

# HESSE FLATOW

Branch, Charmaine. "Embodying Diaspora: Adama Delphine Fawundu Interviewed by Charmaine Branch." *BOMB*. Online. June 15, 2022.

## *BOMB*

### Embodying Diaspora: Adama Delphine Fawundu Interviewed by Charmaine Branch

*Textiles and video art that bring materials and cultures together.*

Jun 15, 2022

[Interview](#)  
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Installation view of Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Hymns and Parables*, 2022. Ortega y Gasset Projects. Photo by Courtney Dudley for Ortega y Gasset Projects.

Adama Delphine Fawundu is committed to amplifying overlooked histories and rearticulating representations of the past to encourage inclusive forms of knowledge production. As a multidisciplinary artist, Delphine taps into material cultures that constitute several overlapping diasporas across the globe. Delphine and I recently discussed her work on view in the exhibition [ELEMENTAL](#) at Ortega y

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Gasset Projects, but we initially met in 2017. I visited her studio and was immediately drawn in by her ability to translate complex concepts across multiple mediums including photography, video, and textiles. From cotton to copper, she is keenly aware of the historical significance of the materials she shapes into assemblage pieces such as the hanging tapestries that make up the *Hymns and Parables* (2022) series featured in *ELEMENTAL*. Curator Leeza Meksin describes the exhibition as interrogating themes of spiritualism, dispossession, and healing—all of which are key areas of exploration in Delphine's practice.

—Charmaine Branch

**Charmaine Branch**You frequently discuss the value of embodied knowledge, which encourages us to center the body in our understanding of the world and our connection to the past. Could you speak about embodied knowledge in relation to your explorations of ancestral heritage?

**Adama Delphine Fawundu**Embodied knowledge plays out through our gestures and the way we intuitively respond to our surroundings. I think about language-making: for instance, when you take something like the Krío language that is spoken in Sierra Leone and examine how it follows a Yoruba syntax because many people arrived in Sierra Leone by way of Nigeria. Emma Christopher's film *They Are We* (2021) traces the connection between the Gangá-Longobá people of Perico, Cuba, and the Banta community in Mokpangumba, Sierra Leone, including their drumming rhythms, dance, and language. This type of memory happens intuitively and is connected to the universe. I think about this way of living when I hear conversations around colonialism and slavery, which are systems that were put in place to annihilate who we are as people. But something within us says, "No. I'm still going to express myself."

**CB**How do you use your own body to cultivate new languages?

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**ADFI** use my body as a symbol of humanity. If you could see my body as a universal body, then that breaks down hierarchical barriers. In my *Wata Bodi* series (2021) there are two gestures that I'm making. One is a praise gesture with hands raised, and the other is inspired by a Dogon sculpture of a feminine figure with both hands extended upward. These gestures connect to ancestors, and the act of praise is also connected to the universe. This series is inspired by my late Grandma Adama's textile practice and camera-less photographic processes. I construct large negatives based on patterns found in her textiles along with new patterns that I create. Then I print them through cyanotypes and UV-activated inks. I make layers and new patterns, which I like to think about as codes.

The pieces in *Hymns and Parables* are like larger-than-life beings constructed out of materials from different places. Some of them are made from Brazilian banana paper and one hundred percent indigenous cotton paper from India that was donated from the climate-conscious clothing brand Eleven Eleven. Then there's raffia from Sierra Leone, cowrie shells from Ghana, and Spanish moss from Savannah. Others have frankincense and herbs from Ghana in them. Copper is a new material that I'm working with, and, because it is a conduit that transmits energy, by adding it I'm activating the materials a little bit more. I feel like a conjurer putting these pieces together. Each one is a body, and the materials are an extension of that body.

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Video stills from Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Deep Inside I'm Blue*, 2018. Courtesy of Adama Delphine Fawundu.

**CBI** appreciate this idea of you being a conjurer collecting and assembling pieces to make a whole. Would you say that bringing together these materials relates to a diasporic experience?

**ADF** Absolutely. I've gone to many places, and I'm always collecting, never really knowing what I'm going to do with these pieces. They live in my studio until I piece them together. Diaspora is often thought of as spread out, but here I am bringing things together. I approach video art similarly to how I make textiles and tapestries. I'm collecting videos as I travel the earth, and then I put them together. I'm also sampling sounds. There are elements of sound that I record, and then they make their way into the piece. In the video *Deep Inside I'm Blue* you have to really listen to hear the birds chirping underneath. My ways of making sound, of making videos, of making textiles, of making photography—they all respond to the spaces that I'm in.



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**CB**How are you repurposing textiles that were given to you by your Grandmother Adama and transforming them into photographs and prints?

**AD**It is about reconnecting with my ancestors, particularly my grandmother whom I was named after. I was obsessed with her as a child. I wondered about her and what she was like because I only met her when I was four on my first trip to Sierra Leone. The second time I was an adult, and after that she passed on. However, I've had her fabrics for many years, and they're not something that I would ever get rid of. Instead, I gathered them in one place. Some were my mom's dresses from the '60s. I also have window curtains and tablecloths. I started scanning the fabrics, and they became symbolic of DNA strands. I reproduce them in different ways, and they never look the same. In *Hymns and Parables* you'll see traces or squiggly lines—one of my grandmother's oldest techniques—that I think of as common ancestors. Oftentimes there is a common shape, like masks, that you can see. In *Hymns and Parables* I made patterns from the Sande masks of the Mende people. Sometimes you only see the shape of the masks, and sometimes you see them in full. The images become a pattern.

I'm constantly patterning. Even in my first abstract video piece commissioned by Audible in Newark, you'll see patterns inspired by Grandma Adama. It's about connecting to my grandma's work and looking at her as an artist. I didn't see her as an artist until I talked to people who knew her. When I went to Sierra Leone in 2017, I sat down with a friend of the family. She explained that in Pujehun, where my grandmother was from, people knew her through her art. They would say, "That's Adama's work." She used her practice to send her children to college, and she trained many women to do this work. I'm proud to honor her legacy.

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**CBI** want to return to ancestry for a moment and explore how it relates to the idea of "home" and your connection to Sierra Leone. How do you position home within the context of Diaspora and your work?

**ADF** I have many different ideas of home. Sierra Leone has always been home to me even though I was born in the United States because it is my mom and dad's home. So naturally it is my home too. They created an extension of that home within my home. There's also the home that I know. Brooklyn is my home, and I'm committed to this community because I live in the same neighborhood that I was born in. I've been here for fifty years and watched it change. That does something to you in terms of how you value community.

The earth is my home, and I focus on whatever part of the earth where I feel a connection. Oftentimes it's near water and amid green things. When I embody water deities, like in the *Wata Bodi* series, I'm exploring the universal body in the sense that we are all home on this earth. These deities are a metaphor for how I see Diaspora. I'm fascinated by how certain spiritual practices from West Africa have been maintained and transformed in the Americas. Spirituality keeps us grounded, and I think about this as I'm making work.



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**CB** Before we end, can you expand on the importance of masking in your practice and, in particular, with *Hymns and Parables*?

**AD** I think about the forms of masking that I heard about in stories told by my family. There are these big masquerades in the streets of Sierra Leone, and if a masked being comes up to you, you have to give it an offering. Is there someone behind the mask or not? Are they possessed? I also think of the everyday "masks" that we wear in society for various reasons or Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" comes to mind. The mask as a means of survival.

The pieces in *Hymns and Parables* are double-sided. I got the idea from a two-sided mask called the Nomoli that I met for the first time when I went to the island Mano in Sierra Leone where the Fawundus descended from. It prompted me to think about 360-degree sight and the double-sided figure. The figures are suspended in space. You can see them from two sides, and they're also seeing everything around them. I don't want them to be seen against the wall. I want them to live in space and for people to walk around them. I've brought these different materials together, and there's plastic from a water satchel that you would find in West Africa. The plastic says Freetown Sierra Leone Water. It brings back a whole bunch of memories for someone who grew up with it. A friend from Nigeria saw that, and she said, "Oh, my God!" I like to place hints in the work with things like that as well, as it stimulates memories of a place.

[ELEMENTAL: Adama Delphine Fawundu and Hong Hong](#) is on view at *Ortega y Gasset Projects* in New York City until June 18.

*Charmaine Branch is an art historian and PhD candidate at Princeton University. Her research focuses on art of the Black Diaspora with an investment in Black Feminist Studies. She is frequently in conversation with contemporary artists and has contributed to several art publications.*

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