



BEYOND THE MARGINS VOL. I



Utopia, Micheal Tella

Welcome to the first edition of *Beyond the Margins*!

My hope is to provide you with stepping stones for building afrofuturist imaginaries in which our futures are shaped by us and for us.

Each week I will be sharing guidelines and reflections which will allow you to discover how to (re)connect with ancestral knowledge and recuperate familial histories.

Join me on this journey as I explore the power of looking inwards to imagine new futures and heal generational trauma resulting from imperialism.



Bare witness to her Evolution, Micheal Tella

Identifying the most important parts of one's history can be a daunting and complicated process when coming from a place of 'unknowing'. **How do we decide where to begin?**

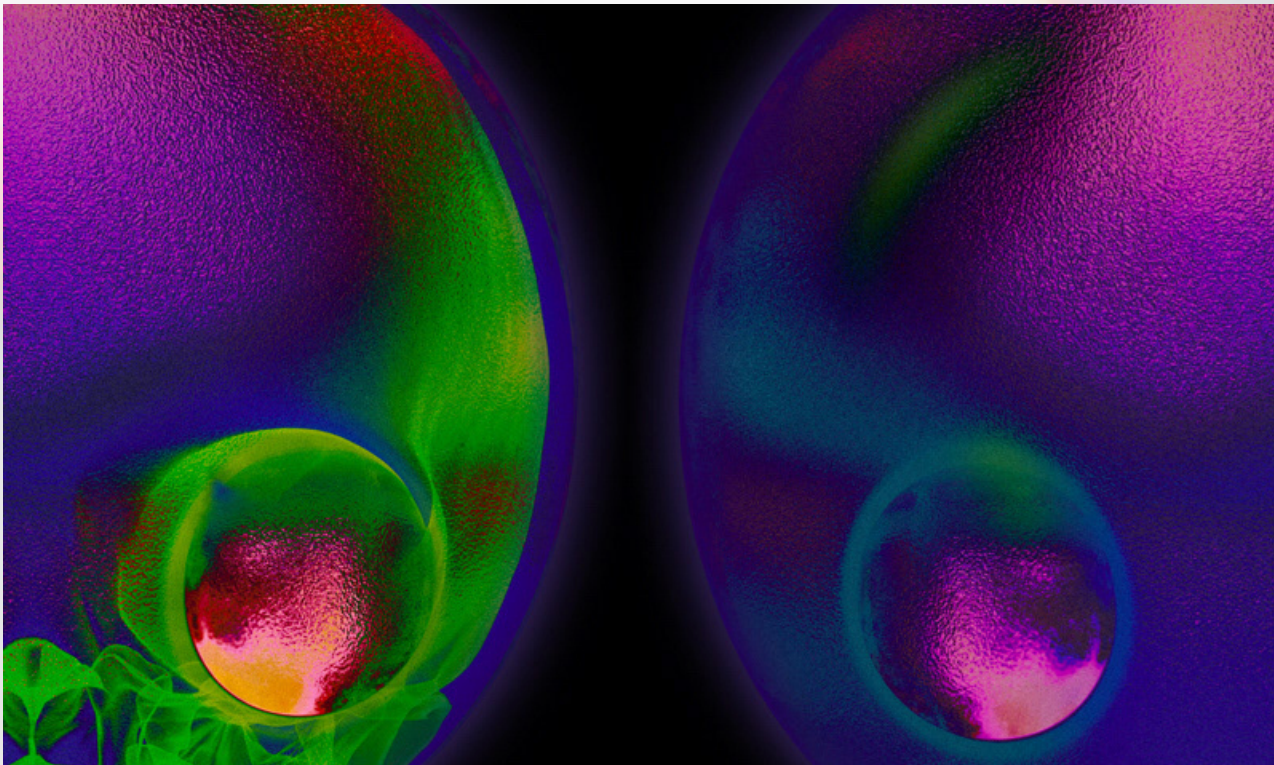
I began by questioning Western historical representations of native resistance, which then allowed me to (re)connect with the lived experiences of my ancestors. And so, I ask you:

Who are you?

When faced with this question some will have a direct answer, while others will squirm or pause, fully taking in the weight of the question. I classify myself as the latter, never having really taken the time to ponder on such a query. I think I know who I am. I'm a 21-year-old Black woman of Haitian and Malian descent, and a first generation Canadian.

But what does that mean? What should it mean? Does it have to mean anything?

This line of questioning comes from never truly having been given the chance to explore parts of myself which don't fit squarely within settler colonial contexts. Much like my parents were encouraged to do when they came to Turtle Island, I too have been encouraged to assimilate in order to fit into the settler colonial project.



Blu The Genius Chrome Direction, Micheal Tella

How have I legitimized my presence on Turtle Island? How has my Canadian Identity been shaped by colonialism?

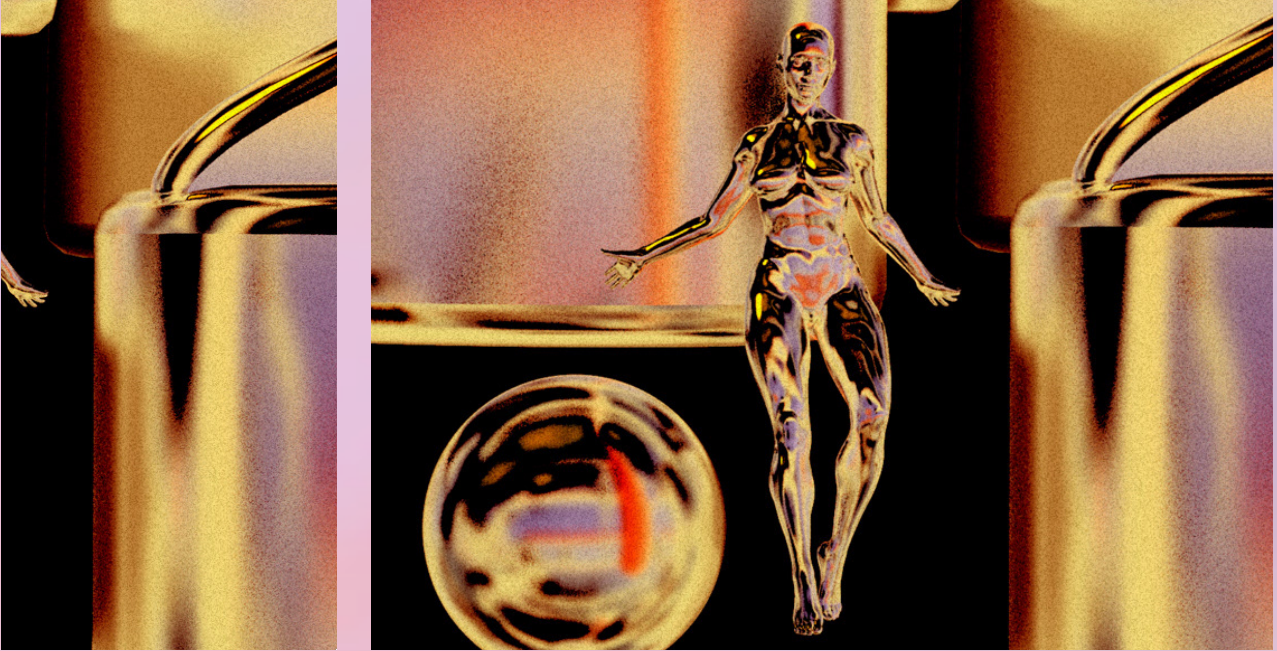
Dr. Damien Lee, Canada Research Chair in Biskaabiiyang and Indigenous Political Resurgence, explains that most of what we know and understand to be associated with Canadian identity is inextricably linked to the process of building, expanding or maintaining the invasive structures of Canada, a settler colonial state (Lee, 2018).

The process of coming to know myself and my (hi)stories could not take place without first questioning how I came to be here, on this land, in this moment. **How do we learn to know ourselves and our histories in settler colonial contexts?** Connecting with ancestral knowledge and (hi)stories can provide us with another stepping stone.

Renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states, “The beauty of culturally inherent resurgence is that it challenges settler colonial dissections of our territories and our bodies” (Simpson, p. 173). In this way, resisting colonial powers can simply mean honouring oneself and one’s (hi)stories.

But what does that look like?

My Beginning



The Cosmic Gate, Micheal Tella

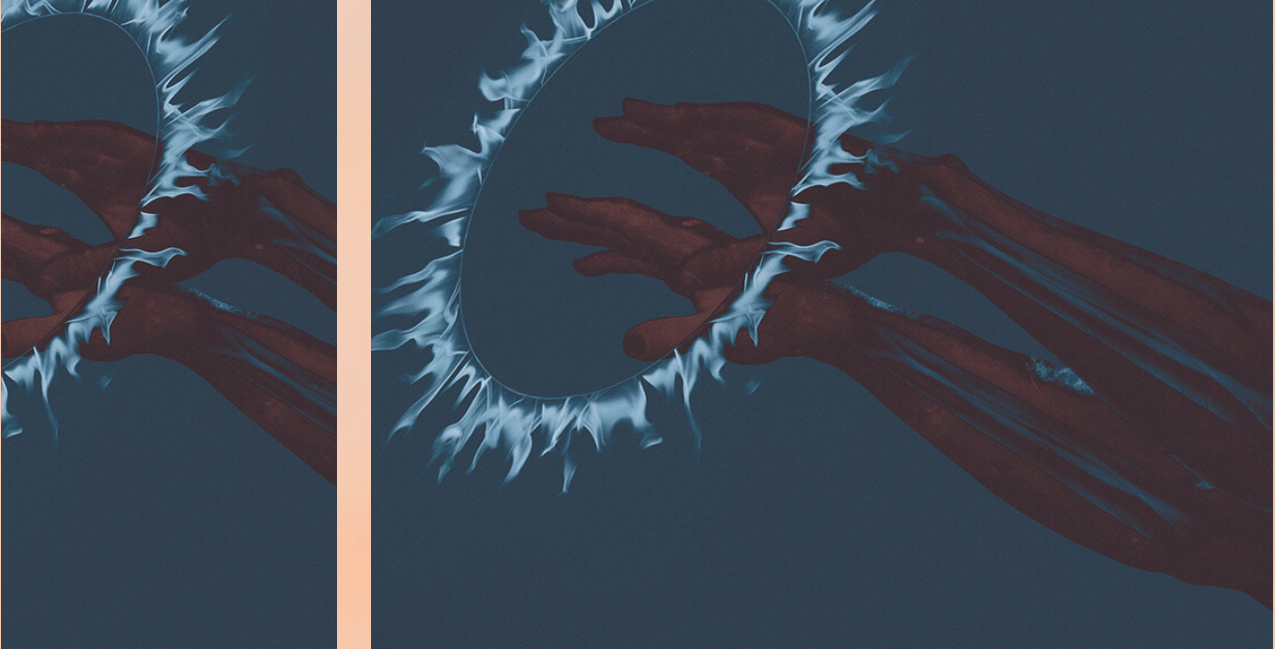
Behind my maternal and paternal ancestries reside rich (hi)stories of strength, resilience, knowledge, and wisdom. And these stories shape my Identity.

The Mali empire was known for its progressive values and impressive wealth. It lasted four centuries and was one of the largest empires in West Africa. Sundiata Keita, the first ruler of the empire, created one of the first known charters of human rights (The Mali Empire | National Geographic Society, n.d.). My father imparted much of this knowledge to me from a young age and often spoke of the importance of education, hard work and respect.

During the decline of the Mali Empire in the 15th century, the transatlantic slave trade began. The Dahomey kingdom, now known as Benin, was one of the primary traffickers of Africans during the Transatlantic slave trade (Benin - History | Britannica, n.d.). As such, many Beninese West Africans were brought to Ayiti, an Arawak word for the land of mountains, where the Taíno, an Arawak-speaking people, resided (Refworld | World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Haiti, n.d.). West African oral histories, spiritual practices and crops travelled to Ayiti to shape the kinships in which my maternal ancestry is rooted.

When settlers arrived in Ayiti, they were met with continued resistance from the Taino people and those whom they had enslaved (Haiti: Overview Paper on Taino Arawaks, n.d.).

My Beginning



His Prisoners, Micheal Tella

In August of 1791, enslaved West Africans in the north of Ayiti rose in rebellion forming alliances with those who had escaped and the local Taíno people, leading to the creation of the first free and Independent nation of formerly enslaved people on January 1st 1804 (Haitian Revolution | Causes, Summary, & Facts | Britannica, n.d.). Haitian women played a vital role in the liberation of Ayiti. Many of the attributes of the powerful women of Ayiti are reminiscent of those of my mother, a smart, innovative and determined Haitian woman who grew up in rural Ayiti.

By taking a look at the resistance of the Taino people, the rebellion of the West Africans and the important role of West-African-descendent and Taíno women in the liberation of Ayiti from colonial siege, I am able to reconceptualize how colonized and enslaved people imagined, enacted, and lived their freedom (Finch, 2020).

(Re)visiting my histories has helped me understand my identity as that of an individual who has great potential and power to shape their circumstances. My Malian heritage reminds me of the depth of knowledge that exists within my ancestral lineage. It encourages me to further learn, innovate and imagine futures outside of western colonial narratives and knowledge systems. My Haitian heritage inspires me to foster the resistance that exists within me. It reminds me of women's kinships as inherent spaces of knowledge sharing and communal care that favor resistance.

Powerful Imaginarities



Meka, Micheal Tella



My journey has taught me that much of what we understand as impossible simply exists beyond colonial narratives. Learning what past resistance and resurgence looked like for my ancestors allows me to envision what it might look like for myself and my contemporaries.

The importance of context is often discarded in colonial narratives. However, context matters. I often wonder what it would have been like to grow up in social contexts which grounded me in ancestral knowledge. Contexts which encouraged me to search deep within myself to pull out wisdom and theory that guided those who came before me. **What would it look like to be fully embraced and accepted?**

Afrofuturism is a way to (re)imagine our realities and create spaces where Black people have agency and power to shape their own circumstances and their future. It encompasses art, film, literature, music, and scholarship (Yaszek, n.d.)

Having the ability to define your own reality is also a way of defining who you are and defining community. **What would a world without anti-Black racism look like? What would it look like for all of us to thrive and not merely survive?**

A Future Shaped by Us and for Us



F.U.B.U., A Seat at the Table, Solange Knowles

In imagining futures in which we shape our own reality and conditions, it is possible to shift a collective psyche shaped by colonialism, which has removed these possibilities.

Our histories can inspire new visions for tomorrow.

And so I leave you with a short guide to carry with you on your own journey:

- Begin by questioning what has shaped your perception of yourself and those around you. What stories have you been told about yourself and how do they differ from ancestral epistemes?
- Ask yourself about what you value and how it is linked to your identity.
- Cultivate care. Care for yourself, your friends, your family and your community. Care for the land you are on and care for your (hi)stories.
- Be curious about the ongoing and historical contexts that have created your current conditions.
- And finally imagine...where you want to go. What kind of world do you want to live in? What kind of love do you want to experience? What kind of kinships do you want to cultivate? What kind of community do you want to be a part of? Who will your future(s) hold? And what does it all look like?

References

About — Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.leannesimpson.ca/about>

Aurora Levins Morales. (2019). *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals: Vol. Revised and expanded edition*. Duke University Press Books.

Benin - History | Britannica. (n.d.). Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Benin/History>

Betasamosake Simpson, L. (2017). *As we have always done*. University of Minnesota Press.

Damien Lee - Sociology - Ryerson University. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.ryerson.ca/sociology/people/faculty/damien-lee/>

Finch, A. (2020). Cécile Fatiman and Petra Carabalí, Late Eighteenth-Century Haiti and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Cuba. In E. Ball, T. Seijas, & T. Snyder (Eds.), *As If She Were Free: A Collective Biography of Women and Emancipation in the Americas* (pp. 293-311). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haiti: Overview Paper on Taino Arawaks. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/precolumbian/tainover.htm>

Haitian Revolution | Causes, Summary, & Facts | Britannica. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Haitian-Revolution>

Knowles, S. (2016). *F.U.B.U. A Seat at the Table*. Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.redbubble.com/i/sticker/Solange-F-U-B-U-by-jaypatrice/52611722.EJUG5>

Lee, D. (2018). *Decolonization is for Everyone: Identity Formation in the Canadian Context*. Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://brightspace.carleton.ca/d2l/le/content/58427/viewContent/2399341/View>

Michael Tella on Behance. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.behance.net/MichaelTella>

The Mali Empire | National Geographic Society. (n.d.). Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/mali-empire/>

Refworld | World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Haiti. (n.d.). Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce1ac.html>

Yaszek, L. (n.d.). *Race in Science Fiction: The Case of Afrofuturism*.