

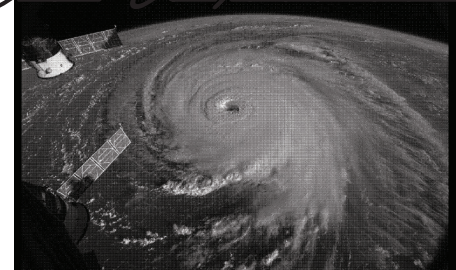


If You Unfolded Us

Sable Elyse Smith

David Dominique

If You Unfolded Us



Institutional Credits:

Studio Sound: Sable Elyse Smith is organized by Martha Joseph, Associate Curator of Media and Performance, with May Makki, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance. Performances produced by Lizzie Gorfaine, Associate Director and Producer, with Nora Chellew, Assistant Performance Coordinator, Performance and Live Programs. Exhibition Design by Jamaal Hooker. The Technical team is led by Paul DiPietro, Senior Manager, Audio Visual Design and Live Performance, with AV Technicians Omer Leibovitz (sound), Christopher Brown (lighting), and Mitchell Leitschuh (installation and rigging)

a chamber opera
music:
David Dominique
libretto and concept:
Sable Elyse Smith

MoMA 2024

“call me”

Intro:
I just want
to make
something I
can feel.
Something my
mom can feel



Night overstays

Cars were covered from over head a new tenor to the water
Still I lose my breath
The air has now emptied
There is a silence and then the song comes back on

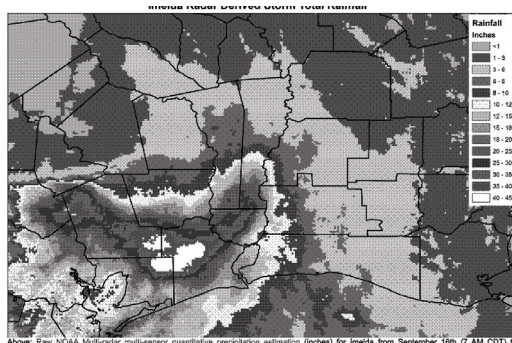
What happens in the space between

two bodies

sublimated versions
of things that are
familiar - memory
+ yearning

"I began the day wanting to bring into convergence three activities of being—what I'd seen, what I'd read, and what I'd drawn—and to say about these acts how they made lines in the world that ran alongside other lines, and how all these lines together made environments of the earth, where I could put my body and you could put yours, and these would be lines always entwined because there was little if anything you could say or make without calling forth other lines, and this was how you knew you were where you were and the ground was worth cultivating and that there was life beneath the ground. I spent a long time looking into each of the acts of how I'd been in the world, how I'd conveyed that I'd been there and I found all these overlapping currents and found that each of the acts divided into further acts like the acts of writing and making narrative, which divided into acts of building and afforestation, which then led to sex and led to reading and wandering. I had found in drawing a way to think my hand was the core; the shape my hand made was the core, and I knew when I was saying narrative that I wasn't limiting it to some event happening inside fiction, but rather was trying to get at an energy, a light that threaded all my acts of reading and writing and drawing and seeing into a day then days."

- r e n e e g l a d m a n



Above: Raw_NASA_Multi-sensor_retrieval_algorithm_quantitative_precipitation_estimation (inches) for Imelda from September 16th (7 AM CDT) to

I don't know any other way to begin than here, then with the phrase "they made lines in the world... and that the lines together made environments..." Where you could take possession of yourself and plant it there. Haunt you, because maybe the refrain is necessary or it's the idea of visiting with or to be visited again; to loop somehow (out of synch)

I want to make things that make you feel. And then...

"We lose things, and the crisis yields sound. In the long recognition of our own disappearance, we turn to our own lyrical noise as the eloquent statement of our "blossoming," our infinite "cultural possibility," our driving "cultural awareness." We see and know and recognize the fade. We are intimately familiar with it, have felt the sorrow of its silences, negations, neglect, and brutal mishandling. We know the meaning of our seeming valuelessness, of being "forgotten but not gone," and yet our masterful rejoinder has always been to build our own monuments by using "wave[s] of sound."..."2

Opera means work, let me work it. Let it do that mythic thing of spectacle it does and let me put the story in it; the everyday stuff of living and breathing and loving and wishing and weathering and looping like tapestries—all of it, once again, living is persistent. This is a story of that.

S
e
t
t
i
n
g

It's set at night. In night. In night life.
It's set at a bar. A black queer bar:
WETBAR. You can catch the vibe.
Refuge is sought on the dance floor,
so is lust. It's set inside. In an interior.
In many. In an interiority. It's set in
the rain. On the phone, in a blackout.
It's set in weather. It's set close to the
chest.... between each breath you take.

C h a r a c t e r s

MAIN & LOVER

LOVER & MAIN

A Storm who isn't named

Various 911 callers

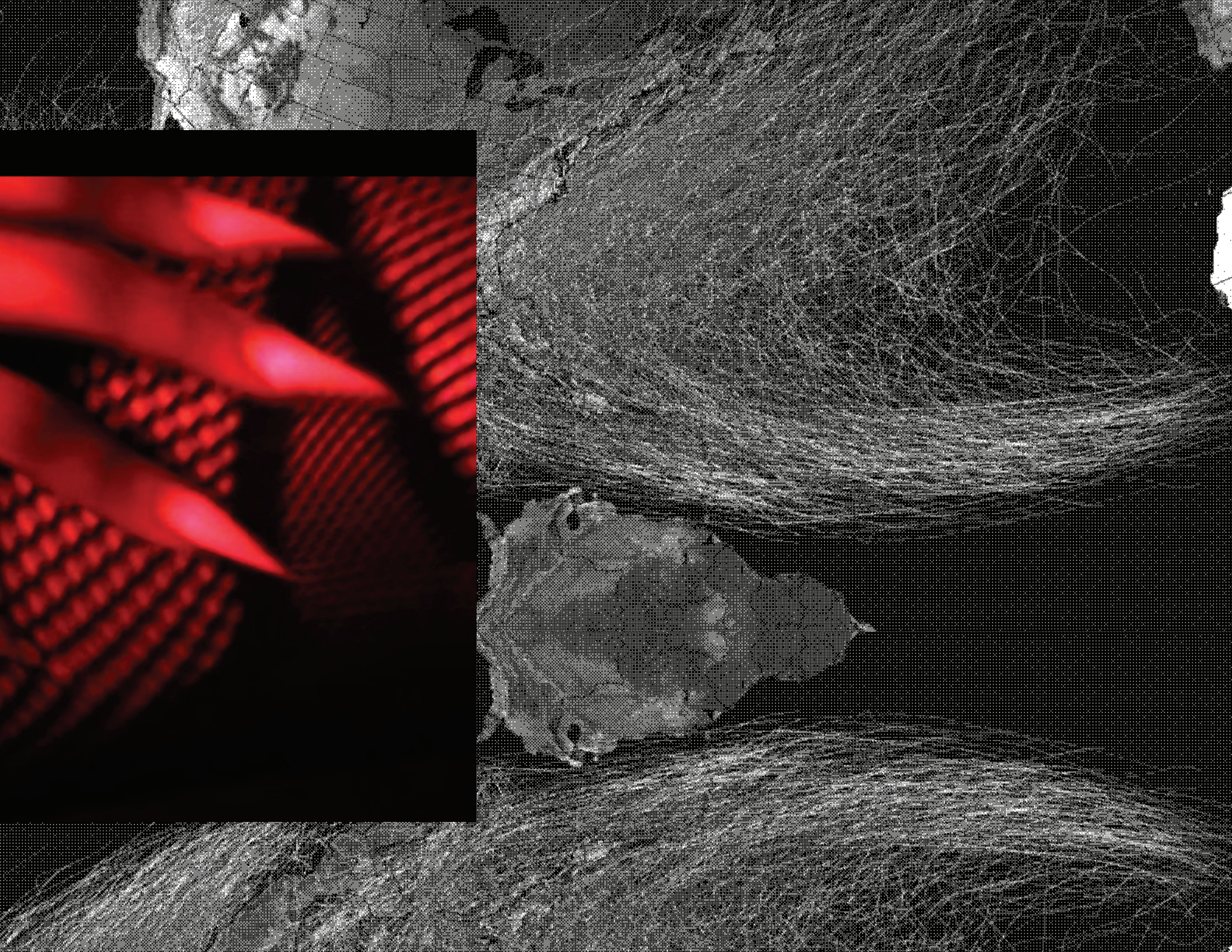
Mother (the specter of the mother)

The Weather

*I can't stand the rain/
against my window/ bringing
back sweet memories...
ann peebles is a shoreline*

*nee could be - Club hit almost
or way yr hair reprise -*





*Sun 17 / Day. 14°. 16%. NNE
of a rain shower. High 14°C.
Humidity 82%. UV Index 1 of 11.*

*21 km/h. Cloudy. Slight chance
Winds NNE at 15 to 25 km/h.
AND CHANGING..*

- Main walking to sit with Lover.

Musical numbers

- 5.7.5?

Part I.

*Overture
Weather Report
911 Recording 1
911 Recording 2
The Way Your Hair Looks*
(opera version)
Siren Song
911 Recording 3
Love
Phone Sex
911 Recording 4
Hello Stranger*

Part II.

Desire to Bruise

*The Way Your Hair Looks was originally written by Shala Miller, who performs as Freddie June. The version included and performed in the production of If you unfolded us, is an adaptation.

*Close your eyes and count
backwards with me*

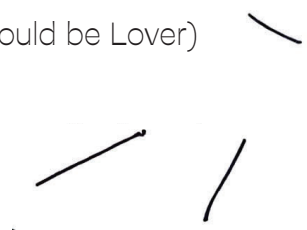
20, 19, 18, 17, 16,
15, 14, 13, 12, 11,
10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5,
4, 3, 2, 1, silence
(deep exhale)

“At the perilous interstices where audibility/inaudibility, imperceptibility/perceptibility, reverberate with and against each other, a BlackFem analytic unlocks the portal to a vestibular geography of different modalities of beautiful Black/queer livingness and healing.”³

ALEXANDER G WEHELIYE

Though I do not promise to heal anything here, we figured out how to speak a language together.

I didn't know how
To not (to not parts could be Lover)
I didn't know how
To not
I didn't know how
To not be
Where I was
I didn't know that no
Was something I could say



"Weather Report"

MAIN

It's just before dawn
all the dust has settled
beneath this whole city sleeping
trying to make a way
my body will not settle

Christina Sharpe:

**"I think to say, but do not, that to look
into other people's faces for your
therapy is a dangerous proposition."**

Ordinary notes

Or that there was such thing as time
And you could just take your
Time
And I could
take my time

*

We've hushed each other to this
Created ourselves a trap around the other
Pierce me, and I lay open
Let oxygen in, let wind do what it must
And build us once more

It's just before dawn
Precipitation is high today
Air is thick
I can hold it in my mouth
Pushing out into this room
The walls here are raining
slick with condensation

MAIN & LOVER

[lots of repetition, sparse then dense.]

Makes your breathing STRESSED
Makes your breathing STRESSED
Makes your breathing STRESSED
Makes your breathing STRESSED
Makes your breathing STRESSED
Makes my breathing STRESSED

MAIN
What is this weather
Scared to go outside
What is this weather
I'm here
standing on the outside

You keep calling my phone
I keep taking your calls
Night time coaxing us back
together
I've been down this road
watching your weather
takes my breath away
is anyone left breathing
bodies squeezing together

looking around for the living
hoping for some heat
a little friction
everything keeps spinning

You keep calling my phone
I keep taking your calls
Night time coaxing us back
together
I've been down this road
What is this weather
Scared to go outside
What is this weather
I'm here

*Dream sequence could be - Club hit almost
instrumental or way yr hair retrace -
Structural
repose
Familiar —
but not
recognizable.*

20, 19, 18, 17, 16,
15, 14, 13, 12, 11,
10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5,
4, 3, 2, 1, silence
(deep exhale)

I'm not sure in which places we actually learn love. Me and my therapist have
been walking through all the rooms.

My last relationship, to her: I am not capable of going on...

I'm not sure in which places we actually learn love. Or who can do the
undoing. Or if it is outside of our control. Or how to untie when childhood is
all about learning how to thread the knot.

And putting things in place, and where it fits and inside the lines.

*Close your eyes and count
backwards with me*

Synopsis

“At the perilous interstices where audibility/inaudibility, imperceptibility/perceptibility, reverberate with and against each other, a BlackFem analytic unlocks the portal to a vestibular geography of different modalities of beautiful Black/queer livingness and healing.”³ Though I do not promise to heal anything here, we figured out how to speak a language together.

*P.185 Alexander Ghedi Weheliye. *Feenin R&B Music and The Materiality of Blackfem voices and technology.*

If you unfolded us is a chamber opera for two voices, MAIN and LOVER. This story unfolds while a developing storm picks up intensity. Memory arrives on the back of the storm and the beat still pulses. Seven songs make up this two-part narrative exploring the remarkable task of living and surviving and making your world over and over again, the small acts of creation or the breaths we take.

NOTES ON MUSIC:

DAVID DOMINIQUE

The score and sounds of “If you unfolded us” were conceived as a series of sonic braids. Like physical braids, each composition is fabricated from three distinct strands: an electronic component, two live singers, and the performance of a live chamber ensemble.

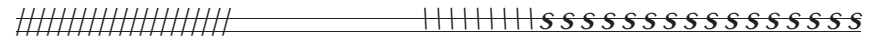
The layers of electronics represent emotional and sensual memories built from field recordings of water, and sampled processed voices. These water-logged song fragments

surface with varying degrees of recognizability -- sometimes granulated into pure texture, and other times upwelling as a familiar shape and timbre. With references to recording history from the near and distant past, each utterance evokes and heightens particular sensations of lust, longing, grief and resignation.

The melodic articulations of the live singers twist through, rise above and collapse upon these memories in real time, providing immediate visceral feedback, and complicating the libretto’s text with the ruminative mystique of song. The tangling of these live performers and sampled voices mirrors the ambiguous relationship between the two singers on stage, who represent the opera’s protagonist, Main, and an enigmatic other, who may be Main’s past lover, an alternate side of Main’s self, or both.

The third strand of the braid, the live instrumental ensemble, bridges the gap between these two realms: nonlinear reverie and somatic feedback become inextricably bound by a harp, strings, electric piano and guitar, who wrap around and support the voices and electronics.

Ultimately, these three strands interwoven as a braid represent an irreducible composite, the difficulty of emotional memory and loss, and the inseparability of present emotion from past experience.



"In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound and they all know what the sound sounded like."

-Toni Morrison *Beloved*

...threaded through our streets our cement our stucco and wood and vinyl and plastic and dirt and detritus and water and spills and spillage and the slickness under our feet. Pinning toes down to toe touch. Cracked bones and rank contortions. It's in every single fucking thing. Wild sinuous whisper whipping through brown latched streets. Do you see it now? Whole breath conjured to push it out. Whole breath belly laughed forward, forward, forward.

*I wrote sentences about space so that I could stand up and walk down that hill. I wrote them, because the hill was too steep to descend gracefully with your body upright and steady. Spaces moaned when you crossed them; they didn't know how to hold you."*²⁵
Renee Gladman from *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*

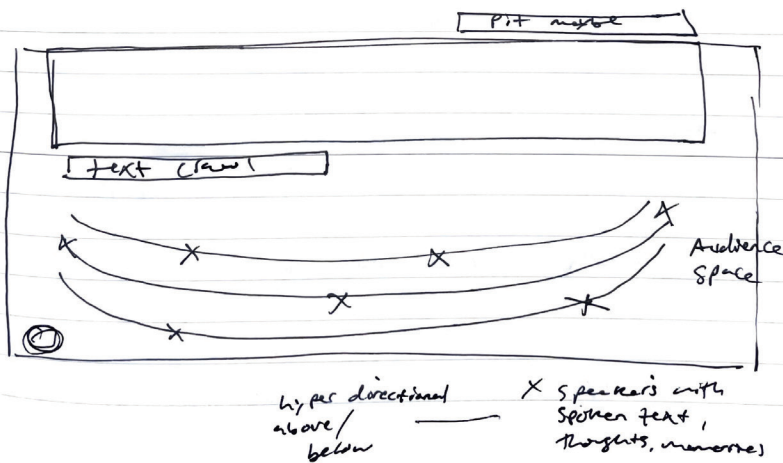
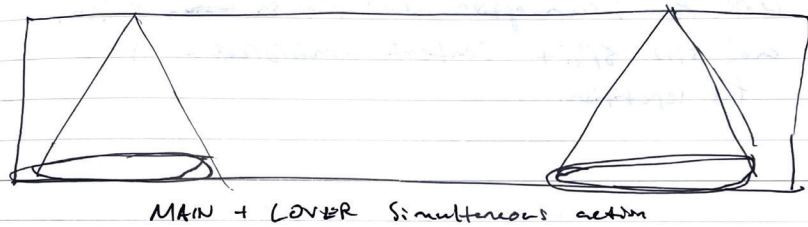
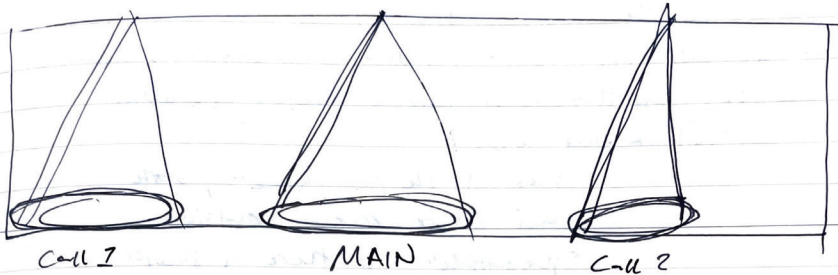
The sound folded itself, folded you up, handed you around in a common sound/note/cluck thrusting out the mouth by the tongue. It threw you out sometimes and you ran back in. Dropped off by the wind sometimes it climbed up in your ear. And it was Marvin Gaye moaning or it was Alice Coltrane coltraning or it was N.W.A saying fuck every single goddamn thing and on top of that fuck the police. Or it was the siren or it was

the lovemaking coming through the wall or it was the creek of the door opening or your mama's keys in the lock heart stopping you dead in your tracks, scrambling to straighten up or pretend sleep or to sneak out whatever body was there in your room hot on the verge of entering and sweaty--

*I wrote sentences about space so that I could stand up and walk down that hill. I wrote them, because the hill was too steep to descend gracefully with your body upright and steady. Spaces moaned when you crossed them; they didn't know how to hold you."*²⁵
Renee Gladman

The sound, you can be in and on top of and wrapped up by and wrapped in and swaddled and thrusting through. The sound can sit between us mean as all out doors. The sound can take your breath away, as in reach down and inside and snatch it out of you--some cored vessel you'll become. But the resonance still lingering in your toes, felt and no longer heard.

When I say music I don't always mean the radio. Or a melody, or a rhythm or a blues, or a sweet lyric riding the underside of a G chord. When I say music I mean a scaffolding with a thin metal mesh so that parts of the other side are visible and parts are not, parts obscured. And the other side can represent an x, y or z space positionality and then something curved and altogether



divergent from that. Because the music can get inside. The pulse is a makeshift roof over our heads. It's tin, percussive as the rain collects. In a time-space where teeth sucked is telecommunication.

Do you remember the first time you heard the sound your own voice?

List of Songs

Part I.

Overture | Weather Report |
911 Recording 1* | 911 Recording 2* |
The Way Your Hair Looks | |Siren Song |
911 Recording 3* | Love | Phone Sex |
911 Recording 4* | Hello Stranger

Part II.

Desire to Bruise

Pushing out into this room
The walls here are raining
slick with condensation

[Toward the middle of this verse LOVER has walked around MAIN
[Title card: work. 01:04:12. Humidity 46%. 3:59:17 remaining.

Love

I'm hooked
And have lost my sight
Can still feel your skin
Everything's changed within
Push me
push me
again

=

THE CITY'S EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLACES ALL CITY
COASTAL COMMUNITIES UNDER A TRAVEL ADVISORY FOR
COASTAL FLOODING

A prolonged period of gusty winds is also expected
this weekend into early next week. Winds will ramp up
tomorrow evening to gusts of 30 to 40 MPH with peak
gusts of 45 mph possible along the coast.

Prepare for Outages: To gear up for potential power
disruptions, keep your cell phones charged, stock up
on supplies. If power outages are predicted, consider
adjusting your refrigerator and freezer to colder
settings to extend the shelf life of perishable
items. Ensure that flashlights and battery-operated
radios or TVs are functional, keeping extra batteries
on hand. If you rely on Life Sustaining Equipment
(LSE) and lose power, dial 911 for immediate
assistance, and remember never to use generators
indoors. Check on vulnerable individuals in your
community, such as older adults and people with
disabilities or health conditions, and assist them in
their preparations

Inhale. 1, 2, 3...

[exhale] how do you know
what
it is

Mother am I strange
Mother is it a strain
Mother am I strange



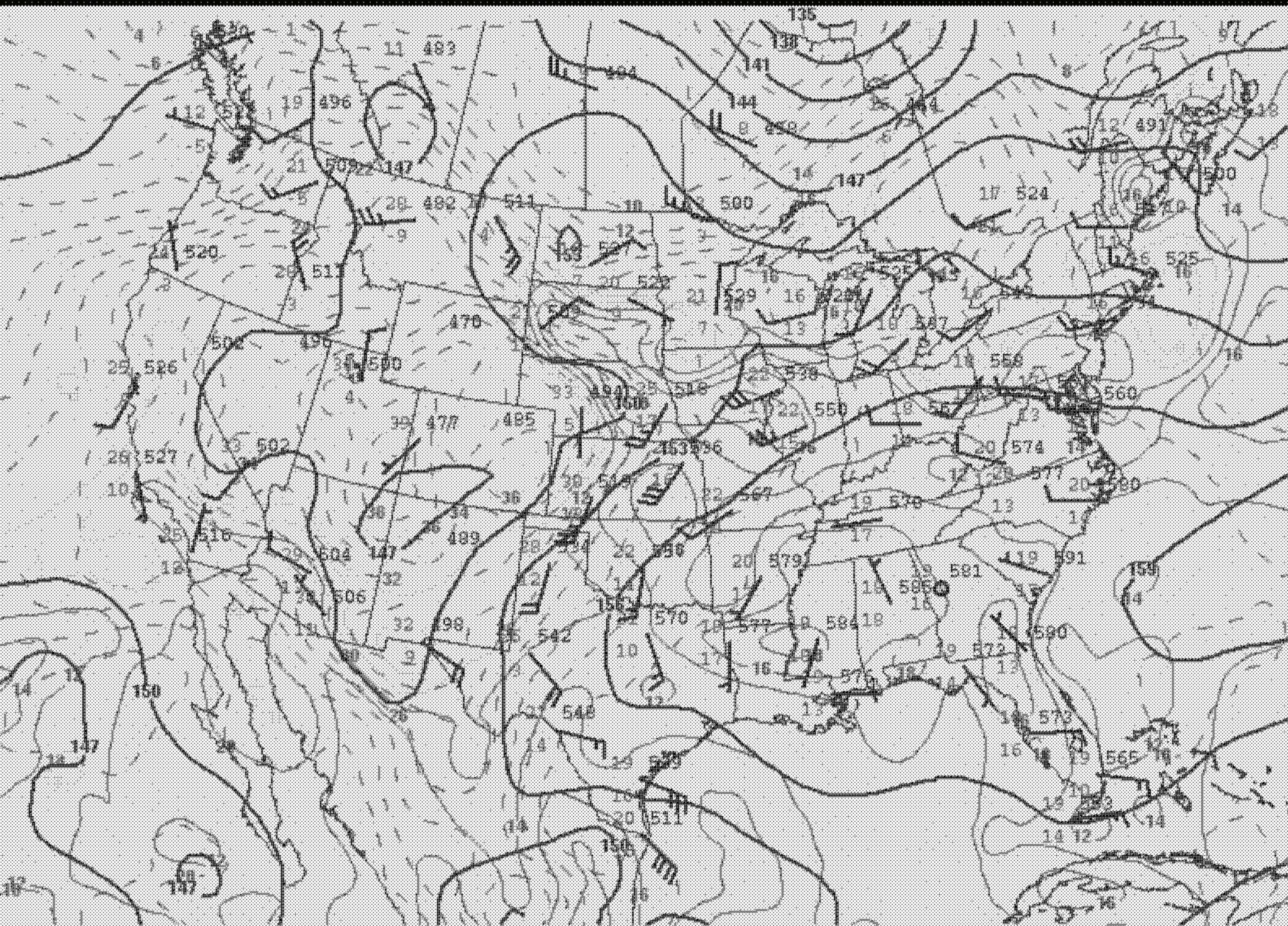
Just a taste

Softness,
Cuz a body is just a thing
My body is more than a thing
And yet skin breaks

Here we go again

[Heavy downpour releases.. Blackout.]





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Creative Team

Sable Elyse Smith is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in New York. Using video, sculpture, photography, and text, she points to the carceral, the personal, the political, and the quotidian to speak about that which is potentially imperceptible.

David Dominique is a musician and writer living in Richmond VA. He is currently writing a speculative fiction opera, and recently completed an instrumental album – Something Might Amount – for ensemble and electronics. Dominique is the recipient of recent Guggenheim and Radcliffe Fellowships, and is an Associate Professor at William & Mary.

Naima Green is an artist, photographer, and educator who pictures individuals and communities to document their vibrant relationships to place and pleasure. Green accesses and prioritizes the nature of intimacy, safety, and self-recognition to frame archival research and picture-making as a continuum, and her still images are kinetic, living histories.

Shala Miller, also known as Freddie June when they sing, was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio by two southerners named Al and Ruby. Miller works across photography, film, writing, music, and performance as a means of meditating on the conjunction of desire, mourning, pain, and pleasure.

Danielle Bowler is a musician, writer and curator at The Centre for Race, Gender and Class at the University of Johannesburg. She is currently working on her PhD, exploring ideas of feeling and movement through the work of three contemporary South African artists.

Sent from my iPhone

Ica Sadagat is a writer, teacher, and interdisciplinary artist. Her work attends to the body as text, text as material, and material as collective ritual. Concurrently, Ica is alive and listening.

Kelley Shih is a lighting designer and programmer for

live performance. Recent designs: STRATA (Center for Performance Research), Hive Rise (Ash Fure/The Industry LA/MOCA Geffen & CTM Music Festival Berghain), The Cosmology of Water; Care Clinic (Rena Anakwe/Abrons Art Center), Umi's performance at Coachella 2023, The Internet's HiveMind World Tour (including Sydney Opera House), and Syd's Always Never Home Tour.

S T A R R Busby (they/she/he/we) is a Black experimental artist who sings, acts, composes, educates, and is committed to the liberation of all people. 2024 NYSCA Grant recipient; 2024 Lucille Lortel Award Winner - (pray); 2024 Drama Desk Award Nominee - (pray); 2019 Drama Desk Award winner - Octet.

Creative/Production Team

CONCEPT + LIBRETTO Sable Elyse Smith
COMPOSER David Dominique

LOVER +
Vocal Arrangement S T A R R Busby
MAIN +
Vocal Arrangement Freddie June
(Shala Miller)

Vocal Arrangement Danielle Bowler

LIGHTING DESIGN Kelley Shih
Dramaturgy Ica Sadagat
Stage Managers Philip Trevino
Stage Managers Stacy-Jo Marine

Ensemble

Contrabass Cameron Ralston
Cello Wayne Smith
Electronics David Dominique
Guitar Ryan Ferreira
Harp Caroline Bryan
Keyboard Curt Sydnor
Viola Jay Julio
Violin Josh Henderson

Film Credits

Co-Director Sable Elyse Smith
Co-Director / Producer Jessie Levandov,
MALA Forever

Creative Director+Visuals Naima Green
Producer Nina Reyes Rosenberg,
MALA Forever

Director of Photography Pierce Robinson
1st AC Collin Morris
2nd AC Afiya Yearwood
Gaffer Stephen Taylor
Grip Auden Barbour
Colorist Aaron Burns
Make Up Artist Kaya Coleman
Production Assistant Auston Bjorkman
Production Assistant Esai Velasquez

Talent

Sana Azim Main
Nedjra Manning Lover
Party Goer Renae Wilson
Party Goer J Wortham
Party Goer Suhaly Carolina Bautista
Party Goer Naiema Carolina
Party Goer Rachell Morillo

Sound Design: Jessie Levandov & Sable Elyse Smith

Music: Weather Report

Executive Produced by Sable Elyse Smith
Music Composed, arranged, produced
and conducted by David Dominique
Lyrics by Sable Elyse Smith
Vocals Performed by: Freddie June (Shala Miller)
Vocal Arranged by: Freddie June (Shala Miller)
Cello: Stephanie Barrett
Harp: Caroline Bryan
Guitar: Alan Parker
Contrabass: Cameron Ralston
Keyboard: Curt Sydnor
Violin: Tressa Gold
Viola: Kimberly Ryan

Recorded and Mixed by Alex De Jong
Mastered by Christopher Colbert
Recorded at Spacebomb Studio
Richmond Virginia
June 2024.





Thank yous

Sable Elyse Smith wishes to thank: The whole hood. How I was raised and what I was raised on. Every single artist and collaborator on this project, especially Freddie June. Definitely Martha! Deep gratitude to David Dominique, a beast of a composer, utterly virtuosic and an absolute dream collaborator. Also deep gratitude to Amber Esseiva **period**. Shout out to time, who was against us but we prevailed. To S T A R R for the immense openness and generosity, jumping into this whirlwind in process. That's no easy lift. And to the text of: Renee Gladman, Daphne A Brooks, Christina Sharpe, Toni Morrison, Alexander G. Weheliye, Simone White, Dionne Brand and hella more. And thanks to the music, to countless hours spent listening to the blues (shout out to my great grandma Dorothy for that), trap, gangsta rap (cali), jazz, funk, R&B. Shout out to the R&B girls! and to the gospel singers—Lord, the gospel singers, that's opera.

And special thanks to my partner Naima Green, a tremendous collaborator on this project and sounding board night and day and day and night! And to nicole killian for leaving Italy early to come see this and the inDesign wizardry! And to Dani with the game time clutch. You know what it is, thank you so much! Love y'all.

Siren Song continued

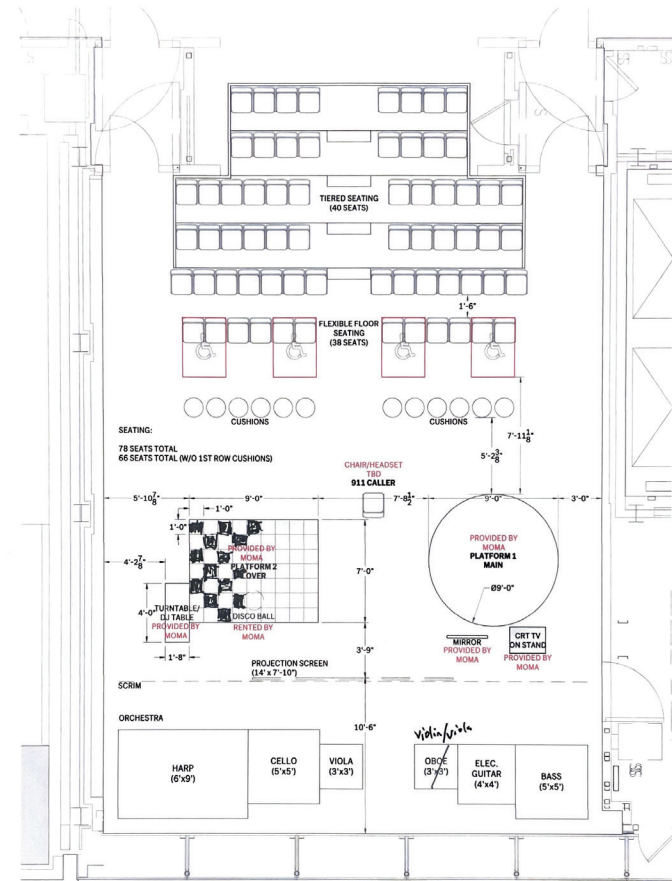
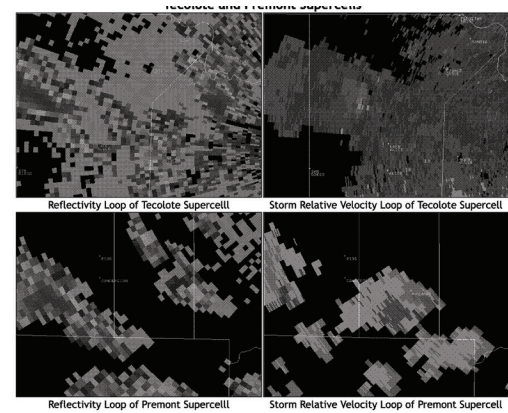
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2. BROOKS, DAPHNE A. Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound. Harvard University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dhph54>.
3. Weheliye, Alexander Ghedi. Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023., <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.114251>.
4. Morrison, Toni. 2007. Beloved. London, England: Vintage Classics.
5. Gladman, Renee. Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge. Dorothy, a publishing project, 2013.

Photo credit: Naima Green

The text is typeset in: Director, Lao, Las Enter,
 Libertine, Louise, NectoMono, Nonplus, Pyk, Ribes,
 Steps, Rigatoni, VG5000, Yatra

design by nicole killian



f keys + electronics

Scared to go outside

u

hat

i

s

this

weather.