

Auto Dissertation I, Vol. 1: Breaths Along the Potomac: An Epistolary Art Gallery

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Auto Dissertation I, Vol. 1

Breaths Along the Potomac: An Epistolary *Art* Gallery



Dominic Shodekeh Talifero



“The moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there. And therefore, as we set sail, we ask God’s blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.”¹

- HISTORICAL QUOTE-EXCERPT SAMPLED BY GANG STARR IN THE SONG “ABOVE THE CLOUDS,” FEATURING INSPECTAH DECK, FROM THE ALBUM “MOMENT OF TRUTH,” 1998.

Dear Reader,

Welcome aboard and thank you so much for taking the time to journey through a very different synthesis of writing, research, and artistic expression. What you’re about to experience is my “epistolary art gallery,” a series of academic love letters reflecting on my experiences as a research fellow and *BREATH** artist at the Presidential Library of George Washington’s Mount Vernon. But first, we should really do a little “literary housekeeping.” Since the Northwestern Law Journal des Refusés offers such a dynamic, creative, and exploratory approach to how scholarly conversations regarding the law can exist, I had to be myself and do some pretty outside-the-box thinking. First, what on earth is an “auto – dissertation”? For me it’s the moment in which a largely self-taught scholar outside of academia – such as KRS-ONE, Neely Fuller Jr., or Col John R.

¹ Kennedy, John F. “We choose to go to the Moon.” 12 Sep. 1962, Rice University, Houston, TX. Speech. Image courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Boyd – publishes work or creates dynamic models of creativity that produce an extraordinary effect and contribution to one or more extensive and academic schools of thought and/or oral tradition-based bodies of knowledge.² I hope to one day produce scholarship that has a fraction of that effect. The epistolary/letter writing style of this article was also very necessary for me, so that I may naturally synthesize between the personal and academic. You’ll also notice that throughout these series of letters, I changed the text color to match the “aura” of each letter recipient, which also became a way for me to explore different methods of illuminating the idea that “letter writing” is an artform unto itself. Pulling inspiration from the legendary works of Alice Walker’s “[The Color Purple](#)”, the letters of Robert Gould Shaw, – which inspired the narration of the motion picture “Glory” and are archived at Harvard Library – and the literary legacy of Phillis Wheatley known for penning a letter and poem to George Washington in 1775 – I would end up falling in love with the idea of taking a similar approach.³

Regarding the idea of an “epistolary art gallery,” I wanted to use as many pieces of art, photographs, and visualizations as possible to create the feeling of being immersed in an art gallery showing, and to further blur the lines of creativity expressed in the paradigms of research, art, and law. The main anchor concepts and images of this article are from my prototype deck of “legacy cards,” which I designed and created for the Juneteenth festival at George Washington’s Mount Vernon as a 2023-2024 research fellow. Instead of feeling forced to default to the knowledge-distribution modalities of a typical dissertation or academic book (no shade, I always have a new book in my hands), I felt very strongly that it would be important for myself and my colleagues at Mount Vernon to explore alternative and experimental channels for what I was learning and experiencing during my fellowship. The “legacy cards” are one indispensable method of consolidating and sharing my research, and believe me, other creative distribution concepts are filtering through my “teaching + learning” imagination all the time. Thank goodness Mount Vernon encourages us to see this as a “lifelong” fellowship. Also, in using a different color text for each letter recipient, from blue ([Eiko](#)), to red ([Aunt Joy](#)) to dark orange ([Tonika](#)) to steel blue ([Christina](#)), I began

² KRS-One. *The Gospel of Hip Hop: The First Instrument*. powerHouse Books, 2009; Fuller, Neely. *The United-Independent Compensatory Code/System/Concept Textbook: A Compensatory Counter-Racist Code*. NFJ Productions, 1984; Boyd, John R. *Patterns of Conflict*. 1976.

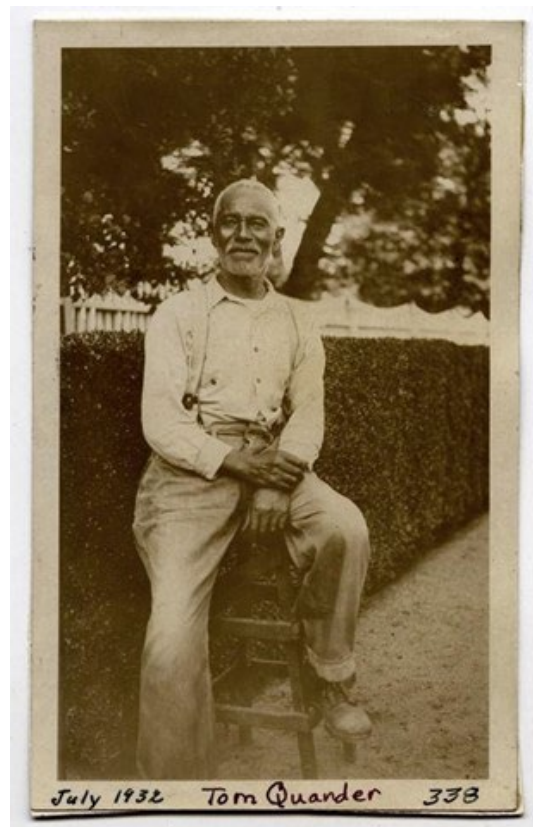
³ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Mariner Books, 2003; Duncan, Russell, ed. *Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992; Wheatley, Phillis. Letter to George Washington. 26 Oct. 1775, National Archives.

to discover that this coloring effect became not only a vehicle for expressing my love for each letter recipient, but also had a therapeutic effect on me as well. Hopefully this is also true for the reader. You see, learning, teaching, and writing about the American legacies of slavery is hard on the mind, body, and soul, so matching colors to the auras of each letter recipient became a part of my ongoing healing process through this writing journey. Also note that each “letter chapter” begins with a historical reference to a presidential quote that had been used as a “presidential sample” within Hip Hop.

Yeah, I had to do that as the first Hip Hop-based researcher at Mount Vernon. Hip Hop is one of my primary foundations for how I approach everything in life, and that’s no different here, as these sample references became a way of reflecting on the scholarly powers of Hip Hop culture. I also find it absolutely fascinating that Hip Hop artists have sampled from a variety of presidential voices throughout musical history; a way of playing with recontextualizing these legacies of power needs to be studied much more deeply. So, no more explaining, let’s all see where this goes. Also stay tuned for vol. 2 of “*BREATHS** Along the Potomac,” as I pull inspiration from the fact that Mount Vernon encourages us as fellows to return to do more work over a lifetime. As there’s just too much to pursue in just one year with a fascinating, experimental, and synthesizing approach to writing such as this one, hopefully I can find ways to go even deeper. I hope by breaking up this series of “academic love letters” into two parts, I can go deeper for a little while longer, as this extraordinary challenge certainly deserves a bigger and more extensive commitment.

Sincerely,
Shodekeh

Special Bioacoustic Note: This series of letters is not just literary but also visual and “bioacoustic” in nature. What on Earth does that mean? For example, each time you read in all caps *BREATH**, that’s a cue for the reader to either hear the sound of that term internally, or to even produce that sound vocally for themselves or a group of listeners. These are “*BREATH** letters,” another dimension of this “epistolary art gallery” through which the reader can engage with the overall work.



TOM QUANDER AT MOUNT VERNON, JULY 1932. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN. CARD 1 OF THE PORTRAIT SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.”
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION.

“Using flashcards can be a very effective self-testing approach. Even the act of making flashcards is a way to ‘work’ the information, challenging you to think about which information to have on one side and the related description on the other.”⁴

Special Visual Note: Each identified “legacy card” throughout these letters that have shadows facing towards the right, or reflections facing downward (musical section of the “legacy cards”) are images that were used in my prototype deck for the Juneteenth festival at George Washington’s Mount Vernon in 2024.

⁴ “Using Flashcards.” *Learning Commons*, usm.maine.edu/learning-commons/using-flash-cards/. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.



A PHOTOGRAPH OF MYSELF VISITING A FOODWAYS DEMONSTRATION DURING MY TWO-MONTH PERIOD OF LIVING AT THE RICHARD AND HELEN DeVOS HOUSE, A RESIDENCE DESIGNATED FOR RESEARCH FELLOWS, WHICH IS LOCATED ON THE SAME GROUNDS AS THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT VERNON. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION.



“I DID NOT HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH THAT WOMAN.”⁵

- HISTORICAL QUOTE-EXCERPT SAMPLED BY RHYMEFEST IN THE SONG “REAL N@##% QUOTES,” 2007.

Dear Eiko,⁶

How’s it going? I’m so glad you’re back at Colorado College! I know it’s been about a year since we first met, but it’s not my first time meeting YOU. I became aware of your striking creativity the moment I *INHALED** the performance you did as “Eiko & Koma” at the American Dance Festival at Duke University in 2007.⁷ This was during my first year there on music faculty, 18 years before I began identifying myself as a *BREATH** artist.⁸ Although I was completely blown away by the disciplined force of your extremely slow movements and choreography, I must admit that I don’t think I was mature enough to really appreciate the power of what you were sharing . . . because I fell asleep. Someone sitting to my left nudged me because I was *SNORING** – I hope you didn’t notice! So fast forward to December of 2024, and here I am leading a master class for you and your students for your

⁵ CBS News. “This Day in History: Bill Clinton Says ‘I Did Not Have Sexual Relations with That Woman.’” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 13 Apr. 2021, www.cbsnews.com/video/this-day-in-history-bill-clinton-says-i-did-not-have-sexual-relations-with-that-woman/. Image courtesy of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁶ Eiko Otake is an interdisciplinary + movement-based artist & 1996 Mac Arthur Fellow. Eiko Otake was a collaborator of mine during my time at Colorado College as the NEH Breath Artist-in-Residence for 2024-2025. I was honored to have Eiko invite me to come in as a guest instructor for her course “The Nakedness of Being” in the winter of 2024.

⁷ *The American Dance Festival*. 30th Anniversary Program Brochure, Duke University, 2007.

⁸ *The American Dance Festival*. School Catalogue, Duke University, 2007.

course “The Nakedness of Being” here at Colorado College. Life’s a trip, isn’t it? The moment I saw you improvising with the “Caroline Branham” card of my prototype deck of “Legacy Cards,” which I created for the Juneteenth Festival at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, it was such a *SIGH** of relief for me. I knew then I was on the right track. You see, I was commissioned by a cohort of researchers affiliated with George Mason University known as “The Sound Justice Lab: Music of Early Black Virginians” to create a series of site-specific creative interpretations of the musical lives of the enslaved at the historical estate of George Washington’s Mount Vernon.

Through that once-in-a-lifetime commission from the Sound Justice Lab, I then learned about the research fellowships that were offered through the Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, so I applied. I couldn’t believe it when I was awarded one; I took in a deep *INHALATION** of relief, because I usually don’t win these sorts of opportunities through conventional means. I knew I wanted to focus on the *BREATHING + AIR** realities, habits, and challenges of the enslaved communities there, which would activate my abilities as a *BREATH** artist, and in general as an “Artist-Scholar.” Around that same time, you and I had just met, and you gifted me with a copy of your exhibition catalogue “A Body in Fukushima,” which I brought with me to Mount Vernon. It became one of my main guides as to how to invoke the *AIR + LUNGS** of those historic communities that were enslaved at the estate.

Your work in “A Body in Fukushima,” your references, and creative embodiments of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (post-World War II) during your class “The Nakedness of Being” all became extraordinary discoveries for me during my time at Mount Vernon and now as I continue to learn and reflect.⁹ Of course I am familiar with the U.S. Constitution, and its political and legal impacts on the institution of slavery here, but I’ve never considered any of the constitutional frameworks of the Asian diaspora before.¹⁰ Article 9, under the Chapter 2 heading “Renunciation of War,” states:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be

⁹ Japan. Nihonkoku Kenpō [Constitution], art. 9 (1946).

¹⁰ United States Constitution.

maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.¹¹

There's so much to consider here, as you also apply this constitutional reference in your current piece "What Is War," which you were generous enough to invite me to experience as a work-in-progress here at Colorado College.¹² Perhaps our national constitutions should also be equipped with the sub-heading "Work-In-Progress," which they essentially are. How very different would our conceptualizations, perceptions, and applications of law and practice be if we were to do that? They are living and *BREATHING** documents after all.



CAROLINE BRANHAM. CARD 7 OF THE SILHOUETTE SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK "BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC."

"She inhales deep as if she's breathing in the lingering spirit of these long-lost souls. 'I feel at peace here, a solace here as well as a connection to the past. And then every once in a while a breeze might blow through and it's as if God or the ancestors are answering a question or a prayer that I had.'"¹³

¹¹ Japan. Nihonkoku Kenpō [Constitution], art. 9 (1946).

¹² *What Is War*. The Center For the Art of Performance of UCLA, 2025.

¹³ "In Reopened Exhibition, Mount Vernon Tells the Stories of People George Washington Enslaved." *DCist*, 6 Aug. 2020, dcist.com/story/20/08/06/in-reopened-exhibition-mount-vernon-tells-the-stories-of-people-george-washington-enslaved/.

“Though the word ‘slavery’ does not appear in the Constitution, the issue was central to the debates over commerce and representation. The ‘Three-Fifths Compromise’ provided that three-fifths (60%) of enslaved people in each state would count toward congressional representation, which greatly increased the number of congressional seats in several states, particularly in the South.”¹⁴

“We know that the more senses you involve in your study habits, the more apt you are to actively engage with the material. Visual note-taking helps you to connect important terms, concepts, and theories to related images and visuals. As you create the visual images in your notes, you are engaging the senses of touch and sight. Later, when you go to study these materials or use them for a research project, you will be able to connect not only to the material, but the memories of creating it.”¹⁵

This also sparks a powerful watershed memory for me, which is when I first learned of the constitutional research and scholarly work of Dr. Mary Frances Berry, specifically through her book “Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America.”¹⁶ When I was living in a house in the Charles Village neighborhood of Baltimore with other housemates in 2012, I found Dr. Berry’s book (I believe it was somewhere in the basement) and it was the first time I that I experienced a solidified argument being put forth for interpreting the U.S. Constitution from a completely different perspective of justice. I find that you’re doing something very similar, which is blowing my mind in terms of considering another perspective of the Japanese Constitution through the lens of your multimedia, movement-based work “What Is War.” Are there existential limits of Article 9? And what about Article 96? Article 96 states:

Amendments to this Constitution shall be initiated by the Diet, through a concurring vote of two-thirds or more of all the members of each House and shall thereupon be submitted to the people for ratification, which shall require the affirmative vote of a majority of all votes cast thereon, at a special referendum or at such election as the Diet shall specify. Amendments when so ratified shall immediately be promulgated by the Emperor in the name of the people, as an integral part of this Constitution.¹⁷

¹⁴ “5 Issues at the Constitutional Convention.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/constitutional-convention/issues-of-the-constitutional-convention. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.

¹⁵ “Libguides: Learning Center - Study Skills: Visual Notes.” *Visual Notes - Learning Center - Study Skills - LibGuides at Central Penn College*, guides.centralpenn.edu/c.php?g=695569&p=4988456. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.

¹⁶ Berry, Mary Frances. *Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America*. Penguin Books, 1995.

¹⁷ Japan. *Nihonkoku Kenpō* [Constitution], art. 96 (1946).

How would Article 96 potentially affect Article 9 if an instance of war were to come about? So many questions Eiko, so many possibilities. I sincerely hope we can continue to find advanced solutions through our art.

You know, the other really powerful reference in your current work “What Is War” was to the atrocious legacy of “comfort women.”¹⁸ According to the Association for Asian Studies, “comfort women” are described in the following manner: “[c]omfort women” refers to the system of sexual slavery created and controlled by the Imperial Japanese government between 1932 and 1945. It is the largest case of government-sponsored human trafficking and sexual slavery in modern history.”¹⁹ I was first introduced to this history during the early months of my commission to create site-specific interpretations at Mount Vernon. I was at a sushi bar in Baltimore one night, talking with a younger bartender about my research on the enslaved communities of the Washington estate, and that sparked her own “legacy memories” of the “comfort women” of World War II. Of course, this drives my imagination to the similar legacy of sexual exploitation within the institution of American slavery.²⁰ According to the “Virginia Humanities: Encyclopedia Virginia,” “the sexual exploitation of enslaved people was a facet of enslavement in Virginia that took many forms for both women and men. Enslavers sexually assaulted and abused enslaved individuals, demanded reproduction from them to enhance their own bottom lines, and otherwise used the bodies of the enslaved for monetary gain, pleasure, and punishment.”²¹ This may be an example of how the historical debate regarding the so-called “misleading interpretation” of the Three-Fifths Compromise falls short, where one side of the discourse argues that the three-fifths reference has been taken too literally.²²

It shouldn’t even be contested in my eyes. Systemic sexual exploitation is just one of a countless number of methods that were employed as part of a holistic, machine-like dehumanization of the enslaved. So within the creative and discursive constructs of art, poetry, and so on, it makes perfect

¹⁸ Bisland, Beverly, et al. “Teaching about the Comfort Women during World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims.” *Association for Asian Studies*, 19 June 2023, www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/teaching-about-the-comfort-women-during-world-war-ii-and-the-use-of-personal-stories-of-the-victims/.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Foster, Contributor: Thomas. “Sexual Exploitation of the Enslaved.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 26 Aug. 2024, encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/sexual-exploitation-of-the-enslaved/#:~:text=Both%20enslaved%20men%20and%20women,their%20potential%20to%20bear%20children.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Understanding the three-fifths compromise,” the Constitutional Accountability Center.

sense to experiment with how the Three-Fifths Compromise is interpreted, which can also inform us about how it's perceived beyond those constitutional definitions if the "three" reference is in fact interpreted in a literal fashion. If the enslaved populations of the U.S. were treated as less than human, then these constitutional and conceptual associations to the Three-Fifths Compromise need to be made and experimented with, but perhaps even more so through the irrefutable power of an artistic process.

Well, Eiko, you continue to inspire and ignite my worldviews, on many levels. The way that you embodied the past tragedies of the nuclear meltdowns in Fukushima through the beautiful, yet haunting photographs in the catalogue serve as a constant for me, showing that a truly embodied performance is always non-linear, particularly at that site and others like it such as Mount Vernon. Your frame of reference gave me a courage I didn't know I had when it came time for me to invoke the past *INHALATIONS + EXHALATIONS** of those many families and individuals who were forced to serve the first president of the United States. Hard histories are what people like you and myself were built for. Infinite thanks to you Eiko. I'm honored to call you a colleague. 'Til the next time we take in a creative *GASP** of air together.

Your friend,
Shodekeh

P.S. According to Neely Fuller Jr., autodidactic scholar and author of "The United Independent Compensatory Code System Concept: A Counter-Racist Code," there is no legal definition of the term or concept "justice" that exists.²³ What do you think about this? Could be a fascinating reference to explore through an artistic lens. To be continued the next time we talk over kimchi and rice I hope.

Institutional Note: The Orchard & Nursery Garden of George Washington's Mount Vernon was the location of my site-specific live interpretation "Breaths Along the Potomac." This was originally commissioned by the "Music of Early Black Virginians" project of the Sound Justice Lab and George Mason University, with support from a research grant from 4-VA: Advancing the Commonwealth, which took place during "Freedom Before Emancipation: Family Day for Juneteenth," June 19th – 22nd 2024.

²³ The United-Independent Compensatory Code/System/Concept Textbook: A Compensatory Counter-Racist Code. NFJ Productions, 1984.

“The Meiji Constitution had stipulated that only the emperor had the authority to revise Japan’s constitution. On November 3, 1946, Emperor Hirohito announced the new constitution, so that the Japanese people would see it as legitimate...The 1947 constitution’s most celebrated innovation was Article 9. By the time the constitution came into effect, Japan’s imperial military had been dismantled and its leaders tried for war crimes. A new military was created in 1954, named the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), with the mission of defending Japan. Today, Japan’s SDF works with partners around the globe.”²⁴

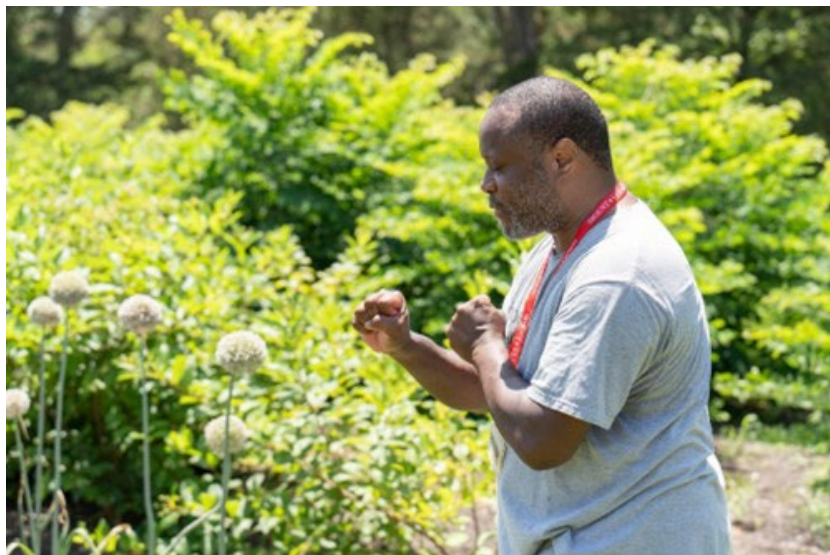
“A woman I wrote a book about, Callie House, was a former slave who started a reparations movement in the late nineteenth century. One of the things that made her so successful is that she went around to meetings and churches and listened to people tell her how they felt about what was happening to them. When you listen to people, they want to join your movement; when you dismiss people and don’t want to hear what they have to say, you don’t get anywhere. Reconciliation requires listening and seeing.”²⁵

“**Every breath** we breathe now will be exhaled a moment later. That is the future tense. That future is already upon us. We will need to exhale. Then it will become now. We can touch it and smell it. Immediately now becomes the past.”²⁶

²⁴ “Japan’s Postwar Constitution.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/japan-constitution/japans-postwar-constitution. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.

²⁵ ““With the Tough Issues, You Have to Be in It for the Long Haul.”” *ClarkU News*, 4 Apr. 2025, www.clarku.edu/news/2022/05/19/with-the-tough-issues-you-have-to-be-in-it-for-the-long-haul/.

²⁶ Otake, Eiko. “Eiko Otake | Magazine | Moma.” *Performing at a Distance*, www.moma.org/magazine/articles/405. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.



“[BREATH ART](#), THE PRIMARY MODALITIES & POTENTIAL PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATIONS,”
AUTHORED BY DOMINIC SHODEKEH TALIFERO AT THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY OF GEORGE
WASHINGTON’S MOUNT VERNON, 2023. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES’
ASSOCIATION.

These experimental associations are inspired by the philosophical texts that exist within the personal book collection of George Washington, archived in the Rare Books and Manuscripts room of the Presidential Library of Mount Vernon and are outlined as follows:

- 1) Functional Breath – Logic.
- 2) Expressive Breath – Axiology.
- 3) Kinesthetic Breath – Epistemology.
- 4) Artistic Breath - Metaphysics.
- 5) Holistic Breath – Ethics.²⁷

²⁷ The John and Adrienne Mars Rare Books & Manuscripts Room of the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon.



“**OUT** OF CONTROL.”²⁸

- HISTORICAL QUOTE-EXCERPT SAMPLED BY EPMD IN THE SONG “RAP IS OUTTA’ CONTROL,” FROM THE ALBUM “BUSINESS AS USUAL,” 1990.

Dear Aunty Joyce,²⁹

How ya doing? I miss you and Baltimore so much, even though I had to get out of there! I truly believe my soul needed some new *AIR**. What cha’ working on these days? I have so much happening here in Colorado – it’s been a real journey for me leaving the East Coast for a new life out here. I’m still in the midst of my research fellowship at George Washington’s Mount Vernon; you see, they encourage all of us as researchers to view this as a “lifelong fellowship,” with the potential to return, discover, and cultivate new knowledge. Remember when I asked if you would have any interest in doing something together at Mount Vernon? You told me about your

²⁸ Reagan, Ronald. “State of the Union.” 18 Feb. 1981. Image courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/NARA, taken by photographer Pete Souza.

²⁹ Joyce J. Scott is an interdisciplinary bead artist, musician, and 2016 Mac Arthur Fellow.

performance art piece regarding George Washington as an enslaver. So how many *GASPS** has that piece provoked over the years? I actually got to view it at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) within your exhibition “Walk a Mile in My Dreams: A 50 Year Retrospective.”³⁰ Wow, you’ve been so busy! When I saw your “George Washington” piece at the show, I heard some hesitant laughter and uncomfortable *SIGHS**. That’s you alright, right on the edge of truth and interpretation. You know what’s interesting though? That piece also brings me back to when I invited you to perform at my vocal arts series “Embody,” and you performed all by yourself “A Change is Gonna’ Come” by Sam Cooke. You hardly cracked any jokes at that moment, and you seemed to embody an intergenerational trauma going all the way back to the times of 18th century slavery. It was in your voice, your wails, your *BREATHS**.

You were definitely time-traveling to the past, through the present, and even into the future struggles of people of African descent. I also remember you talking about how your mother was a sharecropper, which put everything into context before you even started singing. That sort of contextual set-up can serve as its own invocation.

You know, I think one of the reasons I thought about inviting you to do programming with me down at Mount Vernon was because that bit of storytelling you shared planted a seed in me, which eventually led me to the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, specifically the collection entitled “Voices Remembering Slavery.”³¹ It’s an archive of interviews of individuals from the 20th century who were previously enslaved in the 19th century, some of whom became sharecroppers. To hear them tell their own stories, sing different songs, to hear them *INHALE + EXHALE** through different verbalized memories, it’s all so damn indescribable, haunting, beautiful, heartbreaking, hopeful, just like your performance was. I made time for every single recorded interview – I mean every single one, which was definitely one of the most challenging listening experiences of my life. This in turn inspired and informed a great deal of my *BREATH** art activations, performances, and invocations while I was at Mount Vernon. You see, my goal was to research the lives of the enslaved there, more specifically their *BREATHING** realities, habits, and challenges. “Voices

³⁰ *Walk a Mile in My Dreams*. Joyce Scott, The Baltimore Museum of Art, 24 Mar. 2024 – 14 Jul. 2024.

³¹ “About This Collection: Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories: Digital Collections: Library of Congress.” *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/about-this-collection/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

Remembering Slavery” aided me greatly in internalizing a sense of how that can influence my imagination as a performer, similar to acting methods. If you haven’t already listened to some of this archive, you should – it would be really powerful to know what you would gather from it all.

“Well now, they tell me it was a, a year before the folks knowed that, uh, they was free. And when they found out they was free, they worked on shares, they tell me. Worked on shares, didn’t rent no land, they worked on shares. Now you know I was a boy, I’m about explaining to the best of my understanding. They say they worked on shares.”³²

“Flashcards can be an effective study method – even for college students. Remind your students about using flashcards to study, and let them know there is science to support the benefits.”³³

You know what this makes me think of in this moment, Auntie Joyce? Intergenerational creativity and influences. For example, check out this legal, artistic, and cultural reference from the Library of Congress article “The Art of Healing: A Nostalgic Ode to Black Hair Braiding,” which states:

In the era of slavery, the enslaved used braids to hide maps and other directional instructions that would lead them to safety. While copyright law may not protect such braided maps, the law does protect sufficiently fixed maps defining them as ‘a cartographic representation of a geographic area, including atlases, marine charts, relief maps, and globes.’ The Library’s collection contains maps that depict various routes to freedom.³⁴

Wow, talk about the phenomenon of intergenerational knowledge transmission and conceptual inspiration.

When I was at the BMA gift shop buying a copy of your catalogue “Walk a Mile in My Dreams,” I also saw the recent catalogue of Sofia Coppola’s filmography (“The Virgin Suicides,” “Lost in Translation,” “Marie Antionette”); she is the daughter of legendary film director Francis Ford Coppola (“The Godfather,” “The Conversation,” “Apocalypse Now”),

³² “Faces and Voices from the Presentation: Articles and Essays: Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories: Digital Collections: Library of Congress.” *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/articles-and-essays/faces-and-voices-from-the-presentation/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025. Isom Moseley, Age 88

³³ “Flashcards: A Classic Study Tool That Works for College Students, Too!: U-M LSA LSA Technology Services.” *LSA*, lsa.umich.edu/technology-services/news-events/all-news/teaching-tip-of-the-week/flashcards-a-classic-study-tool-that-works-for-college-students-too.html. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

³⁴ Tucker, Ashley. “The Art of Healing: A Nostalgic Ode to Black Hair Braiding: Copyright.” *The Library of Congress*, 16 Feb. 2022, blogs.loc.gov/copyright/2022/02/the-art-of-healing-a-nostalgic-ode-to-black-hair-braiding/.

a stand-out example of intergenerational inspiration.³⁵ Then, this of course inspired a deeper look into your mother's legacy, the great Elizabeth Talford Scott,³⁶ and how amazing it was that both her exhibit and yours were running at the same time at the BMA! From one *BREATH** to another, from mother to daughter . . . in fact, remembering your mother's quilt work brings me to a recent discovery I've made in my imagination constructs of the enslaved at Mount Vernon, and although it is a fascinating thread to follow (see what I did there?), I'm still searching for evidence of this occurring specifically at the Washington estate. In an article published by Smithsonian Folklife, it's stated, "According to legend, a safe house along the Underground Railroad was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next."³⁷ Wow, quilt codes. This leads to so many more questions. I'm wondering if quilt coding was ever discovered and deemed illegal in certain territories? Do these legends and legacies ring any bells for you?

I'm sure that you're also aware of the colonial legacies of "Casta Paintings"!³⁸ A different modality of expression in comparison to quilting for sure, but still one that potentially deals with racial codification within an artistic construct. This excerpt from a Reed College talk entitled "Humanities 110: Racecraft & Casta Paintings" states, "Casta paintings are a form of artwork created in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Mexico and used by elites to create and assign race to people of various ancestries. Although often offensive, these paintings help us understand the role of art in the history of race and racism in the Americas."³⁹ Is that what I'm seeing when I'm looking at the cover art of "Washington at the Plow," the book by

³⁵ Coppola, Sofia, and Lynn Hirschberg. *Sofia Coppola Archive: 1999-2023*. MACK, 2023.

³⁶ Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott. The Baltimore Museum of Art, 12 Nov. 2023 – 28 Apr. 2024.

³⁷ May 3, 2019 | Marie Claire Bryant | Comments. "Underground Railroad Quilt Codes: What We Know, What We Believe, and What Inspires Us." *Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage*, folklife.si.edu/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

³⁸ "Eighteenth-century Mexico saw the invention of a unique pictorial genre known as casta painting. Created as sets of images, the works document the process of racial mixing among Indians, Spaniards, and Africans." Attributed to José de Ibarra Mexican. "Attributed to José de Ibarra: From Spaniard and Mulatta, Morisca (de Español y de Mulata, Morisca): Mexican." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/719284. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

³⁹ College, Reed. "Humanities 110." *Public Lecture - Humanities 110 - Reed College*, www.reed.edu/humanities/hum110/public-lectures/lectures/leibman-021720.html. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025. Laura Leibman, on 17 Feb. 2020.

author Bruce A. Ragsdale (see pg. 30), that argues that Washington's farming practices led to his evolved rejection of the institutional practice of slavery?⁴⁰ An elastic and dynamic counterargument to "Casta Paintings," this has to be what I'm experiencing when I'm looking at some of your work, for sure!⁴¹ I wonder if an argument could be formed that would lead to "Casta Paintings" being conceived as illegal, outside of an archival perspective of course.

Hmmm, may be difficult within a democratic society, but what do I know? But modern-day minstrelsy is still very much alive and well when it comes to some of our Black artists and entertainers in the 21st century.

You know, sometimes I wish I had a powerful and artistic legacy to inherit – no one else in my family has really pursued the arts professionally. It's pretty damn lonely sometimes; perhaps that's one of the reasons I'm so drawn to the "Voices" archive at the Library of Congress and the enslaved communities at Mount Vernon. What an insane challenge. I have two ancestors of my own, Spotswood and Frances Talifero, both born into a state of slavery in Madison County, VA, 1810 or 1812.⁴² Now George Washington died in 1799, and he had it written into his will that those slaves of his estate would be emancipated.⁴³ So what if there were any slave trades that took place between Mount Vernon and the estate that my great grandparents were forced to serve on? What if I have ancestors buried at Mount Vernon, but that remains unknown because there has not been an excavation done, so there's no way to know anyone's identity there and cross-reference that information with the ledgers that are preserved and archived. Speculation of course, but very important to creatively pursue nonetheless . . . so many endless questions. But I'd like to imagine that I've inherited some strong artistic inclinations from at least one or two ancestors – they just have yet to be identified.

Well, I can go on and on, seriously. Thanks so much for everything over the years, Aunty. I still would like to show you around the estate of Mount Vernon one day; your insights and interpretations of the *AIR** that exists

⁴⁰ Ragsdale, Bruce. *Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery*. Harvard University Press, 2021.

⁴¹ Scott, Joyce J. *Casta Family*. 2006, Goya Contemporary & Goya-Girl Press.

⁴² The baby book of my birth, with genealogical annotations and details of my ancestors, Spotswood & Frances Talifero, authored by my Great Aunt Helen Talifero Maddox. 30 Sep. 30 1977.

⁴³ "Founders Online: George Washington's Last Will and Testament, 9 July 1799." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-04-02-0404-0001. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

there would be so valued. Hope all is well for you in Baltimore and hope to talk again real soon.

Love,
Your Art Nephew, Shodekeh

P.S. One more thing, Auntie Joyce – I would love to talk more about your wearable bead jewelry some time, specifically in the performative context of “process art,” (the sustained emphasis on the process of artmaking, rather than being motivated by the goal of a final work or piece) because I’m beginning to discover brand new dimensions to your work.⁴⁴

Institutional Note: The “Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories” collection at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress (LOC) became one of my primary resources for my research and inspiration as a fellow at the Presidential Library of George Washington’s Mount Vernon.⁴⁵ The general collection of the Library of Congress also became the archival home of the transcribed score of my composition “Vodalities: Paradigms of Consciousness for the Human Voice” on April 29th, 2024, following my concert performance with the ensemble Sō Percussion as part of the “Live! at the Library” concert series at the LOC.

⁴⁴ *Messages*. Joyce J. Scott, Mobilia Gallery, 2023.

⁴⁵ “About This Collection: Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories: Digital Collections: Library of Congress.” *The Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/about-this-collection/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.



“**BUTTONS RECOVERED FROM THE SOUTH GROVE MIDDEN.**” CARD 8 OF THE MUSICAL LIVES SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.”

“‘Finding’ music in Mount Vernon’s enslaved community is a formidable challenge, yet we do find subtle clues in surviving historical accounts and through archaeology...Yet many objects historically documented in the construction of musical instruments have been archaeologically recovered at Mount Vernon. Cowrie shells, glass beads, and buttons made from a variety of materials have been recovered from multiple locations at Mount Vernon, including the South Grove midden, the African American cemetery, and the House for Families cellar, one of the primary quartering sites for enslaved people on the Mansion Farm for decades.”⁴⁶

“Flashcards have been used to teach students as young as six years old. Their benefits greatly outweigh their disadvantages, and even many college students use flashcards.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “Native Songs.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/native-songs. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁴⁷ Team, Marketing. “Why Your Students Should Be Using Flashcards.” *Caduceus International Publishing*, 28 July 2023, www.cipcourses.com/blog/why-your-students-should-be-using-flashcards/.



“CASTA FAMILY,” JOYCE J. SCOTT. IMAGE COURTESY OF GOYA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY/
THE ARTIST LEGACY PROJECT.



“[BREATHE](#),” JOYCE J. SCOTT, 2014. HAND-BLOWN MURANO GLASS, BEADS AND THREAD. 20
1/2 × 19 1/2 × 16 IN | 52.1 × 49.5 × 40.6 CM. JOYCE J. SCOTT. IMAGE COURTESY OF GOYA
CONTEMPORARY GALLERY/ THE ARTIST LEGACY PROJECT.

“It’s about freedom and it’s about the amazing power between a mother and a
child.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ “The Brooklyn Rail,” *JOYCE J. SCOTT with Lowery Stokes Sims*, 31 Oct. 2018, brooklynrail.org/2018/11/art/JOYCE-J-SCOTT-with-Lowery-Stokes-Sims/.

Joyce, as far I am concerned, you're a community-based + artistic midwife to many creative souls in Baltimore and beyond . . .



KATE, MIDWIFE. CARD 9 OF THE SILHOUETTE SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK
“BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.”

“There is a dearth of evidence concerning the effectiveness of breathing exercises on the duration of labour. As per our knowledge, this is the first systematic review and meta-analysis on the effect of breathing exercises on the duration of labour. The findings of this review would provide new insight into the effectiveness of breathing exercises in the scientific community.”⁴⁹

“In 1799, Kate was likely in her 50s. There are no records of Kate’s appearance. She is depicted holding an infant because she served as a midwife to the enslaved community.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Issac, Alwin et al. “Effectiveness of breathing exercise on the duration of labour: A systematic review and meta-analysis.” *Journal of global health* vol. 13 04023. 10 Mar. 2023, doi:10.7189/jogh.13.04023.

⁵⁰ “Biographies.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/enslaved-people-at-mount-vernon. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025. Kate, field worker.

“The final resolution of that issue—the Three-Fifths Compromise, a formula by which slaves would be counted as three-fifths of a person in apportioning both representation and taxation—was a purely mechanical and amoral calculation designed to produce harmony among conflicting interests within the Convention.”⁵¹

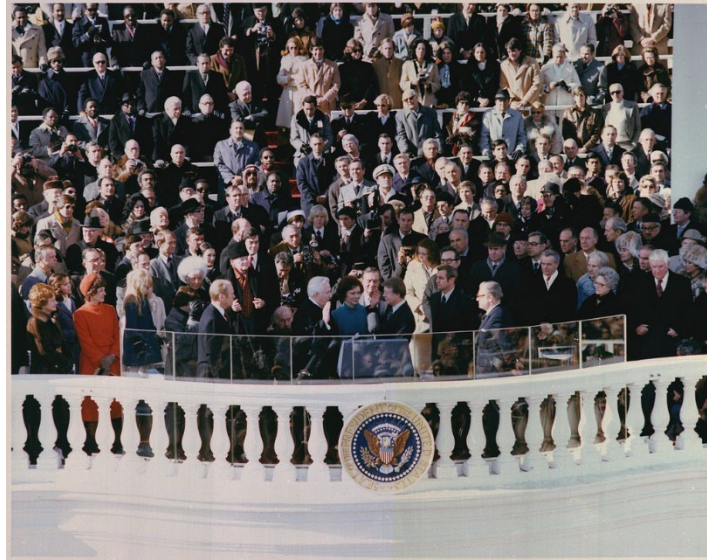
“Many students cringe when I suggest flashcards as a study tool, eschewing this seemingly anachronistic practice for more stimulating study methods. However, I quickly remind them that sometimes study techniques survive for several decades because they actually work.”⁵²

“Still, many of Washington’s innovations for land use had negative consequences for farm laborers. His adjustments often ‘imposed a far more demanding work regimen that redefined much about the lives and labor of the more than two hundred enslaved people at Mount Vernon.’ Increasingly, Washington suspected that the ‘ideal of a balanced order rooted in nature and improved by human endeavor’ was ‘in conflict with the system of enslaved labor’ practiced at Mount Vernon and on his other farms. He came to see that ‘his system of improved farming could not be reconciled with slavery.’”⁵³

⁵¹ “The Constitutional Convention of 1787: A Revolution in Government.” *National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.Org*, constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/white-papers/the-constitutional-convention-of-1787-a-revolution-in-government. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁵² “In Defense of Flashcards.” *Staying Ahead of the Game*, saotg.com/in-defense-of-flashcards/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁵³ Spencer, Mark. Book Review of Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery by Bruce A. Ragsdale - The Washington Post, 17 Dec. 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/as-george-washingtons-farming-techniques-evolved-so-did-his-views-on-slavery/2021/12/15/8c60db9c-1fba-11ec-8200-5e3fd4c49f5e_story.html.



“**CARTER**, ARE YOU PREPARED TO TAKE THE CONSTITUTIONAL OATH? I AM. WOULD YOU PLACE YOUR LEFT HAND ON THE BIBLE AND RAISE YOUR RIGHT HAND AND REPEAT AFTER ME. I, PRESIDENT CARTER . . .”⁵⁴

- Historical quote-excerpt sampled by Lil’ Wayne in the song “President Carter,” from the album “Tha Carter IV,” 2011.

Dear Tonika,⁵⁵

What’s going on? How ya’ doing? You know, I’ve known you for so long now, I feel like I gotta think of you as a cousin; I hope that’s ok, because it means I really f@#\$ with you. I can’t believe we’ve known each other since 2014. That’s 11 years! Remember when we were working together at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum?⁵⁶ I feel like that was the very first time that I was given a platform as an “artist-scholar,” and not just as a performing artist, Beatboxer, or *BREATH** artist, which I wasn’t even identifying as back then, but was certainly practicing in a very intuitive way. I wasn’t even fully aware of what I was evolving into – funny how personal growth works! Speaking of personal growth, how are things for you at the Johns Hopkins

⁵⁴ CBS News. “From the Archives: Jimmy Carter’s Oath of Office and Inauguration Speech.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 1 Oct. 2024, www.cbsnews.com/video/from-the-archives-jimmy-carters-oath-of-office-and-inauguration-speech/. Image courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/NARA.

⁵⁵ Tonika Berkley is an archeologist, museum educator, science fiction writer, curator, and the Africana Archivist of the Sheridan Libraries & University Museums of Johns Hopkins University.

⁵⁶ *For Whom It Stands: The Flag and the American People*. The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, Smithsonian Affiliate, 17 May 2014 – 28 Feb. 2015.

University Sheridan Libraries? Wow and damn, brilliant! I gotta say, is it just me or do innovations within the archival world not get enough credit??? Well, that's what I would like to talk to you about. Ok, so back to the Reginald for a second, during our time there working on "For Whom It Stands," researching how people politically and ideologically *INHALE + EXHALE** the National Anthem.⁵⁷ In a lot of ways, that residency was an extraordinary segue into my ongoing fellowship at George Washington's Mount Vernon, where I'm researching the *BREATHING** realities of the enslaved communities there.⁵⁸ I still can't wait for you to visit me one day while I'm in residence there; your training as an archivist, archeologist, and curator would yield so many indispensable insights. And yes, I still think you should apply for a fellowship one day, damn it. Sorry, don't mean to pressure you, not too much anyway.

But let me tell you about when I was there. First of all, living at the fellow's house was amazing, and freakin' weird. Every day I would visit the library of the estate, conduct interviews, and read hella' books.⁵⁹ And in my countless conversations in which people would learn that I'm a research fellow there, folks would ask "Oh, so are you writing a book?" That question was asked about 15 million times. Not that I was insulted or anything, I'm still honored that they would even ask. It's just evidence that there was a one-track framework regarding distribution of one's research. So of course, I would respond with "Well actually, I established a living archive at the Towson University Special Collections,⁶⁰ and that will serve as one of my primary distribution channels for my research." People would look at me like a deer in headlights wearing an X-Mas hat caught in the middle of a Halloween party. They had no idea what that meant. Dude! We're talking about *BREATHING** life into a living archive. Do you know what that means??? Of course you do Tonika! But I can't tell you how frustrating it became after a while. This wasn't always the case, of course, as a few of my library office notes and Mount Vernon memorabilia are now archived at the Presidential library and Towson University archives, which is amazing! This may have occurred because I was very forthright about using my archive at TU. This also sparked conversations about needing to cultivate a collection

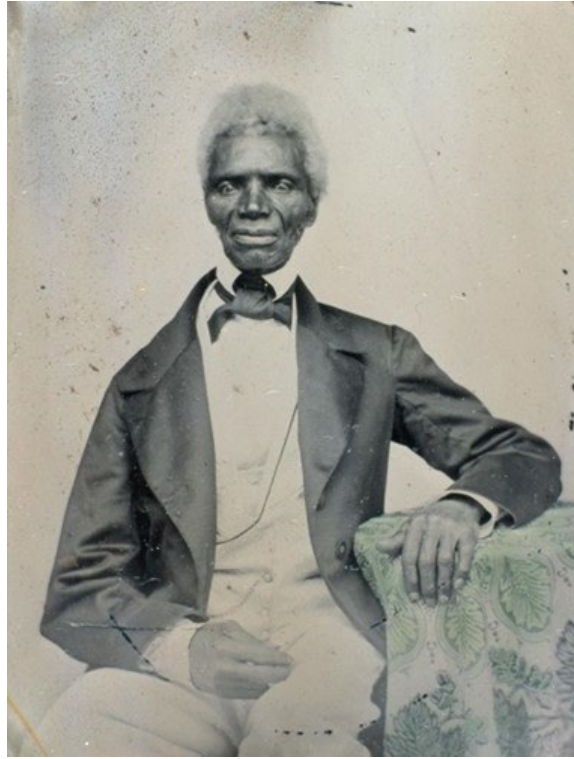
⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Thompson, Mary. "the Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret." *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/the-only-unavoidable-subject-of-regret. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁵⁹ Ganeshram, Ramin. *The General's Cook: A Novel*. Arcade Publishing, 2020.

⁶⁰ Hobstetter, Kyle. "Sharing His Voice." *Towson University*, 12 Apr. 2021, www.towson.edu/news/2021/shodekeh-talifero.html.

at the library focused on the work of the research fellows there, which of course would be so necessary and brilliant!



TOM. CARD 4 OF THE PORTRAIT SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.” PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, 1861 – 1865. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION.

“Tom, a formerly enslaved man whose last name is unknown, sits for a photographic portrait in the 1860s. Tom was probably a member of the enslaved community owned by the Custis estate; some of those people labored on the various farms at Mount Vernon, while others worked on the far-flung farms owned by the Custis estate and overseen by George Washington. Tom was inherited by George Washington Peter, the son of Martha Washington’s granddaughter Martha Parke Custis Peter and Thomas Peter. During the Civil War, Tom ran away from George Peter’s home in Maryland and found refuge with a group of abolitionists who had this photograph taken.”⁶¹

“In the current digital age, flashcards have evolved from traditional paper-based cards to digital platforms and mobile applications. With the advent of

⁶¹ “Self-Emancipated Man Named Tom.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 16 June 2022, encyclopediaofvirginia.org/9664hpr-64f2c93c20eeca3/.

technology, students now have access to various learning tools that enhance the effectiveness of flashcards.”⁶²

You know, from an archival perspective, there are specific aspects of the legacy of George Washington’s last will and testament I would love to talk with you about next time we get to hang out. For example, and according to a post from Mount Vernon regarding Washington’s will:

Washington’s second priority in his will was the emancipation, care, and education of his enslaved workers. Although in the early pages of the will Washington states his opposition to slavery and his “earnest wish” to emancipate those enslaved immediately upon his death, there were complications. About half of the enslaved people at Mount Vernon were “dower” slaves owned by the estate of Daniel Parke Custis, Martha Washington’s first husband. Washington only had the power to free the enslaved people he owned, not those who were part of the Custis estate. Washington was also concerned about Martha’s livelihood and in his will, he freed those he could, “Upon Decease of my wife . . .” The one exception was William Lee, who, upon Washington’s death, was granted immediate freedom and a 30-dollar annuity “for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.”⁶³

So yeah, there’s a lot to unpack here. I remember once on an educational tour during a brief visit to Mount Vernon, I asked the tour guide if Washington’s legal emancipation efforts within his will could also be perceived as one of Washington’s “great relinquishments,” along with stepping down from leadership after the Revolutionary War and only serving a two-term presidency.⁶⁴ I honestly don’t remember the tour guide’s response, I sorely wish that I did, but nonetheless, his power to “legally” enslave was never given up while he was alive and in good health.⁶⁵ But also, what were the intergenerational and legal limits of his will within the context

⁶² “The Ultimate Guide to Using Flashcards as a Studying Aid in College - Scholarly Blog.” *The Ultimate Guide to Using Flashcards as a Studying Aid in College - Scholarly Blog*, 17 Aug. 2023, scholarly.so/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-using-flashcards-as-a-studying-aid-in-college.

⁶³ “Washington’s Last Will & Testament.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/death/washingtons-last-will-testament#:~:text=In%20his%20will%2C%20Washington’s%20highest,his%20family%20upon%20his%20death. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁶⁴ Hofverberg, Elin. “George Washington’s Resignation as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army – Pic of the Week: In Custodia Legis.” *The Library of Congress*, 21 June 2024, blogs.loc.gov/law/2024/06/george-washingtons-resignation-as-commander-in-chief-of-the-continental-army-pic-of-the-week/.

⁶⁵ “The Death of George Washington.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/the-death-of-george-washington. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

of state vs. national boundaries during a time in which slavery was still cultivating gross momentum throughout the new nation?⁶⁶

These sorts of questions and many more are among the countless reasons why “archival curation”⁶⁷ is so very powerful and historically indispensable. These inquiries are the sorts of things that can inspire the brave pursuit of untold stories, and I am positive that there are many unknown, or unpopular stories surrounding the legal legacy of Washington’s will. I know of one in particular, but we’ll get to that in a moment. There’s also the history of “Tom,” who, according to Encyclopedia Virginia, “was inherited by George Washington Peter, the son of Martha Washington’s granddaughter Martha Parke Custis Peter and Thomas Peter. During the Civil War, Tom ran away from George Peter’s home in Maryland and found refuge with a group of abolitionists...”⁶⁸ Did Tom use the war as an opportunity to escape, and if so, how exactly did he learn about it? Seems likely, which then drives my imagination to envision so much, such as the potential oral transmission among enslaved populations regarding the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.⁶⁹ If it was illegal for them to read and write, how does perception of constitutional law take shape within their specific and encultured vernacular of the English language?⁷⁰ Did Tom receive “word” of the war, or, even more specifically, the emergence of this new amendment? How do the dimensions of “law” retain their shape despite language, or possibly morph from one linguistic paradigm to another? This next thought really gets me excited: how can the power of legal archiving lead to curatorial or artistic breakthroughs that may impact change of contemporary or outdated laws? I feel that archival studies, along with art, can serve as extraordinary bridges between the codified terminologies and languages of various laws and their applicable concepts. Of course, as a Hip Hop artist myself, I have to break the “law” all the time. Identifying as a professional “Beatboxer” and “*BREATH** Artist” requires that I break the

⁶⁶ “Martha Washington as a Slaveowner.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/martha-washington-as-a-slaveowner#:~:text=As%20mistress%20of%20Mount%20Vernon,articulated%20her%20views%20on%20slavery. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁶⁷ Archival curation is the acquisition of significant and unique materials, artifacts, and literature that are not only historically preserved, but then also applied for exhibition purposes and the cultivation of a dynamic artistic process.

⁶⁸ “Self-Emancipated Man Named Tom.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 16 June 2022, encyclopediavirginia.org/9664hpr-64f2c93c20eeea3/.

⁶⁹ United States Constitution. Amend. XIII.

⁷⁰ LLC, U.S. Language Services. “The Languages Spoken by the First Slaves.” *U.S. Language Services*, 13 Jul. 2023, www.uslanguageservices.com/blog/the-languages-spoken-by-the-first-slaves/.

“law of expectation” constantly, the most insidious of all “laws,” through producing the universal “Oh my God, how is he doing that with his voice” moment.

The establishment of my living archive was another experience of that effect, but that’s for another conversation and maybe even a little discourse?

I believe in a lot of ways, we’re witnessing a new way of archiving for the future. What do you think? Did you attend any panels or discussions on the future of archiving when we were together at the American Alliance of Museums conference last May?⁷¹ If so, I wanna’ hear all about it! Well, I miss you cous’. Hope all is well, groovy, and super creative in your world. I’ll never forget watching you enjoy “Get Out”⁷² for the first time; you were bouncing off the walls! So many *GASPS**! I miss having fun with you. Take care and stay in touch, and please write back!

Love,
Sho’

P.S. So did you know that Martha Washington actually emancipated the enslaved communities of Washington’s estate before her death?⁷³ She went against the wishes of the general’s will, because there was a fire at the estate, and they couldn’t prove if it was arson or if it was accidental. Either way, she was inspired to take “legal action,” do the right thing, and move forward with emancipating them. Sounds like an artistic interpretation of this could greatly augment that largely untold story within the archives and beyond . . .

Closing Letter Note: Tonika Berkley was a fellow researcher that I worked alongside for the exhibition “For Whom It Stands: The Flag & the American People” at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture (Smithsonian Affiliate) from 2013 to 2015.⁷⁴ She also continues to be a dear colleague and intellectual confidant in the evolving field of archival studies.

⁷¹ The American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting & Expo. Baltimore, MD, 16 May 2024 – 19 May 2024.

⁷² Camille, Jeffrey, “‘Black Is in Fashion’: The Black Body as a Commodity in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*” (2022). *Dean James E. McLeod Freshman Writing Prize*. 18.

⁷³ “Ten Facts about Martha Washington.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/martha-washington/ten-facts-about-martha-washington. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁷⁴ *For Whom It Stands: The Flag and the American People*. The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, 17 May 2014 – 28 Feb. 2015.



WILLIAM LEE. CARD 6 OF THE PORTRAIT SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK
 “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.” PAINTING BY JOHN TRUMBULL, 1780.

“William Lee arrived at Mount Vernon in 1768, after George Washington purchased him from Mary Lee, a wealthy Virginia widow, for £61.15s. Washington also bought William’s younger brother Frank, who went on to serve as a waiter and butler in the household. Both William and Frank were described as ‘mulatto,’ or mixed race, meaning they were probably the sons of an enslaved mother and a white father.⁷⁵ The name ‘Billy Lee’ appears frequently in popular histories and is well known, Washington only referred to his valet by that diminutive until about 1771.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Terminology Disclaimer Note: The term “mulatto” referenced in the Mount Vernon passage about the life of William Lee is used strictly in a research context, and is by no means utilized with any harmful intention to the actual life of that said person.

⁷⁶ “William (Billy) Lee.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/william-billy-lee. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

“William Lee served with Washington throughout the Revolutionary War. He was responsible for organizing the general’s personal affairs, including his voluminous papers, and holding his spyglass. As the attendant to a prominent figure, Lee became a minor celebrity. Postwar visitors to Mount Vernon occasionally sought out the ‘famed body-servant’ of the commander-in-chief.”⁷⁷

“Flashcards offer a high degree of customization. You can create personalized flashcards that target your specific learning needs, focusing on areas where you may need more practice. This adaptability makes them an ideal tool for learners at any level, as you can tailor the content to fit your goals and preferences.”⁷⁸

“Washington finalized his will the Summer before he died, with the document signed and dated July 9, 1799, just months before his death the following December. It was presented for probate at the Fairfax County Courthouse on January 10, 1800, where it remains today. Given Washington’s stature, it was natural that the document would be published for the edification of the nation. Offered here is the first of many printings, issued within days in Alexandria, Virginia.

The will is best known for Washington’s manumission of his slaves, albeit of a qualified sort: ‘Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom’ (The manumission did not-and could not-extend to the ‘dower slaves,’ those brought to the marriage by his wife Martha.) However limited the gesture, Washington was clearly concerned with the welfare of the individuals to be freed, providing for the care and education of those in their minority and ongoing financial support for those in need.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “The Benefits of Flashcards: A Powerful Tool for Learning: Learn Japanese.” *Jlptcards.Com*, jlptcards.com/articles/benefits-flashcards. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁷⁹ Buehler, Michael. “First Printing of the Will of George Washington.” *Boston Rare Maps*, 20 Aug. 2015, bostonraremaps.com/inventory/will-george-washington/?srsltid=AfmBOor8qRZSogTD4_gogp3Y5uQSnOq-crxlLfA0vCvMu9SGhuIH64Kh.



CAESAR. CARD 10 OF THE SILHOUETTE SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.” IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION.

“On April 14, 1798, plantation manager James Anderson placed a newspaper advertisement seeking an enslaved field-worker who had run away from Mount Vernon’s Union Farm. Anderson described Caesar, then in his late forties, as a ‘black negro’ with ‘a sharp aquiline nose’ who stood about five feet seven or eight inches tall and was missing some of his front teeth. The advertisement stated that Caesar usually dressed in homespun black and white, could read and write, and that he ‘frequently’ preached to other black people in the area.”⁸⁰

“The Three-Fifths Compromise was reached among state delegates during the 1787 Constitutional Convention. It determined that three out of every five slaves were counted when determining a state’s total population for legislative representation and taxation. Before the Civil War, the Three-Fifths Compromise gave a disproportionate representation of slave states in the House of Representatives.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ “Caesar.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/caesar. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁸¹ “The Three-Fifths Compromise.” *The Three-Fifths Compromise | Perspectives Of Change*, perspectivesofchange.hms.harvard.edu/node/87. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

“It turns the learning process into a kind of game where the aim is to have your flashcards as far along the chain of boxes as possible.”⁸²

“Any person who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars.”⁸³

Institutional Note: The Towson University Special Collections & University Archives is the home of my living archive “Ideations of Potential: Shodekeh’s Innovation Lab of Embodied Scholarship & Hip Hop Imagination.”⁸⁴ This was established in 2021 as my “innovation capstone project” during my three years as the Towson University College of Fine Arts & Communication “Innovator-in-Residence.” It also continues to serve as one of the primary resources for my research and inspiration as a fellow at the Presidential Library of George Washington’s Mount Vernon.

⁸² “Subject Guides: Study & Revision: A Practical Guide: The Leitner System.” *The Leitner System - Study & Revision: A Practical Guide - Subject Guides at University of York*, subjectguides.york.ac.uk/study-revision/leitner-system. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁸³ *Literacy as Freedom*, americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁸⁴ Ideations of Potential: Shodekeh’s Innovation Lab of Embodied Scholarship & Hip-hop Imagination. The Towson University Special Collections and University Archives, 2021.



“AND SO MY FELLOW AMERICANS, ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU. ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY.”⁸⁵

- HISTORICAL QUOTE-EXCERPT SAMPLED BY 3RD BASS IN THE SONG “WORDZ OF WISDOM,” FROM THE ALBUM “THE CACTUS ALBUM,” 1989.

Dear Christina,⁸⁶

What’s going on? Hope the new year has been good to ya’ so far. I can’t believe we’re in the year 2025, it’s like we’re *BREATHING** in a science fiction novel or film or something. With all that’s happening in the world, it sure feels like it. I’m still waiting to learn about the fellowship on the east coast. I would definitely use it to continue my research at Mount Vernon. I could also use that opportunity to write you a check as a way of saying thanks! You have no idea how much you agreeing to help me with artist representation has helped; from Caramoor to Mount Vernon, I’ve learned so much from your assistance! I always tell folks that you’re my “creativity

⁸⁵ John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. “John F. Kennedy: ‘Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You.’” *YouTube*, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L81l1q_MNRY. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025. Image courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

⁸⁶ Christina Freeman is a fiction writer, graphic designer, game-based learning researcher, and instructional designer for information systems at the University of South Florida.

consigliere,” because if the rapper “Common” can have a “creativity committee,” then you, and everyone else should definitely have one! For example, your sustained encouragement to see myself as an “artist-scholar” was and continues to be a very empowering concept and identity reference. You once said, “We live in a world where scholars don’t know what to do with artists, and artists don’t know what to do with scholars,” and I’ve actually seen that play out in real time at Mount Vernon and other sites.⁸⁷ For me, *INHALING + EXHALING** between the two worlds is not only a point of extreme curiosity, but also an absolute necessity. A leading example of this from the world of Hip Hop is KRS-ONE,⁸⁸ which is a huge reference for my continued work when I became the first Hip Hop-based scholar at Mount Vernon.

So what on Earth does this mean? Just as Hip Hop can potentially sample any record, KRS has illustrated time and time again that Hip Hop can also sample any “body of knowledge” or philosophy from around the world, take in its *OXYGEN**, adapt it, and then redistribute it through its own musical and literary forms.⁸⁹ Can an argument be made that Hip Hop exists as one of the most advanced forms of scholarship? That’s an extraordinary question, very intriguing indeed. We already know that our institutions are gonna’ make that one very, very difficult to answer. All we can do is, of course, “Show & Prove.”⁹⁰ What an exciting inquiry and challenge. That’s also the reason why along with studying the lives of the enslaved communities of George Washington and the intergenerational continuum of our presidential legacies, I must also continue studying the legacies of “Hip Hop Scholarship,” from KRS-ONE to Chuck D,⁹¹ Grandmaster Flash,⁹² the

⁸⁷ Educational Engagement: Participatory Cultures and Modern Educators. Christina Freeman.

⁸⁸ “KRS-One Discusses the Fundamentals of Hip-Hop.” *KRS-One Discusses the Fundamentals of Hip-Hop*, 16 Oct. 2009, www1.udel.edu/udaily/2010/oct/krone101609.html.

⁸⁹ Smith, Brandi. “Hip-Hop Harmony: KRS-One Event Culminates in Prestigious Volunteer Award for CERCL Pioneers.” *Rice News | News and Media Relations | Rice University*, 14 Mar. 2024, news.rice.edu/news/2024/hip-hop-harmony-krs-one-event-culminates-prestigious-volunteer-award-cercl-pioneers.

⁹⁰ *Breaths Along the Potomac: A Breath Art Silent Walk*. Designed and presented by Mount Vernon research fellow Dominic Shodekeh Talifero for “Freedom Before Emancipation: Family Day for Juneteenth” at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, 19 Jun. 2024.

⁹¹ “Fight the Power: How Hip Hop Changed the World.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/show/fight-power-how-hip-hop-changed-world/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁹² “Grandmaster Flash.” *Grandmaster Flash - Polar Music Prize*, www.polarmusicprize.org/laureates/grandmaster-flash/#:~:text=The%20Polar%20Music%20Prize%202019,new%20way%20of%20making%20music. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

RZA,⁹³ the GZA,⁹⁴ Rakim,⁹⁵ J Dilla,⁹⁶ and on and on. Boy, do I have my work cut out for me or what?

Continuing with this idea and practice of “Artistic-Scholarship,” I gotta’ tell you about what I did for the Juneteenth program at Mount Vernon last summer. So as always, I love to push back on paradigms, whether they be artistic or scholarly. Instead of writing a book or dissertation, I created a prototype deck of “legacy cards,” which was made of images, illustrations, and paintings of those who were in some way connected to the institution of slavery at Mount Vernon. This served as a direct conduit for illuminating the *BREATHING** realities of the enslaved community there. At first, I just thought, “Oh, no problem, I’ll just go into the gift shop and buy a deck of cards.” Then I realized, “Wait, I’m also 100% certain that they don’t have anything like that there for sale.” So that’s what forced me to create a prototype deck. It took me about a week to complete, and another two or so to have it approved by the education division of Mount Vernon. I used the visual resources center at Colorado College; they were a huge help. Each card had an image on the front, and then general information on the back.

⁹³ The RZA. *The Tao of Wu*. Riverhead Books, 2014.

⁹⁴ Natematias. “GZA@MIT – Hip Hop as Civic Media.” *MIT Center for Civic Media*, 21 Mar. 2012, civic.mit.edu/index.html%3Fp=1100.html.

⁹⁵ Rakim. *Sweat the Technique: Revelations on Creativity from the Lyrical Genius*. Amistad, 2020.

⁹⁶ “Dilla Time: Dan Charnas and Jason Moran.” *The New York Public Library*, www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/02/09/dilla-time-dan-charnas-and-jason-moran. 9 Feb. 2022.



EDMUND PARKER. CARD 8 OF THE PORTRAIT SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK
“BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.” ILLUSTRATION BY HARRISON HOWELL DODGE.

“In the summer of 1898, a *Washington Post* reporter visited Edmund Parker on his deathbed. For the previous fifteen years, Parker had worked for the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) as the guard at Washington’s tomb. Years earlier, he had been enslaved on the estate. Stricken with stomach cancer, the seventy-one-year-old spoke candidly about his life and journey from slavery to freedom, first as the property of a Washington heir and then in his role as a beloved employee of the historic preservation organization maintaining the estate.

Edmund Parker arrived at Mount Vernon in 1841, at age fourteen, as one of the enslaved people owned by John Augustine Washington III (known to his family as Augustine). Parker recalled that slavery had been ‘mighty hard work. Had more put onto me than I could perform, ‘cept as I took care of myself. There was mighty heavy timber on that Mount Vernon farm, and we slave folks was

pulled and hauled. Altogether, as far as kindness was concerned, I reckon they meant well enough, although life is a burden to a slave person; indeed it is—left without education and the mind terrified all the time.”⁹⁷

“You can introduce new concepts and a wide range of subjects to promote learning . . .”⁹⁸

During the event,⁹⁹ I would have a patron do a “blind pull” from the deck, look at it, read the back, essentially *INHALING** the very essence and aura of the card, then hand it to me. Then I would walk silently to a specific location in the orchard/nursery garden, and I would embody a *BREATH INVOCATION** inspired by the card. This wasn’t a matter of being just an artist, and/or a scholar, but brought in indispensable elements of being an educator or a teaching artist as well. I’ve found that the tactile properties, mobility, and dynamic simplicity of the cards unlocks all sorts of dimensions and constructs of an individual’s unique and personal learning process, particularly the learning paradigms of their “inner-child” and perhaps even their “inner-elder” as well. To have the cards approved by the education department of Mount Vernon was very validating for me. Also, the musical interpreter Don Francisco loved them so much he started using them in his tours right away.¹⁰⁰

Rohulamin Quander, a founding member of the League of Descendants of the Enslaved at Mount Vernon and who is a direct descendant of Nancy Carter Quander (born into a state of slavery at Mount Vernon in the late 18th century)¹⁰¹ was also a very big fan and supporter of my legacy cards, and there can be no greater validation than his. Even though this was quite the challenge, towards the end, it all came together pretty naturally for me. You know, when I think about our conversations regarding constructs as paradigm-extensions of multi-dimensional concepts, so many flashes race

⁹⁷ “Edmund Parker.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/edmund-parker. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

⁹⁸ Shichida Australia. “Power of Flashcards: How They Are Used to Boost Learning.” *Shichida Australia*, 13 Nov. 2024, www.shichida.com.au/blog/the-power-of-flashcards-how-they-are-used-to-boost-learning/#:~:text=You%20can%20introduce%20new%20concepts,letters%2C%20phonics%2C%20or%20words.

⁹⁹ *Breaths Along the Potomac: A Breath Art Silent Walk*. Designed and presented by Mount Vernon research fellow Dominic Shodekeh Talifero for “Freedom Before Emancipation: Family Day for Juneteenth” at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, 19 Jun. 2024.

¹⁰⁰ “Patriotic Piper.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/preservation/mount-vernon-ladies-association/behind-the-scenes/patriotic-piper. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

¹⁰¹ “Nancy Carter Quander.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/nancy-carter-quander. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

through my mind: art, philosophy, game-based learning (which is of course your jam). Here's an example of such a "clashing of constructs" that I've learned about on my journey that is quite the tale. So, in 1772, the legendary African American poet Phillis Wheatley, who also penned the famous 1775 letter and poem to the general George Washington, had to prove in court that she was the actual author of her own literary work.¹⁰² Talk about putting on a "show," – no wonder you recently recommended that I watch the film "Chicago"¹⁰³ on the big screen in the film department here at Colorado College, a viewing experience that illuminated for me the unavoidable dynamics and conceptual similarities between performing on stage and performing in a court of law. In the article "A Critic At Large: Phillis Wheatley on Trial" by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it states:

It was the primal scene of African-American letters. Sometime before October 8, 1772, Phillis Wheatley, a slim African slave in her late teens who was a published poet, met with eighteen of the most influential thinkers and politicians of the Massachusetts Colony. The panel had been assembled to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: Was a Negro capable of producing literature? The details of the meeting have been lost to history, but I've often imagined how it all might have happened.¹⁰⁴

What an obscene and equally fascinating thing to contest in a court of law. Those slave codes of the 18th century¹⁰⁵ (another human construct of externalized imagination) really performed a number on people's perception of reality. Clearly Phillis was a woman born out of time, or perhaps one could argue within a "Universal Court of Time Travel" that all victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade were "born out of time." Hmmm, an interesting

¹⁰² Henry Louis Gates, "Phillis Wheatley on Trial," www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Gates_Phillis.pdf. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025; "Her impact on Washington, though subtle, may well have contributed to one of the most important changes in his life. Beginning shortly after his encounter with this extraordinary black poet, Washington, who had heretofore seemed no different from the typical Virginia slave owner, began to show signs of an evolving attitude about slavery and race." Basker, James G. "A Poem Links Unlikely Allies in 1775: Phillis Wheatley and George Washington." *A Poem Links Unlikely Allies in 1775: Phillis Wheatley and George Washington* | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/poem-links-unlikely-allies-1775-phillis-wheatley-and-george-washington. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

¹⁰³ Sulock, Emily. "Chicago: A Movie Musical Mockery of the Media's Razzle Dazzle Image of Murder." (2012).

¹⁰⁴ Henry Louis Gates, "Phillis Wheatley on Trial," www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Gates_Phillis.pdf. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

¹⁰⁵ "FDLP Resource Guides: Then and Now Experiences of Blacks and African Americans: Historical Events and Notable Individuals." *Historical Events and Notable Individuals - Then and Now Experiences of Blacks and African Americans - FDLP Resource Guides at U.S. Government Publishing Office*, libguides.fdp.gov/tne-blacks-and-african-americans/historical-events-and-notable-individuals. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

science fiction concept perhaps, but I digress. Ok, back to these “constructs of codes.” Here’s another reference from The National Museum of African American History & Culture: “Whereas the teaching of slaves to read and write, has a tendency to . . . produce insurrection and rebellion . . . any free person who shall hereafter teach or attempt to teach any slave within this state to read or write . . . shall be liable to indictment. - North Carolina Slave Code, 1831.”¹⁰⁶ To think of the very act of reading and writing as inflammatory . . . reminds me of the time I was at a bar waiting for some friends to show up, just relaxing and reading a book. My friends were taking a while to arrive, and I hadn’t ordered anything yet, and the owner came over and became really aggressive with me and said, “This isn’t a library.” Needless to say, I left, and so it would appear that the act of pursuing knowledge through literature still exists as an inflammatory act.

Check out this excerpt from the South Carolina Slave Code Of 1740:

And whereas, the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; *Be it therefore enacted* by the authority aforesaid, That all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereinafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught, to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person and persons, shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.¹⁰⁷

Wow, no “Reading Rainbow”¹⁰⁸ for you. To add the extra layer of codification preventing the exchange of services as a scribe for payment, that’s so far removed from my perception of reality that it speaks volumes to how a community, nation, or government entity can create a law for virtually anything that they can imagine.

Maybe I’ve been *BREATHING** this *AIR** as an artist-scholar longer than I’ve realized, but that’s another story regarding the abysmal depths of imposter syndrome. Well once again, I can’t thank you enough. I will also be back in touch about the fellowship that I applied for last fall. Take care in the meantime, and I hope the rest of your family are all safe and well.

Love,
Shodekeh

¹⁰⁶ Nmaahc. “Illegal to Read.” *Illegal to Read* | National Museum of African American History & Culture., www.searchablemuseum.com/illegal-to-read/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Campbell, Annie. “Excerpts from South Carolina Slave Code of 1740 No. 670 (1740).” *US History Scene*, 18 Dec. 2017, ushistoryscene.com/article/excerpts-south-carolina-slave-code-1740-no-670-1740/#:~:text=And%20in%20case%20any%20person,or%20by%20putting%20irons%20on%2C.

¹⁰⁸ Levar Burton, recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities medal, 2023.

Closing Letter Note: Christina Freeman has aided me as my creative advisor in “adult learning art paradigms” and artistic representation for specific residency engagements, composition commissions and concert endeavors since 2021.

Institutional Note: “The Be Washington™ Interactive Theater”¹⁰⁹ of the Donald W. Reynolds Museum & Education Center became a regular reference and resource for me to learn from and experiment with during the two-month living residency component of my fellowship at George Washington’s Mount Vernon. This interactive learning construct became especially dynamic for me during my audit sessions with the George Washington Leadership Institute.



“BE WASHINGTON IS A FIRST-PERSON, FIFTEEN MINUTE INTERACTIVE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE.

COME FACE TO FACE WITH CHALLENGES THAT GEORGE WASHINGTON CONFRONTED AS COMMANDER IN CHIEF OR PRESIDENT IN FOUR KEY SCENARIOS. HOST A GAME AND CONTROL THE PACE OF INDIVIDUALS, OR PLAY AS A SINGLE PLAYER. THIS GAME IS COPPA COMPLIANT. THIS THEATER IS CLOSED UNTIL 2026 FOR AN EXTENSIVE REBUILD OF THE EDUCATION CENTER.

BE WASHINGTON IS AVAILABLE TO PLAY ONLINE.”¹¹⁰ IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION.

Thought you might find this reference interesting Christina, since game-based learning is your wheelhouse in too many ways to count . . .

¹⁰⁹ “Be Washington™.” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/education/interactive-tools/be-washington. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*



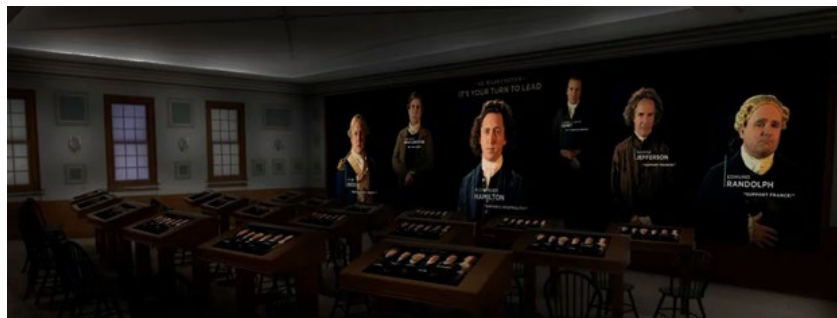
“WASHINGTON’S KITCHEN, MOUNT VERNON.” CARD 7 OF THE PORTRAIT SECTION OF THE PROTOTYPE LEARNING DECK “BREATHS ALONG THE POTOMAC.” PAINTING BY EASTMAN JOHNSON.

“In this mid-nineteenth century painting by Eastman Johnson, an enslaved woman with a small child in her lap and two other young enslaved children sit in front of an open fire in the kitchen that served the mansion at Mount Vernon. The crumbling walls and dark interior create a somber evocation of the life of the enslaved. The kitchen was located in a separate building a short distance from the main house and connected by a covered colonnaded walkway. The artist visited Mount Vernon in 1857 and painted at least six versions of this kitchen scene between 1857 and 1865.”¹¹¹

“Over the past two decades, digital flashcards— that is, computer programmes, smartphone apps, and online services that mimic, and potentially improve upon, the capabilities of traditional paper flashcards— have grown in variety and popularity.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ “Washington’s Kitchen, Mount Vernon.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 14 June 2022, encyclopedia.virginia.org/13052hpr-e05040a2484b300/.

¹¹² Zung, Inez et al. “How do college students use digital flashcards during self-regulated learning?” *Memory (Hove, England)* vol. 30,8 (2022): 923-941. doi:10.1080/09658211.2022.2058553.



“THE ‘BE WASHINGTON’ THEATER COMBINES AN 18TH CENTURY-LOOKING SPACE WITH THE LATEST IN DISPLAY AND INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY. THE ROOM DESIGN, INSPIRED BY CONGRESS HALL IN PHILADELPHIA, CONTAINS 18 TWO-PERSON INTERACTIVE TOUCHSCREEN KIOSKS. THEATRICAL WINDOWS ON THE LEFT AND RIGHT OF THE THEATER CHANGE IN COLOR TO SUIT THE TOPIC AND MOOD OF THE SCENARIO WHILE A LARGE 6K RESOLUTION LED WALL AT THE FRONT OF THE ROOM FEATURES LIVE-ACTION HISTORICAL VIGNETTES.”¹¹³ IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION.

“The first-person approach, interactive elements, rich live-action 6K media presentation and time-pressured gameplay are all designed to appeal to millennials and Gen Z participants—guests with very different media expectations than previous generations.”¹¹⁴

Here again Christina, it would be so interesting to see you perform an analysis of this gaming construct at Mount Vernon. Imagine a variation of this addressing the constitutional legacies of the 13th Amendment. Eat your heart out Daniel Day Lewis . . . ¹¹⁵

¹¹³ “Be Washington: It’s Your Turn to Lead.” *SEGD*, 28 June 2023, segd.org/projects/be-washington-its-your-turn-lead/.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ “Lincoln.” Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013.



“**KING COAL.**” “A DEPARTURE FROM SHELDON’S PREVIOUS VÉRITÉ WORK, THIS EXAMINATION OF STORYTELLING JUXTAPOSES A PRESENT-DAY PORTRAIT OF A COAL COMMUNITY WITH SWEEPING SHOTS OF VERDANT MOUNTAIN SCENERY SET TO A DREAMY SCORE BY BOBAK LOTFIPOUR AND EXTRAORDINARY SOUND EFFECTS BY BREATH ARTIST DOMINIC ‘SHODEKEH’ TALIFERO.”¹¹⁶ IMAGE STILL OF MYSELF RECORDING MY BREATH ART SOUND LIBRARY BY CINEMATOGRAPHER CURREN SHELSON. IMAGE COURTESY OF ELAINE MCMILLION SHELDON, DIRECTOR OF KING COAL.

““Some of the sounds that you heard throughout the film, sparrows, ocean waves, overtone breath, thunder, maybe some crickets, I recorded them as stems at the Monongahela National Forest with Elaine and her team,’ reveals Talifero at the film’s post-premiere Q&A before asking everyone in the room to close their eyes. What followed was a succession of sounds — wind, water, crickets, birdsong — all produced by Talifero’s own breath.”¹¹⁷

Breath Art as a gaming construct? Hmmm, interesting. This would only work offline and away from any sort of disembodied processing of course . . .

¹¹⁶ Ward, Ben. “The Future Belongs to Dreamers in ‘King Coal.’” *Sundance.Org - Sundance.Org*, 15 Sept. 2023, www.sundance.org/blogs/the-future-belongs-to-dreamers-in-king-coal/.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Stay tuned for Vol. 2 of “*Breaths* Along the Potomac,” featuring four new additional letters addressed to the following extraordinary individuals:

- 1) Baba Fred Johnson, Jazz musician and the inaugural artist-in-residence at the National Academy of Sciences.
- 2) Senga Nengudi, Process artist and distinguished member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.
- 3) Vincent Thomas, Choreographer and professor of modern dance and “Movement Skills For Men” at Towson University.
- 4) Myra Jackson, “Diplomat of the Biosphere” at the Stockholm Resilience Centre and permanent representative of the United Nations.