

LETTERS

TO



Photo by Rodney A. Brown.

OUR-

Malcolm-x
Betts



Photo courtesy the artist.



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I want to start by saying I love you.
In my flesh
I type this text
in hopes that you imagine a world
outside of the violence of the Americas
or the violence of any institution—
institutions who don't understand
the complexities of being Black.

Your hands and the attempt to reach what is out of my control—to arrive—at the intersection between what is life and death—sitting at a computer screen on a Monday night.

Spaces that don't hold themselves accountable
for their harmful complicity
in systems of white supremacy,
patriarchy, capitalism and sexism.
I can't accept performative allyship
as compensation for
losing my life.

Write more than a mission statement.
Open up to the possibility of reparations
Open up spaces where Black people can thrive.
In this double pandemic
of Covid-19 and the attack against African Americans,
I ask myself, "How can I show up for myself?"
I love myself.
I inhale to make sure I'm alive.
I exhale what no longer serves me.

Exhale air from the lungs. Inhale air to arrange life back into the body. In order to survive a lynching, one must be able to hold one's breath underwater. There's this trust one must have with water—there must be no fear of drowning—of some water being inserted into the nostrils until you feel it cutting off oxygen to the brain—holy water or baptism as daily showers. I remember how my body felt when I first swam in the ocean— the salt reminding me where my people are—always traveling on boats, wading in waters, running through muddy creeks and surviving underwater.

Teal residues from spray cans left on my fingertips,
like when juice drips down your mouth from peaches
—and I think of the taste of my lover.

My hands attempt to reach what is out of my control—
to arrive—at the intersection between what is life and death—
and the state of my mental health.
With each day anxieties and panic attacks become more unbearable.

He would touch the side of his lungs to know that he was breathing, "You will always be a nigga," as he made his way back into the train station.

Trains in a weird way felt like a passage of sorts, and the thought of being underground terrorized him at times. On subways, he would often have visions of zombies lurking up and down subway platforms and he would see someone who reminded him of himself.

For me, dance allows for transformation to emerge, a space for remembering the unknown, a space to process and find healing.

The Atlantic Ocean tastes like DNA that I am very familiar with. We swim and as you hold me, we kiss against the waves. I know this is the place I was meant to be. Swimming with you and my ancestors.

* "Letters To Ourselves" emerged from an invitation by mayfield brooks to Malcolm-x Betts and Maria Bauman to write love letters to Black artists. The invitation was a seed cultivated by Malcolm and Maria both together and separately. The resulting texts gesture to the desires and concerns of each artist and interconnect with calls for Black liberation, rest, and regeneration.

Malcolm-x Betts is a dance artist who believes that art is a transformative vehicle that brings people and communities together. His artistic work is rooted in investigating embodiment for liberation, Black imagination, and directly engaging with challenges placed on the physical body.