

Eunoia Review

beautiful thinking

Here I Am Looking

Posted on [January 16, 2017](#) by [perfectsublimemasters](#)



Photo by Françoise Bouffault

Here I am looking at the camera. It's last summer, 2016, and I'm about to lie down beside women I don't know. There are forty-plus of us. Each has wrapped herself in linen cloth handed out by a volunteer.

The group of us standing are waiting our turn to join the others on the floor, watching, peering at them laid out before us, as we will soon be laid out, too, touching shoulders, arms pressed against arms in a second line above the one already there.

Unexpectedly to me, there is no aroma of powder or perfume. I can smell the odor of our bodies.

We are candid and kind to each other. We don't say much.

Some of us will bare our breasts.

I am the first to do so. "When should we pull our tops down if we're comfortable with that?" I ask, referring to the option earlier given. From what I can tell, at 49, I am the second oldest of our group.

“Now, if you want,” a woman who is helping to align us replies, and I begin to pull down my cloth.

“Oh, fuck it,” a woman next to me—I’d say she’s in her 20s—says in solidarity and does the same. A couple others look and follow, making similar remarks to women pressed against them: “I’ll do it”—that kind of thing.

A few of us, me included, will be wrapped and bound by the linen from our waist to our toes. This will be done with the help of an assistant.

There’s a camera strapped two stories above us, which a photographer controls as he looks down, leaning over a rail. He snaps a photo more than once, letting us know before each shutter click.

Each time he does, I stare at the camera, overhead and far away, with its lens capturing me, imagining my own enslavement.

We are there as “stand-ins,” representations, memories, of enslaved African people packed in ships to the Americas.

We are placed in positions side-by-side by skin color, as other groups of women and groups of children and groups of men will be in photo shoots by the same photographer, Fabrice Monteiro, in America and Senegal, the light and dark of our flesh to spell out a message in Morse code.

We are all witnesses to history, the artist, the photographer, says. He plans to combine his shots into one large-scale image of hundreds of people, representing those brutally forced and chained down in the Middle Passage over the hundreds of years American and European countries enslaved and killed millions of black people.

I think about that day this photo was taken. It was August, five months ago. I don’t know that I’d participate today. The racism, the sexism, the anger and conflict made more vocal, bold, and prevalent in recent days make me wonder if I would. Such a decision would be more fraught for me now.

Here I am looking at this photo, writing and documenting that day. It’s a week before the Women’s March on Washington, where I plan to be January 21, converging with hundreds of thousands of women on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

I have been in a number of marches and protests over the years. Now near 50, I am less enthusiastic about such things. I don’t plan to hold a sign or wear a pink hat or maybe I won’t chant (I don’t know). Not that I’m against any of that.

I will go and be there as a witness. (We are all witnesses to history, Monteiro says that day of the photo shoot.)

I will represent myself in that crowd, because I can. I will be a memory.

Here I am, I will say with my body present at that march. Here I am.

Right now what I can do is be.

Pamela Woolford writes fiction, memoir, and literary journalism. She has authored more than 100 pieces published in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, the fiction anthology *Amazing Graces* (Paycock Press, 2012), and extensively in *The Baltimore Sun*, among other publications. Her current project is a multidiscipline memoir, *Meditations on a Marriage*, which is a book (represented by the Carol Mann Agency) with an accompanying short film, a film about a dance about a book about emotional abuse. Woolford was a 2016 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards finalist and longlisted for the 2016 Fish Publishing Short Memoir Contest for excerpts from the project. She is a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award winner for fiction, a recipient of a citation from the Maryland House of Delegates for her journalism, and was a 2014 Rick DeMarinis Short Story Contest semifinalist at *Cutthroat, A Journal of the Arts*. Two of her short stories are nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize, one by novelist and Pushcart Prize editor Mark Wisniewski. More about her work can be found at: <https://about.me/pamelawoolford>.

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[Roz Warren](#) says:

January 16, 2017 at 3:27 am

Lovely. Perfect. I'll be marching too. Maybe I'll see you there.

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[michellewendycosta](#) says:

February 11, 2017 at 8:15 pm

My story titled 'Silence' is coming up here!

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