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Precious Okoyomon's portals to Black queer ecologies

Author(s)

Jordan Mason Mayfield

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About the author(s)

is a writer and researcher based in New York. They are a PhD Candidate in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University. Their dissertation, 'Black Queer Feminist Eco-Aesthetics in the Afterlives of the Slave Trade', explores the aesthetic methods of Black women and Black queer artists of marginalised genders whose work considers the intersections of memory, the afterlives of slavery, ecology, queerness, feminisms and Blackness.

Cover image:

Precious Okoyomon's portals to Black queer ecologies

by Jordan Mason Mayfield • 20.03.2024

The artist, writer and chef Precious Okoyomon (b.1993) conjures alternate realms of possibility and animacy outside of white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy. Their practice displays a highly ecological sensibility, namely an attention to the ways in which bodies are interconnected with their surrounding environment. Okoyomon demonstrates how the imagined closing and opening up of worlds can call forth a radical communing of all things in our ecosystems. Their installations and poetry can be understood as a manifestation of José Esteban Muñoz's claim that 'queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world'.¹ As such, Okoyomon's works of art and words scramble Western notions of linear time, and collage together past and present Black catastrophes with a demand that a better, queerer and Blacker world materialise in the future.

In 2018 Okoyomon collaborated with the writer and artist Hannah Black (b.1981) on the exhibition *I NEED HELP* [FIG.1](#) at Real Fine Arts, New York (8th January–4th February). The exhibition text described the show as a 'disintegrating iteration' of Black's solo show *Some Context* at Chisenhale Gallery, London, which was staged the previous year, with works by Okoyomon made in response. Shredded paper was a recurrent material throughout the show: it was stuffed inside various white, beige and brown fabric animals [FIG.2](#), littered on the floor and mixed into balls of soil [FIG.3](#). These paper fragments consisted partly of the remnants of the 20,000 copies of Black's book *The Situation* (2017) that formed a key element of *Some Context*.² Through the use of soil and paper, Okoyomon and Black highlighted the role of the environment and its material interaction with the societal and discursive. The artist and poet manuel arturo abreu (b.1991) argues that the exhibition employed:



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Hannah Black and Precious Okoyomon: I NEED HELP* at Real Fine Arts, New York, 2018.

citation as a gastrointestinal metaphor or context [...] link[ing] abject aesthetics with community-oriented politics 'based on the underlying and frankly disgusting processes of rot and collapse that have produced the dirt from which everything grows'.³



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Hannah Black and Precious Okoyomon: I NEED HELP* at Real Fine Arts, New York, 2018.

At work, therefore, in *I NEED HELP* was the interplay between creation and destruction, or what abreu describes as 'the inevitable horizon of death and decay – and the celebration of the fact that from this horizon all life springs'.⁴



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Hannah Black and Precious Okoyomon: I NEED HELP* at Real Fine Arts, New York, 2018.

The cycle of death and rebirth is a frequent theme in Okoyomon's practice. The ending of worlds allows for something new that could tear at the very logic of oppression and colonialism to unfold in its wake. These concerns are also present in Okoyomon's poetry. In their poem 'The World Is Breaking in Flowers the Breadth of Things', for example, they narrate a moment of love alongside scenes of war and destruction. Amid the 'darkness' and 'void[s]' that plague this poetic scene – and our physical world – Okoyomon urges the reader to 'bring yourself back to the earth'.⁵ There is a calmness to their words, even in the midst of societal collapse; it is an act of surrender to the environment and a recognition of the place everything and everybody holds in these ecologies.

Okoyomon's repeated use of the Japanese vine kudzu is a further testament to their interest in the relationship between destruction and creation. The artist incorporated the vine in their solo exhibition *Earthseed* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (22nd August–1st November 2020) **FIG.4**, before turning to it again in *FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD* at Performance Space New York (20th March–9th May 2021) and their installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* **FIG.5** **FIG.6**, which was part of *The Milk of Dreams* at the 59th Venice Biennale (23rd April–27th November 2022). Kudzu was first imported to Mississippi in 1876 after the American Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans. Due to the overcultivation of cotton on Southern plantations, the soil was left vulnerable to erosion, which added to the ecological damage of dust storms during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. To strengthen the ground, kudzu was widely circulated by the Soil Conservation Service and planted across the South of America. However, the invasive vine quickly spread and overtook

other flora. As a result, kudzu is now a common species in the South well-known for its invasiveness, and it is illegal to import it into the United States.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: Earthseed* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, 2020. (Photograph Diana Pfammatter).

In *Earthseed*, Okoyomon conjured this history through the work of the science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler. *Earthseed* is the fictitious religion in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a post-apocalyptic novel of economic, political and environmental upheaval. The central tenet of *Earthseed* is that 'God is Change' or, in other words, that the only thing constant and absolute in our world is the force of change.⁶ By juxtaposing the Black American history of enslavement and Butler's tale of environmental and societal dystopia, Okoyomon connected past ecological catastrophe with the present and speculative futures of environmental and racial disaster. Over the course of the exhibition, the kudzu grew larger and took over more and more of the gallery FIG.7. However, the work did not solely focus on destruction through this encroachment. Rather, the invocation of *Earthseed* and its core mantra presented viewers with an opportunity to ruminate on what may come of these changes. Large sculptures composed of lambswool, dirt and wire were also spread across the gallery. Okoyomon titled each after angels – *Angel of the void*, *Angel of death*, *Angel of dreams* and *Angel of light* – indicating that perhaps there is a force greater than humanity watching over the process of change.

Okoyomon is extremely thoughtful in how they approach moments of death and rebirth. Their exhibition *FRAGMENTED BODY PERCEPTIONS AS HIGHER VIBRATION FREQUENCIES TO GOD* served as a kind of memorial or environment for collective mourning. A gravel path was nestled between groupings of plants,

large stacks of rocks and curving walls of dirt, moss and rock; a small water fountain led to a fishpond. Visitors were invited to sit or lie down in the space as kudzu ashes were scattered from the ceiling. Anaïs Castro described the exhibition as ‘a space of recollection and reverence [...and] an attempt to tackle the immeasurable grief that resulted from the devastation of the past year’.⁷ One can interpret this ‘devastation’ as numerous events: the deaths resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, or the lives lost over the years to police brutality and systemic racism. For Okoyomon, such events blend into one another and into the past, present and future. Okoyomon allowed for the deep grief and sorrow resulting from these experiences to be felt by visitors, providing a place for communal exchange. Their use of ashes in this installation can be interpreted as a kind of cremation, or memorial for a world of the past, and for the incalculability of Black death.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *The Milk of Dreams*, Arsenale, Venice, 2022, showing *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, by Precious Okoyomon. 2022. Installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia; photograph Andrea Avezzi).

For the installation *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, Okoyomon grew kudzu with another plant that is tightly intertwined with the history of slavery: sugarcane. During French, British and Dutch colonial rule in the Caribbean, sugarcane was cultivated heavily, especially in Cuba, Martinique and Haiti. Okoyomon’s installation was inspired by the Martinican poet and theorist Édouard Glissant’s only play, *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961), which tells the story of the Haitian Revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture. As French colonies, both Martinique and Haiti were major suppliers of sugar during the reign of chattel slavery on the islands. Sugar refineries were extremely dangerous and many enslaved Africans lost their lives while producing the crop. By placing kudzu and sugarcane in dialogue with L’Ouverture, Glissant and Caribbean history, Okoyomon stressed how history is deeply

embedded within the environment. Sugarcane and kudzu are a part of the present ecosystems in the United States and the Caribbean, thus linking the history of slavery to the present day in a very tangible way.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *The Milk of Dreams*, Arsenale, Venice, 2022, showing *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, by Precious Okoyomon. 2022. Installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia; photograph Andrea Avezzù).

Themes of Blackness, Black history and ecology are felt throughout Okoyomon's works. In their 2019 exhibition *A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* at Luma Westbau, Zurich (21st February–21st April 2019) **FIG.8**, the artist linked histories of anti-Black racial discrimination with the environment.⁸ It comprised leafless, small trees planted in mounds of soil on the gallery floor. As abreu notes in their aforementioned essay, 'cotton rains down occasionally from a machine built on-site, referencing Christina Sharpe's idea that anti-blackness is the weather – that is, just as pervasive, invisible, and central to western life'.⁹ Globe lamps hung from the ceiling, referencing eighteenth-century New York lantern laws stipulating that Black and Indigenous people must carry lanterns after dark.⁴ Additionally, strung up on the trees were stuffed animals – an allusion to the lynching of Black Americans. Okoyomon affixed a pair of wings to each animal **FIG.9**, aligning them with angels, which Quinn Harrelson describes in the exhibition material as 'creature[s] without life and death'.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: Earthseed* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, 2020. (Photograph Diana Pfammatter).

For Okoyomon, Harrelson explains, this mirrors ‘the ontological suffering and material heft of blackness in America where the racialized person is made to live in a state of being always and already dead’. Here, the artist recalls Orlando Patterson’s theory of ‘social death’, as posited in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), in which he argues that ‘the definition of a slave [...is] as a socially dead person. Alienated from all “rights” or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order’.¹¹ While Okoyomon’s positioning of the angel represented this state of non-being, they also subverted this logic by claiming that the Black body is a celestial being – an existence that cannot be defined by the epistemologies of the known world.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* at Luma Westbau, Zurich, 2019. (Photograph Nelly Rodriguez).

Okoyomon's practice also calls upon the viewer to understand their identity and body in relation to the world around them. Their installations put human viewers in conversation with non-human beings, such as the flora discussed throughout this article, as well as fungi **FIG.10**, insects and animals, which often live within the artist's garden-installations, such as crickets, ladybirds, lizards, spiders **FIG.11**, butterflies and snails. In *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, Okoyomon even titled the presence of the butterflies as a separate, standalone work: *The Sky Is Always Black Fort Mose*. Communion between human flesh and mosquitos were regularly witnessed and encountered during the Venice Biennale. As in *Earthseed*, throughout this installation there were anthropomorphic figures of wire, lambswool and dirt. Their titles – such as *Efua*, *The Sun is my Own Darkness Swallowed in Flames an Angel Reborn* – reference names in Esan, an ethnic group in Nigeria. These figures helped to animate and mimic the interspecies interactions already happening within the garden.



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* at Luma Westbau, Zurich, 2019. (Photograph Nelly Rodriguez).

Similarly, Okoyomon's recent collaboration with the artist Dozie Kanu (b.1993) for *Sequences* **FIG.12**, an artist-run biennial in Reykjavík (13th–22nd October 2023), was reliant on both human and elemental interaction. *Fragmented Sky – wind – fly giving presence to wind* was installed at the Gróttá Island Lighthouse **FIG.13** and consisted of six hundred bells strung up on ropes along the shoreline and in the lighthouse itself.¹² Inside, a recording of Okoyomon's poetry played in concert with the ringing bells, creating a symphony of human and non-human interplay.

Okoyomon also physically explores the bodily and sensorial

through food. As a child, they watched their mother working in the kitchen of her Nigerian restaurant in Cincinnati.¹³ Okoyomon subsequently worked in restaurants and a gastronomy kitchen while studying at Shimer Great Books School in Chicago, notably as a prep and line cook at the restaurant Alinea. Okoyomon is also a part of the queer cooking collective Spiral Theory Test Kitchen, alongside fellow artists Bobbi Salvör Menezes (b.1993) and Quori Theodor (b.1993), which has hosted dinner parties at various galleries and art world events in New York.¹⁴



Fig. 10 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* at Luma Westbau, Zurich, 2019. (Photograph Nelly Rodriguez).

The microcosms that Okoyomon creates also open a portal to the potentiality of Black queer worlds. In their poem 'Sky song', which was performed and published in conjunction with *Earthseed*, Okoyomon narrates tales of queer eroticism alongside earth-shattering events, for example:



Fig. 11 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: Earthseed* at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, 2020. (Photograph Diana Pfammatter).

To the point of ecstasy you cocoon inside of me with
fragrances
You laugh
I Sing
The references flare
On like cocooned palms



Fig. 12 Installation view of *Sequences XI: Can't See*, Reykjavík, 2023, showing *Fragmented Sky - wind - fly giving presence to wind*, by Precious Okoyomon and Dozie Kanu. 2023. Installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph Vikram Pradhan).

[...]



Fig. 13 Installation view of *Sequences XI: Can't See*, Reykjavík, 2023, showing *Fragmented Sky - wind - fly giving presence to wind*, by Precious Okoyomon and Dozie Kanu. 2023. Installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph Vikram Pradhan).

The mouth sings the hands the ass the feet the cunt
Your entire being liquefies into sounds the voices the
rhythm
Meet me inside of the chrysalis¹⁵



Fig. 14 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty* at the Aspen Art Museum, 2021-22. (Photograph Tony Prikryl).

By combining these words of queer pleasure with Black history and the possibility of a new world, Okoyomon asserts the necessity for Black queer existence in these emerging realms. And what of the angels that visit Okoyomon's galleries: are they ushers of destruction or inception? Or perhaps of both? Queerness concerns the rejection of a normative view of the world and the questioning of its logic. It is, therefore, inevitable that one would question the static binary of destruction and creation in favour of a perspective that merges both acts in anticipation of something new.



Fig. 15 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty* at the Aspen Art Museum, 2021–22. (Photograph Tony Prikryl).

This duality was present in Okoyomon's exhibition *Every Earthly Morning the Sky's Light touches Ur Life is Unprecedented in its Beauty* at the Aspen Art Museum (21st July–18th September 2022) **FIG.14**.

The artist installed a garden on the roof of the museum and collaborated with local farmers to plant kudzu and honeysuckle alongside flora indigenous to the region, such as milk thistle, dandelions and mugwort. For Okoyomon, the resilience of kudzu to grow and survive in foreign lands is similar to that of enslaved Africans and their descendants, who were forced to make a home in the Americas and the Caribbean.¹⁶ Furthermore, Okoyomon's own history as a London-born Nigerian who immigrated to the United States as a child can be connected to the perceived 'foreignness' of kudzu.⁴ Throughout the garden, they installed protective sculptures of clay, scagliola and soil **FIG.15**, which resemble the angels and sculptures in previous works.

This exploration of forced home-making, relocation and marronage was also threaded throughout the recent exhibition *the sun eats her children* at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome (19th June–16th September 2023) **FIG.16**. In the former church, Okoyomon planted a garden full of such species as lantana, bitter nightshade, stinging nettle and jimson weed – all of which have the ability to produce poison. These beautiful yet deadly plants evoke Okoyomon's continued exploration of the dualities of creation and destruction. The environment was also home to an animatronic, lingerie-clad teddy bear called Beloved **FIG.17**, named after the seminal Toni Morrison text, and a gathering of butterflies. Beloved was positioned on its side, asleep, but woke at intervals to release a scream – voiced by Okoyomon, Saidiya Hartman and Okwui Okpokwasili. The communing of black butterflies referenced an

eighteenth-century settlement of formerly enslaved Black people who escaped the American South for Fort Mose, located in what was then Spanish Florida; Okoyomon framed the constant flight of butterflies as a metaphor for the fugitive life of those who have endured enslavement.

Currently, Okoyomon's work can be seen in their first solo exhibition in Spain, *When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* (22nd February–3rd April 2024) **FIG.18**. Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist for the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, the exhibition is a living meditation on the writer and poet Anne Boyer's essay of the same name. Installed inside the Montaña de los gatos in El Retiro Park, Madrid, the exhibition posits the lamb **FIG.19** as a resilient and resourceful creature able to survive the most impossible of circumstances. Again, one can find in Okoyomon's work a metaphor for Blackness and the ability of people of African descent to survive calamities across the globe. Incorporating poetry and musical arrangements, here Okoyomon creates an immersive realm to engage the viewer in their world as a Black, queer and non-binary artist.

In *The Lonely Letters* (2020), the scholar and artist Ashon T. Crawley meditates on the apocalypse and the end of the world. He warns that one should be careful of what they mean by the phrase 'the world', when, in fact, there are multitudes of worlds and infinite species living in them. Furthermore, Crawley argues that 'life in blackness, desires the end of a world that considers itself as the and the only world'.¹⁸ In other words, if one calls for the end of the world then this should specify the world created by a white supremacist, cis-heteronormative patriarchy. Crawley continues: 'life in blackness, is an opening up to and the flowering of the plurality of worlds, worlds already here, worlds that have beeeeen been here, worlds to come'.⁴ Perhaps all humans need to learn to co-exist with the kudzu and other flora, not out of a selfish need to survive, but because all beings are already in existence with other species. Okoyomon's gardens show us that the colonial and Euro-Western cartesian split between 'human' and 'nature' is false: our worlds will always overlap and intertwine with each other. Okoyomon opens our eyes to what Black, queer worlds might be birthed by the limitless bounds of our own imaginations.



Fig. 16 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children* at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, 2023. (Courtesy the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome; photograph Daniele Molajoli).



Fig. 17 Installation view of *Precious Okoyomon: the sun eats her children* at Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, 2023. (Courtesy the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome; photograph Daniele Molajoli).



Fig. 18 Installation view of *Precious Okomoyon: When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* at Montaña de los gatos in El Retiro Park, Madrid, 2024. (Courtesy Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin; photograph Benedetta Mascalchi).



Fig. 19 Installation view of Precious Okomoyon: *When the Lambs Rise Up Against the Bird of Prey* at Montaña de los gatos in El Retiro Park, Madrid, 2024. (Courtesy Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin; photograph Benedetta Mascalchi).

Footnotes

- 1** J.E. Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009, p.1.
- 2** See N. Power: 'Hannah Black, some context', *The White Review* (November 2017), available at www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/hannah-black-context-chisenhale-galler, accessed 19th March 2024.

- 3** m.a. abreu: 'Precious Okoyomon', *CURA*. 31 (summer 2019), available at [curamagazine.com/digital/precious-okoyomon/](https://www.curamagazine.com/digital/precious-okoyomon/), accessed 19th March 2024.
- 4** *Ibid.*
- 5** P. Okoyomon: 'The World Is Breaking in Flowers the Breadth of Things', *The New York Times Magazine* (11th May 2023), available at www.nytimes.com/2023/05/11/magazine/poem-the-world-is-breaking-in-flowers-the-breath-of-things.html, accessed 19th March 2023.
- 6** O.E. Butler: *Parable of the Sower*, New York 1993, p.3.
- 7** A. Castro: 'Precious Okoyomon: "Fragmented Body Perception As Higher Vibration Frequencies To God"', *Esse* 103 (fall 2021), available at esse.ca/en/reviews/precious-okoyomon/, accessed 19th March 2024.
- 8** In conjunction with the exhibition in Zurich, Okoyomon debuted their first play, *The End of the World*, at the Serpentine Galleries, London. The play was scored by Yves B. Golden and featured the model Vanessa Ohenlen, the actors Vivian Oparah and Nancy Ofori, and the artist Phoebe Collings-James as 'angels of light, death and the sun' who, according to the exhibition materials, 'have fallen to earth' in anticipation of a 'reckoning'.
- 9** abreu, *op. cit.* (note 3).
- 10** *Ibid.*
- 11** O. Patterson: *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge MA 1982, p.5.
- 12** See E. Fullerton: 'How an intergenerational cohort of artists at an Icelandic Biennial grappled with notions of darkness', *Artnet* (30th October 2023), available at news.artnet.com/art-world/icelandic-biennial-darkness-2382269, accessed 19th March 2024; and *idem*: '7 standout artists from "Sequences", Iceland's artist-run biennial', *Artsy* (25th October 2023), available at www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-7-standout-artists-sequences-icelands-artist-run-biennial, accessed 19th March 2024.
- 13** P. Okoyomon: 'Rirkrit Tiravanija introduces Precious Okoyomon to his chaos menu', *BOMB Magazine* (13th October 2023), available at www.interviewmagazine.com/art/rirkrit-tiravanija-introduces-precious-okoyomon-to-his-chaos-menu, accessed 19th March 2024.
- 14** See R. Hahn: 'Spiral Theory Test Kitchen wants to change the way you taste', *Vogue* (4th December 2019), available at www.vogue.com/article/spiral-theory-test-kitchen-queer-cooking-collective, accessed 19th March 2024.
- 15** P. Okoyomon: 'Sky song', in *Precious Okoyomon: Earthseed*, exhibition booklet, n.p.

- 16** J. Das: 'Making and destroying myths: Precious Okoyomon', *BOMB Magazine* (14th April 2021), available at bombmagazine.org/articles/making-and-destroying-myths-precious-okoyomon-interviewed/, accessed 19th March 2024.
- 17** *Ibid.*
- 18** A.T. Crawley: *The Lonely Letters*, Durham NC 2020, p.32.
- 19** *Ibid.*

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