screamed ourselves hoarse to national resistance symbols (think *Alright*, by Kendrick Lamar) and local anthems (think *Freestyle*, by Lil Baby) just the same. The music was unifying, and the energy was electric. A few hours earlier that day, I had received a text from my best friend asking if I would go out to protest with him later. He told me he had listened to Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* and it made him feel like he had to get out there. Music had brought us out into the political action of the city, and music was its spirit once we got there.

For the entirety of my political life, defined primarily by the Black Lives Matter movement, the soundtrack to the revolution has been rap. This is a complex reality. On one hand, rap is quite explicitly a counterculture resistance: rappers tell unfiltered stories of pain, oppression, and success against all odds. On the other hand, commercial rap is also known for its rampant misogyny, homophobia, and lyrics that can be seen as glorifying illegal drugs and violence. As I’ve developed my political consciousness, this contradiction has taken center stage. While Fox News decrees that “hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism,” (as sneeringly sampled by Kendrick Lamar on “DNA”) us young African-Americans struggle with using rap as our main inspiration while trying not to internalize its more problematic aspects.

So, rap, which has burst into the cultural zeitgeist of 21st century America, is a complicated political force. Its political existence is something of a conflicting, constantly clashing storm in its public perception: it is caught in the crossfire of those who seek to delegitimize it, and those who champion it.

Journalists are simultaneously vehicles for and interpreters of interactions between music and politics. Through the access granted by their profession, journalists are able to offer valuable insights into these dynamics. This is not to confuse journalists as an absolute authority on the matter: journalism is a heavily white male space dominated by vast corporate entities. So, when thinking about inherently racialized topics such as rap and politics, skepticism is valuable. This raises the question: do we actually care about journalists' opinions on these issues, or do we merely care about the credentials they carry?

This was a main point in my mind in interviewing Joe Coscarelli, a white male music reporter for the New York Times. Coscarelli's reporting has covered topics such as the arrest and prosecution of rapper Young Thug, and he is the author of the book *Rap Capital*, a history and ethnographic account of the Atlanta rap scene based on first hand observation and interviews. The book stuck out to me because of its methodological approach: it truly does focus on centering the lived experiences of people who actually exist in the rap world. Reading it helped me navigate my own experiences with rap, and the following selections from my interview with Coscarelli reflected this to me.

○ *I was reading your book Rap Capital. In the introduction when you're talking about Lil Baby, you say, "his very existence was a political statement," which I think is really interesting. I would think it's a fair extension to say the same thing about rap as a genre. What are your thoughts on this – is rap as an art form inherently politicized?*

I think it is, I think when you look at the roots of hip hop, whether you want to go back to the late 70s, or the rap music that's being made today, a lot of it both documents and comes from struggle, and specifically the struggle of black people and the struggle of black men who, you know, I'm not the expert, but I think we can all agree that the country has not always been welcoming to black men. I think it goes back to debates between Harry Belafonte and Jay Z, you know, Harry Belafonte saying, "oh, you should be doing more for your community, you should be political," and Jay Z essentially saying, "my success is inherently political." I think there's something about the brashness of rap, the refusal to shrink away, or follow white patriarchal forms of what's appropriate. Yeah, to be able to speak freely and live freely through one's art, I think, yeah, it is inherently political.

○ *What role should rap play in politics? Does it have a place there?*

I think it definitely has a place. Throughout history there's always a soundtrack to a revolution. Thinking back to when I was a kid, hearing someone like Dead Prez, you know, that opened my mind to a type of art that I didn't know existed, to ideas I didn't know existed. I learned a lot from them as a young teenager, in terms of names, people like Mumia, whatever causes they were flaunting. But I also feel like art doesn't owe anybody anything. I don't think that rappers have a responsibility to be political. I think America might be better off if we look less to celebrities to lead. I think we often mistake people with influence for activists. And that's not necessarily the job description.

*At the beginning of Rap Capital, you quote Ralph Ellison when you're describing the nature of modern rap, "the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound." And obviously, it's talking about the commodification of rap and black suffering. Would you say this commodification has impacted rap's legitimacy as a form of social resistance?*

I don't know that I've thought about it in those terms. I think it's a two-sided coin. I think you can make the argument that it's humanizing, that people want to actually engage with a side of the world, or even their own city, that they don't see day to day. But I think it's also arguable that America likes to package these things up and commodify the tragedy of poverty, or of racism. There are black critics who have written better about it than I ever could about. I think the quote you mentioned from the book, they're talking about the blues, right. So this debate is ongoing. And I think there are rap listeners, white listeners in particular, like myself, who are drawn to the three dimensional autobiographical writing that a lot of these artists execute. And I think that it can be beautiful, but there's a way where you also want to be aware not to commodify it too much, which, in writing the book, that's why I wanted to let people speak for themselves. I tried to basically use whatever platform I had to shine a light on these artists who I think are contributing to culture and creating amazing art and letting them speak for themselves.

*How would you describe the role that rap plays in defining its cities?*

There's a quote I use in the book from one of the Dungeon Family guys saying Outkast was naming streets, naming clubs, naming barbershops, specific ones that were really putting a spotlight on that. So I think rap is a huge part of the way cities define themselves. I think the way that music can be used as an export for a city, and I think it's interesting when you think of somewhere like Atlanta that wants both sides, it wants to be this entertainment capital it wants to be known for So So Def and QC, but also wants to keep it at arm's length. I think there's a real parallel there in terms of like, the strip clubs. Like, Atlanta is known for its strip clubs. And yet, you're gonna see politicians probably talking about closing them down more than you're gonna see politicians talk about opening more up. And yet, they want the city to be a destination for nightlife and for, you know, mischievous fun, or whatever you want to call it. So I think it's interesting to watch this push and pull as, yeah, rap is the main export of many cities in America.

When I closed the Zoom call after exchanging goodbyes with Coscarelli, I immediately put my headphones in to listen to *So Much Fun* by Young Thug. His comments were similar to thoughts I already had myself, and, for all my radicalism and rejection of institutional authority, it felt good to be validated by an "expert." We should not need the New York Times to confirm how we feel about things that we live everyday, but sometimes, it feels good. We can recognize that white men covering rap do not have to dictate how we think about it, but we can use their work to guide our own personal experiences. Coscarelli particularly understands his position in the space he covers, confirming the good feeling I got from his book.

Reflecting on our conversation as Thug crooned in my earbuds about his money and jewelry, I came to the conclusion: rap is, and always will be political. But, it certainly can't, and shouldn't be expected, to solve any of our problems. Rap is resistance, rap is a coping mechanism, rap is a tool to deal with the world. But rap cannot protect us from police, rap cannot fix our schools, and rap cannot stem the bleeding from gentrification. Rap is pain, rap is joy, rap is sheer defiance. If music is the spirit of the city, rap is the spirit of the city's oppressed and forgotten: it won't save us, but maybe it can help us save ourselves.



➤This is a collection of songs which represents my headspace while writing this piece: aching homesickness for beloved Atlanta, authentic reflections on blackness in America, and, of course, rap's poet laureate, Kendrick Lamar.

[tinyurl.com/3w2estn9](https://tinyurl.com/3w2estn9)



# Digging Up the Roots: Reimagining the Valley Arts District

Photo essay by Glenn Wang

Providence is one of the oldest industrialized cities in North America. However, in the 1970s, Detroit and other hubs replaced its automotive and shipbuilding industries, leaving the skilled workers in the city for the more accessible power and resources in emerging factory towns. The city's industrial buildings were abandoned and forgotten, memories erased, communities left to wither. During the next decades as unemployment soared and crime rates spiked, large numbers of residents moved out of Providence.

In the 80s, Providence began to work with the Federal Highway Administration to dynamize its economy with the Providence River Relocation Project. This project brought in investments and more importantly, people. At the center of this project is the WaterFire, a public installation that consists of braziers along the Woonasquatucket river between Downtown and College Hill. These braziers are illuminated when the installation is activated during events.



Archival photo of downtown Providence from late 60s showing the city covered with large parking lots and no public spaces.

Photo: Library of Congress.

## REBUILD

WaterFire was built on Woonasquatucket River, which was covered with parking lots and railroad before the Relocation Project. As years went by, WaterFire expanded and deepened its connection to the city. With this expansion, the team started looking for a storage space for the equipment. The process of searching for a storage space made them realize that with a permanent physical presence, their visions, originally for WaterFire, can be extended to the new space. In 2017, the WaterFire Arts center was born.

Barnaby Evans, the creator of WaterFire and the current Executive Artistic Director, is the mind behind the redesign of the once-abandoned building that is now the WaterFire Arts Center. This building was originally a U.S. Rubber Company building next to the Woonasquatucket river just west of downtown and north of Federal Hill.

“Art is a medium where we find memory” — Barnaby Evans



Left: The entrance of WaterFire Arts Center, the building was originally a U.S. Rubber Company building. Right: A weekend vintage market in WaterFire Arts Center. With the historic industrial building, the past is celebrated.

This newly renovated building provides a space that invites artists and community members to converge and participate in the making and enjoyment of the arts. They have rotating exhibitions featuring artists in the area and hold workshops and talks with these artists. Besides the public events, the WaterFire Arts Center also provides community groups a space to meet and connect. With various exhibitions in the gallery, special events and performances, and community-building activities, a network of people started to emerge around the establishment.

“We deliberately preserved all the windows and kept all the natural lights, so it’s full of light and full of potential doorways to go in and out.” —Barnaby Evans



Pictures show long-time community members discussing and participating in printmaking workshop.

## REBIRTH

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Woonasquatucket river, The Steel Yard brings artists together and creates a community with a different proposition. After the former site of the Providence Iron and Steel Company was abandoned in the 1960s and 1970s, artists started illegally occupying these spaces for their practices such as welding metal, blow glass, or fire pottery. These artists were placed in danger and precarity as these industrial buildings were often heavily polluted and out of repair. In 2001, The Steel Yard began their mission to own and return the spaces back to this community when the space was purchased by Nick Bauta and Clay Rockefeller, founders of The Steel Yard, with the intention of turning it into an artist hub. Over the past two decades, The Steel Yard has expanded its studio space for workshops and resident artist studios. All spaces in The Steel Yard are shared to catalyze collaboration between artists. The Steel Yard is committed to create more space for artists. One of their proudest moments is the Iron Pour & Sims Avenue Festival.



Steel horse from a previous performance at The Steel Yard. Kept for memories. This Steel Horse represents the Steel Yards' mission for strength and permanence.



The Valley is made up of both new and old buildings, signifying the spirit of creating and innovating without forgetting the industrial roots of this place. Exposed steel beams and uneven brick walls are common features of buildings in the district. Instead of being 'fixed' these features are being showcased for that they represent the history of this district.

“We really centered on the experience of the community and grew from it in a very intentional way and have incremental growth. It’s okay to slowly build the environment that we want to be in.” —Howie Sneider, Executive Director of The Steel Yard

The Steel Yard and WaterFire Providence have built a growing community around the Valley Arts District in the last decade. How do we build a thriving artistic community in a rapidly gentrifying city? Instead of building new structures, the Valley Arts District’s leaders opted for repair, rediscovery, and celebrating the industrial roots of this community.



The pottery studio in the Steel Yard.  
The communal studio space allows artists to collaborate.



# How Did We Get Here?

## Almost-visions of Providence's Lost Chinatown

by Mei Zheng

"I want to make a reconstruction. I want to dive into this memory space with people, to imagine and speculate, to go beyond the reach of history or even family memory."

St. Louis-born, Providence-based artist—community scientist—illustrator—researcher Jeffrey Yoo Warren opens up a portal onto Empire St, the shrouded Chinatown of the late 1800's.



Jeffrey Yoo Warren climbs into his Hanok playset prototype, and envisions beyond the interlocking columns and beams. COURTESY JEFFREY YOO WARREN

In the warmth of Café Pearl, artist Jeffrey Yoo Warren catches his breath after pedaling up the vertical of College St. He pulls from his lightweight backpack a handheld VR headset, searches through his phone for an image and carefully places it between its lenses. "Take a look", he tells me. I am transported into a 360-full body reconstructed, archival view of the narrow Empire Street at the corner of Westminster—the heart of Providence's once-thriving Chinatown, described to stretch almost the width of a sidewalk. It feels real, calming, yet *difficult* to visualize this space with such ease, knowing that Jeffrey and many others have dedicated their practice to painstakingly relocating Providence's forgotten cultural enclave.



Screenshot from VR rendered view of Empire St, ongoing 'Seeing Providence Chinatown' project. COURTESY JEFFREY YOO WARREN



'Combination Ladder Co. on parade' on 393 Westminister St, Providence, RI, 1907, behind this corner of Westminister Street. PROVIDENCE PUBLIC LIBRARY RI COLLECTION ARCHIVES

Between the 1880s into the late 1960s, Providence, RI, was home to a vibrant Chinese American community, many of which had migrated from the West Coast in search of refuge from racist, anti-Asian policies, police, and violence. It was a cultural hub built by Chinese immigrants across the state and region through gatherings and opportunities, in particular at New Year's celebrations in restaurants and festivals. In 1905, this neighborhood was home to 194 people of Chinese descent, with another 100 living in the state of Rhode Island. The expansion of Empire Street for urban development in the early 1910s by the City of Providence tore Chinese Society Buildings down and unhoused many Chinese residents—forcing them to move Chinatown to neighborhoods around Summer and Pine St, as well as the suburbs in 1914.

The interests of these communities were unheard; media and policing tactics spread division, fear, and isolation. Photographs, maps, town directories, and RI journals of Providence's Chinatown remain across the many RI Archives—such as the Rhode Island State Archive, Providence Public Library, and Brown's Hay Library. As these institutions are open to the public, they hold untapped stories in the hands of its colonial archive. Now local members of the diaspora are re-discovering, -creating, and -claiming from within the Eurocentric archives and building new archives to tell stories for generations to come.

Jeffrey has had a longing to look around Westminister St to Providence's once-thriving Chinatown since 2018. He has collected stories of the warm, custard flavors of 고구마 Korean sweet potatoes and perfected crafting traditional woodworking techniques—building memories as vocabularies. His search is also connected to a love of family and its incomplete narratives. "It's almost not a story," he shares. "There wasn't a beginning, middle, and end. It's been interesting to learn how to ask questions and get into it." Jeffrey embodies these feelings through ancestral moments that ask, "how did we get here?"

Since the age of eleven, Jeffrey has pondered the experience of being a mixed Korean-American drawn to aesthetic parallels—sketching Korean temple architecture and exploring Korean crafts. Both of his parents were scientists; his father ran a woodshop, which Jeffrey spent his time in. "The scarcity for Korean Americans is a real motivator and makes the casual interaction into this spiritual experience," he said. Jeffrey's obsessions, that without, he says to me, "[he] would have thought was already gone and impossible to access."



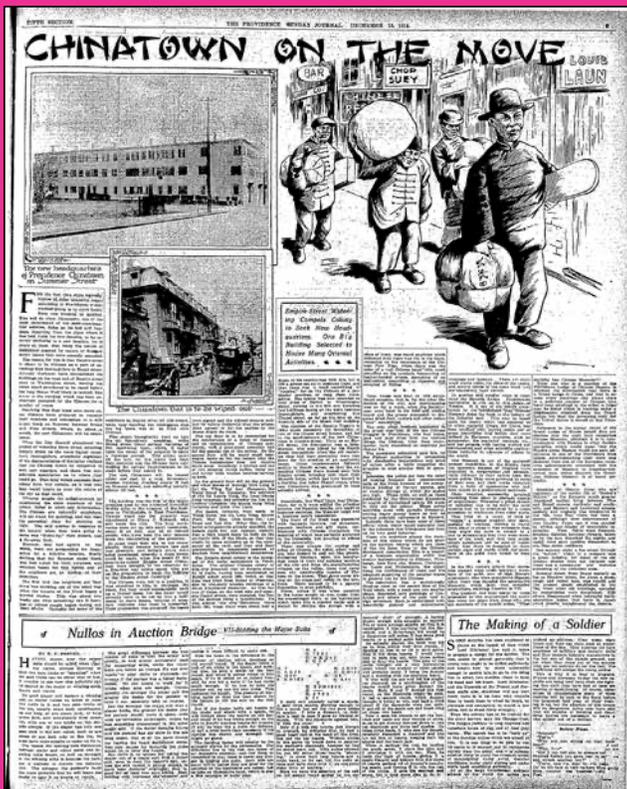
○ (Left) Photo reference to traditional 한옥 Hanok Korean wood-joinery – detail from a rice storage container. Often constructed in Korean homes like that of which his mother grew up in.  
 (Middle) "My mother holds a column capped with the joints I've carved, looking pleased." Jeffrey Yoo Warren  
 (Right) "Perhaps my ideal space to work is in the worlds kids create, and the materials and images they weave, and so I wanted to create a play set for Korean American kids to make their own hanok." Jeffrey Yoo Warren  
 PHOTOS COURTESY JEFFREY YOO WARREN

In 2018, the RI Chinese History Project at Brown University's Public Humanities, was initiated by graduate students and lead curators, Angela Yuanyuan Feng and Julieanne Fontana; visiting scholar, John Eng-Wong; and others to remap Downtown Providence's Chinatown through a site-specific exhibit and walking tours. Jeffrey encountered several temporary plaques from the RI Chinese History

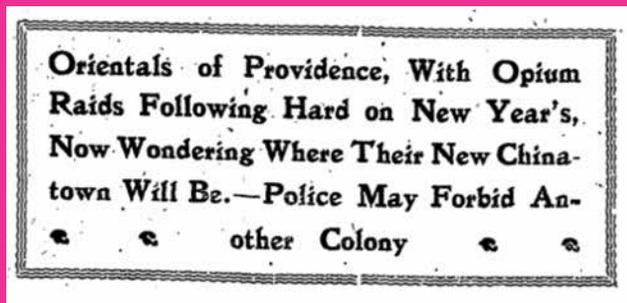
Project on his way home, and was shocked to have learned that his neighborhood was once this sanctuary. "I can see right now where that plaque was—Grace Lee Boggs, born on Westminster. That stood out to me because that's someone who has recently helped shape our world; it didn't  
 ○ feel as much like a distant history," he said. Interested in finding out more about her experience growing up here, he tried to pinpoint the street, but realized the street numbers had changed.



'Chinatown Zones', Warren's ongoing process of re-mapping Providence Empire Street Chinatown. COURTESY JEFFREY YOO WARREN



Providence Journal's 'CHINATOWN ON THE MOVE' close-up of caption, "The Chinatown that is to be wiped out", Dec. 13, 1914  
 THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL ARCHIVES



Providence Journal's 'A "NEW CHINA" HERE TOO', close-up of headline, "Orientals of Providence, With Opium Raids Following Hard on New Year's Now Wondering Where Their New Chinatown Will Be.—Police May Forbid Another Colony", Feb. 5, 1913  
 THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

Jeffrey is compelled by sci-fi and mentions Janelle Monáe's *Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer* and Octavia Butler's *Patternist* Series as references for framing memory collections as liberatory, power-shifting portals—

Jeffrey imagines, "if you could just click over into that world, you could see it the way it was."

The same year, he started an in-progress project, *Seeing Providence Chinatown*, superimposing archival photography onto 3D models of these historically erased enclaves. "I think museums, I know it's not the same as archives, but they're so dissatisfying in so many ways," expresses the artist. We often hear only from white perspectives within these spaces, as ones who erase the histories we wish to know and that further perpetuates, not only Anti-Asian, but collective violence. The Providence Journal\* archives reveal racist, xenophobic, colonial accounts of journalism and police reporting on the people of Chinatown—depicted with orientalized type-fonts, caricatured scenes, and racialized Anti-Asian demands—quote from article titled, "*CHINATOWN ON THE MOVE*" (December 13, 1914), "The Chinatown that is to be wiped out" is written beside an illustration of four Chinese men evicted from their homes on Empire. Police framing sensationalized "crimes" in the area, which perpetuated further Anti-Asian, Anti-Chinese stereotypes of gambling and opium addiction. The Providence Journal's account (of February 23, 1908, Section 4,1) titled "*CHINESE ELEMENT IN PROVIDENCE SLOWLY GROWING*" contradicts future accounts, and states that Chinese immigrants "have done nothing worse than play fan-tan and dominoes on Sunday"—a day meant to be "free" from the struggles of daily immigrant surviving.

On Sundays, Providence Police carried out targeted persecution of Chinese immigrants to prevent "unlawful" gathering. The police exercised militant-like immigration and opium raids and "special" inspection tactics that kept the Chinese immigrant community apart, which dehumanized them. Jeffrey confronts this truth in his practice, and acknowledges the gaps, obstacles, and pains of the destructive, Eurocentric archive(s). He feels dissatisfied to see bare walls from within these 3D models, knowing that there were once people here. The descendants were deliberately erased through displacement. Stories of the diaspora offer connections to reimagine these spaces—making the invisible, visible.

Jeffrey tells me, "there are still empty spaces. One of the whole points of my project is not to define everything and be a recounting of harm. That is someone's job. I don't think it's my job at the moment. It's not my purpose here."

In his recent conversation with Irene Luke Hope, a descendant of Providence's Chinatown and archivist at Beneficent church, to recolor a photo of her family's restaurant, Luke's, neon sign—with conversations, she recalls, "the big letters were red, small letters were green." The subversive truths suggest that memories are essential against violent epistemologies of the Eurocentric archive, that to be remembered is to remember, feel, and share. Historian, academic, and writer of *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, Marisa J. Fuentes, informs us that discursive "history is produced from what the archive offers." Jeffrey by way of a networked diaspora co-creates memory spaces full of emotions—a new archive, a new sanctuary, a new future(s).

He states, "the most important truths about historic space are through what they mean to people today. We don't have another way to understand it; we have a pile of facts, but ultimately, meanings are going to be shaped by who is relating. Descendants are a central part of that."

\*

\*These papers can be found on Providence Journal's digital archive, behind a paywall for access.



Jeffrey describes "Visitor[s-] wears a cardboard tiger head mask, holding it steady by reaching into its mouth, while a group in the background sits looking at a projected 3D scene of brick walls and vegetation"- experienced reflections of mask-making, speculative sounds and ancestral memory, 'Networked Memory Enclaves' by Jeffrey Yoo \Warren and Ann Chen, Culture Hub, NYC, Oct. 2022  
PHOTO COURTESY CULTUREHUB

# Rose is a reminder that defiance without love is meaningless

by Mito Smith

For Jamaican-American Songwriter Rose/Domedekka, moments in the day seen as mundane to some open up a possibility for departure into wildly experimental audio life. By mixing aspects of religious, spiritual, and futuristic influences, Rose builds momentous sonic spaces of refuge from Eurocentric traditions as gifts of love. Journey through Domedekka's celebration of defiance, identity, and community as they ignite the spirits of POC Queer youth culture in Providence, RI.

Rose's Spotify:  
<https://shorturl.at/elpKZ>



Sketch done after interviews  
with Rose, Apr. 2023

*Where did you grow up and when did you connect with your Jamaican roots?*

I grew up in Queens, New York for the most part of my childhood, where I schooled elementary, middle, and Christian high school. I also visited extended family in Jamaica. My grandparents had a house in St. Andrews, Jamaica near Kingston. My cousins and I would hang out there quite a bit. My dad grew up in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica so we go there to visit sometimes. It was confusing going to an all-girl high school, a little nonbinary weirdo in a sea of girls, but I made a lot of great friendships there. It was strict and very homophobic for the most part.

My Fall 2022 semester professor asked me 'where do you feel your family and island through what you make?' I have to hear my mother play James Ingram in the car, speak Patois with my family, hear my family, I have to hear it all.

*Did performing in a choir expose you to the experience of live shows?*

My mom was a phenomenal philharmonic pianist in Jamaica. She gave up on that dream but wanted me to have a similar attachment to music. We would attend this weird Episcopalian church, I felt disconnected from the sound as I was still trying to discover who I was as a person. That stuffy white and red uniform itched. I didn't have a home in it anymore and found love for sound again in spaces where I could sit with my thoughts. I would harmonize with the sounds of lawnmowers and electrical buzzing in my room.

*I know you as Rose, but I also know you as Domedekka.*

*How did Domedekka come to be?*

I entered RISD as a freshman in 2020, shortly after the Covid pandemic began, we were all sent "home". I buzzed my hair off and threw out all my clothes. The friends I made are real special and we have this reactive and encouraging relationship. I feel heard by my friend Eiden, who I met in college. I send him all of my ideas and we go back and forth and form ideas together. Through distance we used zoom to practice our music, I made some beats and sang in our band called VHS for some time. It's not active as of now because of the upkeep it takes while being students.

In the spring semester 2022, my junior year, me and my friend Cassius were on a night walk. Choppin it up freestyling, he was like let's start from the dome, dada dome, dekka dekka dome and then it became it. The two K's, something about dekka, dekka bitch really hit me! I got that tattooed!

\*Rose rolls up right arm sleeve to reveal Domedekka tattooed on inner right arm.\*  
It hit me, something about the double k. It's so percussion in nature, UH! Energy  
Domedekka is a hard nigga!



Rose/domedekka, 2023, "My best friend Hunter, his dad made me feel comfortable but I wanted to be captured right. We met at a space where Rose could be Rose, it didn't have to be Ms. Rose." This portrait project was to capture Essence and light of black fems. In courtesy of hunters Father in 2020

*Who are you in this photo?*

It was a hard time because I had just come out as a trans masc/queer to people closest to me. But I extended my heart out to those who felt loving, real, and caring for who I was, whatever I was. I still don't like having my picture taken but it's one of few photos there are. I wouldn't go by domedekka for another year and a half after this photo. I cherish that summer.

*You mention you developed bitterness towards piano, but I hear piano in your music now. When do you think you got back to that?*

I always considered myself a poet, it was an intro to lyricism in my art practice. In music, I wanted to have a conversation about my Black experience going through unorthodox changes, raised to be something that I wasn't. I needed to revisit my influences to understand that language, certain usages of keys, chords, different



Domedekka and Ezden. Captured by, @therealjackstein

scale structures and deconstruct them to break free of Eurocentric musical understanding beyond how I was programmed to use it.

*Are you writing to someone?*

Sometimes there's people I talk to. A lot of times it's me talking to parts of myself that need attention. I make love songs because I'm a Pisces. I talk my shit about politics, gender, queerness, race issues – everything.

*Can you remember the first person you shared your music with?*

My girlfriend Saph. Summer of sophomore year of college I was going between peoples houses, in Florida at the time. I would put my headphones on and make songs to send her as my gifts of love. It was our way to stay connected when things were up in the air. Performing in front of people can be nerve wrecking. Once I performed a song I wrote for Saph called, "the love of my life". She was so embarrassed, I loved it! I felt so present. I ended up looking at her the whole time. If I could, I would get a choir to sing this song.



Captured by @fifi\_theunicorn, Domedekka performs on the Brown green, with Cassius as Saph watches in support.2022

*I've seen you everywhere from the RISD museum, to the Brown underground, to house parties! What does it feel like to make that space for yourselves and others?*

As I get into rapping it's become a social thing. Having those moments I'm free styling with friends is where I can actively learn with music socially and for myself, both are equal parts of my music making.

As much as it is a solitude based practice, I'm a people person. I love gatherings, partying and opportunities for engagement. Getting people to connect to something they haven't heard before. Like meeting people for the first time, see how we vibe.

I want people to engage on multiple levels. I want people to cry with me, laugh with me, think I'm stupid with me.

That's what I want.



# FINDING ‘US’ HERE: Artmaking and space-taking through NOTSODIFFERENT

by Natalie Mitchell

“With the artists that they’re bringing together, they’re basically like, do whatever you want, and in that sense, there’s the emphasis on ‘you don’t have to buy into the normative’” (Gustav Hall)

That Wednesday night, the vibe in the basement of the House of Ninnuog—meaning “House of the People” in Narragansett (aka Brown University’s Native House)—felt, more than anything else, like a group of friends hanging out after a long day of classes. Music emanated from a speaker as student Jordan Walendom, a rapper and DJ, queued up songs; some were familiar, while others were new mixes and beats created by the students sitting in front of me. Kalikoonāmaukūpuna Kalāhiki, a music producer, rapper, and member of the house, seamlessly began the meeting by proclaiming the space a vehicle to help people with their creative practices.

Kalāhiki is a junior at Brown and a queer mähū, from Kāne’ohe, O’ahu—“for Hawaiians, mähū is our analog to 2Spirit...we embody both masculine and feminine energies,” they explained. They later brought in their dog, a mini poodle named Duke, who ran around the circle of couches and bean bags, trying to steal the snacks people had brought. Throughout the rounds of introductions, creative share-outs, and invited interjections, I candidly got to know the various singers, rappers, producers, filmmakers, graphic designers, and poets that had made their way into this space—and, among them, the three founders of the hip hop collective NOTSODIFFERENT.

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Walendom, Namoo Song, and Elliot Urgent had long recognized a persistent drought in the hip hop and party scene on Brown’s campus post-pandemic, especially due to the lack of performance opportunities for rap artists and DJs. Urgent, a DJ himself, had studied the scene as a freshman prior to the pandemic, and provided a sense of institutional knowledge that was vital with the return of campus life: “I knew there were talented people here. And so it was just about creating those connections, and really just creating this scene with all these people.” Carving out this space for music demanded an investment in the broader culture of hip hop, which is just what NSD set out to achieve. “It’s the difference between going to an open-mic night with a guitar versus if you have a beat and you’re rapping over it; you have energy, you’re hype, you’re engaging with the crowd ... Hip-hop is so unique and different that I think we need spaces for hip hop, and



I think NSD has done a great job in doing that,” said Jordan Turman, aka rapper Sodomaybe, who began performing with the collective in some of its earliest projects.

It was only after a couple of events and performances, most notably an art installation on the ceiling of Wayland Arch created by Song and “Project Main Green”—an exhibition which presented a wreath of visual artmaking surrounding the musicians performing in the most central location on Brown’s campus—that the collective came into shape with motivated, concrete objectives. “Once I saw us all three get together, I was like, damn,” said Walendom, describing those earlier days of NOTSODIFFERENT, as he built a close personal relationship with Song and Urgent. “After Project Main Green and seeing the sum of all we could create...when that music goes, people are here for it.”

These goals manifested in the score of events that NSD has either performed in or hosted since October, through which they created diverse setlists of artists and built a consistent audience. Singer, rapper, and storyteller Jennora Blair first got involved with the collective in early November through Professor Enongo A. Lumumba-Kasongo’s Intro to Rap Songwriting class. Walendom was one of her classmates and eventually asked her if she wanted to be part of NSD’s Sounds@Brown set. She stresses the importance of the space that they have curated, especially for Black artists like herself, saying that, “I think it’s the fact that the community is very diverse and it’s predominantly students of color also running it ... [it’s] just such a warm atmosphere because of that collective joy of difference. It’s really generative.”

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While the collective continued to grow and the diverse, vibrant space of NSD took shape, the need for further organization became apparent. And thus at the end of 2022, Kalāhiki joined the collective as an additional organizer alongside Valerie Villegas and JD Gorman. “We were very much there to provide increased capacity and help to coordinate between a lot of disparate parts of the collective,” they said. Their guidance on these matters helped to facilitate the NSD events of the current spring semester, most notably the “NOTSODIFFERENT Super Bowl,” which saw several rappers facing off in team battles against one another. A week prior to the event, Urgent and Kalāhiki cooked up beats, sent them off to each artist, “and then everyone would just like, hop on,” as rapper and Brown sophomore Osiris Russell-Delano described it. “The Super Bowl was honestly the coolest show I’ve ever done,” he reflected. “The performance itself wasn’t that crazy but the whole idea and the world building that took place was super dope.”

For R&B and neo-soul artist, RISD senior Rose Poyser aka DomeDekka, the event was a new challenge: “I was like, ‘Oh, shit. I’m supposed to freestyle, I can barely do a little ‘Miss Mary Mac’ situation’... but it went pretty swimmingly I think.” They were on Team Purple alongside rappers Gustav Hall and Jesse McCormick-Evans (aka “McBaller”), and the three have collaborated on tracks together since. “We’re just gonna spit whatever. And it wasn’t stressful at all,” said DomeDekka. And spit they did, with not-so-friendly fire and quick-witted back-and-



forths against the competing team that had the packed living room in stitches and in awe. Thus, my initial framing for this piece centered on the success of the Super Bowl and NSD's social media promos leading up to the event, specifically examining the performance hype surrounding the community and what made it so special. However, when I asked the co-founders what NSD performance they had coming up next, I was surprised that Song pointed me toward the Mezcla Latin Dance showcase, an event where they would be ushering, but not performing. At the showcase, witnessing their show of support, my attention was drawn to what I now understand as NSD's most arduous task: building a community.

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To accomplish this task, NSD created a Departmental Independent Study Project (DISP), whose meeting I was attending in the The House of Ninnuog lounge that Wednesday night. Kalāhiki organized the DISP with their advisor in the Ethnic Studies Department “just for us to have the space to talk about, ‘How do we intentionally build a community for creatives, and what does that mean to have a community for creative expression?’”

- They modeled the framework for the course on the book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown, specifically “understanding our community as fractals,” Kalāhiki explained. “Our relationships to one another on an individual level will reflect how we operate on a big scale.” Walendom claims that “one of the molds that NOTSODIFFERENT aims to break is the dominant male hierarchy that hip hop historically has, and go beyond the conversations and personalities that songs are allowed to have.” By design, NSD highlights the art of queer and trans creatives of color within the community. “I speak from my experiences as a trans woman and I think that they give me the space to do that,” said Sodomaybe. Though “I personally just make my space,” she added. “I don’t wait for people to do it if I want space.”

- But there’s still the broader question at hand—“I think NSD’s goal is to change and shift the culture and I think, implicitly, a question that they’ll have to answer for themselves is: what does it mean for them as men [to be featured at the forefront]?” asked Dori Walker, a videographer and recent collaborator with NSD on a music video for the singer Daiela. She articulated the difficulties of creative authority in spaces shared by men, and how the agency of women, especially Black women, is often neglected. “I see the people that shift and change culture most in this country to be within black femme spaces, queer black spaces, [and at] the intersections of that,” Walker said. “So I definitely would say there’s always going to be tension in masculine dominated spaces with that reality.”

NSD, a large proportion of which is Black men, confronts both white supremacy and the complexities of Black masculinity. They have enlisted the help of Beta Omega Chi (BOX), an all-Black, anti-hazing fraternity at Brown, in approaching this project. Walendom and Urgent are both members of BOX; Walendom is currently its President. “The emphasis that BOX places on certain things like communication and vulnerability ... is really important” in NSD, Urgent explained. “[It] has really been a huge factor in how we went about trying to intentionally build our



connections with all these artists, and maintain [a] space that is comfortable for everybody.”

As for Kalāhiki, they see their role within the collective as a force to work through the challenges of community building, to shape NSD not merely as a place for creativity but also a space for healing. “Because NOTSODIFFERENT is so diverse, we’re all bringing different traumas into the space to process and work through together, specifically as a majority space for people of color. So because of that we’re going to make mistakes, we’re gonna fuck up. That’s why I’m so passionate about us being held accountable ... in Hawaiian we call it ho’oponopono, which means ‘to restore back to balance.’”

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The collective (now in its “terrible-tuos,” as the co-founders and others refer to it) is trying to manage NSD’s growth—projects, events, and building a collaborative network of artists—while also sustaining this foundational sense of community care.

- There is also the management of pressure from Brown’s institutions. When it comes to diversity on Brown’s campus, students of color face a double-edged sword. Success is not always rewarded for those who achieve it, in comparison to white students; other times it is tokenized. Walendom told me: “It’s kind of scary that by taking [resources] from Brown, we provide for Brown this diversity brochure, which is terrifying ... it’s a double irony that we play against one another.” NOTSODIFFERENT and its ethos can only exist in spite of the structures of this institution. Meanwhile, the collective’s goals of nurturing creative freedom have provided a necessary space for all of its artists, especially for rappers like Sod-omaybe. “[In] my music, I am a bit, like, raunchy and vulgar,” she told me: “[But] I’m about to apply to med school next year. And so I think my digital footprint is very important...I think that’s also a reason I’ve been kind of stalling on the recording process.” For her, NSD’s focus on live performance has provided a solution to this dilemma. “NSD gives opportunities to showcase your art, and NSD has [helped] me perform and get myself out there and really put effort and time into my artistry.”

Art and its longevity is never a promise one can make, and it is impossible to think that an artist could ever be paid to create the work that they truly want to be making. But when the primary incentive for creativity is the support of a community, the art that is produced can transcend the boundaries of what we deem valuable in society. As Urgent told me, “in presenting these rappers and vocalists, I think it’s just really important to redefine what is acceptable to be presented as hip hop and as Black.”

Like fractals, these intentional steps toward artistic liberation hold power beyond measure, connecting populations of queer and trans people of color who crave this sense of community. “People don’t know the lyrics to the song at the beginning of the song, but at the end, they’re screaming the hook back at us,” said Kalāhiki. “I think that energy is what keeps people coming back and keeps our artists really engaged and wanting to work with us. It’s inexplicable. It’s NOTSODIFFERENT.”





# Making in Radical Diasporic Multiplicity

by Simone Klein

## DIASPORA AND LAND:

“What isn’t supposed to touch that is always touching for me? What is the most absurd thing that makes sense?” These are questions that Jewish trans poet and organizer emet ezell asks themselves in their spiritual, poetry and musical practice. For them, the answers are not only a conversation with text, but a meditation on place and the teachings of friction. emet is world-building and world-disrupting, committed to bringing in whatever they might be “supposed” to leave out. “What does it mean to listen, even when I am afraid of the sounds?”

As infographic-ed political education, somatic trauma healing, and liberatory futurisms spread through social media, and a more theoretical understanding of what it means to “queer” is molded beyond the academy,— non-binary/trans artists are finding distinctly queer ways to subvert, re-imagine spiritual artistic traditions that tie prayer and connection to land to liberation for all people.

Within the implications of forbidden touch lie queer world-making, queer intimacy, and queer embodiment. I’m asking myself how I may be closing or opening my body/mind/heart to the foraging of my forbidden or yet unseen queer-bodied experience, the whispers of my Ashkenazi Jewish lineage as I unlearn Zionism—snarled in cycles of harm and oppression of the other. I’m asking about the specific possibilities of diasporic Jewish art to explore questions of queer ritual, and the queer sacred.

The reality of absurdity, in my mind, is a radical aliveness, a tool for generating rich images/concepts/observations, and containers for art-making that need to hold multiplicity. Absurdity is a life force of juicy creation, evolution, and reflection. What is absurd is what challenges our notion of what can be, who we are, and where we come from. “What it means to be a Jewish artist is to also work with the impossibility of home,” emet explains. “To work with displacement, to look and be in conversation with the multiplicity of place-fulness. That is our people.” For emet, the interest in displacement and return relates to their involvement with the movement to a free Palestine, but also to Latvia, where their family is from—“I can’t return there [Latvia]! The world there is over, the Jews are gone”. In this grief, they see their work as a conversation with both the dead and the diaspora.

Another queer Jewish artist I spoke to, Sol Weiss, is grappling with the positionality of diaspora in their printmaking and design practice, and radical Jewish community-building work. In otherwise transformative spaces of Jewish environmentalism, Sol felt that

an analysis of settler colonialism was missing and needed that to be present in order to trust the spaces and “dive in fully”. Sol describes diasporic Jews on Turtle Island as being at the intersection of two lineages: the history of this land (so-called USA) and the history of the Jewish people. Sol’s prints often put visuals of earth-based Jewish ritual objects/symbols (moon, rose, wishbone, egg) in conversation with visuals of sacred plants and animals of the land they now live in as a settler that may not be considered Jewish (turkey, coyote).



Caption: emet working in their studio at the Vermont Studio Center residency. Images courtesy of emet ezell.

### ART AND MAKING WORLDS:

For emet, language is not only world-making, but a specific kind of Jewish magic—language, not only as a symbol, but as a “legit material”. They remind me about G-d creating the world in words with the Torah—and speak the first few letters of the Hebrew alphabet aloud on our call: “to say these sounds, ‘aleph, bet gimel, dalet’ is to make a world. Emet was “raised in a fundamentalist evangelical home in Texas” and did not know they were Jewish until they were 20—imploding information they thought they knew, theologically, spiritually, ritually, and communally. “How do I be this thing that I am?” In leaving the evangelical fundamentalist church, what they’ve had to do is make their own worlds endeavoring towards a religiosity that receives and invites queerness



Caption: Sol's print "call" in process and completion. Sol in studio. Images courtesy of Sol Weiss.



—a world that is being created and destroyed at the same time. This is liberatory work, and it is also grief work.

Some of their worlds are on the page - places where they can have conversations with the tradition and with their Mom, that they could not do in the worlds off the page. When they are feeling deeply their own frailty in purpose, they remind themselves—"I'm a God, I get to make worlds. I'm a demon. I get to spit. This is what it means to be alive". To emet, a demon is an energy that God can't control—"some kind of thing that springs up on accident in the cracks". When making worlds on the

page, they are part world-maker and “part thing that has sprung up from the cracks of the world that weren’t supposed to be, but is”. Emet reminded me of how most of our poems, our literature called Piyyutim, were sung on holidays at a particular time in a particular place. To them, the memory, magic, and prophecy part of world-building require song: “you’ve gotta unlock something in the throat. It can’t just be on the page”. emet offers another intersection to consider, “diaspora as a dysphoria of body crossed with a dysphoria of place”. Their work asks the question: how can I feel out of body and out of place and out of context and still find intimacy with what is. The question in emet’s book, *Between Every Bird, Our Bones* is how to care for a place when you’re not allowed back. To them, this is the most Jewish question.

For Sol, world-building looked like co-founding a queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural organizing project called Linke Fligl that they spent seven years supporting through facilitation, and design. This was a community where the work of building a theory of being on land as Jewish diasporic settlers could take place. The Linke Fligl fundraising model sought to reflect values of anti-colonization by asking everyone who wanted to make a donation to LF to also make a matching gift to a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) land project in their area, or to their land partner WILDSEED, paying a 5 to 10% land tax to Schaghticoke First Nations on all sales, program contributions, and donations to honor that they were settlers on the land, with a hope to contribute to the healing and cultural reclamation work of one of their local Indigenous communities, and practicing money transparency with all budgeting. Not only was the project made up of folks curious about Judaism who didn’t have an access point because the communities that they grew up with or didn’t grow up with at all were not welcoming to queer folks or women or Jews of color—Sol found the whole process to be queer in nature with the contrast of serious topic, ancient tradition, and the visual identity of LF as playful cartoony chickens and bright colors. Sol’s engagement with ritual is a testament to the fact that ritual makes us as we make ritual.



## BIOGRAPHY

emet:



“The best way to stay up to date on the things that I’m doing is my newsletter. Also, I got to write a book for the Collective Liberation Tarot Deck – a tarot deck that a bunch of incarcerated artists have made, which is coming out in August, so that’s the next thing!”  
[emetzell.com](http://emetzell.com)

Sol:



Sol loves the way letters are charged with trailing histories, and printmaking makes art accessible and communicates a message. Lately, they’ve been inspired by the work of thinker Bayo Akomolafe and are currently working on making an infographic about a friend’s process of tracking down the roots of extraction of their inherited wealth and redistributing it. Their work is connected to the written word “as a form of Jewish resilience”.  
[solweiss.com](http://solweiss.com)

↑ *Telling My Soul To Be Loud*

↑ *Great Waters*





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