

Eckdsis

By

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Abstract

Eckdis is a thesis exhibition that explores childhood play as resistance, reclamation, and healing.

This paper specifically addresses the lack of safe spaces for Black children to mature into adulthood unmarred by societal standards of conduct supported by racism and prejudice. *Eckdis* argues why play is necessary in the lives of Black people and why it may be a revolutionary act.

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Table of Contents

1 *Eckdsis* 1

Works Cited 14

List of Figures

Figure 1 Wide angle view of Eckdsis	1
Figure 2 Moose sitting in her living room	2
Figure 3 Moose's tinkering in her creative space.....	2
Figure 4 Moose paints the wall.....	3
Figure 5 Moose is suspended in the air and represent the speculative aspect of Eckdsis.....	3
Figure 6 Large scale automata crack toy taken from the earlier work Get on Board which was included in Eckdsis	5
<i>Figure 7 Moose eyes glitch while she is watching television. She is processing, and reconfiguring messaging from her media consumption.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Figure 8 Moose stares back at viewer she is the only marionette to acknowledge and confront the viewer.....	10
Figure 9 Pop-up book scene 5 from God Gave Her Children.....	12
Figure 10 ‘The Wishing Bench’ What James Wore When He Met Tom Foolery	12

1 *Eckdsis*

As a kid, I ran headfirst. From the time I was six until I was about eleven, my family called me “Moose— head heavy, headstrong, and heavily destructive. This younger version of myself was the inspiration for my thesis exhibition *Eckdsis*¹. In this show, Moose is re-imagined as the young, African

American protagonist at the crossroads of childhood and teenage years. Resisting initiation into a constrictive social order and racial and gender stereotypes, Moose manifests a vibrant inner



Figure 1 Wide angle view of *Eckdsis*

world. She opposes the constraints placed on her ability to dream, imagine, and create. In the reconfigured gallery space, Moose sheds all expectations to step into the person she wants to become.

The exhibition features four life-sized marionettes, each posed to signify Moose’s engagement in varying stages of different creative processes (figure 1). Each marionette wears a

¹ *Eckdsis* is an intentional misspelling of the word **ecdysis**; a process of molting or shedding of an outer cuticular layer, a process often seen in snakes or cicadas. Ironically the entomology of the word is more pertinent to the context of this show borrowed from the Greek word *ékdyxis* meaning “getting out, escape.”

bright red jumper. The arrangement of the gallery space was meant to allow viewers' eyes to move around the room thus creating a sense of movement and energy. In the first scene, Moose is slouched in a fabricated cardboard wing chair (figure 2). Two sources of light



Figure 2 Moose sitting in her living room

radiate in this specific section of the gallery space— one from a blaring television and another from a low pressure-sodium lamp to create monochromatic lighting denoting both memory and a dream like state. The strings from which the marionettes hang signify the literal and figurative regulation and control of Moose's body. In the second scene (figure 3), Moose lays on her stomach tinkering with an old vintage record player that spins under a makeshift Victrola made from a sewing needle and plastic top. The speaker is constructed out of a recycled soda bottle. On her head she has crafted a helmet made of papier mâché with toy echo microphones protruding from it like spikes. Scattered on the floor are paintings and drawings along with scrap pieces



Figure 3 Moose's tinkering in her creative space

of paper. Moose's creative workspace provides a look at unregulated play and discovery. Moose

confronts the viewer in the third scene with yellow paint splattered over her jumpsuit and face as she stands in a puddle of yellow. Presumably, she has already painted streaks of yellow on three sides of the gallery walls (figure 4). She stands in defiance. This act along with her attitude represents Moose's rebellion and the resistance to the idea of a well-behaved child. Her creativity has no bounds and will not be squelched as she paints a brighter world within a bleak existence. In the fourth scene, Moose takes flight and shadows dance on the gallery walls. She has the agency to leave or escape. She is the embodiment of freedom.



Figure 4 Moose paints the wall

My MFA thesis exhibition invites observers to examine childhood creativity and the ways imagination lies at the intersection of fear and joy for all children but especially for Black children. In this historical moment, where racial violence arrests national attention, *Eckdsis* challenges audiences to envision play as a



Figure 5 Moose is suspended in the air and represent the speculative aspect of *Eckdsis*

means of self-preservation and self-making. More importantly, it begs audiences to consider play as a tool for self-actualization and agency. Because racialized and gendered oppression frequently stifles the creativity of Black children, I contend that play, for Black children especially, is the root of their self-worth.

I was born and raised in West Evanston, in a predominantly Black and Brown suburb of Chicago. In junior high, most of my friends lived in North Evanston— a predominately white, upper-middle class area. There were distinct differences in our neighborhoods, although crime rates were generally low across the town. My neighborhood and its surrounding area were dubbed as “the hood.” Before going to visit friends in North Evanston, my mother would warn me, “You can’t play like them kids. Act like you got some sense. You can’t do what they do.” My mother worried about my safety not because of my own actions but because of the prejudices of others. While I was a respectful child whose play differed little from other children, my mother anticipated how my play might be perceived differently. Even though I was only ten, eleven, and twelve years old, she was aware that others would see me as much older.

When I first sat down to write a reflection about *Eckdasis* I wondered if it were important that I focused exclusively on Black Childhood. Couldn’t everyone relate to childhood being a scary time in some ways? What I realized, through research, was similar to what I initially thought about when considering ways to heal a traumatic childhood experience. Emotional wounds are still felt through the body, and its physical manifestations are carried into adulthood. In America, the body is racialized, and race determines how, when, and where that body can move. This circumstance, unfortunately, is not limited to a particular age group. My first visual attempt to address trauma in the body was to create large-scale automata crank toy, made from recycled cardboard and wood. The large toy had no functionality, but rather the conceptual idea behind the piece a metaphor for the ways healing is activated by and through the body. The large piece titled *Get on Board* (figure 6) was included in the show to represent how my research had come full circle.

In his article “Shaking the bad boys: troubling the criminalization of black boys’ childhood play, hegemonic white masculinity and femininity, and the school playground-to-prison pipeline”, Nathaniel Bryan coins the term “Black play crit” to conceptualize the racialized play experiences of Black children and to note the scrutiny of Black children’s recreation by white onlookers (Bryan 679). Bryan draws on critical race theory to examine Black boys’ play and explores the consequences of white children’s accusations, fears, misconceptions, and mis-readings



Figure 6 Large scale automata crack toy taken from the earlier work Get on Board which was included in Eckdsis

of this play. I was prone to being the object of these “misunderstandings,” labelled as “competitive” and ‘aggressive.’ I was particularly targeted because, in those days, I was marked as a “tom-boy “

I was 19 years old when I came out to my parents as a Transman. My parents love has always been unconditional which is to say: coming out did not strain our relationship. My parents did, however, ask one question, "Will this make you feel better?" My parents were concerned because I tended to self-sabotage and self-destruct. I had rages which seemed to take me far out of my body and into the clutches of a person no one could recognize. Years later, I can honestly answer their question. No. Transitioning did not cure me or make me feel better about myself. Transitioning did provide insight into all the ways I could transform myself and live in my truth. Having two puberties felt strange because I came into my manhood as an adult

which meant that I could make choices for my own care. Most importantly I could determine what type of man I wanted to be. This came with a lot of work and self-reflection.

On my thirty-third birthday it snowed, and I sat in my car which was also my home at that moment. I had been living with my parents, but my father and I had a fight. Once again, my anger had escalated to the point of no return. I was ashamed to ask anyone to house me, and I didn't feel like I was worthy of it. I was tired. Not just the physical tired that comes with homelessness but emotionally tired. I felt as if I was fighting myself. At the edges of another failed relationship, and uncertain about my future, I unpacked my trauma bags. I could no longer carry them.

One way that I justified mistreating myself and others was my childhood. My childhood was not the worst it could have been nor was it a particularly joyful one. With time I realized I had privilege. Both of my parents are educated. I lived in a wealthy suburb, and both my parents lived in my home. The bottom line was that it was futile to continue blaming my parents for how the young James felt. For many Black youth, our parents' parenting styles were motivated by fear and often that fear was due to external and generational dealings with racism. The question "what do I do now?" became paramount. There was nothing that my parents could do to change the past. They had done the best they could with the tools they had. I had survived hadn't I?

Accountability rested solely in my hands. What was I going to do with all the mess that I had made, and all the mess I had been through? Certainly, at the forefront of this discovery was focusing in on *what* had made me resilient. To answer that question, I had to rediscover who my younger self had been. Furthermore, dealing with my younger self meant I had to address my resentment. What did my younger self need? How could I give her/him that care now so I could

focus be the person I wanted to become? I kept coming back to the word ‘freedom.’ I needed the freedom of expression and the ability to be heard and affirmed.

My present creative process mirrors these needs. I am passionate about doing the things that bring me joy, and those usually involve tinkering, creating, and playing with different art mediums and materials. Gradually grasped that the young person inside of me had been speaking the whole time. I had not been listening. Puppet making was cathartic mainly because I was indulging in the act of creating to self-soothe. Thus, the act of making allowed the voice of all the things I was processing to move through the work. Existing in a body that is on the binary of masculine and feminine has taught me the undertaking of balance. It is a reminder that change and transition are not fixed states. Transitioning is tricky business. It is uncomfortable but necessary and empowering.

Like my mother, my father was also concerned with my safety. He guarded his “little girls” with a ferocity that was oftentimes counter-productive and usually more traumatic than helpful. As an adult, I understand the anxiety and fear around raising children with female bodies. His sense of responsibility over our chastity meant that I came to understand my body as a forbidden place, a place of pleasure that I should protect at all costs – even my own sexual development. My father’s angst about protecting me from ‘knowing’ proved counterproductive. He did not realize that I had to first know my body as a sexual landscape which was unfathomable at the age of seven. This awareness produced in me a feeling of fear and uneasiness. This break in consciousness made me fully aware of gender and the oppressive ways it defined how I could move in the world. To my father’s credit, there was only so much time I could exist in this bubble of innocence. Eventually, my father reasoned that I should learn the

conditions of my Black girlhood from someone who loved me rather than from someone meaning to cause me harm.

In the fall of 2021, I took a course titled “Nineteenth Century Life Writing.” I wanted to take a course that could teach me the mechanics of autobiography and memoir. I knew that I was crafting a visual narrative for my thesis, but I wanted to



Figure 7 Moose eyes glitch while she is watching television. She is processing, and reconfiguring messaging from her media consumption

clarify how I could reflect the major themes through word so that I would be able to understand the work I was making more holistically. I was initially disappointed when I discovered that this literature class centered around slave narratives; I was certain that there was no way my work could draw the connections between a contemporary Black American childhood and the 19th century slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and others. The connections became clear as I searched from television clips from the late 1980's and early 1990's for material to put on Moose's television set. I could not recall a single character on TV besides Rudy–Bill Cosby's youngest daughter on *The Cosby Show*. Beyond this character, all the relatable Black girl characters I found were in literature from books like *The House of Dies Drear*, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, and Addy from the *American Girl* doll series. All of these stories featured Black children, both boys and girls, who had courage, admirably overcoming obstacles through their resourcefulness. Yet, the weight of their responsibility and their horrifying encounters with racism cannot be ignored. So in many ways, the books that I enjoyed as a young person were very much similar to the slave narratives from my graduate course. They

were all centered on racial and gendered oppression. Through *Eckdsis*, I wanted to reframe Moose's journey to engage her liberation and not the things she is bound by.

Nazera Sadiq Wright's book *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* answers the question of why nineteenth-century Black writers conveyed racial inequality, poverty, and discrimination through the prism of Black girlhood (Wright 1). Tracing tropes about Black girlhood in early African American print and the origins of these images, Wright argues that from the first decades of the new republic and until the eve of the New Negro Renaissance, Black writers used Black girlhood as a tool to frame national issues concerning the Black community, namely threats to safety and the struggle for survival. In contrast *Eckdsis* features no overt danger or physical peril for Moose. The only threat to Moose is the material she watches on television. What is assuring is that her system of filtering, as seen through the screens in her eyes, helps her piece together what is significant for her piece of mind (figure 7). *Eckdsis* places Moose in a world she has clearly crafted using thematic lighting and props to convey that she is in her internal world.

Viewers were meant to understand Moose as existing in the macrocosm of American childhood but is undefined by it. World building became an interest of mine when reading the African speculative fiction of Nnedi Okorafor. *Akata Witch*, is the first book in Okorafor's trilogy, follows Sunny and her band of misfit friends as they battle the dark forces of Juju in a magical village in Nigeria that exists inside the bustling capital city. I enjoyed the speculative idea of a world-within-a world, and one untouched by colonialism and free of the white gaze. Sunny, an albino American-born Nigerian is ridiculed for the color of her skin in her African community. She is called a witch by the villagers and is initially unaware that she does possess magical powers. Orlu, one of her three friends, has dyslexia but has the special ability to undo

complex Juju (magic). Chichi is described as poor but intelligent and intuitive with a photographic memory. Sasha, also an American-born Nigerian who also possesses a photographic memory, is described as aggressive and prone to anger. He is able to memorize complex spells. In this way, *Akata Witch* was the first book I read that speaks to the magic within children and depicts their flaws as great strengths. Each trait is deemed as a gift that allows them to save their community.

Books like Okorafor's inspired me to create *Eckdasis* as a speculative work. My show



tackles the questions of “what if?”

Figure 8 Moose stares back at viewer she is the only marionette to acknowledge and confront the viewer

What if Moose could fly? What if Moose could articulate her feelings of regulation? What if she could do what she wanted and create what she wanted? What would she make? What if Moose could paint a brighter future for herself? Black speculative fiction for young audiences teaches readers how to dream. Empowering representations of Black girls on television and in literature were nearly non-existent when I was younger, but the speculative fiction of the current moment allows young girls to envision something different.

Moose paints the wall yellow with a grin on her face. She is the only marionette to stare directly back at viewers it may be left to us to discern the results of her action. Might this action be perceived as misconduct and be deemed a punishable offense? There is an uphill battle faced by all marginalized groups but dis/abled Black girls have an exceptionally hard time. Subini Ancy Annamma productively discusses the school-prison nexus. She argues that new systems

and rules are constantly created justify the intervention of detention center and prisons to feed the prison industrial complex. This is executed by defunding and eliminating social services needed to help these already marginalized Black girls (Annamma 28). Therefore, instead of seeing their creativity as a space for self-making and nurturing, the larger society, and Black girls themselves, are conditioned to think about their expressions as criminalized.

Despite the hyper-vigilance of my parents, I was always in trouble. Even now, I frequently refer to my younger self as “bad as hell.” Reimagining Moose challenged me to think about the gifts my younger provided. I needed to dismantle what I had learned and was taught to believe about myself as a young girl. In my recollection, one of my biggest offenses as a child was that I talked a lot in class. I was unfocused. None of those things have changed, and yet, I am completing a graduate degree. When I look back on my childhood— despite being “bad”— I recall a lot of fear, much of that having everything to do with the ways and extent to which I was regulated. My main objective for *Eckdsis* was siphoning out what I saw as “bad” in myself. I was not a bad child— simply a highly regulated one, who had a strong reaction to such oppressive control.

In 2022, Oprah Winfrey released a book with Dr. Bruce D. Perry titled *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing*. Perry explains that asking the question “what happened to you?” signals a shift in perspective honoring the power of the past, which shapes our current way of functioning (Winfrey & Perry 13). I found this profound. In my earlier works, I explored what was wrong with me, and I tried to fix my trauma from the outside in. For example, my predisposition to anger ruined a lot of relationships. I knew that the anger was rooted in the past; however, I was not fully seeing myself for what the anger provided me. I learned to protect myself through anger. That skill helped me to survive. Anger also came with a

sense of assertiveness, but I was unable to be assertive without being aggressive. What I needed was the ability to establish healthy boundaries so that I no longer needed aggression. This is similar to the ways that the children in *Akata Witch* are learning to hone their own gifts that seem to be a curse. Asking “what’s wrong with me?” simply focuses on the outside effects of trauma but doesn’t allow for deep reflection, self-care and love. Asking “what is wrong with me?” is centered in a place of self-loathing and blame and doesn’t allow for growth or a holistic look at the good qualities in the self.

Building marionettes has allowed me to further my conceptual objectives. Through video, garment making, sculpture, and now, puppetry, my work explores storytelling, notions of a Black aesthetic, and self-creation. With my work, histories of joy and pleasure are woven through histories of exclusion and violence. For example, an early project *God Gave Her Children* (figure 9) was a pop-up book for adults. I wanted to evoke a sense of joy through the art of storytelling. *What James Wore When He Met Tomfoolery* (figure



Figure 9 Pop-up book scene 5 from *God Gave Her Children*



Figure 10 ‘The Wishing Bench’ *What James Wore When He Met Tom Foolery*

10) was a project that investigated the act of self-making through garment construction. I created personas that existed in the future and speculated what one might need to wear in a world where the power had shifted to the far left and Black people became the ruling class.

The act of recreating my younger self has given me the opportunity to reclaim a sense of imagination in my adulthood thus honoring the complicated experiences of my past. In so doing, I hope to provide the others the same opportunity, especially those who have navigated violence rooted in gender, sexuality, and racial oppression as children. My vision for Moose is that this body of work will continue to grow and build on itself. What happens as she grows older? What other adventures and discoveries do we see her make? My hope is that future iterations of this show might answer those questions.

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