

Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020)

Review

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"[S]urvival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. have sailed across a sea of words to ask if you will come away with me." Audre Lorde

"We are still undrowning. And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the middle passage, because the scale of our breathing is planetary, at the very least.

Are you still breathing?" Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Following Lorde's definition of survival at the margins, Alexis Pauline Gumbs takes an innovative approach to what it means, in her terms, to be "undrowning". Like Lorde, Gumbs advocates for a communal approach that recognises wider kinships, but also beyond that, that recognises our (that is, an inclusive us as planetary inhabitants) shared use, abuse, and reliance on our fragile ecologies.

The titular “undrowned” are identified with not only the also-titular marine mammals, but also the descendant survivors of Black enslavement and, through our communal responsibilities, all of us. The book offers a set of meditations on a variety of interrelated themes derived from both Black feminist praxis and marine mammal behaviour. The book is arranged around these themes, each chapter centred around Black feminist principles from the personal (“breathe”, “surrender”, “slow down”) to the political (“end capitalism”, “stay black”). The careful and informed investigation into a counter-scientific version of the interior lives of dolphins, seals, whales and other water-dwelling mammals provides a framework for intuitive and novel ways to disrupt and interrupt the oppressive machinations of modern life in a capitalist society.

The book began life as an Instagram project, from which it found a more permanent incarnation as part of the *Emergent Strategy* series at AK Press. Even in print it retains a sense of the collaborative nature of social media, peppered with as many footnoted Instagram hashtags as scientific or theoretical references. Gumbs herself is a scholar, having earned a PhD in English, African and African American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies from Duke University, although she is also a poet, media maker and community builder. These aspects of her practice are evident throughout *Undrowned*, which presents Gumbs’ deep engagement with Black feminist thinkers, poets and creators and presents it in an accessible and community-focused way.

The book is split into nineteen chapters, each of which takes as its starting point specific marine mammals (Gumbs favours dolphins, seals, and whales, but also on offer are sea lions, walruses, manta rays, dugongs, manatees, otters, and others). Each chapter begins by echoing the language of scientific enquiry characteristic of guidebooks on marine mammals, which Gumbs takes issue with in the introduction. The problematic nature of scientific language, in which Gumbs locates racist, patriarchal, colonial, capitalist and heterosexist concerns, is a key issue throughout the book, and the upfront consideration of it provides a stable base from which Gumbs can find common points of reference between us and our marine cousins. She takes issue with the awkward and anachronistic associations of criminalisation and binary sex to these animals by biologists, and deftly avoids falling into the same trap.

The lessons themselves take the form of (mostly) short meditations: what can we, as humans, learn from these animals’ behaviours and environments? Gumbs is radical in her approach to these questions. Rather than providing straightforward comparative answers, each chapter is explorative, inquisitively

probing for unexpected connections and extrapolating them imaginatively and thoughtfully. For example, the chapter “honor your boundaries” begins with a contrast between the differing fortunes of Amazon and captive dolphins due to their sleeping positions to explore topics such as the need for supportive boundaries, the importance of sleep, and the politics of sleep and resistance, before segueing neatly into wider political issues such as CIA interrogation methods and the sleeplessness of separated families held at the US border. The lesson, as she returns to the personal, is for us to learn to sleep, to surrender to dreams and yes, to honour the boundaries: “the danger you thought would open up and swallow you and everyone you love instead reclarifies who you are, updates your dreams and wakes you with new purpose” (90). Gumbs thus insightfully picks out the entanglements between human and marine mammalian life, as well as among and within our human selves.

Gumbs’ writing is lyrical and optimistic, although she does not shy away from difficult subjects or necessary criticism when the material calls for it. It is signposted early in the book that the writing moves “mostly without warning, from a clinical tone to a profoundly intimate tone”, along with noting that “the words ‘I love you’ appear more than other phrase” (8). The shift into the intimate – and the personal, as the prose frequently directly addresses an ambiguous receiver, who is at once both reader-as-student and Gumbs’ imaginary marine listener – is indeed unexpected, but also moving and uplifting. Gumbs takes an afro-futurist approach, centring Black feminist experience via the marine mammals she explores life through, and offering positive potential for moving forward. The prose is by turns serious, furious, playful, and adoring, and the constant repetition of “I love you” feels affirmative rather than monotonous. At the end of the book, Gumbs provides two lists of activities, one containing exercises that can be done alone and one with activities to be considered in a group (also fulfilling the suggestion of the chapter on collaboration). These are welcome suggestions for application of the lessons contained within the chapters, which can, in places, feel difficult to translate into everyday life.

Gumbs suggests early on that the book should be approached as a series of meditations and not necessarily read from cover to cover; this thematic approach quickly becomes repetitive as specific ideas crop up frequently within different chapters. There are also spaces where *Undrowned* could have pushed further into Black feminist possibilities, with some of the chapters feeling as though they would benefit from the same unconventional style of comparisons made elsewhere in the book. For example, the chapter on respecting hair would have benefitted

from a more radical consideration of the potential correspondence between the white supremacist social compulsions for Black hair styling and cutting and the forcible removal of narwhal tusks. Although the linguistic poetics make it an enjoyable read, in places it is dense and difficult to tease out the lesson being taught. This is where the limits of the published book are apparent compared with the open-ended possibilities of social media, where community engagement allows for layered interpretations and knowledge exchange to support development of initial understandings.

Building on Gumbs' previous works – notably the poetic trilogy of *Spill* (2016), *M Archive* (2018) and *Dub* (2020), the last of which deals with similar themes to *Undrowned* and also explores the potential of oceanic life – *Undrowned* provides a strong contribution to the field of Black feminist literature, setting itself apart by embracing the global view, insisting on taking us back to our mammalian roots and placing us among animals as planetary neighbours, rather than above them. The books thus addresses humanity as a whole and recognises everyone's capacity to bring about positive change. The deeply personal resonance prevents the work feeling didactic and stops the casual reader from being overwhelmed by the important political engagements that Gumbs identifies, while the wide-angle examination of human practices keeps activist readers engaged. Gumbs gives us an urgent and formidable text that – through close engagement with Black feminist principles, experimental consideration of mammalian behaviour and a sharp eye on contemporary events – provides the reader with the tools to re-imagine the potential of all aspects of modern life.

WORKS CITED

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Lorde, Audre. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. Penguin, 2018.