

Art

Discovering How Black Women Might Forge a Path to Freedom

The “Loophole of Retreat” symposium at the Venice Biennale demonstrated that the personal is not only political; it’s also where most of humanity lives.



Seph Rodney November 13, 2022



Audience at the "Loophole of Retreat" symposium, Venice, October 7, 2022 (photo by Claudia Rossini, all images courtesy Polskin Arts & Communications Counselors, a division of Finn Partners)

VENICE — To properly discuss **the “Loophole of Retreat” symposium** organized by Rashida Bumbray and Simone Leigh, which took place in Venice, Italy, a few weeks ago, it is only right to discuss the origin of this title. It is the heading of one chapter in the autobiographical narrative of a formerly enslaved Black woman, Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861. In it Jacobs describes a crawlspace she lived in for seven years after her escape as a “loophole of retreat.” This is a paradoxical position to be in: on

one hand having escaped the crushingly brutal conditions of slavery, yet on the other hand being constrained in this space for seven years, limited in movement, voice, and almost all possible expressions of her will. However, Jacobs's predicament didn't, and couldn't, indicate the breadth and depth that the gathered artists, activists, curators, academics, performers, and researchers would reach in exploring the idea of freedom. Jacobs's loophole was only a philosophical and rhetorical launching point for a series of conversations and presentations organized around the production of aesthetic, historical, and well-researched knowledge about, and pertaining to, Black women. That's the back story. What it *felt* like to be there was almost as profound as the premise of the symposium.

The events all took place from October 7 to 9 at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in the Venetian lagoon, about an eight-minute boat ride via the shuttles provided. Most of the observers and participants stayed in hotels in the neighborhood of San Marco, from which these shuttles launched each morning. I didn't know — and indeed didn't need to know — exactly where to find the Loophole taxis along a very long wharf, with many berths for public transportation, because I could see the long line of Black women making their way to the proper place, dressed in vivid and flamboyant colors and chatting amiably with each other. The cavalcade of Black women visually transformed the Venetian island. Rather than primarily constituting a space of touristic *flânerie* and transactional consumption, an atmosphere of real delight and enthusiasm filled those mornings and afternoons, as the women made their way to and from Cini, and as people discovered colleagues who were also present and engaged in excited conversation with them. Every day I was surprised and gratified to find people I had worked with, written about, or corresponded with through social media platforms. That convivial spirit was made even more manifest that first morning (and each subsequent one) when we gathered in the main hall and Bumbray opened the proceedings by welcoming us with a tambourine. Keeping time at her side, she sang, "I've been to the river and I've been baptized."



Welcome from Rashida Bumbray at the Loophole of Retreat symposium, Venice, October 8, 2022 (photo by Laylah Amatullah Barray)

During her welcoming address Bumbray relayed the themes (or, according to the written program, “directives”) around which the presentations were organized. There were five: “maroonage,” which had to do with Maroons in the Caribbean who escaped slavery and created independent communities; “manual,” dealing with the work of hands; “magical realism,” understood to constitute not just a literary genre, but an entire movement; “medicine,” about interactions with both the natural and supernatural world to address differing ailments; and “sovereignty,” the title of the US pavilion in which Leigh’s work is installed, and a term associated with self-governance and independence. It seemed to me that these directives were capacious enough to encompass the majority of work presented without being prescriptive.

I was initially fascinated by the work of the first presenter, Vanessa Agard-Jones, who started the symposium on the right note by talking about Harriet Jacobs and the idea of being “gone to ground,” that is, hidden or inaccessible. From there, Agard-Jones wove in bits and pieces of her own family and personal experience to imagine that from such a place of hiding one might cultivate a kind of “vegetal growth” and “brown thoughts” that could move someone from a place of mere survival to one of thriving.

The subsequent presentations that most profoundly moved me and, from what I could tell, the others in attendance were those that did precisely this magic of interweaving the personal with the theoretical, looking at real-life circumstances informed by academic study and careful observation. Several art-scene stars were on the presentation panels: Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Tarana Burke, Legacy Russell, Ja'Tovia Gary, and others. Their presence I'm sure enticed many of the attendees, but the room felt different when Sandra Jackson-Dumont spoke about the “gimlet,” a tool that Jacobs used to poke holes in her tiny crawlspace to allow in light and air — a tool, as she said, that was “just for those times and conditions that feel unsafe.” Jackson-Dumont talked about wanting to have a gimlet, imagining it tucked into her bra or up a sleeve, and then shifted to discuss her aging mother's slow slide into dementia. Having had a mother who also suffered from that ailment, I felt a kinship with her experience. Jackson-Dumont described her mother's daily rituals of applying makeup in a mirror, looking at herself, and saying in a lower register, though still audible, “You a bad bitch” and, in the next breath, “Look at God.” These snippets of real life drew laughter from us and gave her story heft, letting the audience understand how profoundly it hurt when she heard her mother say, “I don't feel free.” The room audibly sighed at that line.



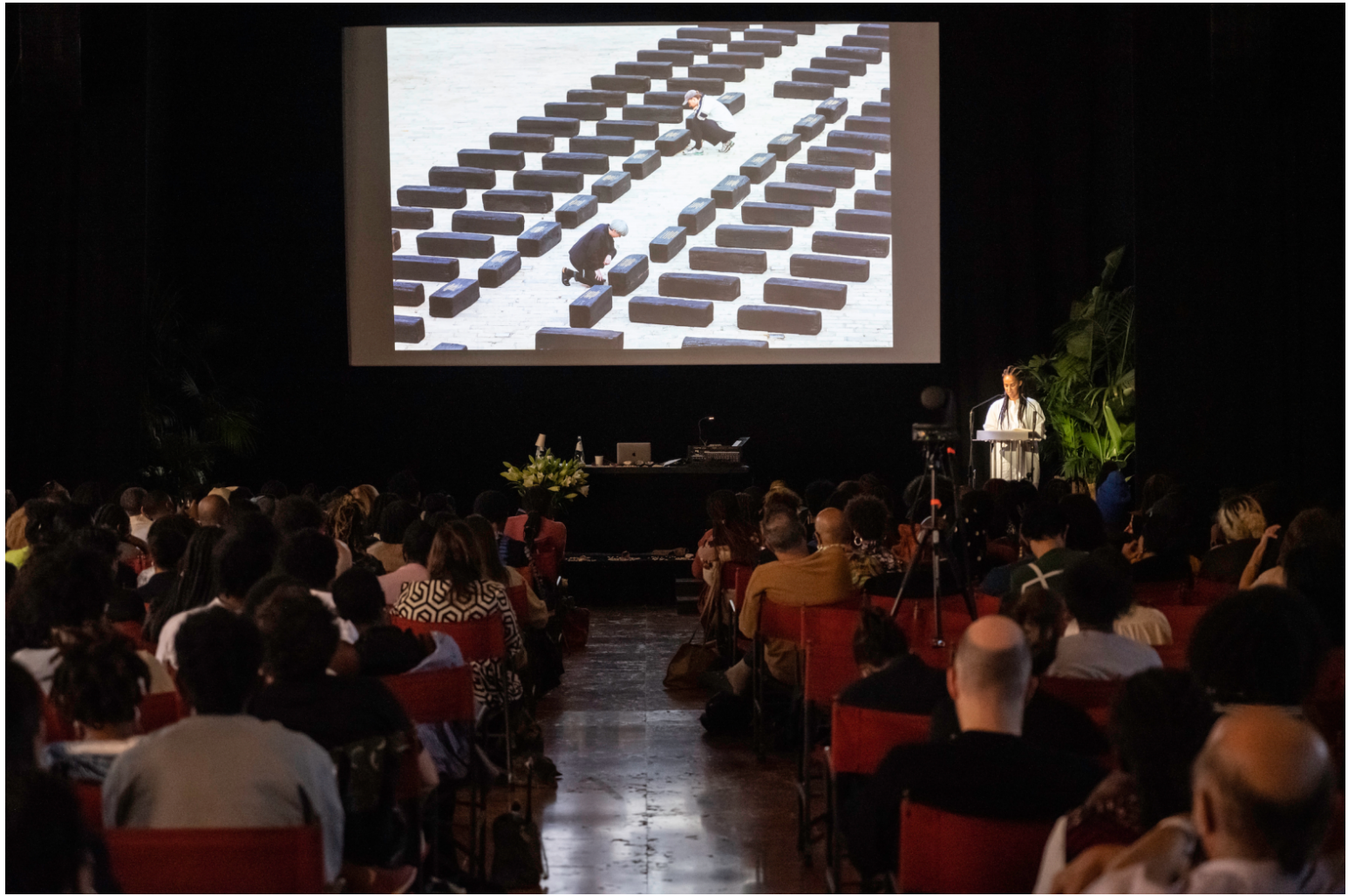
Sandra Jackson-Dumont speaking at the "Loophole of Retreat" symposium, Venice, October 8, 2022 (photo by Claudia Rossini)

Jackson-Dumont said that she wanted to give her mother a gimlet, but didn't have one to give. Then, when she started to personally care for her mother, and looked at all the collaged images of famous Black people and members of her family she had put up on several walls in her apartment, she realized that these installations were her mother's loophole of retreat and that each of these images were gimlets that let in air and light. More, Jackson-Dumont connected this realization to her own work as a museum director whose core concern is "how to make life relevant through things." While she was speaking, many around me were openly crying, and when she was done almost every person rose to give her a standing ovation. Jackson-Dumont gave us a piece of herself as she came into the knowledge of who her mother is and how she is very much her mother's daughter, carrying on a life-giving tradition that Jackson-Dumont to an extent inherited from her.

Several presentations were beautiful, and beautifully moving as well. Negarra A. Kudumu began her talk in a state of heightened emotion. She attempted to discuss how freedom, examined historically in the African continent among colonized people, was intimately connected with love and self-regard. She recounted in a halting voice, often on the verge of breaking into tears, how a certain branch of Catholic thought — the

Antonian ministry — took hold in the Congo, and within it indigenous people could come to understand what Toni Morrison had defined as the essence of freedom: You are made free in order to make others free. At one point in the presentation, when it seemed like she was having difficulty continuing, a friend in the audience, Tina Campt, went onstage and put her hands on Kudumu's back and shoulders, supporting her emotionally and physically, demonstrating what the work of hands can do.

Conversely some presentations made me recall — I had come to this realization before — that offering academic papers at symposia is not generally helpful to the audience, at least not as helpful as it is presumed to be. Listeners have too little time to parse dense writing, thus oftentimes these presentations feel like job auditions, anxious claims to authority, or appeals to recognize their eligibility to be on the dais, rather than avenues to deep discussion. For example, Rizvana Bradley, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, delivered a paper titled “Awaiting Her Verb” in which she rapid-fire referenced Hortense Spillers, Stuart Hall, Tina Campt, Franz Fanon, and other stalwarts in the Black liberation canon. In one instance she quoted **Saidiya Hartman**, saying something about bridging “the gulf between the sovereign and the fungible.” Bradley I'm sure is a fine researcher, but I needed a few minutes to wrap my head around what that phrase meant, and by then I had lost the plot to the rest of her paper. (Bradley was helpful after the fact though, by providing the source of that particular phrase when I emailed her.) Other kinds of narratives and research-oriented explorations need to be made regularly at public symposia. The personal is not only political; it's also where most of humanity lives.



Grada Kilomba presenting at the "Loophole of Retreat" symposium, Venice, October 8, 2022 (photo by Claudia Rossini)



Tsedaye Makonnen, "The Need for Black Refuge: Venice" at the "Loophole of Retreat" symposium, Venice, October 7, 2022 (photo by Glorija Blazinsek)

The symposium was very well organized. We had a legion of guides and others all around the Fondazione Giorgio Cini who helped us get to performance venues, lunch spaces, and a break area with couches and chairs to view the proceedings in a space more comfortable than the main meeting hall. With few impediments to enjoying the presentations, interviews, and performances, my main dilemma was having to make ruthless choices about what to see (while also running back across the lagoon to see some of the biennale's international pavilions).

Thankfully, I made the choice to attend the back-to-back performances of Tsedaye Makonnen and Ayana Evans. Makonnen began her performance at one end of the stage covered almost completely by a glossy royal blue caftan or abaya adorned with appliquéd plastic or acrylic runic symbols. She strode onto the stage and then prostrated herself, manipulating the fabric to billow out in front of her as she rhythmically raised it into the air and hurled it down onto the hard surface of the ground. She repeated this action, at times with such force that some of the ornaments broke off. As she made her way around the space on hands and knees an audio recording of **her intervention during the previous Venice Biennale** at the site of Christoph Büchel's

“Barca Nostra (Our Boat)” (2019) played. Büchel’s piece was essentially a reclaimed barge that had sunk in the Mediterranean in 2015, taking the lives of over 1,000 migrants fleeing North Africa with it. In the 2019 recording I heard Makonnen saying “This is not a performance,” as the police and biennale representatives tried to prevent her from spreading rose petals and lying on the ground to commemorate those who had died, while the gravestone was trivialized as a tourist gewgaw. Indeed, it was more than performative: it was an act of mourning for children of the continent who, like Harriet Jacobs, were attempting to leave their dreadful circumstances behind. It was fitting that Makonnen reprised and extended that memorialization during the retreat.

Makonnen was followed immediately by her friend and frequent collaborator Ayana Evans, who turned the space into a colorful bacchanal. After posing playfully and flirtatiously in **her signature neon catsuit** (here with her midriff exposed), Evans began using a length of sheer, green fabric as a rope for an impromptu tug-of-war contest between her and Makonnen. Following that, Evans stretched out the fabric to create a canopy and then invited people to come and join her onstage, holding it up to create a dance space. As hip-hop music blared, Evans asked for a ladder to be brought to her, stepped onto it holding a microphone, and became the MC of an ad hoc party. People shimmied and boogied as she related that she had recently had a miscarriage, and thus needed a reason to celebrate with her friends, colleagues, and anyone else yearning to leave their troubles behind for the moment. I found myself appreciating the way that Makonnen and Evans together demonstrated that seemingly opposite emotional responses to calamity are both right and reasonable, and one has as much to do with healing as the other.



Ayana Evans, "Sparkle #5: I love you" at the "Loophole of Retreat" symposium, Venice, October 7, 2022 (photo by Glorija Blazinsek)

On the final day of the symposium a video of Lorraine O'Grady's film *Greetings & Theses* was screened before Simone Leigh engaged the artist in an interview. During this unconstrained conversation O'Grady described the sum total of her artistic work up until this point as "self-exploration, putting myself together." Because I believe very much in the public and transparent discussion of the problems of our politics, her understanding that this work needed to be done in communal spaces resonated with me. An understanding of the importance of her relationship to those afforded less power and authority also came through as she discussed the Decolonize Museums protests that took place outside the Brooklyn Museum during her retrospective there. As she was confronted by trans activists, O'Grady said she began to wonder: "Have I become part of what is keeping the door closed to them?" One of her final comments to Leigh was that in order not to be defeated in the cultural war that is being waged, one question we (I assume she meant Black women) need to ask is, "How imaginative are we going to be in creating allies."

This thought stayed with me days after returning from Venice as I recalled the work of Fred Hampton, who sought to cultivate a broad racial, gender, and ethnic coalition to address the root causes of poverty and

alienation. And again, the words of Toni Morrison via Kudumu came back to me: that my freedom is gained in order to make others free. There is a rich vein of political thought in the United States that has long touted freedom as its central concern and the prime motivation of human life in general. But the last few years have made me aware that much of the public discussion of liberty in mainstream US culture — especially those arguments pertaining to mandated vaccination, gun ownership, the use of dark money to influence elections — tends to be selfish, myopic, and juvenile, distressed by having *any* limitations placed on people’s agency, rather than considering how one’s actions might inhibit or empower someone else. Depending on the context and the speaker, “freedom” might mean radically different things. I am buoyed by the freedom song of Rashida Bumbray, of Simone Leigh, of Lorraine O’Grady, of Sandra Jackson-Dumont. It is a song that invites me to join in, and it lets in enough light and air for all of us.



Conversation between Lorraine O’ Grady and Simone Leigh at the “Loophole of Retreat” symposium, Venice, October 9, 2022 (photo by Claudia Rossini)

Loophole of Retreat took place from Friday through Sunday October 7-9 at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, Italy.

Editor's Note: *Hotel accommodations and meals were provided to the author by the ICA Boston.*

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