

adrift: the bayou project

"We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection."

— *Bell Hooks, Belonging: A Culture of Place*

With a distinguished career in sound, projection, and extended reality production, Sadah Espii Proctor continues to make her mark in the field of immersive storytelling. Garnering awards from her peers for Outstanding Media Design, and recognition for her contributions to the craft by Forbes Magazine and American Theatre Magazine among a number of award nominations, it can be said that Espii's technical skill and innovation in the experimental field of immersive design is only surpassed by her talent for intuitive storytelling.

Following the multi-continental success of her immersive film *Girl Icon* (2019), *adrift: the bayou project* is a much-anticipated invitation to dive deeper into the creative world of Sadah Espii Proctor. Commissioned by Lincoln Center as an inaugural work for their [Social Sculpture Project](#), and the first chapter in a larger body of work *adrift: the bayou project* is an immersive sonic and mixed-reality folktale that transforms Lincoln Centers Hearst Plaza into a multi-dimensional liminal space that blurs the borders of *memory, history, and time*. With *adrift: the bayou project* Espii establishes an expansive footing in the tradition of Black folklorists like Corneila Bailey, Zora Neale Hurston and Beverly J. Robinson whose rich engagement with culture as a practice walked hand in hand with their creative and artistic forms of expression.

Born in the liminality of Espii's dreamspace 7 years ago, glimpses of spirits, and bodies passing through the murky water of a bayou beckoned to Espii for their stories to unfold. The years of research that followed into the pre-and post-reconstruction era United States lives of African - Americans would reveal stories of black fugitivity, liberation, political autonomy and marronage, rich with nuances of separation, loss and reunion. ***adrift asks you to reflect on the roles that time - place - space - person - image and sound play in the creation of memory and meaning within our lives.***

As you enter the Hearst Plaza, 3 Haint Blue door frames greet you as gateways into the world of *adrift*. The hue of these frames get their name from the spiritual belief held in Southern Gullah Geechee Coastal Culture¹ that anything painted in this particular shade of blue has the power to ward off "Haints," also known as malicious spirits. Once activated by your mobile device the "Haint Blue" frames become portals into the past draped with delicate digital collages of newspaper clippings suspended through space.

Beginning as early as 1866 during the (*gradual*) enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation following the end of the American Civil War - African - Americans who had been separated from friends, family and loved ones by

¹ Pollitzer, W. S. (2005). *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Illustrated ed.). David Moltke-Hansen (Foreword).

way of the American Slave Trade and the American Civil War - took to submitting ads and letters of inquiry into Newspapers all over the United States to be sent as far abroad as Liberia, Brazil and Jamaica in search of reconnection. These letters, penned by emancipated African - Americans represent profound acts of audacious hope in search of reunion with their estranged loved ones.

Collected and archived by teams of scholars across two databases, the Lost Friends and Last Seen². Together totaling over 15,000 letters, these deeply vulnerable, public moments of longing and reunion offer windows into the lives of emancipated African-Americans at a pivotal moment of community, economic, and identity reclamation.

It is important to note that a majority of these ads were published in and by Black-owned and founded newspapers. The impact of these publications during the Reconstruction-Era would contribute significantly to the emergence of African-American political leadership for close to a decade during the Reconstruction era - before the era's failure in 1877.

In *adrift* ads and letters searching for the lost and celebrating the found form a network of narratives that you are invited to traverse through from frame to frame guided by the voice of a Mother searching for her Daughter - through the bayou.

A deliberate nod to the historical significance of bayous as sites of independence, refuge and joy for free and fugitive African-Americans, the bayou exists here as a transitional plane. In *adrift* the bayou is not a sedentary place, the bayou is an embodied voice and portal of storytelling here to guide you through a rememory³ of our collective past.

There is an abundant political & cultural history of bayous in the southeastern United States as sites of resistance and literal portals to autonomy for indigenous peoples and fugitive African Americans living independently from society⁴ - also known as the maroons.

Records show that between 1672 and 1864, especially among the sparsely settled mountain, forest, or swampy regions of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama at least 50 maroon communities existed.⁵ These communities held distinct cultural practices and norms and were major actors in the shaping of the nation from the colonial era through the end of the American Civil War.

For Espii and her collaborators, Gio & Joyous, a trip to the low country of South Carolina, its coast, bayous, swampland, marshes, former rice plantations, and sites of freemen subsistence rice production⁶ would provide a creative alchemy that would be integral to shaping the visual and sonic experience of *adrift*.

²Information Wanted. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://informationwanted.org/>, The Historic New Orleans Collection. (n.d.). Lost Friends: Advertisements from the Southwestern Christian Advocate. Retrieved from <https://www.hnoc.org/database/lost-friends/>

³ Saleh-Hanna, V. (2015). Black feminist hauntology: Rememory the ghosts of abolition? *Champ Pénal/Penal Field*, XII. <https://doi.org/10.4000/champpenal.9168>

⁴ South Carolina Encyclopedia. (n.d.). Maroons. Retrieved from <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/maroons/>

⁵ South Carolina Encyclopedia. (n.d.). Maroons. Retrieved from <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/maroons/>

⁶ KyleFromOhio. (2017, November 22). The Ion Swamp. KyleFromOhio Blog. <https://kylefromohio.blogspot.com/2017/11/the-ion-swamp.html>

In *adrift* Espii activates her “aural and visual sense for the transmission of meaning”⁷ to transform visual and sound recordings captured on-site in Charleston, South Carolina at Ion Swamp (the site of a former rice plantation) and Harvest Gardens (black-owned land that borders Francis Marion State Park) into a mixed - reality immersion that blurs the borders of space and time.

Drawing inspiration from the Afro-diasporic tradition of oral storytelling the audio and visual cues of the bayou act in their own way as griots (*west-African storyteller/historians of the oral history tradition*) calling out for you to respond with your presence and interact.

You see, you, visitor, are the steward of this story

Your presence - propels the story forward

Your cues, questions, reflections, gestures and demands⁸ are rituals of regard and recollection⁹

As you travel from frame to frame through the bayou we ask that you listen with compassion, move mindfully and do not isolate this work from the contemporary context of the institutional space you find yourself in, as well as the larger global context of loss, separation and joy of reunion that links *adrift* to the continuum of stories shaped by forced migration through time.

We pay our respect and deep gratitude to the indigenous stewards of this land and the lands of our ancestors

We pay our respect to and remembrance to the people of San Juan Hill who were forcibly evicted from this land

may we always remember:

“How we choose to tell our stories -

Is how they tell their story”¹⁰

Written by Joyous Pierce
Curator - *adrift: the bayou project*

⁷ Chandler, G. W. (2008). *Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories* (K. Mills, G. C. Peterkin, & A. McCollough, Eds.). University of South Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.890644>

⁸ Chandler, G. W. (2008). *Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories* (K. Mills, G. C. Peterkin, & A. McCollough, Eds.). University of South Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.890644>

⁹ hooks, bell. (2009). *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (1st ed.). Routledge.

¹⁰ Sadah Espii Proctor, 2024