

## LET'S FINISH IT: NINA SIMONE AND THE OBEAH WOMAN

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In 1974 Nina Simone released an album called *Let's Finish It*. On that album was a song called *The Obeah Woman* in which Simone sings of a powerful feminine figure who mediates between the forces of the natural world and the realm of human beings. In the aforementioned song, The Obeah woman is a composite of actual shamanic healers with deep roots in the history of colonization and slavery in the Americas. The power of this shamanic role is founded in, what might be called, an ecologically immanent form of spiritual practice. Like many women who have historically carried deep ecological wisdom, the Obeah woman's role, as Simone articulates it, is replete with the ambivalent pain and suffering of both the capacity to heal and the deep traumatic pain that characterizes the lived experience of slavery in the Americas. Simone characterizes the immanent positioning of this spiritual healer as a certain kind of relation to natural forces that holds no necessity for prayer to an outside God. Instead the realm of the spiritual is composed as a lived familiarity with angels, Satan and other spirits.

In the song, Simone asks the listener whether they know what an Obeah woman is. Implied in the question is an entire history of rupture and subjugation. While Obeah women were once well known in both slave and slaveholding communities, the role and function of such women has been severely marginalized in the process of colonization, slavery and the rise of modernity. Of course, there are those who might hail this as a triumph of rational scientific progress that relegates superstition to the dust bin of history. However, for Simone there appears to be something else in play. There is a weariness and a weight to be carried through the vicissitudes of the system of slavery that both called the Obeah woman forth and simultaneously forbade and demonized the practices and knowledges of an immanent reading of a non-binary relation between nature and human beings.

In performing this song in 1974, at what was arguably the height of black power movements in the U.S., Simone simultaneously signals a call to "finish it" and through the re-articulation of the figure opens a moment of possible reincarnation within a new historical period.

*Yes, I'm the Obeah woman  
Do you know what one is?  
Ha do you know what an Obeah woman is?  
I'm the Obeah woman from beneath the sea  
To get to Satan you gotta pass through me  
'Cause I know the angels name by name  
I can eat thunder and drink the rain  
Been through enough  
Yeah they call me Nita and Pisces too  
There ain't nothing that I can't do  
If I choose to, if you let me*

*Ha I'm the Obeah woman, above pain  
I can eat thunder and drink the rain  
I kiss the moon and hug the sun  
And call the spirits and make 'em run  
You hear me?  
You hear me?  
'Cause I ain't praying, never was  
Just waiting for my time  
Waiting for to die  
Hackle and patience  
Hackle and patience oh yeah*

*Obeah now  
Obeah Obeah now  
I'm the Obeah woman from beneath the sea  
To get to Satan baby you gotta pass through me  
I know the angels name by name  
I can eat thunder and drink the rain  
How you think I lasted this long?  
Alright, alright  
I kiss the moon and hug the sun  
O yeah oh well oh well  
You people from the islands  
Know about the Obeah woman  
I didn't put the name on myself  
And I don't like it  
Sometimes, but the weight is too heavy  
The weight is too heavy  
Let's finish it*

In Simone's work above, I would argue that there is a double articulation of suffering and revolt. Certainly, her own affiliations with the Black Power movement had a devastating effect on her career, forcing her to leave the United States and flee to Europe. Her own life and work were deeply intertwined with personal struggles with racism that etched itself into her performances. Her personal life deteriorated emotionally and psychologically in the face of an increasingly ambivalent, if not hostile, response to her insistence on performing with an intensity of rage and pain that made her audiences both revere and fear her (George-Warren et al. 2001). In a sense, Nina Simone stood, like the Obeah woman, as a mediative transit between historical periods. She articulates a form of passage and possibility that cannot leave ancestral memory behind without doing violence to the world to come. In her life and work, she constituted a form of socio/cultural alchemy that holds the capacity for revolutionary transfiguration of social coordinates, identities and forms of governance.

In the song referenced earlier, she tells of her struggle with living force and the ways that the blockage of that force weighs her down. She tells us that she can "eat thunder and drink the rain" and that there isn't anything she can't do "If I choose to, if you let me." She notes that it is through these forces that she has been able to "live so long." While she is undoubtedly referring to the lineage of Obeah women and their constant

reiteration as immanent force, she simultaneously appears to be describing her own ability to persist within that legacy. On the other hand, Simone sings that “I didn’t put the name on myself and I don’t like it sometimes.” She says that the “weight is too heavy the weight is too heavy. Let’s finish it.”

In their work, *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari (2014) delineate both a function and personae for art and the artist. They describe the function of art as the development and sustenance of intensity of affect. As we know from Deleuze’s (1990) writings on Spinoza, affect, refers to a transit between bodily states. Such transits are always indeterminate and liminal in their composition. They open passages of becoming and transformation. In a sense, we could say that they function to open time to the future and in doing so call the present into incipient obsolescence.

Deleuze and Guattari (2014) propose the artist as one who composes passage out of the compositional elements of production and dissolution inherent in the dynamic flows of force within any given historical period. Central to this mode of composition is the capacity to create something that expresses that which does not yet exist. Deleuze and Guattari juxtapose the function of the artist from that of the philosopher, who creates concepts and the scientist who produces quantitative theories. While all three are necessary to comprehending the world, the artist alone works in the realm of sensation and affect. To do this, they argue the artist must enter fully into the dynamic chaos of living force in order to distill a sensate mapping of revolutionary capacity.

This capacity for revolt or what they call “resistance to the present” (1994 p.108) is rooted in the particulars of a geography and a particular historical configuration that constitutes a form of catastrophe that signals the limit condition of a given social form. This catastrophe of social form is expressed through the artist’s ability to apprehend what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) refer to as the “abominable suffering” of a people (p. 110). Art as resistance to the present summons and forewarns radical shifts in subjectivity and social reconfiguration. The signification of a new world is premised in what Foucault articulates as the expressive force of subjugated knowledge or in Deleuze-Guattarian vernacular the minoritarian (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988).

I would argue that it is precisely the expressive capacity of a minor lineage of women’s ways of knowing that is to be found in Simone’s *Obeah Woman*. The song is composed out of what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call “minority elements.” It functions by “connecting” and “conjugating” such elements and constituting “a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming” (p. 106). To this degree, it propagates the “seeds” and “crystals” of minoritarian becoming, “whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority” (p. 106). As art, Simone’s performance acts as a generator of intensities, sensations, and affects that establish a set of relations between the human body and the forces of nature.

Set within a specific lineage of historical configurations of women within processes of colonization, subjugation, and shifting modes of enslavement and racism that extends from the world of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Obeah woman to the world of Nina Simone in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expressive capacities of the performance as art very specifically signals a continuity of force that calls for us to “finish it.”

While one reading of this phrase, to “finish it,” is of abnegation and defeat, the alternative possibility is a call to bring the force of the Obeah woman into its full fruition as an unfinished project of revolt.

To explicate this, however, we need to be clear that art as revolt against the present never proposes an ideal outside of a world to come, but is fully situated in the material struggles and aspirations of living force. In this manner, the Obeah woman does not reference a spiritual outside but the expressive capacities of what we might derive from the work of Starhawk (1982) as immanent” spirituality. That is, a spirituality without a transcendent outside. The Obeah woman is in relation to the compositional elements of creation and destructions articulated as angels, Satan, and the spirits yet, in the same breath, they are thunder, rain, moon, and sun. These are the expressive capacities of an immanent art form that is not relegated to the realm of the aesthetic. Instead, it is art as fully lived compositional capacity.

The forces mediated by the Obeah woman are not representative terms that stand for some form of perfect or ideal outside. Quite simply, they are pure cause that refuses the spiritual as a realm of idealized, unattainable, hierarchical, taxonomic, and abstract cause. The shamanic force of the Obeah woman is immanently expressed through the world as acts. It is a contingent relation of force that is brought into apprehension through material phenomenological encounter. It is in the ecological assemblage of idiosyncratic and unique bodily capacity, ritually engaging for common purpose. The task is not to understand, in any abstract sense, the realm of the spiritual. It is instead to practice an extensive and intensive experimentation with belonging and becoming.

The question of belonging and becoming in the context of colonialism is undertaken in the work of Eve Tuck. Tuck (2010) undertakes a re-reading of becoming as an element of desire as a Deleuzo-Guattarian concept. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is pure connectivity. It is the force that underlies creation as a dynamic process of sheer production. Following Spinoza, living force as production is never composed out of lack but is always a field of infinite surplus. Desire structures and orders composition out of chaos. Becoming, in relation to desire, is the capacity of any given body to act and to persist. Becoming desire arises out of relations between bodies in in encounter with each other that evokes previously unknown capacities for expression.

Eve Tuck takes issue with desire as sheer production that is absent any capacity for agency. She argues that for those peoples emerging from centuries of genocidal cultural and physical destruction, agency is a crucial element in formulating a political reconfiguration of themselves. In this regard Tuck re-deploys desire, utilizing its capacity to open the field of virtual resource. She takes this aspect of desire and reconfigures it to propose that communities who have been read as devastated, damaged, or destroyed by colonialism might be seen not as sites of lack or defeat but as sites of infinite virtual capacity.

In this reading, communities are seen as having agentic qualities rooted in their capacities for survival. The survival of these communities over hundreds of years of genocidal attack indicates unanticipated and surprising abilities for, what Spinoza (2000) called, “conatus” or the ability thrive and continue to produce themselves (p. 64). Tuck’s reiteration of desire as productivity immanent to the ecology of bodies in

combination brings us back to the notion of immanent spirituality and new possibilities of belonging and becoming. To belong as a dynamic force of contingent production premised in the infinite force of desire as becoming life holds profound implications for revolt, flight, and resistance. I would argue that this alternative is and has always resided in the deep connection of women's ways of knowing to their bodies in relation to all other living things.

As women's ways of knowing, Simone and the Obeah woman intersect across historical configurations as alternative modes of value and production in precisely this way. They articulate the blocked living force of, what Marx (2012) refers to as, primitive accumulation. The double appropriation and exploitation of living force in the marginalization of shamanic understandings of the more than human world and the subjugation of women's reproductive capacities, both biological and social, is the taproot of abominable suffering and revolt. The Obeah woman's role as a shamanic healer was deeply embedded in the life world of the communities in which she participated. The colonization and enslavement of human beings in the Americas was concomitant with the savage and brutal appropriation and subjugation of the more than human elements of the environment. Both these registers of living productions were essential to the development of capitalism. As Sylvia Federici (2004) points out, without the free labor of enslaved people and the absolute subjugation of social and biological production of women, the surplus value of capital would never have come into its own as the dominant mode of value of our time.

However, as Negri (1999) denotes, living force will always revolt against its abstraction into regimes of dominance and control. Simone's reference to the Obeah woman in 1974 was a beckoning towards a world of tactics embedded in the realm of the mundane. Without a doubt, the language of the song seems to focus on a dramatic supernatural world of spirits and extraordinary force. However, the revolutionary force of the Obeah woman functioned at a far more mundane level. It was the force of what Federici refers to as the, "heretic . . . the disobedient wife, . . . the obeha woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt" (Federici 2004, p. 11). Simone, as the artist and heretic, referencing the Obeah woman, is dipping deeply into the complex assemblage that composed living relations of slavery. In this intricate and horrific set of power relations the Obeah woman signals the ambivalence of humanity within conditions of impossible cruelty.

As a practitioner of the shamanic, the Obeah woman was a healer and nurturer accountable to extending the living force of her people. Moreover, she was also a revolutionary figure who led her people in slave revolts in the, British, Dutch, and Danish American colonial possessions. Obeah practitioners were involved in important revolts in Jamaica in 1733, 1738, and 1760; Antigua in 1736; and Berbice in 1763. No less than 20 rebellions in the Americas were attributed to Akan-speakers in locations including Dutch Guyana, the Virgin Islands, Barbados, and based on the above findings, colonial New York City as well (Rucker 2001 p. 100).

As revolutionaries, Obeah practitioners worked both covertly and overtly in supporting acts of resistance and revolt as well as by acting as saboteurs from within the slave master's household where they worked and sometimes lived. Their practices included the use of herbs, plants,

and graveyard dirt in the creation of ointments and powders used ceremonially in combination with incantations and charms in the resolution of daily troubles. However, such powders, ointments, and charms were also used to protect rebellious slaves and to promote and encourage revolution. The Obeah use of magic and conjuration is similar to other shamanic practices found across slave societies in the Atlantic world. What makes the Obeah tradition notable here is that, instead of using their practices and rituals to find modes of accommodation and simple survival under conditions of enslavement, Obeah practitioners in North America promoted what Rucker (2001) denotes “revolutionary consciousness” and constituted “a revolutionary vanguard inspiring and encouraging resistive behavior among their fellow slaves” (p. 100, 86).

The acts of revolt Obeah women engaged in under the brutal subjugation of slavery were entangled with their role in caring for the families and households of slave owners. As Frederici points out, the relation of women as deeply intertwined within the mode of production that is household labor, is central to the force and power of any given social configuration. There is nothing more fearful for a dominant class than to imagine those who prepare their food wishing them harm. The inevitable imbrication of female house slaves into the most delicate aspects of slave owning families constituted a complex dynamic full of unimaginable contradictions and antagonisms. The same enslaved women who prepared food, cared for sick family members, delivered babies, and performed other acts absolutely necessary to the mundane survival of slave owning families, were also the women subjected to rape, beatings, mundane and spectacular tortures, daily insults, and an infinitude of petty personal offenses.

It would be impossible to dis-entangle the living force of mundane magic as practiced by enslaved African women from the daily tasks of cooking, healing, and midwifery. Obeah women who labored in the slave holder’s households must have held a profoundly ambivalent dual relation between the rituals and spiritual practices they performed within their own community and must have slipped into their relations with the children, women, and even the slave holders themselves. From what we know of their role as a revolutionary vanguard, this meant Obeah women were powerful subversives embedded at the heart of colonial slavery as a mode of production.

In the role of a revolutionary vanguard, Obeah women used whatever tools were at their disposal in the fight for liberation from bondage. Like the Wobblies and Anarchists who attacked the machinery of industrial capitalism, enslaved women engaged in varying forms of sabotage. The feminist labor leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn characterized the role of sabotage as follows: "Sabotage is to the class struggle what guerrilla warfare is to the battle. The strike is the open battle of the class struggle, sabotage is the guerrilla warfare, the day-to-day warfare between two opposing classes" (Davis, 1975).

However, unlike the laboring revolutionaries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tactic of the strike was an impossibility for enslaved peoples. As a result, the options available were sabotage or open revolt. Those enslaved in North America and the Caribbean did not have the factory where machines operated as a kind of mediation between their bodies and the boss. The industrial workers and miners that came after chattel slavery could blow up mines, train tracks, or damage

machinery. They could slow down the assembly line or refuse to work. For those in full chattel slavery, these options were fraught with immense consequence. It is not that labor leaders and strikers were not beaten, imprisoned and killed. The difference lies in the immediacy of the body to the mode of production. Enslaved bodies were the literal machinery of production twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

In his work on the relationship between psychiatric patients incarcerated in large asylums and the institution itself, Franco Basaglia (1987) argues that an extended exposure to the logic and routine of the asylum has the capacity to produce a symbiotic relational identity between the subject and the institution. In other words, the patient becomes identified with the asylum. Basaglia noted that this is one of the reasons that it was quite difficult to get long term psychiatric patients to leave the asylum even when the doors, locks, and bars were removed. He suggests that this form of imbedded subjectivity, where the patient literally becomes a part of the machinery of the asylum, significantly impacts on the capacity for resistance and revolt. If one's identity is merged with an institution that is harming one at all levels of existence, then the logical act of sabotage is self harm. As an antidote to this singularly vicious social configuration, Basaglia arranged for the inmates of the asylum to take tools and literally destroy the elements of physical plant that had constrained them.

For enslaved peoples, the institution that constrained them was not so much any particular building, or the furnishings of the house, barn, slave quarters, or other physical aspects of plantation life. Of course, there were chains, whips and so on which made daily life a source of anxiety, pain and suffering. However, because the form of production was so intimate and derived from the primitive accumulation of daily lived relations, even for those free of overt coercion, the obvious target of sabotage were the bodies of the slave-holder and his family. It is in this respect that the skills of the Obeah woman in the administration of poisons for righting wrongs or seeking vengeance are drawn upon in the resistance and revolt of American slaves. Poisoning becomes an act of guerilla warfare in the struggle for liberation.

The act of poisoning as guerilla warfare, rooted in the traditions and practices of shamanic immanent spirituality, strikes an intricate relation between the arts and elements of healing and the crafts and practices of death and dying. To use poison, to undo a set of relations premised in a parasitic relationship, such as slave owners and their slaves, requires a targeted application of the poison so as to kill the parasite while invigorating the life force of the host. According to Rucker (2001), this is precisely what the acts of the poisoning of slave owners did. It both weakened the immediate system of rule while spurring slaves to find the power to revolt. Regrettably, the tactic did not have sufficient force to undo the broader systemic force that was slavery writ large, beyond the local conditions of a plantation or group of plantations. Undoing chattel slavery and its effects would take generations of living bodies insisting on the right to live with full living force in the world. I would argue that such an affirmation of joy, defined as the capacity to act, operates as a poison that is toxic to racism and other forms of domination.

In my reading of Federici's call to take up the tactics of the Obeah

woman, I have to wonder about what it means to poison the slaveholder in our contemporary period? Perhaps, it is to discover what aspects of living force are toxic to capitalism as it is emerging today. If that is the case, then it is important to understand the nature of the parasite we are dealing with in order to identify what kind of poison would work. How might we find the way to poison capitalism at the very source of its sustenance?

For the Obeah woman, the source of capitalism's capacity lay in the appropriation and exploitation of the body itself, both human and non-human. The task of poisoning therefore lay in the double action of poisoning the body of the slaveholder and producing rebellious slave bodies that were toxic to the system of rule. In the industrial period, the act of poisoning moved from the domain of the sheer force of living bodies to the hybrid formation of body/machine. Here the act of poisoning capitalism engages another double movement comprised of sabotaging the machinery and the refusal of bodies to labor. In our contemporary period, where the mode of production has emerged as the full on appropriation of our intellectual and creative capacities (Negri, 1996, Deleuze, 1992) the question of producing ourselves as toxic to capitalism engages not just our bodies, but our very capacity for thought conscious and unconscious.

Nina Simone (2013) was interviewed following her flight to Europe to escape the hostile environment of the United States to assertions of Black Power and said the following about being an artist:

An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians . . . I CHOOSE to reflect the times and situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. And at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when everyday is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but be involved. Young people, black and white, know this. That's why they're so involved in politics. We will shape and mold this country or it will not be molded and shaped at all anymore. So, I don't think you have a choice. How can you be an artist and NOT reflect the times? That to me is the definition of an artist.

To query the way that one reflects the times as a mode for reshaping the values systems and political configurations of a given historical period is a critical and vexing question. Of course, the capacities for revolt in any given period must be composed out the material actualities of the lived experience of social, cultural, and physical modes of production. It is always an act of composition. In the song, *Obeah woman*, Simone articulates the expression of the times and situations in which she finds herself as having two dimensions that operate in contradistinction from the values and functions of postmodern capitalism.

In the first register, she opens an ecologically immanent set of relations between the Obeah woman and the natural world. The centrality of the Obeah woman to the means of production as a certain kind of compositional element rooted in, what I have named above as, desire, offers an immanent alternative to the abstract forms of desire as lack that characterizes postmodern global capitalism. It offers an alternative, founded in pre-modern social formations of value, that express subjugated knowledge that operates under the surface of the dominant social in the forms of community and subjectivity indicated in

Tuck's (2010) work. By using what appears to be an archaic figure largely abandoned by western dominant historical accounts, Simone signals both a repudiation of accounts of her time and opens the possibility of an alternative history that is still resonant in our contemporary period. Her question as to whether we know the Obeah woman could well be read as a contemporary question. The issue is not whether we know the Obeah woman as a historical figure, but do we know the Obeah woman as a socio-cultural configuration that has the capacity for alterity and revolt. As I have noted above, certainly the hidden and forgotten history of the Obeah woman as a figure of insurrection and revolt has evocative possibilities for political movements today. The question of what constitutes sabotage or poisoning of the master in the world of corporate Empire is undoubtedly worthy of reflection. Perhaps just as significant is the recognition of the immanent qualities of women's ways of knowing as a neglected and marginalized set of practices and modes of thought. Simone reflects her own historical moment in the song by connecting across a minoritarian lineage that affords her, in Tuck's vernacular, a capacity for survival in these times.

In the second register, Simone offers us an alternative mode of temporality and duration. In her rendering of the Obeah as a working contemporary personae, she can inhabit, refuse teleological conventions of linear continuous temporality and interrogate the finality of historical ruptures. In her rendition of the Obeah woman as herself, she diachronically traverses history in a movement Deleuze and Guattari refer to as flight.

In Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they delineate three different social formations. In the first of these, what they call "molar structures," social formations are axiomatic. They are universal linguistic signifiers that contain and bound the terms by which we know things. With deep similarity to Lacan's phallic signifiers, they bring the world of the symbolic into being. The second social formation they term the molecular, which they describe as those idiosyncratic elements contained within molar structures that disturb their universal claim to signify. They are the disturbances in the homogeneity of molar axiomatic structures. These would be variations in the smooth functioning of the nuclear family, the clear binary structures of sexuality, the intersectionality of clear taxonomic distinctions such as race, class, and gender. These are exceptionalities that disturb and unsettle molar categories without undoing them. The third and final social formation is the line of flight that occurs at the moment a molar structure ceases to function. It is an intensity of capacity that exceeds the ability of the molar structure to contain the alterity of the molecular. Such an intensity gives way to a velocity that sets indeterminate capacities into motion that cut diachronically across the social, gathering fragments of affiliated capacity along the way without ever becoming anything in particular yet.

I would argue that the Obeah woman holds the capacity to open just such traverses as the woman who exceeds the phallic signifier in Lacan as well as the living force of the more than human world that cannot be contained within the world of human centered accounts of the social. In the register of phallic molar signification, it is the reference to woman that holds reservoirs of unexpended social force. This force is found in Lacan's (1998) reading of woman as radical singularity that goes

beyond the abilities of symbolic signification. The Obeah woman, read this way, holds the residual force of virtual becoming as a social function that operates outside of limited modes of generational duration. In other words, the force of woman as liminal capacity for immanent spiritual production functions across generations as a lineage of revolt that precedes domination. Woman as becoming force precedes any attempt to encode, capture and contain it because of the way in which it articulates, at the material level of lived force, expressions of the Real. Lacan (1998) notes that it is the capacity of woman to operate outside the vernacular of the phallus that opens a unique form of what he calls feminine jouissance or “an order of the infinite like mystical ecstasy” (1998 p. 44). This unique form of the infinite and the ecstatic mystical is specifically the realm of the Obeah woman, shamanic artists such as Simone, and other modes of immanent spiritual praxis and understanding. The mediative force that diachronically transits the realm of the symbolic in order to radically reconceive capacities of joy and liberation is the hallmark of the affective, liminal, sensate production of an immanent social unconscious. However, such apprehension can only occur at the edges of language where definitions fail, and anxiety begins to disassemble rationality and reason so as to access new modes of becoming other. I would argue that it is the realm of the non-human that functions as a point of entry into, what I have called, the social unconscious or that mode of consciousness closest to the Real in its absolute virtuality. In view of this, the Obeah woman, and perhaps art and artists as well, open temporality to a time outside the time of capitalism. A time without limit in which the time of production is no longer the time of appropriation and in which accumulation refers to the temporary pooling of social configurations before they overflow themselves into the practices of infinite surplus.

I would suggest that the struggles and revolutionary capacities of any given historical period are not to be found in the future or the past, but in those lines of flight that open affective transits across history. Nina Simone doesn't tell us about the Obeah woman. She inhabits that shamanic figure from the inside out. She calls on us to recognize her and the lineage that constitutes living force in every moment of every age. In this respect, when she says, “Let's finish it” I hear her asking us to quit wasting time, and to become the Obeah women of our time.

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