

NIGREDO
(THE BLACK KENNING)

mayfield brooks and
brontë velez in conversation

mayfield brooks: I am so excited to have this conversation with you, brontë.

brontë velez: I am so excited too!

brooks: I've been looking forward to this for a while, and I decided, in the spirit of my work *Improvising While Black*, to not prepare questions, but to welcome what comes, as it comes, and to push back at this idea that we have to produce something for someone, for an audience, for anyone but ourselves. What's present for you right now?

velez: Something that's really been on my heart is equanimity and Blackness, longing to be in a posture of equanimity, to have the wisdom to not let things latch onto me. But also wanting to complicate the ways that equanimity encounters being a Black person. I've been feeling angry and hurt and resentful and don't want to do the work to un-feel that way. Not wanting to meditate and not wanting to be a bigger person—and feeling a lot of shame around that. Saying it aloud now feels like I'm just wanting space to be able to be impacted, and to grieve that I'm hurt about a lot of things I had to get over very quickly. So, in this moment, I'm letting things catch up to me to find ways they might move.

brooks: What do you make of that word “equanimity”?

velez: I don't know the actual etymology, but it feels like I'm balancing on a little fulcrum that's between my feet but it's kind of wobbly. It's almost like a form of “enlightenment:” not letting things get to you. But I'm also noticing the respectability politics that I grew up around in my family. You didn't let things get to you, you didn't react, you needed to be calm, you needed to not be an angry Black woman—I'm like, “hold up now!”

brooks: There is a real contradiction in allowing for the rage to be rage, acknowledging and validating it, while holding your own tenderness at the same time, and maybe allowing others to support you in that. There's so much that we're expected to hold. That makes me mad too. I know we share an investment in farming, and I've been thinking a lot about compost. Compost allows for all of that complexity, because there's anger in compost. When compost gets hot, it activates. Anger, the emotion of anger, is hot. Hot is good, and hot also burns. Hot burns, but hot is also beautiful.

velez: Exactly, exactly.

brooks: You get a crush on someone that's hot, right? This is just holding all of the complexity of where anger brings us in an embodied sense. The liver is the organ that is associated with anger.

velez: That is really deep to know. I've been thinking about my relationship with alcohol recently and also about bringing other spirits to my body. I have noticed how anger can't move in a clear way when there are these other spirits among your spirit. I'm interested in finding other ways that I might engage plant spirits that don't throw me off center and just confuse things. It's really profound to think about the liver as a site that can help tend the anger; what plants and beings actually want is to be in the right relationship with that site of the body. That's really helpful to hear.

brooks: I've been into juicing celery—and, I know it's this big fad, celery juice. But then, last night, I looked up asparagus, whether or not you can juice asparagus, and basically celery, asparagus, cilantro, green apple, and cucumber is a liver cleansing combination.

velez: I have to write that down, because you said it at just the right cadence where I was able to write it all down, as if you were saying, “Write this down, now!” And I did. [laughter]

brooks: The juicing had me thinking about heat and alchemy. That got me to your work with *Lead to Life*. Part of your work is to melt guns down into shovels, which was inspired by Pedro Reyes's project in which he transforms weapons into shovels and instruments. This got me to thinking about the immense amount of heat that it takes to turn those guns into shovels, that is, farm tools. How often do Black folks get to be honored and revered for their heat? We are the ones turning lead to life. We've been doing it, that's how this country came to be. You know, tilling the earth, and not of our own volition.

velez: It's beautiful to imagine the crucible and alchemy, and to offer reverence to lineages of Black rage, rebellion, and sedition. When one of our former colleagues who worked with *Lead to Life*, Kyle, was in a seed germination class, he learned about this process called serotiny. It's basically seeds sprouting because of an environmental trigger—mostly fire. I've always loved thinking about this. You're helping me come back to the work of serotiny. I like the first step of alchemy in the medieval European alchemical traditions, which were ultimately Egyptian and North African traditions. The word used for the first step in the alchemical process of bringing lead or metal to be transformed into gold was *nigredo*, “the blackening.” And I've been really thinking about how to go through a cultural *nigredo* of just letting Black folks take up space to move grief and time. In a way, we might collectively have more insight once we go through that blackening together. It's already happening to an extent, when we think about the pandemic, and how things are breaking us down together so that we might come into closer contact with one another and with the land. Sometimes *nigredo* is translated as “decomposition,” which brings us back to your point around compost, heat, and Blackness.

brooks: I love the blackening. I think that also relates to how in darkness, or in the darkening, there's awakening. Because that's the dream space. The dream space is in the darkness, so in order to actually dream and transform the alchemical process on an embodied level, that right there is another form of *nigredo*, if you ask me.

velez: It is so clarifying to think about this connection between darkness facilitating dreams and Blackness facilitating dreams.

brooks: Thank you for bringing it up. Thank you for struggling with equanimity. Thank you for being in that contradiction and not wanting to feel anything else. That's where it's at. I wonder how that kind of awareness of your own state of being in rage might inform other aspects of how you're working—across your earth work, healing work, performance work—and how you might work in the future?

velez: I'd love to share about a collaboration that I'm working on with Esperanza Spalding that is thinking a lot about rage. We're exploring the question of which frequency can stop a gun, and troubling activisms that lean toward theories of change that move in relationship to whiteness or the State. The idea that the State can offer us “freedom” which we, in turn, have to fight

for has created something irreconcilable between us that needs to be resolved. Esperanza and I are working on a story that examines this dissolution of needing something from them. When I say “dissolution” I mean the opposite of solution.

brooks: Does dissolution also connect to the wake work you do?

velez: There is a systemic, historical project that does not allow us to actually grieve our dead—from enslaved Black folks to us not being able to mourn our dead, as they overwhelm funeral homes during the current pandemic, or people not being able to see their families in hospitals as they go. The funeral industrial complex is so huge and capitalism is so predicated on death and eliminating cycles for us to go through death. This also includes the formaldehyde and other chemical solutions that won't allow people's spirits, their bodies, and their flesh to be reincarnated, to become something again.

Lead to Life's work is trying to address these deficiencies and I'm trying to confront these deficiencies myself as well. This is such a big project. I have to learn how to think beyond Lead to Life, about the partnerships we are entering into and the ecology of care work and wake work that we're in relationship to. Are we being resourced to do this work together so it doesn't feel like we're supposed to deal with these huge deficiencies alone? I noticed yesterday that I get so anxious about not doing enough. There is just always this feeling of us not doing enough, always a sense of scarcity and of not being on it. There are four people on our team, and I'm one person, and we're young! I'm trying to feel more compassion and tenderness for myself and to tell myself that the more people we work with, the more powerful we are, so that can be alleviated. We're trying to reconcile the irreconcilable and heal things across so much time. It's just ancestral work and preparing the future beings, all of these things, in this really big prayer. I am also learning the necessity of this kind of work and of the resources to hire more people to be able to do this work with us; that is just as essential. I'm learning that it's not just an art project—in the way that “just” art is often a way of diminishing something. Or rather, art is culture changing and life changing. When we create spaces to imagine otherwise, I'm starting to feel the confidence in myself to be like, “We need the resources to do this, and I don't want to apply for your dumbass grants to do the things we should have reparations to do.” So, I have started a conversation with some dear friends at Resource Generation, an organization of young people with access to generational wealth, often inherited in ways that were toxic, white supremacist, and unaccountable to the earth. Some of my peers, the white queer femmes and nonbinary folks in the organization, have created a group to start working around ancestors and money, and have begun funding the work we are doing. It's deep, and to me that's how I want to receive money for this work, because it needs to happen in this way that is ceremonial, and white folks are getting to be in their wake work with their lineages and their ancestors.

brooks: There are ancestors who don't want to be awake and I don't want to work with them.

velez: Right? Stay your ass asleep.

brooks: If other people are in direct lineage to those ancestors and their lives have actually been made better by the destruction caused by those ancestors, then they're the ones who need to be talking to those ancestors. Because we might have the same ancestors. I know I have some white ancestors that I don't want to talk to. So, go ahead y'all. I didn't get anything from that deal. And to the folks that did, well that's your responsibility. I think it's just something we don't talk about as a culture in the United States, on Turtle Island. You know, it's something we don't want to... I don't even know what it is. There's so much healing that needs to happen. The wounds are so deep that this generational burden gets put on the wrong people.

velez: Exactly.

brooks: It's so huge, so gigantic. And that's why the compost is calling us to say, “Come inside of me, and let me take care of this shit.” Because this ain't even ours. We ain't even from here. This is not my country! I've never claimed it, even when I was a child. There's a dancer from the Congo, Faustin Linyekula, and he always says, “My only country is my body.”

velez : Wow. I love that.

brooks: And he does amazing work to not claim responsibility for the colonial legacy. He understands that the colonial destruction that wreaked havoc on him and his people is not his responsibility even though it falls on him and his body. I think that this is so powerful because I feel similarly about this land.

velez: That makes me think of Kevin Quashie's book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. There's something about the dancer you're talking about, and the notion that my only country is my body... there's something there that troubles the concept of sovereignty, that we are beholden to a nation state that extends us our liberation. I love this language of the sovereignty of quiet, because at the beginning of the text Kevin talks about Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the track stars who won at the 1968 Olympics and raised their fists in the air. He discusses how that posture is often read as a posture of resistance against white supremacy in service to the Black Power Movement. Kevin asks, instead of focusing on the fists, could we imagine a prayer that's happening inside this person? Could we afford them interiority, a sovereignty of this internal experience? That makes the work of our resistance a lot more dynamic.

brooks: That kind of resistance against the nation state can actually get away with a lot more. It can upend an entire system. Think of how Assata Shakur escaped prison. How does one have enough resources to gather the right folks to get them out of prison? To escape the political terrorism against one Black woman's body? And it's still going on, she's still in her quiet resistance, which is very loud.

velez: That makes me just think about the ways I theorize around fugitivity. Sometimes that notion becomes theoretical or academic and loses the real work of abolition. Hearing her name and thinking about her labor and the fact that she is a fugitive is just humbling me to feel her. To literally get out, to flee, is... yeah...

brooks: Can't touch this.

velez: Yeah! Can't touch this! I'm out of here! It's profound.

brooks: Speaking of going through the fire, I did some serious decomposing this year. I'm still doing it. What is it like for you now? What does decomposing or dissolution feel like for you now? I hear that you're out on land that's away from an urban center, so I just wonder what's simmering for you?

velez: Yeah, thank you. A brother named Bayo Akomolafe, his work at the Emergence Network, and their theology have really influenced my recent practice. Bayo talks about apocalypses returning in cycles. So many apocalypses have already happened. There have been so many ends of the world, and we're at another end of the world. It is exactly what you're saying, it's asking a lot of me to decompose and listen to the warning we just received and the invitation to interrupt everything that was going on to reflect on what the fuck is going on. I saw a video yesterday of immigrant or undocumented migrant workers in a strawberry field somewhere in the U.S. and folks were running with their crates of strawberries because they're paid by the crate. Literally running through the fields, so that they could pick it fast, pick some more, and I'm witnessing them pick these strawberries so fast. And I was just like, "What is going on?" So I started to think about our food systems, and bioregional food systems, and trying to think about the cultural shifts that have occurred. I used to be engaged in food justice but became disillusioned by where I was working, how it was going, and what was really happening because of the non-profit industrial complex. We weren't really getting food to people. But it was still deep work, and I was thinking about what are the cultural shifts that can allow us to say, "I'm going to eat what can grow in this place. I'm not going to eat strawberries." And also about how angry people would be if we were really trying to set up bioregional food systems in that the whole project of slavery and how this whole country was built around this shit around luxury and spices and dyes for blue and clothes and fiber. It's just so fucked up and I'm noticing the ways I have been entangled. I have the privilege right now to be out on land. I've rejected that access in the past, because it felt like a really big responsibility and I told myself that if I'm not in the city, I'm not about that life. But I've had some dreams. I've had a dream where I was in a Black femme sanctuary. There were Black women and elders, specifically Black women elders, who I used to live with in a community in Oakland. There were little Black children running around and there was this pile of Black women. One of the young Black women who used to live there calls me into this pile of Black women on the ground laughing, and I follow her. I can see myself from above, I'm weeping, and I'm just like, "I've been looking for this place." There are all of these ornate beds, and all of these Black femme saints. I've been fasting and praying and listening for temple work—both temples in the city and continuing my work with Lead to Life in the city, but knowing there is a reason why people became renunciates, adopted a monastic lifestyle and went out to the mountain to go fast and pray. I did that for a while. I am just letting this moment allow me to do that, as well as praying and listening. I hadn't touched soil in a year. But the other day, when me and my partner planted a maple tree, I was like, "Oh my gosh! I totally forgot about

this, what this feels like. I don't need coffee! Why the hell am I on the computer all day?" I don't want to be tricked by all the solutions that are going to come to accommodate us to keep doing the same shit. I still want to do really cool shit with people. I miss the club. I miss dancing, all of those things. Don't get me wrong, I love brunch. But I want to be slow.

mayfield brooks improvises while black.

brontë velez's (they/them) work and rest is guided by the call that "black wellness is the antithesis to state violence" (Mark Anthony Johnson). They embody this commitment to attending to black health and imagination by serving as creative director for the Lead to Life design collective and educator for ancestral arts skills and nature-connection at Weaving Earth school.