

FOR IMMEDIATE
REVIEW

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& more black

t'ai freedom ford

Second collection by known literary figure • Multiple Major Prize winner
• Reading tour in major cities throughout U.S. • Scheduled interviews
& author-written articles • Book club-targeted Goodreads campaign •
Extensive ARC campaign • Overdrive/Library push • Prize candidate

t'ai freedom ford's second collection of poems, *& more black*, is direct, ingenious, vibrant, alive, queer, & BLACK. By turns tough and sexy, wrapped up in the evolving language and sonics of life, these poems take their cue from Wanda Coleman's *American Sonnets* as they rhapsodize and dialogue with artists such as Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, and Wangechi Mutu, along with many other musicians, artists, and writers. The kinetic energy of ford's words leap off the page in rebellious, stunning, and revelatory fashion—poems that mesmerize with sheer velocity and telling pauses.

& more black is full of "dance floor long division," Hello Kitty lunchboxes, double-dutch, and "dyke dowry." It remixes the visions and vernaculars of Wangechi Mutu, Amiri Baraka, Erykah Badu, Glenn Ligon, and countless others. It finds the music in Graceland quicksand and "Kanye's alter ego." "we be makeshift / bodies got too many mouths" t'ai freedom ford writes in these propulsive, poly-vocal, poly-verbal gems. This is a book holding spectacular spells, songs, and instructions for freedom.

—Terrance Hayes

I'm so excited for t'ai freedom ford's silky, tough, clear-eyed, and irreverent new collection. These poems suffer none of the ongoing American foolishness. They snap so hard you might—as I did—jump up and run out of the room laughing at their brilliant, slicing wit. They are composed with soul and funk and lightning-fast intelligence. This poet will reward your reading over and over with her impressive power and relentlessly exuberant music. Read them aloud. *& more black* is truth moving at the speed of sound.

—Patrick Rosal

t'ai freedom ford is a New York City high school English teacher and Cave Canem Fellow. Her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in the *African American Review*, *Apogee*, *Bomb Magazine*, *Calyx*, *Drunken Boat*, *Electric Literature*, *Gulf Coast*, *Kweli*, *Obsidian*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, and others. Her work has also been featured in several anthologies including *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop* and *Nepantla: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color*. Her first collection, *how to get over*, won the 2015 To the Lighthouse Poetry Prize, published by Red Hen Press. In 2018, she won a Face Out Emerging Writers Award from the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses. t'ai lives and loves in Brooklyn, where she is an editor at *No, Dear Magazine*. (Photo by: Dominique Sindayiganza)

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A Conversation between Kate Angus and author t'ai freedom ford

Kate Angus: Many of the poems in & more black either directly respond to, are inspired by, or otherwise reference the work of visual artists, as well as musicians and other writers. Can you speak a bit to the role other art plays in your poems—as inspiration, conversation, meditation, collaboration, and/or...?

t'ai freedom ford: To be honest, I just LOVE visual artists. I'm especially obsessed with Black art and artists. I collect Black art. I watch videos of Black artists talking about process and production. I have many friends who are visual artists and, when I'm lucky, they let me visit their studios to see their process firsthand. As a writer, when I visit museums and galleries, I'm always fascinated by the titles. They are a bit of common ground that I find comfort in cause I'm like, hey, I make titles too. Except my art uses words solely as its medium. Still, artists have the coolest titles. One day, while visiting the Wangechi Mutu exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum for the umpteenth time, I started taking pictures of the placards. At home, I pulled up the work on my computer and just stared and stared at it. Then I typed the title out: *misguided unforgivable little hierarchies*. And then I just listened to the art, allowing the images to speak to me. That was the beginning of the series. Some of the ekphrastic work is me translating the art into poetic imagery. Sometimes I'm strictly riffing off the title without any influence from the artistic content of the original piece and sometimes the poems are informed by things learned from the artist's intent and/or process.

Do you also make any visual art yourself?

Over the years I have dabbled in many expressions of creativity from rapping and beatboxing to jewelry making to deejaying and even painting. Realizing my strengths, I settled on creative writing and left everything else to those with greater talents than mine.

Do you imagine your readers knowing the art your poems reference already or perhaps discovering it through your poems; do you see the poems as being in dialogue with the art and also stand-alone, simultaneously?

The poems were written with the intent of standing on their own without any reliance on the reader's artistic familiarity. That said, should someone want to Google pics of the artwork referenced while reading the collection, it would certainly enhance the experience, but I think readers will feel the poems either way.

Are any of these poetic/artistic conversations that happen on the page echoed in correspondence or relationships between you and the artists off the page? And carrying on from that, does your mind ever move toward doing a more overt conversation/collaboration like a chapbook with poems paired with visual art or a gallery installation of art with copies of your poems on the walls with the visual art and/or you doing a reading or a recording of you reading within the art space? Or a poem that collaborates with another poet or poets?

Because I do have artist friends, I've had the pleasure of being in conversation with them about their work and their process. In creating this collection, I did consider the possibility of having pics of the art pieces coupled with the poems but then I thought, what publisher would agree to (or could afford to) do that? Now that the book's launching, I'm brainstorming ways I might present the poems that utilize multimedia formats.

Can you talk about why you chose to have the book exist as two books within one?

There are many dichotomies and dualities present in the work:

whiteness vs. blackness

public vs. private

the hood vs. everybody

queerness & otherness

Black visual art & Black literature (as art)

the Black body & Black intellectualism

I'm also reminded of Du Bois's double consciousness theories. Being American and of African descent and how that literally colors my experience in this country, but also, this constant consideration of the white gaze and how that affects our every action. I think this book explores those sensations a great deal. So, to have a first half of a book that ends... (almost as if there was a death of that persona/voice) and then a birth/rebirth of a new (or con-

tinuation of that) voice... the first persona (black) then resurrected (& more black).

I wondered at what point in your writing or arranging process this design idea struck you, as well how you chose which poems went into which arc?

Honestly that was just me being greedy. In considering cover art it was hard to stop at just one piece. I wanted two pieces, which made me think, oh, maybe I can have two covers like some of the fashion mags sometimes do. So at first it was very superficial, but then when I was told that I would need to reorder them so that each half had its own arc, I began to see how halving the text made sense considering the thematic duality of the content. As far as ordering them into two separate arcs, I just listened to the poems. They were very opinionated, these poems. They knew where they want to be.

You've also spoken of the idea of the first half of the book ending almost like a death of the persona/voice and then the persona/voice being resurrected, returning *& more black* as the book's title promises us with the second arc. I love this idea, and how it resonates with the black page at the book's center which thus functions as a resting place and a birthing place both, a kind of wellspring. I wondered if you could speak to this idea of the death and return/resurrection of the poetic voice a little more?

The idea of death and resurrection is really a metaphor for the existence of Black folks in America. We choose death delivered by our own hands. We die at the hands of others. Parts of our authentic selves suffer little deaths everyday just to live in this country. And yet, we return. We replicate. We renew. We resurrect. We rebirth. We epitomize resilience. In my last book, how to get over, one of the sections was "die", meaning that one way Black folks get over is by dying. That dying might be literal, metaphysical, spiritual, controversial. Like the idea that maybe Tupac is living on an island off the coast Cuba somewhere. Dead, but not really. Not in the imagination of Black folk. That idea is continued in this book. The narrative voices go dark. Then come back to life/light.

I think also often of the idea of conversation in your poems—the conversations the poems are often having with other artists, as well as the conversations that happen within the poems themselves, such as the imagined posthumous dinner conversation between you and Gil Scott-Heron at a diner Uptown, or the conversations that unfold through the series of rhetorical questions you ask in poems like "the body that i'm performing in doesn't know limits" or "Just because you love black pussy don't mean you love Black lives." I feel I often read books by poets that feel very self-contained, as if the world of the book is a kind of bio-dome—one of the things I love about your work is how expansive it is, how much it reaches out and engages with the world and other thinkers and artists and the readers. Do you think of your work as being in conversation with others and, if so, whom? Tied to this, are there any influences on your work who weren't mentioned directly in the poems but whose presence you feel?

Once I began the conversations between the art and artists I revered, it sort of opened the floodgates so to speak. Cause these folks are like gods to me. I remember losing my shit at a party in Johannesburg because I shared the elevator with Wangechi Mutu. I remember being a fan-girl at a Carrie Mae Weems talk and afterwards being so nervous about giving her a copy of the two poems she'd inspired. I remember being in the same jury duty pool as Kara Walker and summoning the courage to tell her how much I appreciated her as an artist and a human. The poems are much more braver than I am. They have the audacity to call folks into the conversation and to call folks out. They have the nerve to holler at Kanye and Basquiat, Gil and Amiri, Bill de Blasio and Erica Garner in the same breath.

My influences come from a great variety of creative spheres and theoretical tangents, but there are some folks with whom I'm currently obsessed like Arthur Jafa and Fred Moten and Christa Bell and Frida Orupabo and Genesis Tramaine and Texas Isaiah and Deborah Roberts who are doing mind-blowing shit in the world of art (and letters).

Can we talk about the book's title, *& more black*, a little? It's such a great title, and as I see it especially for a second collection (or any post-first-book collection), as if it's not only its own entity but also an amplification of the body of work that precedes it. The phrase itself occurs in the book as the last few words of "what i risk to walk in this world as my full human self;" a poem that arrives in the second arc of the book, and within the poem, among other possible readings, it can also be seen as functioning in response to the poem's title: that blackness is what is risked or is what puts the speaker at risk, in the way that black bodies are continually at risk in this country. But the phrase is also—within the poem as well as especially as it titles the book—such a powerful and joyful declaration. Did you always intend it as the title of this book from early on while you writing the bulk of the poems within the collection or did

you come to this title later on?

The title came early and out of nowhere. I can't even remember how it arrived. And the poem where the title lives was one of the later poems in the collection. It was written while I was on a cruise for the very first time. I was hellishly seasick and thinking of and praying to my ancestors. I wondered how they endured that passage from Africa to the Americas. I was later given some pills and some sort of band that bit into my wrist and stabilized me. Grateful, but still considering my place as a queer, Black, masculine of center presenting woman, I wrote that poem and the title found its place there very organically.

I also love how you use sound, the way you play with association and auditory similarities to create new meanings, like how "O beautiful for spacious skies for amber waves of grain" becomes "O beautiful for faceless cries for amber graves of pain," as well as the way your use of spacing seems to echoes spoken pauses. I believe you also come from a background in performance poetry from when you lived in Atlanta when you were younger. Can you speak a little to techniques you use to synthesize the poems on the page with the way you imagine them being spoken?

How the poem sounds is important to me, so I spend a lot of time reading poems aloud. One of my teachers said that the poem should tell us how it wants to be read. So, I began to use caesuras as a way to air out the language and give the poem (and the reader) its breath and to instruct the reader how it should be read. Really, the way I use caesuras and line breaks are more for me than anybody else. *I need to know how to read the poem first.*

What is your writing process? Do you tend to write in the same place at the same time on a consistent schedule or do you go for stretches without writing? Do you set poetic assignments for yourself to summon up new work or do you wait for the poems to be inspired somehow by the world around you or arise within you? If you do give yourself assignments, would you be willing to share one?

Because I am so obsessed with artist process, it's allowed me to think about my process with a great deal of clarity. I've taught poetry workshops on process and have shared what mine entails. Basically there are six main components. Muse: some form of inspiration. Minding Business: Mine and other people's. Mining: Digging for golden nuggets amidst the dirt of my imagination. Magic: connecting with ancestors, listening to the voices that speak to/through me. Morning: the time when I'm most creative and my imagination is most fertile. Music: making sure the work sings and that the musical elements are present on the page and in the air.

The assignments I give myself mostly have to do with the "muse" stage of writing, which involves taking myself on a lot of art dates to museums, galleries, concerts, artists talks, readings, etc. Sometimes it's less formal... me on the art21 site watching artist videos.

The thing I'll say about process is that is SUPER personal. Everyone's will be different, but once you figure it out, you'll realize that you're writing more often than not. So there are large swaths when I'm not actively writing, but I am doing lots of things to stimulate my muses and so I count it as writing. In that way, I don't really believe in writer's block, because when I consider the elements of my process, I'm most always writing (even if it's only in my head).

Many poets I know talk about having an ideal reader, either another actual person (living or dead) or an imaginary perfect reader. Who do you see as your ideal reader, is there a specific someone or someones (real or imagined) who you are writing for?

I don't really have an ideal reader in mind. If something propels you to buy the book or if the book winds up in your hands, and you read it and *feel* it and walk away with some sort of impression then that's ideal.

And now I'll latch on to the last bit of that question "who you are writing for." Always I am writing for my ancestors who were voiceless, who had voices and were silenced, who had voices but were in a foreign tongue and labeled gibberish, who didn't have the luxury of writing poems. Always I write for my current folk, my people who hear with their hearts, who understand the layers and levels, who know the codes, the inside jokes, the meanings of "finna" and "lookded." I made a point with this book not to include a Notes section because who I'm writing for don't need notes. Still, everyone is my audience, but some might have to work harder than others. And I'm okay with that.



& MORE BLACK

||||| T'AI FREEDOM FORD |||||

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Praise for *& more black*

& more black is full of “dance floor long division,” Hello Kitty lunchboxes, double-dutch, and “dyke dowry.” It remixes the visions and vernaculars of Wangechi Mutu, Amiri Baraka, Erykah Badu, Glenn Ligon, and countless others. It finds the music in Graceland quicksand and “Kanye’s alter ego.” “we be makeshift / bodies got too many mouths” t’ai freedom ford writes in these propulsive, poly-vocal, poly-verbal gems. This is a book holding spectacular spells, songs, and instructions for freedom. —Terrance Hayes

& more black
t'ai freedom ford

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First Edition

When you removed the gag that was keeping
these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for?
That they would sing your praises?

—John-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus*

from here i saw what happened and i cried
after Carrie Mae Weems

the blood is red the blues is red the blues
is blood the red is dirt the dirt is brown

the brown is red the dirt is blood the blood
is blues the blues is brown the brown is skin

the skin is blood the blood is kin the kin
is red the red is blood the blood is new

the new is skin the skin is news the news
is brown the brown is noose the noose is red

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the red is blues the blues is dirt the dirt
is skin the skin is blues the blues is kin

the kin is brown the brown is blood the blood
is news the news is black the black is new

the new is red the red is noose the noose
is black is blues is brown is red is blood—

people in glass towers should not imagine us
after Wangechi Mutu

i spy dark things dancing in my periphery

i cross the street but it is only the trees

poplocking in the wind—my knees are dark things

they click like triggers when i walk i fail

to notice sudden flinching—my body's

post traumatic—i hail from dark things unknown

& cosmic or, less romantic: niggerish

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& bionic like bullets arcing in the night

sky aching for other dark things to slow

their trajectory—i fear these dark things

will be the death of me reeking of Wednesday's

blood & bourbon & bathroom reckoning

i pull dark things from the center of me

& flush before considering their resemblance

cravings

if the chocolate is good it will melt
like a good lover darkens herself into
your sheets & disappears in a puddle
of moans—you will understand the science
of her invisible body but not
the fiction of her pulling you toward
some bloody orbit you do not crave—
this monthly reminder you are woman
in spite of wingtips & bowties you rock
estrogen is a catty bitch scratching
at your womb—an eyeless hag seeking sperm
& purpose beyond where eggs go to die
your body craving synchronicity
copycats your lover's fertility—
its false alarm

riding death in my sleep

after Wangechi Mutu

except i am awake or so i think

my crotch—nothing more than a saddle
for her to climb atop & giddyup
black beauty thoroughbred: watch me gallop
find my stride in a field of daffodils
wet pussy honeysuckle i am all
muscle & rhythm—a sped-up heartbeat
verging collapse like a clapboard house
with too much wind but we can't stop won't stop
abdominal ache & grind slick bound by sweat
& other wetness even her moans drip
with something sticky—a sap of sorts spit?
shit: eyes closed we witness this murderous ride

i think: *goddamn this woman could kill me*

you are a remarkable woman (now hurry up & die)
after Kara Walker

together they gathered the weapons
& placed them into baskets like fruits

their calloused fingers nimble & careful
the weapons otherwise questionable—

a hot comb brick a covered pot of grits
a spade clumped with soil a soup ladle

a few choice shards from a broken teacup
a horseshoe a small cast iron skillet

that smelled of cornmeal & burnt butter
the men predictably had already

removed real munitions from the big house
leaving nigger wenches to fend for themselves—

hardly defenseless after all they had
no panties & pounds of black pussy

badass

after he died, me & Gil Scott had dinner
some dingy diner Uptown where cabbies
came for coffee between shifts—he ate soft
boiled eggs cause it was easier to get down
since smack had snatched his front teeth & his mouth
was a graveyard of decaying brown stumps
other than that he looked good considering

he asked me bout my writing told him all my poems
had bullets in them he changed the subject
told me bout a yoga class he & Amiri took
where they had to balance banned books on they heads
& how the books were heavy & made him angry
& when he laughed the hooks in his head made him ugly
& how they promised him new teeth after a year of good
behavior

in America even the black sheep are white

my mouth is a museum of moving
images ignorance is this nigger & his twitter
scrimmages motherfucker i'm bionic
check the tonic in my lineage her spine
an abacus of dreams my fingers count
the cartilage between disenfranchised
& privileged we be the in between
squishy & niggerish indigenous
with heathenish tendencies sacrilege
black power packages bridge kunta
kinte to white christmases what sort of
gift is this i make gibberish of English
nasty as black licorice we don't tapdance
no more all we do is this: (middle finger
emoji)

everybody wanna be a nigga but nobody wants to be a nigger

the kids say the kid *act Black* but he white
not *white* white but white *black* like city snow
he sag know swag like white boys know how to rap
he wear the mask know trap music hits
shmoney in shit he say *nigga* get a pass
he rock Jays & Nudies so cuties notice
he down he get ass in class he clown still pass
but niggas suss second period: *thwack*
his white face flush red as fried baloney
he grins stupidly throws up his fists false
bravado voice all vibrato means: this nigga shook
his dukes up looking like the great white hope
a poor man's piñata they bust him open
hoping for gummy bears & jellybeans

untitled

after Glenn Ligon & Zora Neale Hurston

my tongue two-faced tongue-tied tired and—i
dunno what it be sayin half time— feel
like shit in my mouth unfamiliar— most
these folks don't expect it cuz— colored
sound like blue notes not dictionaries— when
i speak sometimes words look like flowers— i
gotta nother voice sound like Sally— am
silly to be bullied all proper— thrown
into green gardens mouthful of thorns— against
ebonics lurking behind dull teeth— a
weapon awaiting redemption song— sharp
as Sunday morning a blackness turned— white
these wild words of mine sing in the— background

dear Ebonics

you be a clever bitch how you say *book*
& mean: *get the fuck outta here* how
you say *bad* but mean: *Pam Grier* how you roll
your eyes at Webster one minute be twerking
in his sheets the next how you say *cracker*
ofay *honkey* & mean: *mean motherfucker*
how you bend— break— make shit up— mispronounce—
how it be cool as hooch in a house of countless drops
how your daddy *the dozens* your mama
jive how you conjugate & signify
simultaneous with your machete
& alla your heart & when whitewash tries
to render your black spectacular irrelevant
your heartbeat whisper: *i be i be i be*

about the author

t'ai freedom ford is a New York City high school English teacher and Cave Canem Fellow. Her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in the *African American Review*, *Apogee*, *Bomb Magazine*, *Calyx*, *Drunken Boat*, *Electric Literature*, *Gulf Coast*, *Kweli*, *Obsidian*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, and others. Her work has also been featured in several anthologies including *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop* and *Nepantla: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color*. Her first collection, *how to get over*, won the 2015 To the Lighthouse Poetry Prize, published by Red Hen Press. In 2018, she won a Face Out Emerging Writers Award from the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses. t'ai lives and loves in Brooklyn, where she is an editor at *No, Dear Magazine*.



About the Author

& more black by t'ai freedom ford is a collection of what ford calls "Black-ass sonnets," which take their cues from Wanda Coleman's "American sonnets." For ford, the word "American" conjures the spirit of her ancestors. The poems are rebellious, outspoken, and take no shit. They investigate Black art, Black bodies, Black sexuality, and Black language, unapologetically and with a capital B.

The Rebirth or HeyGirlHey

after Alexandria Smith

what they don't tell you is the white picket
fence is splintered & weathered & tethered
to a mortgage—a death sentence of normal
your limbs taunt lawnmowers & anything
with teeth you peel back pastel wallpaper
feed pasty strips to the flames whispering
in your closet—& so you die come back
with too many mismatched legs & arms
all wanting to strangle you as you run
but see how smart you be? how you buried
your throat in them bushes of blackgirl hair—
how the clueless limbs wave: *heygirlhey*
what they won't tell you is the white picket
fence was once brown & dull just like your skin

i sell the shadow to sustain the substance

after Glenn Ligon & Sojourner Truth

as black woman i am untitled—nameless
my heart a faint glow of neon wire
buzzing toward some shameless demise
i stand against walls looking nonchalant
flashbulbs mistake me for celebrity
or bored whore same difference—as black woman
i am installation art as negress
my heart a black plastic bag ghosting streets
what parts of we ain't for sale as woman?
black skin shiny as gold teeth worthless swag
is this body possible? or do i
merely exist as melancholy gesture—
self-portrait as shrug eye roll blank stare
sacrificing shadow the body remains

root of all Eves

after Wangechi Mutu

her name mean *pornstar* in ebonics: fucks
flickering electric in whiteboy head
she made of paper; she tear easily
crumple in his palm like a mistake oops
origami pussy: now she a swan
he ruffle her feathers with his magic
wand blonde weave down to her ass crack apple
bottom of the barrel black blasphemous
she pre-Jesus—tongue embroidered with lies
little lacy things like doilies in shit
hell yeah he hit that then fucked up them pies
while she unfolded herself smoothing her
wrinkled eyes her prized thighs her right nipple
her other self buried brown sprouting roots

#notorious

who we be? you already know— must be
groovy & rhythmic quixotic erotic
exotic ethnic must be east indian
with all the red dots on our foreheads must be
picnic pick a nigger loop a noose round her neck

must be disrespectful neck swivel & eye roll
pick & roll basketball our namesake
pump fake & fast break must be breakfast brown
thief suddenly ground beef see how bullets
scramble legs must be dangerous jail cells

9

cannot contain us tame us us anger shameless
thus anger hangs us we be beautiful & blameless
hollywood shuffle *nigger entertain us* must be
tragic traffic target you don't know us
till triggers name us murder us we famous—

Darkness very dark darkness is sectional.

—Gertrude Stein

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