

AMP Seed Spring 2021 Season - Bloom

Event Transcript

Ancestral Ceremonies

Thursday, May 27th, 2021

Scheherazade Parrish: Hi everybody, my name is Scheherazade Washington Parrish, and I'm excited to welcome you to the Allied Media Project Spring Series BLOOM, and today's event, Ancestral Ceremonies. We're grateful to share this space with you and our guests, Bronte Velez and Liz Kennedy from Lead to Life. Give them your kudos in the chat.

Allied Media Projects has been cultivating media for liberation for over 20 years. Right now we'd like to take a minute to acknowledge and uplift the rich history of Detroit, the city that AMP calls home. Detroit sits on the Anishinaabe land and that of other indigenous people. It is the largest majority black city in the nation with a long legacy of African diasporic global contributions. It was once a stop on the Underground Railroad known by its code name "Midnight".

Detroit is also the U.S. city with the largest concentration of Arab Americans. It's a border city with Canada and has a growing Latinx community, and a rich legacy of Asian American communities and movements. We encourage you to connect with the legacies of your cities and acknowledge the land and communities where you reside. Feel free to name them in the chat.

You should know this event will be, is live captioned providing ASL and Spanish interpretation. Before we begin this conversation we would like to invite you to join Liz Kennedy from Lead to Life with an opening ritual.

Bronte Velez: Hello, y'all. Hello. I'm Bronte Velez. I go by they/them pronouns, calling in from Kashia Pomo territory, representing Lead To Life, and we are so excited for you to join us for this soft premiere of *Between Starshine and Clay*. The film is going to continue to grow and evolve, but we want to extend our gratitude to everyone on the production team who pushed through so hard this past month to bring this project to this moment for you all to receive the medicine of this prayer.

This has been two years in the making. It was definitely on CP time, and we are just so grateful. Shout out to the director and editor for all of your hard work and labor,



for going to pick up your baby late from daycare yesterday. We so appreciate you. Thank you, thank you to Jose, Donny, and Trevor for getting us together for the final round of color and sound and animations. We will be actively participating today to co-witness this film together. It's not a casual experience. Sorry if you just signed up to watch from the living room. You're going to have to sit down with us.

This work draws upon lineages of African diasporic ritual storytelling. We're going to do a practice of acknowledgment, prayer, candle lighting and confirming consent for your participation today. These rituals are nondenominational offerings and simple ways to let the ancient elements of fire and water accompany us in our healing while we witness this ritual film. We invite you, I'm going to slow down for the interpreter, I'm speaking fast. We invite you to follow your intuition and discernment on what feels good and right for you throughout our time together today, so that in each moment during our time together, we're in our dignity and agency, we're listening for our yes and our no. You can be like, "I want to close my eyes right now while I pray. I don't want to light a candle now, I'm going to hold a stone in my hand or look at a picture of a relative." Whatever feels good for you, we encourage you to listen and trust your intuition and to be comfortable throughout our time together as best you can, practicing what helps you and your body regulate.

Liz Kennedy: Thank you, Bronte. Amen. Now we're going to invite folks to gather a candle, I have here one with me. Or incense, if you use incense, check in with folks around y'all for sense sensitivities. And grab some water as well. If you're able and it's close. We'll use the water after the film but we want it close and for us to stay hydrated throughout our time together. Imagine the water will be holding the many dreams shared in the film. And after the film, we'll drink those dreams and bring them into our body.

As a content warning, this film grapples with themes of gun violence and police brutality. There are no images of harm happening, but the content traces the wake of gun violence and police terrorism. So we ask folks to take care of themselves through the screening and event.

Before Bronte invites us into a fire blessing, I'm going to lead a simple practice from somatic therapist and abolitionist Resmaa Menakem to ground our bodies for today's screening. This will engage our psoas and vagal nerves and can be done sitting or standing. It involves turning your neck or hips. If this is inaccessible for you, I invite you to participate in a way that feels good for you and your body. If you're not interested in participating, that is okay, too.

Stare straight ahead. Ask yourself, what is in the air? What do you need to feel present to witness this film? Take a moment to notice what's happening in your body. Now, I ask you to use your neck and hips to turn and look over your left shoulder. Come back to center. Breathe. Look up. And look down. Now, look over your right shoulder.



Using your neck and hips to move your body. Come back to center. Breathe. Notice how this practice invites your body to enter the space from perhaps a new place. Notice what's different. I hope this created spaciousness for you to witness this offering and we'll now turn it over to Bronte for the fire blessing.

Bronte Velez: Thank you Liz, and thank you Resmaa for that practice. I'm now going to offer a fire blessing and we can invite us to light our candles or incense or you can just visualize yourself opening a fire between us. And just that, when we light these, imagine ourselves circling up somewhere around fire. It's nighttime, we're watching a story or telling a story between one another. I know that is not how we're gathering just yet, still. But we want to offer that kind of experience if you ever want to look at your fire and bring you into that ritual storytelling space.

So I have my little incense. I want to thank you, sweet fire, for the way that you help us move and hold our rage as prayer. Thank you for the reminder that some seeds can only germinate through your heat, through your light. Thank you for your alchemy. We light our candles together this evening with the wisdom that the seed of abolition might emerge through aligning our efforts, and our hearts, and a calling to something beyond us, when fire is at the center.

We light our candles or our incense to illuminate injustice. We light our candles and incense to memorialize those we lost, and to bring heat and warmth to the grieving. Today, we light our candles and our incense with the trust that there might be a baptism, a rebirth available in the ashes. You may now light your candle or incense or your visual or internal fire. Now we're going to offer an opening invocation for this film and then we're going to witness.

Liz Kennedy: This is not a film. This is a ritual. This is black queer alchemy.

Bronte Velez: Same way we transform guns, we seek to transform the camera. Liberate the wake of capturing, shooting, taking, developing. This is not to be consumed, trapped, watched, appropriated, surveilled, et cetera. This is for beholding, this requires your tenderness.

Liz Kennedy: We invite you in as a witness to hold these stories with us. To redistribute the grief and continue the prophecy. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with ours, welcome. We invite you to bring water into your body to begin. Prevent your breath to keep finding you. Our people are free. Enjoy the film. Thank you.

Bronte Velez: Whoa, thank you so much for watching our offering. Thank you to everyone who helped make it possible. We're just going to do a quick breath practice to



integrate, that I learned from my friend Amiris Miller. It's called a seventh generation breath practice, and it's brief, and you can participate or you again, can choose not to.

What we're going to do is each time we inhale and exhale, we're going to imagine that we're inhaling for those who came before us and exhaling for our descendants. Those can be biological, those can be more than human beings. They can be the world at large, children and elders. I'm going to invite you to get in a comfortable position if you want to participate, and maybe have your hands on your belly if that feels good.

We're inhaling liberation for our parents. And we're exhaling liberation for our children. We're inhaling liberation for our grandparents. And we're exhaling liberation for our grandchildren. We're inhaling liberation for our great grandparents. And we're exhaling liberation for our great grandchildren. We're inhaling liberation for our great great grandparents. And we're exhaling liberation for our great great grandchildren. We're inhaling liberation for the fifth generation who came before us. We're exhaling liberation for the fifth generation after us. We're inhaling liberation for the sixth generation before us. We're exhaling liberation for the sixth generation after us. We're inhaling liberation for the seventh generation before us. One more little itty bitty sip for the eighth. And we're exhaling for all of our descendants. May the prayer of this work serve our practice in liberation backwards and forward through time. Thank you. I'm going to pass it back to Sche.

Scheherazade Parrish: That was absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much. I can't wait to dig in to this with you all. Wow. That was really moving. Thank you so much. For that offering, for the visual representation of ritual. You said this was not a film and so I want to be mindful in acknowledging it as it is.

I am— I understand we have Dionne Smith and Denise Friday joining us and they were featured in this offering. Yes? I'd like to say hello and welcome. And thank you so much for your offering. And really I just want to know, tell me a little bit about this work. What drives this work? Anyone?

Bronte Velez: I'm going to go for it. And then people can loop in. I think this work is... something dreamed us into this work. I think this work is not, we didn't kind of generate this work, I think of this work as having called us to it. It comes from a lineage of black prophetic traditions, and the other day Liz used the language of black trans traditions of bringing people into experiences where we imagine ourselves free. We imagine that police brutality, violence to the earth and to ourselves and to our children is over.

And we kind of move as such. And there's a kind of being in that practice so that we might be able to imagine yourselves and go, reverse backwards. Okay we had that experience, how do we generate that in real time and space. So that is some of what drives that practice of really having deficits on our imagination. And so how do we make



space for that, where we're not always in resistance but we're also getting to practice what freedom feels like together.

Scheherazade Parrish: Thanks for that. Denise? What brought you to this work?

[Denise has actually stepped away for a moment.]

Scheherazade Parrish: Well, can we go to Dionne, is Dionne available or Liz?

Dionne Smith: Yes. Can you hear me?

Scheherazade Parrish: I can.

Dionne Smith: Yes, what brought me to this work is losing a son through police violence. So it woke me up, not only about killing, the death of my son but what was going on in the world. And so I became an activist after his death. And to be able to understand and how to stand for something and also educate and also love and cry with each other. To move forward, to change.

Scheherazade Parrish: That is -- I don't want to be cliché, right. That is powerful work. It's something to be able to take a pain in that way and transform it into something beautiful and something that serves others and serves communities greater than your own. I am infinitely moved and grateful to you for this work. I do want to ask you though, because I heard that you, both you and Denise have this really awesome genesis, how you met story. Would you care to share that with us?

Dionne Smith: Yes. Well, it was a day that, that her son was murdered. At that time I was at school, picking up my children from school, at the high school. I got a call that there was a police-involved shooting. Instead of taking my kids home, I took my kids right with me to the scene. And I seen a lot of officers, and, you know like, they always try to push everybody back so they can stage the crime scene. And so to get to the point, that, I was wondering where the mother at, where the family at? That was my main concern. I know how I was when I lost my son. I didn't know who to run to, who to talk to, who to cry with, who to ask questions. And so, I was there when they took Denise son in the ambulance and I said I'm not going nowhere until the family get here.

At 1 o'clock in the morning, that is when I met Denise, when she came. I identified myself to her and let her know that I'm here to support her, I'm here to stand with her, I'm here to fight with her, I'm here to cry with her, and I also asked her, I would love to support you and come to the funeral. And ever since then me and Denise been two peas in a pod.



Scheherazade Parrish: That is a beautiful story of sisterhood. I love that, born of unthinkable circumstance. I am, I extend my condolences to you, still, and Denise as well. And thank you for the work that you're doing. How did y'all get with each other? Liz and Bronte? How did you meet Dionne and Denise and get together and do this work?

Bronte Velez: I was introduced to Dionne through folks over at Anti Police Terror Project when we were wanting to... so you saw the film and the part of the project where we're in Oakland in 2019. But then we wanted to do this other story where it was like the earth was in consort with what we were doing in the city. It was like bridging those places. And I reached out to our contact at Anti Police Terror Project who we had collaborated with on the ceremony. They gave us a couple of contacts of families who might perhaps want to participate. I had a call with Dionne and shared about the project and then Dionne is like, well Denise has to be there.

And they got to Point Reyes. which I've never seen this many black people in Point Reyes. It's quite a white town. I love you CPAS, I saw you're on the call. But it's not black. It's amazing to see it so deep with so many black folks and that is how we met Dionne and Denise that day in Point Reyes, and we met in rituals. And I hear that is how you meet people, that is the way the rest of your relationship is going to be. We met in the land that day doing that work.

Scheherazade Parrish: Nice. I am very interested in this notion of relationship as ritual. And I noticed in your film, in your offering, that there are, it felt like, focuses on tangible things. There was, there were shovels. And there were bullets. And guns. And sand. These very earth-based materials. And I'm curious to know how that, how that material plays a role in this offering and this ritual practice.

Liz Kennedy: So Lead to Life's work really exists at the bridge between racial justice and environmental justice. And so part of our practice is recognizing that the same violence that we're experiencing as black folks, that's a shared struggle that is also being mirrored in the way that the earth is being violated.

So in that shared struggle, there is shared solidarity. And we know that guns at the end of the day, are sourced from the earth. Metal is sourced from the earth. The iron, the lead that is part of guns, is sourced from the earth. So how can we return those elements back to the earth as a gift? That is actually one of the things that we say in our opening mantra that we read together when we start every meeting.

So it was really important that we ground this type of grief work, this death doulaship or what we like to call "wake work" in reference to Christina Sharp's work. It's really important to call upon the earth as witness to this wake work that we're doing.



And for as long as humans have mourned one another and practiced rituals around death and mourning, there is such a rich lineage in the ways in which the earth has witnessed us in that grief and has held us. So you can see in the film that Denise and Dionne, the mothers were using, were cleansing the guns. And you can see Bronte in the soil and those stars that you see were actually burned from a gun that night on MLK Day in 2019 in our public ritual.

As these elements from the earth were stolen and extracted to produce weapons of violence, we're returning them back to the earth as regenerative tools that can support healing. That is why we call our work alchemy. That is what we call applied alchemy. It's really activating our radical imagination to transform systems and objects of harm and violence into ones that can heal and actually affirm black life and the earth.

Scheherazade Parrish: Bronte? Does that sound about right to you?

Bronte Velez: Yes. I just DM'd, Liz, you talking that shit right now. That is, I think that's about it.

Scheherazade Parrish: Liz, I told you it wasn't going to be me that said it. It wasn't going to be me.

Bronte Velez: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Scheherazade Parrish: No, it's fine, I'm all for it. I was going to bring up, I noticed these three different uses of wake. And the first one was from Kristina Sharp's work in the wake. Standing in the wake, keeping watch with the dead. And then the second use, if I remember, is the trail that is left in the water from a ship?

Liz Kennedy: Uh-huh.

Scheherazade Parrish: And then just being awake and conscious. Can you talk to us a little bit about how these three separate instances of wake tie together in your work?

Liz Kennedy: Yes. I can jump in and Bronte, feel free to interrupt me. So the definitions of wake that you see in the film are adapted from Kristina Sharp's 2016 book, "In The Wake on Blackness and Being". There's actually one other definition of the wake that was included in there that's the wake as in the recoil of the gun.

And so Kristina Sharp defines "wake work" as the work that's needed to really steward black grieving and mourning in this constant perpetual state of antiblack violence that we find ourselves in. Just this week so many of us are grieving the way that George Floyd was taken from us. And so in the year since he's passed, we lost over



a thousand people to police terrorism. So this is a persistent climate that we're in. And to quote Claudia Rainkind, the condition of black life is one of mourning. So we know that we're constantly mourning the way that the state, the way that the police constantly take our loved ones. What do we need to do to stand watch? What do we need to do to hold space in a container for public ritual and to grieve together?

There is an Alice Walker quote that I return to so often when I'm talking about Lead to Life's work. And she says, "Those who love us never leave us alone with our grief." So if you love black people, if you are committed to black liberation, you cannot leave us alone in this grief. We know that our grief longs to be witnessed in community. And American and just western cultures in general, you know, we've really lost so many of the tools and the technologies that we have to practice grief in community.

So that's why public ritual and public ceremony is so important to us so we can really invite others to hold this grief with us, to redistribute it as we said in the opening ritual. And we want this work to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. So that definition of wake as consciousness, you know, how often do you hear, oh, wokeness, staying woke. We want you to be awake to the way in which black folks are very much still in the hold.

That is why Kristina Sharp uses the definition of wake as the passage of the ship. Because in many ways the middle passage, the wake of the slave ship has just reinvented itself through the different mechanisms of police terrorism, through prisons, through jails. We want folks to be awake to our grief and to hold it with us.

Scheherazade Parrish: You better talk about it, Liz Kennedy, come on. I'm going to just say that. And thank you.

Now I want to say this, I want to just throw this out here for folks who may be tuned in. Who may, like my, you know, my father, right, and his generation of folk who look at ritual when they hear the word ritual, they think it's something, like, oh, don't do that, right. So can you give us a definition of ritual that is like super simple, something a three year-old can understand. Something that 80-year-olds can go, oh, I used to do that growing up. Let's normalize it for the skeptics.

Bronte Velez: I love that. I love that. Thank you. I think about how our colleague Jazmin Calderon-Torres shared that white supremacy is a tradition, and how there are these things we do every day where we follow traditions. We follow traditions of ways we were socialized. I was told when I was little, I got to brush my teeth in the morning and at night. It's a ritual, it's a consistent practice of doing a thing, you know. And we do them all the time. We have these little ways that we actually also engage rituals that... maintenance, you know, the things that we want to dismantle.

We have rituals with money. We have rituals with capitalism. I know sometimes I have practices where I still am trying to release things from patriarchy and whiteness



from my body and how I've been socialized. And our rituals, we already do this. There are things we already do all of the time. Black church which I grew up in was always so ritualistic, even though it may not have used that language. I saw something recently that says what's more, what is more witchcrafty than what is going on at black church? I saw things that were very mystical.

I know that is dangerous to say with my mom and dad on. But what I'm saying is black church and black ritual, the things that we do, we a mysticism to us. We have a way to us where we want to connect with spirit. And we do that, I think, all of the time. So these practices are to, in our work with ritual is just to say we're coming together to make an agreement about something. And to open up a different kind of attention together.

And I think the ritual practices are about your attention. And saying, in 2019, at that ceremony we came together and agreed to say, "We're going to imagine that you can change a gun back into the earth and you can turn it back into a star. You can turn iron back to the Cosmos. And we're going to lend our attention to it." I think it's that kind of, I think it's that agreement that helps us know we can heal together. And we have to do that consistently.

Liz Kennedy: I also like to just briefly add Bronte, thank you for bringing in the black church, because this roots this practice in so many ways. One of the things that we're very attentive to is the ways that black ritual traditions have been surveilled, criminalized, policed. We're looking at the lineages of the home goings.

The ring shouts. We're talking about how we might bring back the memory jars. There are so many ways that enslavement and bondage and the many ways that white supremacy has reinvented to terrorize our people and our rituals were stolen from us. This is a re-remembering. We're very committed to decolonizing black ritual traditions.

Scheherazade Parrish: A reclamation.

Liz Kennedy: Uh-huh.

Scheherazade Parrish: Bronte, I have a question. Who was it that said that white supremacy is a tradition?

Bronte Velez: Our friend Jazmin who works for Lead to Life who is also one of the producers for this film.

Scheherazade Parrish: I saw a question pop up and I wanted to make sure that answer got out there.



Bronte Velez: Jazmin Calderon-Torres. Hey Denise.

Scheherazade Parrish: Pardon me?

Denise Friday Hall: Hey. I was going to show you guys my medallion.

Scheherazade Parrish: That's, oh.

Denise Friday Hall: This one is the first one they made in Atlanta, Georgia.

Scheherazade Parrish: That's beautiful. Thank you.

Bronte Velez: That's so beautiful.

Liz Kennedy: That medallion is made from alchemized guns.

Scheherazade Parrish: That was gonna be my question. Is that a product of one of the ritual practices?

Denise Friday Hall: Yes.

Scheherazade Parrish: That is beautiful. I want one. I guess I'm going to have to come and practice and participate with you all.

Denise Friday Hall: Dionne and I, we had a chance to hit the fire with a sledge hammer.

Scheherazade Parrish: Denise, what is one of your most memorable experiences in these rituals?

Denise Friday Hall: My most memorable experience was when we had a chance, they had the fire, they put the iron in -- the gun, the whole weapon inside this burning -- I guess like, I don't know like an open fire or something.

And they let it burn and then they give you the opportunity to break it, to hit it. So that was very special and memorable for me and then to be able afterwards to receive one, was even better. It was so special. And Dionne, too. We were there together.

Scheherazade Parrish: Dionne is back?

Dionne Smith: Yes.



Scheherazade Parrish: Hi, Dionne is joining us from telephone. I'm glad you are here with us to share a little bit about your experience with Lead to Life, with these rituals. I would be interested in knowing.

Dionne Smith: Well number 1, I was thankful that we had the opportunity to be a part of something that we believe in and also in this fight for change. And I was excited to No. 1, even go and see a different part of the world. And seeing the dance and, you know, just take a deep breath because we're always fighting for justice and change. And you need to also self-care. Self-care.

So we had nothing but love, it was love that day and nutrition, good food. The food I ate is different than I ever ate, it was organic. And it was eye opening and something I was able to bring back and tell my kids about that day. And you know, also, like Denise was saying, to be able to beat the metal and talk about the trees. So it was an experiment and a learning process as well as the movement, fight for justice.

Scheherazade Parrish: This has been an amazing conversation. I thank you all for joining me, for sharing, for being vulnerable. For educating my father and others out here on the importance of ritual.

Before we get out of here, if I could ask you to all contribute one small thing that you, what's bringing you joy right now?

Denise Friday Hall: Me?

Scheherazade Parrish: Everybody, yes.

Denise Friday Hall: Oh, everyone.

Scheherazade Parrish: Denise, what is bringing you joy right now?

Denise Friday Hall: You funny. Out there in nature.

Scheherazade Parrish: Dionne, what is bringing you joy right now?

Dionne Smith: Love.

Scheherazade Parrish: Absolutely. Bronte, what is bringing you joy right now.

Bronte Velez: Dionne and Denise.



Scheherazade Parrish: Liz?

Liz Kennedy: I feel so grateful to bring both my AMP people and my Lead to Life people together. I love everyone I'm in conversation with here tonight. So it feels really special and I'm feeling really grateful.

Scheherazade Parrish: I thank you so much. This has been an inspiring, like I said, inspiring educational talk. The time went by quickly. I'm a little sad about that. I wish I could talk to you more for longer. However, I do want to let everyone out in the world know that if you would like to support the revolutionary mothers included in the film today, there is a link that is going to show up in your YouTube box, I don't know which way it is on your screen. But [donorbox.org/support the revolutionary mothers of Lead to Life](https://donorbox.org/support-the-revolutionary-mothers-of-lead-to-life).

Please, please, if you are so moved, support them, support their work. Thank you for sharing your energy in the chat and social media. A special thank you to the incredible ASL, CART and Spanish interpreters. Our events will be recorded and made available in a few weeks. If you would like to let us know your thoughts on today's conversation. Go to bit.ly/AMPBloomFeedback. That will show up in the YouTube feed. We would love to hear from you.

You should know we have one more event coming up. Deep Work on June 10th. We're super excited to close the season with Sterling Toles and Boldy James who will be speaking with Nandi Comer. To learn more about these events and register, please visit AMP/bloom. That will show up in your feed as well.

Last but not least, the AMC has announced its call for tracks and network gatherings. So if you've got something to propose, please visit AMC.alliedmedia.org for more information. I thank you all so much. Be well. I'll see you soon. Bronte?

Bronte Velez: I'm going to pass it to you Liz.

Liz Kennedy: We'd like to conclude our time together with a brief water ritual. If you poured yourself some water earlier in our time together, please hold it, bring it to your lips if you feel called. Thank you, sweet water, for the way you trace the memory of life. We ask that reconciliation, rest, and justice be undammed so freedom may flow. We're grateful for the ways you subvert that which tries to block you. The way you shape shift your body around obstacles. As we bring you into our bodies today, we pray that our imagination may flow so our freedom may be realized.

We thank you for your precious offering. We invite you to drink the dreams from our time together. Bronte and I will offer our waters out as libations.



Bronte Velez: I want to bring us into a quick practice before we go that I like to do in, from the Jewish tradition of Sabbath. When I say Jewish, I mean before the state of Israel, before Zionism, the powerful Judaism that is about liberation.

During this time of Sabbath when you light the Sabbath candles, you wash the candle light over you and then you cover your eyes to intra-Sabbath. You can imagine if you want to, you can just wash your candle light over your or just this time, the time on the screen and the beautiful faces. You can cover your eyes, and cover your hands over your eyes, and I'm going to offer this dedication of our time outward for those who couldn't join us. This is from a deep friend and colleague, Nia Koda-Taylor. The phrase is "May any positivity generated be given away for all of life for the sake of freedom".

Say it after me. If you're getting ASL translations, you wouldn't want your hands over your heart. Put your hands over your heart or whatever works for you. May any positivity generated be given away to all of life. For the sake of freedom. Ashe, thank you so much for joining us today. Invitation to leave softly and carefully from this place. Make sure you blow those candles out or let them run. However you want to do it.

