

“Restricted Access”:

Researching and Embodying *Navassa: An Astrolabe*

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What happens when we forget a place?

While exploring the scant evidences for and (more importantly) the meanings underlying a mythic island for a term paper in a Celtic Folklore course during spring 2014, I became peripherally fascinated by the idea of an inverse to this construction – a geographically present place without a native folk contingency. Such an island exists, very real and nearly forgotten, and it lurks in American jurisdiction. There are no native inhabitants of Navassa Island, a 2.008 square mile cay a few miles off the coast of Haiti; it is without fresh water. Even so, 19th Century American imperialism claimed the island (along with +100 others across the globe) under the spurious Guano Islands Act of 1856. The Navassa Island Riot of 1889 sent ripples throughout the labor sectors of the Gilded Age but has since been relatively forgotten. The stories of humans' limited interactions with the now “restricted access zone,” according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, have enthralled me for the last year.

I immediately began work on a chapbook of poems pertaining to Navassa, but, influenced by LeAnne Howe's remarkable text on mythmaking and embodiment in place-based narrative, *Choctalking on Other Realities*, I soon chose to tell the story as a stageplay. (I discovered only later that Professor Howe would begin teaching at UGA in fall 2014.) Given the grander scale of the myth, then, I knew that more research would be required if I wanted to flesh out the world of the play, but to my surprise, the historical databases (America: History and Life with Full Text, Historical Newspapers Online, African American Biographical Database chief among them) with which I began in the library turned up only a handful of articles and absolutely no monographs. The vast majority of results I uncovered amounted to roughly 20 newspaper articles dating from the Golden Age of Yellow Journalism. After that, it would appear national attentions turned away from Navassa, and even two of the four articles demonstrating rigorous criticism predate what we might now call post-Colonial rhetoric. It felt like a dead end.

The Multi-Search became my ally. I began pulling at every thread of this patchwork narrative, drawing from panoply databases: Biological Sciences, Ethnic NewsWatch, CQ Supreme Court Collection, Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Abstracts, among others. My study

had grown increasingly transdisciplinary, the prospect of which excites me but also locates my research and analysis along difficult terrains. Suddenly I found myself swimming in Congressional reports, 19th century Supreme Court proceedings, book-length reportage on native biota, pamphlets, circulars, ham radio enthusiasts' documentation, interviews reproduced entirely in Creole, journals detailing the earliest European contact with the island, video-graphic re-creations of Taïno ceremonies, maps of all varieties, and more. Synthesizing all of this material into a cohesive script overwhelms, but I have also been fortunate in having access to mentors like Professor Howe, Dr. John Patrick Bray, Dr. Marla Carlson, and Dr. Freda Scott Giles (professor emerita) throughout the process. Howe's work on "tribalography" and all of their guidance toward writer / theorists like Femi Euba, Wole Soyinka, Marie Clements, and Jo Carson have been more than influential in developing the text of *Navassa: An Astrolabe*. Not all of the advice gleaned from these sources has been in concert, but their complementary perspectives have certainly deepened my treatment of the multifarious story.

As the recipient of the 2015 New Georgia Award, the play will be performed April 13-14th, 2015 in the Cellar Theater at UGA. Nothing is better for a new play than a production, a chance to show how the text functions on its intended platform, but this process is proving especially opportune because so much of the Performance Studies research through which I have been focusing the entire exploration demands that these texts and stories be *embodied* in physical spaces with actors. Our creative team is working with performers and designers to interrogate these many histories by becoming them, layering them into their own bodies and other media—a vibrant method in the field today—and then analyzing our findings. In addition to traditional rehearsals, we are also planning excursions in off-campus wilderness spaces order to allow the team to handle the story in a natural setting, letting the environment inform their interpretations. The intimate quality of this kind of rehearsal work will be further supplemented by the mounds of primary and secondary sources which I have already compiled for the generation of the text. The director, designers, and actors are in a sense inheriting this documentation to all the more interweave these many disciplines.

My role as dramaturge for the forthcoming production of *Navassa: An Astrolabe* positions me to continue researching historical, environmental, legal, anthropological, and mythic resources germane to the play, but it also allows a freedom to experiment, observe, and scrutinize it as a process. There is a reason I was not satisfied with the poems comprising my first attempt to tell this story: performativity is essential to this narrative. *Navassa* is a story we must tell together. The more traditional records have (and continue as I continue to uncover more) colored my understanding of the world of the script, but only as we move into embodiment research have we truly begun what I consider the *work* of the play.

Grave injustices and counter-histories are at stake in the narrative of Navassa Island, so inasmuch as we working to develop the text of a new play, we are also helping to pioneer a new generation of theatre for social change and doing so through rigorous, transdisciplinary, and sometimes transgressive arts-based research.

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