

## AT A GLANCE...

Nicholas Gebhardt

### *1776, The Forgotten World*

Imagine the mangrove-fringed coast, mudflats and silty brown waters. The relentless Equatorial sun beats down. They are far from home, at the edges of Empire. Bodies doubled over and beaten by days of tropical storms and heat and the Atlantic winds. Giant rubber leaves and frangipani and jasmine mixed up with clouds of mosquitos, cockroaches, spiders and flies. Hard to stay focused, alive even. Overseers leave nothing to chance, pushing the bodies as far and fast as they can, shackled pasts held down by the whip and the hunger and the fear of tomorrow.

### *1786, mid-Atlantic*

She was the first to die. A songstress, unnamed as usual. Referred to by a young sailor as an oracle of literature. “In order to render more easily the hours of her sisters’ exile,” he reported, the woman would “...sing slow airs, of pathetic nature, and recite such pieces as moved the passions, exciting joy or grief, pleasure or pain, as fancy or inclination led.”[1] Adrift and afloat, fighting currents of past and future, plagued by the threat of insurrection, the ship’s Captain paused, just for a moment, and allowed the slaves to bury their dead. This was not usual.

[1]William Butterworth quoted in Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery.” *The American Historical Review*. Volume 114, Number 5, 2009, 1231.

### *1803, City Edge*

Names unknown, places unseen, so many thousands gone. Snatches of memory, fragments of another life, talked about in quieter moments perhaps, or simply forgotten. But there's no way of knowing any of this, other than to try to imagine how it might have been for us, similarly placed. A danced existence: coming and going, moving in and out of time, unfolding somewhere between a meter and a rhythm. A rate of motion that gives that motion a life of its own. "There is no one," it is said amongst the Ewe.<sup>[2]</sup> Glanced from the side, a crowd of people gathers together, caught in the being-there of their festivities, old timers and newcomers, drummers and singers, onlookers and outliers. On the periphery they remain, out of focus, more mirage than actuality.

### *1986, The Music Lesson*

It was a long bus ride, two hours at least. To the right, traversing outwards and on endlessly towards the horizon was the Pacific; to the left, nothing but storefronts and motels and fast food restaurants and surf shops and gas stations and supermarkets. Early morning humidity, 100%. Blue moving through blue moving across stretches of sand; a slight breeze wrapped around rows of palm trees and curling between sea and sky and shoreline, catching the murmur of the board riders and their friends in pursuit of the perfect break. It was a long way to go for a music lesson, and it was hot.

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[2] Steven M. Friedson, *Remains of Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 138