Poet, Activist, and Educator Kwoya Fagin Maples, MFA

Kwoya Fagin Maples is a writer from Charleston, SC. She is the author of *Mend* (University Press of Kentucky, 2018) which was named a 2019 Finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Poetry and a 2019 Finalist for the Housatonic Book Award for Poetry. *Mend* tells the story of the birth of obstetrics and gynecology in America and the role enslaved Black women played in that process. Maples teaches in the MFA program for Creative Writing at the University of Alabama, home of the *Black Warrior Review*.

Sarah Berry //

This interview series features educators, scholars, artists, and healthcare providers whose work is vital to the growth of the health humanities. On Friday, March 12, I interviewed Ms. Kwoya Fagin Maples, MFA, about her poetry collection *Mend* (University Press of Kentucky, 2018), her intersectional activism, and her work as an educator at the University of Alabama.

Sarah Berry: *Mend* is a collection of poems "concerned with the lives of the eleven enslaved women who were subjected to [Dr. James Marion Sims'] experiments" in suturing techniques for fistula, a tear in the birth canal following difficult labor. What inspired you to create *Mend*?

Kwoya Fagin Maples: I first heard the story [of Betsey, Lucy, and Anarcha, the three enslaved women named by Sims in his autobiography] in 2010. At the time I was at a writing retreat through Cave Canem, a national organization for African American poets. (They have an annual retreat every summer.) There, I met a writer named Robin Coste Lewis, a historian; she was working on a poetry collection called *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, which later became a winner for the National Book Award.

I was in my late 20s and at a point where I was curious about pregnancy and motherhood. During our conversation, she shared that she had a young child, so I was kind of gently prodding her about pregnancy because of my curiosity. That's when she told me about her experience.

She was frank in a way that I had never encountered. Most of the time, when you talk to women about birth, they gloss over it. Especially in the South, they gloss over it. They don't want to give any detail that might discourage someone else from having a baby. They don't say things like, "It was terrible," or "It hurt."

Robin was very explicit with me, and it floored me. Then she asked, "Have you heard about Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy?"

When I said that I hadn't, she told me the story, and that night I went back to my room, and I looked it up.

There wasn't a lot online then. It wasn't a part of the discussion at the time; I found one site that only provided a cursory story.

But I went home that night and I wrote the first poem.

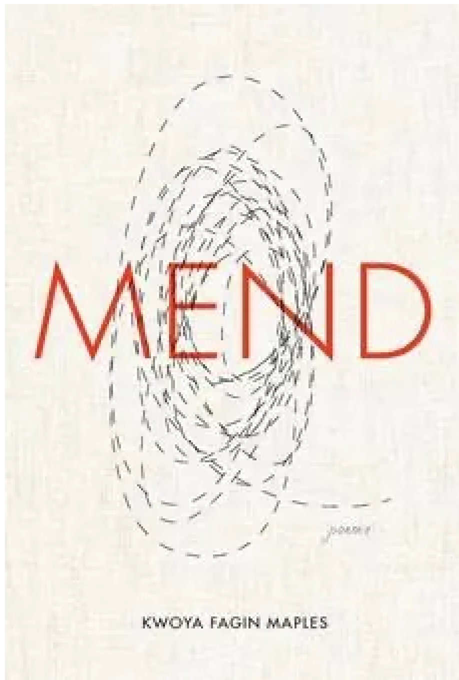
I had read that the primary position the women were required to be in [during the experiments] was on their hands and knees.

The inclination that I had at that time was to write the poem like that: I stayed on my hands and knees the entire time that I wrote. That first poem was called "The Door." It became the prefatory poem that sets up the narrative of the book. In the poem there is a lot of white space between the lines, and, while this can express a range of ideas poetically, here it suggests a hesitation—halting. As I wrote the poem, it became really hard to breathe—being in that position for a long time—it was really difficult to take a full breath.

If you just look at the structure of that poem, you can see that process; it directly influenced the poem. But still, there was so much missing when I took that poem into workshop. I decided that I wasn't going to write another poem until I had done my due diligence of researching. And so I didn't write another poem towards the book for an entire year.

In 2011, I was fortunate to receive a writing residency through the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation. I travelled to Tarrytown, New York, and stayed in the Marcel Breuer House on the Rockefeller

estate. I was there alone for a few weeks, and there I began writing the book in earnest.



SB: The embodied nature of how this poem started is fascinating—thank you for sharing that. Being away from the South, Alabama, where the women lived in the 1840s, did that help with your process? Because I hear a lot of writers say they have to go away in order to get a purchase on their material that is tied to place.

KFM: Yeah, I think being away did help a lot. I told my family (and at the time I didn't have children), "Look, I really need this time." I would call every once in a while, but I really had the space, the mental space that I needed, and [it helped to] know that *that* was what I was there to do specifically. It was enough for me to really, really focus in.

Tarrytown has a lush landscape, and on the estate itself there are varied sculptures and intricate gardens. There's a lot there visually, which is something that I need. I even attended a ballet performance set on an outdoor stage. That was the first time that I'd seen a ballet performance outside, and the wind and trees were blowing, it was gorgeous.

In the Breuer house, I was able to make the space my own. Because I was working with limited research material, I printed photos of enslaved people from the Library of Congress, and I read literally hundreds of slave narratives. They served as an entry point. The slave narratives were very useful for me in terms of developing voice and setting. I was also considering the images as windows into what the women would have known. For me, it was important to be as accurate as possible. It was important to listen for them.

I put up photographs of enslaved women on the walls around the house. I printed slave narratives and cut up sentences. I arranged words and language into poems and created found poetry. I listened to music—recorded Negro spirituals. I was doing whatever I could to enter their world and immerse myself in the process. It was a very fruitful experience for me. Without it, I don't think I would have been able to formulate my ideas; it would have been really difficult without that space and time.

Kwoya Fagin Maples at work on *Mend*, 2011. Photo courtesy of Kwoya Fagin Maples.

SB: So for you, it was more the immersion that the time away afforded rather than being physically distanced from the location. In the preface to your book, I think it's really important that you call upon readers to learn from these poems and to acknowledge our own complicity in this history and, most of all, to use the poems towards addressing real racial disparities, especially in Black women's health and maternal health. *Mend* provides an extremely important intervention where art meets public health in a very specific way directed by you, the poet.

Have you had any responses or seen any evidence of your poems sort of turning on that light bulb for readers or getting readers to do things differently, either in favor of current health equity or any aspect of the legacy of history on Black women's health?

KFM: Yeah, it's been amazing. I think of three things.

One category for this collection is documentary poetry, which I describe as a kind of writing that has legs. It's the kind of writing that can get up and do things. Whenever you're writing about something that addresses a current social issue—as in this case, public health—the work can surprise you. This work goes beyond me. It's interdisciplinary and multi-faceted.

It led to me creating and co-organizing a protest in 2017 at the statue of James Marion Sims at the statehouse in Columbia, South Carolina.

University of South Carolina MFA student Catherine Ntube reads a poem at a protest in front of a bust of J. Marion Sims on the State House grounds. Photo by John Carlos ("'The Way We Protest as Poets': Gynecologist Monument Sparks Anger, Art" by David Travis Bland, free-times.com, Sep 8, 2017, Updated Oct 10, 2019).

At the time, the mayor of Columbia said that he was interested in having it removed. As soon as I heard him mention it, I immediately started trying to organize a protest. I had never done it before, but, again, this is something that's kind of happening in real time. I'm researching Sims, this is my subject area, and I'm responding to it, and so I set up a protest. It was a very peaceful protest by way of art. Throughout that day, all the participants read poems and prose that address medical bias and racism.

In the state of South Carolina, the Heritage Act ensured that the confederate flag was removed from the statehouse, but it also allows for the protection of historic monuments, and the Sims statue is protected under that act. The removal would have to be approved by a two-thirds vote [in each branch of the General Assembly], so we still have work ahead.

So that was the first way that the book surprised me in terms of reaching people, touching people in that way, in 2017.

Last week I had a visit with the University of Utah's Medical School. I spoke with students, professors and medical providers about *Mend*. Continuing these discussions within medical schools is essential, and it's been encouraging to see that this story has impacted medical providers. John Hopkins University added *Mend* to their medical ethics library. This work is making a difference, and I'm very happy about that. I'm happy for us; I'm happy for Black women. If it makes us any safer, if it makes us any more *seen* when we go in to see the doctor, then it's accomplished something.

It's interesting to me because the preface in a collection of poetry is not a usual thing, but I realized that writing the preface was really important because the book could very easily become trauma

porn, something that people would consume and say, “Oh. This happened. Of course, this happened during slavery.” Then, of course, they could compartmentalize the work. And so, beyond consumption, I wanted people to really consider and think about how they were a part of this work, or how they could continue these conversations.

SB: Near the end appears “This Poem Resists with Joy.” I really appreciated what you said about your book not just becoming trauma porn and about designing it to have a lasting impact once the reader is done. The call to resist with joy is so important. That poem comes almost at the end.

And the very last poem, “My Mother Bathes Me after I Give Birth,” is a very moving meditation on intergenerational women’s care.

You start with “The Door,” and you end with “My Mother Bathes Me after I Give Birth,” so you are attaching yourself at the end of this long history. You’re really allowing us to see a continuum in Black women’s lives and health history. It’s a really powerful move, and it’s also a really generous move, I think, to show readers so much of a deeply personal experience, to invite readers into this space.

Earlier, you were saying how, especially in the South, women don’t want to talk about such intimate bodily experiences. Understanding that cultural context just amplifies the importance of what you’re inviting us into.

KFM: You know, a lot of times in poetry and in my writing it’s important that it doesn’t stop, that we don’t necessarily reach a conclusion. I didn’t want you to be able to close the book and say, “Okay, that’s done, all wrapped up.”

Having that poem as the last poem was a perfect way to end the book. *Mend* ends with reaching back again, looking at my ancestors and the women who came before me, and then relating that to my own motherhood. And my own experiences are continuing this story because I’m having children and they happen to be little girls. And they could become mothers one day themselves.

That’s exactly how I would want it to be represented, [the idea that] I am just a part of a larger picture. It was very important to me that there was a connection across generations there, because there’s no way that I would want to expose these women in a way where they would feel disrespected today. Sometimes I think about that because I’m thinking of them as family members, my aunt or someone like that, you know, and I’m very much aware of ensuring that I’m respectfully presenting them because they’re human beings.

My goal was to amplify their voices and diminish Sims’ voice, even though he does have quotes throughout the collection. I only included them because I wanted to provide context for his motives. The quotes are also there so the women’s voices can counter (and drown out) his perception of their experiences.

SB: I think the whole collection is hugely valuable as a counter narrative. You've done this incredible work of immersing in order to capture and honor the women's point of view. Earlier you described composing the first poem while on your hands and knees, in the same position as Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and the eight other women, and experiencing difficulty breathing.

There's so much continuity with an important discourse around the Black Lives Matter movement, in which "I can't breathe" is a slogan.

KFM: Yeah, right.

At the same time, as your book attests, there's a whole history from the colonial era to the present—but especially in the 19th century—when medicine amps up scientifically around breathing, inventing machines like the spirometer and measuring people's lung capacity in biased ways based on assumptions about race, and that numerical lung measurement bias exists today. Then a viral pandemic begins and the primary symptom, breathing difficulty, is written into its full scientific name (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus 2). We know also that people of color have been disproportionately affected by coronavirus.

When you started the poems in 2011, and published the book in 2018, public recognition was gaining traction about Black Americans not being able to breathe, physically and figuratively, in this country since 1619, as detailed by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones. Then the Movement for Black Lives Matter hit another peak in June 2020 with a cluster of publicized police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery. Did your poems take on extra significance during that time?

KFM: Last June, there was so much more immediatly for me to process. I didn't have the emotional bandwidth to analyze or relate last June to anything from history so much as I was thinking about surviving the present.

During that time, it was kind of like a day-to-day, moment-to-moment survival. I have three young daughters: two eight-year-olds and a six-year-old. We were finishing remote schooling, and my husband, who is Black man, was going jogging every day in the middle of this. I was hypervigilant, worried about him, of course, and our survival. It was very emotionally taxing for us; I'm witnessing what's happening around me and at the same time trying to protect my daughters from the knowledge that they don't need yet.

I had no foresight; I had no ability to analyze deeply at that time. It was just too difficult.

I guess the thing that's still kind of swirling in my mind currently is the [insurrection at the Capitol] on January 6 [2021]. I know people have discussed just how painful it was to watch.

It made it so clear—with the way that the terrorists were treated—that white supremacy and terrorism is abided in our country. It was such a stark contrast from how Black people have been

treated. At the time, it immediately just hit me in my chest as I was watching a [white] woman being [gently] escorted down the stairs by the police.

That was very hurtful, I think, for many people of color—I know I'm not the only one. And one of the things that I'm trying to do with *Mend* is to assert this truth that the Black woman's body is worth tenderness.

This idea that somehow white women are more feminine and more deserving of tender treatment, that they have to be approached with decency, but a Black woman's body doesn't deserve that same consideration, is psychologically damaging for Black women and Black girls. It [allows] for little Black girls to be pushed around and told, "You're tough." That's something that I was trying to emphasize in the book. The word "tenderness" appears a couple of times at very significant moments, and it's also in that last poem, too. ["When she moves the lotion over my skin with her hands I breathe. I am an aching shell, but her touch says I am worth tenderness."]

These ideas [of different fragile white and "tough" Black bodies] still persist in our culture, like you said, from colonial times, such as the idea that Black women and Black peoples' bodies don't feel pain, that we don't experience pain. The same way that medical myths persist that our skin is thicker, right? In 2016, there was a survey conducted at the University of Virginia to determine medical biases of current medical students. One question asked if Black people's nerve endings were different than white people's, and there was an overwhelming percentage of people who answered that question, "Yes." There are even persistent beliefs about Black men's bodies and them having bigger penises and how Black people are better at sports. All of these ideas are still in our culture, but they're based in social Darwinism and scientific racism. After all these years, we're still trying to work it out, and you can see that clearly in how Black people are treated by the police versus how white people are treated by the police.

It's hurtful to witness.

But there's also this impetus to continue the work after you recover.

SB: Thank you for sharing; that's a compelling way forward, but also that work should not be the work solely of the people whom it oppresses. In your opinion, are there things that everybody can do, and things allies can do? What is most helpful, from your point of view, to act without re-inflicting trauma?

KFM: I have a hard time answering that, but I think that the first thing is what people always say—listening; that's the encouragement—always listen.

Last June, several of my white friends reached out to me. It was almost as if there had been a white ally meeting where it was decided everyone needed to reach out to their Black friends. (I say this with some humor.) I knew that people's hearts were in the right place, that they were being sincere. And I really appreciated that people do what they can, but they're human, you know what I mean? If I tried to speak to someone who was grieving, my words would be inadequate because

they're in the process of grieving. My being present is probably the only thing that I can do, other than also trying to protect them within that space. But I couldn't necessarily fix it.

I do think that it's important that white people check other white people, as in calling them out if they're witnessing instances of bias or covert racism. It's really important not to leave it up to a POC who's already done so much of that labor. Allies need to talk with their family members—not judge and cut off their family members, but communicate with their family members to discuss race-based aggression and bias.

It's also critical for white allies to recognize the people of color in their daily interactions. My issues as a person of color are not any different or less real just because you know me and see me every day at work. It's not only the people of color in the articles you read or the videos you watch who experience racial aggressions.

Lastly, I've had conversations with people who are well-read, very liberal, and they still express ideas that convey their blind spots. So, I think it's really important for white allies to realize that the learning is not over, and there's not a point at which you ascend into, I don't know, like...

SB: "Woke-[ness]"?

KFM: Yeah, like you get a "woke" crown because, I mean, *I* don't get a "woke" crown. Do you know what I'm saying? There are other social issues that I'm not well-versed on. So, I don't get a "woke" crown. I still have work to do; I still have learning to do. Just being able to sit with that, hold on to that, is important.

SB: Yes, it is, and it is an ongoing process in the end. A conclusion that I had reached was that I have to be constantly aware and constantly willing to do the work and to change and to take on new insights and new levels of interacting. In teaching, it doesn't matter what course the university assigns me to teach, I'm teaching on race and gender in some way or another, and I really appreciated what you said about checking other people. As a teacher, I use my role to help students see a bigger picture. Like a student who just uncritically repeats the term "colored person" because they don't understand the difference between "colored person" and "person of color."

KFM: I bet it's really confusing a lot of people from the Boomer generation, now hearing "people of color," and thinking, "Yeah, that's what I said!"

SB: Yes, that's a really good point. And I think that subsequent generations have this confusion, too, because they learned it from their parents or grandparents. When younger students who were born in the 21st century are repeating terms that they've read, or heard, it's a seemingly small aspect of how we are habituated into thinking about [race], but it's also part of how this legacy just keeps going; there's so much momentum behind it, dragging along this cultural stasis, and that's not where we want to stay.

So the linguistic part of it seems minor, maybe, but then you think about that phrasing as an access point to attitudes and actions that are vast and ongoing and embodied and material to millions of Americans.

And the linguistic processes of race and racism act in concert with all you've been saying about the embodied effects of racism and with the long legacy of enslavement and segregation. Thank you so much for everything that you're sharing about your creative and lived experiences.

What are you working on in your teaching life?

KFM: I started a new position last fall at the University of Alabama teaching in the MFA Creative Writing program. Teaching graduate students creative writing has been a really big transition for me. I've taught college for seven years, and then I taught creative writing at a magnet high school for seven years, and now I'm teaching graduate students.

This semester I'm teaching a course on hybrid experimental memoir, which has been really fun. I love leaning into my obsessions, and I'm definitely one of those professors who teach what I'm currently obsessed with, so I've really been enjoying it.

I'm also committed to creating a space and community for the students of color. At the University of Alabama, there are so many opportunities for students. We have full-tuition funding for all graduate students who are accepted into our MFA program. They are also able to obtain a second Master's degree for free once they're accepted into our program. We have a Prison Arts and Education project that is very robust. Our journal, the *Black Warrior Review*, is very respected in the literary community, and students have editing opportunities there as well.

I would definitely encourage folks to apply for the graduate program.

SB: Excellent! Readers can click on the embedded links above to see more about the University of Alabama Creative Writing Program.

What have been your favorite recent projects other than poetry and teaching?

KFM: Last Saturday I decided I wanted to change out my faucet on my sink, and I did it. It had been installed thirty years ago, so the pieces were really hard to remove. It was challenging, but I completed it and installed a new one. I also stained our back porch, which was huge project!

SB: Awesome! In closing, where can readers access your book?

KFM: Consider adding *Mend* to your medical ethics library and course materials. I'm available for engagements with medical schools and providers. I am available for lectures, writing workshops and readings of my work.

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To read more about *Mend*: bit.ly/MaplesMend