

## VULNERABILITY WITH ATTITUDE (OVERDUE DUES)

As a devotee of both their playful antagonism and the healing reality they inspire, I'm grateful for the temporary church HCJ has made through OWED TO CHIRON (The Wounded Healer), their long overdue debut solo exhibition in London this tumultuous Autumn. Allowing space to catch one's breath amidst crises near and far, and reflect on all that is owed to the colonial diaspora, HCJ's art, primarily through her voice and sound-making, encourages us to return to ourselves as wounded children and create new myths together. Aptly, in the first meeting of the QTIWOC 'Chiron Choir', beneath the stained-glass icons of vocal cords, psilocybin, weed leaves, beating hearts and inner ears shining above the *Chironic Chapel*, we release some of the built-up tension through breathwork and a capella song, collectively calming a rainstorm. When I suggest that as well as a conductor she's a preacher, she agrees. Because she is equally as open about her fears and sadness, this isn't cringe. Irresistibly, HCJ embodies a kind of post(-colonial)-camp and a stance of 'vulnerability with attitude' (a phrase they borrow from Greg Tate) urging us to keep ourselves and each other going, destabilising the status quo with an energy of resilience.

Welcomed with a cup of herbal tea offered to all visitors, I settle down to watch the first video in the show, *Owed to Humana 0.1* (2020) which documents HCJ's struggle to find the origins of white supremacy. From the days of the week to the names of constellations in the sky, nothing escapes its rationalising logic, until this begins to blur with the anomalous behaviours of Pluto's unruly moons, leading us "far out" towards the shapeshifting celestial body Chiron. Chiron is a unique synthesis of astronomy - classified at different times as planet, comet and an asteroid - and ancient Greek mythology, as a learned centaur who practised as an artist, an archer and a healer. Tragically Chiron died of a wound to his foot, unable to heal himself. "Using synthesisers to explore the synthesis", HCJ's epic, 30-minute long sound installation *Owed to Chiron (The Wounded Healer)* (2022) unpacks the astrological antagonism Chiron represents



Photo credit: Jadon Cobb

as a wounded healer. The centaur's mutability as both a human and animal, together with Chiron the planet's erratic but cyclical orbit pattern, opens up a plurality, which for HCJ is deeply comforting as a way of defying fixed categorisation. This space of contradiction, together with the altered 432Hz frequency of her soundscape (more relaxing for the body and mind than 440 Hz, AKA the note A, the frequency most modern music is tuned to), allows us to reflect on the resistance we unconsciously feel in our bodies and how we might listen to our intuition and embrace the potentialities of change and queerness instead.

Hannah's world-building, *world-divining* practice drawing on the stars, sound technologies and non-linear time, I feel continues the legacy of transcendent, unearthly music recounted by Edward George in Black Audio Collective's 'Last Angel of History' (1996). During the film, George traces a constellation of musicians from Sun Ra, Lee Perry and George Clinton, up to Derrick May and Carl Craig. These were practitioners of 'imaginary music', impossible in that it looked to space and the future rather than reflecting Black musical traditions of the past born of the streets and live performance. In the exhibition's titular work, *Owed to Chiron (The Wounded Healer)* (2022) a vast glitter ball rotates majestically and hypnotically at eye level in the centre of the gallery: A glowing disco star within touching distance. The pitch of Jones' voice is lowered as we hear them affirming the immeasurability of their queer listeners in the face of white supremacy ("which craves our rhythm but not our blues"), off-footing the gender bias of history makers while channelling Ra. I have particularly enjoyed the grandeur of the long cape and the woolen crown HCJ has worn over her braids throughout the public programme. Together with the altar-like shelves (*Quest for Knowledge (New Onnim No Sua, Ohu)*, 2022 and *Unlocking Divination*, 2022) laden with sacred texts, objects and tools (from books about Chiron to cowrie shells, condoms, and Jones' mouthguard for boxing), her practice generatively and irreverently overlaps with Ra, Perry and Clinton's unhinged (at least from the outside), regal and ceremonious brand of Afrofuturist pseudo-science.



Photo credit: Jadon Cobb (top and middle) and Hannah Catherine Jones (bottom).

Outside of the exhibition, Peckham Chamber Orchestra, which Jones founded almost a decade ago, feels like what orchestras will look like when elites fall and we start over. It is an orchestra made up of amateur musicians with an ethos of ritual and joy rather than meritocracy and discipline. Christina Sharpe coined the term ‘undisciplinary’ which seems appropriate for Jones, who has brought punning to academia and brought academia to NTS Radio; broadcasting their vibrant PhD research ‘The Oweds’ through her monthly offering, The Opera Show (recordings of which greet you in the entrance of the show, titled *Growth*, the speakers entangled with the vines of living plants). Celebrating vocal labours of all kinds, HCJ uses this space to demystify complex concepts such as 432Hz and 528Hz frequency healing sound theory, Chiron’s queer celestial body and its erratic orbit path through space and more. The Opera Show also serves as their diaristic account of navigating institutions, a practice I can relate to having edited the Flatness website over the last decade as a way of processing so much grief and sharing learning and epiphanies along the way (exactly the growth suggested in the work’s title). The exhibition and events programme tirelessly hosted by HCJ, (which seems to grow with community celebrations and performances by the week including Seah Wraye’s Shamanic workshop ‘A Chironic Quest’, Chipo Kandake’s Femme Funk dance workshop, Teshay Makeda’s Omega Mother Goddess workshop/performance, HCJ’s Embodied Listening Session – a combination of listening session and sound bath... the list goes on...!), is an expanded version of the radio show, a chance for them to address their listeners’ other senses and desires by creating a precious space for queer gathering, healing and rest. An opportunity so tragically elusive in this privatised city where pleasure is too often treated as a luxury.

Like a teenager seeking refuge from all the feels building up inside, lately I have been wearing headphones as a form of protection. My nerves are acutely sensitive to the cruelties of 12 years of Tory ruin (as a continuation of centuries of divide, rule and extract) which have begun to leech into everyday interactions on the street. My new cans filter out some of the chaos, helping me to connect with the breath (and at particularly

sweet and silent times, my heartbeat), consciously slowing it down to be able to coexist with the cadence of a world queered of hierarchy and extraction that my people, mentors, queer mothers and daddies – HCJ, Evan Ifekoya, Daniella Valz Gen, Adam Farah, Lucy Parker, Amardeep Singh Dhillon and Beverley Glenn Copeland to name but a few key oracles – are lovingly engaged in working towards. In this knowledge, protecting our hearts and energies through being selective over what we hear, see and remember is critical to our survival. Elegiac works *Owed to Diaspora(s)* (2019-20), a 40-minute long video conjuring Afro-Caribbean histories and legacies with an original soundtrack weaving together HCJ’s synths, choral-like vocals and dub beats, and *Owed to Catherine* (2022) HCJ’s grandmother and namesake whom she never met but calls into the space of the exhibition through an arresting pencil drawing displayed above the fireplace (where the apse would be if the gallery were indeed a church) alongside a few auratic objects, are testimony to this devotional practice. Midway through the show HCJ and Evan Ifekoya create an exceptionally grounding and generous performance together. I wasn’t alone in experiencing the deeply relaxing and energising effects of their healing sounds reverberating around the chapel: their literal *vibing* in both senses of the verb, of love as kindred spirits and healers, and through the airwaves via voice, singing bowls, percussion and waterphones (whose spectral effects I’d never witnessed before). We were calmed into a sublime state of expanded alertness, what I recognised as the ‘waking sleep’ quality of yoga nidra. Reflecting on the erotic possibilities of sound experienced in HCJ’s exhibition, it’s no surprise we close our eyes to meditate: As I breathe in, I welcome in life energy, and as I breathe out I feel myself connecting with the earth, coming home to myself, my ancestors and the vitality of my daughter and younger generations.

On one of several bus journeys home from the show, I listen to the loping, weirdly upbeat rhythm of Nina Simone’s lament ‘Baltimore’ where she sings about the post-industrial city dying, ‘Oh, Baltimore, ain’t it hard just to live’. I compare it to my experience of London now that the famous Elephant and Castle shopping centre – for me, diasporic London at its most magical and peaceful – has finally been razed to the ground. A loss



Photo credit: Jadon Cobb (top and right) and Shama Khanna (left)

which has me reaching for the comfort of full-strength headphones where previously I would have drawn so much from the sounds around me as I walked. As the orchestral strings surge towards the second half of the song, Simone paints an image of new life being created in the country: ‘Got my sister Sandy and my lil brother Ray... Buy a big ol’ wagon, to haul us all away... live out in the country where the mountains’ high... never gonna come back here, til the day I die...’. This image reminds me of the ending of the first book in Octavia Butler’s post-apocalyptic ‘Earthseed’ series as the brave, yet super-sensitive protagonist travels into the horizon to start a revolutionary farm. HCJ, however, answers this conflicted fantasy of leaving the city for Brit-ish POC, with a mantra we practice in the Chiron Choir, to “stay, stay, stay” even though we’re “tired, tired, tired” (*Owed to Humana 1.0*, 2020). And somehow the vibrations in the air do lift us, stirring my spirit, reminding me of a reality within reach: If together we give it voice.

Shama Khanna

Curator and founder of [Flatness](#) and editor of the new book [Queer Diasporic Futurity](#).





Photo credit: Jim Winslet