



Gabrielle Civil
Swallow the Fish

#RECURRENT Series

Civil Coping Mechanisms

ISBN 978-1-937865-79-5

314 pages

Release: February 15, 2017

Distro: Ingram

Memoir / Performance Art / Autobiography

[Civil Coping Mechanisms](#)

Gabrielle Civil's *Swallow the Fish* is a memoir in performance art that explores the medium from within its beating heart. Adding its voice to black feminist conversations, it combines essays, anecdotes, and meditations with original performance texts to confront audience, motivation, and fears. Both joy and panic appear in Civil's world of performance, where neither walls nor city limits set the scope of the stage. Civil bares vulnerabilities and entralls readers, asking essential questions and embodying dreams.

"Enjoy. Enjoy? Enjoy!" Perhaps this is Gabrielle Civil's calculus for performance art, though I suspect that accuses her praxis of being too pat. Instead, *Swallow the Fish* discloses that the "Enjoy?"—that doubt, her sense that she's maybe said or done the wrong thing—is catalyst and outcome. Thus, this remarkable book is a monograph and manual, a catalog and travelogue rendered as a progress of generative failures. An intimate showcase for Civil's fierce eros, mordant humor, and intellectual appetites, *Swallow the Fish* is also a vital record of how a black woman moves through spaces where desire and aversion make equally rough contact. So, enjoy! But enjoy(?), too.

—DOUGLAS KEARNEY, Author of *Mess and Mess and*

This book paints a beautiful Black woman sky of possibilities. This book makes me want to perform/it makes me want to write-to holla-to hold it close. I love this book!

— SHARON BRIDGFORTH, Writer/Performing Artist

This book is so meticulous and so absorbing, I am in awe. It is declamation, reflection, proposal, documentation, blueprint. Gabrielle Civil is revealed as an artist perfectly poised to speak to how race, gender and sexuality enact embodied performativity. She writes and performs herself into history in ferociously intelligent and relentlessly personal ways. And I've never read such a perfect articulation of the turbulence of performing - the way that externalizing the possibility and conflicts of one's body leaves you open and vulnerable to the quagmire of interpretation, misunderstanding and projection. How the specificity of identity mixes with desire to confound, comfort or disrupt public space. As with so many things that I love, I want everyone to read this book.

— MIGUEL GUTIERREZ, Music & Performing Artist

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#RECURRENT Design by Janice Lee
Cover Design by Eugene Lee
ISBN - 978-1-937865-79-5

The #RECURRENT Novel Series is an imprint of
Civil Coping Mechanisms and is edited by Janice Lee with
John Venegas.

For more information, find CCM at:

<http://copingmechanisms.net>



Swallow the Fish

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xx infestation of gnats xx

directive: I stand a brown seed, now wound in diaphanous paper,
honey and ash smeared in a halo of earthen light... glow of ecru,
hints of sunray, kernel, pomegranate seed...throughout this, it is
the permeation and permutation of light that creates the effect of
beauty and also of war. throughout, I am raveling, unraveling...
the light grows

voiceover:

Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died"

i came here to be buried	mud
in mud	i came here for
or burned	beauty rest
hot rocks	nature is never
unfurling	beauty
beauty treatment	rest
rest	i should have gone
i can't find—	to the big apple
i can't wait—	the steel apple
rest	ash
mud	fifth avenue
mud	chelsea
mud	downtown
smeary memory	mud
mud	hot rocks
mud	mud
mud	smoldering under the ash
i can't find—	nature is never
i can't wait—	i need to
for life	wash this away

voiceover:

Lucille Clifton's "last night we killed all the roaches"
and Rumi's "gnats in the wind" / light permeates, dims.
the effect of Balthazar's feast: the writing on the wall.

THICK DESCRIPTION
"INFESTATION OF GNATS"

this is the ritual.
kneel before the paper dappled with black.
kneel even in your purple and blue high heels.
spangled. open toes peeking.
your long ochre painted skirt.
your strange black bustier.
your metallic scarf.
it will change on your head.
jemima, babushka, guerrilla.
for now, kneel and tear.
long strips in your hands.
pull the paper long and hear the ripping
live mingling with recorded ambient poem.
there's my directive
and emily dickinson as well
i heard a fly buzz beauty and also of war.
crush the paper, reverse time. the bloom
becomes bud again. now hard packed seed.
kick off your shoes.
climb your fear to the rafters.
bundle it there. it hangs. no longer paper.
something transformed.

sometimes
i feel like
I am walking
through a swarm
an intelligence
my own
seeping through
a war
 my skin
he doesn't like it when i say
discombobulated
imbricated
inextricable
he doesn't like it
he doesn't say
he doesn't like it
he doesn't say
he likes it either
a war
 a swarm

you descend the ladder,
turn to make the path.
hard charcoal laid in tracks.
crawling on your knees.
making trance aloud now the poem.
i came here to be buried
the you now an i. a clearing making
my way making a maze of seeds to the yellow
spiral painted stone. once there more voices
lucille's roaches and rumi's mystical gnats
and i am gathering the paper, balling it up,
crushing it using the whole of my arms.
i am bundling it into my rust
pomegranate scarf to make it like
a honeycomb dripping from a tree
like what katherine dunham put under
her scarf in haiti the offering for the spirits
and i do something terrifying for me
i kick off my heels and turn to climb
a carpenter's ladder up to the rafters
to hang this prize out of the way
everything prepared and i
return and put on my shoes and
yes, every gesture then and now

ten of them on a pencil eraser
fifty on the fit of my nail
cluttering the corners of my door frame
a million pressed, dying,
blurred against my skin
an intelligence, a madness
not killing, buzzing furious
like that poem by alice notley
that time i read
to my best friend
and she wished i was her boyfriend
and i brought a crepe from the afghan
(was he really an afghan, have i rearranged his skin)
and i flirted with him like a man
and it was sugar and lemon
and he was so shocked
and he almost fell into a man hole
and steam
and fly smelled the lemon
and buzzed in her mouth
and came apart and burst
and fragmented into the confetti of swarm
and a war, a swarm
and slathers itself on the front of my house
and it smushes and it stills and threatens and it calls
and i tie a rag around my head
and i spray the green off onto another clean rag
and i clean them off my art/ not art postcards
and the circular for vacuums and planter's nuts
and the electric bill
and on the mail box
and in the mail box
and off the porch
and especially off the screen with its mesh gritted teeth
and my heart is meshed beating furiously

and i'm thinking how many crushed
under the head of my nail
and the angels dancing on a pin
and *electroluminescence*
and *cathexis*
and *palimpsest*
and *intelligence*
and *glow*
and *you*

everything had to be thought
learned and done
everything was a challenge
how to step into those heels
without my hands
how not to tremble if i needed
to turn one over
bend down and actually slide into it but yes
i did stand tall and speak the sometimes
and snapped my hands in an understory
to the words themselves sometimes i feel like
always my favorite part of the poem
a war a swarm
and then momentum climbing back up
the ladder bringing down the bundle shake
what's in there out and put it in down
with the charcoal in the bucket
on the spiral painted stone.
And keep speaking these words layered

incantation sugar confetti planter's bill
and light the paper on fire and hope
you can strike the match and the paper
will catch and the one night the paper
didn't catch and you didn't know then yet
what to do and so there was just a sputter
a plume of smoke but that was just once
the other nights it blazed and you stood
and pulled the scarf up to your face
and over your mouth and tied it in the back
pulling the ends long to stretch out your arms
and letting the ends go with your arms still
outstretched and the lights dimmed until
it was just you and the blaze and mankwe's
voice voice-overed *first there's dying,*
then union like the gnats /
inside the wind

Fat Black Performance Art

"A scholar's concretizing her social location may help the mutual connection between an audience and herself, but erotic scholarship entails speaking from, for, and about the body. The assertion of an "I" requires more than anecdote and autobiography. I base theory on my body and my experiences and on other women's bodies and experiences."

- JOANNA FRUEH, *EROTIC FACULTIES*

FAT BLACK PERFORMANCE ART: A SLIDE SHOW

Slide 1 (1960)

[A fat black woman] swan dives from the window of a building, falling towards her friends who hold out a tarpaulin to catch [her]. A photo captures this moment and a second one captures the empty street. The two photos are fused together to create an iconic image in black and white. Almost forty years later, RoseLee Goldberg, the preeminent scholar of performance art, writes: "The final photograph of [the fat black woman's] self-endangering and bold feat would profoundly influence generations of artists."

Slide 2 (1965)

[A fat black woman] sprawls out in a red unitard, her long black hair [straightened or with a synthetic fall] falling past her chin. She lies on amorphous white forms with red polka-dots, like Dr. Seuss balloons. Some are serpentine and others more like miniature marshmallow pillows. All pocked with red. Goldberg suggests: [The fat black woman's] obsessional art "emerged as much from her episodes of acute depression as from observations of the repetitiveness of daily life."

Slide 3 (1975)

[A fat black woman] stands naked. Her posture is a semi-squat. Presumably, it is red paint painted in a circle on her face and splattered around her crotch. But who can be sure? She pulls a long scroll from her vagina, reading from it a searing litany of male criticism of her art work.

Slide 4 (1981)

[A fat black woman] makes a recording of [herself] saying the names of all the people [she] can remember who have died in [her] lifetime. During [her] birthday party, [the fat black woman] plays the tape and, at the sound of each name, [the fat black woman] falls ritually to the ground, tries to rise up, but, hearing another name, falls again.

Slide 5 (1990)

[A fat black woman]'s performance was catalyzed by the 1987 Tawana Brawley case, in which a sixteen-year-old, black girl accused white men of raping, terrorizing and spreading their feces on her. [The fat black woman] describes in her journal: "I knew I could never go emotionally where Brawley had been, and I could not actually put real feces on myself . . . So I decided to use chocolate. It looked like shit."

Slide 6 (1973)

[A fat black woman] decides to dress up as a once-famous black ballerina who studied with Diaghilev. [The fat black woman] writes innovative plays and inaugurates a series of performance actions in this persona. Esteemed performance critic Henry Sayre writes: "This 'Black face in a snowbank' as Diaghilev describes her in the plays, invader of the "white machine" of the classical ballet, is a complex amalgam of [the fat black woman] and the residues of modernism, cast into radical otherness."

Slide 7 (1993)

[A fat black woman] dresses in a full body black unitard and "paints" an entire gallery floor with her long hair. She does so by dipping her tresses in what Goldberg describes as "a large plastic bucket of Loving Care's 'Natural Black' dye." According to Goldberg, "It was an ironic provocation of male-dominated legacies (in this case that of Pollock and Klein." [The fat black woman] explains: "I feel attached to my [fat black woman] heritage and I want to destroy it."

Slide 8 (2001)

[A fat black woman] goes to Bilbao Spain and makes a clandestine short film, mocking an audio tour's rapturous admiration of a corporatized art institution. At one point, [the fat black woman] gyrates her [fat black woman] pelvis and strokes her [fat black woman] hands across the burnished walls. At one point, [the fat black woman] lifts up her short skirt to show her perfect [fat black woman] ass.

Slide 9 (1971)

[A fat black woman], enthralled by Immanuel Kant's critique of pure reason, took to recording herself photographically to verify her existence. [The fat black woman writes]: "To anchor myself in the physical world, I ritualized my frequent contacts with myself in the mirror . . . I rigged up a camera and a tape recorder next to the mirror so that every time the fear of losing myself overtook me and drove me to the "reality check" of the mirror, I was able to both record my physical appearance objectively and also to record myself on tape repeating the passage in the Critique that was driving me to self-transcendence."

Slide 10 (1992-1993)

[A fat black woman] shares a cell with [another fat black woman] pretending to be an undiscovered tribe of Amerindians. [The two fat black women], who had intended the performance somewhat sarcastically, are appalled by how easily they are apprehended as the real thing: how they are fondled, dehumanized and ridiculed. [The first black woman] is especially upset by the level of objectification [the first black woman] receives, but [the second fat black woman], by virtue of being [a fat black woman] is used to it.

Slide 11 (circa 1970s)

[A fat black woman] has a formative affair with her art professor who helps her discover herself as a [fat black woman]. In later work, [the fat black woman] burns a trace of her own scintillating silhouette in the ground.

AFTER THIS YOU WILL LOVE ME

I live in a cold place.

This is as good an answer as any when people ask me:

"Why performance art?"

*I arrived to Minnesota, young, gifted and black,
to teach at a women's college.*

I arrived to Minnesota, more beautiful than I knew at the time.

I look back and see shining,

radiance exuding through brown skin,

twinkle of excitement, flush of expectation,

desire for the first day of school, those burst capillaries

the night before, gleaming hope for love affairs.

And as happens, perhaps, for every girlchild,

for every woman in the world,

those deemed beautiful and those not,

it didn't happen the way that I thought.

*("and my sexual growth and development as a woman
which all women know about")*

*It matters too that I was dark and brown and plump,
although these are not tautological distinctions.*

*The world I was moving in was white and cold. My body covered
up in sweaters and coats and gloves whose mates I kept losing.*

I wanted what I felt was my glorious destiny,

("New York and Paris and love"), what I expected to be,

if not effortless,

then seamless, organic,

the natural process of life.

("there's no such thing as natural.")

My mother had to roll her Afro in the sixties.

For me, also artifice, fabrications, concoctions.)

In Minnesota, I felt invisible, ignored, sexually bereft.

I wanted attention, affection, for once to be seen,

to be visible and undeniable

as beautiful as poetry as intelligence as image

*as a way to transform my life
and the way I felt in it, in my body, to gain presence,
fully there in space and time,
to contradict one kind of present, to stop waiting
for another future and manifest it myself.
Love. (Is this what the "Venus Hottentot" wanted?
Or Josephine shaking her banana tail?)
It's difficult but important for me to confess this wanting
as a part of my performance impulse.
In so many of my early pieces, it's painfully clear
in my yearning, frustration, isolation,
dejection, desperation and wry, resilient desire.
This flush of heat through cold, this opacity made transparent.
To keep a sense of humor about my quasi-pathetic quest for love,
to push through shame or embarrassment or pride
into something aesthetically to mine.*

