

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Chiwenite Onyekwelu: “Transatlantic Equation”

Chiwenite Onyekwelu · Wednesday, October 14th, 2020

“Transatlantic Equation” is a brave and moving poem, blending the political with the personal. The poet approaches a difficult and serious subject with the right balance of passion and control, politics and aesthetic, clarity and beauty. In the poem, the speaker examines the “equation” that is involved in transporting slaves to the Americas or Europe, where “one black body equals a ship + half a distant country” and also the grief of the women and children left behind, “the density of every heart shriveled.” This confrontation of the past is no easy task, as we are told, “This is the century you keep trying to forget.” Yet, it is an obligation that the speaker must perform. In the last few stanzas, the poem shifts from a series of couplets to two solid tercets, as the speaker meditates, “All my life, I have memorized the Transatlantic Equation,” and then reimagines “a black man seated by himself // hoping and hoping and hoping / that the ship would wreck.” This final couplet is such a powerful and perfect ending to a poem such as this. Thus, reading the poem, we witness the power of poetry in which language, imagination, and desire are used to find space for rebellion and resistance in this painful history of violence, subjugation, and oppression.

— Bunkong Tuon

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### Transatlantic Equation

In antediluvian mathematics, one black  
body equals a ship + half a distant country

across the shores. Sum up your windpipes.  
multiply by every minute you held your breath,

a gun nailed halfway into you. The  
science of disappearance, make *water* subject

of the formula. All the women deserted  
at home. And their children still too fragile to

accommodate grief. Measure the density  
of every heart shriveled. This is the century you

keep trying to forget. Number every black

man left on each ship, multiply the logarithms

of overload. And the bodies not too strong  
to reach the shores, only strong enough to float

on water. Take drowning as the mathematical  
equivalent of freedom.

All my life, I have memorized the  
Transatlantic Equation, where  $x$   
is distance traveled towards the

Americas or Europe. And in every  
proximity to shores, there is  
a black man seated by himself

hoping and hoping and hoping  
that the ship would wreck.

*(Author photo by Martha Eze)*

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