

I heard once that we began with water, that we were birthed by water. And while my specific memories of water began with play, with water balloons, muddy puddles, garden hoses, and summers swimming in neighborhood lakes, my connection to water, much like many of our histories, began with the ocean. The history and brutality of the Middle Passage flow through my veins. It is the constant and persistent echo of my ancestors. As a Black woman, or, as I am categorized in the United States, an African American woman, I recognize my relationship with water, how my parents' relationship with water—my father grew up near one of the Great Lakes, and my mother grew up near the Savannah River, a port for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade—and how my children's relationship with water—the two of them growing up near the Atlantic Ocean—have all been framed by this significant moment in our shared histories that many would like to erase, that many have tried to erase. But, much like water, it continues.

Patrick Rosal, a former teacher, mentor, and dear friend shared during a conversation the beauty and necessity of *Quilting Water*. I was struck and moved by many aspects of the project. But what impacted me the most was the idea of water as memory and its importance beyond just a resource or element, which, of course, are both deeply important, but, specifically, its importance as a source of reflection, of storytelling, of sharing, listening, and witnessing, of remembering. In her essay "[The Site of Memory](#)," Toni Morrison wrote that "all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."

I have many memories of water. I remember it was my father who made sure I knew how to swim, who took me to lakes the color of rust and to pools of chlorinated water and entrusted me with strangers who waited patiently until my sinking became floating and then swimming. Perhaps he did this because he wanted me to learn a way of survival that he had never learned. Like so many Black elders and ancestors, my parents never learned how to swim, but his persistence in ensuring I learned how to navigate water was a gift that I eventually shared with my own children.

I remember a trip to Salobreña, Spain, where I washed my feet in the Mediterranean Sea, a body of water with its own history connected to Black bodies. And I remember a trip to Dakar, Senegal, in particular, to Gorée Island, a port for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and a trip that, in many ways, left me broken. Gorée Island is situated on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. It is a body of water where, on the other side of that same ocean, as a Jersey girl, I have placed every inch of my Black body in its water too many times to count. These trips, in many ways, remind

me of what Morrison said about the perfect memory of water and how it constantly tries to return to where it was. Much like water and our histories, connected or otherwise, I hold these memories in my body. I hold Quilting Water as a powerful symbol of the connection between memory and witnessing, the connection between the stories of our ancestors, the cycle of life and death, and a return to our histories. Or, maybe, it's an honoring of our histories because, after all, we began with water; we were birthed by water. And through this project, we return to it through our sharing, our listening, and our reflecting on its power to shape and echo our cultural and spiritual beliefs, traditions, and identities.

Bio & Photo:

Cherita Harrell earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Rutgers University-Camden and a Master of Science in Education at Walden University. She is a doctoral candidate at Walden University, and her research interests include a focus on critical literacy, racial literacy, and Black feminism. Her research examines how critical literacy, racial literacy, and critical theory may help to create spaces that allow for the exploration of students' lived experiences through forms of expression, such as oral stories, narratives, visual media, and other literary contributions. In her free time, she writes fiction, and her work has been published in *Decades Review*, *Minetta Review*, and *The Bleeding Lion*.

