

REMEMBERING SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS IN *LUCY NEGRO, REDUX*

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'Memory', Derrida reminds us, 'is not just the opposite of forgetting.'¹ Since, as he argued, the ancient archives where public memory was stored were the property of the state, knowledge of the past was controlled by gatekeepers who held a vested interest in what could become known and in how citizens who managed to achieve access to it could use this knowledge. To remember, then, is at least potentially to engage in acts of subterfuge, rebellion, stealing away.

For the purposes of this article, the difficulty of retrieving embargoed memory – much less of recirculating it and living in its light in the present – is only exacerbated by the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, beginning to gather its dreadful force during Shakespeare's lifetime. The sheer scope of what Saidiya Hartman calls 'the catastrophe that was our past'² – for millions to have been abducted and violently transformed from human beings into objects – might seem to form an unnavigable dead zone between what may once have been and what survives now, in catastrophe's wake. But I say 'might' because of what we know about the power of the yearning of the enslaved to recover the past, and about the will of the descendants of the enslaved not only to remember, but to reanimate. The remembrance and reanimation I discuss here is Caroline Randall Williams's 2019 poetry collection *Lucy Negro, Redux*, which meditates on critical claims that the Renaissance London bawd known as Lucy Negro was the inspiration for the 'Dark Lady' of Shakespeare's Sonnets 127–154. Randall Williams's collection asks us to imagine what we cannot know about the time and space

between Hartman's 'catastrophe' and our own contemporary vantage point on that past, and to fill in details of an autonomous creative power that escaped and defied bondage.

Randall Williams's poems imitate the sonnets, absorbing and reproducing them for the present. Her poetic imitation also accepts the larger mission of confronting black Atlantic subjects' dispossession. Thus, her collection must play with time, moving back and forth from the present to the Renaissance to US slave culture, as it imagines a life for Lucy Negro and a point of origin for all the black women subsumed into slavery's wake. Indeed, Randall Williams's imaginative play is enabled by the blank spaces in the records of Lucy Negro's historical presence, as well as by Africans' disappearance into the gulf of transatlantic time. Her project was inspired by the research of Shakespearian Duncan Salkeld into the minutes of London's Bridewell Hospital, which was not a place for treating the sick, but rather a combination of a criminal court and a prison for those convicted for crimes connected to the city's sex trade.³ She notes that the only one of the Bridewell Minute Books that did not survive

¹ Peter Krapp, 'Derrida online', *Oxford Literary Review* 18 (1996), 159–74, quotes a 1995 interview transcription on p. 164.

² Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), p. 4.

³ Duncan Salkeld's *Shakespeare among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500–1650* (London, 2012) reviews the Lucy Negro materials in the Minute Books, pp. 128–34.

London's Great Fire of 1666 was the volume covering 1579–1597, which would have included any arrests or prosecutions arising from the wild night when Lucy Negro first comes into historical view. As the fire raged, people inside the hospital threw the books down to barges on the Thames below to save the history they contained, but 'that one volume missed its mark, and lies from that day to this at the bottom of the river'.⁴ Randall Williams resurrects and reads from the drowned book of state memory. In her hands, absence and loss generate possibility.

Gesta Grayorum is the chronicle of the Christmas revels put on by Gray's Inn on the Feast of the Innocents, 28 December 1594. According to its mock-heroic narrative of the occasion, Lucy Negro and some of the prostitutes she ran were invited to perform: 'Lucy Negro, Abbess de *Clerkenwell*' held her title 'by Night-Service in *Cauda*' to the Prince of Purpoole, the imaginary patron of the law school, and had been charged 'to find a Choir of Nuns, with burning Lamps, to chaunt *Placebo* to the Gentlemen of the Prince's Privy-Chamber'.⁵ 'In *Cauda*' is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *in cauda venenum*, meaning 'the poison is in the tail'. '*Placebo*' means 'I will please.' Lucy Negro's choir of nuns who will please the gathered audience with what is in their (poisoned?) tails points to her ill fame as a madam in Renaissance London. Apparently, the night got so out of hand that the planned entertainment devolved into 'a disordered Tumult and Crowd upon the Stage', with some of the well-connected audience members even leaving their places to join Lucy's 'nuns'.⁶

The image of Lucy Negro in motion is dazzling, one of the few descriptions that survive of a black woman in Renaissance performance.⁷ Perhaps inspired by it, G. B. Harrison proposed her as Shakespeare's lover and the inspiration for the so-called 'Dark Lady' sonnets in 1933.⁸ He hung much of his conjecture, which he put in an end-note (where he doesn't use her name) rather than in his main text, on *Gesta Grayorum*'s account that another part of the entertainment that night was a play called 'a Comedy of Errors', which from its

description was probably Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. But its description of the evening's festivities doesn't mention Shakespeare's name, as it does Lucy Negro's, nor does it describe anything about the play, while it enthusiastically details the performance of Lucy and her girls. Shakespeare might well have been there, as a young playwright eager for the kind of recognition a successful holiday performance for the well-connected lawyers at Gray's Inn could have brought him, but there is no absolute evidence that he was, or that he even knew her, much less fell disastrously in love with her. As with the lost minute book, this absence of proof one way or the other is one of the factors enabling Randall Williams's invention.

As I've written elsewhere, I'm not particularly interested in whether Shakespeare and Lucy Negro were lovers or if the 'Dark Lady' sonnets are inspired by their relationship; the poetic flows of time, memory and absence – my real subject here – don't necessarily require material facts to manifest in the present.⁹ Shakespeare's biographers no longer work under the assumption that his works directly reflect events in his

⁴ Randall Williams's poems first appeared as her MFA thesis in 2015. They were republished as *Lucy Negro, Redux: The Bard, a Book, and a Ballet* (Nashville, 2019), in a volume that also includes the transcript of a conversation between Randall Williams and Paul Vasterling, the artistic director of the Nashville Ballet, who based his 2019 ballet *Lucy Negro, Redux* on Randall Williams's poems, as well as the ballet's libretto and some rehearsal photographs. In this article, I cite this 2019 volume; here, p. 18.

⁵ *Gesta Grayorum: Or, the History of the High and Mighty Prince, Henry Prince of Purpoole* (London, 1688), p. 12.

⁶ *Gesta Grayorum*, p. 22.

⁷ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* [1984] (London, 2010), p. 3, describes the participation of a young female 'More' at a tournament of a black knight and a black lady staged at the court of King James IV of Scotland in 1507 and 1508.

⁸ Harrison's *Shakespeare at Work, 1592–1603* (London, 1933) doesn't use a proper name, calling her only the 'Black Woman' (p. 64, pp. 310–11).

⁹ See Joyce Green MacDonald, 'The legend of Lucy Negro', in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, ed. Janell Hobson (Abingdon, 2021), 66–74. I cite some of the material on Rollins and Hotson here.

life. And yet, in the decades after Harrison, the very idea that Shakespeare and Lucy Negro *could* have been sexually connected was firmly rejected. Hyder Rollins, editor of the 1944 *New Variorum Sonnets*, doubted that enough evidence existed to assign Shakespeare 'a negro mistress', but, referring to a suggestion by a nineteenth-century German scholar that the poet had been her lover and that she may have been 'a mulatto or a quadroon', was not surprised that Shakespeare's 'eyes ... in her "a thousand errors" noted'.¹⁰ Twenty years later, in a book published during the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's birth, Leslie Hotson is even more racially explicit. For him, Harrison's advancement of Lucy Negro as the 'Dark Lady' was a 'dark ... misapprehension'. It was a 'discredit' to Shakespeare to imagine that he could have fallen so desperately in love with 'a blackamoor'.¹¹

More recently, Miranda Kauffmann has expanded doubt about a sexual relationship on occupational, evidential or racial grounds to doubt about the possibility that Lucy Negro existed at all. *Gesta Grayorum* 'does not provide straightforward evidence of a real woman named Lucy Negro', she writes. '[I]n creating the character of Lucy Negro', the author of the description of the 1594 Christmas revels may have been referring to one of two known bawds in the city who were forenamed Lucy, but there is no evidence that either of these women 'were of African origin'.¹²

There are actually two claims here – one, that Lucy Negro wasn't a real person; and two, that even if she were, there is no proof that she was black. Both claims, I would argue, fit into this article's framing within a conviction of the memory void imposed on the history of racial relations shadowed by African slavery and on those subsumed within that void. Proof of black people's existence in Renaissance Britain is increasingly a matter of recovered historical fact, and yet still we can't always immediately recognize what we're seeing when we look into the racial archive of a period that was still figuring out everything it meant by the term 'race'. Kim Hall pointed us to the racial valence that familiar Renaissance poetic vocabularies of fair and black accumulated in a period of colonialism that would be underwritten by race-based slavery.¹³ Attentively searching British archives,

Imtiaz Habib found traces of black lives that he used to create a compelling narrative of emerging premodern black urban existence, despite incomplete and inconsistent parish documentation, eccentric spelling and naming, and 'the pressures of the conversion process, whereby ethnic identities disappear under Christian names'.¹⁴ More recently, Urvashi Chakravarty has drawn our attention to the role of the domestic in shaping ideologies of service which in their turn invisibly shaped ideologies of slavery, linking their origins to the household.¹⁵ Intimate household circumstance is necessarily at least partially hidden from public view, making the generation and administration of race in many respects a private family matter. Historian Jennifer L. Morgan, noting the degree to which black women and the children they bore to white men were denied civil status in Britain's North American colonies, describes the entanglement of rules of kinship, inheritance and disinheritance, and slavery as a mechanism that would make 'African women ... particularly illegible – both historically and archivally'.¹⁶ Thus, in London, to read the remaining Minute Books, Randall Williams was obligated to 'dig and root about and trawl and query and wildly surmise until there is a place for you, Lucy. And it will be my place for having carved yours out, and altogether earned by you for us, and proved by me for us' (p. 19).

Of course, transported and enslaved Africans could not be entirely erased from public memory, even if

¹⁰ *New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, ed. Hyder Rollins, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 272, p. 243, n. 1.

¹¹ Leslie Hotson, *Mr. W. H.* (New York, 1964), p. 244.

¹² Miranda Kauffmann, "Making the beast with two backs": interracial relationships in early modern England', *Literature Compass* 12 (2015), 22–37; p. 30.

¹³ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995).

¹⁴ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the British Archives: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁵ Urvashi Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2022).

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021), p. 5.

the conventions of silence might have preferred it. The magnitude and horror of the slave trade were simply too great. In the spring of 1769, residents of Charleston, South Carolina, would complain that slavers' crews were throwing so many dead captives into the Cooper River as it emptied into the city's harbour that the stench from their decomposing bodies was creating a public health hazard: the sophisticated, prosperous city reeked of death.¹⁷ As Randall Williams imitates Shakespeare in order to bring one shadowy black female subject into full presence, she works to fashion a way across the drowned horrors of the Middle Passage and reimagine a place of origin. Together, the knowledge of slavery and a yearning for times before it frame Randall Williams's project.

The yearning for a generative and nurturing place of origin that *Lucy Negro, Redux* demonstrates is itself a product of the early modern. What we now know as nostalgia was first given a name in 1688 by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer, based on his clinical studies of people we would now recognize as having been politically or economically alienated from their homes: young men from powerful and oligarchic Bern studying in Basel, natives of Germany and France working abroad as household servants, Swiss soldiers who had been fighting abroad. Those afflicted with this disease would 'easily become sad, continually think about the Fatherland, and because of the perpetual desire of returning there . . . finally fall into this illness'.¹⁸ The only cure was to return home, and if patients could not, they remained dangerously vulnerable to being 'snatched up' at any time by 'grief for the lost charm of the Native Land'.¹⁹ When 'the use of native liberty is prohibited', as it was prohibited for those effectively exiled by the unforgiving conditions of life under Bern's system of inherited economic and political power, the 'melancholy delirium' of nostalgia was the inevitable and tragic result.²⁰

The links Hofer establishes between nostalgia, melancholy and distance – distance dictated by circumstances beyond the sufferer's control – resonate powerfully in the suffering of those caught in the period's slave trade. Captured, transported across a vast ocean, enslaved and permanently barred from 'the use of native liberty', the enslaved were subjected

to a variety of Hofer's diagnosis that was effectively terminal because it could not be cured by going home.

Yearning attachment to the place of one's birth survived into the social practices of the West Africans who were brought as slaves to Georgia and its barrier islands. Trapped among strangers, far away from West Africa, in 1803 captured members of the Ibo tribe newly transported to St Simons Island walked together into the waters of Dunbar Creek and drowned in what was either a mass suicide, or an action undertaken in the belief that they could return home.²¹ Throughout small towns in the Georgia sea islands, stories of Africans who did find a way to escape bondage and satisfy their 'perpetual desire' to go back home survived into the 1930s, as these slaves' descendants reported that some of their ancestors either turned themselves into birds, or flew away in their human bodies. According to Wallace Quarterman, who was born as the property of Roswell King – the manager of the plantation on St Simons where the Ibos walked into the water – the slaves on the plantation who had come directly from Africa were troublesome: no one could understand their language, and they either didn't know how or refused to learn to work the fields. Finally, they simply decided that they 'ain't stay down here'. One day, when the frustrated overseer set out to whip them, they all downed their hoes, 'then say "quack, quack, quack," and they riz up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and fly right back to Africa'.²² The grandmother of Rosa Grant from Possum Point had been brought from Africa with

¹⁷ Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 47.

¹⁸ Carolyn Kiser Anspach, trans., 'Medical dissertation on nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688', *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934), 376–91; p. 385.

¹⁹ Hofer, 'Medical dissertation', p. 380.

²⁰ Hofer, 'Medical dissertation', pp. 384, 381.

²¹ See the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*: www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ebos-landing.

²² Wallace Quarterman, quoted in Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers Project, Works Project Administration, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens, Georgia, 1940), pp. 150 and 151.

her own mother, called Theresa, when she was just a little girl, and Grant remembered her grandmother Ryna telling her how Theresa got to the point where she just couldn't stand her American life any longer: '[S]he wanna go back to Africa. One day my gran Ryna was standing with her in the fiel'. Theresa turn 'roun' ... She stretch her arms out – so – an rise straight up and fly right back to Africa.'²³

The myth of flying Africans in Georgia and South Carolina percolated through the decades, finding its imaginative way into texts as different as Lionel Hampton's 1939 swing tune 'Flying Home' (which in its turn generated Billy Eckstine and Gerald Valentine's 'Second Balcony Jump'), Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, and documentary filmmaker Sophia Nahli Allison's 2019 short *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*.²⁴ Robert Hayden's 1943 poem 'O Daedalus, Fly Away Home' layers the imagination of Africans' return to their origins in freedom and sovereignty over the Greek myth of the designer of the labyrinth who was imprisoned there, and whose son Icarus fell to his death when he mismanaged the wings Daedalus created to help them escape:

Night is an African juju man
weaving a wish and a weariness together
to make two wings.²⁵

For Hayden, Daedalus' labour and creativity – disrespected and suppressed by the evil power confining it, but still surviving – echoes in the work of a slave longing to 'deave the air fly away home'.²⁶ Flowing through its classical foundation, the 'wish and a weariness' of Hayden's poem invoke a kind of remembering that does not so much recall what has happened as it conjures the circumstances under which something *could* happen, if the 'weariness' of the poem's present hadn't quashed the possibility of flight.²⁷

If access to memory is policed and nostalgia for lost homeplaces which is not treated by a return home will eventually disable knowledge of oneself, the problem of imagining how to heal nostalgic loss and act in light of the remembered power of return to a time and place before is perhaps particularly acute in representing black women, who have

been so deliberately absented from the historical record. 'No one archived your existence', Sophia Nahli Allison remarks in her narration for *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*, and so poets and historians have had to learn to find traces of these women's lives in the stories others told about them, and in the ways these stories were recorded.²⁸ Just as Hayden used classical myth as a tool for recalling the myth of flying Africans, thus borrowing the outline of an existing story to bring into being one that had been suppressed but that nevertheless told of the existence of a rich life that predated and escaped the confinements of slavery in the Americas, Caroline Randall Williams turns to another part of the Western canon – Shakespeare's Sonnets – in order to conjure the traces of autonomous power left by the lost black subject we know as Lucy Negro.

Given the vagaries of archival recording for black women in the early modern period, it is not surprising, and perhaps even appropriate, that Lucy Negro – also sometimes known as Black Luce or Luce Baynham – both is and is not present in the surviving Bridewell Minute Books. There is no record of her arrest, conviction or imprisonment, but other, less lucky arrestees do bring up her name, perhaps in an

²³ Quarterman, quoted in Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, p. 145.

²⁴ Allison includes a clip of her film and discusses the legend in 'Revisiting the legend of flying Africans', www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/revisiting-the-legend-of-flying-africans.

²⁵ I cite the poem 'O Daedalus, Fly Away Home' as it appears in Hayden's *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York, 1985), p. 55.

²⁶ Hayden, 'O Daedalus, Fly Away Home'.

²⁷ See Wendy W. Walters, "'One of dese mornings, bright and fair, take my wings and cleave de air": the legend of the flying Africans and diasporic consciousness', *MELUS* 22 (1997), 3–29.

²⁸ On black women's invisibility in the archive and on the methods required for recovering their presence, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2020); and Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016).

effort to deflect some of the state’s punishing power away from themselves. It’s clear that Black Luce – whoever she was – ran a brothel that moved through various locations in Clerkenwell, north-west of the city. A pander named William Mekyns testified that the prostitute Margaret Goldsmyth ‘laye at Black Luces a great while and greate companye resorted to her and black luce has much gayne by keypyng of her and was lewde to her and knewe yt well that she was noughte’.²⁹ A prostitute named Elizabeth Kirkman who worked for the pimp Gilbert East testified before the court that Black Luce and East were partners: they agreed ‘that when Blacke Luce had any great geste’ that either Kirkman or another of East’s prostitutes should go over to Luce’s house to serve the prominent customer, ‘and Luce Baynham should have thone halfe of the money and East thother halfe’. Kirkman insisted to the court that ‘Black Luce is a vilde bawde and lyveth by it’, and that she, East, and his wife Margaret ‘agree together and devide the monye that is geven to the harlots and helpe to tryme them up with swete water . . . and cotes and thinges for the purpose fitt for the degree of them that use them’.³⁰

Randall Williams partly remembers and partly imagines Lucy Negro as she plots to recover what is not there:

My exiat sayeth that

If Black Luce alias Luce Baynham alias Lucy Negro alias lewis eeaste might have been Shakespeare’s Dark Lady then she is indeed the Dark Lady and is me also.

...

My exaiat sayeth that

Her black wires are where the World began, and all of it pouring out from atwixt her thighs. Enough to make any man write that harder Hallelujah:

Exhibit A	Exhibit B	Exhibit C
Thy black is fairest in my judgement’s place	And this, also, has been one of the dark places of the earth	Justlikeablackgirl-howcomeyou-tastesogood

(‘Black Luce’, in *Lucy Negro*, p. 19)

‘Exiat’ is one of the Minute Books’ abbreviations for ‘examinat’, the record of witnesses’ examinations by the hospital authorities. As she first reports on the Minute Books’ records and then fills in the blanks they contain, the blanks where she acts to create a kind of history for black women’s agency and sexuality, Randall Williams adopts their fluid lingo: ‘My exiat’, ‘My exaiate’, ‘My exaiat’. This poem, ‘Black Luce’, renders its final findings as a table, as if to invest her reconstructed ‘wildly surmise[d]’ history with a certain technical rigor. Her newly excavated line of historical descent flows from line 10 of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 131 – ‘Thy black is fairest in my judgement’s place’ (12) – through a phrase from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* that identifies London, the imperial centre, as ‘one of the dark places of the earth’.³¹ ‘Her black wires are where the World began’, Randall Williams writes, affirming Sonnet 130’s rejection of a Petrarchan vocabulary for women’s beauty. Conrad’s ‘dark’ heart of empire becomes the dark space between Lucy Negro’s legs, adorned with textured black pubic hair. Randall Williams goes on to invoke this vulvar space again in the poem ‘Sublimating Lucy. Considering Courbet’:

It’s the beginning of the world,
That endless human vessel,
And what is mightier?

(p. 22)³²

For Randall Williams, Lucy Negro’s blackness – her hair, her skin, the unseeable spaces inside her body – generates light and knowledge. ‘There is beauty in the dark / Lucy’, she observes early in her sequence (‘BlackLucyNegro III’, p. 14).

²⁹ Quoted in Salkeld, *Shakespeare among the Courtesans*, p. 141.

³⁰ Quoted in Salkeld, *Shakespeare among the Courtesans*, p. 136.

³¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Timothy S. Hayes, with introduction by Adam Hochschild and afterword by Maya Jasanoff (London, 2017), p. 5.

³² The poem’s subtitle, ‘after *L’origine du monde*’, refers to the title of Gustave Courbet’s 1866 painting of a nude woman, shown reclining on a bed from the breasts downward, her legs splayed wide to display her thick dark pubic hair.

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Shakespearians have observed that even though Shakespeare's characters spend a lot of time talking about black people and about blackness, very few black people actually appear onstage in his plays. That is one of the things that makes the 'Dark Lady' sonnets so striking. They obsess over the speaker's obsessive love for a woman who is clearly not white, at least as whiteness was understood in the period. The final couplet of Sonnet 132 serves as the epigraph for Randall Williams's collection: 'Then will I swear that beauty herself is black, / And all they foul that thy complexion lack' (13–14). 'Complexion' could refer to character or personality as well as to skin colour, so that the 'Dark Lady's' blackness – or a traditional sonnet lady's fairness – was about more than her physical appearance. Williams's *Lucy Negro* knows this well:

Say she wild, that she live by it,
 that she like it,
like that money, like that witness,
 like that grotesque, and his *yes, yes* –
 and she dazzle him, when she monkey shine,
'causa how *she* know and *he* know
 his people shamed
of how he go
 for them darker juices, her darkness using
 him up
 like ain't nobody watching.
 ('Then Will I Declare That Beauty
 Herself is Black V', p. 50)

In this poem the only shame surrounding the sexual connection between Lucy Negro and the poet is the shame of 'his people', embarrassed by his helpless desire for someone he should not want. Her wildness, her 'monkey shine', her characterological darkness calls him out and into her orbit. He is a devoutly helpless object and not the discerning, disciplined subject that Rollins and Hotson insist he must have been.

Although their physical and sexual and reproductive labours sustained the distorted domestic intimacies of slave culture, the stories enslaved women might have told remain unvoiced; no life story told by a female survivor of the Middle

Passage survives. Thinking of the women who lived and died in slavery without being able to record their own histories, Hartman wonders how we, as descendants and survivors, can uncover those lost lives without merely 'reiterating [the] violent speech' and the 'rituals of torture' that swallowed them.³³ As she discovered the traces of Lucy Negro that Duncan Salkeld outlined in his study of the Bridewell Minute Books, and as she reread the 'Dark Lady' sonnets in light of her imagined presence, Randall Williams creates an opportunity to speak with and through one of these lost female ancestors, to fly away home to her and revive her in the present. Through her presence in Shakespeare's sonnets and through the poet's claiming of her as a historical ancestor, the poem 'Black Luce' declares that, finally, 'Lucy Negro is a seat at the table' (19). Not only Randall Williams, but Lucy Negro herself, emerges from historical silence.

Lines and phrases from more than a dozen of the sonnets mark Randall Williams's collection: it is made in light of Shakespeare's. But *Lucy Negro, Redux* is equally animated by its liberating lack of a critical or creative archive. For Randall Williams, the gap in the Bridewell Minute Books' evidence of Lucy Negro's presence becomes an invitation to freely imagine how she might fit into the historical record if it were whole. One poem, 'From Volume IV of the Bridewell Prison Records. London. 1579–1597', records 'exiats' referring to a scandalous triangle between Black Luce, a lawyer named William Hatclyffe, and one 'William Shaxberd'. Randall Williams's 'Shaxberd' gets into 'a grete disturbance' with a lawyer from Gray's Inn in the street in front of Black Luce's house, apparently because he thought the lawyer was visiting Luce too often, and the entries end with Hatclyffe's accusation that 'William Shakepere' performed 'lewde acts' on her 'in the curtain playhouse' and that while

³³ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in two acts', *Small Axe* 12 (2008), 1–14; p. 4.

she left the playhouse singing, ‘Mstr Shakespeare never came again to the stage that nyghte’ (27).

The historical William Hatclyffe played the Prince of Purpoole at the 1594 Gray’s Inn Christmas celebrations and was advanced by Leslie Hotson as the mysterious ‘Mr. W. H.’ to whom the 1609 first edition of the *Sonnets* is dedicated. When she invents this scandalous brawl over Lucy’s affections, however, Randall Williams deliberately outdoes Hotson by not only putting Hatclyffe into Shakespeare’s orbit, but also putting Lucy Negro between them; her Hatclyffe is as obsessed with her as her Shakespeare is, as we see in ‘In Which the Fair Youth Loves Black Luce’ (p. 31). She thus engages in a second kind of remembering and re-evaluation, of materials from the thriving Shakespeare biography industry as well as of the *Sonnets* themselves. Randall Williams’s play with Hotson’s William Hatclyffe story opens that industry to the same kind of imaginative rereading she conducts on the sonnets themselves, a playfully documented reversal of Hotson’s certainty that Shakespeare could not or would not have had sex with ‘a blackamoore’.

While both Randall Williams and Hotson might be accused of writing the kind of Shakespeare fan-fiction that foregrounds autobiographical readings of the sonnets, Randall Williams joyfully scandalizes the poetic archive in a way that Hotson’s book explicitly refused to do.³⁴ Hotson even advances another (white) candidate for the role of the real-life ‘Dark Lady’, a disgraced royal maid of honour named Mary Fitton, whom he believed fell into prostitution.³⁵ For him, there was no scandal – or, if there had been, it only involved white people. Shakespeare’s disastrous love affair was only conventionally scandalous, and not interracial to boot. But in the absence of the life records that might have confirmed or denied the possibility of an intimate connection, Randall Williams is as free to assert or intuit a historical narrative as Hotson was to deny one: ‘Lucy Negro / I am you / Lucy Negro / You can become anything I say’, she writes in ‘BlackLucyNegro III’ (p. 14). This poem is subtitled ‘after Jack Spicer’,

indicating some inspiration by the work of the San Francisco Renaissance poet (1925–1965) who described his own work as being ‘dictated’, in the conviction that poets acted as receptors to language and ideas rather than creating entirely of their own will. Is she thus positing herself as a receiver and transmitter of what was true but obscured about Lucy Negro – what she would have said herself if her words had been recorded?

This claiming of Lucy Negro’s standing – a claim Randall Williams can make through her own determined creative labours over historical records that only partially exist (‘I will dig and root about and trawl and query and wildly surmise’) – in its turn enables the speaker’s claiming of her own beauty and sexuality. ‘[W]hat would you think of my body?’ she asks in ‘Nude Study Or, Shortly Before Meeting Lucy. A White Boy’:

Had you ever negotiated such coarse hair,
Seen nipples dark and darker in their tensing,
Breasts swaying sideways with the weight
Of them? Did you know how much it was to ask,
To be the first glimpse of a naked black body?

(p. 20)

Part of what these poems’ speaker is unquestionably drawn to in Lucy Negro is what the existing records portray as her successful commandeering of a sexual economy in which women had been designated objects for men’s consumption: Randall Williams’s Lucy walks away ‘singing’ from the Curtain Theatre while jealous Hatclyffe rages and Shakespeare tries to gather his wits. But if the poems begin with the delighted establishment of a connection between their speaker and their con-fabulated Lucy Negro, the collection’s second section more deeply historicizes the notion of specifically miscegenous scandal as object of erasure and denial as they begin to engage with the sexual oppression of black women in US slavery. In

³⁴ My notion of the sonnets’ miscegenous scandal comes from Margreta De Grazia, ‘The scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’, in *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (Cambridge, 1993), 35–49.

³⁵ Hotson, *Mr. W. H.*, pp. 245–9.

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'Field Holler', the bag for harvesting picked cotton becomes

a whitish exclamation mark
pointing
back to the house.
Baby girl
 the anchor
 to this earth,
 this house,
the accidental crop,
the unwanted harvest yield.
(p. 38)

Following the Caribbean children's rhyme 'Brown Girl in the Ring', 'Brown Girl, Red Bone' sings:

There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord
There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord
There's a red bone in the field, oh lord, oh lord, oh lord
And she looks like the house girl in the house. His house.
(p. 40)

This secret, yet open, history of white men forcing sex on black women in slavery and the unacknowledged biracial babies such rapes produced is a constant presence in this second section of *Lucy Negro, Redux*. At its 2019 Nashville premiere, the ballet Paul Vasterling choreographed around Randall Williams's book includes several poems from the collection, many theatrically delivered onstage by Randall Williams herself, but this second group of poems was instead represented by Rhiannon Giddens's live performance of her song 'At the Purchaser's Option', from her 2017 album *Freedom Highway*.³⁶ The song's title comes from a phrase in an 1822 notice advertising a young 'Negro Wench' for sale in New York's Hudson Valley. She was used to both house and field work, the notice said, and she had a nine-month-old baby who could be included in the sale – or not – 'at the purchaser's option'. The song's speaker is that young mother, facing the possibility of separation from her baby, who was probably the result of rape by the man who owned her.

Giddens's performance of the song served as the score for a solo by dancer Kayla Rowser in the role of Lucy, so that the music and the dance together

articulated the backstory of concealed and denied sexual violence against enslaved black women. In one way, of course, the cruel story Giddens's song tells is not applicable to who the historical Lucy could have been; Lucy Negro disappears from the historical record in the early seventeenth century, long before the slave trade was fully established in North America, and no surviving mention of her ever connects her to any place but London. But in the gulf of absence in which women's memories of the Middle Passage have been drowned, and in the unproven but tantalizing possibility that Shakespeare and Lucy Negro knew each other, Randall Williams works with the tools she has to recover the past unspoken scandal of enslaved black women's sexual abuse by white men – a scandal that permeated life in Atlantic slave cultures but that was rarely publicly acknowledged by the white people who witnessed and perpetrated it. Randall Williams herself is a descendant of Edmund Pettus, the Confederate general and Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan for whom the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama is named. 'I have rape-colored skin', she wrote. '[A] modern DNA testing has allowed me to confirm, I am the descendant of black women who were domestic servants and white men who raped their help.'³⁷ The sexual secret of miscegenous desire her poems imagine resonates within the later rapes of enslaved women and those rapes' reproductive consequences. In Randall Williams's recounting of this tale, only Shakespeare's desire is scandalous; Lucy is neither abused nor abandoned. Nor does Randall Williams romanticize Lucy Negro's prostitution: 'The skin rubbed raw / Behind the cry in the night' ('BlackLucyNegro II', p. 9). But the placement of this second section of the collection nevertheless identifies them both, I think, with that 'accidental crop', grown now in the collection's

³⁶ Giddens composed and performed the rest of the ballet's score with Italian musician Francesco Turrisi.

³⁷ Caroline Randall Williams, 'You want a Confederate monument? My body is a Confederate monument', *New York Times*, 26 June 2020: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html.

leaps back and forth across time, inflicting a version of the emotional pain they were born into on a white man, and then walking away singing. Time blurs as Randall Williams supplies a lineage that history has denied.

The ‘accidental crop’, the ‘red bone in the field’, live in the shadows of their mothers’ exploitation – a sexual inevitability that the narrators in some of this section’s poems accept and attempt to turn to their own purposes. Here, for example, is ‘Knowing Thy Heart Torment Me with Disdain’:

The way my body	<i>I don't want you</i>
Is my body	
<i>to be true</i>	and nobody else's,
and how I do I	
what I want to do	
without seeming selfish,	
that's the why and the how	
<i>I just wanna</i>	come I divide myself:
my heart from my head	
from my snatch from his stuff,	
<i>make love to you</i>	so when I get it together
<i>love to you</i>	with him, or whoever,
I stay belonging to me.	

(p. 53)

The title of this poem comes from Sonnet 132:

Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me –
 Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain –
 Have put on black, and loving mourners be,
 Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain

(1–4)

Here, Randall Williams intersperses her poem with lines from the sonnet and lines from Willie Dixon’s ‘I Just Want to Make Love to You’, best known from its 1960 recording by Etta James. She does make one significant change to the quoted lyrics, though: James recorded ‘But I want you to be true’. Lucy Negro does not. Her sexual prerogative, and not the gratitude for a man’s fidelity that we hear in James’s version, is the new subject. Building out an enunciative authority for Lucy Negro requires mixing Shakespeare with her own composition and with lines (almost) sung by the woman known as ‘The Matriarch of the Blues’: there is no single, clear line from the poem’s

present back to its pasts. Each of these pasts lives in the others.

Not knowing the truth about any relationship between Shakespeare and Lucy Negro clears space for Randall Williams’s fictions, although we do know that the paths of sex workers and theatre workers could often cross in Renaissance London. Philip Henslowe, owner of the Rose Theatre and obsessive record-keeper, noted in his *Diary* that he had dinner with former pimp Gilbert East, professionally associated with Lucy Negro, thirty times in 1600. By 1604, Lucy Negro and Gilbert East were apparently sharing rooms in the Boar’s Head buildings that Henslowe owned on Bankside, where big public theatres like the Rose, the Swan and the Globe were also located. Working on such hints, the last part of the collection keeps pressing what evidence there is – evidence which for Randall Williams includes the *Sonnets* themselves – in order to excavate Lucy as ancestor, and herself as a contemporary black woman, from the shadows: ‘And it will be my place for having carved yours out, and altogether earned by you for us, and proved by me for us’ (19). Not only will she make ‘a seat at the table’ for Lucy Negro by writing her into history and literature and by imagining a voice and agency – perhaps especially sexual agency – for black women even within their embedment in sexual shame during their enslavement, but she will find herself there, too. The last column of the formal table Randall Williams constructs in ‘Black Luce’ puts a line from the Rolling Stones’ ‘Brown Sugar’ – ‘Justlikeablackgirlhowcomeyouastastesogood’ – next to the quotation from Conrad and the line from Sonnet 131. Randall Williams thus implies that she herself lies somewhere at the end of this chronological progression that moves from Shakespeare’s original statement of blackness’s allure, through Conrad’s uneasy recognition of the earth’s ‘dark places’ as the source of imperium, to a final reiteration of black women’s erotic power. ‘Mick. Bob. Bowie. All my favorite rock stars have black babies’, a poem in this last section observes (‘This Exiat Sayeth That’, 73).

REMEMBERING SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS IN LUCY NEGRO, REDUX

In line with the collection's interest in recovering black women's subjectivity, some of its last poems imagine Black Luce as a member of the audience at the Globe – dismissing the romantic effervescence of *Much Ado About Nothing* ('Some People Don't Have Enough Real Things to Worry About'), resenting *Othello*, thrilling to *Henry V*. This section details Shakespeare's sexual approach to Black Luce and, more importantly, her reactions to him. She even writes her own, uneven sonnet about their connection:

Once he bent him down to me,
he bent and
 his words came
with him. His blood
 word –
his. beauty. black.
 His writ word,
all breathing between us
all doing that old
that old
that old thing between us.
 Never made him pay,
never after the words came
 first, held ransom sin.

(p. 70)

The power of his words moves her to give herself to him without demanding payment, to hold captive the knowledge of the 'sin' of his lust for her. It is she who refuses to release this erotic knowledge into the public domain until and unless it can receive its just due in the world's 'false esteem'.

Lucy Negro, Redux dislocates time, blurs place, and blends multiple speakers into a single story. Its refusal of linearity is suited to its project of bringing to voice a character whose very existence has been denied, and to speaking out loud a story whose materiality uncomfortably contradicts the stories that white supremacy has chosen to tell about itself. Merely speaking a truth out loud is its own kind of achievement in the face of denial, refusal and loss. Flying home in order to begin again, Randall Williams exhorts us at the beginning of her sequence to

run and tell everything,
every truth you ever knew
about BlackLucyNegro.
Say she is the loose light.
Say she is the root.
Say she ate at his table.
Say she ate at all. Say she.
Say she. Say she.

(p. 7)