

# The dysautoethnographyst's *oríkì*

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## Notes from the self-named

I am the dysautoethnographyst. I am an *auto* (self) *ethno* (culture) *grapher* (writer). The prefix *dys-* stands for the dis-ease and difficulty, the stumbling and spinning in this colonial lexicon<sup>1</sup>. Through this word store tainted with violence and psychic fracture, there is a therapeutic that is always trying to speak to this poetic life, this black aliveness (Quashie, 2021). The lexicon – which has been built on the assumption that it knows better than me what it is that I mean – does not understand my resistance. When it tells me how I live, or should live, or should not live, and I refuse, it is baffled.

*They are only words*, it says.

And I say, *only word-ly disruptors of psyche-soul-tongue relation; only autocorrect toward enclosure; only codes to bounce every utterance back to a status quo; only poisoned in psychoanalytic innocence* (see Sheehi, 2021).

*Your grammar*, it says.

We would, if we could, go our separate ways. Since we cannot – since English is my *mother tongue* (and) *anguish* (Philip, 2015), we rely on the thinkers and poets whose conjuring of words – *necropolitics* (Mbembe, 2019) and *necrocapitalism*, for example – offer us ways to name the meaning-killing conditions in and through which we write. I must recognise the conditions that are not interested in my counternarratives before I can turn away from them; before shrugging off their scorn about my attempts to *remake subjectivity through the senses as a concrete analytic* (Yusoff, 2018, p. 11). This is writing as a mode of resistance to the charges of narcissism and irrelevance that they level against me to stop me from naming myself. I write in search of names; lost names;

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1 Diaz (2020) speaks about the trouble of the colonial lexicon in a conversation about her *Postcolonial Love Poem*.

names I have forgotten; names I have never known. *Dysautoethnographyst* should be understood as a meantime name, a placeholder for fugitive futurity.

### Notes of caution, definitions and methodology

**Dysautoethnographyst:** Confessant/confessor. One who recognises the in/significance of a personal story by writing it and becoming its witness.

Dysautoethnography; A collaborative engagement easily mistaken for self-indulgence. Practices of *writing with*. An antiphonal practice. Word calls listening for words in response.

A dysautoethnographyst knows that their one small life is not interesting to everyone and may not even be considered grievable (Butler, 2015). And they write anyway.

A dysautoethnographyst tells and retells and is particularly interested in stories from lives viewed as expendable and extractable, closer to death, or coded algorithmically as already dead (McKittrick, 2021). The dysautoethnographyst finds data in lives lived anyway and otherwise and finds validity in *verisimilitude* (Ellis, et al., 2011) – in lifelike, believable, possible truth.

The dysautoethnographyst praxis – *here I am* and ‘*it feels right to me*’ (Lorde, 2019) is rooted in self and never only self. It is an embodiment of a black feminist metaphysics of *breath*, and *everything is everything* (Gumbs, 2018).

The dysautoethnographyst refuses to disappear behind (or be disappeared by) boastful claims of objectivity. They can survive being called a *swell-head* (Burning Spear, 1974).

### Notes of why, what and what for?

I chose *oríkì* as a form for this composition because *oríkì* is part of an inheritance that I failed to inherit properly. After my birth – into the geopolitical-material-spiritual-psychic disturbance of the wake (Sharpe, 2016) – I found myself at sea. I was unaware of *oríkì* – the oral praise poetry of my Yorùbá people. This is a tradition that was not passed on to me. Which is another way of saying that if I have praise names, I do not know what they are. To find my *oríkì*, I have allowed myself to float in this ruptured time-space and in my unknowing. A trust in interconnection and ongoingness has helped. A refusal of the logic within which freedom can only mean being alone has been essential.

The form, function and application of *oríkì* are not homogeneous and are understood in different ways<sup>2 3</sup>. I am not claiming (or pretending) any authoritative knowledge. I was drawn to the *oríkì* as technologies of transmission operating on multiple levels of psyche-spirit-body. I am interested in processes of recognition, recording, recitation, remembering and respect, and how they invite and support relational being. As a starting point for The dysautoethnographyst's *oríkì*, I built on verse headings borrowed from a community college course<sup>4</sup> and drew on some of the writing practices that I use in therapeutic/activist work. My engagement with/in writing is a method of finding out, knowing and unknowing, collaborating, making and remaking.

## The dysautoethnographyst's *oríkì*

an announcement from the talking drum

this is for those who refuse to believe that they are born without; for those who have landed in a world that refuses them; for the unannounced and undecorated; for the commoners and foreigners; for the motherless and fatherless; for those who, in the sound of this ongoing rupture, still sing.

Conditions of entry

she is born with questions that no one remembers assigning

she is the girl born after a boy who never breathed

she has questions about the stillborn brother

she wants to know if he was black like her

she wants to know how he would have lived this blackness

in the conditions of the necropolis, blackness is primary, instrumental, alluvial; is under every footprint; shores up and is crushed by the heavy tread of categorical discipline

she is the one who also wonders about other things

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2 The suggestion of Vidal (1969) that commoners, slaves and foreigners *do not* have *oríkì* raised serious questions for this dysautoethnographyst. However, I took the same author's statement that *oríkì can* be composed for cities, animals (and even food) as evidence of their potential to un-fix from and move beyond the limits imposed upon them.

3 Abimbola (2012), discussing *oríkì* as a literary genre and source of Yoruba history, also seeks to disprove stereotypes that would suggest that certain Yoruba people (e.g. Ijebu) do not have *oríkì*.

4 This course can be found at <https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/praisesongs.htm>

(if they would have laughed at each other's jokes  
or cursed each other  
fought and then wiped each other's tears)

he had no name

he is X who died, and she is the one who lived after X

in yorùbá there is (she thinks) a name for this

names by which bodies remember land, circumstance, breath

*She is the one whose body could not speak its names*

unusual features of the birth

she who was cut out of her mother's body. a caesarean birth

caesarean being a term of disputed etymology; a maybe reference to a roman emperor

a cutting procedure referenced in folklore, beginning with sacrifice; a mother's death as necessary consequence of the rescue of a child

until at some point women began to survive

we do not know the name of the first woman to survive

some say she lived in switzerland

not everyone believes this

if she had been living elsewhere (in lagos for example) the disbelief would be more thorough

this is another unusual feature

*born to a people who are not believed*

a spiritual force known to have interceded in the child's conception or an ancestor come again

a child conceived at a crossroads (a space of tricksters and intersectional collision) may feel like an accident

may suppose that the hum of the world is

a symptom

a sign that *mentally*, things were not as they should be

an indication that the dead are not under the earth<sup>5</sup>

the ancestors are forgiving about being mistaken for daydreams

but will not give her permission to travel home

no, she may not join them

not by suicide

not by reckless living

she is the one who weeps

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5 See Sweet Honey in the Rock (1988).

they are the ones who wait many years for a drink of water  
she/they together

*in this communion of thirst and tears*

genealogy or kinship group affiliations  
she is one of the *clan of the genealogically bewildered*<sup>6</sup>  
they do not know from who or from where they came  
they wear (or carry in their diasporic bloods) essences and tones  
of un/belonging  
of a persistent elsewhere  
of a *black existence, permanently and always already, uprooted*<sup>7</sup>  
they say that she is the one who drank from the bush of forgetting  
that she *lost her mother*<sup>8</sup>  
that she became nameless and homeless and less and  
but for the generativity of Jamaican praise singers whose

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6 Genealogical bewilderment (cited in Sants, H.J. (1964)) names the stress experienced by children who have uncertain, little or no knowledge of one or both of their parents. This is my personal experience, but I am also curious to think about this in relation to the ruptures of transatlantic slavery and the ‘fixing methodologies’ that Barbara Christian (1993) explores through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. She addresses the trouble of the lack of knowledge – of not being able to remember, name and therefore feed ancestors – as a collective experience.

7 See Harvey (2021).

8 Saidiya Hartman writes of a plant called *manta uwa* meaning ‘forget mother’ in Hausa. It was given to slaves so that they would forget their origins and no longer attempt to run away.

sweet dub

two-step

superior naming abilities

named kinship as what they shared and owed each other; as *owing each other everything*<sup>9</sup>

the genealogy of home and belonging traced back to the way we move together

*where home is a moving belong*

geographical affiliations of place

city streets, blues dance, village, compound, river, womb

tunnel, sky, bus stop, airport,

london, kingston, lagos

mountain, road, lake

ganvie, freetown, ouidah

threads of a diasporic weaving

a *black sense of place*<sup>10</sup>

*nowhere and everywhere*

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9 Harney and Moten (2013).

10 McKittrick (2021).

totem

a brixton estate, taught to meditate

expects an angel, meets a bear

imagines she is doing it wrong, stays quiet

and when the women return from night work to build their altars and call on spirit

they dance

they feed her with language

the language is filled with

ways to live and hear and speak

ways to recollect

ways of the interconnected<sup>11</sup>

*the bear ends the world. The world begins again*

an important past experience or unusual incident

’cause they moving right out of babylon<sup>12</sup>

‘cause they refusing advice and taking all the babies and going

‘cause babylon is hot (this is the reason they give)

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11 Alexander (2005).

12 Bob Marley and the Wailers (1979).

‘cause while babylon burns it is burning them

‘cause in the end they just got to go

‘cause migration is not an unusual incident

and breathing otherwise should not be either

*burning moving breathing*

the initiation stage or social role

she the writer (meantime *dysautoethnographyst*)

writing into, through and with

who knows initiation

as looking

as feeling

as being a part

as “*sitting in the room with history*”<sup>13</sup>

as playing in a grammar of black feminist futurity<sup>14</sup>

*initiation of a writer (dysautoethnographyst)*

special "age-mates" to whom the person is bonded by shared affinities, experiences, destinies...

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13 Brand (2001, p. 25).

14 Campt (2017).

- @ the intergenerational collaborators, confabulators, collective utterers, black feminist conjurers, disruptors of the necropolis
- @ the spiralists, poethicists<sup>15</sup> and non-algorithmic listeners
- @ the sisters of the order of decolonial decomposition<sup>16</sup>
- @ the chanters of re-enchantment and being more than human<sup>17</sup>
- @ the singers of praises; the self-appointed tellers of small stories

*we birth ourselves again*

*she is the one whose body could not speak its names*

*born to a people who are never believed*

*in this communion of thirst and tears*

*where home is a moving belong*

*nowhere and everywhere*

*the bear ends the world. the world begins again*

*burning moving breathing*

*initiation of a writer (dysautoethnographyst)*

*we birth ourselves again*

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15 Ferreira da Silva (2014).

16 Velez (n.d.)

17 See Sylvia Wynter's reconceptualisation of the human in McKittrick (2015).

## Bio

**Foluke Taylor** is a psychotherapist and writer living in London. With black feminisms providing the ground and ethical steer, she explores writing as a relational, creative, psycho-political, therapeutic. Foluke teaches at the Metanoia Institute and is involved in a range of transdisciplinary collaborations and experiments. Her forthcoming work, *Unruly Therapeutic: Practices in Living Room* is being published by W.W. Norton.

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