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A Review of Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals

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Gumbs, P.G. (2020). *Undrowned. Black feminist lessons from marine mammals*. AK Press. 174 pp. \$15.00 paperback ISBN: 978-1-84935-397-7

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Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned* is one of its kind; the work defies all categorization. *Undrowned* is generative, devotional, bursting with life and hope, and teaches us to mourn, survive, and most importantly to love. A love that is grander than our human-centeredness. It is precisely here that *Undrowned* makes a valuable contribution. *Undrowned* helps us expand our capacities for imagination and empathy through the intimacy that is weaved between humans and marine mammals. Slowly, we start attuning to the practice of breathing from an interspecies and interrelated perspective. The latter is needed seeing the urgent ecological crises we are facing. In that sense, it teaches us a love that expands our capacity for being alive through awareness that we breathe together on this endangered shared planet because "breath is a practice of presence" and the scale of breathing is collective (Gumbs, 2020, p. 21).

The interspecies awareness is cultivated by bringing us humans back to our origins as mammals through a process Gumbs goes through, which she describes as a "Marine Mammal Apprenticeship" (p.7). Different species of seals, whales, dolphins, otters, manatees are among the many in the book that become our mentors in core black feminist themes such as surviving, mourning, bonding, self-care, mothering, adaptation, collaboration, and love.

Through a preface, a forward by adrienne maree brown, and an introduction, readers are introduced to the philosophy grounding the work. Breath is an important theme in the book, and the ocean is a space that connects us all through breath and history. Gumbs explains in her preface how the title *Undrowned* is related to the Transatlantic Middle Passage. Both humans and our marine mammal ancestors are historically entangled in the genocidal practices of colonization, and the exploitative and toxic practices of capitalism. An example is the extinct Caribbean monk seal whose blubber "literally lubricated the machinery of the plantation economy" (Gumbs, 2020, p. 139). And sadly, the contemporary crises we face caused by humans remain a threat to the planet and to most of the marine mammals mentioned in the book. Think of melting ice, rising sea levels, pollution, and both commercial and illegal hunting of animals.

The work itself is as layered as the depths of the ocean, and just as the sperm whale teaches us in *Undrowned*, each theme invites us to dive deeper with a variety of marine mammals as our wise mentors. The core of *Undrowned* is then composed around nineteen themes including listen, breath, remember, practice, collaborate, end capitalism, refuse, go deep, surrender, rest, stay black, and take care of your blessings. These themes become meditations weaved in black feminist principles. Because of the book's thematic organization, the themes can each be read on their own, and don't need to follow a linear pathway.

For each theme Gumbs shifts between different registers with fluidity of water. Each theme is centered around a couple of marine mammals and what they can teach us. Starting with detached descriptions of the behaviors of marine mammal species, Gumbs mimics natural science discourse aiming at 'classifying' species and their behavior. The point made here is that scientific discourse often misrepresents and is violent and shallow in its descriptions. Gumbs then shapeshifts in her poetic voice, bringing the reader in a space of wonder, narrating the depths of ways of being of marine mammals cultivating intimacy and kinship. A lyrical declaration of love and the ways each

marine mammal teaches us to love bring the reader into poetic reverence. The book repeats the mantra “I love you” rhythmically. This is the power of her poetic intervention, as she moves:

from identification, also known as the process through which we say what is what, like which dolphin is over there and what are its properties, to *identification*, that process through which we expand our empathy and the boundaries of who we are become fluid, because we *identify with* the experience of someone different, maybe someone of a whole different so-called species (Gumbs, 2021, pp. 8-9)

The book ends with a section containing practices -both solo and group versions- for delving deeper into each theme. This makes *Undrowned*'s pedagogical approach strong. The exercises are meant as a way to *embody* the wisdom of marine *mammals*. It is suggested to be read slowly, in bits, and to practice.

Undrowned, as black feminist pedagogy, is relevant in a broad range of contexts: academic, activist, literary, but also on a deeply personal level. Because of its interdisciplinary character, *Undrowned* is suitable in academia for both undergraduate and graduate-level courses and workshops in different subject areas. Gumbs (2020) grounds her work in the *movements* that, according to her, “are boldly seeking to transform the meaning of life on the planet right now. Movements for Black liberation, queer liberation, disability justice, economic justice, racial justice, and gender justice” (p. 9). Thus, *Undrowned* can be a valuable addition to courses spanning from feminisms, gender and queer studies, ecological humanities, social and ecological activism, posthumanisms, decolonization, animal studies, and in creative writing settings (poetry, non-fiction, natural science writing, and as an example in genre-bending innovations). The breath of impact of Gumbs' *Undrowned* is rich and can be used in different settings, as it cultivates an ecological sensitivity, awareness in interspecies relatedness, emphatic imagination beyond the anthropocene, and lessons in planetary love.